

Author Statement

Rebecca de Heuvel is a first-year PhD student in Communication Studies at Concordia University working under the supervision of Professor Mia Consalvo and an affiliate of the mLab. Her doctoral research explores how game mechanics shape emotional experience and identification with a particular focus on time-control mechanics in choice-based games. She previously earned an MA in English Literature from the University of Waterloo where her research focused on Victorian literature and animal literary studies.

Abstract

An Interactive Epic: Adapting Virgil's *Aeneid* into a Choice-Based Narrative Game

My on-going research-creation project adapts Virgil's *Aeneid* into a choice-based narrative game to practically examine the extent to which interactivity impacts the emotional and thematic resonance of classical stories. Specifically, my work addresses Sanders' observation in his article explaining the *Playing the Classics* (2022) database—an archive of game adaptations of classical literature—that games can “express[] the tone and themes of their sources through playable mechanics” (Sanders 232).

My project takes as its starting point the *Remixing the Classics* (2022) initiative, a year-long project spearheaded by the University of Birmingham's Shakespeare Institute, that investigated the intersection of adaptation studies, media studies, technology, and classical literature. In the introductory article to the *Adaptation* journal's special issue on *Remixing the Classics*, Sullivan describes the initiative's goal as asking “what do digital technologies bring – artistically, pedagogically, politically – to the re-telling of old stories?” (Sullivan 105). My project contributes to the body of work aiming to respond to this question by elaborating upon the ways in which interactivity and mechanic-design can deepen the affective impact of themes from classical literature. A choice-based narrative game was a natural fit for the game adaptation of the *Aeneid* due to the ways in which the genre's emphasis on moral dilemmas and narrative determinism complements the epic's core threads. In *How Games Move Us* (2016), Isbister points to games as being distinctly powerful as a medium to evoke feelings of “responsibility and guilt”—two of the core themes of Aeneas' particular hero's journey from the epic poem (8). The issue of narrative determinism can be aesthetically incorporated into the choice-based game medium as

part of the ways in which the gods are forcing the Aeneas-player along in an unwanted destiny. Rather than attributing Aeneas' journey solely to divine will, however, the medium compels players to navigate and internalize the tension between autonomy and destiny as Aeneas. In order for a game to be included in the *Playing the Classics* database, Sanders argued that it needed to make use of "the power of adaptation in an interactive medium [by] allowing players to explore the text as an interpretive possibility space, one that lends itself to the kind of playful exploration and (re)interpretation that is core to the practice of literary adaptation" (Sanders 237). My adaptation, therefore, purposefully takes significant liberties with the original structure of the epic poem and reorganizes the sequence of events while preserving the thematic and emotional core. The game's branching structure includes missable scenes, chances to succeed or fail where Aeneas did the opposite, and offers an alternate ending to that of the original poem. Therefore, the project also interrogates the tension between fidelity to the source material and the demands of the game format and asks where players/viewers/readers draw this line. This portion of my research addresses another question posed by the *Remixing the Classics* group from their website: "to what extent do digital adaptations reinforce the hegemony of existing literary and dramatic canons, and to what extent do they destabilise them?" ("Remixing the Classics").

The research component of the project compares receptions of multiple adaptations of Virgil's work including stage and television adaptations with iterative play testing sessions that have begun to take place on the first of five game chapters. The play-testers thus far have consisted of individuals with undergraduate or higher academic backgrounds, though their expertise range from game studies and classical literature to physics. The interviews conducted thus far suggest that the narrative changes and re-interpretations enhance emotional investment without negatively impacting any loyalty felt to the source material. The presentation I propose to give will address both the creation and research aspects of this project. The first portion will outline the design principles and narrative changes in the process of gamifying the *Aeneid*. The second, and main, portion of the presentation will detail results from play testing and analyze player feedback through a discussion on the implications of adapting classical works into games. The presentation will offer insights into how game adaptations can expand our engagement with classical texts by giving a particular emphasis to the ways in which emotions felt through reading or watching are translated into the game medium.

Bibliography

- Cormier, Raymond. "Classical Continuity and Transposition in Two Twelfth-Century Adaptations of the Aeneid," *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literature*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2010. pp. 261-74.
- Isbister, Katherine. *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*. MIT Press. 2016.
- Panayotakis, Costas. "Virgil on the Popular Stage." *New Directions in Ancient Pantomime*. Oxford UP, 2008. pp. 185-97.
- Playing the Classics Database*. 2022.
<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1m9Ygx7WxJLeY91UMiNgOjOkHALuNWYYT/edit?gid=827470472#gid=827470472>.
- Pomeroy, Arthur J. "Franco Rossi's Adaptations of the Classics," *A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen*. Wiley-Blackwell. 2017. pp. 253-70.
- Sanders, John. "Playing the Classics: Constructing a Digital Game Adaptation Database." *Adaptation*, vol. 16, no. 2. 2023. pp. 231-39.
- Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. MIT Press. 2013.
- Sullivan, Erin. "Introduction: Remixing the Classics," *Adaptation*, vol. 16, no. 2. 2023. pp. 105-115.
- University of Birmingham. *Remixing the Classics*. Research at the Shakespeare Institute, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/centres-institutes/research-at-the-shakespeare-institute/remixing-the-classics>.
- Virgil, *The Aeneid*. Translated by Robert Fitzgerald, Vintage Classics, 1990.

Ancient Epic in the 21st Century: Narrative and Themes in *Final Fantasy XVI*

Abigail Fry

If there is one thing that has stuck with humanity since the dawn of our species, its stories—and as we evolve, so, too, does the way we tell them. This paper analyzes the ways in which *Final Fantasy XVI* (2023; FFXVI) adapts and expands upon storytelling as it appears in the infamous ancient Greek epics *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Argonautica* to conform to the medium of an action/adventure narrative video game in the twenty-first century. In light of the boon of ancient retellings in the last decade, classicists have begun to acknowledge their value as introductions to the ancient world. More recently, video games have gained attention due to popular titles such as *Assassins Creed: Odyssey* and *Hades I and II*. Vandevallé's research posits video games as "mythographical museums," achieved through casual riffs on mythology and mythological figures that recontextualize them to a new narrative (6). The characters and beasts of FFXVI are a range of ancient mythological figures reborn in the universe of *Final Fantasy*, often assuming a similar role or one that contrasts the conventional meaning of the figure.

It is with the help of Haubold's insights on the conventions of epic that FFXVI is analyzed as adapting and modernizing heroic tales. Most interestingly, the game's score is where this point is strongest, as each godlike figure (Eikon) has its own musical theme, and the familiar *Final Fantasy* victory theme is given lyrics in ancient Greek. Epic's origins as songs that tell the "deeds of gods and heroes" (9) translates clearly through this adaptation of literary tradition. FFXVI, indeed, is such a tale, where seemingly ordinary people may prime into godly Eikonic forms and a hero's *klēos* (their glory) is immortalized by the tradition of passing on their story. And where there are video games, there will also be fourth-wall breaks; the most compelling relationship this has with epic is through ekphrases (an extended description of a work of art) that depict the overall story and characters' actions in a metanarrative manner. The immortalization of Clive's deeds is seen at the very end of the game in a similar manner, through a post-credits cutscene that primarily focuses on the revelation of the novel, *Final Fantasy*. Waskiewicz' definition of fourth-wall breaks as being in "direct communication" (49) with the player is in direct relation to the ways in which ekphrases such as the "Shield of Achilles" episode of *Iliad* 18.*

While there is a plethora of more direct adaptations of the ancient world into video games, it is through such discreet references and integral elements that we may begin to understand the power of video game narratives to charge the progression of storytelling. Millennia of literary tradition have culminated into this pinnacle form of the story—but it is only when comparing it to the one of the most ancient forms of the story that this may be recognized.

Works Cited

Haubold, Johannes. "Greek Epic." In *The Edinburgh Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome*, edited by Edward Bispham, Thomas Harrison, and Brian A. Sparkes, 277–81. Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

Vandewalle, Alexander. "Video Games as Mythology Museums? Mythographical Story Collections in Games." In *The International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, Springer, 24 May 2023.

Waszkiewicz, Agata. *Metagames : Games about Games*. First edition. Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2024.

Author Statement

Abigail (Abby) Fry is an independent, junior academic based in Victoria and Surrey, British Columbia. She will be graduating from the University of Victoria in Spring 2025 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and a minor in Greek and Roman Studies. While not yet published academically, she is heavily involved in gaming and fan communities through independent game development, game jams, conventions, and cosplay. The majority of her studies have been devoted to forging connections between video games, narrative, and artistic practices, and she is particularly concerned with adaptations of the ancient world into modern media. Abby has worked as a student researcher at the University of Victoria's Praxis Studio for Media Studies and participated in the XRtsist Link-up, a collaborative effort by Canadian students of all disciplines to create a VR experience that was showcased at the PXR Conference in November 2024. She aspires to engage with the gaming community as an artistic academic who creates and studies simultaneously.

The Tragedy Genre in Games: How Reframing the Dark Souls Series as Tragedies Recontextualizes Game Narratives

Tragedy is arguably the oldest genre of narrative media we have records of. We see tragedy in plays, novels, films, and television series, but rarely explicitly in games. I argue that tragedy in games is uniquely troublesome as one of the primary medium features of games is their apparent freedom; the seeming ability to choose how one interacts with the world and narrative of the story. While this is always a false freedom; freedom is always constrained by the designers, with even the most open recent games like Larian Studio's *Baldur's Gate 3*, having clear bounds to their freedoms. Rebecca Bushnell, in *Tragic Time in Drama, Film, and Videogames*, posits that it is this apparent freedom that makes games unique for adapting tragedy; that this is how the genre is evolving. Freedom, even the illusion of freedom offered by games is incompatible with many traditional tragic narratives. Hamlet will always agonise over his actions until it is too late and Orpheus will always turn around to look at Eurydice. Without these actions, there is no tragedy. Some games like *Elsinore* or *Hades* have adapted these narratives directly, but these stories cannot be understood as "tragedies". These narratives do not fit organically within an interactive medium, but their essence can.

This paper explores how the *Dark Souls* trilogy evokes tragedy on both narrative and mechanical levels, both in the story and the mechanics. Tonally, the games centre around a dying world, with the player character tasked with repairing or prolonging the world's current state. This paper looks at how the mechanical genre overlaps and is entwined with the tragic narrative genre. Using the *Dark Souls* series as a case study, the paper looks at how core elements of tragic narratives, such as the tragic flaw, exist within the series. This involves a bifurcated analysis, first of the narrative functions of tragedy, predominantly in the games' backstories, and secondly on a mechanical front, how the games' mechanics make the player into a tragic hero.

On a narrative front, the games draw on mythic narrative structures, as addressed in Dom Ford's "Approaching FromSoftware's Souls Games as Myth". The entwining of the mythic and the tragic has dated back to our earliest forms of the genre, but mythic tragedy differs in how it emphasises the degradation of the world not to natural sources or malicious intent, but to individual, personal, failings. There is collateral damage to the world that results from the tragic flaw of a mythic tragic hero that is not present in non-mythic tragedies. The idea that narratively, the world's state of decay is the end result of the characters' good intentions, not of their failures or malice. Gwyn, in *Dark Souls*, desires an eternal "age of fire", and in making it eternal, makes it one of inevitable stagnation and eventual decay seen throughout the rest of the series. This itself is a tragic flaw of hubris and avarice, classic flaws especially as they relate to mythic tragedies.

Mechanically, on the other hand, the games attempt to turn the player's desire for success, to overcome the game's challenges, into a tragic flaw. Continuing to play the games results in the decay of the game's world, certain elements become exhausted, places change in irrecoverable ways. This is most apparent in character quest lines, which, in almost every case across the series, end with the character in a worse state than they started in. The endings of each game are also intentionally unsatisfying, with each game having endings that hinge on singular choices that, in most cases, leaves the world worse than it started. There is rarely an option that, unilaterally, makes the world better, or even stops the degradation. The mechanics also encourage the ending to not be "the" ending, inciting the player to continue playing in "New Game Plus" almost immediately upon

resolution, starting the game again with the same character. This itself would be akin to a tragic play ending with an encore performance of the same play. The game never needs to end in this state, and thus a cathartic ending never needs to exist. Playing the games at all becomes a tragic flaw of the player, where their actionable goals cause degradation to the game world, those who exist within it, and the player's avatar.

Works cited

- Bushnell, Rebecca. *Tragic Time in Drama, Film, and Videogames: The Future in the Instant*, Pelgrave Macmillan, 2016, Kindle edition.
- Dark Souls: Prepare to Die Edition*, Directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki, From Software / Bandai Namco, 2012.
- Dark Souls II: Scholar of the First Sin*, Directed by Tomohiro Shibuya and Yui Tanimura, From Software / Bandai Namco, 2015.
- Dark Souls III*, Directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki, Isamu Okano, and Yui Tanimura, From Software / Bandai Namco, 2016.
- Ford, Dom. "Approaching FromSoftware's Souls Games as Myth", *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, August 13 2024, pp. 31-66.
- Sharma, Sarah "Introduction: A Feminist Media is the Message" *Re-understanding Media: Feminist Extensions of Marshall McLuhan*, Edited by Sarah Sharma and Rianka Singh, Duke University Press, 2022, pp 1-19.

Author Bio:

Jay Smith is a nonbinary independent researcher with a Bachelors of Arts from the University of Calgary and Masters of Arts from the University of Waterloo.

Their research is predominantly in queer literary analysis, with their Masters thesis exploring how Queer forms of liminality can be reflected in medium and genre liminal expressions. Jay has recently been focusing on presentations to non-academic audiences; predominantly aimed at illustrating issues facing the 2SLGBTQI+ community in Alberta, Canada, and more broadly. They are looking at continuing their education at the doctoral level and exploring further research opportunities. Jay is currently writing articles analyzing unique expressions of genre, medium, and identity in video games, tabletop games, and comics.

Genre Games and Games with Genre: Genre Adaptation in *My Life as a Teenage Exocolonist*

Genre is inherently about adaptation, as individual texts borrow from texts that precede them to conform to (and confound) audience expectation. Videogames are no exception to this borrowing; in many ways, they are the exemplar of it. Following Carolyn R. Miller, genre is a “structural nexus between action and structure, between agent and institution, between past and future,” useful for the way it connects the flux of experience to our sense of past and future, makes recurring patterns significant, and provides satisfactions and pleasure (69). Further, the emphasis on action and structure in particular has often been a part of the discussion of game genre; Thomas Apperley, for example, argues that videogames are more properly considered not just as structures of representation but also the action of play. While adaptation is often not applied to texts within the same medium, given that videogames can vary much more than other media forms while still being identifiable as videogames, some videogames can be aptly said to be adapting other videogames as well, creating new hybrids of genre actions and structure.

For this conference paper, I would propose to investigate the genre structures, actions, and adaptations of Northway Games' 2022 *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist*. As a videogame where the player inhabits a teenager who is part of a community effort to colonize a new planet, *Exocolonist* adapts many different genres inside and outside of videogames and fuses them together to create something that is not dominated by any one genre but still recognizably contains all of them. This list of genre includes, but is not limited, to science fiction, young adult, bildungsromans, lifesim, deckbuilder, role-playing game, and choose your own adventure narrative. Some of these genres are commonly placed together; some of them are even commonly considered subgenres of the other. My contention is not that these individual pairings or combinations are unique, but that they are worth investigating for the ways in which they juxtapose and support each other.

To this end, I will look into how the various genres mentioned are theorized within videogames, and how *Exocolonist* adapts them in particular. Following Frow, Hardie and Smith, the bildungsroman is “a form with continuing power ... not just to map the story of the growing up of a young man or woman on to the historically changing world with which they must come to terms, but to map this process of the getting of wisdom on to the reader’s experience of the text” (1907). Further, Ennslin and Goorimoorthee argue that videogames adapt the bildungsroman through adaption of elements that include mastery, mentorship and choice (382). *Exocolonist* explores this “thematic triad” through both its RPG statistics system, whereby the player manages quantitatively measured skills sorted into social, intellectual, and strength, and through its CYOA narrative system, whereby they choose jobs to specialize in, generally overseen by adult mentor figures. Cameron Kunzelman argues that videogames’ relationship to science fiction is potentially most fruitful in their engagement with the “mechanic of speculation,” in which the relation between input and output that is fundamental to gameplay is both tempered by previous experience, but also “in the moment of novelty a player is asked to wildly conceptualize what they think might happen on the other end of an encounter” (3). This speculation harkens back to Miller's claim that genre is useful for the way it connects “the flux of our experience” to our sense of past and future, and in *Exocolonist*, it speaks to both the more trivial uncertainty of performance in the game's card-based challenges, but also its time loop mechanic through which players bring their own experience and the player character's experience to bear on choices they've made in the past, with the hopes of uncovering new narrative outcomes. Further, the deck-building narrative game relies on cards that represent systems of exchange (Tyler), as well as moments of uncertainty and expanded time (Martin), as Tyler and Martin discuss respectively in regards to the game *Signs of the Sojourner*. In *Exocolonist*, choices made by the player-character may result in the collection of a card representing a memory of that event, which are then called into play during

narrative challenges. The cards are both randomly chosen from the player-character's deck and a representation of the experiences of the character, drawing on the speculative element Kunzelman flags and the mastery and choice of the bildungsroman.

My Life as a Teenage Exocolonist is not unique among videogames in adapting multiple genres to form its whole; to the contrary, it is because this adaptation is not unique to a single videogame that it demonstrates the creative potential of adaptation and genre in the medium at large. By examining how they are adapted into *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist*, we can better understand how videogames in general adapt and hold together a myriad of genre forms.

Dr. Michael Hancock is a sessional instructor with the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Waterloo. His dissertation was on the use of image and text in videogames. His research interests include games, comic books, and popular culture. In “Playing it By the Book: Transmedia and Player Formation in the Videogame Instruction Manual Paratext,” he investigates videogame manuals from the 1980s and 90s as texts that not only instruct the player on how to play the game, but how to properly perform the social capital of being players of games. Recently, he has been investigating image and text in gamebooks and depictions of time travel in videogames. His most recent publication is a forthcoming piece for the website *Shelfdust*, in which he investigates Jimmy Olsen, the photographer from Superman's supporting cast, as a figure of play.

Works Cited

- Apperley, Thomas H. “Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Video Game Genres.” *Simulation & Gaming*, vol. 37, no. 1, Mar. 2006, pp. 6–23.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878105282278>
- Ensslin, Astrid, and Tejasvi Goorimoorthee. “Transmediating *Bildung*: Video Games as Life Formation Narratives.” *Games and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 4, June 2020, pp. 372–93.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018796948>.
- Frow, John, et al. “The Bildungsroman: Form and Transformations.” *Textual Practice*, vol. 34, no. 12, Dec. 2020, pp. 1905–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1834692>.
- I was a Teenage Exocolonist*. Developed by Northway Games. Finji, 2022. PC.
- Kunzelman, Cameron. “Introduction.” *The World Is Born From Zero: Understanding Speculation and Video Games*, Walter de Gruyter, 2022, pp. 1–20.
- Martin, Thomas. “Playing Your Cards Right. A Stanislavkian Analysis of Dialogue and Player Role in Narrative Deck-Building Games.” *Thomas James Martin*.
<https://www.thomasjamesmartin.co.uk/ugx.html> Accessed 30 November, 2024.
- Miller, Carolyn. “Genre as Social Action (1984), Revisited 30 Years Later (2014).” *Letras & Letras*, Dec. 2015, pp. 56–72. <https://doi.org/10.14393/LL63-v31n3a2015-5>.
- Tyler, Tom. “Exchanges.” *Regimes of Capital in the Post-Digital Age*, edited by Szymon Wróbel and Krzysztof Skonieczny, 2023.