

Empathy and Identity in Digital Games: Towards a New Theory of Transformative Play

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the concept of *transformation* in digital games and posits it as a core pleasure of digital games that can be positioned within a new discourse of “transformative play”. The poetics of transformation are uniquely suited to particular forms of narrative play, and the power of transformative play has significant implications for the design of persuasive games. Transformative play supports a process of empathic identification with a new point-of-view or lived experience, which impacts how we understand games as persuasive cultural artifacts. We situate our argument at the intersection of two bodies of theory and practice. The first is *method acting*, which is perhaps best known for its capacity to profoundly transform an actor into his or her character. The second is *figured worlds* theory, which considers the dynamics through which both agency and identity are constituted within social and technological imaginaries. We then use these new theoretical perspectives to analyze examples from recent digital games that we see as producing the types of identification and empathy that arise from the pleasures of transformative play. We conclude with a set of themes for understanding and deploying transformative play within digital games.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8 [Personal Computing]: Games

General Terms

Design & Theory

Keywords

Transformation; Empathy; Identity; Games; Narrative; Method Acting; Figured Worlds

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of digital games has long considered the concept of “transformation” to be significant in understanding game experiences. Perhaps most famously, Janet Murray positioned it alongside *agency* and *immersion* as one of three “fundamental aesthetics” underlying computational media [27]. However, while

games scholarship has dedicated significant attention to unpacking the pleasures of agency [2,13,31,41] and immersion [1,11,12], transformation has received comparatively little attention. We speculate that this is in part due to a lack of clear design utility in how transformation was initially conceptualized by Murray. From a design standpoint, agency is readily mapped to facilitating meaningful choices within simulated worlds, and while it has often been misconstrued to mean “facilitating unrestricted freedom to act” in a game environment, the concept has still proven to have significant power in motivating design. Likewise, immersion is often interpreted in terms of either sensory fidelity, imaginative engagement with a game’s fiction, or the excitement of overcoming a challenge [12], three poetics that continue to motivate the design community. Transformation, in contrast, does not immediately suggest a clear set of design poetics; its functions often become subsumed in the rhetoric of immersion within a fictional world.

In this paper we seek to rescue and redeem transformation as a dominant pleasure of digital games, and to position it within a new discourse of “transformative play”. We contend that the poetics of transformation are uniquely suited to particular forms of narrative play, and that the power of transformative play has significant implications for the design of persuasive games. In particular, we contend that transformative play supports a process of empathic identification with a new point-of-view or lived experience, which affects how we understand games as persuasive cultural artifacts. We situate our argument at the intersection of two bodies of theory and practice that research in the study of digital games has yet to fully explore. The first is the theory and practice of *method acting*, which is perhaps best known for its capacity to profoundly transform an actor into his or her character. The second and perhaps more esoteric lens that we bring to bear is that of *figured worlds* theory, which considers the dynamics through which both agency and identity are constituted within social and technological imaginaries. We then use these new theoretical perspectives to analyze examples from recent digital games that we see as producing the types of identification and empathy that arise from the pleasures of transformative play. We conclude with a set of themes for understanding and deploying transformative play within digital games.

2. TRANSFORMATION IN DIGITAL MEDIA

Murray discusses how digital environments support transformative, make-believe roleplay where a player becomes a bird, a soldier, an elf [27]. However, she quickly diverges from this notion of identity transformation to instead focus on the general mutability of forms and environments within digital

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Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG 2015), June 22-25, 2015, Pacific Grove, CA, USA. ISBN 978-0-9913982-4-9. Copyright held by author(s).

environments rather than the diversity of roles a player can take on. In this sense, it seems that Murray has conflated “instability” with “transformation”: she discusses the notion of “kaleidoscopic narrative” in which many potential actions and outcomes are presented simultaneously and argues that it is necessary to create conventions for making sense of stories in such fragmented and fractal spaces.

The other aspect of transformation she discusses has to do with the power that comes from enacting events in a narrative. She argues that enacting a story within a digital narrative has more transformative power than witnessing more conventionally dramatized events because the enacted stories are more easily assimilated as personal experiences” [27:170]. Here she lays the groundwork for an understanding of *enactment* as a unique poetic of participatory media.

Green et al. discuss the notion of *transportation* into narrative worlds as one of the primary sources of media enjoyment [16]. They compare the experience of being transported to a narrative world with the concepts of immersion and flow; however, they also argue that much of the enjoyment of transportation comes from both “escaping the self” and “enduring transformation”. Being transported into a fictional world gives a media viewer an opportunity to vicariously experience new identities, other possible selves, and alternative life choices that support a process of self-expansion. Transformation also often has the benefit of providing the viewer with an experience that teaches them new knowledge or provides insight into a historical event or philosophical problem.

Transformation, here, is seen as something that is both temporary (the opportunity to experiment with different identities and then discard them) and lasting (transformation results in a changed perspective or worldview). This latter notion of lasting transformations is seen in the psychology literature around emotional engagement with a narrative text. Mar et al. suggest that one of the outcomes of deep emotional experiences of fiction is a transformed sense of self, citing research showing that readers who became deeply engaged in a fiction experienced both short term alterations of mood and long-term transformations to their self-perception and personality [25].

The concept of *transformative play* itself already exists in the world, albeit in different ways than we are using it here. Salen & Zimmerman discuss transformative play as “a special case of play that occurs when the free movement of play alters the more rigid structure in which it takes shape” [32]. This kind of play produces “emergent, unpredictable results”, and functions as a kind of resistance to established rules and structures. There is an element of our definition of transformative play that taps into this more chaotic and unpredictable understanding of “transformation” by acknowledging the power of identity transference and empathic understanding of a character. But we believe transformation and empathy are experiences that can be explicitly designed for; they do not only arise in a wild fashion through resistance to the designed play structures.

Closer to our perspective on transformative play, Barab et al., use the term to address concerns about the “gap” between the content of material in the traditional K-12 classroom and the so-called “real world” [4]. They argue that games can support a new form of engagement with educational material by enlisting the learner into an active role within a simulated world where they have

opportunities to apply their ongoing learning in a problem-solving context. They write:

More than a simulation, games support playing, allowing players to become someone and do things that we are unlikely to do in the ‘real world.’ During play, one engages a space of possibility, negotiating rules and roles and discovering the potentialities for growth within and across the boundaries of fantasy and ‘reality.’ Through play, we transcend the borders of reality, and it is this potential that, in our opinion, gives play the power to support meaningful learning. In the types of videogames we develop, the learner becomes a character that engages in storylines and takes on roles that the learner would not in real life. Ironically, it is the act of play and the affordances of the fictional world that legitimizes disciplinary content, providing learners with opportunities to engage in authentic and consequential disciplinary tasks not usually available in schools. [4]

We owe a debt to this work for coining the phrase *transformative play*, but seek to apply it more broadly within the study of digital games. To this end, we first turn to theories of method acting and interactive drama to understand a context in which identity transformation is a central concern.

3. METHOD ACTING

Fundamental to our arguments about the poetics of method acting and transformation is the insight that the structures of play and motivation in games are similar to the structures of enactment and motivation in theater practice. A close look at the exercises and activities employed in actor training reveals a strong connection between the “play” that happens on stage and the play that happens in contemporary games. Canonical texts on improvisation, such as Viola Spolin’s *Improvisation for the Theater*, are little more than collections of rule systems for in-person, multiplayer, real-time gaming [35]. In fact, she writes quite persuasively about the game-like nature of theatrical play, arguing that while game play might differ in *degree* from dramatic acting, that it is not different in *kind*. Likewise, many of the theorists and teachers of the Method regard performance and game-play as inextricably linked to each other. The primary goal of acting theorist Kurt Daw’s approach to teaching the Method is to get actors to abandon critical, analytical thought and to play freely [10]. To achieve this goal, he fills his book with exercises that are actually simple games, intended to structure the behaviors of players in order to lead them to the experiences of the creative state that he seeks to impart. The authors of training manuals and texts for actors know that the experience they are trying to impart lives in embodied practice, rather than linguistic knowledge. To this end, they employ *procedural rhetorics* [8] intended to create lived experiences of the desired state of mind from which a good performance emerges. This particular type of active learning also adheres to the principles articulated by James Gee about experiential learning and games [15].

The notion of “games as drama” is not new [20], but most approaches to “interactive drama” have been rooted in the application of improvisational theater principles to the development of AI-driven digital narratives [14,23,26,39]. A notable exception to this is the work of Manaro et al. who have applied the principles of Stanislavski’s system of method acting to

game design [24]. In our own previous work we have discussed how method acting provides a basis for participatory narrative experiences that emphasize the pleasures of *being in the story* and *performing the role of a character* [38]. Here we choose to focus on one particular aspect of acting theory that we believe has significant bearing on questions of identity: the notion of “outside->in” transformation.

3.1 A Brief Overview of the Method

At a very high level, contemporary theater has two broad approaches to the work of acting, which both have their roots in the work of Russian actor, director, and theorist Constantin Stanislavsky [7]. Over the course of his career, Stanislavski pioneered two very different but highly complementary approaches to acting which we can loosely term “Inside-Out” and “Outside-In”:

- **Inside-Out:** This approach focuses on connecting the *emotional memory* of the actor with the experiences of the character. Inside-Out Method acting works first through a deep analysis of the script and given circumstances. The actor builds many cognitive “layers” of reality inside his or her own head to create a lived experience of being the character, with the understanding that this imaginative commitment to the truth of the play will manifest in a performance that is perceptibly more lifelike and immediate for the audience.
- **Outside-In:** This approach instead emphasizes what Stanislavski called the “psychophysical” activities of the character. Outside-In Method acting works through embodied actions and external scaffoldings that are intended to elicit an internal cognitive transformation into a character.

Stanislavski’s early work emphasized the Inside-Out approach, relying primarily on emotional memory to motivate truthful performances. However, as his system matured, he began to attend more carefully to what he called the Method of Physical Actions that was more oriented towards Outside-In methods [7].

For a period of time, Method acting was split between these two approaches, with British actors primarily advocating for the Outside-In approach and proponents of the American Method favoring Inside-Out techniques. However, this has shifted in recent decades, with the work of influential Outside-In practitioners like Jerzy Grotowski, Keith Johnstone, and Anna Deveare Smith [17,19,21,33].

3.2 Sanford Meisner’s Principles of “Doing”

Sanford Meisner originated a perspective on the Method that more directly explored Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Actions. Acting theorist Brant Pope explores how Meisner’s action-oriented version of the Method differs from more traditional, emotion-oriented approaches. Pope does not claim to teach the “Meisner Method” (reserving that honor for the late Sanford Meisner) and instead describes a process of teaching acting that is greatly influenced by the work of Meisner. He contends that “the radical nature of Meisner’s work is expressed in the core principle of *doing*”, which emphasized the action on the stage and the reactions of other characters over the internal emotions of the actor [29:148]. Pope’s version of the Meisner

method instructs actors to not attempt to display how they are feeling but instead to identify what response or change their words and actions are seeking to elicit from the other actors in the scene. In doing this, the mood of the scene is made manifest in the social fabric of the *interaction* between actors, rather than in the individual performances of each player.

Pope argues that characterization is more effective when seen through the lens of another person. So, rather than trying to perform a character a certain way, a Meisner actor would focus on how he or she perceived and experienced the personality of the other characters in the scene. Pope argues that this focus on the other actor forces Meisner actors to reconceptualise conflict on stage as a “result of two people trying to change each other” [29:156]. In this new conception of conflict, actors are instructed to play the scene for “positive energy” instead of negative. This means focusing on how to effectively change the other character, even in brutal, knock-down-drag-out fights.

3.3 Method Acting and Character Voice

Meisner’s approach can be seen as a step on the path to more fully realized Outside-In strategies and techniques, such as the language oriented work of Anna Deveare Smith. Smith’s work starts with trying to master the words of her subject, focusing on the details of how her character speaks. This leads to a bodily transformation into that character: a physiological change that is necessary for the production of the language. For Smith, the act of repetition of a character’s language leads to an experience of becoming that person. She views words as a powerful form of action, and she argues that every individual does something unique and specific with language [21]. This aspect of Smith’s work has some interesting connections to Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia, the idea that we exist within intersecting fields of discourse and language [3]. One can also see some similarities to Meisner’s techniques, in particular his infamous repetition exercise in which actors repeat the same phrase back and forth for extended periods of time.

3.4 Creating a Sense of Life

Non-actors are not accustomed to thinking about acting in terms of choice. Acting certainly takes place within a set of highly ritualized constraints imposed by the playwright in the form of the script, the director in the form of the staging directions, and the technical configuration of the stage, sets, and props. However, Daw identifies choice as lying at the core of an actor’s practice. According to Daw, acting is about making the choice that the character is making, *as if for the first time*. This type of preordained choosing resembles the imaginative immersion of the “willing suspension of disbelief”. Daw describes this in terms of creating a sense of life on the stage, as if the action playing out on the stage is “spontaneously created at the instant the audience sees it” [10:10].

“Actors create this sense of life not by manipulating appearances, but by experiencing the action as it occurs. They are in the ‘here and now,’ a state where concentration on the details of the moment preclude the distractions of the past or future. In this sense, they have a great deal in common with those other ‘players,’ athletes. [10:10]”

For an actor, one pleasure of playing a role is experiencing making the choices of the character within the moment, as if they

were new. When done right, a performance is experienced as spontaneous and alive. To create this “*illusion of spontaneity*”, actors are taught to *choose* their actions fully and completely every time they enact them, to fully commit each action as-if he or she means it, even in situations that are highly scripted and rehearsed [10:129]. Daw teaches this by having actors perform scenes under a number of unusual seeming conditions. In one exercise, he instructs actors to consider *not* saying each line, before choosing to deliver the line. By “fully choosing” his actions, an actor *commits to the meaning of those actions*, as if he were experiencing them for the first time.

3.5 The “Magic If”

Benedetti also regards “artistic choices” as the heart of the acting process. He frames this in terms of the “Magic If”: actors playing roles are making choices constantly *as if* they are the character. These are deeply meaningful choices, even though they are within the confines of a scripted set of events. This notion of *as if* is key to much acting theory. It forms the core of Benedetti’s five steps of the acting process:

1. “You put yourself into the circumstances of your character *as if* it were your own circumstance;
2. You experience the needs of the character *as if* they were your own needs;
3. You allow yourself to form the same objectives the character chooses to satisfy those needs, and to care urgently about them *as if* they were your own objectives;
4. You allow yourself to do the things (the actions) the character does in order to try and achieve those objectives *as if* they were your own actions;
5. If you do all this, simply and completely, you begin to experience a natural process of transformation (the ‘magic if’). A new version of yourself, a new ‘me,’ begins to develop according to the same principles by which your personality developed in life.” [5:81–82]

For Benedetti, the process of transformation follows the process of commitment to the character and to his or her actions. An actor need not first fully imagine herself to be the character, she simply needs to agree to accept the character’s needs as her own and perform the actions from which the transformation will arise.

“Your experience of your character’s significant choices is the mechanism by which the Magic If produces transformation. When you have entered into your character’s circumstances as if they were your own, felt their needs as if they were your own, and *made the choices they make given those needs in those circumstances*, then action follows naturally and with it transformation.” [5:145]

Benedetti describes how action can also lead to evoking emotional states in the actor. He writes that actors need not be concerned with playing emotions; rather, they need to play actions and the emotional states will arise automatically from that process. This is a very strong approach to acting as an Outside-In practice: the actions and behaviors of the actor lead to emotional and cognitive transformations into a character.

In method acting, the notion of Outside-In transformation is used to account for the ways in which identity transformation arises

from actions and external structures, rather than purely psychological and emotional effort [5,10]. From this standpoint, aspects of transformation are involuntary, the product of the tight coupling of our bodies and our minds. If one does the things the character would do, as if one were the character, if one wears the clothes the character would wear, and moves the way the character would move, and speaks the words with character’s voice (as in the case of Anna Deavere Smith [21]), then one experiences a transformation into that character. However, perhaps the strongest evidence for the power of Outside-In transformation comes from the historical traditions of *Mask Work*.

3.6 Mask Work

The canonical discussion of “Mask Work” can be found in Keith Johnstone’s book *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* [19]. Johnstone is trained in a tradition of theatrical work using Masks (always capitalized) that he connects back to primordial rituals, but which has been formalized in a variety of traditions including Italian *commedia* and Japanese *Noh* theatre. Mask work uses masks (most commonly), but also costumes (as in the case of Chaplin’s Tramp character) as gateways into characters and identities that Johnstone argues exist within all human consciousness at some level. Johnstone describes the experience of seeing oneself in a mirror while wearing a good mask as “disturbing” and transformative, often leading to a “moment of crisis” where one feels that the Mask is going to take over [19:151]. He writes that “in a Mask class you are encouraged to ‘let go’, and allow yourself to become possessed” by the character [19:151]. Johnstone cites Stanislavski, who also wrote about the Mask state in *Building a Character*, in which a student discovers a character in himself through the (mis)application of stage makeup and who describes the experience in terms of divided consciousness. Mask work is often described in terms of trance. Johnstone writes about a number of actors who report dual states of consciousness: “they speak of their body acting automatically, or as being inhabited by the character they are playing.” [19:151] He argues against the idea that a trance state somehow disconnects one from reality, and uses game play as an example of a form of trance in which the participant is deeply engaged in the present moment.

“In ‘normal consciousness’ I am aware of myself as ‘thinking verbally’. In sports which leave no time for verbalisation, trance states are common. If you think: ‘The ball’s coming at that angle but it’s spinning so that I’ll anticipate the direction of the bounce by...’ you miss! You don’t know you’re in a trance state because whenever you check up, there you are, playing table tennis...” [19:153]

He connects this trance state of a number of spiritual practices, including Maya Deren’s experience of voodoo ceremonies in Haiti and other ecstatic religious practices such as the possession of priestesses at Delphi in ancient Greece. He also connects it to more recent practices of hypnosis. Crucial to Mask work is the surrender to an external influence, which allows the actor to be transformed. It is important to Johnstone that a student doing Mask work not force the change, and he argues that it is better for the student to stop “thinking” and instead act from intuition [19:167]. Johnston’s Mask work has clear connections to the techniques Daw and Benedetti describe to put actors into the “creative state”. Daw discusses working from a sensory state in

which verbal thinking is suspended [10], while Benedetti describes a state of dual consciousness in which the actor suspends her own desires and commits to acting as if the character's desires were her own [5]. Johnstone's discussion of trance states also has some strong resonances with Csikszentmihalyi's descriptions of the *flow* state [9].

This type of Outside-In work is a highly literal approach to transformation, and it has some interesting implications when considered in a context of digital games. For instance, Murray equates avatars with masks, which she identifies as "threshold markers" that help players negotiate the boundary between the ritualized symbolic world of the game and their ordinary lives [27:117]. This notion of a ritualized and symbolic world in which the game takes place leads us to the second theoretical perspective that we wish to consider in this work: *figured worlds*.

4. FIGURED WORLDS

Figured worlds theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how people make sense of the world and establish an identity within it [18]. The foundation of figured worlds theory comes from a series of case studies in a wide cross-section of domains: alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous, women in Nepal, patients in a mental institution, and women at college. In each of these studies, the authors explore how individual actors establish their identity and take action within the meanings made possible by the "figured world" that each domain constitutes. Holland et al. define "figured world" as:

"...a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents (in the world of romance: attractive women, boyfriends, lovers, fiancés) who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts of changes of state (flirting with, falling in love with, dumping, having sex with) as moved by a specific set of forces (attractiveness, love, lust). These collective "as-if" worlds are socio-historic, contrived interpretations or imaginations that mediate behavior and so, from the perspective of heuristic development, inform participants' outlooks." [18:52]

Drawing on the interpretive theories of Mikhail Bakhtin [3] as well as the cultural-history psychology of Vygotsky [40], the authors set forth figured worlds theory as a way of understanding how social action and identity are constructed. Everyone inhabits multiple, possibly conflicting figured worlds in their everyday life: one might simultaneously be a woman, a wife, a daughter, a teacher, an artist, an American and an immigrant. Each of these identities is circumscribed by the social domain that it plays out in, but is also individually constructed and enacted. In this view, personal identity is assembled from the figurative worlds that a person finds themselves in, a process of continual negotiation, adaptation, resistance and creative reassembly.

"In the making of meaning, we "author" the world. But the "I" is by no means a freewheeling agent, authoring worlds from creative springs within. Rather, the "I" is more like Levi-Strauss's (1966)[36] *bricoleur*, who builds with preexisting materials. In authoring the world, in putting words to the world that addresses her, the "I" draws upon

the languages, the dialects, the words of others to which she has been exposed." [18:170]

Figured worlds are comprised primarily of social actors and "mediating artifacts" that structure and help define the meanings inherent to that world.

"Artifacts 'open up' figured worlds. They are the means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful...The conceptual and material aspects of figured worlds...are constantly changing through the improvisations of actors. This context of flux is the ground for identity development." [18:61-63]

Figured worlds theory provides a powerful way to think about the forces that shape individual identity and agency within the world, and about the way in which specific groups of social actors and artifacts can help create the possibility for a new figured or refigured world. All figured worlds are in some sense "as-if" worlds, where everyone has agreed that certain specific acts and words have particular meanings. This notion of the "as-if" has parallels with Margaret Mackey's notion of the *subjunctive mode* of engaging with a fiction, and Janet Murray's concept of imaginative immersion in a text though the active creation of belief in the fictional world [22,27]. Play allows groups to construct new possible figured worlds, to experiment with new identities and ways of making meaning. Holland et al., following Vygotsky, see play as a critical capability of humans.

"Play is also the medium of mastery, indeed of creation, of ourselves as human actors. Without the capacity to formulate other social scenes in the imagination, there can be little force to a sense of self, little agency. In play we experiment with the force of our acting otherwise, of our projectivity rather than our objectivity...It is the opening out of thought within the activity of play, what we might call the cultural production of virtualities, that allows for the emergence of new figured worlds, of refigured worlds that come eventually to reshape selves and lives in all seriousness." [18]

Play is how we learn about the world as it is, as well as how it might be. Play is not limited to children, but is a key resource for people throughout their lives. Holland et al write "Through play people acquire the key cultural means by which they escape, or at least reduce, the buffeting of whatever stimuli they encounter as they go through their days." [18:280] Figured worlds theory provides not just a lens for understanding the systems of meaning and identity that an individual is bound up in but also a tool for constructing interventions that can open a door to new meanings and new identities.

5. TRANSFORMATIVE PLAY EXAMPLES

Both figured worlds theory and method acting provide a roadmap to how transformation and identity play out in games. When we say an experience is transformative, what do we mean? In media, we often mean that the experience has temporarily allowed us to put our own identity on "pause" and instead experience the world from a new point-of-view. We are transformed into a character and allowed to experience the story *as if* we actually were that person. In film studies this is understood in terms of *identification with a character*, a process that involves both *empathizing* with a character (at a conscious and unconscious level) and *sympathizing*

with a character [34]. Transformation is part of why story has always played such a significant role in our society; it is the mechanism that allows narrative to communicate different perspectives and experiences, to transcend solipsism and empathize with each other.

Transformation is also persuasive. It creates experiential rhetorics by allowing us to project ourselves into a set of contexts and circumstances that might be foreign to our day-to-day existence. Finally, transformation is pleasurable. Experiencing a transformation into a character through fiction can be a profound and powerful experience. Sometimes that pleasure is simply about escaping from the ordinary and seeing the world through another's eyes for a few hours. But it can also have real emotional impact: we can experience fear, love, anger, and catharsis through character transformation. In some cases, it can be deeply unsettling, resulting in glimpses into the minds and experiences of serial killers and psychopaths. When this happens, transformation serves to reinforce social norms, by allowing audiences to experience transgression without committing heinous acts themselves. In digital narratives and games, there is a potential for a more profound transformation than in other media forms, because we are no longer passive audiences, projecting ourselves into a character. In games, we become the driving force behind that character, enacting the events of the plot and assuming the goals and objectives of that character for ourselves. To ground this discussion of transformative play, we provide examples of contemporary games where these poetics are already at work.

5.1 Papers Please



Figure 1. Papers, Please by Lucas Pope

In *Papers, Please* [30] the player assumes the role of a customs officer for the fictional nation of Arastotzka, where he is responsible for processing visas for citizens and non-citizens attempting to enter the country. The player must negotiate an increasingly complex set of rules and regulations while faced with bribes, kickbacks, and ethical quandaries such as whether or not to refuse entry to a woman whose husband has already been admitted because she lacks the proper paperwork. As a low level bureaucrat the player must stay productive to earn enough money to pay rent, food, and heat for his wife, son, and extended family. The family members become increasingly hungry, sick, and desperate as the pittance paid by the state fails to cover their needs, even as the player is financially penalized for any mistakes made on the job. The increasingly complex regulations, the pressure to make ends meet, and the temptation to subvert the oppressive state apparatus in which one is implicated all conspire to evoke a sense of desperation and helplessness. In this sense,

Papers, Please uses its game mechanics to produce a transformative experience for the player, one which arises from the frantic hunt for discrepancies in a growing clutter of paperwork, the *thunk* of the passport stamps, and the blaring of klaxons calling out for the glory of the state. These game elements serve as *mediating artifacts* for the figured world that the player comes to inhabit; they demarcate the possibility space for the player's identity in rules, regulations, obedience, subversion, and despair. There is no escape from the oppression of Arastotzka, because all choices within the world are defined through either acquiescence or resistance to that oppression. Thus, *Papers, Please* is able to elicit an understanding of what it means to exist as a disposable cog in service to an uncaring machine.

5.2 The Graveyard



Figure 2. The Graveyard by Tale of Tales

Created by Belgian studio Tale of Tales, *The Graveyard* [37] is a meditative “art game” in which the player assumes the role of an elderly woman visiting a cemetery. The woman walks slowly, with the aid of a cane, as birds call out and the wind rustles the trees overhead. The player may stop to consider the graves or sit on a bench and take a rest. Sitting on the bench triggers a short musical interlude, in which the song *Komen te Gaan* (which loosely translates from the Dutch as “*To come and go*”) plays, a surprisingly upbeat moment until one realizes that the lyrics are all about death. The entire experience is slow, thoughtful, and meditative. It is both peaceful and morbid. The elderly woman serves as a mask for the player to inhabit, communicating through her own halting movements the wear of time on the character. The game is free to play online, although a paid version is also available. The paid version differs from the free version in only one substantial way: in it there is a small chance that the player's character might die. The graveyard creates an opportunity to inhabit an identity that is far removed from the fantasies of power and action that many commercial games provide. It provides the player with a brief but poetic moment of contemplation of her own mortality, something that games are seldom able to accomplish even when they feature significantly more death and dying as ludic features.

5.3 Mass Effect 2

The third and final game we wish to discuss is a departure from those we have already considered. While both previous games fall under the rough category of “indie” or “art” games, *Mass Effect 2* [6] is inarguably a mass market, mainstream, “Triple A” game. We include it here as evidence of the kinds of transformation that are possible even within a more commercial and mainstream

game. We wish to focus on a specific sequence within Mass Effect 2 which warrants a close reading from the standpoint of transformation. In this sequence, the player loses control of the game's main character, Commander Shepard, and instead is given control of Joker, a secondary character whose primary role is to pilot Shepard's spaceship, the Normandy. Joker is an unusual character to place in the player's control because he is an almost perfect inversion of Shepard: where Shepard is strong, Joker is weak; where Shepard is serious, Joker is flippant; where Shepard is tough and fast, Joker is fragile and slow. In fact, Joker suffers from a brittle bone disease. The ship is essentially a large prosthesis for him, and he seldom leaves his command center. In the sequence in question, the Normandy is attacked by alien Collectors (the main antagonist in the game) while Shepard and her crew are away on a mission. Joker must negotiate the besieged corridors of the ship in order to access the systems that will allow the ship's computer to vent the atmosphere and remove the threat. Joker moves with a limp. He has no weapons and no special abilities. He is deeply vulnerable and yet for a moment he is the only thing standing between the Collectors and the "Mission".

The ensuing sequence is one of the most intense sections of the game because it is the first time that there is no opportunity for the player to fight her way out of the situation. The ship's AI coaches Joker to follow a set of blinking lights on the floor of the ship to a maintenance hatch. His path takes him through the command center of the ship, where enormous Collector Scions and Praetorians are capturing and killing the Normandy's operational crew. As Joker limps towards his objective, crewmembers shout encouragement even as they fall prey to the Collectors. The message is clear: *Joker is the galaxy's only hope!* Some crewmembers try to escort the character, but they are grabbed by the Collectors and dragged off, kicking and screaming, while Joker manages to just squeak through by the skin of his teeth. Moving agonizingly slowly, Joker finally reaches the AI Core, where he is able to expel the Collectors from the ship, but it is too late for the crew. They have all been taken.



Figure 3. Joker limps through the Normandy while crew members call out: "You're our only shot! Joker, go!"

There are several reasons why this sequence is so effective at eliciting a sense of transformation. First, it is a *very* narrow interaction channel. There are only two real options for the player, to move forward or to die. There is a very clearly articulated script to follow, a clear objective and a clear set of actions needed to achieve that objective. This is made very literal by the "breadcrumb trail" of blinking red lights for Joker to follow. The

presence of extreme danger in the periphery contributes to this, but it is Joker's inherent *vulnerability* that really drives the experience of the transformation in this sequence. For the first time in the game, the player cannot fight, cannot run, and cannot survive combat. The game has stripped away all of the mechanisms that the player has come to rely on over the course of play. This stark contrast to the rest of the gameplay serves to heighten the experience of unique danger that pervades this sequence. The inability of the player to have rehearsed or prepared for this situation only makes that vulnerability feel more genuine. All that remains for the player is to *react* to stimuli in the environment, to follow the prompts, and hope that everything will be all right. To do this, the player must embrace the "magic if" and behave as if she is Joker in this situation, suspending judgment and trusting the AI with her life.

6. TRANSFORMATIVE PLAY THEMES

In the three examples above we see several common themes and several unique properties of transformation that warrant further consideration. These five themes provide us with a starting point for understanding and designing games with transformation as a central poetic. They provide a structure for attending the pleasures of identity transformation during game design.

6.1 Transformation and Limitation

One common element to each of the games discussed above is a struggle against the limitations imposed by the system. In Papers, Please this struggle is against the increase in complexity and the looming threat of the oppressive regime in which the character and player are situated. In both The Graveyard and the Joker sequence of Mass Effect 2, the struggle is against the physical limitations of the character bodies the player inhabits, which contradict the rhetorics of ease and freedom of motion that invisibly characterize most navigation of virtual spaces. Shared hardship and struggle are powerful techniques for bringing the lived experiences of the player and the character into alignment and for producing opportunities for empathy.

6.2 Transformation and Enactment

From the standpoint of method acting, we can look at the procedural rhetorics of these systems as a way to communicate the script to the player. By supporting the process of scripted enactment, these systems create structures of participation and play that lead to the kinds of character transformations that actors experience. When the player limps down the graveyard's path or the fraught corridors of the Normandy, she is given a body and a character to inhabit and a clear trajectory for that role that supports her in the process of surrender to the narrative, leading to an experience of transformation. In this sense, scripts are not restrictions on the freedom of the player, but cognitive scaffolding for the pleasures of playing a role inside of a make-believe world.

6.3 Transformation and Urgency

In both Papers, Please and the Joker sequence, urgency and time pressure help to shift the player from an "active" to a "reactive" mode. Taking away the luxury of being able to stop, think, and plan forces the player to experience the game *in the moment* as it is happening. This parallels the training of actors who are taught to create an "illusion of the first time" on the stage by suspending their critical evaluation of the scene in order to more authentically inhabit the reality of the imagined world.

6.4 Transformation and Figured Worlds

The worlds of these three games are in some ways literal expressions of the notion of *figured worlds*. The rules that govern a player's participation in them explicitly circumscribe the roles and identities that the player is permitted to inhabit within them. The game's interfaces, visual rhetorics, and motivational structures serve as *mediating artifacts*, guiding and supporting the player's participation within their imagined world and establishing the conventions that the player must obey.

6.5 Transformation and Masks

Keith Johnstone's writing about the poetics of Mask Work in improvisational theater suggests an interesting role for the visual representation of the characters on the screen in these three examples. Janet Murray has explicitly connected the ritual practices around masks to the practice of taking control of an avatar in a game [28]. Masks operate on an Outside-In logic to create character behaviors by changing the actor's sense of self. When a player is provided with a meaningful Mask to inhabit, that Mask can communicate information about the character's embodiment back to the player. Both the Graveyard and Mass Effect 2 use this technique to great advantage, creating characters that embody aspects of the narrative for the player to inhabit.

7. CONCLUSION

We believe that Transformative Play is a concept that is long overdue in the study and design of digital games. Identity transformation is an essential component of games, not just because it is a source of narrative pleasure, but because it takes advantage of the unique participatory properties of games to create opportunities for empathy and shared social understanding. It is one thing to read about the struggles of someone else, but it is quite another thing to experience those struggles firsthand. In a world where a lack of empathy increasingly characterizes our political discourse and our social and communal interactions, Transformative Play has the potential to meaningfully alter how we relate to each other.

In this paper, we have focused primarily on examples of transformative play within single-player, narrative-driven games. Further analysis of how transformation works within multi-player games, non-narrative games, and other forms of digital media is clearly needed. Each of the themes described here form the basis for further research into how exactly transformative play works within games, how to design to achieve it, and how to understand the experiences it affords. The pleasure and power of transformation is only one component of the experience of games and interactive media, but it is one that deserves more attention than it has received so far.

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