STICKS, SANDBOXES, AND STORIES: RE-THINKING THE NARRATIVE AND THE LUDIC IN L.A. NOIRE, JOURNEY, AND FLOWER

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Thomas J. Erb, B.A.

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Thomas J. Erb, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: Caetlin Benson-Allott, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

In the field of game studies, narratology (the study of video games using the same methods for studying narrative in old media, particularly television or film) and ludology (the study of video games as a participatory medium bounded by rules and procedure) have traditionally been understood as opposing terms. The present project aims to reconsider this binary as a continuum for the study of video games in which neither pole can exist without the other, but rather both must be considered relative to the given game under study, weighted according to that game's particular features. In this paper, a model for this kind of analysis is proposed, using the 2011 video game L.A. Noire as a particularly narrative-oriented example, while the 2012 game Journey and the 2008 game Flower are positioned on the ludic end of the spectrum. Although these games use the same technological affordances of the PlayStation 3 (PS3) platform to seemingly different ends, the examination of the narrative and ludic features of both games prove illuminating, albeit in ways that are particular to each.
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Introduction

Practically speaking, video games pose a particular set of problems for scholars in the field of English. As so-called "new media" objects, they raise questions about classification, about what marks the boundaries of a given medium as opposed to others: as Mark B.N. Hansen states, "For almost every claim advanced in support of the 'newness' of new media, it seems that an exception can readily be found, some earlier cultural or artistic practice that already displays the specific characteristics under issue" (21). Additionally, video games challenge us to rethink our critical and theoretical approaches to studying media. On a fundamental level, as Steven E. Jones argues, "there is a sense that what literary scholars do is at odds with what video games are for. We read, we interpret. We produce meanings by performing either close readings of verbal texts or somewhat more 'distant' readings of the historical and contemporary contexts out of which those verbal texts are produced and within which they circulate" (2, original emphasis). Perhaps not surprisingly, then, some scholars have tended to "stick to their guns" in analyzing video games, arguing that they are merely updates of old media forms that can be described and understood in much the same way as movies or novels. Mark J.P. Wolf, writing in 2001, claims that "[c]urrently, they [video games] are best approached and analyzed using conceptual tools developed in film and television theory and media studies" because "[t]he study of video games overlaps these fields in many theoretical areas, including those of the active spectator, suture, first-person narrative, and spatial orientation, point of view, character identification, sound and image relations, and semiotics" (2-3). Of these areas of critical overlap, many scholars have chosen to focus on the elements of narrative that are common between new and old media. Although this perspective acknowledges that video games in some sense are, or at least seem to
be, different from other media, the assumption is that narrative is still a fundamental part of what video games are about.

As such, so-called “narratologists” seek to describe video games in terms of the symbolic plots they enact, albeit in a different way than other media, as Murray points out: “Whereas novels allow us to explore character and drama allows us to explore action, simulation narrative can allow us to explore process. Because the computer is a procedural medium, it does not just describe or observe behavioral patterns, the way printed text or moving photography does; it embodies and executes them. And as a participatory medium, it allows us to collaborate in the performance” (181). In this sense, then, any “innovations” that video games offer are seen primarily in terms of how they contribute to our experience of plot. Murray contends that although narrative in video games is pre-scripted, it must be enacted by the player, so the game itself encourages the player to see a direct connection between the actions he or she is performing and the unfolding of the plot (207). This mode of participating in a narrative is seen as merely an extension of what was already operating in older media: although gamers are undeniably more “active” than even the most invested film viewers, in that they cause the game’s events to occur, both spectators must attempt make sense of the action as it happens. Thus, as the video game medium has advanced technologically, its ability to do what movies do, to present a visual world that is realistic (though stylized) in as much detail as possible, narratologists point out that it tends to rely on the conventions of cinema in its presentation, which leads gamers to adopt similar expectations of video games to those of film viewers. Although these expectations are largely applicable to more modern games, the narratological perspective contends that presenting a story has always been the basic goal of video games, whether technologically “advanced” or “primitive.” Wolf asserts that, “whether characters are represented by high-
resolution photographic images or a few colored squares, certain basic narrative roles and functions (protagonist, antagonist, obstacles, etc.) are always present” (95). From such a perspective, the gameplay elements of this new medium serve to increase our immersion in the story; even if the apparent challenge of the game is to master its controls, it is the narrative that keeps the player invested.

More recently, however, there has been considerable pushback against perspectives that privilege narrative (and particularly cinematic) analysis of video games. Even from what seems like a now-distant perspective, Wolf foresees the potential limitations of the above-described approach: “Perhaps the main reason for the neglect of the video game is that it is more difficult to study than traditional media. Admittedly, the video game as a ‘text’ is much harder to master” (7). One major criticism of narratology, according to Steven E. Jones, is that “[i]t’s hard for literary scholars to understand how they [video games] can truly be meaningful, any more than a soccer game is meaningful, I mean apart from what most of them perceive in advance would be superficial semiotic readings of the characters or mythical narrative structures of games – Mario as the Hero with a Thousand Faces, say” (2, original emphasis). Thus, from this perspective, narratology is an inadequate tool for analyzing video games because, on a fundamental level, video games are presumed to be deficient at storytelling when compared to other media forms. A new perspective began to arise in the late 1990s in order to shift our thinking away from a perspective in which video games are constantly fighting an uphill battle, trying to catch up with the advancements in media that have the advantage a head start of decades (in the case of cinema), centuries (in the case of the novel), or even millennia (in the case of literature or symbolic storytelling more generally) over the fledgling medium of video games.
This new approach, which is often referred to as “ludology,” suggests that narrative meaning is only of secondary interest when studying video games and that their primary connection is to other forms of gameplay experiences rather than old media forms. Again, Wolf acknowledges that the dominant perspective at the time he was writing ignores the video game’s “status as a ‘game,’ which separates it from traditional media such as books, film, radio, and television, despite its audiovisual nature and often narrative basis” (6). As Steven Malliet recounts, ludology focuses instead “on the formal characteristics that mark out the boundaries of video games as a distinct medium, and on the terminology that is the most appropriate for analyzing video games as cybertexts (e.g. Aarseth, 1997), as rule-based systems (e.g. Juul, 2005), as simulations (e.g. Frasca, 2003) or as second-order cybernetic systems (e.g. Kücklich, 2002)” (“Adapting the Principles of Ludology”). Rather than presuming that video games are intended to function similarly to media like film, ludology emphasizes that the shift from viewer to player implies a radically different subject position is required to interact with this new medium. What is important to understand, from this perspective, is the technological foundation of the medium; in order to play a game, ludologists argue, one must learn the underlying rules, what is and is not made possible by them, and how to act in accordance with those rules to succeed, all of which are moderated by computer technology. By attending to the formal features of video games, ludology seeks to privilege the ways in which video games are recognizably different from other media as a way of seeking disciplinary purity within the humanities.

Initially, then, these two perspectives were conceptualized as fundamentally opposed to one another, forcing scholars to make an “either/or” distinction in the field of video game studies. Steven E. Jones summarizes the conflict thusly: “ludology was an institutional reaction to existing interdisciplinary work on games by cultural studies and comparative media studies
scholars [...] who treated games as one among a whole range of cultural forms of media
expression and, according to their critics among the ludologists, often from a perspective that
privileged text-based or filmic presuppositions of meaning or aesthetic value” (4). Although the
fervor surrounding this debate has largely faded over the years, the debate appears to have been
less resolved than merely dropped, with few concessions or attempts at reconciling the
contradictions between the two viewpoints made on either side. There are two major problems
with this resolution, or lack thereof, that I wish to reconcile here: first, ludology and narratology
both propose useful theoretical tools for the study of video games that, if abandoned to disuse,
would represent a major loss for the field. Secondly, lacking a satisfactory conclusion to a
conflict that I believe introduces a useful friction into the field of media studies, I fear that video
game scholarship may lapse back into such unproductive territory-marking in the future. I bring
up this distinction, then, in order to recontextualize it in a more productive manner, as a way of
salvaging what was useful about the debate while simultaneously exposing the fallaciousness of
the original conflict. While I do not disagree with the notion that ludology and narratology are
pulling video game scholarship in different theoretical directions, I believe this tension is
actually productive when considering video games not as a unified medium but as discrete
objects, each with their own specific projects and contexts. In this view, procedure and narrative
might be conceived of as two ends of the same spectrum, and individual video games would be
distributed along that continuum according to their formal characteristics, whether they are more
narrative- or procedure-oriented. I do not, however, mean to suggest that such categorization
would absolve the video game scholar of seeing this binary as a meaningful distinction in
determining the approach to take with a particular game. Instead, I intend to show that a
totalizing perspective for analyzing video games is impossible because of the numerous varied
forms that they can take and that scholars should rather focus on approaching video games with a greater sensitivity to these variations. I have selected three games as the focus of my study here, one (*L.A. Noire*) with a decidedly narrativistic bent and two (*Journey* and *Flower*, from the same publisher, thatgamecompany [TGC]) that ostensibly present purely ludic scenarios, as outliers from their contemporaries in the realm of modern video games. My project here is to demonstrate that even at the outermost reaches of this continuum, the opposite pole still has considerable pull on our understanding of any given video game. Although "new media" can be taken to imply a contradiction in terms, between what is innovative and what is conventional, video games problematize that distinction by requiring a hybrid perspective in order to be fully comprehended.

*L.A. Noire* and Narrative

The 2011 Team Bondi game *L.A. Noire* in many ways presents itself as thoroughly narrative-focused, harnessing the video game medium's technological affordances to primarily cinematic effect. The game begins with a cut-scene, which functions in much the same way as the opening credits sequence of many films, to familiarize the player with the game's setting, visual style, and some of its major characters and themes. In fact, the first on-screen credit besides the game's developer, Team Bondi, and its title is to writer/director Brendan McNamara, which foregrounds the traditional means of media production — that is, studio production, writing, and directing, rather than programming. Following this scene, the opening title of the first case, "Upon Reflection," plays over a cut-scene showing the player's character on patrol in a police car with his partner when they are radioed with an assignment. When the player takes over control of the scene, on-screen text instructs the player on the controls of the game, which are context-specific to accelerating, braking, and steering, as well as the new objective, to drive
to the crime scene. Once the player has progressed toward this goal, another cut-scene plays, showing the characters exiting the car and speaking with the officers already on the scene, who give them the assignment of finding evidence relating to the murder committed there. The player is again given on-screen prompts about how to control the character on foot, as well as how to examine potential pieces of evidence.

This opening sequence, like much of the game that follows, places most of its emphasis on what happens in the cinematic cut-scenes. The player knows that he or she has done something right, like driving in the intended direction or finding a necessary piece of evidence, when such a cinematic scene plays, and the narrative progresses primarily in these cut-scenes. In fact, at this point in the game, the player is restricted in terms of gameplay by a need to progress the storyline further, as it is impossible to leave the alleyway without completing the objective set in the preceding cut-scene. From the outset, then, the expectation is set that the player will view these narrative scenes as rewards; as Sacha A. Howells argues, “In narrative-driven games, cut-scenes have often come to replace the classic videogame reward system: points” (113, original emphasis). By allowing the player to progress the narrative, unlock a new area of the gameworld, or simply learn more about the story, these scenes function to drive the plot along, to guide the player’s actions during the gameplay sequences toward pre-defined goals, and to afford the player views of the game’s characters and settings that would not be possible given the third-person focalized perspective of the rest of the game. In a sense, then, gameplay functions here in much the same way that narratologists theorize it should: to give the player the sense of control over the narrative’s progression, but always with the intent of fulfilling the predetermined plot. Thus, although the player in these opening gameplay sequences may drive to the crime scene at his or her own pace or examine more than just the required objects that are counted as
"evidence" in the alleyway, a definite linear progression is implied, and to a great extent controlled, by the ongoing narrative that is depicted in the cut-scenes. Given the central significance of the plot, then, the narratological perspective suggests that we might productively begin by talking about the game in terms of the established standards of film genres and how this game positions itself within, against, and as a reformulation of traditional understandings of film genre.

**L.A. Noire and Definitions of Genre**

As its generic title overtly suggests, *L.A. Noire* is positioned as participating in the tradition of noir fiction, the provenance of which can, in this case, be traced to film. If, as Marshall McLuhan argues, “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium” (8), this game is perhaps only unusual in how open it is about what medium it is appropriating. In order to define what *L.A. Noire*’s project is in relation to the film medium, it will be useful to establish a definition of film noir first, particularly given the debates surrounding the genre and how this game seems to be conceptualizing it. As William Park points out in his book, *What is Film Noir?*, the noir period is generally understood as beginning in 1941 with *The Maltese Falcon*, extending through the 1940s and into the ‘50s, and including films such as *Double Indemnity* (1944) and “a semi-documentary phase” of dubious standing within the genre (1). There has also historically been agreement about the reasons for film noir’s rise during this period, “most of them the result of World War II: wartime gloom; [...] angst-ridden veterans disoriented by their experiences in combat and threatened by working women; a post war boom that as it created new suburbs also destroyed the city and turned it into a dark wasteland” (1). Frank Krutnik points specifically to the “series of ‘tough’ thrillers in which a war veteran returns home to find himself caught up in a tortuous criminal conspiracy” (65) that emerged in the postwar period as a
particularly notable subtype of noir, which *L.A. Noire* draws upon. Philosophically, film noir is aligned with skepticism about the post-war period’s optimistic outlook on self-improvement (Hibbs xvii), pop-psychology (Krutnik 45), and the increasing paranoia about government surveillance and demography (Copjec 176).

As useful as these characterizations of film noir can be—and I will return to them later—Park is also quick to mention that, “despite this accurate summary of received opinion about film noir, no agreement has yet been reached about what exactly it is” (2). The problem of defining film noir, and by extension of what it is that *L.A. Noire* is participating in, is in the indeterminacy surrounding what the term “film noir” means: “Some consider film noir a genre; others think it is a style. Robin Wood sees it as ‘occupying an indeterminate space between a style and a genre’ and still others refer to it variously as a ‘movement,’ a ‘cycle,’ a ‘hybrid,’ some kind of ‘generic field’ or ‘transgeneric phenomenon’ which defies classification” (2). Some critics go even further: Ronald Schwartz argues that because the Hollywood directors of the 1940s and ’50s did not apply the term to their own films, but rather it was applied later by French film theorists, film noir is, at most, “an unconscious stylistic movement” (xi). Foster Hirsch agrees with Schwartz’s characterization, pointing out that the directors of classical noir films “would probably have called their stories thrillers or crime dramas and let it go at that” (8) and therefore were not consciously contributing to the development of a new genre or style. As Copjec points out, these questions about genre classification are not unique to film noir, though she believes that, with film noir, “these doubts nag more persistently than usual, and cannot be simply accounted for by the fact that the term *film noir* was not of Hollywood’s devising” (x).

In some ways, *L.A. Noire* relies upon exploiting the uncertainties surrounding the category of film noir in order to argue for its place within the genre by reformulating noir’s
formal terms at the same time as it draws upon its conventions. One of the most explicit ways that the game addresses the noir canon it draws upon is in the side quest to find gold film canisters hidden throughout the gameworld, with an optional achievement\(^1\) (called "Hollywoodland") for finding all fifty. Of the films included in the game, twenty-one are not included in Geoff Mayer and Brian McDonnell's *Encyclopedia of Film Noir*, whereas only four do not appear in Michael L. Stephens’ *Film Noir: A Comprehensive, Illustrated Reference to Movies, Terms and Persons (Angels with Dirty Faces [1938], Odd Man Out [1947], Rififi [1955], and The Third Man [1949]). Many of these films are on Park’s “Within the Genre” list (137-171), but many others are considered to be “Borderline” (173-178), some are on his list of films he feels are better classified as “Period Pieces” (179-184), and some do not appear on any of his lists of films traditionally considered to be within the noir canon. In fact, the film that *L.A. Noire* arguably most directly draws upon, *The Naked City* (1948), is one such film on Park’s “Period Pieces” list, in his opinion better classified as “Police Work – Law and Order” (179) than as film noir. (*The Naked City* does appear in both of the other above-referenced guides to noir film, but both make mention of its semi-documentary style, which, as I will discuss in more detail in the next paragraph, is a theoretical “gray area” for some film noir scholars.) This film is not only one of the collectible film reels within the game; one of the game’s bonus downloadable cases, appropriately titled “The Naked City,” is an adaptation of the film’s plot. Although this adaptation requires some minor alterations including a change in location from New York to Los Angeles, the plot of this case remains essentially the same as in the film, though most of the characters’ names are changed. The game even includes clever nods to the movie by offering

\(^1\) These achievements are merely abstract “awards” on the player’s Xbox Live account for accomplishing certain pre-defined feats within the game; they do not affect gameplay or unlock in-game benefits. *L.A. Noire*, like many modern games, has a list of achievements that the player can access to learn what actions are required to unlock them. On PlayStation Network (PSN), these awards are referred to as trophies but function in the same way.
achievements titled “Give My Regards” (for shooting the letters in the Broadway Hotel’s sign, the L.A. landmark Willy climbs in the case’s final confrontation, substituting for New York’s Williamsburg Bridge in the film) and “Eight Million Stories” (for completing the case, a reference to the film’s final lines: “There are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them.”).

More broadly, L.A. Noire owes a significant debt to The Naked City for its narrative style in the introductory scenes of the game’s early cases, in which the narrator shows familiarity with the characters in the diegesis, even directly addressing Cole Phelps (Aaron Staton), the main character, as if offering him advice or questioning him about the events of the story. Furthermore, the police procedural structure of the game resembles a style of films that Park refers to as “docu-noirs,” the model and most famous of the type being The Naked City (60). The distinction between these documentary-style films and noir films can be seen in the shift from the criminals’ perspective (in film noir) to the police’s (in docu-noir) and the attendant focus on piecing together, after the crime has already occurred, what happened, how it happened, and why (61). Park says of these docu-noir films, “I do not consider [them] as generic film noirs. First, the police or government officers opposed to the criminals are Dudley-Do-Right characters […] And second, many of the films, rather than having the noir style, look just the opposite: crisp black and white cinematography, shot for the most part in daylight” (60). As in The Naked City, where the external narrator focuses on Jimmy Halloran (Don Taylor), the protagonist of L.A. Noire is a young war veteran with a wife and family; both are tenacious in pursuing leads and idealistic about defending truth and justice. In addition, the game takes place mostly in the daytime, and even if the player enables the option of playing the game in black and white (the default presentation is in color, another possible violation of the traditions of the genre) the
visual style of the game often conforms more to the documentary style Park describes than to the typical look of film noir, which generally consists of much darker imagery and which I will delve into in more detail in the next section. Because of the reliance on a film whose status in the noir canon is so questionable, the characterization of the protagonist in the game’s early patrol cases, and the visual style of certain sections of the game, it is doubtful that the game can claim noir authenticity by the traditionally-understood formal standards of the genre.

*L.A. Noire and Generic Conventions*

Despite these objections, *L.A. Noire* functions within a different logic of film noir that aligns with what Thomas S. Hibbs refers to as the “family resemblances” of the genre (xv). Similarly, Park responds to the traditional question of whether film noir is a style or genre thusly: “The answer is that it is both, the only Hollywood genre that is also a style, a period style no less [...] the genre depends more on the situation and actions of the protagonist, while the style consists of dark cities, night clubs, detectives, femme fatales, expressionist camera work and chiaroscuro” (6-7). This dual perspective allows *L.A. Noire* to utilize only those features that are most relevant for its project and discard the others without being disqualified from fitting into the category of noir. Although Park goes on to argue that “the genre persists, but not the style” (28), the game does make several notable references to noir’s stylized visual techniques. Park refers to the numerous locations and elements that typify the noir setting, from dark and smoky bars, back alleys, and waterfronts to rundown buildings and subterranean locales (56-7). Virtually all of these elements appear in *L.A. Noire* at some point in the game, as well as the typical narrative style of film noir that Park describes, involving voiceovers, flashbacks, multiple (often unreliable) perspectives, and hallucinatory or dreamlike imagery that is difficult to distinguish from reality (57-8). The game’s backstory, which centers on Cole Phelps’ experiences in World
War II, is told in flashbacks between cases, and the visual style of these scenes, with hazy distorted images and washed-out colors, suggests a dream-like or hallucinatory quality to what are ostensibly the collective traumatic memories of his Marines unit. Additional background is supplied by various newspapers that can be found throughout the game, which trigger cutscenes that help explain the vast conspiracy that is building just below the surface of the game narrative’s events (more on which later). Also, after Phelps has been disgraced and demoted to the arson desk, he employs the services of Jack Kelso (Gil McKinney), a private investigator who served in the Marines with Phelps, and in order to continue the investigation, the player takes control of Kelso for several cases. Since Phelps and Kelso were described in the opening narration of the “Warrants Outstanding” case as “two guys who should have been friends, but their personalities got in the way,” the juxtaposition of the two focalized perspectives is thematically significant. By enacting multiple points of view, the game brings an extra level of complication to the narrative, which is part of its noir project; as Nathaniel Rich puts it, “Film noir tries to make sense of the complexities and anxieties of the postwar urban experience” (qtd. in Park 2).

These conventions help position *L.A. Noire* within the genre’s style, but they are inextricably joined to the other generic hallmarks that the game also employs to fulfill the standard expectations of what constitutes “noir” as a recognizable form. Broadly speaking, the characteristic features of film noir, as described by Hibbs, go beyond the surface-level stylistic elements like typical settings, shots, and visual effects to include thematic elements such as crime, illicit romantic liaisons, and failed attempts at fame or glory, as well as “dominant moods (anxiety, dread, and oppressive entrapment)” (xv). On a basic level, the game obviously revolves around crime, which is a typical noir plot device, though as Park points out, docu-noirs also deal
with the criminal element, especially organized crime (60). Park allows that the distinction may be overcome and certain films of this style can fit into the noir genre; the key is that certain other elements must supply the conventional noir requirements. Here, too, Park provides a list:

In the classic period, [the noir] situation gives rise to a typical cast, no one type of character being absolutely essential to the genre. In addition to the fallible protagonist and investigator, one is likely to find a femme fatale, a conventional girlfriend or wife, a psychopath, numerous police (good and bad), corrupt politicians, gangsters or criminals, not as protagonists but as villains or obstacles, returning G.I.s, and a psychiatrist. (26)

Again, *L.A. Noire* provides an embarrassment of riches in each of these categories. All of the cases on the homicide desk revolve around catching the psychopathic Black Dahlia killer, Garrett Mason (Andrew Lukich). The conspiracy plot that drives much of the game’s action involves many corrupt police officers, including Phelps’ own partner on the vice squad, Roy Earle (Adam John Harrington); at least two other policemen are specifically referred to as corrupt in the course of the game: Vernon Mapes (Jack Conley), who is tasked with protecting business tycoon Howard Hughes’ interests at all costs, and Floyd Rose (Jack Impellizzeri), whose “early retirement” paves the way for Phelps to become a detective. The other former members of Phelps’ unit, the Sixth Marines, are mixed up in a plot to steal army surplus morphine, and gangster Mickey Cohen (Patrick Fischler) becomes involved, as the stolen morphine being sold by the ex-Marines is cutting into his drug racket. In order to end the conflict with the Cohen gang, Courtney Sheldon (Chad Todhunter), one of the Sixth Marines, ends up unwittingly funding the conspiracy when he agrees to give his portion of the loot to Dr. Harlan Fontaine (Peter Blomquist) to be distributed to legitimate medical institutions. Dr. Fontaine is a psychiatrist who manipulates the traumatized ex-Marine Ira Hogeboom (J. Marvin Campbell)
into committing arsons for the Suburban Redevelopment Fund, the organization behind the conspiracy. Although Dr. Fontaine is generally not the direct subject of the game’s investigation, he is a notable character because, as Marlisa Santos reasons, the psychiatrist is a stock villain within the noir tradition. Such characters often figure as even more of a threat than the many violent criminals who also appear as antagonists, because “[i]n the intensely psychological world in which noir takes place, […] there is little more dangerous than someone who can use one’s innermost secrets and fears as the means for doing damage” (1). In sum, Schwartz characterizes the cast of classic noir thusly: “Characters share obsessive behavior, males are generally untrusting and misogynistic, and become victims of their own paranoia” (xii).

Perhaps the most significant item on Park’s film noir cast list is the fallible protagonist, which in L.A. Noire is primarily Cole Phelps. Although he generally does not share the same pessimistic, sexist, and distrustful outlook described in the previous paragraph that many of the other male characters (especially his various partners throughout the game) openly display, Phelps is arguably the game’s most obsessive character. His dogged pursuit of truth and justice is shown to stem from his traumatic past, his failure to live up to these ideals in a past life that now seems unreal to him, which perfectly fits what Krutnik calls the “new ‘psychological’ trend in the representation of character” (x) in classic film noir. Park says that “the noir protagonist [is] a man or woman who is ‘tarnished,’ that is to say ‘fallen,’ not an innocent hero like Philip Marlowe but someone like Sam Spade who crosses a moral boundary and becomes – if not the criminal himself – enmeshed and tainted by criminality” (23, original emphasis). Phelps, like Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) in The Maltese Falcon, becomes entangled in an (extramarital, in Phelps’ case) affair in the course of the story, but this is not his primary transgression. Phelps’ first misstep occurs before the events of the game, as shown in the flashbacks to his service in
Japan, when he was accused of having “Custer Syndrome” (being so focused on his own glory that he gets his men killed). Additionally, Phelps is shown to have received an award for bravery despite his cowardice in a key moment in battle and unwittingly ordering his men to kill civilians. Phelps apparently feels uneasy about his actions and the fact that he was honored for them, experiencing the cut-scene flashbacks to his military days throughout the events of the game as a way of obsessively repeating the traumas he has suffered, and this anxiety plays out in his tense interactions with former members of his Marines unit. Even when Phelps employs Jack Kelso’s aid in the game’s later cases, he refuses to tell the man who was once his ally (in the beginning of their military training) the full scope of his plan, suggesting that the intervening events have caused significant distrust between the two men. Phelps’ primary way of dealing with these feelings, however, is to refuse to talk about his military service with any of his partners, never actually addressing his character flaws or the traumas of his past. In this sense, Phelps comes to embody the noir hero of the period as, in Hibbs’ terms, “a counter to the optimistic, progressive vision of post-war America. Subverting the rationality of the pursuit of happiness, noir turns the American dream into a nightmare [...] [and] gives us disconcerting shadows and a present tense that is incapable of moving forward because it is overwhelmed by the past” (xv-xvi).

Therefore, when Phelps encounters Elsa Lichtmann (Erika Heynatz), he is already primed for transgression; as Copjec claims, the internally conflicted protagonist “tries to take some distance from himself, to initiate some alterity in his relation to himself: to split himself, we could say” (193-194). The split between Phelps as a morally upright police officer tasked with upholding the law and himself as a cowardly, unjustly decorated war hero leads him to embrace the division between his public and private selves, between virtue and vice, that the femme fatale
offers. Although we can see Phelps’ adherence to his duty as a police officer as the noir protagonist’s attempt to subsume the internal contradictions he feels, his pursuit of justice is also, as Hibbs puts it, “a search for self-knowledge, for love, and for friendship; it involves a desperate desire to communicate one’s predicament, to make clear, if not the answer, at least the precise shape and source of the dilemma” (31). Since he is unwilling or unable to communicate his hidden pain to his fellow officers, who are largely depicted as unsympathetic anyway, this search for self-actualization in his professional life fails, so he turns to the femme fatale, Elsa, as a last-ditch effort for human connection. When Phelps interrogates her during the “Manifest Destiny” case, she demonstrates an understanding of his inner turmoil by pointing out the futility of his “war against narcotics” and asking him, “Are you so full of courage you have never felt ashamed?” While she praises his ideals, calling his speech about his perceived duty to improve the world “brave words and very noble,” she concludes that “words are just words,” suggesting that she is able to see beyond his façade of adherence to duty and can identify with his struggles.

As Jonathan Auerbach states, “the femme fatale is not a root cause but only a triggering mechanism or mere ploy […] [the protagonist] may be less motivated by libido per se than by a deeper sort of identification: how her discontent speaks to his own and emboldens him to take action” (64). In entering into an illicit extramarital affair, Phelps embodies the role of the “protagonist who has taken a false step, attempted a cover up, become an accomplice, or in some way fallen into crime. Either he or she commits the crime or in some way, through chance, a mistake, a moral lapse, or bad decision, becomes implicated in it, most often as the chief suspect” (23). Elsa is depicted as essentially good despite the popular perception of her as a suspect foreigner, drug addict, and sexually promiscuous “fallen” woman, but since Phelps was already tarnished before their relationship, the public knowledge of his moral failing is enough to
bring about his ruin, especially because he is working in administrative vice when it becomes public. Copjec argues that publicity is a common concern among protagonists in noir films: "The noir hero is embarrassed by a visibility that he carries around like an excess body for which he can find no proper place" (ix). As is common among noir protagonists, maintaining virtue is not an option, but concealing vice is; Sam Spade is able to save himself at the end of The Maltese Falcon by maintaining the façade of his innocence, while Cole Phelps, like Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) in Double Indemnity, is undone by his inability to keep his complicity secret.

L.A. Noire and White-Collar Conspiracy

I bring up Double Indemnity for two reasons, both because it is considered one of the cornerstones of the noir canon and also in order to mention one final important element of noir that L.A. Noire appropriates. Ronald Schwartz begins Noir, Now and Then: Film Noir Originals and Remakes (1944-1999) with this film because, while previous films "have 'noirish' stylistic elements," it is the first in which, he argues, "all of the stylistic characteristics basic to noir came together in a whole that identifies this particular kind of cinema" (xiv). In The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir, Foster Hirsch claims that Double Indemnity is "as representative of the genre [of film noir] as Stagecoach is of westerns or Singing in the Rain of musicals" (2). The connection between this film and L.A. Noire is hardly coincidental, and in fact, the game uses a recurring visual reference to the film to signal their ideological connection: at the beginning of each case, the font that is used to display the case's title is highly reminiscent of the Double Indemnity's stylized title screen.² Additionally, the voiceover narration noted earlier is markedly similar to the narrative style of this film: the narrator of the early sections of the game is later revealed to be the voice of Herschel Biggs (Keith Szarabajka), the protagonist's partner for the

² See Figures A and B in the appendix for a comparison of the title screens of L.A. Noire and Double Indemnity.
final portion of the game. As Copjec notes, the fact that the voiceover that crosses the boundary between non-diegetic and diegetic in both *L.A. Noire* and *Double Indemnity* is “proof of the faltering of the hero’s knowledge, his inability to control or comprehend the image” (185). This style also fits into the concerns of the noir canon; as Copjec points out, this nonstandard narration, in which the ostensibly omniscient narrator is revealed to be focalized through a character within the fiction, functions “in film noir [as] the evidence of a post-war waning of masculine self-certainty and power” (185). On a plot level, the connection between *L.A. Noire* and *Double Indemnity* deepens in their similar uses of typical noir themes. As Park points out, film noir revolves around a relatively simple crime like murder or robbery, but in each of these examples murder is (generally) secondary to, and in service of, a larger crime or conspiracy (25). In the case of *Double Indemnity*, Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) orchestrate the murder of her husband (Tom Powers) as part of a larger scheme to commit insurance fraud. In *L.A. Noire*, many of the street crimes (which do not require extended investigation) are murders or thefts, but the major cases involve some larger conspiracy. The Dahlia killer’s identity is covered up by the police due to his being the half-brother of an unnamed politician, and the Suburban Redevelopment Fund conspiracy, which requires many lesser crimes to cover up the larger plot, is fundamentally an attempt to defraud the government. Leland Monroe (John Noble), the real estate tycoon behind Elysian Fields Development, bought up properties in the path of a proposed freeway and built cheap houses using substandard materials so that they could be sold for a larger profit when the government exercised eminent domain to build the freeway.

As Auerbach points out, the concept of white-collar crime, which is “actually historically very precise” to the 1940s, “marks a decisive shift away from Depression-era explanations for criminal behavior that tended to emphasize and totalize environmental factors such as social
class, wretched living conditions, and poverty” (71). The high-profile members of the community who are involved in the Suburban Redevelopment Fund play into the anxieties surrounding white-collar crime by rejecting their civic responsibilities, which leads to a chaotic lack of social order. These concerns were especially prevalent in the 1940s because of the shift from a militarized economy to a privatized one, which led to greater uncertainty about where one’s loyalties truly lay (74). Auerbach argues that, ultimately, *Double Indemnity* is about the rejection of national identity in favor of a corporate identity as the basis for one’s civic responsibilities (78); the central problem of the film is that “Neff’s subversive plan suggests how such rationalized principles” of civic duty “do not fully apply in the new postwar world of noir” (79-80). In *L.A. Noire*, the police and other public officials implicated in the conspiracy, whose loyalty should be to the citizens of Los Angeles, reject identifying with the state, instead acting primarily out of self-interest in a way that violates the public trust and threatens to destabilize the entire political system. This fear of corruption is inherent to the noir genre, though Park points out a key distinction that operates between *Double Indemnity* and *L.A. Noire*: “Whereas classic film noir always provided a saving framework of law (crime did not pay, and if the mayor was corrupt, the governor was not), neo-noir presents a paranoid, nightmare world where everyone is victimized” (28). *L.A. Noire*’s use of color already disqualifies it as belonging to the “classic” style, so the neo-noir label hardly seems necessary, but it does lend some historical precedence to the game’s attempt to rethink the conventions of the genre.

**L.A. Noire and Remediation**

Given that *L.A. Noire* is a new media object, its engagement with and extension of the conventional understanding of film genre serves as to forge new ground for noir in shifting it from the medium of film to the medium of video games. As Jay David Bolter and Richard
Grusin point out, “new media are doing exactly what their predecessors have done: presenting themselves as refashioned and improved versions of other media” (14-15). Bolter and Grusin “call the representation of one medium in another remediation,” and in their definition of the term, they point out that “to take a ‘property’ from one medium and reuse it in another” does not mean that our understanding of the original material remains intact: “With reuse comes a necessary redefinition” (45). The reuse of old media in this game, however, is only a part of its project, best seen in cases that engage directly with familiar noir plots such as Double Indemnity or The Naked City, but merely representing film noir in video game form is not all this game is intended to accomplish. Because L.A. Noire is, in effect, making an argument for its own existence as a new media remediation of a contested genre, it is out of necessity also making an argument for an expansion of the original category that would accommodate it. This is not a trivial project; as Lev Manovich points out in The Language of New Media, new media such as video games are different from old media in several significant ways. Specifically, he argues that new media are characterized by the following unique criteria: they are digital (based on numerical code), modular (reducible to atomic elements like pixels rather than complete images like the frames of celluloid film), automated (governed by rules of logic that function independent of human agency), variable (infinitely duplicable, not fixed in a material format), and transcoded (involving a combination of human concepts about the world and computerized representations of it). While the first two characteristics can apply to remediated objects, the final three signal a significant break from old forms of narrative media and function as ludic elements.

Like all video games, L.A. Noire necessarily fulfills the first two of Manovich’s criteria of new media, though it is worth discussing how old media forms are layered on-screen in this game specifically. The screen display is generally uncluttered compared to those of many other
modern video games, suggesting that the overall effect is primarily intended to be cinematic and positioning the game as what Bolter and Grusin refer to as an “interactive film” (47). Instead of showing numerous health meters, item indicators, reminders of objectives, weapon data, and other such status information, the display generally only shows a mini-map in the lower left corner, while the rest of the screen space depicts the game world and the player character.\(^3\) When the player is engaged in more goal-oriented sections of the game, however, especially during the main storyline’s case investigations, several different forms of media may be on screen at once. Bolter and Grusin refer to this phenomenon as “hypermediacy,” which operates by a different set of principles than “immediacy,” which they refer to as the presentation of a single coherent visual image. Whereas immediacy obscures the process of mediation, hypermediacy calls attention to it by splitting the visual field into different “windows,” each containing a different mediated form (33-34). Included among the media forms that can coexist on-screen in \textit{L.A. Noire} is the detective’s notepad, which can be used to display case objectives, persons of interest (P.O.I.s) in the investigation, the clues that have been collected, the locations that are involved in the case, and, when conducting an interrogation, the questions that can be asked of the P.O.I. Another media form that the game employs is a map of the city with various icons to show the locations of buildings such as the crime scene and local landmarks, people such as your partner and suspects, and events such as in-progress street crimes. These media forms may take up the majority of the screen, as when the player is selecting a question to ask in an interrogation from the list in Phelps’ notebook, or they may be relegated to a small part of the screen, as when the player is walking or driving with a miniature version of the map in the lower left corner of the screen to show only what is nearby. The player can manually toggle between these modes, bringing up the full-screen map or notebook in order to figure out where to go or to review case

\(^3\) See Figure C in the appendix for a depiction of \textit{L.A. Noire}’s screen display.
information, but at times these decisions are automatically made for the player. For instance, when the player instructs Phelps’ partner to drive them to a particular location, the mini-map disappears from the screen; conversely, when an interrogation begins, the notepad is automatically brought up on the full screen. In a sense, too, the presentation of the game’s visuals in such a straightforward manner relates to “the logic of immediacy [that] dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented” (Bolter and Grusin 5-6). The “thing represented” in this case may be a filmic cut-scene made to resemble a noir film, or when the player is in control of the action, it may be the painstaking recreation of 1940s Los Angeles, with its crowded streets full of vintage automobiles, famous landmarks, and non-playable characters (NPCs) dressed in period garb.

*L.A. Noire and Ludology*

Remediation, however, cannot account for *L.A. Noire*’s project entirely; there are several aspects of the game that do not draw upon elements of previous media forms and are specific to the video game medium. These ludic elements require the player to engage with the game in a distinctly different way than in its story-driven sections. In fact, there is a game mode (called “Free Roam”) and at least two of the game’s achievements⁴ that seem to encourage this sort of direct engagement with the virtual city itself instead of with the plot. The “Star Map” achievement is unlocked when the player has found thirty different Los Angeles landmarks, and the “Auto Fanatic” achievement is unlocked by driving each of the ninety-five different types of vehicles from the period found in the game. Neither of these achievements is necessary or even likely to be unlocked in the course of playing through the game’s storyline once, so those who wish to accomplish these feats are practically required to engage with the game world outside of

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⁴ See footnote 1 on page 10.
its narrative. In Free Roam, as well as in between investigations of the major cases of the game’s main plot, the player may choose to walk or drive around the city looking for collectible gold film reels, landmarks, or street crimes to solve. In this sense, L.A. Noire fits into a trend of game design that Al Kang refers to as “the use of a ‘sandbox’ area” in which players are allowed “to travel down a linear story path, if they choose, but at any given point they can leave the beaten path and enter the ‘sandbox’, which is the ability to roam around the world that the story exists in and engage secondary and incidental characters in a variety of mini-games, side missions, and distractions” (44-45). The existence of this game mode points to a clear break from the old media forms that the game is openly indebted to and reveals its undeniably ludic underpinnings.

Like all video games, L.A. Noire also employs artificial intelligence (AI), which relates to Manovich’s requirement that new media be automated and refers to the functions of the game’s code that control the behavior of non-player characters (NPCs). The AI in video games are necessarily limited to only certain functions; though they appear to be highly responsive to the player’s input, the game’s AI only functions effectively to the extent that the user’s interactions are similarly limited. At first glance, L.A. Noire appears to have a very sophisticated AI engine that controls vehicular and pedestrian traffic, light and sound effects, in-game physics such as gravity and momentum, and numerous other systems that operate to render the player’s experience of the game as a coherent world. Upon closer examination, however, Manovich appears to be correct: the player may choose to have the avatar walk, run, drive cars, shoot guns, open doors, jump over fences and other obstacles, climb ladders and drainpipes, and examine evidence. In short, the advanced AI allows the player character to interact with the world in numerous ways, but they are always defined, and therefore limited, by the AI engine itself. Cole Phelps cannot walk up to a random NPC and begin a conversation, nor can he drive a car through
the side of a building or beyond the borders of Los Angeles; some doors in the game can never be opened; only fifty film canisters may be found, and only those on a pre-defined list. If, as narratologists insist, the primary goal of video games is to tell stories, this foreclosure of narrative possibilities implied by the limits of the technology on which the medium is based would necessarily hamper the medium’s capacity for expression.

In this way, as Kang points out, the rigid artificial logic of video games appears to be limiting even when compared to old media forms: “There is a set of rules governing a session of game play that contradict and contravene those that exist throughout a sitting of storytelling” (42). While video games must make their rules explicit from the outset and maintain the same governing logic throughout, the rules that govern most stories can be changed at will by the author or director, and the reader or viewer must figure out the rules of such narratives as they go. In this sense, video games are arguably limited by the standards of traditional media analysis. However, ludology provides an alternative explanation: creating an immersive video game experience is not predicated on giving the player an exhaustive set of controls. Janet H. Murray points out that video games use “literary and gaming conventions to constrain the players’ behaviors to a dramatically appropriate but limited set of commands” so that “the designers [can] focus their inventive powers on making the virtual world as responsive as possible to every possible combination of these commands” (79). Ewan Kirkland argues that “old-media preoccupations can result in a productive analysis of the video game experience without compromising the ontological specificities of the video game medium” (168). Indeed, a game like *L.A. Noire*, which is especially reliant on old media (particularly, cinematic) elements, benefits from being analyzed in the manner I have above, but thinking of video games only in terms of governing rules or logic privileges old media in a way that new media need not be
restricted to. As Kirkland puts it, “an analysis focussing [sic] solely on the rules of the games, ignoring storytelling and representation, would miss” something fundamental about the gaming experience. Namely, focusing on mastery of the rules as the key to understanding what the gamer is doing differently than a reader or viewer implies a unified gameplay experience is shared by all skilled players; instead, the way a particular player makes use of the game’s rules produces a unique experience each time the game is played.

Although the gameplay possibilities are necessarily finite, and there exists what Kirkland calls an “ideal player following the single pathway(s) to game completion [that] constitutes a gaming narrative” (176), I want to emphasize that this is not the only such narrative that exists; in fact, it is far from the typical experience of gaming and, in many cases, may not in actuality describe anyone’s experience of the game. The existence of the sandbox provides the player with many possibilities for exploration and discovery outside of the main storyline, all of which are constrained by the game engine but not limited to those goal-oriented actions that are prescribed by the game’s narrative. Media scholar Julian Kücklich “claims that there exists no such thing as an ideal player, because it is an essential part of games that players are allowed (and required) to be creative within the framework provided by the game rules” (Malliet, “Adapting the Principles of Ludology”). For instance, the player in *L.A. Noire* may have multiple active objectives, and choosing what order to accomplish them in may be a significant factor in whether the player is able to solve the case or not – if the player chooses to interrogate a witness before discovering a crucial piece of evidence, a particular line of questioning may fail or be unavailable altogether, which will make solving the case more difficult. Thus, it is to the player’s advantage to learn from his or her mistakes in order to figure out what works best and to be able to prioritize certain methods of investigation that are not explicitly communicated by the game itself. Often,
however, the order in which tasks are completed is left up to the player without consequences, especially in side quests like the street crimes, which allows the player to develop his or her proficiency with the game’s controls outside of the storyline. The ability of the player to exercise creative agency over the narrative is one major way new media, like video games, differ from the old, like literature or cinema. As Kang points out, one of the limitations of old media is that “[n]o matter how many distant lands we travel to in a film or a book, and how many strange, enrapturing characters that we meet along the way, we are ultimately stuck on one linear path” (42). In contrast, as Bolter and Grusin argue, in a video game, the player is allowed to dictate the pace at which the storyline unfolds, which locations to visit, and in which order certain actions are performed, which gives the player some measure of narrative control (47). The level of control that the player is afforded, according to Mark J.P. Wolf, is related not only to the player character but also to the amount of time a game’s narrative takes to complete (86). Some players may be able to complete L.A. Noire’s narrative in only a few hours, if they are skilled enough and stick to the main storyline only, whereas others, who either take longer to master the game’s controls or spend more time in Free Roam mode, may spend significantly more time engaging with the game. This variation in the amount of time a game takes to play sets up a distinction between video games and film: as Wolf points out, films have a pre-defined running time and video games do not, which allows programmers to create games that take much more time to complete than most films do (91). Therefore, just as Manovich argues, variability is one of the key elements of video games, especially given L.A. Noire’s open world and case-centered level design; they grant players “360-degree freedom of movement which allows us to wander through our universe, in any direction, at any time. We can double back to our favorite bits, change their outcome, change our own nature from passive to aggressive, and continue on again” (Kang 42,
emphasis added). Thus, even within the confines of the apparently linear storyline of the game, there is room for the player to exercise agency. Being able to replay a particular section of the game is specifically related to one unique feature of the modern video game, as Wolf points out: “With the Save function, players [can] save a game at a point where a decision [is] required, and then play the game out multiple times from the saved game, making a different choice each time” (87). Since the primary goal of L.A. Noire is to solve cases in order to progress the narrative, one might be tempted to think of Kirkland’s “ideal player” as one who finds every piece of evidence, nails every interrogation, and accuses the guilty party correctly on the first try; I would argue, however, that such a player would miss out on a huge part of the experience of this game, its use of the medium’s technical capacity to produce a unique fusion of gameplay and narrative.

_**L.A. Noire and Programmability**_

One of the major attractions of the game is its advanced facial scanning technology; as Chris Pallant points out, much of the game’s pre-release marketing strategy, created by its publisher Rockstar Games, focused on the innovative facial-scanning technology, MotionScan, that the game employs to capture real-life actors’ performances and render them in-game (45). If such “increasing visibility of computer game acting may represent the latest development in what has been the long-time convergence of film, games and television” (47), to the point that it makes sense for me to attach the actor’s name to his or her role in L.A. Noire the same way that one would to a film star, then exploring and appreciating the nuances of performance made possible by the game’s multiple-path structure would seem preferable to a strictly linear experience of the narrative. Detectives Muldoon (Barry Fitzgerald) and Halloran in The Naked City must apprehend Frank Niles (Howard Duff) and Dr. Stoneman (House Jameson) in their
first encounter with the case, and the actors in the film would not be doing their jobs if they did not act in a manner appropriate to their respective characters’ roles as policemen and criminals. The key to film actors’ performances is in their verisimilitude; in *L.A. Noire*, on the other hand, the actors’ success

lies not in the degree to which they fully capture the essence of the character, but rather the extent to which they make it difficult for the player – and by extension, Phelps – to make a confident conviction. This is not a performative shortcoming, however, *given that this is a game predicated on capturing the nuances of human deception*, but rather it stands as a testimony to the developer’s restraint from encouraging their [sic] performers to use melodramatic facial tics as a way of signposting the correct decision to the player.

(46, emphasis added)

If one of noir’s characteristic traits is that it “tries to make sense of the complexities and anxieties of the postwar urban experience by exploring the rotten underside of the American city, the place where the American dream goes to die” (Park 2), then the uncertainty produced by such effective deception puts players of *L.A. Noire* more fully into the shoes of the noir protagonist than any film could. The ability to replay a nagging case that has been completed imperfectly, or even to fail to complete a case and have to start over from the beginning because a key detection was not made, is what makes such an experience possible. In fact, the player may be unsatisfied even when they have made the “correct” accusation in the homicide cases. There is often only circumstantial evidence to base an accusation upon, or the player may have to choose between two suspects who seem equally likely to have committed the crime, with only a miniscule margin

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5 The player is awarded a star rating for the completion of each case, with a maximum of five stars (which is considered “valorous”) and a minimum of one star (“unbecoming”). These ratings are based on how many pieces of evidence the player finds and how successful the player is in the interrogations, but the player can still continue on to the next case with less than a five-star rating, meaning that some clues were missed or interrogations were failed.
of difference playing the deciding factor as to whom the player chooses to accuse. That gut feeling turns out not to be unfounded: in subsequent cases, it is revealed that the real killer was not among the suspects previously brought in for questioning. It is only after completing the final case in this section of the game that the player realizes the level of deception that has occurred. Conversely, if at the end of the film the viewer still has doubts as to the accused party’s guilt or feels dissatisfied with the resolution of the plot, no subsequent viewing will yield a significantly different result.

I will conclude here with a consideration of Manovich’s final standard for new media objects. He suggests that “new media in general can be thought of as consisting of two distinct layers – the ‘cultural layer’ and the ‘computer layer’” and that, since new media is computer-based in nature, “the logic of a computer” affects our cultural understanding of media (46). Although he concedes that new media may be approached by using the tools of traditional media studies in the way narratologists suggest, he concludes that the narratological perspective “is not sufficient. It cannot address the most fundamental quality of new media that has no historical precedent – programmability” (47). In this sense, he is following Marshall McLuhan’s assertion that “the ‘content’ of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind” (18). As I have argued, the point of L.A. Noire is not that its “content” is unique; as is patently clear from the outset, the game’s storyline is heavily dependent on old media forms. What is unique about the game is the way in which players can interact with the story, and that gameplay interface fundamentally alters what experiences people have and how they understand those experiences in the context of even a well-established generic tradition like noir. Antoni Roig, Gemma San Cornelio, Elisenda Ardèvol, Pau Alsina, and Ruth Pagès align their project in the article, “Videogame as Media Practice,” with Manovich’s emphasis on
transcoding, arguing that “videogames introduce a new relationship between subject and representation that goes far beyond the ‘spectatorship’ position, pointing to a playful relationship with images that may be useful to understand new forms of media practices” (89). This argument represents a shift toward the study of the way players interact with video games as opposed to the effects a media object such as a text or film have on the spectator or how they are “received” by audiences (90-91). Since the interaction between player and game is foregrounded in such a view, the sense of linearity that characterizes previous media forms is no longer essential to the experience of new media like video games. Although certain elements of L.A. Noire (necessarily) depart from the conventional features of older media forms, it can still be relatively well understood by a traditional media studies approach; ludology offers an additional perspective that is not applicable to most other media forms, but its effect is augmentative rather than radically inversive. The narratological focus on old media genre classifications is productively complicated by the ludological insistence on how the procedural realization of its plot fundamentally alters our understanding of the genre; at the same time, the ludic elements of the game contribute to our experience of its narrative possibilities. As we will see, however, not all video games privilege such narratological forms of inquiry.

Journey, Flower, and Ludology

On the surface, Journey (2012) and Flower (2009) appear to run counter to the focus on narrativity within many modern video games with increasingly compelling plots and realistically detailed characters. As Janet H. Murray points out, as video game technology has improved, most game developers’ “effort has gone into the development of more detailed visual environments and faster response time, improvements allowing players to enjoy more varied finger-twitching challenges against more persuasively rendered opponents” (51). It would seem
that the developer of *Journey* and *Flower*, thatgamecompany (TGC), has chosen to use the advanced technological capacity of the PlayStation 3 (PS3) platform to somewhat different ends. *Journey* begins with the player’s character, a figure in a flowing red robe with a scarf trailing from its neck and no discernible facial features except for two white eyes, standing in the middle of the desert with a large mountain visible in the distance. The only words that appear in the game are the title screen, the end credits, and some on-screen prompts that show the player the basic game controls, which consist of movement (of the character using the controller’s left thumb stick and the camera angle using the right thumb stick or tilting the controller in the direction the player wants to look) and two abilities: flying (controlled by the X button and limited by the length of the character’s scarf) and “singing” a single note (causing a symbol to appear over the character’s head using the O button, which enables certain interactions with the objects, environments, and characters the player encounters throughout the course of the game).

For the majority of the game, there are no enemy characters, only an identical-looking cooperative companion (if the player has an active internet connection – a point I will return to later) and some vaguely sentient scraps of red fabric (often resembling aquatic life, such as fish, kelp, jellyfish, and whales) that enable the player to perform tasks such as rebuilding a collapsed bridge and flying through the air to lift the player up to previously inaccessible areas. Along the way, the player encounters evidence of a civilization that once inhabited this desert, but no other life forms can be found in these areas. When the player finally does encounter giant one-eyed dragon-like stone creatures, who are the game’s only hostile characters, there is no fighting back against them; the only strategy available is avoidance, as if the player gets too close to the creature’s field of vision (which is symbolized by a cone of light projecting from its eye), the creature will rip off part of the character’s scarf. These attacks inconvenience the player, as any
reduction in scarf length corresponds to a decrease in flying ability, but cannot kill the player’s avatar. Enemies are infrequent enough in the game as to be counted as obstacles to be gotten around rather than sources of significant conflict that drive the game’s action along. In fact, the entire game can be thought of in terms of resistance, not hostility, to the player’s actions and aims, with the landscape and architecture of the ruined civilization that the character encounters along the way forming a sort of obstacle course for the player to traverse.

**Journey and Spatial Navigability**

From the outset, *Journey* posits itself as a gameworld to be inhabited and explored by the player without any externally-imposed objectives. Explorable virtual space is one of the hallmarks of the video game medium, according to Janet H. Murray: “The new digital environments are characterized by their power to represent navigable space. Linear media such as books and films can portray space, either by verbal description or image, but only digital environments can present space that we can move through” (79). Mark J.P. Wolf further elucidates the significance of spatialization in video games as a marker of the medium’s departure from older media, explaining that “the video game’s added elements of navigation and interaction lend an importance to diegetic space which is unlike that of other media” (51). In fact, the use of space may be one of the few ways *Journey* can be said to be aligned with most modern video games’ use of the PS3’s processing capability; as Murray claims, the technological affordances of the video game medium allow developers to represent gameworlds that are at once immense and minutely detailed (84). Although the avatar’s appearance is not photorealistic, nor is the player given options for customizing it, and the system’s processor is never pushed to its limit by the number of enemies to be rendered on-screen at once or the amount of input from the player, the game does devote considerable resources to the rendering of a vast, detailed
gameworld for the player to navigate. From the beginning of the game, individual grains of sand glitter in the sunlight as gentle desert breezes shift the dunes, causing small drifts to cascade down them. The play of light and shadow causes the sand to vary in color, from yellowish and orange in direct sunlight to rosy pink and near purple. At times, the landscape is so vast that the player can walk as far to the left or right as he or she can go straight forward from the beginning of the level. The sheer size of these levels would not have been possible on earlier video game platforms, but the technological affordances of the PS3 platform allow the player to be particularly immersed in Journey’s extensive gameworld. Again, photorealism is not the goal here, since, as Paul Ward points out, “the ‘uncanniness’ of [video games] is predicated on their being perceived as simultaneously highly naturalistic/transparent and hypermediated/opaque; this combination appears to be central to their allure” (131-132, original emphasis). What is significant, then, is that the player believes in the gameworld as realistic if not actually real, in the sense that the controls and settings feel appropriate within the logic of the gameplay; unrealistic physics and scenery may exist in a game that does not aspire to emulate reality, for instance. In essence, the vast explorable gameworld, in which our sense of the realism of the game’s (literally) unreal landscape is made possible only by considering and rejecting the concept of “reality,” is rendered in just such detail as to produce a coherent sense of the rules that govern it while making discovery of its secrets a challenge.

Journey implies two different but related modes of navigation: moving around in space and moving through space. As Murray points out, the former is a uniquely enjoyable way of engaging with the video game space: “The ability to [explore] virtual landscapes can be pleasurable in itself, independent of the content of the spaces […] orienting ourselves by

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6 See Figure D in the appendix for an example of Journey’s visual style.
landmarks, mapping a space mentally to match our experience, and admiring the juxtapositions and changes in perspective that derive from moving [around in] an intricate environment” (129). Especially in the shimmering deserts of Journey’s early levels, exploration can be extremely satisfying irrespective of any other goal, and players are given a vast expanse of space to simply investigate at their own pace\(^7\) before moving on to the more linear later levels. This sort of movement need not be seen as pointless, however; exploration of the gameworld, according to Wolf, “becomes an important part of the experience of the game, and an understanding of how that space is constructed can be crucial to gameplay” (69-70). Especially in early levels, the player is allowed to explore the entirety of the game’s space in order to discover various game mechanics; climbing steep sand dunes, for instance, causes the player character to plod forward at a slower pace than normal, and if the player stops pressing the control stick forward in the middle of the incline or climbs past the dune’s peak to the downward slope, the character will slide back down at a high speed. Unlike L.A. Noire’s early sequences, in which the player is given on-screen prompts to explain various gameplay elements, Journey never explicates the physics of its gameworld to the player. The experience of discovering the game’s governing logic is a major source of enjoyment in this section, though later levels do make greater use of these physics, which makes building up a basic understanding of them early on through investigation of the game space useful. Moving through space in a directed manner, however, is ultimately necessary for the game to function; as Murray explains, even in a game where there is no “winning” condition, the feeling of making progress can be experienced as a surrogate pleasure (132).

\(^7\) See Figure E in the appendix for an example of the scope of Journey’s early levels.
If navigability of space is taken as a fundamental quality of *Journey*’s gameplay that is unique to new media, analyzing how the game functions in terms of its formal characteristics is necessary to understanding the game. Ludologists like Jesper Juul focus on the way gameworlds are constructed and managed, emphasizing how the rules of the game constrain the player’s activity to make negotiating its outcome a challenge (Malliet, “Adapting”). *Journey* clearly sets up a challenge for the player that is fundamentally based on the rule-based constraints it imposes; since the player is limited to only four inputs, navigating the gameworld is much more challenging than in a game that makes fuller use of the PS3 controller’s ten buttons. However, the simplicity of controls in *Journey*, since it is not a result of technical limitations, must be taken as a conscious choice on the part of the developers and can therefore be understood as significant to the experience of the game.

**Journey and Control**

The particular mode of interaction made possible in *Journey* directly relates to the player’s sense of immersion in the gameworld’s virtual space. What the control scheme provides, in essence, is a sense of agency; Murray contrasts the idea of agency, which is the player’s ability to act in ways that have a direct impact within the gameworld, with interactivity, which she refers to as “the mere ability to move a joystick or click on a mouse” (128). Therefore, giving the player fewer options for input does not inherently limit the sense of agency that the game offers. Likewise, as Timothy Crick argues, “Although the sophistication of a game’s AI [artificial intelligence] engine and the realism of three-dimensional graphics and movement are important, the fundamental aspect that allows a videogame player agency in a virtual world is, of course, the control device – affording the player the opportunity to act directly on and in that world” (266). Since *Journey* is already less focused on realistic graphics and advanced AI
combat than many of its contemporaries, the control scheme takes on even greater significance. Taken within the game’s larger project, then, the relative ease with which the player can master the controls fits well with the short duration of the game and the fact that upon reaching the summit of the mountain, the player character is transported back to the point in the desert where the game began.

By allowing the player to master the game controls relatively easily and making replay a significant part of the game experience, TGC creates a gameplay experience in which exploration and mastery are encouraged, which leads players to engage in the virtual world more deeply than they might otherwise. As Crick points out, “the control device acts as an extension of the player’s body. That is, once the device is mastered, it rarely requires any conscious thought to navigate the avatar’s virtual body” (266). Since Journey is a third-person game, the player’s avatar is always on the screen, but by making a clear and direct connection between the player’s control inputs and the movements of the avatar’s body, the game encourages a strong bodily identification between the two. Although embodiment becomes more significant in my consideration of Flower, it is worth pointing out here that, as Crick argues, the embodied relationship between the player and the onscreen avatar is forged by the player mastering the controls (267). Thus, if the player of Journey finds, like Crick did, that “during some game moments, I [am] aware that my body intuitively leans toward the direction to which I require my avatar to run” (266), the control scheme has been designed specifically so that the camera will pan in the direction that the controller is pointed in. Since “a measure of success in a videogame simulation [is] the ease with which a player can cross the border between the real ard the virtual” (266), a simplistic but responsive controller scheme is ideal for facilitating the player’s entry into the gameworld.

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Journey and Ludic Genre

Journey’s methods for interaction, coupled with its lack of traditional narrative indicators, mark it as a singularly distinct new media object that seemingly defies genre categorization, at least by the conventional metrics of old media. Mark J.P. Wolf points out, however, that “player participation is arguably the central determinant in describing and classifying video games” (114); by re-categorizing games in terms of their ludic similarities rather than narrative ones, as was the case with L.A. Noire, these new genres are more useful from a ludological perspective. Since Journey involves progressing from one location to another, with the player’s curiosity as the primary driving force for exploration of those spaces, it might fit into the category of “Adventure” games, which involve the exploration of game space in a way that requires the player to achieve objectives along the way besides fighting or fleeing from enemies (118). The fact that the player spends the majority of the game exploring areas where there are no hostile characters fits the requirements of this genre. In “Journey and the Art of Emotional Game Design,” Nick Harper points to the concept of “game loops – cycles that involve setting a player objective, providing a challenge to overcome in order to achieve that objective, and rewarding the player for their triumph” as the basis for driving a game forward, which matches the structure of an Adventure game; finding the glowing glyphs that extend the player’s scarf (and thus the ability to fly) or pictographs that depict the rise and fall of the buried civilization are examples of this kind of objective-challenge-reward loop. Journey also shares some similarities with Wolf’s category of “Obstacle Course” games, “in which the main objective involves the traversing of a difficult path or one beset with obstacles, through which movement is essentially linear, often involving running, jumping, and avoiding dangers” (127). This categorization seems especially appropriate in the portions of the game where the player
character is sliding down a hill and the gamer must direct the avatar’s movement in order to avoid running into pillars and falling sand. As Wolf points out, “The object of the game can be multiple or divided into steps, with the result that the game may be placed in more than one genre, just as a film’s theme and iconography can place a film in multiple genres” (115).

Perhaps the best fit in terms of genre, however, is what Wolf calls a “Maze” game, since the primary way the player interacts with the game world in Journey is to navigate its spaces from a starting point to an ending point by following a path that may not be readily apparent. Although the sprawling desert landscape from the beginning of the game does not obviously resemble the narrow passageways traditionally associated with a labyrinth, Wolf’s definition accounts for this discrepancy: “What can be called a maze is, of course, a matter of degree, though it is usually possible to discern whether a configuration of rooms or hallways was intended to deliberately cause difficulties in navigation” (126-127). Later levels become more explicitly maze-like as the player descends into the now-subterranean ruins of the lost civilization and must find a path through these spaces to continue the trek up to the mountaintop. The earlier desert levels are similarly, albeit more covertly, limited and limiting: if the player goes too far in any given direction of the desert, a wind begins to blow in the opposite direction, pushing the character back into the playable space of the game. As Nick Harper points out, many modern games lack obvious boundaries but have “invisible barriers” that keep the player from accessing certain areas; here, “there is a clear intent – you’ve reached the end of the map, but for a mainstream player the form of this feedback is subtle and believable” (“Journey and the Art of Emotional Game Design”). The fact that the world is apparently more open to exploration than it actually is relates to another challenge the Maze game presents; Wolf points out that no map is presented in a game like this because it would give away the solution, which players must arrive
at on their own (67). Thus, the mapping of space referenced earlier takes on a doubly ludic significance: the navigation required to accomplish it is one feature that marks the game as a distinctly new media object and helps place the game into a generic context that is distinctly different from those genres of old media that more narrative-oriented games like *L.A. Noire* are engaging with.

**Flower and Non-Narrative Interactivity**

Although *Journey* is somewhat difficult to categorize in terms of its interactive features, *Flower* seemingly resists any such categorization by occupying an even further remove from the narrativistic mainstream of modern video games than even most other ludic-oriented games. The most fundamental break it makes from traditional media is in its complete lack of characters; the player controls the wind blowing flower petals around a landscape that is entirely uninhabited by humans. (In later levels, when the player enters the city, and in the cut-scenes between levels that occasionally show the city, there are no recognizable characters; the cars whiz by in such a blur that it is not even possible to tell whether there is a human driver.) Even though identification with the avatar is not a major goal in *Journey*, it is still possible to project onto the largely blank canvas presented by the gender- and race-neutral main character; in *Flower*, there is no on-screen avatar with which to identify, only a floating flower petal (or cloud of petals, as the player progresses through a particular area of the game) to serve as a focal point for the player’s gaze.\(^8\) With no characters to identify with, the subject position of such a game is markedly different from the vast majority of traditional media; as Hansen points out, however, with new media “the embodied activity of the [player] functions to restore some form of ‘motivation’ – a supplementary motivation” (22). Since the player is not forced to identify with a character’s

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\(^8\) See Figure F in the appendix for a depiction of the player’s perspective in *Flower*.
wants and needs, it is up to the player to make crucial decisions based on his or her own desires, further foregrounding the interface between player and game as fundamentally important.

Although the lack of on-screen characters is, in a sense, a radical departure from the norm, within the medium of video games this may be, in another sense, merely a logical extension of a phenomenon that has long been a part of gameplay: namely, the necessity of selectively ignoring the on-screen avatar. Even in more conventional third-person games, Crick explains, “while the player’s eyes scan the screen, searching for enemies to target and shoot (or objects they need to obtain or locations where they need to be), their attention and intention is primarily directed toward the action unfolding within game world and not toward the avatar itself” (264). Thus, for the player, the lack of an on-screen avatar may actually be a welcome innovation, since one of the skills required for proficiency at such games is the ability to selectively ignore graphical elements that are unchanging or unrelated to the task at hand, including the virtual body that is carrying out that task. Crick explains this apparent paradox thusly: “This is not to suggest that both the presence and physical appearance of an avatar is not an important dynamic in the player’s experience. […] Yet, it is often the case that the experienced player pays little attention to the avatar’s body during gameplay – even in a third-person gaming experience where the avatar is continually visible in diegesis” (264). In this way, the removal of the avatar allows the control scheme of Flower to be even more streamlined than Journey; whereas the latter has four inputs, the former has only two: the player presses any button on the controller to regulate the speed of the wind and tilts the controller in order to control the direction that it blows in. Since motion (speed and direction) is the only input that the player has, the connection between the player’s physical body and what Crick calls “the game body” is strengthened. He argues that “during many third-person-style gaming experiences the
player is effectively in control of three bodies: the avatar’s body, his or her own body, and the visual perspective of a ‘game body’ or ‘game subject’” (262), whereas here there are only two “bodies” for the player to control. Therefore, the player of *Flower* has the advantage of most third-person games, that the player can see outside of the avatar’s limited perspective, without the drawback that movement of the character and the camera are separate (261-262). Even in ordinary third-person games the ability to control the “game body” is a necessary one in order to the player to succeed; attaining this skill is even easier when the player’s on-screen representation is effectively reduced to a small petal in the center of the screen.

*Flower and Phenomenology*

Ironically (or appropriately, depending on one’s perspective) as *Flower* disembodies the avatar, it foregrounds the embodiment of the player through its use of the PS3’s motion-sensitive controller. Whereas the player has the option of using the right analog stick to control the camera angle in *Journey*, no such option exists in *Flower*; the player is required to tilt and angle the controller in order to control the direction of the wind’s motion *and* the camera angle simultaneously. As was the case with the former game, this control scheme is significant to the game experience; here, the player is given firsthand experience of how controlling a force of nature like the wind is different from controlling a more conventional humanoid avatar. The press of a button starts the wind blowing, but stopping the motion of the wind or changing its direction is not as simple as halting or turning a physical body; abruptly letting up on the button causes the cloud of petals to lurch forward slightly and swirl around as it reacts to such a sudden stop, and making a sudden movement with the controller similarly sends the petals whirling chaotically. The player therefore must adapt his or her motions to the fluid, gradual flow of the wind: gradually pressing down on and releasing the button allows for more precise control of the
wind’s speed, and making smooth sweeping movements with the controller allows the player to produce currents that better conform to the contours of the natural environments that make up most of the game’s levels.

Learning to perform these motions requires a different sort of embodiment from what is typically required by video games that only use the controller’s buttons and sticks, such as *L.A. Noire*. While the activity required in those games can be typified by rapidly moving one’s fingers from button to button – what Murray somewhat reductively refers to as “finger-twitching” (51) – here the player must concentrate on how the single button is pressed *and* coordinate the movement of his or her arms. To an even greater extent, then, the controller can be seen as an extension of the player’s physical body, as the point of contact is extended from the fingertips to include his or her entire hands, wrists, and forearms. In fact, the entire upper body may be involved, as the turning motions required in some cases resemble those of driving a motor vehicle. This control scheme reflects Crick’s notion that the body is “adaptable” in that our physical experience of the world may be mediated through “numerous tools or technologies” (267). He argues that we are able to experience a virtual gameworld specifically because we are able to experience the corresponding physical sensations implied by the game in our own lives (266). This connection between the embodied nature of the player interface and the game’s ability to bring him or her into its virtual world adds new dimension to the idea of navigable space as a vital feature of video games. To further articulate the importance of the malleability of the physical and the digital, Crick argues that the gameworld can be navigated in the same way as the real world and can “thus be experienced as an inter-enactment as well as an embodiment of vision” (265).
*Flower*, then, can be seen as a singularly procedural game, at the very least making overt what is present to some extent in every game experience if not actually expanding the player’s sense of embodiment. Perhaps not surprisingly, these latter claims of Crick’s are directly in response to Vivian Sobchack – specifically, her 1990 essay, “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic Presence.” His claim is that “the digital imagery in videogames need not necessarily represent, as Sobchack claims, a diffused, fragmented, and dislocated material existence for the player” (265). Essentially, then, he is arguing that the use of phenomenology that she wants to deny to electronic media is, in fact, entirely appropriate to video game studies; *Flower* might well serve as a case study for such a claim, due to its particular control scheme and relative purity as a ludic (non-narrative) object. In *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Sobchack’s claim about “the radical origin of such a logic in lived-body experience” (7) is only extreme in the context of film studies because the viewer’s interaction with a film is generally not understood to have a physical component; in the context of video game studies, however, the interposition of the controller as a means of haptic engagement makes this claim seem less controversial. Likewise, Crick claims, “When I enter the virtual world […] my experience is not one of disembodied perception nor can my body be reducible to a mere set of eyeballs” (266). On a literal level, the spectator position is not available for the video game scholar, since the game image generally remains unchanged without the player’s input. The centrality of the *player* (as opposed to the *viewer*) is one of ludology’s central tenets; as Malliet says, “A game has to be played in order to be understood” ("Adapting").

On the surface, ludology and phenomenology appear to be compatible, and in many significant ways they are. The interaction between the player and the game can be
conceptualized as physical, bodily contact, an argument that can be adapted to apply to video games from Jennifer M. Barker’s book on phenomenology and cinema, *The Tactile Eye*. If the player and the game are viewed as “two differently constructed but equally muscular bodies, acting perhaps in tandem or perhaps at odds with each other, but always in relation to each other” (72), then a game like *Flower* can be seen to enact a particular mode of embodied interaction not just in its unconventional control scheme but also in the way we relate to its unique visuals.

Barker points out that “[f]ilm and viewer share certain deep-seated muscular habits, beginning with the very tendency to move through the world in an upright position” (81); this habit is not inherently reinforced in a game where the player controls the wind, yet the game still shares our embodied sensibilities about the world despite the fact that there is no human subject that would necessitate such a mode of presentation. As Hansen points out, however, visual perception is not our only way of interacting with a video game: vision is embodied not just because our eyes are part of our bodies but because our bodies are where we take in all our sensory input, combine it, and use it to make sense of the world around us (27), a point on which he, Barker, and Sobchack agree.

In order to account for video games’ procedural features, then, we must go beyond visual perception to account for our subjective experiences more fully. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, *Flower* presumes a particularly embodied subject even though it presents the player with no on-screen body to control. The game itself, then, can be said to be the “body” with which the gamer interacts; Barker argues that the primary mode of interaction between two bodies “manifests itself in the muscular movements and comportment and gestures of each,” specifically focusing on gestures as “expressive bodily movement that is ‘intentional,’ in that it is directed toward a world” (78). Since intentionality is always tied to the body, a game like *Flower*
(in which there is no player-character whose intentions must be considered but, rather, only the player’s) strengthens Wolf’s claim that “the intention – of the player-character at least – is often clear, and can be analyzed as part of the game” (115). In both cases, the lines between player and (game) world are blurred by the association forged by intentionality: just as the player is drawn into the virtual gameworld by the intentionality actualized by embodied interactivity between player and avatar, it is the bi-directional contact between the physical and film/game body that forms the basis for phenomenology.

*Journey and Covert Narrativity*

Ultimately, however, some of phenomenology’s underlying implications begin to erode the foundations of ludological explanation and introduce recognizably narrative elements into even the most seemingly pure ludic games like *Journey* and *Flower*. While ludologists maintain that it is experience, not meaning, that is of primary importance in understanding video games, from a phenomenological perspective the two are fundamentally inseparable. The interaction of perceiving and expressing meaning is taken to be a necessary result of our relationship to the (game)world, rather than a contingent function of our cognitive functions. If the crossing of the boundary between the physical body and virtual gameworld implies that intentionality goes both directions, then the player’s ability to act on the game must also entail the game’s ability to act on the player. As Barker states, the contact between viewer/player and film/game is what gives the experience meaning, solely by virtue of that embodied relationship rather than through a conscious act of perceiving meaning (26). Simply by entering into a “relationship” with a game, then, the player activates meaning with every interactive gesture, whether there is an ostensible plot or not. Much as ludologists want to claim that meaning is at best contingent, the
phenomenological formulation reveals that perception and expression are fundamentally linked, and thus meaning must be inherent to the experience.

Indeed, on a fundamental level, both Journey and Flower rely on signification as the basis for the player’s experience. Even in a wordless game like Journey or Flower, communication occurs on the level of the gestural interaction between player and game; Barker argues that “[g]estures are a muscular form of speech” (78), which casts our bodily interactions with games as “a means of communication, the ‘words’ and ‘phrases’ of its body language” (78). The meaning we find in the experience of such games is the same as what may be found in “a non-narrative film or one without actors,” since we can identify with a film even if we do not share the perspective of a character (75). For Journey, the relative lack of overt narrative content belies the fact that meaning-creation is at the heart of its structure. As Wolf explains, the seemingly contradictory elements of player agency and authorial intent can be bridged by using the mechanisms that govern the game’s interface to narrative ends: game developers “imbed a worldview into the structure of the game itself,” which then is inextricable from the playing of the game whether the player recognizes it as meaningful or not (109). While the recursive nature of Journey’s gameplay would seemingly allow for infinite permutations, its status as a “Maze” game means that certain paths are privileged and, therefore, the player’s decision-making process is influenced by the developer’s intentions (109). As Harper points out, the embedded “message” of the game, which he takes to be “Only by understanding our past mistakes can we prepare for the future,” exists on the level of gameplay: in playing through the game multiple times, the player learns, for instance, that “you feel comfortable with a longer scarf, and as such when you replay the game seek out scarf pieces that in the past you may have ignored” (“Journey and the Art of Emotional Game Design”). While the player may initially believe that collecting the
glowing glyphs is an optional side-quest, the underlying mechanic of the game punishes the player for refusing to recognize these items’ importance; traversing the game’s space is significantly more difficult without the augmentations they bring.

**Journey and Network Logic**

Similarly, the cooperative element of *Journey* might foreclose certain narrative possibilities (namely, those that require a single defined protagonist) but actually enables others in a fundamental way. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, any player who is connected to the PlayStation Network (PSN) may be matched with any other player who is on the same stage of the game. Players may choose to stick with the partner they encounter at the beginning of the game all the way through to the end, or if they get separated or one chooses to advance to the next stage before their partner, a new partner will appear in the next stage of the game. Additionally, in *Journey* players may not initially be aware that the other characters they encounter, who are identical in appearance to their own except for the shape of the symbol that is produced when they “sing,” are actually other players that are connected via PSN. The game does not provide a voice chat feature or any information that would reveal the other user’s identity, both of which are common among other interactive video games, especially massively multiplayer online (MMO) games like *World of Warcraft*. The lack of communication between players is essential to the experience of the game, as they must learn to coordinate behaviors using rudimentary means of interaction, especially gesturing. For instance, during my first playthrough, I encountered another player who was obviously more experienced than I was, and he or she would often make a sharp movement in the intended direction before beginning to move, as if pointing to show me where we were going. Often he or she would have to turn back to make sure I was still following, sometimes “singing” a short note as a form of confirmation or
encouragement. This fellow gamer was invaluable to me throughout the game, as he or she led me into a few hidden places that I probably never would have found on my own, certainly not in my first session.

Connections between players are made according to the logic of what Alexander R. Galloway refers to as a “distributed network” in which “each node may connect to any other node (although there is no requirement that it does)” (34). Variability and decentralization characterize such a network: “During a node-to-node connection, no intermediary hubs are required – none, not even a centralized switch as is the case in the telephone network. Point ‘X’ may contact ‘Y’ directly via one of several path combinations” (34). In this sense, the flexibility of the network and the interchangeability of its parts directly affect the players’ experience of the game; whether a player is matched with another player or not, and how the other player behaves if such a connection is made, creates a range of possible narrative meanings that the player could take away from a given gameplay session. The game itself encourages players to stick together, as when two players are in close proximity, their scarves glow and their ability to fly (which decreases with use and must be “recharged”) lasts longer than when apart. Since the game is divided into stages and only one other person appears in each part of the game, coordination between players is essential, as having an unresponsive partner makes the experience of traversing the barren landscape seem all the more isolating. Because players are paired at random, it is impossible to return to the same partner once separated; a particular stage may be replayed, but the crucial element of a given playing, the particular pairing of players, cannot be (intentionally) recovered once lost. Thus, each playthrough takes on a unique feel based on the dynamics between players. As Wolf points out, however, a game’s potentialities are all contained within its logic: “complex narratives can occur, through a combination of rules, chance events.
and the players’ own decisions and actions. Interactivity, then, does not have to work against narrative or even linearity; it simply requires that multiple lines of narrative be present, or the potential for a variety of narrative possibilities” (109). Although the particular pairing of two given players may affect the (literal and figurative) route they take through the game, what they discover along the way, and what they make of the experience, all of these elements are already contained within the game itself.

This is not to suggest that gameplay is meaningless, however; in fact, it is inherently tied to authorship in digital texts. Murray claims that “authorship” refers to constructing the rules that govern the way meaning can be produced in a video game as well as the creation of those intended meanings (152). The game developer, then, can be said to be one such author, whose job is to make certain narratives available in the gameworld, and the player(s) must work through these possibilities by playing the game. As Paul Ward points out, the experience any given player has on any given playthrough is always unique: “When responding to the player’s actions, the game engine draws upon a library of short, pre-rendered animated sequences. These are combined and recombined in the real-time of the gameplay, with the result that the complete animated sequence as experienced by a particular player on a particular occasion [...] comes into existence only at the point of playing the game” (124). In this way, the narrative multiplicity that is possible in video games like Journey is directly related to the logic governing the network that enables the players to connect. Murray refers to maze-like games as a “kind of digital labyrinth” whose “aesthetic vision is often identified with philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s ‘rhizome,’ a tuber root system in which any point may be connected to any other point” (132). On another level, the player is also encouraged to explore the multiple connections that can be made with other players via an online network that is described in much the same way as the maze structure of the game.
itself. Galloway describes the distributed network as a “rhizome [that] links many autonomous nodes together in a manner that is neither linear nor hierarchical” (33).

In this sense, then, the philosophies governing the game’s structure and the network that supplies it with an added level of possible meaning can be said to be the same; according to Stuart Moulthrop, rhizomes reject the creation of meaning in a simplistic, linear manner like in traditional language-based narratives, but rather prioritize situations in which multiple contingent meanings can be uncovered (qtd. in Murray 133). Because the player is able to explore the numerous possibilities contained within the game space while also being given sense of direction and purpose, Journey balances between the two types of maze narrative that Murray describes as “the overdetermined for of the single-path maze adventure and the underdetermined form of rhizome fiction” (134). Murray argues that “[t]he potential of the labyrinth as a participatory narrative form would seem to lie somewhere between the two, in stories that are goal driven enough to guide navigation but open-ended enough to allow free exploration and that display a satisfying dramatic structure no matter how the interactor chooses to traverse the space” (134-135). The balancing between the goal-oriented, path-seeking movement and the sense the player gets of directionless exploration in which multiple (sometimes contradictory) directions are considered is central to the logic of the game itself but also to the experience of playing with another gamer. If the two players’ goals are in harmony, the game may feel surprisingly linear; alternatively, if both gamers are engaged in pleasurably aimless wandering, the rhizomatic possibilities of the gameworld support that style of gameplay as well. The dual nature of the game’s maze only becomes apparent when the goals of the two players are contradictory, the aimless wandering around in space of the one hampering the directed movement through space
of the other, but the logic of the network allows both players to shuffle through potential partners until they find a suitable companion.

**Journey and Co-Authorship**

In *Journey*, the player is co-responsible for the fictive experience of another user, and interaction between players becomes increasingly critical as the game progresses; when players reach the mountain’s icy summit, the only way to continue to stay warm enough not to freeze in place is to stay close to another player. The player characters’ scarves glow with warmth when in close proximity, but when at this stage of the game they begin to freeze and pieces begin to break off, movement becomes increasingly restricted until both players fall into the snow, apparently dead. There is a sense of hope when playing through this section with a partner that is entirely absent if playing alone: each successive playthrough gives the user a sense that with a different partner, this time they might be able to reach the mountaintop, but the solo gamer feels the futility of the climb almost immediately as the avatar begins to slog up an impossibly steep, snow-covered slope towards apparently inevitable doom. In what might be termed the game’s epilogue, however, the player(s) is(are) revived to fly through the vibrant, sun-soaked clouds above the mountain’s peak. If both gamers have remained together throughout the course of the game, this sequence of events will have a particular resonance: after the struggles to coordinate behavior in the earlier sections of the game, the sense of loss as the player characters die and the sense of elation as they are reborn together give the game an emotional payoff that can be surprisingly powerful. On the other hand, if the player has been paired with numerous others or finishes this sequence alone, the meaning ascribed to these events will likely take on a different tone, either emphasizing the importance of a larger community of players who contributed in
part or the sense of personal triumph that comes with bravely facing the game’s challenges unaided.

Given that replayability is built into Journey’s structure, in that the player returns to the beginning upon successful completion of the climactic stage, this multiplicity of meaning complements the ludic approach quite nicely, as multiple playthroughs are encouraged as a way of exploring the game more fully. However, as Murray cautions, ludic plurality is always constrained by the authorial programmability of digital media: even though there are many unique ways to traverse the game’s space, all of these possibilities are made possible by the game’s programming and thus constrained by the developer (152). There is, then, no truly unforeseen way of traversing the maze without breaking the rules of the game, something which is not possible without modifying its underlying programming in an unauthorized way. Although the circularity of Journey’s narrative allows the player to be, as Murray says, “protected from feeling the irreversibility of death by the fact that the stories do not have to end there” (134), this ending is just as pre-scripted and deterministic as the more linear forms of traditional narrative media. Thus, the rules-based constraints that make the gameplay experience possible both enable and limit the player’s ability to have the freedom to choose multiple pathways; as Wolf puts it, “Goals and obstacles, choices and their consequences, and the means and ends with which the player is provided; these become the tools that shape narrative experience, and the real narrative becomes the player’s own passage through the narrative maze of branching storylines and events” (109).
Journey, Flower, and Filmic Conventions

Although the multiplicity of narrative options available in video games is significantly different from those in cinema, both Journey and Flower use wordless cut-scenes that, while less formally tied to filmic narration than those found in L.A. Noire, nonetheless use particularly cinematic techniques to shape the gamer’s experience. Sacha A. Howells distinguishes between “full-motion video (FMV), pre-rendered computer-graphic (CG) animation and in-game (or ‘engine’) cut-scenes” (114) as the primary varieties that video games employ, but the cut-scenes in Journey and L.A. Noire are essentially a combination of CG and in-game animation. Basically, the cut-scenes in these games are pre-recorded and play automatically when the player reaches a certain point in the gameplay, like the pre-rendered CG scenes Howells describes. However, because the “characters, props, and environments that the player interacts with during gameplay are consistent with those he or she sees in cut-scenes,” these games retain the continuity of experience associated with the use of in-engine rendering while also avoiding the “bugs” associated with that type of “rendered on the fly” cut-scene (115-116). As Howells points out, the lack of control that the player experiences in these scenes, over both the avatar’s body and the camera, changes the experience in a fundamental way: the character is seen acting independent of the player’s input, and the camera may take on a perspective that was previously impossible (117). In Journey, for instance, the between-level cutscenes that show the player character interacting with a similar-looking white-hooded figure who shows the player a series of runes depicting various stages of the now-ruined civilization that the player has been exploring.

Flower’s cut-scenes produce a more distinct break from the visual style of the rest of the game, as these scenes depict the same locations seen within gameplay stages using a more simplistic, two-dimensional art style. Additionally, these cut-scenes are even more set off from
the action of the game by the use of “letterboxing,” which is a cinematic technique of framing the on-screen image with black bands at the top and bottom of the screen. As Howells explains, this “technique was initially useful in keeping the viewing area small to allow for smoother playback, but while current technology does not suffer from the same limitation, designers have recognised the usefulness of letterboxing as a signifier” (118). The use of such a recognizably filmic technique in a game that is otherwise relatively free of such influences contributes to the expectations of the gamer, that he or she is not only performing some purposeful action but also engaged in passive spectactorship of events that occur irrespective of those inputs. These cut-scenes, then, in which the gamer “watches and takes in information, allowing the game’s movies to work with its action to form a satisfying, unified whole” (120), contribute to the implied message of the game despite the fact that there is no verbal narration to explain the meaning of what occurs in them. These cut-scenes presumably foreshadow future levels, as some early scenes depict the city that the player will eventually reach, or show the larger effect that the player’s actions are having on the gameworld, as later scenes show the city becoming less dirty and gloomy as the player has brought the healing power of nature from the fields and meadows of the countryside into increasingly urbanized settings.

**Flower and Narrative Markers**

In *Flower*, the narrative implications of playing through its stages are perhaps not as complex or developed but no less present. Even in games where plot is less important to our experience, Murray contends, “A game is a kind of abstract storytelling that resembles the world of common experience but compresses it in order to heighten interest” (142). In this sense, the simplification of natural processes such as the wind blowing and flowers blooming transforms them into narrative elements that contribute to the game’s intended message about the
importance of nature in an increasingly industrialized world that develops as the game progresses from a meadow to a city that is full of hazardous metal and electricity but oddly devoid of color and life. By overcoming the corruption of the city and bringing a balance to the urban and pastoral landscapes, the player “can experience one of the most exciting aspects of artistic creation – the thrill of exerting power over enticing and plastic materials” (153). Playing Flower, then, brings out the connection between ludic and narrative elements, in that the “navigation of virtual space has been shaped into a dramatic enactment of the plot” (83).

Although “plot” must be used in a very loose sense with Flower, there is a definite sense of narrative teleology present to be made sense of by the gamer. In a sense, we human beings are predisposed to find meaning in our actions by our very nature; as Murray points out, “When we enter a fictional world, we do not merely ‘suspend’ a critical faculty; we also exercise a creative faculty. We do not suspend disbelief so much as we actively create belief. Because of our desire to experience immersion, we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience” (110, original emphasis). Our desire to believe in these fictive experiences is directly related to our desire to find meaning in the events of our lives; although we know them to be fictional, Murray argues, we use the same mental apparatus for understanding these stories as we do for deriving meaning from non-fictional life events (110). Given that playing a video game is a singularly embodied procedure, the experience of even simplistic stories like those of Journey and Flower can be especially enthralling.

This inherent desire for meaning is also reinforced by many aspects of the game’s presentation. One way in which the player’s experience of the game is shaped by narrative elements, albeit less overtly in Flower, for instance, than in a plot- or character-driven game like
L.A. Noire, is in the dynamic musical soundtrack that highlights the player’s goal-oriented movement through space. The music reflects the mood of a particular stage: the earlier levels, which take place in meadows tend to have happier, more harmonious-sounding music, whereas later, more industrialized levels have more foreboding music; daytime levels are matched to vibrant melodies, whereas nighttime stages are accompanied by a more relaxing soundtrack. Additionally, when certain goals are accomplished, such as the blooming of a cluster of flowers or the clearing of an entire field of debris, the camera moves out of its usual position to show the effects of this feat (which is usually that a new cluster of flowers has appeared in a different part of the field or that some other change in the landscape has occurred, such as the flowering of a tree, the activation of a windmill, or the coloration of a set of buildings), and a musical flourish accompanies this action. Janet Murray points out that music, when used in this way to provide feedback on players’ actions and guide them toward a particular understanding of the events they entail, “is not gamelike in tone” but rather “shapes [one’s] experience into a dramatic scene” (53-54). Without the soundtrack, in other words, the player would be unlikely to know what to make of such ambiguous actions, and much of the meaning of these gameplay moments would be lost.

This use of music as a narrative device is a highly conventional one in film; as David Bordwell points out in The Classical Hollywood Style, music in film “fills in cracks and smoothes down rough textures [...] This continuous musical accompaniment functions as narration” (33). Bordwell details how the soundtrack came to be a significant part of the Hollywood style during the classical period of the 1930s, drawing on the traditions of opera, and how “the classical film score enters into a system of narration, endowed with some degree of self-consciousness, a range of knowledge, and a degree of communicativeness” (34). Even in a game like Journey or Flower, where the background music shifts in response to the player’s
actions, “[t]he use of non-diegetic music itself signals the narration’s awareness of facing an audience, for the music exists solely for the spectator’s benefit” (34). Since the player may not know where to go in order to progress in the game, the music can serve as an indicator of when the player is going in the “correct” direction, as in Journey, or is performing some necessary action, as in Flower. The use of background music in this way is analogous to its use in the classical Hollywood model, as it follows certain classical conventions for denoting a scene’s intended function or mood (34). In one sequence of Journey, for instance, the player goes from sliding downhill through partially-submerged ruins, which is accompanied by a fast-moving orchestral piece that matches the player’s rapid movement through the sun-soaked landscape, into a dark and foreboding underground cavern, and the music shifts accordingly to match the mood of this new setting. While initially the music in this subterranean stage is merely mysterious, once the player encounters the game’s first enemy the soundtrack takes on a decidedly more sinister vibe. This shift in tone obeys another of Bordwell’s rules for classical Hollywood cinema: “The music confines itself to a moment-by-moment highlighting of the story” and only “[s]light anticipations are permitted” (35).

There is also a system of visual semiology at play in Flower which, although it may not be readily apparent to the player, gives the game a sense of logical coherence. Ostensibly the player’s only task in this game is to use the wind to bloom all of the flowers in a given area, at which point a single flower (like the one which began the level) will bloom and the player will be able to steer the cloud of petals into that flower, thus ending the stage. However, each different color of flowers designates a different function within the game. The whitish-purple flowers serve as connectors between different clumps of flowers; although blooming these

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9 See Figures G and H in the appendix for a visual comparison of these two sequences.
flowers has no effect on the surrounding environment, they give the player a sense of direction that might otherwise be lacking. Pink flowers give the player a boost in the direction of a group of unbloomed flowers, which similarly can guide the player if he or she is unsure of which direction to follow. The other colors have more direct effects on the gameworld: generally speaking, yellow flowers allow the player to raise other groups of flowers that were previously hidden by the surrounding grass; blue flowers control the ambient (non-player controlled) wind currents and windmills; red flowers affect landscape elements such as rock formations and buildings. Unbloomed flowers glow slightly to indicate their position, and although not all the flowers in a particular area must be bloomed before the player can move on, certain conditions must be met in order to complete a stage or progress to a new area of the level. The player may not necessarily be aware of this system of signs, and indeed is never explicitly told what each of the flower types does, but picking up on these patterns affords the player a sense of the underlying causality that his or her actions has on the gameworld. In this sense, then, *Flower* meets the criteria for “abstract storytelling” that Murray lays out:

> Every game, electronic or otherwise, can be experienced as a symbolic drama. Whatever the content of the game itself, whatever our role within it, we are always the protagonists of the symbolic action, whose plot runs like one of the following:

- I encounter a confusing world and figure it out.
- I encounter a world in pieces and assemble it into a coherent whole.
- I take a risk and am rewarded for my courage. [...] (142)

- I am challenged by a world of constant unpredictable emergencies, and I survive it.
By figuring out what each level requires, whether it is to revive a dormant tree, to activate a series of windmills, or to clear an urban landscape of industrial corruption, and how to perform the necessary actions to achieve that goal, the gamer is able to act out a symbolic plot without direct verbal narration. In this sense, gameplay and narrative are inextricable, as understanding the mechanisms that govern the game’s (unspoken) objectives reveals the narrativity lurking under the surface of the overt ludic scenario.

Conclusion

The inherent connection between gameplay and narrative in the video game medium, as I have described here, invites us to rethink notions of what constitutes a unit of scholarly analysis by putting pressure on our understanding of a medium and/or a text, as well as the relations between them and the user. Game scholars have typically approached video games as a unified medium, but given the individual features of such fundamentally dissimilar games as *L.A. Noire*, *Journey*, and *Flower*, the presumption of coherence based on a shared technological platform is untenable for game studies. Rather than arbitrarily deciding on which features of these video games to focus on, I have instead privileged an approach in which all aspects of the medium are equally important as units of study, in order to more fully account for what video games are capable of doing. As an alternative to the traditional methodologies of game studies, I want to advance a theoretical approach like what Ian Bogost proposes in his book *Unit Operations* as a way of understanding how the complex interaction of player, narrative, genre, medium, and gameplay operates, by conceiving of each of these elements as rendered equal. Within digital media, Bogost argues, “a *unit* is a material element, a thing. It can be constitutive or contingent, like a building block that makes up a system, or it can be autonomous, like a system itself” (5). Just as a digital image, text, or other object is represented by an underlying system of code,
whose units are the binary 1s and 0s that Manovich refers to as “numerical representations” (27), Bogost argues that video games involve discrete units of a broader type: “When thought of in this way, units not only define people, network routers, genes, and electrical appliances [like video game consoles], but also emotions, cultural symbols, business processes, and subjective experiences” (5). Therefore, as every gameplay experience involves different units – the player or players, generic expectations (whether “genre” is taken to mean its relation to a pre-existing genre like noir or a specifically video game genre like the maze game), control schemes, narrative structures and techniques, technological capabilities, network connections, etc. – what can be considered eligible for analysis in this medium expands to include all of these particularities. By blending different existing approaches and attending to the concerns of each as a way of making connections between them, scholars can move beyond focusing only on the games themselves and include the actual media practices of gamers. For instance, Jones refers to the fact that video games are social objects, imbued with meaning by the players – specifically, the collaborations among communities of players – and thus are not simply meaningful in and of themselves, outside of the contexts in which people play them (2-3). By moving away from a perspective that emphasizes either the meanings intended by a game’s developers or the way any given player understands the experience of playing a particular game, game studies can profit from the collaborative understandings produced by the larger community of gamers and their lived practices of gaming. In a similar vein, Roig et. al advance “a theory of playability, which is broadly understood as the quality that identifies the margin of freedom for the player, [that] should be able to contribute to the elucidation of how the interaction between users, texts and technologies shape media practices” (93). This theory would help to account for Jones’ assertion,
“Video games are to be played” (2), but from the perspective of unit analysis, it is not necessary for the video game scholar to stop there.

As Bogost points out, such a nuanced theoretical approach, although based on the logic of digital media like video games, need not be limited only to discussions of new media or even of narratives (15). This approach, then, would avoid the problems advanced earlier, of the relative inferiority of video game narratives or of the status of video games as particularly “new media” objects. As Bogost puts it, “Each medium carries a particular expressive potential, but unit analysis can help the critic uncover the discrete meaning-making in texts of all kinds” (15). This theory essentially holds that a given medium constrains what is possible for the author of a text, whether digital or otherwise, but that this particularity is only one part of our understanding of a given system of “meaning-making” that revolves around that text. These arguments address one of the central paradoxes of new media that Bolter and Grusin describe: “Although each medium promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium. Thus, immediacy leads to hypermediacy” (19). Just as Bolter and Grusin claim that digital media reject the “either/or” binary, suggesting instead that immediacy and hypermediacy exist in a “both/and” relationship despite being seemingly contradictory, this new method of analysis allows for the importance of a given text’s medium to be merely a matter of perspective. Considered as one unit among many, the medium is both significant (in that, if it is changed, the entire system of meaning-making is changed) and insignificant (in that there are many other units of equal or greater importance that must also be considered). Thus, one scholar may find a great degree of agreement with Murray’s argument for immediacy, that “we rely on works of fiction, in any medium, to help us understand the world and what it means to be human. Eventually all
successful storytelling technologies become transparent: we lose consciousness of the medium and see neither print nor film but only the power of the story itself’ (26). Another scholar may be more in accordance with Malliet’s proposed “topics of interest: audiovisual style, narration, complexity of controls, game goals, character and object structure, balance between user input and pre-programmed rules, and spatial properties of the game world” (“Adapting the Principles of Ludology”) as units of analysis. Additionally, some video games may be created primarily as narrative texts, while others may be aimed at being understood mainly as playable games. In the end, however, it is only in the interaction between all of these elements that video games can truly be understood. By analyzing video games in the manner I have here, I am proposing a new theoretical perspective that recognizes that neither narratology nor ludology has all of the answers, but each proposes a set of units that must be accounted for.
Appendix

A. "A Marriage Made in Heaven"

The title screen from a case in *L.A. Noire*

B. "Double Indemnity"

Directed by Billy Wilder

The title screen from *Double Indemnity*
C.

*L.A. Noire*'s screen display during a chase sequence

D.

A detailed screenshot from an early level in *Journey*
A view of one of *Journey*’s early levels, emphasizing the size of its navigable space

The on-screen display in *Flower*
A fast-paced outdoor sequence, accompanied by a stirring soundtrack, in *Journey*.

A mysterious underground scene, accompanied by a foreboding musical score, in *Journey*.
Works Cited


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