Playing as a Mutant in a Virtual World "That Hates and Fears Them": Understanding Learners Negotiation with Overlapping Worlds in Popular Culture Videogames

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Stories do not merely begin and end; they are spaces we inhabit, in which we dwell and seek solace, find comfort, and peace and sometimes provocation.

Vasudevan, 2011: 1168

Introduction

As a mutant, players enter the *X-Men Destiny* game prepared to fight with humans to stay alive. Players begin the game with a background and history: you have been separated from your family and you are only now realizing the full potential of your mutant powers. There are many options to decide from where to move, what to say, and X-Men superheroes and heroines enter and exit the game all of the time to guide players through their journey. Such is the story of *X-Men Destiny*, a videogame designed by Marvel Comics and Silicon Knights. In this article we have come together as scholars working in different disciplines to consider how and in what ways learners negotiate overlapping worlds that players must negotiate when playing videogames. Within the author team, we sit on different ends of the spectrum, with the lead author concerned with story and the production and materialization of story and the second and third authors concerned with the rhetorical analysis of games, as well as augmented and immersive worlds. There is significant literature that explores how videogames contribute to learning (Abrams, 2009; Beavis, 2006; Gee, 2003; Squire, 2008; Steinkuhler, 2007; Williams, 2008), but there is relatively less literature on how gaming worlds draw on discourses, rhetoric and affect to create storied worlds where students so often seek solace, comfort and provocation. Using *X-Men Destiny* as our exemplar, this article classifies and attends to three overlapping worlds that must be negotiated when approaching adapted videogames – a *canonical mythic universe*, the *adapted game world*, and the *storyworld of the learner* – in order to enable the harnessing of videogame practices for literacy contexts. Our core argument is that while there are many videogames that hinge on comic and/or film-inspired story worlds, it is rare to find a game

that maintains the integrity of the original text or canon. In this article, we focus on *X-Men Destiny* as a videogame that strives to maintain the canonical mythic universe of the X-Men specifically and Marvel comics more broadly, but is constrained by the game design in the process of establishing the adapted game world. The resulting consequence affords the learner with the opportunity to imagine, create and negotiate with a storyworld, an act that makes video games so compelling.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the team, we draw on several methodologies. Most notably, the paper is informed by ethnographic research drawing on an interview with one of the Silicon Knights designers. Further, we root terminology within a social semiotic theoretical framework that affords the learner/subject a capacity for creative meaning-making. Finally, we draw on a humanities-based reading of the X-Men mythic canon as it evolves historically in the resulting mass media.

This paper will proceed in four parts. First, we define key terminology and draw on previous scholarship in these overlapping fields. Second, we offer a brief history of the canonical mythic universe that precedes the game and continues to evolve; this section explores the issues that transpire in the adaptation of the game using the character Wolverine as a focal point. The third part offers detailed analysis of how individual designers contribute to adapting and evolving the game world that ultimately becomes inscribed into the game. The fourth part attends to the storyworld of the learner. It extends the notion of transmedia intertextuality to a new genre, game walkthroughs, that support videogame culture and the paratextual practices that accompany gaming.

Defining Terms and Literature Review

Literacy research has increasingly turned from a focus on words to a focus on semiotics and *social* semiotics. That is, from a focus on how we work across complex sign and communicational systems together or on our own. Literacy not only refers to skills that enable successful communication, but also to the social tensions and struggles with using semiotic systems. Given their multimodal nature, videogames are a popular forum to examine participatory structures and semiotic systems. There is extant literature on videogames that vindicates their status from being perceived as senseless time-wasters to worthwhile pursuits that actually make one think and learn. In his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee argues that videogames can be harnessed for critical thinking, active learning, problem-solving, self-knowledge, even embodied learning. Gee offered thirty-six competencies that result from videogame play. Gee showed how there are *achievement principles* – principles that reward players for jobs well done; *practice principles* – playing games to empower gamers; and *discover principles* – experimenting and self-learning through gaming. In *Why Video Games are Good for Your Soul*, Gee unravels gaming worlds in more detail, focusing on specific games from *Tetris* to *Full Spectrum Warrior* to *Rise of Nations* and *Morrowind*. In the book, Gee claims that if young people project their values, desires, and

fantasies onto a character they can learn deeply in the sense that issues, topics, and content within videogames become a part of themselves. In this article we consider the videogame, *X-Men Destiny* from the three perspectives: the one of its designer, a triad of constructed worlds, and response in social media outlets that learners encounter.

This exploration also demands a broader critical attention to popular culture and popular cultural practices in the context of young learners. Jackie Marsh provides a useful definition of the term popular culture as "those cultural texts, artefacts and practices which are attractive to large numbers of children and which are often mass produced on a global scale" (Kenway and Bullen, 2001) (2). She goes on, however, to point out the fact that experiencing popular culture must also be recognized in terms of "transmedia intertextuality," a term she borrows from Kinder:

> These goods are frequently linked by common themes, so that 'tie-in' goods are related to popular television or film characters and narratives. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify the origins of themes, given the multiplicity of platforms on which they occur. Indeed, it is this 'transmedia intertextuality' (Kinder, 1991:3) which is particularly appealing to children. (2)

X-Men Destiny is an apt exemplar for transmedia intertextuality. As a game, it follows a long history of X-Men mythos that plays out across myriad "cultural texts, artefacts and practices" (Marsh 2) that inform the canon.

Indeed, Martin Zeller-Jacques' article "Adapting the X-Men Comic Book Narratives in Film Franchises" explains the complexity of transmedia intertextuality when it comes to superhero texts:

> Superhero films can pose particular problems to the theorist of adaptation. The plethora of comic books, films, television shows, radio programs, advertisements, toys, video-games, and novels which comprise even a moderately well-established superhero's textual history problematize the process of adaptation in ways that are productive for thinking about adaptations in general. Such variety encourages us to think of adaptation not as a binary with "source" on one side and "adaptation" on the other, but instead as an ongoing process through which new adaptations continually (re)develop an ever-growing metatext – an intangible "ideal" text formed by the agglomeration and interrelationship of all the texts which deal with a particular superhero's narrative universe. (143)

Zeller-Jacques points out that superheroes such as X-Men characters operate in a constant state of dynamic redevelopment as they are embodied across such a broad "textual history."

For the needs of our paper, we offer three basic definitions of the overlapping worlds (see Figure 1):

- ***canonical mythic universe***. This term refers to myth largely constituted by Marvel's franchise content. However, canonical mythic universe also accounts for the "ideal" text formed by what Zeller-Jacques calls "the agglomeration and interrelationship of all the texts which deal with a particular superhero's narrative universe" (143).

- ***adapted video-game world***. Videogames are constituted by three categories: game play (the player's actions, strategies and motives), game structure (the rules of the game, including simulation rules) and the game world (fictional content, topology/level design, textures) (Aarseth 2). An adapted videogame world has also undergone an additional process of translating a pre-existing universe requiring a fusion of the existing fictional content with game play.

- ***imagined storyworld of the learner.*** The meaning transaction that happens between the story itself and gamer subjectivities is the 'imagined storyworld.' James Paul Gee talks about how gamers project identities onto virtual characters, in his words, "projective identity," that is, "projecting one's values and desires onto the virtual character" (2003: 55). The imagined storyworld is the transacted event – the transaction between the story and the player's agency and subjectivities into an imagined storyworld. To experiment with the notion of imagined storyworld, we observed a twelve-year-old play *X-Men Destiny* and project her identity onto the avatar, Aimi Yoshida, as she worked her way through obstacles and fought against humans with the help of X-Men characters during game play. The decisions that she made and mediational practices that she engaged in invoked an *imagined storyworld*.

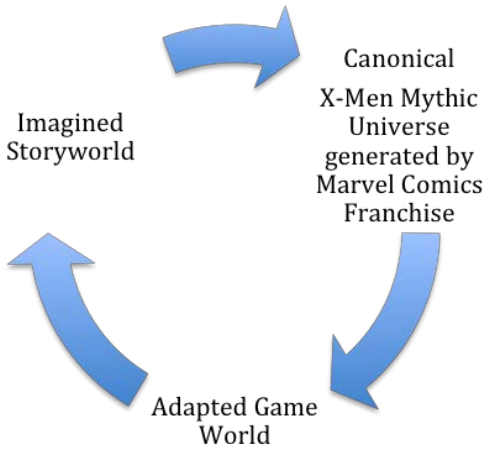

Figure 1. Negotiating Overlapping Worlds Relating to Games

X-Men Canonical Universe

Created in 1963 by writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby, the X-Men comic series has reached iconic status in popular culture, leaping from the rectangular panels of processed color printing to a global multimedia franchise encompassing graphic novels, feature films, cartoons, novelizations, and videogames. While the stories of the X-Men feature outlandish characters, vivid imagery and super powers children daydream of possessing, their lasting popularity stems from the X-Men serving as a metaphor for any group or individual that has been marginalized by society, be it minorities, the differently-abled, members of the LGBT community, or the "geeks and nerds" which created their initial fan base (Sanderson, 1998).

Rather than come up with a different back-story for the dozens of characters he would ultimately create, Stan Lee tapped into the zeitgeist created by the Cold War as the genesis for the X-Men. Genetic mutation triggered the superhuman abilities of his characters and ultimately divided his cast into homo sapiens (regular humans) and homo superior (mutants). Adrift in a world that hated and feared them, the mutants of the X-Men universe found solace in each other, but quickly split into two factions. Wheelchair-bound telepath Charles Xavier created the X-Men, a motley team who sought to use their abilities to better humanity. Holocaust survivor Erik Lensherr, a mutant known as Magneto with the power to manipulate metal, saw his kind as the next step in human evolution and formed the Brotherhood of Mutants, a cabal that sought dominance over mankind through violence and terrorism.

Of course, X-Men fame also springs from significant marketing and merchandising. To date, there have been four *X-Men* feature films*: X-Men* (2000), *X*2 (2003), *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), *X-Men: First Class* (2011) and the upcoming *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014) and two Wolverine films: *X-Men Origins - Wolverine* (2009) and *The Wolverine* (2013). While the larger Marvel universe contains many famous characters and their subsequent films (Spider-Man, The Incredible Hulk, Iron Man, etc.) a discussion of the complete universe would be beyond the scope of this paper.

Adapting the X-Men Canonical Universe to Videogames

X-Men Destiny, created by Silicon Knights in 2011, was given the difficult task of transforming a world with fifty years of popular culture into an interactive videogame. To be clear, the game developers were not transforming a single story into a videogame, but rather, a world. The narrative that unfolds through the playing of *X-Men Destiny* is unique to the game but must remain true to the characters and rules that inhabit and circumscribe what is referred to by its fans as the Marvel Universe. Indeed, as Zeller-Jacques writes,

> With their variety of visual styles and their abundance overlapping, intertwining narratives, long-running superhero comics like *The X-Men* are among the most varied and complex, or perhaps contradictory and over-determined, texts ever to have existed. Thus the central question which should be asked of any new superhero adaptation, in terms of both its visual and its narrative qualities, is the same: what, exactly, is being adapted? (p.146)

How game developers answer this question will ultimately affect the success of their title.

Visual representation of a character can vary greatly depending on the medium (comic, film, cartoon or videogame), but the representation of a character must always be canonically faithful. For example, in the original 1960s comics, Cyclops was skinny and wore a blue leotard with a rubber cap that covered his hair. This costume was replaced in the modern revival of the character with a more muscular body and a uniform that revealed his brown hair. In the X-Men film directed by Bryan Singer in 2000, the blue leotard was replaced by jeans and a black leather jacket. However, Cyclops's core characteristics remained the same: in both instances he was a prototypical American jock that served as team leader, was in love with fellow mutant Jean Grey and fired concussive blasts out of the ruby quartz visor worn over his eyes.

An example of the difficulty in transforming a mythic universe to an adapted game world is the character Wolverine, renowned for hand-to-hand combat. Aside from having three razor-sharp metallic retractable claws in each hand and an indestructible metallic skeleton, Wolverine possesses a mutant "healing factor" that allows him to heal at a vastly accelerated rate compared to a normal human. In a traditional narrative, the author can integrate Wolverine's accelerated healing into the plot as he or she sees fit. But in the ludonarrative world of the videogame, Wolverine's perpetual healing makes for problematic game development. If the developers remain true to the character, then players who control Wolverine are essentially immortal.

The problem becomes more lucid when the term "game" is properly defined. Jane McGonigal writes that any game has the same number of components: a goal, rules, a feedback system (to inform the player of their success, or lack thereof) and voluntary participation. (McGonigal, 2011). If the goal of *X-Men Destiny* is to defeat enemies in combat before the player is defeated and Wolverine is immortal, the achievement of the player's goal becomes a mathematical certainty. Players would not require skill, strategy, cunning or creative thinking – the creation and employment of which is a large reason children play – to achieve their goal because victory is guaranteed before the game even begins. In videogame terms, this would result in a boring, unsatisfying experience because players could engage in combat without any fear of defeat and could simply "mash" the attack button until the game ended. The problem, then, is that both in the canonical universe of the comics and in the adapted videogame world, Wolverine, by his very nature, does not play by the rules.

The skill with which developers incorporate an existing character's abilities, motivations and relationships with other characters figure greatly into a game's success, more so than a dedication to a particular visual or aural aesthetic. Game franchises like *God of War*, which are built from the ground up to be ludonarrative experiences, have no restrictions placed upon them by outside licensees to be canonically faithful to a character or world, and it is for this reason that the majority of critically acclaimed, multi-million selling titles are not examples of transmedial shifting, but instead are organic creations that give game developers free reign. The difficulty in translating an existing franchise to a game while remaining true to the rules that circumscribe it

has led to the disappointing reality that most games based on existing canonical universes are not satisfying. However, these games perform well commercially not because of their gameplay, but because of their very nature as a global transmedial entity and the desire for gamers to see a favorite universe digitally enacted.

Our rationale for choosing X-*Men Destiny* as an example of a transmediated universe was our opportunity to interview one of the game designers at Silicon Knights, who designed the game (Rowsell, 2013). Designers and producers of videogames have a veiled knowledge and expertise about learning and thinking in gaming environments. David Elton worked at Silicon Knights when they produced the X-Men videogames. Elton first came into the videogame industry through sales and merchandising and worked in a variety of roles in the videogame industry in the USA and Canada before he worked at Silicon Knights. We met with Elton to discuss different videogames that he has worked on and designed and they spent most of the interview discussing the development of X-Men videogames.

During our interview, Elton illustrated how the developers were allowed more design license and expansion of modes by introducing new characters:

> … for X-Men, we have the [Marvel] universe. We were fortunate enough in that we were able to create some original characters for it, which are actual playable characters in addition to the Marvel characters, but these characters still need to fit inside the universe. (March 2011)

What Elton enjoyed about working on the X-Men videogame was having some artistic license to create some new characters, but always within the X-Men universe and aesthetic. Elton described this process as "fitting inside the universe of the story." When Elton met with the X-Men producers, he and his team talked about introducing new characters into the adapted gaming world. Elton talked about how players can take on the persona of new characters as their avatars, but they cannot take on an original character such as Cyclops because he is pre-existent with his own idiosyncratic look and behaviour. As Elton elaborated: "They cannot play as Cyclops, although they can play alongside him. But he already exists. There's not a lot of customization to that, whereas if we have an original character as long as we're inside the overall guidelines of what makes a Marvel superhero."

However, this is not to say that transmedial shifting is impossible, or that efforts to undertake it always result in a poor videogame. The title *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, created by the development house Raven Software to serve as an interactive version of the 2009 film starring Hugh Jackman, successfully incorporates virtually all of the character's canonical abilities, motivations, personality and overall aesthetic while simultaneously creating a compelling adapted game world. As the videogame enthusiast website Cheat Code Central writes in their review:

> In *Origins*, nearly everything [players] have seen Wolverine do in the comics is an attack [they] can control…Years of dealing with the Marvel-verse have given [the developers] some incredible insights into the characters and story here and it's evident. Every remark, battle cry and slash looks, sounds, and feels authentic to these characters (2007).

The developers at Raven Software dealt with Wolverine's immortality not by breaking canonical rules, but by reinterpreting them, just as storytellers do with a myth. In *Origins*, Wolverine can heal minor and major injuries (such as stabbings, clubbings or gunshot wounds) but a catastrophic injury, like a grenade explosion, render him incapacitated and results in the end of play. Later in the game, a more advanced level is prefaced by the temporary removal of his healing ability, told through his capture and victim of medical experimentation via an in-game cinematic. Lazy, or perhaps novice players who have relied on Wolverine's healing to survive earlier levels must come up with new strategies to defeat their enemies. In this way the developers at Raven Software have woven Wolverine's canonical abilities from the Marvel universe into the adapted game world they have created, which will then become part of the player's storyworld. Whereas Elton's *X-Men: Destiny* has an aggregate score of 47 out of 100 at Metacritic.com, a website that evaluates popular culture, Raven's *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* has a score of 75. It should be noted that the feature film which spawned the Wolverine videogame has a rating of 40, marking one of the rare times a videogame based on an existing text has outperformed the original (Metacritic.com, 2007). A game which does not let players play as the characters they have seen in various media is likely to fare poorly, and this could be a key reason for the poor reviews *X-Men Destiny* received from gaming critics.

Just as a child playing with a Wolverine action figure has no restrictions imposed upon him by adults as to what his version of Wolverine can and cannot do, (within reason: a very imaginative kid would likely grant Wolverine Superman's flight and laser vision), the ultimate goal of a game developer is to let the player imagine Wolverine in any way they wish that would still remain true to the character. It could be argued that the success or failure of a game is not measured by flashy graphics or a compelling storyline, but could be largely measured on how well the developers let them bring a child's imagination to life.

Game Designer Perspectives

The job of a videogame designer and design teams is to mediate canonical, mythic universes within an adapted game world, bearing in mind a typical (if that is possible) "imagined story world" of players. In other words, developers must work within the boundaries of an existing story to transmediate and speculate on the idiosyncratic nature of possible gamers. Designers must maintain the integrity of the story myth or canon – like the X-Men universe – which extends across mediums and media. As well, game designers have to speculate on imagined story worlds. Of course, the idiosyncratic nature of gameplay makes it difficult to standardize *an* "imagined story world," so the challenge for designers like Elton is to design a

world shaped around the canonical mythical universe, based on gaming logic and adapted story games, shaping it all around possible imagined story worlds.

Elton offered X-Men as an example of 'world building' or what we call in the article, adapted game world:

> When it comes to an idea for a story or concept or for *building a world* with a player, designers construct worlds around stories. One of the things that's in the toolbox for every designer is being able to communicate, and it is the same for a producer or people working in teams. You need to be able to communicate your ideas in ways that different people will be able to understand. (March, 2011)

In this quote, Elton talks about the art of taking a canonical mythic universe like X-Men and adapting it into an adapted game world. Elton's emphasis on communicating worlds and stories to users refers to crafting a compelling plot through dialogue, graphics, words, illustrations, etc. to elicit interest in an existing story into an adapted version of the story.

During our interview with Elton, he returned to the concept of "core ideas need to be communicated." Elton talked about how designers focus on particular features or elements of a story to create an adapted X-Men game world. Elton talked about creating *touchpoints* in their designs that signal a mythic, canonical universe, yet he also discussed having freedom and license to create gamer storied worlds. For instance, a player can select an avatar (e.g., Aimi Yoshida) at the beginning and then select a trajectory for their character to project a certain pathway for *their* story and recruit the help of X-Men to help them with aspects of game play. In this way a designer makes the game more idiosyncratic by offering flexibility in terms of actions but is constrained somewhat by aesthetics to exist within the canonical, mythic gaming universe.

A touchpoint can be a recurrent sound or musical motif, or, it can be a visual that appears in particular instances to signal a story element (allude to mythic universe). For instance, the phrase "sworn to protect a world that hates and fears them" is the unofficial motto of the X-Men, appears or is alluded to in virtually all "X-Media" and informed the title of our paper.

Touchpoints can both reflect canonical worlds *and* they can signal ways of deviating from established storyworlds. For example, when Wolverine extends his adamantium claws in the comics, the action is always accompanied by the word "snikt," a visual onomatopoetic construction which serves to illustrate the sound of metal scraping against metal. Because videogames are multimodal, the developers can choose to replace the visual representation with a sound effect, or further illustrate this touchstone with the word appearing on-screen. Much like there is no way to truly express the auditory representation of a musical note in any other medium, there is no true way to literally translate "snikt" to an aural medium, or vice-versa. Developers, then, must do the best with the resources they have available.

A concept that recurred in the Elton interview is the notion of migrating the canonical, mythic universe into an adapted media world, known as transmedia. Elton talked the notion of transmedia during our interview. Marjorie Siegel (2006) talks about transmediation, which she

describes as a process when one mode switches into another mode. That is, moving a character like Wolverine from an X-Men comic into a videogame not only changes how the character is visually portrayed, but also requires game developers to subtly shift character abilities for successful game-play requirements.

But when modes shift from say a printed cartoon to a moving image to a videogame, modal properties, affordances, and constraints shift. As we discussed earlier with the example of Wolverine, there are effects that you can have in comics and movies that are far more difficult in game worlds. Game designers need to have creative and innovative ways of adapting a mythic universe into authentic and homologous gaming practices but still keeping with the integrity of the story. Elton talked about being able to have more creative freedom and license when the design team could develop their own characters. In this instances, they could deviate from the mythic template, as he says:

> … for X-Men, we have the universe. We were fortunate enough in that we were able to create some original characters for it, which are actual playable characters in addition to the Marvel characters, but these characters still need to fit inside the universe. (March 2011)

There are several production practices implicit to the X-Men example – transmediation, bricolage, and multimodal composition. Remix represents the choosing, sorting, assembling, distributing, and remixing practices that happen when turning one text into another one. It is about remixing one thing into another thing – a Marvel comic into a Marvel videogame (but, importantly, not changing canonical characters or the Marvel universe). Whereas remixing privileges a mixing and melding together of previously existing texts, discourses and "stuff" (Gee, 1999), convergence privileges uniting technologies and functions, thereby gathering dispersed networks (Sheridan & Rowsell, 2010). To keep with the X-Men example, remix is taking one thing and making into something else. Convergence is combining different technologies such as moving images that can be manipulated to create a different meaning-making and communicational experience. Convergence describes a melding and blending process of technologies with communicational systems (Jenkins, 2006).

Henry Jenkins writes about convergence culture and how media consumers choose among an array of forms to participate socially in new media cultures, blurring the lines between consumers and producers. During the interview with Elton and our discussion about X-Men, he talked about remixing practices in which game designers engage. Within a game's visual design, remix and convergence take place when game designers combine vestiges of characters and embed them in the game. To offer an example of remixing in visual design, Elton discussed how designers take a familiar aesthetic such as Scarlett Johansson's body type or Angelina Jolie's lips and remix and converge these aesthetic features to design a character. Through bricolage, designers construct characters and backdrops that are remixed and converged versions of other texts. Elton describes the process:

> It actually happens in a variety of ways, so, part of it is the main reason why that is successful is because what you're trying to do is communicate your idea in a way that people can understand or grasp, and one of the easiest ways to do that is to come up with examples everyone is familiar with. So if you say, so for example, if you say, I want this to taste like chicken, pretty much everyone knows what chicken tastes like so, by using examples from film or a very popular film or very popular painting or a very popular movie, people have a level of understanding of what that idea is about, be it tone, be it what the audience is, what it is they want the player to be feeling or experiencing during that time, so by taking all these examples from different media and applying them together. I know a lot of studios use film as a reference, so, say, I want this to be as epic as *Star Wars*, you know, and have this, or I ordered this as more of a period piece, and bring examples, so here's in the '40s, and just so here's an example from *Ice Age*, so that sort of idea. There are other cases, so when you're doing concept art, for example, you're trying to define what that visual look is on your board or object or character, you know, being able to take ideals from different places, so I'm looking for a character. I'm looking for, you know, Angelina Jolie's mouth, you know, the hairstyle of Scarlett Johansson, or the overall body build of Julianne Moore. (March 2011)

Aspects of visual design in videogames, such as a character's hairstyle looking like Scarlett Johansson's, may be transplanted into another character, but they still serve as touchpoints to remind the player and/or viewer of the original character. For example, Jean Grey may have one of many different hairstyles but her locks will always be fiery red, while Storm's will always be white.

During the interview, Elton described a process that happens when negotiated mythic universe with adapted, transmediated text, with possible imagined story world trajectories. First of all, once there is an idea for a game – such as building on a universe, or fulfilling actions or a repertoire of practices – then there need to be touchpoints that materialize and circumscribe the adapted game world. Does the world have a darker, more abstract aesthetic like *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, or, does the immersive world use bold, fun colours to represent levity and light-hearted play such as any of the *Super Mario* titles? Once the story develops, and there needs to be a structure and boundaries. If the settings and characters are good and evil illustrated in darker, more sombre colours, then it would not make sense to introduce comic, pastel characters. Modes need to match and adhere to story boundaries. What is more, modes exude the internal meanings and thinking systems.

Imagined Story Worlds

Videogames offer new ways of telling stories. But, it is not quite the same way that we tell stories in printed texts or orally through performative storytelling. Children's use of games is complicated by the fact that they actually play a role in the telling of the story because they are both the character and the reader/player. To tell the story, they need to act it out – they need to *do* something, which is typically to complete a set of actions to make the game happen. To successfully play many videogames, players need to live the story narrative. Gamers need to take on a role, forcing them to engage in cognitive processing. To roleplay, one has to interpret elements, choose sides and know one's environment. While many casual games like *Tetris, Angry Birds* and *Peggle* have no storyline, most console-based titles (that is, games played on the Sony PlayStation, Microsoft Xbox or Nintendo Wii) feature a story that serves as the skeleton for a title to hang its gameplay upon and to compel people to play.

Videogames like *X-Men Destiny* are nested within story worlds or story narratives. In this way, they can be considered modern-day cultural narratives (Lacasa, Martinez, & Mendez, 2008). According to Lacasa, Martinez, and Mendez (2008), there are two main approaches to gaming and narrative: ludologists who prioritize game rules and narratologists who prioritize story and story-telling.

Stories rely on narrative entry-points, which hinge on the different senses of game narratives in the literature. Juul (2005) talks about event-based games. From this perspective, the videogame relies on rules and rules carry power for players. In contrast, Juul identifies another narrative construct as "embodied fictional themes." These are game narratives that rely on emotions and affect. In other words, there are game narratives that function on experience and actions with rules shaping gameplay. Then there are games that work within imaginary worlds and that function on responding to and transacting with stories. These stories not only rely on the integrity of existing franchises such as the X-Men, but also and importantly on the assumptions and predilections of the gamers coming into the experience. Often times the videogame story as narrative sets up a series of variables to exist in another domain entirely, allowing children and adolescents to take on different ways of talking, writing, understanding and producing images and experimenting with different parts of their identities.

Multiple playthroughs allow gamers to relive, again and again, the elements of a story. In other words, as Toscana describes it, players absorb the cultural messages of games. Gamers thereby exist in what is tantamount to a figured world (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998), or what we refer to above as an imagined world. For a gamer to exist within their own storied gaming world, they need to adopt and project a particular identity into their avatar and to base their gaming practices and trajectory on combined properties from their own subjectivities and those of the avatar. Videogames usher gamers into adapted story worlds, like a film, only the gamer enacts the plot for the film as they play. Videogames could even be seen as enacted or even remediated cinema. Videogames are stories rendered live through objects that players can manipulate and act upon. Often narrative choices not only entail choice, but also trajectories. Games tell stories – they are rich in description – they display visual and aural material. In this

way, games are not closed stories but they are circular and iterative and they can provoke multiple interpretations.

However, because they are a participatory media, videogames require a player for their story to be told. While a television show or movie theatre may broadcast their story from beginning to end to an empty room, a videogame without a player will not progress and tell no story at all. The player and the story told by the game are therefore two sides of the same coin; one cannot exist without the other.

Paratext and Story Worlds

To support our argument that video-game practices afford the learner literacy opportunities, we acknowledge that paratextual practices also contribute to the notion of the storyworld. Gaming is a social practice that extends into other social media forums.

On September 28, 2011 a gaming enthusiast named GhostRobo uploaded a video on YouTube called "X-Men Destiny Walkthrough Part 1 – Emma, Where Are Your Clothes? – Let's Play (Gameplay & Commentary)." To date, this video – the first of eighteen videos for the videogame *X-Men Destiny* – has been viewed 399,082 times. Game walkthroughs are usually created by an expert gamer who records a voiceover while playing a new title. With an authorial tone, the player walks the viewer through footage of the game offering advice, strategies, jokes, and personal opinion as to the game's quality. Game walkthroughs on YouTube are a popular genre amongst audiences of not only those who play the game, but also potential consumers looking for hands-on gameplay footage instead of pre-rendered animations often shown in television commercials. Walkthroughs are also entertainment media for individuals who might never purchase the game. For example, children who are too young to play but are drawn to the popular mythos might enjoy watching the recording. The joke in the title of the video alludes to the X-Men character Emma Frost, a British telepath who can turn her body to diamond and who rarely wears more than lingerie; with a prudish tone, GhostRobo expresses his discomfort with her wardrobe. While walkthroughs are often comedic and light-hearted they also reveal the social conditioning that goes on alongside gameplay in these paratexts. The *X-Men Destiny* walkthrough series is only one of a nearly one hundred game walkthrough series that GhostRobo has produced in the last two years.

Game walkthroughs are a growing practice that contribute to the broader popular culture experience of gaming. Christopher Walsh and Thomas Apperley draw on Mia Consalvo's observation that walkthroughs are one form of gaming "paratext" which "play an important role in creating connections and distinctions between individuals in gaming capital and are an important common ground for the basis of social relations formed around videogame play" (3-4). In their paper "Gaming Capital: Rethinking Literacy," Walsh and Apperley theorize the importance of the notion of the student's "lifeworld":

> This research hopes to explore the value of studying games in school because they play a vital role in young people's lifeworlds and in the development of their sense of self as

> well as their relations with others. We suggest that gaming capital is a valuable tool for conceptualizing the nexus of gameplayers, video/computer games and gaming culture along with all of its accoutrements. (10)

In this formulation, the *X-Men Destiny* walkthroughs offer not only a means to engage in fan culture around the game, but also an identity-building process from the learning subject which contributes to the phenomenon as a whole.

Increasingly, videogame practices will be further incorporated into the notion of Home. As such, literacy professionals will have to deal with convergence on new levels. On May 22nd, 2013, Microsoft announced the Xbox One entertainment system, the sequel to the Xbox 360 from 2005 and the original Xbox in 2001. The system promises to deliver what Bill Gates foresaw in his prescient book *The Road Ahead*, published in 1995, which discussed the convergence of media.

Built from the ground up to be an all-in-one entertainment device, the Xbox One plans to merge the many disparate computer devices found around a home by fusing the functionalities of a cable box, DVD player, Blu-Ray disc player, stereo system, internet browser, webcam and gaming console into a single machine. Users will be able to seamlessly switch between the console's many functionalities via voice command, or operate several simultaneously, all while talking to friends in high definition via Skype. Television shows and movies will be viewed either from a television cable plugged directly into the machine and operated with an in-board menu system, via streaming download through Netflix or through content burned to a DVD, copied to a USB key, or streamed wirelessly from a PC. The potential for transmedia intertextuality in this formulation will intensify significantly when home becomes saturated with embedded digital media.

Conclusion

An aboriginal scholar by the name of Thomas King (2008) once said, “the truth about stories is that, that is all we are”, which serves as a fitting coda for our article on overlapping story worlds in videogames. Stories are age-old and where they used to be passed on in oral cultures, present-day storytelling has many manifestations such as videogames. Epic ancient stories emerged from oral stories like *The Odyssey* and many of the tropes within such stories buttress contemporary media. Archetypal heroes like Odysseus setting out on adventures to face battles, friends, and foes are the basis for videogame plots such as *World of Warcraft* and *Xmen* videogames. Adventure stories have been passed down from generation to generation, taken up in many different iterations.

In this article, we examined a videogame and stories of its production to speculate on how learners negotiate overlapping storied worlds. Reinterpreting stories and tropes, characters, rhetorical devices in stories is not new in disciplines such as literary criticism, but within gaming literature there is a gap in research that traces transmediated stories and the ways in which

transmediation influences gamers and how they take up these worlds. Our explicit framing of the *Xmen* story and how it transforms and morphs into something quite different in an adapted gaming world illustrates shifts in aesthetics, practices, and navigational systems when a story migrates into a gaming text. Such an optic gives readers of this special issue not only a deeper appreciation for the complexity of story arcs in design and producing ppopular culture texts but also, how integrity to story and to central substantive strands deviate to accommodate different media channels and modal constraints. We hope that this optic compels other researches to dig down deep into stories and the shifts and diversions they take when they transmediate into other text genres.

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