

NARRATIVE STRENGTHS, ISSUES, AND COMPLICATIONS OF GRAPHIC
NOVELS AND VIDEO GAMES

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English: Literature

by

Victoria Huu Trang

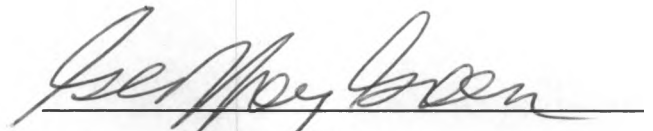
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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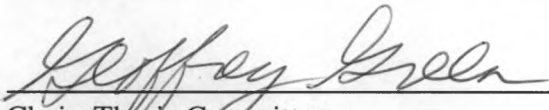
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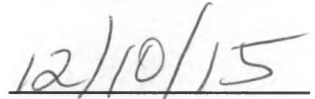
NARRATIVE STRENGTHS, ISSUES, AND COMPLICATIONS OF GRAPHIC NOVELS AND VIDEO GAMES

Victoria Huu Trang
San Francisco, California
2016

While some video games have novel counterparts, some novels have video game counterparts, graphic novels have video game counterparts, or any other adaptations, not many video games use other mediums to inform events in the video games themselves. Usually, video games and other mediums act more as "ports" or as another point of accessibility for the settings of the video game. However, some video games use other mediums as a means to build up the setting, add more information and depth, or to explain new game play changes or content. For this project I am considering video games and graphic novels that depict events in the same established settings and the narrative complications that come from having more than one source of material and the possibility of conflicting narratives either of the player, multiple players, and those existing in the video games.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.


Chair, Thesis Committee


Date

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| List of Figures | vii |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter 1: <i>Portal</i> series | 11 |
| Challenges to Narrative Authority | 11 |
| <i>Portal 2</i> - What is Narrative Authority? | 25 |
| Chapter 2: <i>Left 4 Dead</i> series | 30 |
| Cooperative or Conflicting Narratives | 33 |
| Canonical Narrative and Issues with Canonical Narrative in <i>Left 4 Dead</i> series and <i>The Sacrifice</i> | 35 |
| Chapter 3: <i>Team Fortress 2</i> | 44 |
| Narrative Benefitting from Player and Reader Feedback | 44 |
| Narrative and Story Through Gameplay Experience with Other Players and Conflicts and Agreements with Narrative Perpetuated by Valve | 55 |
| Conclusion | 59 |
| Bibliography | 63 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| Figures | Page |
|---------------------|------|
| 1. Figure 1 | 13 |
| 2. Figure 2 | 18 |
| 3. Figure 3 | 21 |
| 4. Figure 4 | 23 |
| 5. Figure 5 | 28 |
| 6. Figure 6 | 31 |
| 7. Figure 7 | 32 |
| 8. Figure 8 | 33 |
| 9. Figure 9 | 38 |
| 10. Figure 10 | 39 |
| 11. Figure 11 | 39 |
| 12. Figure 12 | 40 |
| 13. Figure 13 | 46 |
| 14. Figure 14 | 46 |
| 15. Figure 15 | 46 |
| 16. Figure 16 | 48 |
| 17. Figure 17 | 51 |

Introduction:

With the evolution of video games and subsequently video game narratives I believe that it is important to consider studying video games with greater detail rather than fixate solely on ludology, game rules, and game mechanics. Like graphic novels, video games have been considered a product created to pander to the "uncultured masses" or as a tool in the destruction of morality. However, video games as a medium are still relatively new. In the span of roughly eighty years graphic novel narratives have evolved from weakly contained and weekly published plots into expansive storylines with deep, but flawed characters. Graphic novels, also known as comics, hold the potential to use not only text, but also visual aspects such as color, space, and lighting to expand their narrative depth. Video games can implement not only text and visual tools, but also sound and in some cases physical consequences such as the rumbling of a controller in the hands of the player. The potential of video game narratives grows with advances in technology or shifts in entertainment mediums.

Marie-Laurie Ryan's distinction between narrativity and interactivity should be considered:

While narrativity is a type of meaning, interactivity, when put in the service of entertainment, is a type of play. The combination of narrativity and interactivity oscillates between the two forms: the *narrative game*, in which narrative meaning is subordinated to the player's

actions, and the *playable story*, in which the layer's actions are subordinated to narrative meanings. (45)

That is to say, when considering video games or similar media, whether story enhances gameplay or gameplay produces story, what is doing which action should be scrutinized (Ryan 45). Alongside distinguishing gameplay and story, the amount of participation expected of the player should also be examined as well as how many players contribute to the game environment.

Consumers or players of video games function not only as audience, but also active participants. The player may function as a character in the narrative, a secondary narrator, or even a co-editor if there are various endings for the player to work towards, depending on the video game and its mechanics. While the notion of reader (or in the case of video games, player) involvement is not entirely new when considering texts such as Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* or even in the mere act of turning a page in a novel or swiping a finger across an electronic book reader, the participation of a video game player encompasses various forms such as pressing the correct keys, solving puzzles presented by the video game, or even interacting with other players simultaneously or through the imprints those players leave in the video game world. Players, like some readers, may take their participation beyond the video game world and attempt to interact with developers or producers of the video game series through letters, art, and other means of showing their appreciation or criticism. Additionally, players may seek to increase their amount of participation and information of the video game world by

seeking other means of immersing themselves such as novels, movies, graphic novels, and short stories published for the video game's world.

Consider the following regarding player involvement in a video game series:

On November 20, 2007 BioWare released the first game of the *Mass Effect* series which critics (such as Andrew Reiner of *Game Informer* and Kristan Reed of *Eurogamer*) lauded for its excellent story-telling and considered the game the beginning of a new generation of video games and video game narrative. The franchise included various novels, graphic novels, and even fan novels based on the game's universe. While the first and second games of the *Mass Effect* series were well received by many fans and critics, the last installment of the acclaimed series left many fans disappointed and even betrayed. Simply put, the *Mass Effect* series offers players the ability to control the events of the game through their choices as Commander Shepard (whose physical appearance and skill sets can be customized to suit the player's vision). Throughout the course of the series, the various decisions players could put into motion evolved, including but not limited to: dialogue choices with the members of the player's crew, Loyalty Missions to unlock the potential of the player's crew, and mission assignments. While these choices were mainly divided between two paths (Paragon and Renegade), the series still allowed players to participate in the narrative and experience the consequences of their actions (such as loss of loyalty from a crew member, the death of crew members, a failed mission, and even the death of the player's avatar, Commander Shepard, expressed in different endings of the games).

However, the ending of *Mass Effect 3* ignored most of the player's past decisions. This created many issues, as examined by Thomas Morisset's "The End of the End as We Know It: A Philosophical Look at the Narration in *Mass Effect*," where developers seemed to lack respect for the players' choices and investment in the game (235). If the player was unable to accumulate the current number of points in "effective military strength," (a point system associated with completing missions, side missions, and dialogue choices) he or she did not even have the ability to choose any of the three endings. Instead the game would choose the ending based on the outcome of the *Mass Effect 2* ending if the player transferred their data from *Mass Effect 2*. If the player has accumulated enough points he or she may choose between three endings: Destruction, Control, and Synthesis of the Reapers, each choice distinguished by a color. The issue with these three choices was that a Paragon aligned Shepard had the same choices as a Renegade aligned Shepard so long as both types of Shepard had accumulated enough points within a certain range. Another issue was that the game inundated the player with information, which made some players feel as though the game's ending was lazy due to the information dump when players could question non-playable characters (NPCs) in prior games. Most players would rather investigate and find the information rather than having the information handed to them through walls of text and dialogue, another facet of the issue regarding players' investment in the game. These endings had relatively the same outcome: Commander Shepard becomes a legendary figure responsible for the setting of the last cut-scene where a small child asks an old man called Stargazer for more

stories about "The Shepard," indicating the rise of a new civilization after the events of *Mass Effect 3*. With these factors in mind as well as the belief that the endings are hypocritical, the *Mass Effect 3* endings generated extremely negative fan responses. Some fans developed petitions to change the ending such as the "Retake Mass Effect 3" movement (Yin-Poole). Kristal Heffley reported, in "*Mass Effect 3* is Having a 'Mass Effect' on Its Consumers for Better or Worse," that some players even appealed to the Better Business Bureau with claims of false advertising since BioWare advertises the game on the *Mass Effect* website with statements such as: "Interactive storytelling. Experience the beginning, middle, and end of an emotional story unlike any other, where the decisions you make completely shape your experience and outcome" and "Along the way, your choices drive powerful outcomes, including relationships with key characters, the fate of entire civilizations, and even radically different ending scenarios." Months later, BioWare released the *Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut* in response to the fans' criticism. Additional cut-scenes ranging from the aftermath of Shepard's surviving crew to the fate of various species assuaged some of the player choice issues. However, the additional content did not completely acquiesce to fans' expectations. While the Extended Cut added a fourth option (Refuse), it did not change the issue where past choices within *Mass Effect 3* did not completely affect the endings.

For the players of the *Mass Effect* series, the problem of the *Mass Effect 3* endings was not so much the idea of their crews' deaths that bothered them, but the notion that their participation in creating a narrative had been cast aside for what essentially

amounted to colored filters over similar cut-scenes illustrating the conclusion of the series. As Andrzej Zarzycki stated, regarding video game narrative,: "many players were looking for a more meaningful or 'real' conclusion. 'It's not about a happy ending; it's about an ending that makes sense'" (788). Playing a video game requires some exchange of freedom and control since it is not plausible to create paths for every variant of the player avatar. However, the *Mass Effect 3* endings could be seen as a betrayal of the exchange between player and video game since ultimately few of the player's choices mattered and even then the "different endings" were hardly differentiated.

While the issues with *Mass Effect 3*'s ending may seem to be a product of the video game industry, the role playing genre, and internet culture, a similar event happened before in older mediums with the death of Sherlock Holmes where readers (instead of players) felt betrayed and shocked by the Arthur Conan Doyle's decision to "end" Holmes's life. Many of the readers of Sherlock Holmes's adventures held attachment to the detective, the narrative, and other associated aspects- similar to the players' investment of the *Mass Effect* series. According to Stanford University's website, "Discovering Arthur Conan Doyle," in the following years after the publication of "The Final Problem," Arthur Conan Doyle received a mixture of pleading and threatening letters from fans to brought back Sherlock Holmes. People even wore black armbands as though with the "death" of Sherlock Holmes, a real person, loved and admired by many, had died (Stanford University).

Michael Saler, in "'Clap if you Believe in Sherlock Holmes': Mass Culture and the Re-Enchantment of Modernity," examined the notion of fans who believed in a real living Sherlock Holmes and the fan response to the great detective. Saler noted that there were two types of believers of Sherlock Holmes; "Some actually believed that Holmes existed- 'naive believers'- but most were 'ironic believers', who were not so much willingly suspending their disbelief in a fictional character as willingly believing in him with the double-minded awareness that they were engaged in pretence" (606). Both types of believers engaged in "playing" with the world of Sherlock Holmes whether they were aware of their participation or not. Some fans would carefully reconstruct Holmes's manner of thinking and incorporate the method into their thought processes while others would send letters to the fictional detective (Saler 606-609). Other fans strengthened their ties to the world of Sherlock Holmes by claiming themselves to be part of the "Baker Street Irregulars," a literary society based on Holmes's informers (Saler 601). Through taking on the collective name of Sherlock Holmes's character, fans could participate not only through "believing," but also through the notion that they, like the Baker Street boys, supported Sherlock Holmes through their knowledge of his world. In this sense, the readers as the Baker Street Irregulars had become part of the world of Sherlock Holmes while they bring Sherlock Holmes into their reality.

Readers or players serve an integral purpose in keeping the book or video game world alive. As Saler had stated:

By the end of the century such virtual realities of the imagination had become substantially augmented by information technologies, but arguably there is a direct line of descent from the Baker Street Irregulars to the denizens of online computer gaming worlds and the enthusiasts of fantasy role-playing games. (621)

While readers or players may provide a more passive role such as through simply reading a text or pressing buttons in a sequence, readers and players enrich the narrative of their fictional worlds through active participation as seen through the readers of Sherlock Holmes and the players of *Mass Effect* series.

With the above examples of player and reader interaction with the text, what occurs when there is a fictional world that provides both a text and a video game to the player and reader? Various video game series have supplementary materials through books or websites. However, the three series I have in mind have graphic novel equivalents that can be viewed electronically and have minor interactive components. Valve Corporation's *Portal* series, *Left 4 Dead* series, and *Team Fortress 2* allowed players and readers to interact with the world through different levels of involvement. These levels of involvement ranged from simply guiding the avatar, assuming an avatar, or personally identifying with the player avatar. The video games also have varying levels of narrative. For all the video games listed above it is possible to return to a previously finished level and replay the level as a means of refining or redoing a choice or path the player has made. However, the games differentiate in how linear their

narratives are compared to gameplay. For example, the *Portal* series has a linear narrative tied to the levels while the *Left 4 Dead* series has a basic narrative, but nonlinear gameplay levels which results in the same level being played differently depending on how the computer AI placed enemies and items or the varying skill level of players as well as nonsequential play. *Team Fortress 2* differs completely in narrative in that the bulk of the narrative comes from the graphic novels, video clips, and game updates that include various snippets of new dialogue and information, but must be pieced together to form a narrative. In these ways video games could be considered "ergodic" texts. As Espen J. Aarseth stated, in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, "in ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1). Lastly, while the different series and games have multiplayer options, the games have varying levels of multiplayer involvement. For the *Portal* series, the player may interact with only one other player during multiplayer maps in the second game of the series. The two players in *Portal 2* usually cooperate to solve the levels, but it is possible for players to turn against each other. *Left 4 Dead* series has multiplayer interaction that varies from one to seven other players who work with or against the player, depending on what game mode the player chooses. *Team Fortress 2* varies from one to thirty-one players depending on the server. Like the *Left 4 Dead* series, other players may work with or in opposition of the player. The influence of other players can create a collective narrative or conflicting narratives since there is another person responsible for what occurs in the level. While the narrative of the games such as in the case of *Team Fortress 2* may delve

into the ludicrous, the nature of these games drives their popularity and deepens the narrative of what could be considered a product of "low" or popular culture while the graphic novel supplementary materials provide depth or at least exposition.

Chapter 1: *Portal* series

Challenges to Narrative Authority

When examining the *Portal* series, the fact that it is not a traditional FPS (First Person Shooter) game should be taken into consideration. While the other games in this discussion are FPS games orientated around defeating enemies (usually through violence) to accomplish a goal, the *Portal* series focuses on solving various puzzles through using the Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device or the Portal Gun, which creates two way portals, in the Aperture Science Enrichment Center's Test Chambers. In a puzzle solving game situational awareness of numerous factors in the testing environment is paramount to gameplay. The game introduces the AI GLaDOS (Genetic Lifeform and Disc Operating System) to the player as a "teacher" or "overseer" who instructs the player and Chell, the player's avatar, through the various tests with promises of cake as a reward. While GLaDOS should appear to be a neutral automated facilitator, her statements have an unsettling tone underneath the testing jargon. For example, GLaDOS says, "Please be advised that a noticeable taste of blood is not part of any test protocol, but is an unintended side effect of the Aperture Science Material Emancipation Grille..." (Valve) when the player and Chell first encountered a tube dropping cubes. More chillingly GLaDOS's first message affirms the idea that "fun and learning are primary goals," (Valve) but "serious injuries may occur" (Valve). This calls into question who is having fun and learning from the tests besides the player. Some players may have sensed that there is something wrong with the "testing" narrative that the game presents to him or her

through GLaDOS. Suspicion against GLaDOS strengthens as the player and Chell discovered various "Rat Dens" where Doug Rattmann or the "Rat Man" left various warnings to the player and Chell against GLaDOS. In the case of *Portal*, the player and Chell must consider who to believe between GLaDOS and the mysterious Rat Man. Between the conflicting narratives of these two other characters, the player and Chell ultimately chooses a path that would favor Rattmann's. The player and Chell are not necessarily creating their own narrative, but defying the one set up by GLaDOS with the secondary effect of enforcing Rattmann's.

GLaDOS becomes increasingly unreliable as her contradictory statements proliferate, making the player doubt her ability as a co-narrator or proctor. In Test Chamber 04 GLaDOS claims, "we will not monitor the next test chamber" (Valve). However, at the end of the test she admits that "our previous statement suggesting that we would not monitor this chamber was an outright fabrication...we will stop enhancing the truth" (Valve). GLaDOS can lie because the player had no way out of the testing yet or another narrative to follow. The AI continues her contradictions in Test Chamber 8 with the sludge-coated floors. GLaDOS begins by telling Chell and the player "any contact with the chamber floor will result in an unsatisfactory mark on your official testing record. Followed by death" (Valve). However, she contradicts herself by informing the player and Chell to note, "Any appearance of danger is merely a device to enhance your testing experience" (Valve). While there is certainly a grain of truth for the player in the scheme of the game, if narrative and story are ignored, this is not entirely true for



Figure 1: Left: Weighted Storage Cube. Right: Weighted Companion Cube (WCC or Companion Cube) from *Portal* Test Chamber 17.

the player who sympathizes with Chell, has accidentally triggered the "death" sequences, or both.

GLaDOS's callousness as a narrator and proctor manifests in Test Chamber 17 with the introduction and destruction of the iconic Weighted Companion Cube (WCC or Companion Cube). She builds up the importance of the WCC to the player and Chell in the tests to come. GLaDOS instructs the player and Chell to "Please take care of it" (Valve) while lauding the WCC's virtues such as its inability to threaten the player. However, the player and Chell must destroy the cube under GLaDOS's orders to progress. If the player and Chell procrastinate, the AI goads the player and Chell while attempting to ease their guilt for incinerating the Companion Cube by using softer language such as "escort" and "euthanize" and by informing the player that "an independent panel of ethicists has absolved the Enrichment Center, Aperture Science

employees, and all test subjects of any moral responsibility for the Companion Cube euthanizing process" (Valve). Ultimately the player and Chell must destroy the cube to progress in the game. Upon the WCC's destruction GLaDOS announces, "You euthanized your faithful companion cube more quickly than any test subject on record. Congratulations" (Valve). GLaDOS's control over her lies slips as the player and Chell learn that the AI does not care about Chell's well being both physically and mentally. However, GLaDOS's antagonistic nature fuels the player and Chell to find another path or another way in order to avenge themselves (and the cube depending on the player) and change the narrative of callous testing to suit themselves.

Although the idea of revenge for a simple cube sounds far-fetched, the game developers and by extension GLaDOS designed the companion cube in such a way that it was not only essential and nonthreatening, but also endearing. The developers decided to place pink hearts on the cube to show that it was different compared to the other cubes that were left behind in the test chambers (as shown in Figure 1) as well as invoking general positive traits associated with pink hearts. To further underline the difference between the Companion Cube and other cubes, the other cubes do not have hearts and are called "Weighted Storage Cubes" (Valve) by GLaDOS. The Companion Cube played a fundamental role in the puzzles of Testing Chamber 17. The cube acted as a platform for Chell in areas where the platforms were too steep to jump over and in the areas of the test chamber where dangerous projectiles roamed the halls, the bulk of the cube protected Chell from the projectiles. GLaDOS did not lie about the importance of the cube. If she

did lie about the importance of the cube, the destruction of the cube would not have impacted players as much if at all. By making the usefulness of the cube one of the few truths that GLaDOS stated to the player, the "death" of the cube became important. As developer Jeep Barnett explained, the Companion Cube's demise served to add "a lot more sinister character to our already sinister AI while simultaneously training players to use the incinerator, a key component of the final level" (Valve). The destruction event strengthened the tension to "avenge the death of . . . the companion cube by stuffing some of the AI's important parts into exactly the same type of incinerator" (Valve). The act of dropping the WCC and pieces of GLaDOS into the incinerator would impact the player much more than if he or she were only to read about the event because a sense of responsibility comes from the interactive nature of video games (Green & Jenkins 488). It is common for players to become attached to friendly or helpful characters or objects such as in the case of *Deus Ex* where the player must kill a friendly character turned zombie, but may become so attached that he or she may "experience extreme discomfort at treating her like an object that needs to be eliminated" (Ryan 56). Although the WCC was not as dangerous as the zombie example, it was still probably the friendliest "character" in *Portal* besides the Rat Man.

Whether the player chooses to continue testing or simply quits the game, GLaDOS's narrative will be fulfilled. Simply quitting the game would not be enough to overthrow GLaDOS. She would still "win" in the sense that she still collects data from Chell's death or the player's noncompliance. "Death" in *Portal* is not permanent. Should

the player lead Chell to a situation that would kill a normal living person, the game simply stops until the player pressed a key to try again. To triumph over GLaDOS, the player and Chell adheres to her narrative and script until they discover the opportune moment to defy her for the sake of themselves or the martyred Companion Cube.

While GLaDOS as the primary antagonist was certainly memorable, it is interesting to note the importance of the player's avatar, Chell, in interacting with the game. As Zachary Wendler noted, in 'Who Am I?': Rhetoric and Narrative Identity in the *Portal* series,":

In one iteration of the tech demo[of *Portal 2*], the game designers went so far as to put a mirror into the beginning area, so that players could see their own reflection, and make it clear that they were not Chell, the protagonist from the first game. It didn't matter that the game was a prequel or that the character that players were playing wasn't Chell—players wanted GLaDOS to recognize them, and to react to them, for whom they were in the first *Portal* game...which was very strange, as Chell never spoke, was named only in the credits, and could only even be seen if players manipulated game mechanics to do so. (352)

For players the return of Chell as the protagonist avatar in *Portal 2* created a cohesive narrative whereas a prequel game detailing the events of the past seemed to fall flat. Chell could be seen as a "shell" for the players to wear, but she serves a greater purpose beyond simply being the link between the player and the world of *Portal*. If the players

manipulate the portals in order to see their avatar Chell, the portals revealed a moderately attractive young woman in an orange suit when previously the player could not even see her hands in the classic first person shooter perspective. While the orange suit served to "help her pop out against the colder tones of the environment," (Valve) developer Bay Raitt admitted that the developers "put the player character in an orange jumpsuit to reinforce the fact that she's a test subject" (Valve). For many players (at least those familiar to stereotypes of prisons), Chell's jumpsuit not only signified a test subject, but also a prisoner. Chell is not only a prisoner of GLaDOS, but also of GLaDOS's narrative power-that is until she and the player could find the alternative path in the video game.

The opportunity to defy GLaDOS's narrative arrives at what would be the scripted "end" of Chell. At the end of Test Chamber 19 GLaDOS leads the player and Chell towards the incinerator. If the player chooses to obey GLaDOS and believe that there is no way out of the incinerator, Chell respawns (revives) on the moving platform after her death until the player quits or discovers a solution. Through making the player replay this section after a supposed death, the game impresses upon the player that he or she must find a way out. However, if the player paid attention to GLaDOS's numerous statements, he or she would know better than to trust the AI and would plot to find a way out of the murderous narrative. As Wendler stated "only by actively rebelling from the script of the game-and GLaDOS's oppressive control- can the player realize that by portalling into the fiery pit itself, they can burst the boundaries of the narrative and escape" (360). GLaDOS calls out to the player and Chell, "What are you doing? Stop it! I . . . I . . . We are



Figure 2: Rat Man's Mark from the Unofficial *Portal* Wiki.

pleased that you made it through the final challenge where we pretended we were going to murder you" (Valve) and similar messages as she attempts to regain control over the narrative and the situation, but ultimately confirming to the player and Chell that the escape is the "correct" path to defy GLaDOS's narrative. The player and Chell traversed the inner parts of the Aperture Science Enrichment Center, away from GLaDOS's prying cameras and the stark white test chambers. However, they were not wandering around arbitrarily. Chell and the player moved away from GLaDOS's narrative and began to work under the Rat Man's narrative.

For the events of *Portal* and the accompanying *Portal 2: Lab Rat* graphic novel short, Rat Man could be considered an intrusive editor who strikes to overthrow GLaDOS's power as narrative authority in the Aperture Science Enrichment Center. Within the events of *Portal*, Chell and the player could identify the Rat Man's domains through his rat-like handprints as shown in Figure 2. They may resemble asterisks or at least served as a means to denote that the Rat Dens were not part of GLaDOS's narrative. Chell and the player find the dens outside of GLaDOS's stark test chambers. Rat Man's dens could be considered marginalia or editor's notes informing the player that there is something more than what they have seen or learned from GLaDOS. Much of his graffiti warns the player and Chell of what will come. "The cake is a lie"(Valve) became his most

iconic warning alongside, his grief for the Companion Cube through parodies of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Reaper and the Flowers" and Emily Dickinson's 712/ "Because I could not stop for Death." At first these notes could be considered fun "Easter eggs" or references, but ultimately they move to undermine GLaDOS's narrative by providing the player and Chell alternatives to what GLaDOS established. *Portal 2: Lab Rat* encompassed the most influential edit performed by Rat Man. In *Portal 2: Lab Rat* the graphic novel short switches between the "present" where Chell is heading to the final chamber to confront GLaDOS and the consequences of those actions and the Rat Man's past where he was Doug Rattmann, an employee at the Aperture Science Enrichment Center. Pages eleven to fifteen of *Portal 2: Lab Rat* established Rattmann's opposition to GLaDOS through his inability to understand the "fun" (Kosmatka 11) behind attempting to control a murderous AI as expressed by his coworker, Henry. Henry lamented about how the "all the easy stuff is taken," (Kosmatka 11) regarding the "new frontier" (Kosmatka 11) every generation comes to explore. His lamentations could be tied to the idea that the "easy" narratives and fields such as space exploration have already been explored by other scientists. "We're on the bleeding edge here. Artificial consciousness is the next frontier," (Kosmatka 11) Henry explained to Rattmann, but Rattmann doubted whether GLaDOS could be controlled to suit Aperture Science as seen below:

RATTMANN. What is that thing, anyway?

HENRY. Just the latest in AI inhibition technology. You can think of it
as a conscience.

RATTMANN. If that's all you use to control her, it won't be enough.

HENRY. Why's that?

RATTMANN. You can always ignore your conscience. (Kosmatka 14-15)

Rattmann cast doubt on the idea of a morally driven AI since if she could become anything like a person, she could do whatever act a person was capable of committing. In the case of narrative authority, Rattmann's doubts about the conscience of an AI extends to the reliability of a narrator. Any narrator could lie to the reader and in the case of a narrator who seemed to be antagonistic, the illusion of safety created by inherent trust in the narrator should be dispelled and every narrator should be questioned.

Ironically, Doug Rattmann during the development of GLaDOS started developing signs of schizophrenia or was diagnosed with the phenomenon, but was ultimately the sanest person in Aperture Science and possibly the only individual in the research lab who could defy GLaDOS's literal and narrative control. Normally, brain disorders or anything that affects the veracity of the senses would disqualify an individual from being trustworthy. According to Wendler, "the appearance of [Rattmann's] warnings is an indication that the player's worst fears have been actualized. . ."(360). It is possible that the choice to favor the Rat Man's narrative over GLaDOS depends on who benefited Chell and the player more. In addition to the notion of a possibly unreliable, but beneficial narrative, Rattmann should be considered in the context of his environment. His coworker displayed less than sane thoughts such as his idea of safety when asking Rattmann to reach into a suspicious device: "wait a sec. Safety first. Are you right handed

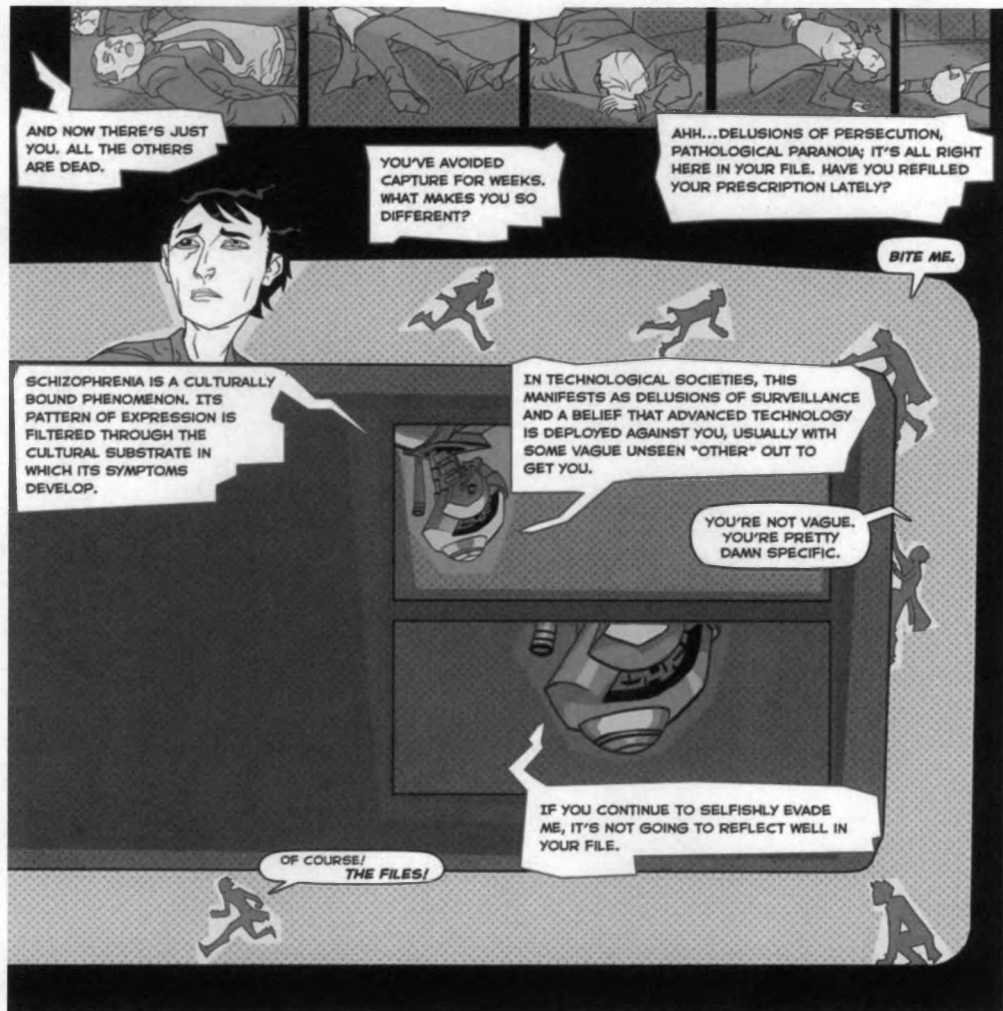


Figure 3: Doug Rattmann evading GLaDOS in *Portal 2: Lab Rat* Page 20.

or left? . . . Better use your left then" (Kosmatka 14) or in his lack of concern that the AI attempted to kill the researchers as soon as the researchers activated it. Instead, Henry displayed maddening optimism at the idea of the AI going from a sixteenth of a picosecond to becoming murderous to a tenth of a picosecond (Kosmatka 11). Doug Rattmann was most likely the sole researcher with serious doubts regarding the trustworthiness of GLaDOS, judging from Henry and the gullible researchers who

provided the dangerous AI with neurotoxin. However as GLaDOS stated later in *Portal 2: Lab Rat*, "schizophrenia is a culturally bound phenomenon. Its pattern of expression is filtered through the cultural substrate in which its symptoms develop" (Kosmatka 20). While GLaDOS explained the schizophrenia as a means to demoralize Rattmann and convince him to surrender, her statement should be considered in context. *Portal 2: Lab Rat* revealed the truth of Rattmann's schizophrenia, but juxtaposed Rattmann against his coworkers who should be sane, but did not act sane. The schizophrenia of Rattmann could be explained as a matter of perspective, leading the player to consider the issue of "if there is one sane person in an insane society, could that singular person be considered sane?" If all other co-narrators, co-editors, and other participants consider a certain narrative correct, does that automatically make that narrative just? When only conflicting narratives are left and no way to reason with each other, whoever can make their narrative true would be "correct." As illustrated in Figure 3, Rattmann clearly defied the panels and environment of GLaDOS's boxes, sneaking around her space and territory. Rattmann traveled through the "gutter" or the space between panels usually reserved to separate panels or to suggest action in between. Like his rat dens, that existed within the walls of the test chambers in *Portal* and *Portal 2*, Rattmann survives through evading GLaDOS's space and narrative authority and staying at the fringes. He eventually found the file room filled with information on testing subjects and future victims of GLaDOS's narrative. After searching through the files Rattmann came across Chell and saw that "it [had] to be her" (Kosmatka 22). He changed the testing order, sending Chell to the top.

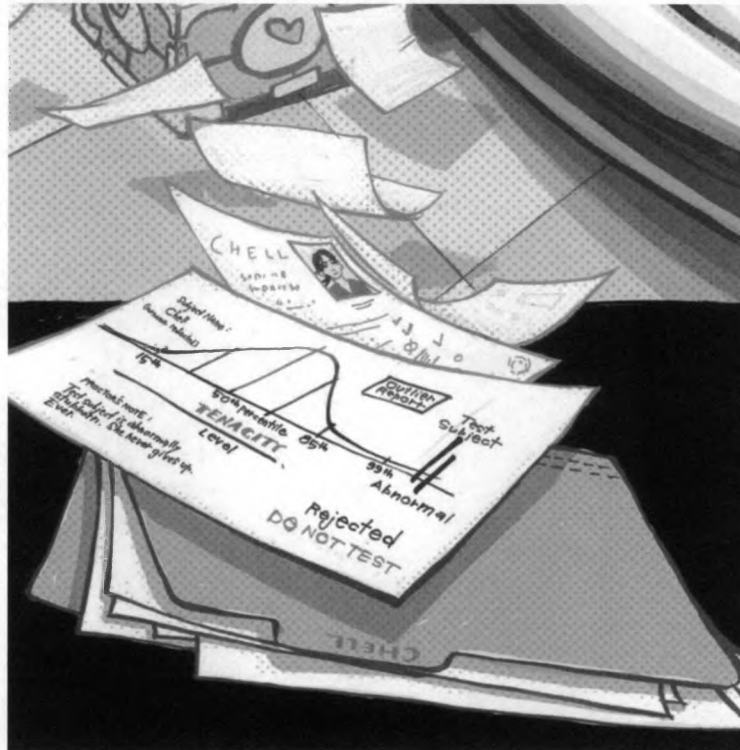


Figure 4. Chell's Testing File: Tenacity Outlier from *Portal 2: Lab Rat*. Page 24.

Through changing the order of the subjects (one of the few things GLaDOS as narrative authority cannot do) Rattmann has edited the "reader" or "co-narrator" that GLaDOS faces in the events of *Portal*. Later, while Rattmann drifted to sleep (or death), his mental version of the Weighted Companion Cube questioned his editorial choice:

WCC. There's something I wanted to ask. How did you know about the
girl?

RATTMANN. Know what?

WCC. That she was the one.

RATTMANN. Something in her file.

WCC. She had the highest IQ?

RATTMANN. No, some were higher.

WCC. Then she was the fastest? The most athletic?

RATTMANN. No, nothing like that.

WCC. Then What?

RATTMANN. A hunch. (Kosmatka 24)

The conversation served two main purposes. The first purpose established that intelligence and physical prowess would not be enough to escape GLaDOS's narrative, similar to Rattmann and his survival considering that he may not be considered the most intelligent researcher or the most physically capable. The second purpose allowed the reader/player to consider him or herself a possible candidate. However, the last panel of *Portal 2: Lab Rat*, as depicted in Figure 4, revealed that Chell (and by extension the player) has an abnormally high level of tenacity. Intelligence and power could only go so far without the tenacity to continue no matter what had transpired. The difficulty of the task does not daunt the player as the difficulty of a narrative does not daunt the tenacious reader. The obdurate player rises to the challenges set upon him or her as does the obdurate reader.

The ending of *Portal* complicated the narrative of the game and the series as a whole. Valve added to the original ending of *Portal*. Initially, the ending of the game faded to white while GLaDOS's control room fell apart. The newer ending included a view of the outside world and a robotic voice that is not GLaDOS's, apprehending an exhausted Chell. Since GLaDOS was last seen in the midst of deconstruction through the

destruction of her cores, who is continuing the narrative? In the events of *Portal 2: Lab Rat* Rattmann worked to ensure Chell's survival so that she would contend with this new horror. Most likely, the new narrator is not Rattmann, but Rattmann chose to keep Chell alive, knowing or rather hoping that she can defy and defeat this "new" narrator. To explore the complications of the ending of *Portal*, *Portal 2* must be examined.

Portal 2 -What is Narrative Authority?

After the events of *Portal* the player and Chell begins *Portal 2* in the middle of an Aperture Science Extended Relaxation Center disguised as a motel room, revealing that Chell and the player are once again under the control of another narrative power. The player and Chell meet a new AI, Wheatley, who promises to free Chell. However, the actions of Chell, Wheatley, and the player rouses GLaDOS and places Chell underneath the control of the antagonistic AI. Chell and the player already know that they can endure GLaDOS's tests until they can find another opening. Once again Chell and the player explore and travel through the areas outside of GLaDOS's control. However, instead of destroying GLaDOS, the player and Chell attempts to replace her with Wheatley in hopes that the bumbling, but seemingly kind AI would be able to change the narrative. Unfortunately, Wheatley in the "DOS" body becomes mad with power and he assumes a similarly antagonistic role as GLaDOS in *Portal*. Chell, the player, and GLaDOS form an unlikely alliance to overthrow Wheatley. Surprisingly, GLaDOS allows Chell to travel to the surface world without killing her at the end of *Portal 2*. Through *Portal 2*'s revisit to the struggle between GLaDOS and Chell, establishment of Wheatley's antagonistic

status, and the Chell and GLaDOS alliance, the former understanding of narrative authority in *Portal* drastically shifted, challenging the player's knowledge and former assumptions. The first assumption that the player forms about Chell is that her silence acts not only as a "bridge" between the player and the game world. However, the silence also functions in defiance of whatever narrative authority Chell and the player stand against. In the beginning of *Portal 2* Wheatley asks Chell to speak, but the player could only press a button to jump, making that action the only one Chell took. The small tutorial to jumping reveals to the player that Chell does have control over her own voice through her refusal to speak voluntarily. Her silence acts as refusal to completely participate in the narrative. In this sense the player's control over Chell could be similar to Chell's and the player's acceptance of Rattmann's narrative if only because the action benefited Chell and the player.

Another piece of knowledge or assumption that quickly corrected itself is that an enemy of GLaDOS and the oppressive narrative is a friend to the player and Chell as can be seen by the betrayal of Wheatley. Wheatley introduces himself as a new personality core that Chell and the player have not met in the past. Unlike the other personality cores that Chell and the player destroyed, Wheatley appears to have some autonomy. He speaks, expresses his own thoughts, and proves himself capable of controlling certain parts of the Aperture Science Enrichment Center, albeit with many flaws. However, Wheatley had been hindered by the warnings piled onto him by other "people," possibly the same researchers that created GLaDOS. "They" as Wheatley refers to those

individuals, discouraged him from doing anything from using a flashlight to detaching himself from the safety rail that restricted his movement. Wheatley tells Chell and the player, "they told me if I ever turned this flashlight on, I would DIE. They told me that about EVERYTHING" (Valve). From this information the player and Chell could deduce that Wheatley's creators controlled him heavily, similarly to how they strove to control GLaDOS. However, Wheatley could be considered an alternative narrative that is just as harmful as GLaDOS's. When Wheatley replaces GLaDOS in the large DOS body he assumes a position of narrative authority. As "WheatDOS" he abuses his power and broke his promise to Chell and the player. As Chell and the player progresses through the game, WheatDOS attempts to copy and improve GLaDOS's designs as a means to solidify his role as tester and narrative authority, failing for the most part, but eventually coming up with ideas of his own.

However, the change in Wheatley to WheatDOS suggests something far more sinister about the DOS body or power and narrative authority since Wheatley states, "I HAVE to test. All the time. Or I get this... this ITCH. It must be hardwired into the system or something" (Valve). In the case of the *Portal* series, the oppressive narrative aimed to not only control Chell and the player, but also whomever or whatever assumes narrative power. The "narrative authority" is shackled to the role that he or she must play. For example, when WheatDOS attempts to tell Chell and the player the solution of a puzzle the DOS body punishes him for acting outside of his role.



Figure 5: GLaDOS as seen in *Portal*. From the Unofficial *Portal* Wiki.

After the transformation of Wheatley to WheatDOS, Chell, the player, and GLaDOS formed an uneasy alliance that revealed more about the potato battery confined GLaDOS (now called PotaTOS to distinguish her fall from authority). As the player and Chell progresses through *Portal 2* PotaTOS reveals more about the attempts to control her. Wheatley was the Intelligence Dampening Sphere that "clung to [PotaTOS's] brain like a tumor, generating an endless stream of terrible ideas" (Valve). Wheatley was one voice of many that flooded PotaTOS's thoughts. PotaTOS comes to a frightening revelation in her time with Chell and the player; "the scientists were always hanging cores on me to regulate my behavior. I've heard voices all my life. But now I hear the

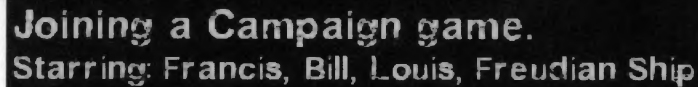
voice of a conscience, and it's terrifying, because for the first time it's my voice" (Valve). The various cores acted as antagonistic or unhelpful co-narrators and co-editors while the DOS body represented the specific narrator that GLaDOS was supposed to become. As seen in Figure 5, GLaDOS's body bore resemblance to a bound humanoid. This image of a bound GLaDOS clashed with the image of an all-powerful AI. Through switching GLaDOS and Wheatley, the player and Chell learn that the abuse of narrative authority may come from the expectations pressed upon narrative authority as well as a means to act out against extraneous co-narrators and co-editors. With Wheatley's banishment into space he appears to be returning to his former bumbling self. GLaDOS's reinstatement into her DOS body without the meddlesome cores appears to have bettered her, at least in the sense that she no longer wishes to see Chell and allows Chell her freedom.

Throughout the course of the *Portal* series, issues with narrative authority and authority as a whole abound. Narrative authority limits and isolates those who have tried to claim it or have it already. GLaDOS even with the many voices intruding her thoughts was alone in that she struggled to keep her sense of self even though it had become twisted. Rattmann never directly contacted Chell, but guided her through his notes. However, Chell is not alone and has the player as co-narrator and guide.

With the next two series more complications in narrative arise as not only does the player consider or contest narrative set by the video game developers, but also narratives that could be set by *other* players.

Chapter Two: *Left 4 Dead* series

While the *Portal* series presented several different narratives and issues with narrative to the player, *Left 4 Dead* and its sequel *Left 4 Dead 2* displayed narratives of survival where the player works against not only "The Director" (the name of the program that decides when waves of enemies and items spawn), but also other players, depending on what game mode the player selects or the disposition of the other participants. The computer (PC) versions of the games offer the player gameplay and narrative choices through an online Campaign mode where up to four players take on the roles of the Survivors -Bill, Francis, Louis, and Zoey in *Left 4 Dead*; Coach, Ellis, Nick, Rochelle in *Left 4 Dead 2*- to cooperate for mutual survival. Another choice is a Versus mode where up to eight players can play against each other in teams of four Survivors versus four Special Infected (Infected enemies with unique abilities). Other options include a Survival mode (where players are tested on their endurance in the game), and a Single Player mode for offline play. *Left 4 Dead 2* added "Realism" modes and "Scavenge" mode, increasing the diversity of the game modes and obstacles/details in the narrative. The maps and levels can be played in any order. In both games of the series players can choose to play as a Survivor, one of four human characters in the middle of an "Infected" outbreak caused by a virus called the "Green Flu" and "The Infection" or as a Special Infected depending on which gameplay mode the player chooses as well as the difficulty of the modes. The Survivor the player decides to play as has his or her name



Joining a Campaign game.
Starring: Francis, Bill, Louis, Freudian Ship

Figure 6: Portion of loading screen in *Left 4 Dead 2* listing players.

replaced by the player's name as seen in Figure 6. If the player chooses to play as a Special Infected, he or she cannot choose which Infected he or she becomes. The difference between who or what the player can be enforces the idea of two main narratives where the player becomes an integral part of a team or where the player constantly shifts between characters to sabotage the other team.

The first broad narrative given to the player is the narrative of survival. When the player starts *Left 4 Dead*, he or she may view an opening cinematic depicting four Survivors: Bill the war veteran, Francis the biker, Louis the office worker, and Zoey the college drop out. The cinematic introduced various gameplay elements such as the Special Infected enemies and their behavior, methods to exploit the behavior, and most important of all, teamwork. Every Survivor was saved at some point in the cinematic by their fellow survivors either through advice such as Bill snapping Louis out of his panicked refrain, "Run or shoot?!" (Valve) by shouting, "Both!" (Valve) or action such as shooting an Infected attacking a preoccupied fellow Survivor or by taking a Survivor by the hand to help him or her to stand (an allusion to the "revival" game mechanic). The cinematic featured the Survivors coordinating their defense to reach a "safe house" at the top of the roof. However when Louis started to celebrate their survival, Bill stated, "Son, we just crossed the street. Let's not throw a party 'til we're out of the city," (Valve)

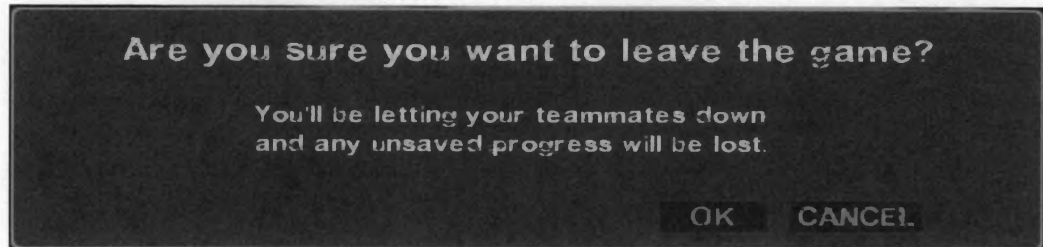


Figure 7: *Left 4 Dead 2* "Exit to Main Menu" Screen.

emphasizing the difficulty of survival even with teamwork and a collective goal shared by the survivors. In the case of the designated "first" levels of the *Left 4 Dead* series, the Survivors do not know each other yet, but will still refer to themselves as a team. If a Survivor has died before a certain point in the "first" levels the other Survivors would still mourn the loss even if they not know him or her at all in *Left 4 Dead 2*. The game will also display messages whenever one Survivor has protected another, helped a Survivor, or killed a Special Infected. Within the two games and all modes, if the player chooses to exit the match, the window in Figure 7 will appear, letting the player know that he or she is an asset to the survival team and strengthening the idea that cooperation is needed in order to survive. However, even in a relatively ideal situation, upholding the survival narrative requires cooperation.

Single Player mode gives the most control of the survival narrative to the singular player in that the player does not have to contend with the motivations and whims of other players. Like the *Portal* series, the opposition to the player's narrative is an AI. However, the opposition is not limited to the Director AI. The player must also handle the substandard AI of the Survivors also known as "Survivor Bots." While the *Left 4*



Figure 8: *Left 4 Dead 2* reminder triggered by attacking fellow Survivor with red Prohibition Sign.

Dead series granted a larger amount of agency than other horror games with shooting elements, such as *Resident Evil*, the player paid for the agency through tougher opposition. The Survivor Bot would be considered worse than the AI of the Infected since unlike the Infected, Survivors can be taken out of the game for extended periods of time or the Infected can permanently kill the Survivors during the course of the match if the difficulty is high enough while the Infected can be spawned into the game in countless numbers. Survivor Bots will not initiate certain events in the game, leaving that decision in the hands of the player. However the Survivor Bots can shoot and defend themselves to a certain extent and also have certain weapon preferences. The player must choose whether he or she looks after him or herself or attempts to look after the ineffective Survivor Bots. Often a single player may have to intentionally incapacitate a Survivor Bot to ensure that the Bot does not waste resources. Some players choose to abandon the Survivor Bots while other players intentionally kill the Survivor Bots themselves in order to better allocate resources or to challenge themselves. The narrative of survival mutates into that of solo survival depending on the player.

Cooperative or Conflicting Narratives

When other players are involved, the broad narratives of survival and the Survivors' defeat may change. For example, there could be a selfish player in cooperative mode who strives for his or her own survival above all else. This type of player may sabotage the cooperative survival narrative by leaving other players in the clutches of the Infected when they require assistance or hoarding the majority of the medical supplies. Other players, called griefers, may intentionally sabotage the survival narrative in an effort to aggravate their teammates or amuse themselves without any thoughts to their own survival beyond existing to annoy the other players. In other cases, there are players who enjoy killing their own teammates. These players actively run counter to the game's collective narrative of cooperative survival amongst the Survivors. Not all causes of conflicting narratives are negative or fueled by ill will. Some players may not be skilled in playing an FPS like *Left 4 Dead* and its sequel. While these players may mean no harm, they can create conflicting narratives through their inexperience. In contrast to unskilled players there may be players who become aggravated by their team members' lack of experience and may harass their teammates through voice communications or through the chat box. Theoretically in Versus mode, where the "us vs. them" mentality features other players as the enemy rather than the AI, conflicting narratives would be less likely to exist within the team. This is not the case. The same issues that plague cooperative campaigns can occur for both the Survivors and the Special Infected teams. Unskilled players, griefers, or easily aggravated players can join either team and create

conflicting narratives within teams in a mode where the battle for which narrative to become the fulfilled narrative in that instance of gameplay already exists.

However, the game developers have made it possible to handle players that do not fit the collective narrative shared by the majority of the players. When a player starts a campaign he or she can decide if the campaign is private or public. Private campaign lobbies allowed only invited players to join the campaign. Public lobbies allow anyone to join. The second step that allows the player to control the narrative is the voting system. The player who set up the room for the campaign can choose which campaign and level, but the other players must consent to that decision to begin the campaign. The lobby allows players to communicate through text or speech regarding what they plan to do whether that be play style, who plays what Survivor, or whatever factor that requires discussion. Lastly, if an unsatisfactory player has not been weeded out yet, players can vote to ban the dissenting narrative and player. Other players can be invited to replace the disruptive player or a player can take a break from gameplay by allowing a Survivor Bot to take over. Alternatively if the particular campaign or level does not suit the players, they can pick another area. While the voting system is a useful tool, the player should keep in mind that if their narrative and play style conflict with the other players they too can be kicked out of the lobby and the game.

Canonical Narrative and Issues with Canonical Narrative in *Left 4 Dead* series and *The Sacrifice*

On September 14, 2010, Valve released the graphic novel *The Sacrifice* and on October 5th, 2010 Valve released "The Sacrifice" as a DLC (downloadable content) campaign for both *Left 4 Dead* and *Left 4 Dead 2*, revealing issues with the notion of canonical narrative in a medium that allows the reader and player to defy the canon. *The Sacrifice* graphic novel established Bill as the canonical sacrifice for the campaign. Through the graphic novel further insight into the Survivors of *Left 4 Dead* are revealed to the reader and player. *The Sacrifice* began in media res with Bill's thoughts and his sacrifice. It transitioned between the Survivors during the first week of the Infection before they met the other Survivors, the events leading up to *The Sacrifice*, and then the events of *The Sacrifice*. The death of Zoey's father, Bill's escape from the hordes of Infected before fully recovering from surgery and the progressing isolation of the Survivors before they met each other were the most notable stories in the *The Sacrifice*. Throughout the course of the story, Bill stressed that the Survivors must do what they can to survive, "we gotta look out for our own. Or **we will die**" (Valve 135). Bill, who was revealed to have no one left or willing to visit him, found another family through Zoey, Francis, and Louis. Zoey found a surrogate father figure through Bill. Unfortunately, the Survivors learned that they have been transmitting the virus all over Philadelphia as asymptomatic carriers. With the infectious potential of the Survivors, they had been perpetuating the narrative of survival since they unwittingly spread the cause of the Infection everywhere they went. Zoey tried to convince Bill that the possibility of fighting back against the Infection with the rest of humanity exists. However, Bill most

likely came to the conclusion that the only path to survival for their group was if the Survivors go into seclusion, away from the already Infected and non-Infected humans alike. The narrative of survival would be achieved through seclusion, but at the cost of forgoing the rest of humanity and looking out for only their own as Bill would put it. If the Survivors continued attempting to find other uninfected individuals or asymptomatic carriers, the narrative never ends. Near the end of *The Sacrifice* in the face of the unending hordes of Infected and Special Infected, Bill chose the only path he believed he could take, a suicidal run for the sake of his fellow Survivors. As Bill struggled through the waves of enemies, he thought, "You'll never stop comin', do you? Every time I think we're **done**...Every time I think, 'She's finally safe...' 'I can finally **rest**...' There you are again. Like a bad nightmare. **And I have had. Enough**" (Valve 168). These thoughts strengthen the idea of a never-ending narrative for the Survivors as long as they continue trying to fight. Bill trudged on with these thoughts, "Almost there. **Do** it, you old useless bastard. Get to work. Get them out of here. Get them safe. **Don't let her down**" (Valve 171). He attempted to keep his hopes up through believing that he would live long enough to see his "family" survive, but by page 173, the illustrations of page 2 are repeated, but this time without his inner dialogue, "All I ever wanted was for you to be safe. I'd sacrifice another hundred people to **keep** you safe. I'd sacrifice **myself**. 'Course... That don't mean I'll go down **easy**" (Valve 2). The father-daughter relationship between Bill and Zoey manifested most strongly in Bill's thoughts during his sacrificial run and in the beginning of *The Sacrifice*, where Bill thought, "Zoey, Louis. Francis. You're Safe"

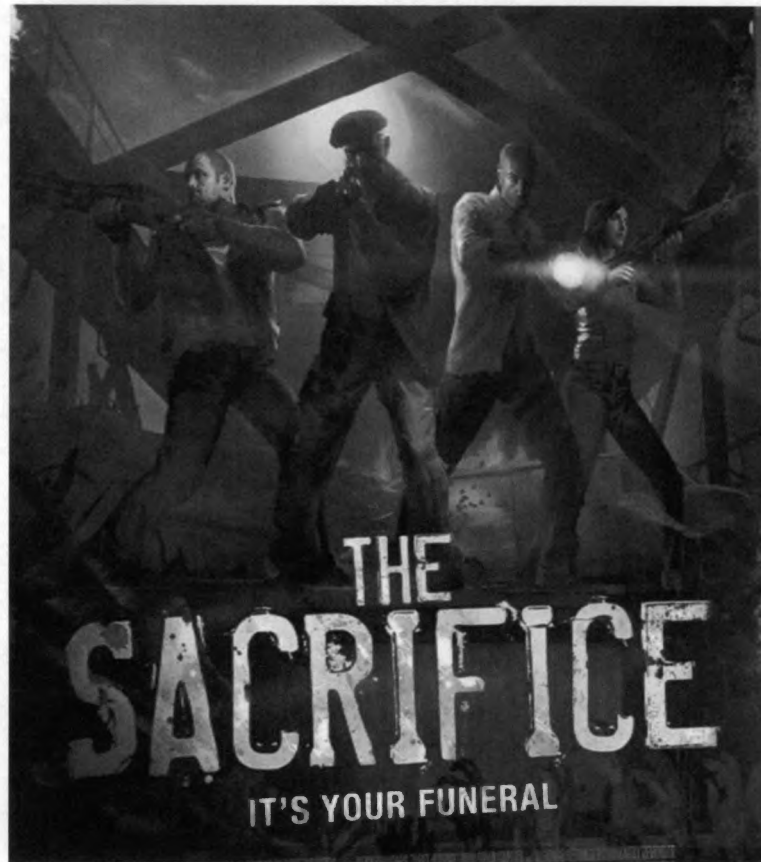


Figure 9: Movie poster for The Sacrifice campaign in *Left 4 Dead* and *Left 4 Dead 2*.

From left to right: Francis, Bill, Louis, and Zoey.

(Valve 1) with Zoey as the first person that came to mind. In the end of *The Sacrifice* the remaining survivors mourn the loss of their greatest comrade and family member. Zoey ends the dialogue of the graphic novel with "we look after our own" (Valve 177). The three remaining Survivors can be seen heading towards an island via sailboat, Bill's plan of escape.

Through the playable campaign version of "The Sacrifice," Valve further supported the notion of Bill's sacrifice as the favored choice. Figure 9 depicts the movie



Figure 10: *Left 4 Dead 2* Supreme Sacrifice Achievement.



Figure 11: *Left 4 Dead 2* Kill Bill Achievement.

poster loading screen for "The Sacrifice" campaign. The artist for the movie poster depicted Bill with the sun behind his head. The light could be considered a halo, not unlike those seen in paintings depicting saints. In addition to the halo, Bill did not have his characteristic cigarette in his mouth, perhaps referencing the last smoke he had in the graphic novel as well as the idea that the loss of such a persistent detail would mean that something will happen to Bill. The tagline "It's your funeral" also refers to the requirement of a sacrifice. Along with the movie poster of "The Sacrifice," the achievements for the campaign support the dead Bill narrative. In some video games the player can earn achievements by completing specific goals. In the case of "The Sacrifice," the player earns the achievement "Supreme Sacrifice" as seen in Figure 10 for completing the campaign. As the tombstone indicates, there is no way to complete the campaign without sacrificing a Survivor. If the Survivors choose not to sacrifice anyone, the Director would continue to spawn Infected until the enemies overwhelm the Survivors, the Survivors make the choice, or they quit the campaign. There is no way to save the sacrificial Survivor once he or she has done their job. The game will cut to a sepia colored cinematic that would normally depict rescue, but instead focuses on the



Figure 12: Left: Bill's corpse in the generator room in *The Passing: Port level of Left 4 Dead 2*. Right: Bill's last stand in *The Sacrifice: Part 4* Page 174.

death of the sacrifice as he or she is overwhelmed by the infected. The words "In memory of" followed by the name of the sacrificial Survivor or player would appear over where he or she fell. If the sacrificed Survivor is Bill, the achievement "Kill Bill" will be awarded to the participants of the campaign. As seen in Figure 11 Bill has a golden halo. In *Left 4 Dead* only the sacrificial players can earn the achievements, making the choice a powerful one to the individual player. Further supporting Bill as the most probable sacrifice is the fact that Bill has the largest pool of response lines when he sacrifices himself, many of them being variations of "Do not follow me" (Valve) and "Take care of each other" (Valve) as he expresses how much the other Survivors meant to him. If the sacrificial Survivor is not Bill, Bill expresses his regret in various lines such as:

Zoey!!! It wasn't supposed to be you!

No, No, Not Zoey.

Zoey! It wasn't supposed to end like this.

Francis, I will not forget you.

Francis, you beautiful son of a bitch you did it!

Louis, you weren't supposed to die.

Louis, Louis, goddamnit Louis!!

Lastly, in "The Passing," the *Left 4 Dead 2* campaign that occurs canonically after the events of "The Sacrifice," players can see Bill's corpse in the room he was last found in *The Sacrifice* as seen in Figure 12. The campaign was most likely named so to commemorate the passing of Bill.

Despite all of the overwhelming evidence that points to a favored narrative of a sacrificial Bill, the player can still choose to sacrifice another Survivor. The ability to sacrifice someone other than Bill presents an odd dilemma. The choice to defy the Bill narrative could accommodate for a Survivor Bot Bill who would be unable to sacrifice himself since Bots have little agency, a Bill who died before he could become the sacrifice, or a Bill who decided not to be the sacrifice or failed. However, unlike the ending to *The Sacrifice*, Zoey, Francis, and Louis were still at the bridge, possibly mourning Bill while trying to live up to the idea of protecting their "own." In the events of the campaign "The Passing" the *Left 4 Dead* Survivors stay on the bridge. Zoey, Francis, and Louis do not attack the Survivors of *Left 4 Dead 2*. Instead, they assist the *Left 4 Dead 2* Survivors by giving them cover through suppressing fire or sniping Special Infected that threaten the new Survivors. "Our own" becomes other Survivors instead of

the core *Left 4 Dead* group. If this change in variation is valid, certainly another Survivor becoming the sacrifice in the events of the campaign could also be a valid choice since the death of a Survivor for the sake of his or her fellows, the core aspect of the narrative, remains irrefutable.

Which narrative the player decides to uphold falls underneath the overarching narrative of the *Left 4 Dead* series. The name of the series holds several connotations that may enrich those narratives. *Left 4 Dead* may refer to the fact that the Survivors are left for dead by the government and that there are four Survivors in each game of the series. "Left for dead" may also refer to the play style of some players where if a Survivor cannot pull his or her own weight, he or she is left to the Infected. Alternatively the title of the series can be fought against depending on the types of player that exist. Some players may insist on leaving no one behind in defiance to the title. It is also possible that all of the narrative choices are viable due to the nature of the *Left 4 Dead* series because there will be different players starring as the various Survivors. However what should also be considered is what the narrative of survival could become. If the Survivors strove to live, they create a narrative of death stemming from their status as asymptotic carriers. Should the Survivors give up or make sacrificial choices like Bill, they create a narrative of survival for others. Although these simultaneous alternative narratives are not as refined as those explored by Borges, the dilemma could be considered a version of his "The Other Tiger" where in "writing of one tiger, it is precisely, the *other* that Borges is describing" (Christ 53). In describing survival one describes death. When describing

death one describes survival. While the same general form of the narrative may seem the same, the ways that the gameplay and players create the narrative differ. What seems to be one narrative can quickly mutate into another.

Chapter 3: *Team Fortress 2*

Narrative Benefiting from Player and Reader Feedback

Team Fortress 2 unlike the *Left 4 Dead* series began with little narrative, but evolved in response to catering to the players. The game's predecessor, *Team Fortress*, began as a modification (mod) of *Quake*. Eventually it was re-released as *Team Fortress Classic* due to popular response from players. Although *Team Fortress 2* shares little in common with its predecessor, the game is rooted in player feedback. On the Team Fortress website's comic portion the page contains these statements regarding the development of *Team Fortress 2*'s story:

TF2 didn't start with a lot of story. There wasn't room for one. But as the updates got more ambitious, we found the perfect way to explore the mercs' world: comics. Over the years, the comics have spawned ancillary characters, then assistants to the ancillary characters. Companies mentioned in passing became global empires three generations old. The game that started as a handful of guys in a desert shooting at each other slowly blossomed into the most labyrinthine story in Valve history.

Initially, *Team Fortress 2* contained a simplistic story: in an alternate version of the 1800s-1950s, two companies, RED (Reliable Excavation & Demolition) and BLU (Builders League United), hired nine mercenaries to claim various areas. These mercenaries made up the classes of *Team Fortress 2*: Sniper, Spy, Medic, Pyro, Heavy, Scout, Soldier, Demoman, and Engineer. Valve introduced the mercenaries through short

biographies based on various cultural stereotypes formed in the 1950s and "Meet the Class" videos where the mercenaries are interviewed by an unseen cameraman. Players picked a map, then a side, and finally their class and adjustments to weapons or cosmetics. Eventually the RED versus BLU conflict expanded into a centuries old feud between two brothers, Redmond and Blutarch Mann, and the characters that made up the iconic classes became more fleshed out with deeper histories. However, multiple copies of the same class could exist at the same time, making it difficult to create a narrative since there would be different versions of the same character established through the comics, class gameplay interactions, or some amalgamation of both. Death, depending on the server or map, is not permanent and the penalty for the player would be waiting for his or her character to respawn, taking away the seriousness of death that the *Left 4 Dead* and *Portal* series had. Due to the nature of the game as an FPS with different playable modes, there could never be any strong influence to the narrative that players could wield through gameplay under normal circumstances. RED or BLU could win countless small battles, but they would always be in a perpetual stalemate.

However, as the developers became more ambitious, they found ways to include the players and fans in the narrative as seen through the "WAR! Update" in 2009. The "WAR! Update" introduced the Announcer as a character in the world of *Team Fortress 2*. The Announcer initially was a disembodied voice that would provide both teams information on the status of the map. However, a popular fan piece by the artist Makani

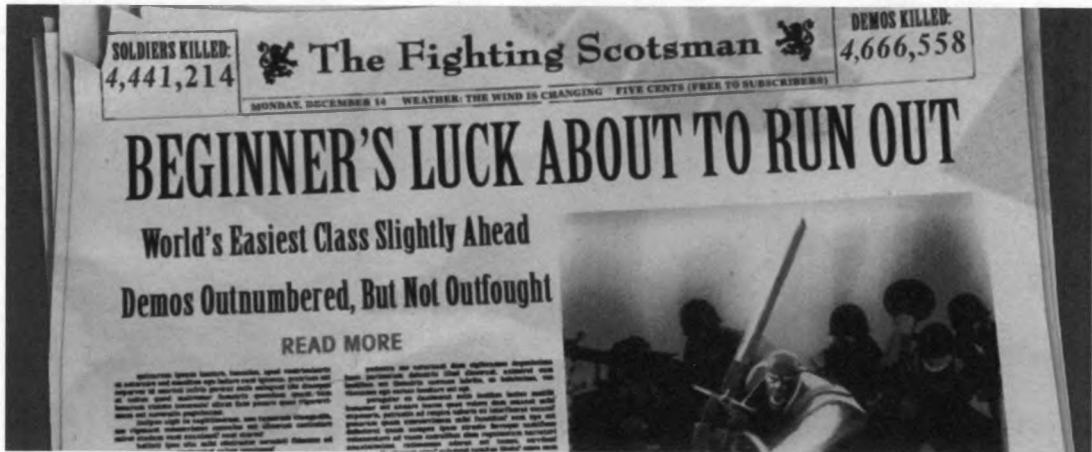


Figure 13: Demoman Propaganda from 2009 "WAR! Update." Day 4

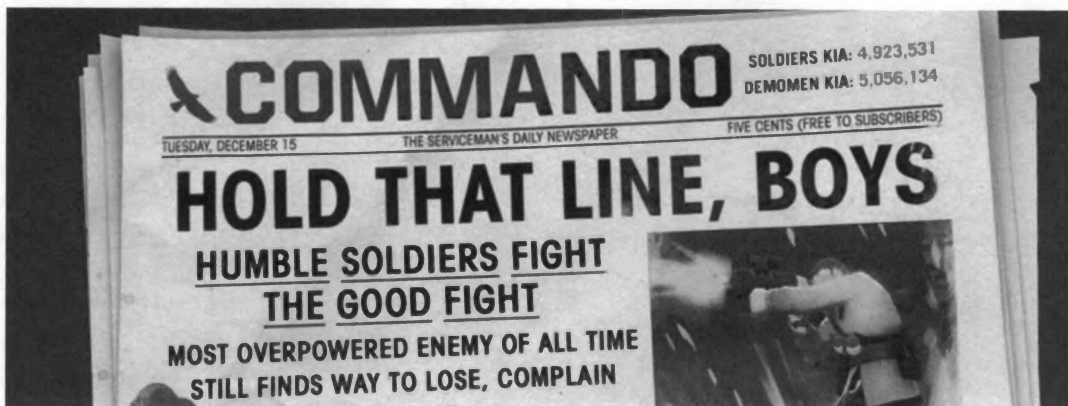


Figure 14: Soldier Propaganda from 2009 "WAR! Update." Day 5



Figure 15: Soldier Victory from 2009 "WAR! Update." Day 7

popularized the idea of the Announcer as a character in her own right and Valve purchased Makani's design ("Administrator"). The Announcer, now called the Administrator played a key role in the "WAR! Update" which was also known as the "Demoman VS Soldier Update." The Administrator discovered that the BLU Soldier and the RED Demoman have become friends, a relationship that she finds unacceptable. "Nothing kills a friendship faster than a **healthy competition**," (Valve 5) claimed the Administrator in the *WAR!* comic. For the players the healthy competition was which class could kill more Demomen or Soldiers. Whoever won between the Soldier and the Demoman would be rewarded with a new gameplay item. In order to participate players must choose the Demoman or the Soldier as their class and kill the opposing class. As a means to stir up the community, the information on the update was written in the perspectives of the RED Demoman and the BLU Soldier of the *WAR!* comic, each character expressing his characteristic perspective on the conflict. Players were also encouraged to participate in a Propaganda Contest with various prizes to be awarded in-game. Every day during the update, the Team Fortress website would publish a newspaper parody not unlike those in the 1940s as seen in Figures 13-15. The newspaper articles were also written in the perspectives of the Demoman and Soldier with some "neutral" papers that introduced more items into the game. Both the Demoman- and Soldier-themed newspapers as seen in Figures 13 and 14 contained common complaints from the player-base about the other classes. "World's Easiest Class" (Figure 13) referred to the relatively simplistic style of the Soldier which mostly involved aiming a rocket



Figure 16: BLU Soldier's Reaction in the WAR! Page 21.

launcher and firing. When compared to the Demoman who must consider how his grenades bounce or the placement of his traps, the Soldier appeared to be easier to play. In response Demoman have been considered the most "overpowered" (Figure 14) class due to the ability of the Demoman to place traps and his mobility accomplished through well-timed explosions and jumps.

While the Administrator's tone seemed malicious, the developers and writers kept the contest relatively genial. Part of this was accomplished through utilizing the overly exaggerated personalities of the two classes. The Demoman's portion of the WAR! comic portrayed him and his proud elderly mother. His mother stressed that "it wasn't **easy** bringing you up Scottish, lad. . . yer da walked fifteen miles in the rain to blow up the queen of England for a **nickel!**" (Valve 12) Her lecture confirmed the Scottish background of the Demoman and somewhat explained the bombastic nature of his upbringing and his career. The Administrator's assistant, Miss Pauling, appealed to the Demoman's Scottish pride with an arsenal of new weapons catering to his background

such as a sword "slow-forged for **generations** in the bowels of captured English Kings" (Valve 14). For the Soldier, various artistic choices in the comic accentuated his insanity and general paranoia. Starting on page 16 the panels are black and white in a stereotypical pulp comic style. However, when the BLU Soldier entered the comic he and his actions blare across the screen in intense bright colors. The colors suited the Soldier's belligerent attitude and insanity. A colored reproduction of the panel in Figure 16 would reveal the BLU Soldier colored in with the small wall on the right in grey scale and the larger wall in color. In addition to the comic depictions of the RED Demoman and the BLU Soldier, various unused voice clips hinted that the two are still friends ("Demoman Responses") ("Soldier Responses"). These voice clips would have either the Demoman or Soldier shouting "DOMINATED" followed by a quieter line reassuring their friendship such as "I do like you, it's just for show." ("Demoman Responses") and "I'm still your friend" ("Soldier Responses"). Although these voice clips went unused, it is possible that the friendship between the RED Demoman and the BLU Soldier still exists due to the nonsensical nature of *Team Fortress 2*.

Since YouTube celebrities and videos seemed to be rising in popularity, Valve launched its next attempt to allow players in on the action for creating narrative through the May 5, 2011 "Replay Update." The introduction of the "Replay Update" did not change gameplay so much as allow players to film their matches, upload them, and share them on either Steam, Valve's program for video game playing and networking, or YouTube (Replay Update). As with any of the major updates, the "Replay Update" came

with various achievements and an accompanying comic, *Meet the Director*. The achievements could be earned through saving, editing, and publishing gameplay videos. As extra incentive to start producing, a special hat and taunts would be awarded to players who could meet certain goals such as 1000 views or more on YouTube. The "Replay Update" also started "The First Annual Saxxy Awards" where players could upload videos into various categories for the chance of winning a unique in-game item. Twenty different categories allowed players a wide range of video types to submit. Players did not have to be skilled at the game to capture footage for submission. Categories were spread across different types of gameplay as well as players. Some videos could be displays of skill in the game, good timing, coordination or humor. Other submissions could be a result of staging, scripting, and skillful editing and directing if players were ambitious enough. While the quality may not be as good as what Valve or skilled members of the player community have done, the "Replay Update" allowed the common player to record and upload footage without the need to invest in video production. If anything else the update allowed access to a player who normally would be unable to share and produce content. The update was a success seeing as how the SFM Team had announced the winners of the Fifth Annual Saxxy Awards on November 18, 2015 (The 2015 Saxxy Awards Winners Have Been Revealed).



Figure 17: *Meet the Director* Page 1

Meet the Director drew attention back to the "Meet the Class" videos and provided insight into the "filming" of some of those videos while enriching the characterization of some of the mercenaries and other characters in the *Team Fortress 2* setting, despite the Director's desire to create his own narrative for the mercenaries. Players who have seen the "Meet the Class" videos will be able to recognize some of the settings from the videos in *Meet the Director*. On page one players would be able to recognize the Sniper's van as well as the road and the bobble head trinket in the van. However, Figure 17 showed a less than happy Sniper due to the The Director's prodding and attempts to conjure a narrative around the Sniper as seen by how many times he taps the bobble head and the focus on the bobble head for several panels (Valve 1). The "taks" sounds effects covered the negative terms for the Sniper's job, acting as a way for Sniper to control both his temper and his story. The Director presented himself as haughty in the

opening question, "If you could pick *one word* to describe yourself, Mister Mundy, *What would it be?* . . . I'm going to answer that for you: '**victim**'" (Valve 1). He could not accept that Sniper was simply a professional and continued aggravating him. Although Miss Pauling informed the Sniper that The Director was only there for public relations, The Administrator told Miss Pauling the truth, "He's too stupid to divine our reasons for commissioning him. Too arrogant to *listen* to anything our mercs are actually *telling* him. And he records *everything*" (Valve 3). She intends to use the information the mercenaries told The Director to keep them alert and teach them to be aware of who they talk to and about what. In the last page of the comic The Administrator told Miss Pauling, "We'll need to find some **new** directors" (Valve 10). The statement implies that any of the other players who participate in filming could be a potential victim of The Administrator or already "working" for her. *Meet the Director* as a whole displayed an interpretation on narrative. One should be aware of the narratives that others are projecting or pushing for their own use as well as making sure that the desired narrative is not vulnerable for exploitation.

The next attempt at involving the players in the creation of content and narrative for *Team Fortress 2* was on May 17, 2013 through the "Robotic Boogaloo Update," but the update had mixed results. "Robotic Boogaloo "was advertised as "the first entirely community created update" (TF2 Team). On the *Team Fortress* blog the TF2 team stated, "this update is 100% created by the TF2 community. And when we say everything, we mean *everything*-- the in-game content, the update hub website, the animated short, the

comic, even the splash images in the Steam store." The plot of *Death of a Salesbot* (the comic accompanying "Robotic Boogaloo") began with the third Mann brother named Grey, who was introduced in a prior update as the most intelligent brother during the update focusing on cooperative defense mode against robots, realizing that he was not gaining money from his robot army scheme. Grey decided that selling metallic hats to the mercenaries to rectify his money woes would be the best course of action and a future version of the Engineer warns the mercenaries against opening the crates holding the hats since the hats would lead to the "Hat Wars of the 1990s" (Cat Bountry 12). The overall plot seems ludicrous even for *Team Fortress 2*. At first glance it appears the player community is making a weak parody of the game, but there is purpose in parody when considering what Hutcheon has considered about the subject:

Parody is, therefore an exploration of difference and similarity; in metafiction it invites a more literary reading, a recognition of literary codes. But it is wrong to see the end of this process as mockery, ridicule, or mere destruction. Metafiction parodies and imitates as a way to a new form which is just as serious and valid, as synthesis [. . .] (25)

However, the story behind the update is rooted in reality. Games and their updates can "provide a representation trace of both individual and collective activity" (Steinkuehler 98). With this in mind this particular update could serve to examine how some players in the community felt after up to six years of playing the game, watching the narrative grow, and experiencing successes and blunders. Perhaps, some players felt that the community

of *Team Fortress 2* had become too obsessed with cosmetic hats and that the game felt more like a "hat simulator" than an FPS game. Enough players decided that this update would provide the best opportunity for criticism and exploration of the game. Grey Mann opened *Death of a Salesbot* with exasperation since he had nothing to show for his supposedly brilliant scheme while "**Mann Co.** [reports] record profits selling weapon upgrade to the **very men** fighting [the] robots, with the same money [he uses] to **power** them!" (Cat Bountry 2) The player turned writer drew attention to what he or she considered an outrageous step even for *Team Fortress 2* by having the "intelligent" Mann brother realize the flaw behind his plans. During the Mann vs. Machine game mode the robots dropped money, which apparently powered them. Along with the strange update, the introduction of Grey Mann may not have been well received by players since he more or less came out of nowhere while other characters such as the Administrator or Miss Pauling slowly inched their way into the storyline of the game and into characterization. While *Team Fortress 2* has an unusual amount of abnormal gameplay ideas or characterizations, some players such as the writer for *Death of a Salesbot* may have thought the notion was too unusual even for a game where mercenaries fight over gravel. However, Grey Mann becoming as silly as his supposed brothers makes him a less threatening character than his murderous introduction into the *Team Fortress 2* stories.

The other main criticism that the community based update may have focused on could be the mounting consumerism of *Team Fortress 2*. The Robo Community Crate resembles the "Mann Co. Supply Crates" that were introduced in 2010 ("Robotic

Boogaloo"). These supply crates would flood players' inventories and would be completely useless without spending money or trading for keys to open the crates. The items in the robotic crates may be "robotic" counterparts to items that already exist in the game, further emphasizing the possible frustration towards *Team Fortress 2*'s marketing. Alternatively, the robotic crates and items could have been a test to see if Valve was truly committed to a community-based update no matter how banal or seemingly unoriginal the content could be.

Whether the developers of *Team Fortress 2* will respond to these possible criticisms is not quite clear. Valve has become more open to featuring community or player made content, but not on the scale of the first community based update. If the "Robotic Boogaloo" was not meant as solely criticism or criticism at all, it could be considered a fairly decent attempt at creating new content, albeit the attempt seemed to be conservative in technique and execution.

Narrative and Story Through Gameplay Experience with Other Players and Conflicts and Agreements with Narrative Perpetuated by Valve

When Valve first started delving into creating supplementary materials for *Team Fortress 2*, inconsistencies in characterization for some mercenaries created glaringly different personas for individuals who were supposed to be essentially the same person. However, these inconsistencies pose a unique position to players since they have not only the source material to draw from but their experience in the game playing against or as the mercenaries. Of the nine mercenaries the Sniper presents the most incongruous

narrative or image compared to gameplay and many player expectations. Originally the Sniper was portrayed as a grim, but respectful professional assassin in "Meet the Sniper" ("Meet the Sniper"). The video depicted the Sniper's interview with an unseen cameraman as he discusses the details of his job interspersed with other sequences such as him trying to speak to his parents over the phone, preparing himself for the ideal shot. His parting words to the cameraman are "[b]e polite. Be efficient. Have a plan to kill everyone you meet" ("Meet the Sniper") with each sentence being separated by short clips of him taking his hat off in respect for the dead, assassinating other mercenaries, and reloading his sniper rifle. Before the video ended a cut back to the phone showed the Sniper trying to speak to his mother instead of his father ("Meet the Sniper"). From the contents of the video the Sniper would be considered a relatively well-adjusted person compared to the other mercenaries.

However, as Valve developed more updates to *Team Fortress 2*, the depiction of the Sniper drastically changed. The anticipated "Sniper vs. Spy Update" was expected to be a narrative of skill in a dangerous game of cat and mouse between the two classes. On April 1, 2009, Valve published a poster emblazoned with the title "Your enemies will taste your power! With JARATE. The Jar-based Karate" (Walker) as a blog post. Initially many players thought the Jarate was merely an April Fool's joke. When the "Sniper vs. Spy Update" went live on May 21, 2009, the formerly professional assassin could trade his sniper rifle in for a bow and arrow set called "The Huntsman," his secondary weapon for a car battery taped to a shield called "the Razorback" or a jar filled with questionable

yellow liquid to "practice Jarate" ("The Sniper Update"). As with many class-based updates many players assumed the roles of the Sniper and the Spy in anticipation for the new weapons earned through achievements. These achievements would range from simple tasks to events that required ideal timing and coordination. With the increased number of players choosing the Sniper and the Spy classes players began to notice something about the two classes: people who were horrible at the classes greatly overshadowed those with some measure of skill. A relatively unskilled Sniper goes unnoticed in a match so long as no one pays attention to the scoreboard. In the case of the unskilled Spy, there would often be screams of "Fire" as the Pyro class players did their usual surveillance routes. The larger volume of players made the apparent issues of the Spy and Sniper classes obvious as the bottom of the scoreboard would host Snipers and Spies. The lack of coordination would result in half of the teams being Snipers or Spies with their own agendas beyond what the goal of the match was. By the end of the update the narrative of the Sniper as a professional was nearly unsalvageable. In the minds of players he went from a relatively normal character to an unbalanced urine jar-hoarding lunatic or a completely unskilled buffoon.

Although the Sniper has undergone a more or less permanent change to his narrative and character in the eyes of the player, that change could also happen to other characters and players through simply switching out weapons and accessories. Certain weapons and cosmetics could negatively or positively affect the image and characterization of a player in the eyes of his or her fellow teammates or enemies, subtly

affecting gameplay. For example, equipping the "Cheater's Lament," a cosmetic item in the form of a glowing halo, may aggravate other players due to the history of the item. On September 2, 2009, Valve awarded the item to players who did not use external idling programs to increase their chances to gain hats or those who had played at least once since Valve implemented the item drop system ("Cheater's Lament"). The reward system for the item was not documented in the patch notes initially, much to the annoyance of many players ("Cheater's Lament"). Equipping certain weapons may signal to other players that the player is unskilled since some weapons require less time to learn or can cover certain weaknesses of the player while revealing more such as equipping an item that protects from melee attacks, but not from bullets. Many weapons have small penalties to stats in response to what boons they grant. Even before players have selected their weapons or "loadout," they may be judged by the class they pick or even the team they join. Player experience may be defined by fellow players in a game like *Team Fortress 2*. Allies may defend the player or leave him or her to the enemy.

In a game like *Team Fortress 2* where players enter and leave matches quickly and with little effort, whatever collective narrative that players can make depends heavily on feedback between the community and developers. While it is possible to create micronarratives of what happened on a map at a certain time for a RED Spy and a BLU Sniper, a substantial narrative depended on the developers' abilities to motivate thousands of players. Responses between the community and the developers strengthen narrative bonds and camaraderie through enjoyment in a shared goal.

Conclusion:

Graphic novels and video games when used together can strengthen a narrative where the other cannot. Video games can provide cinematic cut-scenes, sounds, dialogue and other types of tactile and audio feedback to the player for the sake of conveying sensations and information that may evolve into a cohesive story to be shared between the player and the video game or other players. Graphic novels can improve the narrative of games that require a faster pace and where important details can be missed by the player, but not by the readers who can leisurely take their time. They can act as physical ties between the video game and the player. Other mediums such as videos, blogs, and podcasts may also work to provide various platforms and approaches that players and readers can use to form a narrative. The player or players work between the various mediums to piece together the narrative whether these pieces are voice clips, scraps of information gleaned from hidden links in web comics or other information seemingly innocuous by itself, but providing a wealth of knowledge that informs the narrative. There are even narratives where the player achieves full understanding through watching a movie, reading a novel, or playing an installment of the game in a certain order. Missing an installment in the narrative will not completely hinder the player's understanding, but will create an altered narrative to what the developers may have intended. The ergodic narrative requires work, but usually becomes a fulfilling journey to experience.

How much players can contribute to a narrative or control a narrative heavily depends on the type of story that is already there. Does the player intrude on an existing narrative? Does he enrich it? Does she run counter to it? Some video games could be considered playable stories. Some of these games do not require much input from the players beyond a few key presses to continue the dialogue or start the next events. Other versions of the playable story would resemble "Choose Your Own Adventure" texts or hypertexts where the players decide which branch of the narrative they wish to explore. Narrative games may sometimes feel like there are not many narratives to pick from, but usually depend on the notion of conflicting narratives to create tension. The players must decide if the narrative is one they wish to enforce or one they wish to cast aside in the hope that if the players continue exploring the narrative or the environment, they can make an informed decision based on better understanding of the context. Lydia Hazera, in "Strategies for Reader Participation in the Works of Cortázar, Cabrera Infante and Varas Llosa," claims:

Cortázar believes that a text must incite the reader to participate, i.e., it must be material in gestation: the experiential immediacy must be transmitted through words but using the least aesthetic words possible. It is only through such a text in gestation, conveying experiential immediacy, that the reader will be aroused to become a coparticipant and cosufferer of the creator's experience at the same moment and in the same form. When the text and reader converge, not only does the text come into existence

but a new text is made possible. Although the new text is controlled by the limits of the author's text, it is new because it has been enhanced by elements provided by the reader's imagination. (21)

While narrative is not interchangeable with text there is the possibility that video games would fit the text that Cortázar believes could create player participation. Every game discussed in this thesis has the possibility of becoming such a text. The games require some form of immediate response and experience. Words are not exchanged, but the barest twitches or the slightest nudge of a controller can translate into meters of effort within the video game's narrative. In the case of video games with active communities and feedback from the creators of the game, it is possible to have an inkling of what the creators experienced, especially in the case where the developers would share their insight during game development and planning. Every time a player participates in a video game the narrative changes ever so slightly. The player may have gained insight regarding how to deal with an enemy or problem. He or she may stumble across an issue sooner in the video game because of some slight miscalculation that the player cannot perceive. Perhaps the player has decided on a different narrative or a small change in detail that could impact the narrative. Small choices like always going left, making sure there are enough materials left, or something else could make or break a new narrative. Certainly the player is limited by what the developer of the video game has designed. However, there is no fun in a narrative that always bends to the will of the player.

Different, but not always conflicting narratives, in a multiplayer game enrich the gameplay and experience. Each unique narrative and the experience the co-narrators/players bring with them allows for endless possibilities. How much narrators immerse themselves in the character they control could provide a new means of completing the goals in the game. Even if the story may seem ludicrous such as in *Team Fortress 2*, there is still a collective narrative to explore and participate in with other players. Whether the players would disrupt other players' narratives, enforce them, alter them, or impress their own upon others, their experience allows a new text to germinate because for a period of time, whether short or long, the player acts as a new factor to another's narrative understanding or even misunderstanding.

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