From ‘Epic’ to ‘Epic Win’: Play and performance as open-database storytelling in pre- and postliterate media

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From ‘Epic’ to ‘Epic Win’:
Play and performance as open-database storytelling in pre- and postliterate media
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Vassar College 2012

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Abstract:
Attempts to reframe critical study of early medieval storytelling by applying media theory and specifically videogame studies; as well as reframe videogame studies by grounding it in the deep and old tradition of oral storytelling. By suggesting a new conception for our understanding of ‘play’ as an embodied, rule-bound and amusing activity that takes place both within linear time and yet outside the bounds of ‘reality,’ we can consider folktales and videogames to be strikingly similar media in their formal composition. Both folktales and videogames operate with the logic of ‘database,’ occupied with elements, possibilities, building blocks, and world-building. Interactors with these media then ‘play’ the database, creating a narrative from the possibilities. Thus another feature of what I call “open-database storytelling” is that it blurs the line between author and audience that was established through the premodern era by media like the printing press. Videogames, then, do not merely conflate author/audience; they represent a return to a style of storytelling before the idea of ‘author’ and ‘copyright’ was established, a style found in early medieval storytelling.
# Table of Contents

Introduction: 3

1: “The Play’s the Thing”: The historical connection between games and drama 12

2: Close Playing: Case Studies of the Havelok story and *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* 24

3: The Mechanics of Play 52

4: ‘Play’ as the Act of Drawing Narrative from Database 70

5: Conclusion 80

Glossary 87

Works Cited: 90
Introduction: Medieval videogames and hypertextual manuscripts: The history of play

The so-called *Ultimate History of Video Games* by Steven L. Kent begins with a timeline that starts at 1889, with the establishment of the Japanese playing card game company Marufuku.1 Hardly ultimate, but then even this brief period of just over a century has given Kent enough material to write a long and detailed book. Kent seems to define its purview as limited to games with a verifiable release date, whose intellectual property falls under copyright laws. But ‘game,’ a notoriously hazy term, extends far beyond the purview that Kent explores; the sheer volume of the word’s implications is probably why Kent omits ideas of play that do not involve balls, boards, cards, dice or machinery. The book begins, for example, with an in-depth discussion of pinball.2 From there, however, the book presents a sound version of videogame history, detailing the rise of table-top role-playing games (RPGs) that served as analogue forerunners for the first MUDs, text adventures, and early videogames. In this way 1889 serves as a manageable starting point for the topic he covers.

But the history of videogames—in particular, the history of RPGs—goes much farther back than ping-pong and card games, As Johan Huizinga argues, role-playing games have been an important part of human expression and communication since the earliest societies. He argues that: “culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning. …In its earliest phases culture has the play-character…it proceeds in the shape and mood of play.”3 According to Huizinga, the earliest notions of roles, jobs and divisions were treated like play. Today, the term ‘role-playing game’ connotes complicated narrative-driven videogames like *Final Fantasy* or *Mass Effect*. Game critic Noah Wardrip-Fruin has defined RPGs as a text where “the story

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2 Kent 2-14
This idea of ‘playing stories’ is intrinsic not only to videogames but to medieval forms of storytelling.

The term ‘medieval storytelling,’ however, is enormously broad. It constitutes everything from myths, folktales and legends to verse romances, lays, songs, and prose histories, all of which influenced, transformed, and blended into each other. Folktales and oral performances could be recorded in manuscript form, and later storytellers might use these manuscripts to help produce further oral performance. Authors like Marie de France and Chretien de Troyes, for example, took Breton folk material and from it wrote their lays and romances, which in turn served as a foundation and inspiration for many subsequent texts. The textuality of the medieval period, circa 500 to 1500, was a complicated blend of oral traditions and increasingly developed literary ones, and it is impossible to distill these many forms into incontrollable definitions. Therefore, we are reduced to using somewhat ambiguous terms to broadly discuss the role of play through various medieval genres. What I can argue, however, is that in the Middle Ages—particularly the earlier Middle Ages—there was no concept of an authorial text, a ‘right’ version of a story. Notions of ‘author’ and ‘singular text’ are an invention of the late medieval period that saw its peak in the premodern and early modern period; Walter J. Ong has argued that “the romantic quest for originality, the novel, the new new, reveals romanticism [is] a typographic phenomenon,” one that is being superseded by the idioms of what he calls “new orality.” Oral material existed in the open-access database of cultural memory to be appropriated, expanded, reinterpreted, retold—in essence, to be played with. The term ‘folklore’ is a useful one when discussing this type of nonliterate storytelling. Vladimir Propp defines folklore as follows: “the art of the lower social strata of all peoples, irrespective of the stage of their development. For

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5 Ong 295
peoples before the formation of classes it is their entire art taken together.” With this definition Propp positions folklore as the earliest style of communal storytelling. Paul Zumthor uses the word “mouvance” to describe the relationship between texts and the fluidity of narrative that precludes an attempt to pin down an authoritative version. Medieval forms of storytelling—folktales in particular—were, to a greater or lesser degree, role-playing games not too different than the videogame RPGs of today. People have been playing RPGs for centuries; the only thing ‘new’ about videogames is the technology used to deliver them. In this sense, then, it is no mere coincidence that so many contemporary RPGs have medieval fantasy themes, since they share so many formal elements as well.

At this point, at the mention of “medieval fantasy” and “RPG” we might look to the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, a medieval scholar and writer of the *Lord of the Rings* novels, who has had an enormous impact on videogames. Noah Wardrip-Fruin’s history of videogames lists among videogame RPG’s influences: “the computer game *Colossal Cave Adventure*, sports simulation games, tabletop war games (the tradition from which [*Dungeons and Dragons*] emerged, and the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien.” According to Gary Gygax, creator of *Dungeons and Dragons*, “Just about all the players were huge [J. R. R. Tolkien] fans, and so they insisted that I put as much Tolkien-influence material into the game as possible.” T. L. Taylor, too, comments on the popularity of Tolkien with early designers: “Indeed, what remains quite striking is how many MMOGs continue to operate in this fantasy genre and remain based in the preferences and play styles favored by the designers themselves.”

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8 *Colossal Cave Adventure*. Will Crowther. 1976.
9 Wardrip-Fruin 45
It is truly striking how much of Tolkien’s aesthetics have permeated modern fantasy. His conceptions of Elves and Dwarves, for example, have become staples of the fantasy genre, and even creatures he invented such as orcs, balrogs, and hobbits frequently appear in other media as well. But a closer examination of Tolkien’s form reveals that he was not only appropriating themes and concepts of early medieval myth—he was experimenting with medieval concepts of textuality, of *mouvance*. While we cannot go so far as to say that Tolkien was writing folklore, scholars like Gergely Nagy have argued that:

Tolkien’s texts and the background mythological system they succeed in creating are essentially similar to real-world mythological corpora and the way they invoke their mythological system because of the basically similar relation of text to myth. Mythology traverses the definitions of textuality in the overlay of textual on oral and makes it clear that *no text is myth by genre*. The texts are mythological and together they form a *mythology*, the “*telling* of myths” contained in the background mythological system. [Nagy’s emphasis]¹¹

*The Lord of the Rings* books are certainly novels, but Tolkien did not approach them the way traditional novelists do. Rather, his texts serve as accounts of the mythology he created, as navigations of the complex system known as Middle-Earth. This attitude toward the relationship between system and novel—between database and narrative—not only recalls medieval attitudes of orality and storytelling, but presages videogames with their focus on world-creation and multitudinous narratives.

Therefore I argue that the RPG can be understood as a storytelling form that has been expressed in various technologies throughout history. By treating RPGs as an old, predigital—and even preliterate—medium, we can establish a non-technologistic history of videogames that stretches further back than 1889. In other words, the prevalence of medieval themes and tropes

in videogames is no coincidence. Rather, as videogames can trace their history back to preliterate concepts of storytelling, which were grounded in play, or *ludus*, their structure can be seen as an aesthetic echo of the ‘play’ that defines preliterate medieval storytelling as well.

My intent is to provide a new framework for comparing medieval role-playing, which has its roots in folklore, with videogame storytelling, through analysis of the logic of the database over linear modes of storytelling. Specifically, I argue that what defines these media is a blurring of the traditional roles of ‘author’ and ‘audience,’ where any given interactor can serve to varying degrees as teller and listener in the intertextual system that constitutes a folktale. With both game designers and medieval authors, the emphasis is on the genius of derivative, not the obsession with originality that dominates print culture, particularly through the 19th and 20th centuries. A videogame, as a whole, is analogous to a story such as the King Arthur legend, or Little Red Riding Hood, that exists abstractly in the form of narratival elements and possibilities. A single playthrough of a videogame, then, which is by necessity linear, is analogous to a single telling of the King Arthur story, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or *The Alliterative Morte ’Arthure*. In other words, audiences are not given predetermined linear narratives to follow, but rather are given access to the database as a whole and allowed to traverse it freely—to play with it. In this way they are not ‘audiences’ in the modernly understood sense of the word, but rather participants, as the nature of these media allows their ‘audience’ to not only influence the story by reacting to and commenting on the storyteller’s performance, but also retelling and modifying the story for future performances.

I suggest a new term to express this type of communicative genre: ‘open-database storytelling.’ In open-database storytelling, users interact with a formulaic database—either a consciously created and organized database like a videogame, or a culturally accumulated
database like a folktale—and use it to produce new narratives. I thereby hope to develop a new conception of ‘play’ as that which lives in the tension between database and narrative. This objective reflects my two fields of study: as a media scholar, I want to ground videogames (and modern interactive storytelling in general) in a deep history of the formal logics of story construction. As a medieval studies scholar, I want to devise a new way of understanding, playing and creating videogames in general—and RPGs in particular—built on a recognition of their roots in medieval and pre-literate storytelling, a means of discussing them as a medium deeply rooted in medieval conceptions of ‘authorship,’ allegory, database and orality.

In the first chapter I discuss the theoretical conceptions of ‘play’ in the fields of game studies and Medieval Studies, particularly with regard to medieval drama. Today ‘play’ in the dramatic sense and ‘play’ in the games sense are considered different words with distinct glosses, but despite the seemingly disparate nature of my two fields of study, both have encountered similar difficulties in attempting to define the term. By using the Oxford English Dictionary to analyze the uses of the word ‘play’ throughout history, I will show that in preliterate oral societies, particularly that of early medieval Europe, people saw no conflict in using the word ‘play’ (or ludus in medieval Latin and pleigen in Old English) to describe acts of both drama and game. This is because, in oral cultures, drama and game were not seen as separate media. The etymology of the words ‘play’ and ludus shows that the concepts of game and drama, considered quite separate entities today, were once easily interchangeable. These and other examples situate both game theorists and medievalists in the mindset of a preliterate culture abounding with orally told/played ludi.

To expand upon the idea that videogame play has its roots in medieval concepts of play, and that by extension videogames can be considered more technologically advanced folktales, in
the second chapter I will elaborate on thematic similarities between medieval stories and modern videogames through a close study of the game *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*[^12] and the medieval story of Havelok, which exists in several different versions in various medieval manuscripts[^13]. A.B. Lord has defined the term “theme” as “a recurrent element of narration or description in traditional oral poetry.”[^14] Following this definition, I will use these two texts as case studies to discuss thematic similarities between early medieval storytelling and videogames; firstly, that both employ the ‘quest’ structure. Ideas of quest revolve around the creation and traversal of geographic space, a trope which both the Havelok story and *Skyrim* employ to create narratival space. Within this space the characters of the quest narrative come into physical conflict; the site of the conflict, as well as the audience’s entry point into the narrative, is the hero’s body. For that reason the hero as a character must serve as something of a blank slate on which the storyteller or game player can map his or her own emotions, decisions, opinions and choices. Thus a quest narrative is always biased in favor of its hero, because the hero’s body is the center of the plot. Any criticisms or commentary that the designers or tellers or players may wish to explore must therefore come from this embodied perspective.

The similar thematic devices in both folktales and videogames arise from their formal structure. This may seem to be a strange claim, since folktales were communicated orally or handwritten on manuscripts, whereas videogames are communicated through complex arrays of data stored in computers and often linked through the internet. However, by positioning digital communication as a remediation[^15] of oral communication we can see the striking similarities in

medieval and modern forms of storytelling. Therefore, in the first half of this chapter I will address the different types of delivery technologies that videogames and folktales employ and the way that they move and operate in society. In addressing these differences and coming to understand them my intention is to show how these seemingly different devices operate similarly. In the latter half of the chapter I will go further into the specific formal composition of videogames and folktales. Specifically, using Vladimir Propp’s understanding of folktales as systems of reorganizable elements, as well as modern videogame theories of how to create nonlinear stories, I hope to show that the formal structure of the two media is strikingly similar. Both consist of discrete elements that exist in a system, or database, known as the ‘story,’ which are called upon to produce many different narratives, or iterations, of that story.

In the fourth chapter I will expand on the themes discussed in chapter two, and the mechanics thereof expanded upon in chapter three, in order to discuss database theory. Terms such as ‘narrative architecture’ and “version” versus “story” that I have used to talk about videogames and folktales will be abstracted into the theoretical terms “narrative” and “database” in order to come to a broad theory of the unique interaction between them that defines both videogames and folktales and ultimately lets us classify them as theoretically identical media. N. Katharine Hayles argues that database and narrative are “natural symbionts,”16 two methods of communication that work together in different ways to comprise the structure of a medium. Using her understanding of database and narrative, I will show that videogames and folktales’ modes of operation are nearly identical with respect to the relationship between database and narrative: that is, players are presented with a database, and are free to create their own unique narrative from that database. Thence I come to the term “open-database storytelling” to define all

forms of such play-centered storytelling regardless of the technological means used to access them, thus classifying videogames and folktales as part of the same branch of media.

In theory, narrative and database can be distilled into separate formal elements, but when analyzing actual stories the act of separation becomes much more difficult. In the last chapter, therefore, I seek to complicate concepts of database/narrative, oral/literate, and folktale/novel/videogame that may have arisen from the preceding discussion. The role of play in storytelling may have become more or less pronounced through various periods of history, but it is always present. Even novels and other forms of ‘traditional’ linear media can be played with using forms such as fanfiction. Ultimately, however, although no theoretical term can ever be practically perfect, I argue that the term “open-database storytelling” is still a viable means of conceptualizing stories such as that of Havelok and the game _Elder Scrolls: Skyrim_. When a story exists in an abstract, nonlinear form, and interactors are asked to make a narrative out of it, that story can be considered though the lens of the “open-database” genre.

At the end of the study I have also included a glossary of terms. The fields of Media Studies and Medieval Studies use very different vocabularies to talk about similar ideas and concepts. Therefore I found it helpful to define a vocabulary for this study, drawn from both disciplines. The glossary serves to organize and integrate these terms, and to illustrate these seemingly disparate fields’ usefulness to each other in a manner more akin to database logic than the narratival approach of this paper.
Chapter 1: “The Play’s the Thing”: The historical connection between games and drama

"The purpose of playing... is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature."

“I’m performing in a play.” “I like to play games.” “I play the piano.” “I’m playacting.” “Stop playing around.” Why do we use the word ‘play’ to refer to both dramatic performance and games? Today we rarely associate the two actions. Theater is one medium, and videogames are another. There is very little ‘cross-pollination,’ to borrow from biology. But in a pre-literate society, the word ‘play’ easily fit both media, before technologies like writing and, much later, computing, allowed them to become differentiated. Excavating the etymology of the word ‘play’ in the English language will help come to a definition of play that encompasses the acts of oral storytelling and videogames.

Let us begin with the modern definitions and trace our way backward. Game theorist Bernard Suits proposes this definition of “play” in his book The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia:

To play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favor of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity.

This definition covers sports such as golf and baseball, simple games like Tic-Tac-Toe and checkers, and simple digital games like Tetris and Minesweeper. It also, argues Suits, covers less structured types of games: games of make-believe. Despite their apparent lack of rules, as

17 William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 3, Sc. 2
18 Though these are separate media, a new genre has emerged that mixes the two. “Machinima” are narratival films created using the environments, characters, and controls of a videogame. See http://www.machinima.com/ for more information.
19 This fact may be changing, however, as “older” media such as theater begin to incorporate “new” media. See Fin Kennedy’s “Can video games help theatre reach the next level?” in Theatre Blog. http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2011/jun/06/video-games-theatre-technology
required by the above definition, games like “Cops and Robbers” or “House” follow a more abstract rule: one that merely requires the players to prolong their play. Suits proposes that there are two types of games: “closed” games like checkers or baseball that have definable rules and goals, and “open” games, which he defines “generically as a system of reciprocally enabling moves whose purpose is the continued operation of the system.”\(^{21}\) Falling under this category of “open games” is the genre of videogames called role-playing games, or RPGs, a type of game in which closed games such as minigames, sidequests, and combat exist under the overarching goal of embodying a character. Because playing make-believe, with or without a computer, is a goal-governed activity, it falls under Suits’ definition of ‘playing a game,’ because “seeking to keep a dramatic episode going is to be engaged in goal-governed role-performance.”\(^{22}\) As Noah Wardrip-Fruin writes of digital RPGs, “the story itself is playable.”\(^{23}\)

In his discussion of play, Suits makes little to no mention of theater, except to argue that acting from a script is not ‘playing.’ Just as to use a homing device to land holes-in-one in golf would not be ‘playing’ golf, Suits argues, in the same way using a script in a game of make-believe would not be playing. Because both are machines, they take the play element out of the activity by removing the use of inefficient means, which was a criterion of Suits’ above-quoted definition. “Use of a script by players of make-believe games would be a more efficient—less risky—means for keeping a dramatic action going than is the invention of dramatic responses on the spot, which is what the game requires.”\(^{24}\) In this way Suits validates the distinction between games, which includes make-believe games, and theater, despite the fact that both use the word “play.” However, Suits does not address the reason why the term applies to both media. Suits’

\(^{21}\) Suits 124
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
\(^{24}\) Suits 125
modern game studies, therefore, only serve as the starting point for an excavation of the term “play.”

The question of how to define “play” has occupied theater scholars for even longer than it has game theorists. Complicating their attempts to gloss the term as it appears in medieval usage is the fact that the Latin word *ludus* means ‘play’ as in gaming and ‘play’ as in theater, just as in English; the words *ludus* and ‘play’ both appear frequently in medieval texts. Of the word *ludus*, medieval drama scholar V. A. Kolve writes that its “lack of precision has tried the patience of distinguished scholars.”25 The only thing medievalists seem to agree on is the word’s ambiguity. Various scholars have posited definitions: Chambers suggests that *ludus* merely means “amusement” and theater-related play is a derived usage thereof; Young observed that the word seems to relate most closely with “popular revelling.” Yet, Kolve writes, “this very ambiguity may prove an entrance into the medieval idea of theater, for it is this word *ludus*, in its English equivalents “play” and “game,” that becomes the ubiquitous generic term for the vernacular drama.”26 Thus he posits that a certain ambiguity—or perhaps what a modern observer would regard as ambiguity—is inherent in the term. The definition Kolve eventually arrives at, therefore, is that at its root, the word ‘play,’ or *ludus*, means “something amusing.” It is a definition that handily overlaps with Suits’ despite, or perhaps because of, its lack of specificity.

These are, more or less, modern definitions of ‘play’ as the term is used in game studies and in theater. To see how the word has been used throughout the history of the English language, we can turn to the Oxford English dictionary. “Play” is an Old English word, meaning it survived the dramatic linguistic shifts that occurred when William of Normandy conquered

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26 Ibid.
England in 1066 and irreparably infused the English language with French (and by extension, Latin) vocabulary. So what did the word mean in its earliest instantiations?

The Oxford English Dictionary has an almost overwhelmingly long list of the word’s various usages throughout history, beginning with the Old English poem “Christ II” by Cynewulf, found in the Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501:27

“Þa wearð burgwarum eadgum ece gefea æþelinges plega.”28

Here, the word ‘play,’ or *plega*, is glossed as “exercise, brisk or free movement or action.”

Another definition is “the action of lightly or briskly wielding or plying a weapon in fencing or combat,” as signified by the word *lindplegan* in Beowulf line 2039:

“Oð ðæt hie forlæddan to ðam lindplegan swæ gesiðas.” 29

Neither of these definitions reaches the specificity with which the word is used in game studies, nor do they connote any sort of narrative communication, as in theater. What they do connote is physicality, of using one’s body to communicate. It is not unfair, then, to say that embodiment was intrinsic to a medieval concept of ‘play.’

In the Blicking Homilies, a series of prose sermons written in Old English before the second millennium, OED lexicologists have glossed ‘play’ in a more specific manner: “exercise or activity engaged in for enjoyment or recreation rather than for a serious or practical purpose.” And there are examples of the word being used to mean “a dramatic or theatrical performance” in Old English, as in Orosius’ History, circa 1025:

> Wearþ eft Godes wracu Romanum, þa hie æt hiora theatrum wæron mid heora *plegan*, þa hit eall tofeoll;30

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29 Ibid.

30 “play.” OED.
and the version of the Old English Martyrology found in Cotton Julius A. x, reads:

Se wæs ærest sumes kaseres mima, þæt is leasere, ond sang
beforan him scandlicu leop ond plegode scandlice plegan.\textsuperscript{31}

Although interesting, here we must remember that just because modern readers gloss the word *plegan* with different meanings (or meanings that we today would consider different) does not mean that medieval people thought of them as different. In these examples, *plegan* holds the same meaning as the above examples; that is, embodied movement to communicate an idea. Just because modern English speakers think of the word “play” as having to do with the established institution of theater does not mean that medieval people divided *plegan* into discrete definitions.

Recreation and lack of practicality continue to be staples of the word’s definition in our later existing examples. In the fourteenth century, Chaucer used the word in *The Pardoner’s Tale*, verse 627, in a way that the OED glosses as “a particular sport, game, pastime, or recreational activity”:

*Lordes may fynden oother manere pley Honeste ynow to dryue the
day awey*\textsuperscript{32}

And in Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*, the second printed book in England, the word appears twice. The first instance is glossed as “jest, fun, sport”:

*Than the damesell that halpe sir Alysaundir oute of the castell, in
her play tolde Alys all-togydir how he was presonere in the castell
of La Beall Regarde.*\textsuperscript{33}

Then later:

*Thus sir Launcelot rested hym longe with play and game.*\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
Here, the word is glossed as “The activity of playing a sport or game; physical recreation, sport.” Both Malory’s uses of the word have a physical aspect to them; his players are “in play,” an act that requires tricks of speech as well as use of the body to act in accordance with the speech. Both are for the sake of amusement, and at least the damsel’s use of the word implied an unscripted act. The nature of Lancelot’s play is less clear, but it is also safe to assume that his play, too, was of an unscripted, spontaneous sort.

As we have seen, in modern English the word “play” is used to refer to games or to performance such as drama or music. Historically, however, the words “play” and “ludus” were used much more broadly to refer to an activity that we in the present day have difficulty defining in and of itself. We are tempted to label it either “game,” or “performance,” because these have become discrete media in the modern world, and occupy separate fields of study. William Tydeman describes this problem in “An introduction to medieval English theatre” when he writes of the difficulties posed by the term *ludus*:

Too often we can never be certain as to what extent drama is the principal feature of what documents refer to, nor indeed whether at times we are dealing with drama at all. were, for example, these popular ‘ludi’ objected to by outraged prelates ‘plays’ in our sense of the term, since the Latin ‘ludus’ can be used to denote a sport or a pastime as well as a drama?35

This excerpt from Tydeman’s work highlights the two most important problems associated with inquiry into medieval game studies: 1) physical texts are difficult to find, and 2) when we do find physical texts, we are baffled by the ambiguity of the word “ludus.” I propose, however, that these problems arise from our position as modern observers of historical media, and that they were in fact not problems at all to medieval people. For one, the absence of physical texts does not mean that the multitude of documents have not survived the centuries; rather, in all

likelihood to write down the script of a dramatic performance was rare in itself, and when it was, the text was not considered an authoritative document, but rather a record of one instantiation. Secondly, medieval people saw no ambiguity in their varied use of the words ‘play’ and ‘ludus’ because they meant neither ‘games’ nor ‘theater’ in the way we conceive of them today. Rather, ‘play’ and ‘ludus’ refer to a means of storytelling from which we have derived “games” as Bernard Suites defines them and “theater” as contemporary scholars define it.36

According to the OED, the essence of the word “play” in medieval conception is broad enough to encompass both Suits’ and Kolve’s definitions. In looking through the OED, however, we must also remember that text can only tell us so much about the word’s everyday usage. Even if we analyze every single instance of the word in print, our sample size is still small in comparison to the word’s usage in speech. As William Tydeman says of the attempt to study medieval linguistics: “It is as if we have inherited a small number of pieces, some of which connect with one another, from a huge but lost jig-saw puzzle.”37 All we can do is use the OED as a collection of jigsaw puzzle pieces and use it as a foundation for extrapolation of the meaning of the oral signifier “play.” And it seems that medieval English speakers had no trouble using the word to mean anything from amusement to organized sports to dramatic performance. What does this tell us about the way medieval people approached both games and dramatic performance? To them, both were acts of embodiment for the sake of recreation, and acts that, we must assume, were almost entirely unscripted. Only later does the word take on theatrical connotations, as the printing press and subsequent increase in literacy allowed for the emergence of theater as a medium distinct from storytelling.

36 As mentioned in my introduction, I have named this form “open-database storytelling.” It is a form that describes both oral performance and videogames. In Chapter 4 I elaborate on my reason for choosing this term.
37 Tydeman1.
From the OED’s glosses of the medieval “play” it’s clear that play was originally an unscripted activity. The phenomenon of the canonical script occurs relatively recently; it is a product of the literate culture enabled by the printing press. Tiffany Stern and Simon Palfrey explain that medieval actors very rarely saw the entire text they were to perform; rather, by the time of Shakespeare they were given their individual lines and cues, which they memorized in private, and then synthesized these parts into a live performance with the help of a prompter who held the “play-book.”38 Not an oral activity, to be sure; rather it was a complicated enactment of textual mouvance as it existed between play text, actor, and performance. The actors were drawing not only from their considerable database of memorized lines, but also improvising with their parts as they performed with each other.

Thus we see that play is not an entirely freeform activity. Games require rules. We return to Suits, whose definition of play includes the stipulation that the play activity is “directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favor of less efficient means.”39 Consider children playing “House.” There is no script, no defined narrative, which makes playing “House” quite a different experience from reading Little House on the Prairie. However, the game of “House” does come with a predefined set of narrative elements that they are free to juggle and rearrange as they perform. Thus, one game of “House” may be strikingly similar to the text of Little House on the Prairie. The key difference is that nothing about the game itself forces players to follow the same narrative as in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s book. If, however, during the course of the game, one of the children decides to become a rampaging alien invader, either the other children must agree they are now playing “House with Aliens,” or they will get angry at the aberrant player for

39 Suites 49.
willfully ignoring the rules of the game—for dismissing and rejecting the agreed-upon narrative elements. In modern parlance, the other children will accuse the “alien” of trolling.40

So modern definitions of “play” have become more rigid than medieval ones; the word has become more and more specific throughout time. In the earliest conceptions of play, the only rule was that players make the continuation of the play their goal, a stipulation which often required obeying culturally agreed-upon rules such as the nuclear family structure essential to “House” or the understanding that aliens do not have a place in the game. This does not mean that play in any period lacked rules. The difference is that more modern forms of play have externalized and codified their rules in the form of rulebooks, instructions, or programmed code. Rules and guidelines of medieval role-playing games could be more variable between different performances, but each specific game-performance was still a rule-governed activity.

Johan Huizinga positions this type of play as the original type of play in the earliest human societies. Huizinga was an early 20th century scholar and medievalist who is also considered to be the father of game studies. In his book Homo Ludens, Latin for “playing man”, Huizinga examines the etymologies of various forms of ‘play’ at great length. He writes:

_Ludus_ covers children’s games, recreation, contests, liturgical and theatrical representations, and games of chance. In the expression _lares ludentes_ it means “dancing”. The idea of “feigning” or “taking on the semblance of” seems to be uppermost. 41

In Suits’ terms, Huizinga’s definition positions “open games” as the original type of game, and “closed games” as a more recent derivation thereof. In other words, when medieval people talked about “play” and “game” they were referring primarily to open games, not closed ones.

Throughout the course of the book Huizinga traces the concept of “play” through all the most

40 “Trolling” is a modern slang term used to describe when someone willfully transgresses the boundaries of play to irritate the players and disrupt their “magic circle.” See [http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=trolling](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=trolling) for a more colloquial definition.

41 Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens 35-36
fundamental aspects of human society, from ritual and religion to war to law and art, and finally to poetic creation, which he observes to be “at the heart of any discussion of the relations between play and culture.” He writes:

While in the more highly organized forms of society religion, science, law, war and politics gradually lose touch with play, so prominent in the earlier phases, the function of the poet still remains fixed in the play-sphere where it was born. Poiesis, in fact, is a play-function. It proceeds within the play-ground of the mind, in a world of its own which the mind creates for it.42

This description of “game” positions even more firmly what Suits would call “closed games” as a subset of “open games.” Huizinga traces ‘play’ back to the debates of the ancient Greek philosophers, where rhetoric, riddles, and constructions of logic were treated as a game.43

According to modern genres of ‘game,’ these ancient forms of play all have to do with performance, with role-playing and meaning-making. In videogame terms, they are “role-playing games,” or RPGs. Other genres of videogames, where narrative is less emphasized, evolved from this early poetry-centric play through the creation of “closed games.” Electronic “closed games” like Tetris or Tic-Tac-Toe evolved from poetry in a less direct route, through analogue closed games and board games that all but lost touch with narrative. RPGs, however, are games in which one’s purpose is to “play” a “role.” Noah Wardrip-Fruin offers this definition of RPGs as separate from other types of videogames such as first-person shooters (FPSs) and platformers:

What changes is the emphasis in play. As the name would suggest, first-person shooters are focused on combat as the main form of play. It becomes both the primary challenge and main motivation for players moving through the world. Platformers, on the other hand, make movement itself (sometimes through a puzzling space of platforms of varying shapes and heights) the main challenge and motivation for players. RPGs, however, often work to motivate players to engage in a variety of types of play (e.g. exploration, combat, and intellectual puzzle solving) via character development

42 Huizinga. Homo Ludens 119
43 Huizinga 149
set in a larger story. In particular, many RPGs give the sense that the story itself is *playable* by offering the payer freedom to roam across a world infused with quests that operate at many scales.\(^{44}\)

And what Wardrip-Fruin calls “playable story,” Huizinga calls “poetry.” In his chapter “Play and poetry” in *Homo Ludens*, he writes:

> The first thing we have to do to gain such an understanding is to discard the idea that poetry has only an aesthetic function or can only be explained in terms of aesthetics. In any flourishing, living civilization, above all in archaic cultures, poetry has a vital function that is both social and liturgical…ritual, entertainment, artistry, riddle-making, doctrine, persuasion, sorcery, soothsaying, prophecy, and competition.\(^{45}\)

Instead, Huizinga suggests that “*poiesis* is, in fact, a play-function. It proceeds within the playground of the mind, in a world of its own which the mind creates for it.”\(^{46}\) For Huizinga, poetry is a game—the game pieces are words, the “world of its own” the stage, the poet’s voice his bridge between his mind and his audience. Rules such as rhyming, rhythm, and cultural expectations guide the creation and transmission of narratives concerning nearly every facet of social life.

We may think of the RPG as a new medium, but really the cyclical nature of media has led us back to a mode of play that prevailed centuries ago. In fact, if the definition of an “open game” is, in Suits’ words, “goal-governed role-performance,” then the very phrase “RPG” is redundant. So where does this bring us? At its heart, the word ‘play’ has to do with embodiment—with the movement of a body through space. Further, when people ‘play’ they participate in an almost entirely unscripted performance, although certain narrative elements must be previously agreed upon to achieve cohesion. Such was the nature of preliterate, or oral, storytelling. Oral storytelling is a form of ‘play’ because the storytellers, or players, operate

\(^{44}\) Noah Wardrip-Fruin, 47  
\(^{45}\) Huizinga 120  
\(^{46}\) Huizinga 119
within Huizinga’s “magic circle.” They repeatedly retrace their steps through the story world, using the same narrative elements to enact different outcomes.

‘Play’ is intrinsic to the idioms of both medieval storytelling, oral and manuscript, and role-playing videogames, one in which you take some givens, such as “Lancelot and Guinevere are in love” or “You are the Dragonborn” and follow these rules in such a way that you extend your play for as long as possible. Through the centuries different forms of play have become specialized enough to constitute their own media; thus today we use the term “role-playing game” to refer to a subset of games that is in actuality most closely akin with the roots of gaming. Keeping this in mind, through the rest of the paper I will attempt to outline an alternate definition of ‘play’ that is neither “ambivalent” nor specific to modern categorizations. In the next chapter, I will further elaborate on this conceptualization using the videogame *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (2011) and the various versions of the popular medieval legend of Havelok the Dane.
Chapter 2: Close Playing: Case Studies of the Havelok story and *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

_Herkeneth to me, gode men -  
Wives, maydnes, and alle men -  
Of a tale that ich you wile telle,  
Wo so it wile here and therto dwelle.  
The tale is of Havelok imaked:  
Whil he was litel, he yede ful naked.  
Havelok was a ful god gome -  
He was ful god in everi trome;  
He was the wicteste man at nede  
That thurte riden on ani stede._

47

_Our hero, our hero, claims a warrior’s heart  
I tell you, I tell you, the Dragonborn comes  
With a Voice wielding power of the ancient Nord art  
Believe, believe, the Dragonborn comes  
It’s an end to the evil, of all Skyrim’s foes  
Beware, beware, the Dragonborn comes  
For the darkness has passed, and the legend yet grows  
You’ll know, You’ll know the Dragonborn’s come._

48

Medieval stories of knightly prowess often include an “arming scene,” where the narrator carefully describes the hero equipping himself for battle. And most videogame players will be familiar with the similar process of equipping one’s avatar or characters or units for an especially challenging fight. Similarly, in Chapter 1 we equipped ourselves with a new reading of “play,” an alternative lens through which to see the diverse activities that the word describes. Thus equipped, we are now ready to enter the fight—that is, to examine the Havelok story and *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* through the lens of play.

The story of Havelok, in its most basic terms, is about a dispossessed Danish prince raised by a kindly fisherman named Grim. Havelok’s superhuman strength, and other miracles


48 *Skyrim.* Bethesda Game Studios. 2011. This song is sung by various bards throughout the game world. An example can be found here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOra9ZBBYiY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOra9ZBBYiY)

49 I originally chose *Skyrim* as my videogame case study because at the time I began this project in the fall of 2011 it was the most recent medieval/fantasy-themed major RPG. Since its release on November 11, 2011, however, the game’s sophisticated gameplay has proved it a worthy choice for this study. Further, its record-breaking popularity has provided me with a wealth of cultural material to analyze.
that point to his royal heritage, help him on the way to rescuing an English princess and claiming
the thrones of both Denmark and England. The story exists in several versions: first is a twelfth
century Anglo-Norman verse history in Geoffrey Gaimar’s *Estoire des Engleis*, where Havelok
is raised believing he is a commoner named Cuheran. Gaimar’s *Estoire* exists in three
manuscripts: British Museum, Ms. Royal 13 A. XXI; Durham Cathedral, Ms. C. IV.27; and
Lincoln Cathedral, Ms. A. 4/12. The story in Gaimar is as follows: Blessed with extraordinary
strength, Cuheran goes to work in the court of the English king Edelsi as a scullion. After the
evil Edelsi forces his niece, princess Argentille, to marry Cuheran in order to discredit her claim
to the throne, the princess has marvelous dreams that lead Cuheran to discover his true identity
and birthright. After this, Cuheran-turned-Havelok fights several battles, where his extraordinary
strength helps him prevail against Edulf, who killed Havelok’s true parents, and Edelsi. An
Anglo-Norman French poem entitled “Le Lai d’Havelok le Danois” also appear in Herald’s
College, Arundel XIV E.D.N. no.14. This text follows the same general plot as Gaimar’s,
although variations in plot and detail exist, leading scholars to believe that both texts were
written from a common source, a textual or performative ur-Havelok.⁵⁰

Both the Gaimar and the *Lai d’Haveloc* are missing lines in several places; The only
other mostly complete version of Havelok’s story also appears in Middle English in manuscript
Bodleian Library, Laud Miscellany 108 from the mid-thirteenth century. Here, several of the
names are changed significantly; Argentille is Goldeboru, Edelsi is Godrich, and the titular
character, instead of thinking himself a common fisherman’s son named Cuheran, is instead
aware of his identity as prince Havelok, as the story began with his sisters’ murder and his
expulsion from Denmark. A number of other sources contain fragments, summaries, or
references to the story of Havelok; all extant versions both phrases and wordings in common

with the others, as well as mention of incidences unique to that particular version. Scholars disagree over the compositional history of these manuscripts, offering different theories of which versions influenced which others.\(^{51}\) Ananya J. Kabir, for example, has suggested that the Laud Miscellany 108 version was composed as a written work intended to mimic orality.\(^{52}\) Certainly its date of writing, which scholars place in the late thirteenth century,\(^{53}\) increases the likelihood that it was written in a thoroughly literate environment. However, the narrative’s distinct folkloristic tropes, such as the expulsion, coming-of-age, and eventual return of the hero,\(^{54}\) strongly suggest that enjoyed a wide oral circulation before ever being committed to print. Nancy Mason Bradbury, for one, cuts through discussion of the Havelok story’s literary iterations to argue that it originated as an oral folktale.\(^{55}\)

Throughout this study, I will draw from these various extant versions to discuss the Havelok story more broadly, as it exists as a singular cultural artifact. To clarify that I am not talking simply about the romance found in Misc Laud 108, or the Lai found in Arundel, or the verse history in Gaimar, I will use the term ‘folktale’ to refer to Havelok’s story throughout this chapter. This is a delicate and possibly incorrect assumption; as Bradbury writes in an article arguing for the traditional origins of the Havelok story:

\[
\text{Th[e] transforming power of writing along with the lack of any direct means for knowing the oral ways of the past requires that we be cautious about the claims we make for the oral origins of a particular work, especially a work from the later Middle Ages,}
\]

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51 See also the introduction to W.W. Skeat’s edition of *Havelok the Dane*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923; and Edith Fahnestock’s introduction to her book *A Study of the Sources and Composition of the Old French Lai d’Haveloc*, Jamaica: Marion Press, 1915. Although both are outdated, they do a good job of laying out the manuscripts’ histories and the manners in which the Havelok stories were considered in earlier decades of scholarship.
54 Quinn and Hall 28
such as the one I will treat here. The circumstances justify caution, but they should not make us unwilling to look at what evidence exists for the oral past of a written narrative, especially if those origins affect our critical judgments of that narrative. Using Bradbury’s argument, I will proceed through this paper by referring to the Havelok story as a “folktale” and treating its various iterations: lay, romance, verse history, as literary genres that developed from folklore.

Next to the collection of manuscripts that comprise our records of the Havelok story, its distant cousin *Skyrim* looks quite different in its slender plastic CD case. *Skyrim* is the fifth in a series of games by Bethesda studios called The Elder Scrolls. Like the other games in the series, *Skyrim* takes place in one of the countries that comprise the fictional continent of Tamriel. Players are asked to customize the main character in appearance, race and abilities, and after a brief scripted tutorial-slash-introduction are let loose into the vast and explorable world of *Skyrim*. At this point they may pursue even further character customization in the form of stats, skills, and apparel. The main plot of *Skyrim* revolves around the player character’s identity as the “Dragonborn,” a human with the powers of dragons. As dragons have returned to Skyrim and some read their coming as an apocalyptic sign, it becomes the duty of the Dragonborn to defeat the dragons and their leader, Alduin. Various other quests can be undertaken at the player’s discretion, including: becoming involved in the political upheaval in Skyrim and either assisting the native Nords, called Stormcloaks, in rebellion against the Empire, or assisting the Empire in maintaining its governance; becoming Archmage of the College of Winterfell; joining the Dark Brotherhood and either becoming its leader or bringing its members to justice; discovering your mysterious abilities as the so-called “Dragonborn,” or one could pursue entirely domestic

56 Bradbury 115-116
57 A very useful digital map of Skyrim can be found here: [http://www.ign.com/wikis/the-elder-scrolls-5-skyrim/interactive-maps](http://www.ign.com/wikis/the-elder-scrolls-5-skyrim/interactive-maps)
pursuits: buying a house, getting married, acquiring a trade such as smithing, enchanting or alchemy, and befriending the neighbors. Completing every quest that *Skyrim* offers produces a narrative some would find disjointed, repetitive and monotonous, although players driven to pursue such completion would surely not find it so.

Though their histories may seem different, both *Skyrim* and the story of Havelok exist as abstract tools of play. They are textual entities that can be discussed in terms of game, or in terms of a specific narrative derived from the game. To talk about the game called *Skyrim* is a very different thing than to talk about a specific playthrough of *Skyrim*. The game can only be expressed in possibilities, whereas in a playthrough those possibilities have been resolved into a cohesive narrative. I could, for example, tell you about my playthrough of *Skyrim*, where the main character is a Redguard woman named Avalon, a law-abiding person who loves books, avoids Daedra, and favors elfish armor. She lives in Windhelm with her husband, Marcurio, and her housecarl, Lydia, in a home decorated with treasures she has collected from her various adventures. None of the details I have just described are inherent to the game *Skyrim*. The only thing my playthrough has in common with every other playthrough of *Skyrim* is that no matter what, the player character is the Dragonborn, the hero.

In the same way, to talk about the story of Havelok is a very different thing than to talk about *Le Lai d’Havelok*. In *Le Lai d’Havelok*, we have the story of a scullery boy named Cuerin whose royal identity is unknown to him. Every night when Cuerin sleeps, a strange fire burns at his lips, a trait that he tries to hide from his wife, Argentille. When Cuerin learns of his royal heritage, he fights in several battles, including one where he stands at the top of a monastery tower, hurling boulders down upon his enemies. None of these details are found in *Havelok the Dane*, a version of the Havelok story found in a different manuscript, the Laud Misc. 108.
Audiences of both texts came to them with a willingness and an expectation to engage in role-playing, in performing a Havelok or a Dragonborn. This is an accepted convention of videogames and, as I seek to prove, it was also inherent in the performative nature of medieval storytelling.

Although the details are different, the themes that the texts engage are the same, as they arise from the texts’ role-playing nature. One word often used to describe this nature is ‘quest.’ Susana Tosca defines the word as “a way to ‘play’ literature,”58 a definition strikingly similar to Wardrip-Fruin’s definition of an RPG as a medium in which “the story itself is playable.”59 Indeed, Wardrip-Fruin’s subsequent description of what he calls “basic story structure” is practically identical to Joseph Campbell’s explanation of the basic “hero quest.”60 Jeff Howard uses Campbell’s theories to touch on the resonances between folktales and videogames, and specifically on their identities as RPGs and as quests: “Quests are about action that is meaningful to a player on the level of ideas, personal ambitions, benefit to society, spiritual authenticity.”61

The term ‘quest’ applies to videogames as well as more traditional epic literature—he cites Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and The Faerie Queene as examples—“because readers of literature have to work to actively interpret a story, there are game-like elements to quest narratives.”62 As I hope to show, quests differ from modern, linear Romantic conceptions of a story in several ways, all of which are based on the centrality of ‘play’ to their telling. Themes of combat and travel, common traits of quests, make this type of storytelling more playable than other kinds of literature.

59 Wardrip-Fruin 47.
61 Jeff Howard, Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives. Austin, TX: A.K. Peters, 2008. xiii
62 Howard xii
A quest implies a space in which that quest takes place. Both folktales and videogames invest greatly in the creation of spaces, whether through imagery-rich textual descriptions or visually striking digital graphics. Johan Huizinga first outlined the importance of space in play in his theory of the “magic circle,” the marked-off space within ‘real life’ but separate from it, in which the game’s rules apply. He writes: “The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.” Writing in the 1940s, Huizinga could not have predicted the addition of another important space to his list of “magic circles”: the virtual world.

Role-playing videogames, too, emphasize spatiality. Henry Jenkins refers to game design as “narrative architecture,” writing: “Game designers don’t simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces.” The job of a game designer is not so much to write a story as to create a world in which stories can be told. The task of the bard, the dungeon master, the game designer (via the game’s processor) is to generate a world in which to play. Spatial rhetoric can be traced back to the early text adventures, which prompted commands with the line “goto,” implying exploration of an existing, if virtual, space. Text adventures like the Zork series, created in the late 1970s, guide players through the narrative using text-based descriptions. The game Zork I begins, for example, with the line “You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door. There is a small mailbox here.” Nearly all subsequent text in the game is descriptive; action comes almost entirely from the player, who, next to these descriptions, adds typed commands such as “go north” or “climb” or “attack with sword.”

63 Huizinga, Homo Ludens 10
64 opening text of Zork I, published in 1980 http://pot.home.xs4all.nl/infocom/zork1.html
game *Zork*, in other words, tells its story through creating narrative-rich spaces for the player to occupy.

Skyrim depends more on its visuals than on text to communicate its story, though small text in the upper left corner notifies the player of various conditions otherwise difficult to convey visually, such as “Your follower leaves your service,” “You have been poisoned,” or “You do not have sufficient gold.” But the lavish attention to graphical detail serves the same purpose as a carefully crafted description. The story *Skyrim* attempts to evoke is one of medieval fantasy and heroism. Its environments, therefore, are of stone castles, farm villages, and long stretches of untamed wilderness. The authenticity of *Skyrim*’s architecture is unimportant, as its audience is unlikely to know the difference between a Norman Romanesque style and an Aquitainian Gothic. What’s more important is that the architecture signify ‘medieval’ to contemporary audiences. Even the technical quality of the image is not as importance as the richness of the images’ significance. As one fan writes on HubPages, “Skyrim begs to have pictures taken of it. While lacking some of the finer sophistication of the best rendered games, it more than makes up for a small loss of photographic detail with a tremendous helping of masterfully handled artistic direction.”

*Skyrim*’s unique narrative lives in its visuals. On a gameplay level, for example, *Skyrim* is strikingly similar to *Fallout 3*, an RPG by the same company. Whereas *Skyrim* takes place in a rugged, snowy and pristine-looking medieval land, *Fallout* takes place in a post-apocalyptic western U.S.A. In both games, the geography is laid out in the same way: players travel across a vast map, crossing stretches of empty space to reach isolated homes and settlements. In *Fallout*, however, these empty spaces are irradiated and polluted deserts; in *Skyrim* they are untouched wildernesses. These different settings immediately convey vastly


different narratival concepts: past versus future, preindustrial versus postindustrial, utopia versus dystopia, man as a creature of promise and enterprise versus man the destroyer. Players experience these narratives through the course of exploring these places; it is the places, far more than any character or narration or other form of communicating narrative, that informs players’ thoughts and decisions.

Folktales, too, tell their story through spaces. Vladimir Propp observes of folktales:

“Action is always performed physically, in a space... Compared with space in realistic novels and novellas, space in folklore has certain peculiarities that can probably be accounted for by early forms of human thought. Folklore focuses only on empirical space, that is, on the space that surrounds the hero at the moment of action.”

Havelok’s journey from pauper to prince is told through the places that he traverses: in the Laud 108, he begins in a palace but is then cast out to sea by the usurper Godard. Crossing an ocean, a ‘no-place,’ symbolizes the un-creation of Havelok’s identity; he becomes the vehicle that carries players through the subsequent locations: a poor fisherman’s home, a village, a castle (as a servant), a church, a battlefield, and from the battlefield to king of Denmark. The Arundel and the Gaimar begin with “Cuheran” living with Grim; thereafter Cuheran’s discovery of his royal lineage instigates the hero’s journey. Each place that Havelok inhabits girds him with a new identity; he goes to these places not out of a personal desire to be there, but because the plot, and the progression from “fair unknown” to king, demands it. Consider, for example, the scene in the Laud 108 where Havelok returns to his foster-father’s home after learning from Goldeboru’s vision that he would be a king. This location once served as the beginning-place, the humble origins; now Havelok returns there to gather the resources that he formerly lacked the power to

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67 Prop 22
accrue: namely, the fighting power of his foster brothers.\textsuperscript{68} The brothers’ military strength unlocks for Havelok areas that were previously inaccessible to him: namely, the castle of Ubbe, a lord who will help him reclaim his throne.\textsuperscript{69} In this way, the hero’s journey unfolds through movement between and transformation of the spaces that the hero occupies. In the Laud 108, this journey is cyclical, beginning with Havelok’s life in the palace, followed by a subsequent betrayal and exile; through the course of the story Havelok’s presence catalyzes a new symbology of place based on his increased physical power. He was helpless, for example, to stop Godard from killing his sisters in the tower,\textsuperscript{70} but by the end of the story he is a powerful warrior who defeats Godard on a battlefield even greater than the tower where Godard had previously defeated him. In the Anglo-Norman versions, because they do not begin with Havelok’s royal origins, follow instead a more linear path through space: from poor fisherman’s house up through increasingly prestigious and difficult contests until finally Havelok has claimed a new home for himself in a castle far grander than his humble beginnings. Movement through space becomes a transformative act, and the locations in which the story takes place contain embedded in them the majority of the plot’s progression.

The setting of the Havelok story is medieval England, a setting with which listeners would be familiar not only through lived experience but through other stories as well. Thus England becomes both a reality and a story-space. The separations between history and fiction that we erect in the modern era did not exist in the Middle Ages, at least not to the same degree; people lived and played in fluid, multilayered realities. Videogames separate all that out into the digital and still we’re afraid people can’t tell if it’s fake or not; the question of whether videogames make players more violent in real life is a persistent concern. Imagine, then, the

\textsuperscript{68} Havelok the Dane 1391-1445
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid. 1703
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid. 471
creative possibilities that everyday life presented in the Middle Ages. Making things ‘digital’ lets us create safe boundaries between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ that just didn’t exist in the medieval period.

Emphasis on spatiality is often perceived as a negative in a novel. As Jenkins points out, “How often, for example, has science fiction been criticized for being preoccupied with world-making at the expense of character psychology or plot development?” In Jenkins’ understanding, “These writers seem constantly to be pushing against the limits of what can be accomplished in a printed text and thus their works fare badly against aesthetic standards defined around classically-constructed novels.” Instead, he argues, spatial stories, or quests,

are not badly constructed stories; rather, they are stories which respond to alternative aesthetic principles, privileging spatial exploration over plot development. Spatial stories are held together by broadly defined goals and conflicts and pushed forward by the character’s movement across the map.71

From Jenkins’ observations we can see that role-playing elements are not unique to the mediums of folktales and videogames. However, these media are best-suited to communicating an open-ended and geographically embedded story than more linear forms like novels. Whatever the medium, or the level of interaction the medium permits, the emphasis on narrative as the product of moving through space remain.

The idea of the hero as the player’s vehicle through quest-space is also an important idiom of folktales and videogames. Therefore the structure of this ‘vehicle’ is important to establish; all versions of the Havelok story contain detailed descriptions of the hero’s body. The text of *Havelok the Dane*, for example, makes much of the enormous quantities of food that Havelok consumes. “Ich ete more bi God on live, than Grim an his children five!” Havelok’s

inordinate strength is also remarked upon; in the Arundel, his introduction to the story consists entirely of descriptions of his “beles jambes out, e bels piez.” But Havelok’s most important feature is an otherworldly glow that sometimes shines from his body. For example, Havelok’s life is saved when Grim and his wife perceive

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{therinne a lith ful shir,} \\
& \text{Al so brith so it were day,} \\
& \text{Aboute the knave ther he lay.} \\
& \text{Of hise mouth it stod a stem} \\
& \text{Als it were a sunnebem;} \\
& \text{Al so lith was it therinne} \\
& \text{So ther brenden cerges inne.}^{73}
\end{align*}
\]

Later, as the unhappy princess Goldeboru lies beside a husband she thinks is a commoner, the Laud Miscellany 108 says:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{…saw she therinne a lith,} \\
& \text{A swithe fayr, a swithe bryth -} \\
& \text{Al so brith, all so shir} \\
& \text{So it were a blase of fir.} \\
& \text{She lokede noth and ek south,} \\
& \text{And saw it comen ut of his mouth} \\
& \text{That lay bi hire in the bed.}^{74}
\end{align*}
\]

The same scene in Gaimar’s version is as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Entre ses bras si l’ad aers,} \\
& \text{Pur la pour ses oilz overit,} \\
& \text{Une flambe vit, ki issit} \\
& \text{Fors de la buche son marri} \\
& \text{Ki uncore ert tut endormi.}^{75}
\end{align*}
\]

And in the Lai d’Haveloc:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{As dens se geut, si se dormi;} \\
& \text{Ne voleit pas q’ele veist} \\
& \text{La flambé qe de lui issist;} \\
& \text{Mes puis s’asseurerent tant,}
\end{align*}
\]

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72 Gaimar line 110
73 Havelok the Dane 589-595
74 Havelok the Dane 1251-59
75 Gaimar 241-246
Et par parole et par semblant,  
Qu’il l’ama et od lui geut  
Come od s’espouse fere deut.  

Finally, on the eve of Havelok’s campaign to retake his throne:

Aboute the middel of the nith  
Wok Ubbe and saw a mikel lith  
In the bowr thar Havelok lay  
Al so brith so it were day.

This light more than anything else convinces Ubbe to help Havelok. The light, in essence, is what marks Havelok as the main character. The other characters react to his narrative presence as much as his physical presence. As the editors of the TEAMS edition argue, Havelok is “a hero whose very body is central to the narrative.” Nothing of Havelok’s personality (his lack thereof notwithstanding) leads to his heroism. Rather, he is our hero from the start, with the light as well as his strength and his voracious appetite serving as markers that identify his body as the center of the narrative action.

For all the emphasis on Havelok’s body, his personality is almost entirely nonexistent with respect to his story. We can find traces of personality only in the recorded versions of the story, where the storytellers—the bards, the authors, the ‘players’—have interpreted the character in a certain way. Havelok’s personality is not a constant among the versions because it is not important to the story’s architecture. In the Laud, for example, Havelok knows of his royal heritage; though he appears to be unaware of his strange habit of glowing at climactic moments, it does not surprise or alarm him. Gaimar’s Havelok, however, believes the fisherman Grim to be his father. He also knows that every night when he sleeps a fire burns at his mouth, but he doesn’t know why; instead, he appears embarrassed by it, and tries to hide it from his new wife.

76 Lai d’Haveloc 384-91
77 Havelok the Dane 2092-5
78 Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, Havelok the Dane: Introduction.
http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/daneint.htm#f1
Each of Havelok’s personalities is the creation of the individual storyteller who performed that version; it is a way that a storyteller leaves his mark on a story that he has otherwise largely appropriated.

As our vehicle through the text, Havelok’s physicality is far more important than his personality. Personality falls to the players, i.e. the storytellers to create as they inhabit the vehicle. Audiences of that story are players as well, any time they creatively interact with and repeat the story; they, too, enter through Havelok and inhabit the character with their own interpretation. The ‘character’ of Havelok, if he can be considered a character, is theoretically nonexistent with respect to the story; rather emergent personalities manifest themselves in the various iterative versions, or playthroughs, of the Havelok story. As Chris Chesher says of videogames:

Identification between player and the central on-screen character is direct and visceral. The player takes on the role of a character directly, rather than the cinematic spectator who vicariously identifies with others. Players are glazed into a game world subjectivity, rather than detachedly gazing as cinematic voyeurs, or indifferently glancing at the world through television.79

Though speaking about videogames, his observations apply to folktales as well; Havelok is no fleshed-out film or novel character. He is, rather, a skeleton that needs, to continue the metaphor, a performer’s flesh to complete him. Havelok, therefore, becomes our avatar and our subjectivity.

Similarly, most RPGs track the player’s decisions and scale them on a moral spectrum. Players are allowed to experiment with a variety of choices, either kind or cruel, while being protected from actual guilt by the mental separation of story-space from real life. In Skyrim, for example, the quest entitled “In My Time of Need” involves a woman who claims to be on the

run from mercenaries sent to kill her for speaking out against the ruling Thalmor. If you agree to track down these mercenaries and stop them from killing her, then once you find the mercenaries they do not attack you. Rather, their leader explains, quite civilly, that the woman you had agreed to help is actually a traitor forced to flee because she sold her city out to the Thalmor. The mercenaries were hired by those she betrayed, to bring her to justice. The game offers no way of finding out who is right and who is lying. The player is simply left with a choice: kill these soldiers in cold blood, or betray a woman whom you had agreed to help.\footnote{In the case of “In My Time of Need”, we see that the hero’s personality is emergent, not extant. Nothing in the character’s personality makes her heroic; rather it is her heroism that engenders her personality.}

In a videogame, too, plot action is entirely incumbent on the player character’s body in the digital space. Although some NPCs are programmed to perform actions irrespective of the player, they cannot dynamically impact the plot. Players must interact with them in some way to trigger narrative events. In older games, for example, important NPCs did not move; the old man in \textit{Legend of Zelda}\footnote{\textit{Legend of Zelda}. 1987. Nintendo.} who gives you your sword with the now-iconic warning “it’s dangerous to go alone. Take this,” will always be found in that cave. He has no personality; none has been imagined for him, none has been coded. In more recent and more detailed games, NPCs walk around in a simulation of agency. People go to their homes and lie in bed at night; they move through the market during the day. Even in the wilds of Skyrim, the game manages random encounters between predators and prey. But these feats of programming have nothing to do with the plot; nothing, that is, unless the player’s body becomes a participant in their action. In the game \textit{Skyrim}, the designers have programmed a rich and dynamic world that seems to ‘breathe’

\footnotetext[80]{Or players can take a third option, as I did, and simply do nothing. In the Skyrim of my player character named Avalon, Saadia is safe from the mercenaries and the mercenaries are safe from death at Saadia’s bequest, because I promised help to both and have avoided them ever since.}
on its own. But unless you, the player, intercede in conflicts such as the turf wars in Riften, neither Jarl Laila Law-Giver nor Maven Blackbriar will win the city. Neither Alduin nor Paarthurnax will become lord of the dragons. Neither the Imperials nor the Stormcloaks will win the civil war in Skyrim, nor even make any military move without your direct intercession. Only if the player decides to pursue plot elements with regard to the civil war, by taking sides with either General Tullius of the Imperials or Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak of the Stormcloaks, will Whiterun ever become the sight of a battle between the two, and even then the hero’s intercession is needed not only to instigate the battle but to win it for either side as well.

The crux of *Skyrim* is this absence of personality at the center of the narrative. Not only does it affect critical plot-points such as Stormcloaks or Imperials, Daedra or Divines—it affects even the smallest role-playing action. As Chesher points out, “This lack of characterization is no flaw. It is a necessary condition. Players fill that absence with their own motivations, strategies and reactions.” Therefore the main characters of both folktales and videogames—both Havelok in the discussed medieval legend and the Dragonborn in *Skyrim*—must lack personality so that the player can have agency. The hero character is to be as devoid of personality as the environment is detailed. Chesher calls it “a hole at the centre of the action.” Both the hero and the environment, therefore, are loaded with narratival potential, though they approach this potential from opposite spectrums of completeness. Writes Jenkins, “In many cases, the characters - our guides through these richly-developed worlds - are stripped down to the bare bones, description displaces exposition, and plots fragment into a series of episodes and encounters.”

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82 Chesher “Neither gaze nor glance, but glaze: relating to console game screens.”
83 Ibid.
84 Jenkins *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*
environment; the avatar becomes a “tabula rasa” for a productive comprehension of the story-space.

The hero’s body is the site of the action, the vessel for agency, and this agency often takes the form of physical violence. Folktale violence, however, is not perceived with the same gravity as real violence. Rather, the violence is a tool to show how the stakes of the battle are laid out, how the audience’s sympathies are aligned. So it is with videogames; the player is naturally on the side of whomever he is embodying. As folklorist Vladimir Propp writes, “the hero is the one who wins, irrespective of the means, especially if he defeats a stronger opponent.” This is even the case when the so-called hero does something reprehensible according to the audience’s moral code. Discussing the various iterations of shockingly violent and morally ambiguous heroes in folktales, he argues that such lots gained popularity “only because the tale is an amusing farce. Neither the teller nor the listener treats it as reality...What we have before us is not a case of reduced or limited folktale realism, not an allegory or fable, but a folktale.” Folktales, Propp argues, and I would add videogames to his statement, “are permeated by a light, good-natured humor, which stems from the feeling that all this is only a folktale, not reality.” That is not to say that players are freed from an emotional connection with the characters. Prop argues that the mechanics of folktales naturally give rise to this lack of moral constraint.

They are not at all products of “free” fantasy; they result from the development of the poetics of folklore. When the hero of the folktale is a “fool,” this means not only that he is foolish, but also that he (and consequently the narrative) is not bound by the listener’s norms of conduct and behavior.

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85 Havelok intro
87 Propp 19
88 Propp 20
This does not mean that the story has no effect on audiences, but rather that the audience is free to put aside moral outrage in order to guiltlessly observe and participate in the plot.

The Havelok story presents long and enthusiastic fight scenes with little commentary on the violence described in them. Consider this ridiculous episode in the Laud 108, where Havelok is attacked; his enemies knock down his door, and enraged, Havelok picks up the door bar:

That was unride and gret ynow,  
And caste the dore open wide  
And seide, "Her shal I now abide!  
Comes swithe unto me -  
Datheyt hwo you henne fle!"\textsuperscript{89}

The ensuing carnage lasts over a hundred lines; with relish the poet describes in detail how

Havelok on hem wel wreke.  
He broken armes, he broken knes,  
He broken shankes, he broken thes.  
He dide the blod there renne dune  
To the fet rith fro the crune,  
For was ther spared heved non. \textsuperscript{90}

Further, these fight scenes differ between the various manuscripts. Gaimar’s account, for example, does not have this door bar scene, but includes an interlude in which Havelok defends Argentille’s honor against six thugs who take a fancy to her.\textsuperscript{91} The incident serves little narrative purpose, other than to impose trials that the hero must overcome in order to continue his journey. In doing so, it opens up the possibility of physical performance and role-playing.

Freed from the constraints of morality and realism, the violence in videogames and folktales becomes a device for user participation in the narratives. Combat is the mode of narrative struggle, the means of progressing the plot by physically entering the narrative. In other words, the combat is part of the ‘play.’ \textit{Skyrim}, for example, is about the return of dragons

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Havelok the Dane}1795-9  
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid. 1901-7  
\textsuperscript{91} Gaimar 532-50
to the kingdom of Skyrim and the political, social, and practical ramifications thereof. One of the ways in which it conveys these ramifications is putting the player in the position of interacting with artificially intelligent dragon non-player characters (NPCs), which most often means fighting them. Players must dodge the dragons’ flaming breath, swinging tails, and snapping jaws, switching between weapons to overpower it. In the Havelok story, the final confrontation with the usurper must occur for the player to achieve his happy ending. Through this type of interactivity players experience a sense of authenticity not present in linear media; it is quite possible to die in combat with a dragon (in which case the game reverts to its previously saved state and allows you to try again) and early on in the game it is almost impossible to take down a dragon without the assistance of other friendly NPCs such as the Windhelm guards that help you in your first encounter. In these types of combat, the audience is an active participant in the narrative: the story will not progress unless the player completes a successful simulated enactment of killing a dragon, in accordance with the game’s programmed rules and algorithms.

Such fights often take upwards of ten minutes; hours of the game are devoted to fights ranging from prolonged combat such as this to hours of fighting through swarms of monsters. But the Havelok story is not programmed into a computer that guides players’ progress, constantly presenting them with new events and elements. Rather, medieval culture was hard-wired for such play: performance and spectacle are intrinsic to an oral or mostly oral society. The protection that fantasy provides even extends to physical actions in the real world, so long as those actions continue to take place in the agreed-upon magic circle. In this sense, not only are texts like the versions of Havelok descriptive of the performative aspects of storytelling—in an age of increasing literacy and textual circulation these texts can become prescriptive of how to play and perform the story.
Evidence of this performative component to manuscripts and oral tales can be found in various accounts of the jousts and tournaments held throughout the Middle Ages. These jousts were games in that not only were the contestants playing a sport, but they were playing roles in the construction of a narrative based upon the combat. Usually the stories adopted into these live-action role-plays, or LARPs as they are called today, were Arthurian, as that was the best-known and easily the most expansive pseudo-historical legend of the time. One of the best and most well-documented examples of such LARPs are the Round Table tournament that Edward III of England held in 1344. In the same way that modern role-playing gamers perform LARPs, Edward III and his court engaged in jousts, mock-battles, pageants, and other performances while playing the roles of various characters from Arthurian legend. Archaeological study of the foundations of Windsor Castle in England even reveals that Edward III commissioned an enormous round table, and a great chamber to house it. All things considered it was probably the most expensive LARP ever performed.\(^2\)

Documentation for these types of events is scarce, partly due to their performative nature and partly, perhaps due to their commonplace nature. Other evidence of such performance can be found in the *Grandes Chroniques*, which contains an illumination of performers acting out a retelling of the siege of Jerusalem for the French court (figure 2.2). An account from the Kingdom of Cyprus in 1223 also records an Arthurian LARP held by the court, described as:

> the greatest festival and the longest of which anyone knows which was held beyond the seas; much was given and spent, and there

\(^2\) Interestingly, Edward III’s round table was more than a role-playing game; Edward hoped to raise enthusiasm and support for the next in a series of campaigns against France that he waged throughout his reign. He intended for his game to operate in the real world, for the roles his knights played to affect their real-life performance as his vassals. This use of game as propaganda, and play-fighting as a model for real fighting, can be found in modern videogames such as *America’s Army*, the online first-person shooter released by the U.S. government. See [http://www.americasarmy.com/](http://www.americasarmy.com/)
was much holding of [tournaments] and imitation of the adventures of Britain and the Round Table and many kinds of games. The combat inherent in these two narratives presented a pathway to performance. Play was a common feature of medieval communication; Richard Barber describes it as “the strong theatrical element in the way in which magnificence was presented.” As seen in Edward III’s Round Table, the Arthurian legend was often at the center of these royal theatrics, “particularly as the normal mode of presenting the romances [of Arthur] may have been through dramatic readings rather than the leisurely perusal of a manuscript; it is only a small step from a recital by a single actor to a full re-enactment.” Edward III’s players were relying on more than the oral common knowledge that everyone could be sure to know about King Arthur’s story. They were surely also looking at manuscript texts to inform and guide their play. Thus battle scenes like in Havelok the Dane, once descriptive of oral performances, were transformed into prescriptive instructions, or rulebooks, from which the performers learned the rules of the game.

As media whose narratives depend heavily on combat and travel, folktales and videogames leave almost everything else in the player’s hands. Characterizations, themes, morals, are all fluid, only defined by each player via each playthrough. Because so much is left up to the audience, the player/reader/scribe/storyteller, both manuscripts and digital media like videogames possess a strong sense of ephemerality. And if geographic spaces and character creation can be considered a form of architecture, then a third type of narrative architecture is also an essential part of both folktales and videogames: the creation of signs, allegories, and other modes of meaning that players can interpret and manipulate at their own discretion.

Ross G. Arthur argues that medieval poets themselves had no one theory in mind when telling or performing their works, and did not expect audiences to come to one opinion or conclusion when listening. According to him, there was no “science of symbolism” in the Middle Ages, “if by ‘science’ we mean a discipline that creates the equivalents of logarithm tables and lists of metallic specific gravities.” Instead, Arthur argues that medieval authors were interested in what he calls “the productive possibilities of controlled ambiguity.” The use of the pentacle, or ‘endless knot’ in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an important example. This sign appears on the back of Gawain’s shield, and the narrator takes time to go into its significance, “thof tary hyt me schulde.”

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Hit is a synge that Salamon set sumquyle  
In bytoknyng of trawthe, by tytle that hit habbes,  
For hit is a figure that haldes five poyntes,  
And uche lyne umbelappes and loukes in other,  
And ayquare hit is endeles, and Englych hit callen  
Overal, as I here, the endeles knot.
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For Ross G. Arthur, however, the use of the pentangle raises more questions than it answers. He points out that although the symbol evokes eternity in some systems, geometrically speaking it cannot be called infinite. Therefore the theoretical description of such a sign and the practical application of drawing such a sign on a shield are two very different exercises. “In [the poet’s] desire to create for Gawain a heraldic sign that is comparable to an infinite figure, he must choose one whose perimeter is endless even though its enclosed area is finite,” says Arthur. But this logical contradiction adds, not detracts, from the text’s richness. He argues: “The writer is in no way troubled by the fact that his concern with endless figures involves him in apparent logical contradictions, but seems rather to relish the fact that opposites are reunited and definitonal.

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97 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 625-630
boundaries vanish.” Medieval authors treated storytelling as a participatory activity in which the audience played a significant role in meaning-making. The more ambiguous, and therefore interactive, a story was, the better it was considered, because such a story was far more productive.

This statement could apply to any well-crafted role-playing videogame as well. The role of the game designer is to program an array of conditionals, a space for “controlled ambiguity” in which players can create their own unique narratives. John Howard writes:

“Scripting requires designers to think of a quest not as a single whole or as a story that is told by one narrator to a passive listener. Rather, designers must consider the ways that a quest can be accomplished and brought into being through the interactions of a player with landscapes, objects, and other NPCs.”

As with oral poets, game designers leave room for audience participation, because their medium is defined by the interactions between storyteller and player. Where oral storytellers weave tales of “controlled ambiguity,” game designers program a conditional space, where the player is allowed to choose from a set of specifically programmed options. In the aforementioned “My Time of Need” quest in *Skyrim*, for example, though the game presents players with a seemingly complex situation, in terms of practicality only two options are available: 1) kill the mercenaries and receive money from Saadia; 2) kill Saadia and receive money from the mercenaries. Clever players have found a way to trick the game into allowing them to get money from both by exploiting a loophole in the game’s code. The final option is simply to decline the quest. The game designers did not program other options, such as turning the case over to a government official or other authority. Nor is there any way for the player to verify either Saadia’s or the mercenaries’ accounts, even though clearly one or both of them is lying. As Howard writes, “the

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98 Arthur 39.
99 Howard 117
designer must locate junctures of a story that have implicit interpretative interactivity and then
set up challenges that allow players to play strategically in order to reach goals that are motivated
by their own values.”

In creating these spaces for audience meaning-making, storytellers in both the folktale
and videogame media hope to create a piece that their audience will revisit again and again.
Howard gives the example of a key, an item in a videogame that is algorithmically necessary to
open a door and continue the plot. He writes:

It is true that once a player has determined what chest a key
unlocks, the meaning of the key ceases to be interesting in
subsequent playing sessions. However, if the key has greater,
multivalent allegorical and symbolic connotations, then these
might be productively and enjoyably enacted multiple times by
different players, as they deepen their understanding of this
meaning or seek a different interpretation.

It may be argued that linear media like books and movies are also very often open to multiple
interpretations. This is true, but the relationship between the audience and the interpretation is
the key difference that defines folktales and videogames. In books and movies, the audience
observes and then draws conclusions. In a videogame or folktale, the audience is incorporated
bodily into the story via the body of the main character/avatar. In a folk tale, this is accomplished
by the physical role-playing potentiality of the text, as well as its naturally fluid and non-defined
nature that allows retelling and variance. In a videogame it is accomplished through giving he
player control over the avatar via a controller or a keyboard, with their relationship mediated by
programming. Both the gameplay and the variously encountered narrative elements serve to lead
players through multiple versions of the same story.

This interpretive freedom opens the door for agency on the part of the audience, thus

101 Howard 117
102 Howard 20
transforming the audience from mere listeners into players. Although there were certainly scribes who copied manuscripts word-for-word, and storytellers who did not seek to embellish, medieval culture allowed, and often expected, recipients of a story to change it, edit it, and tell it differently next time. The result of such agency and interactivity is a story experience totally different than that of Romantic media. This is why, when read with Romantic expectations, medieval texts are often dismissed as poorly written and rambling. The medieval Arthurian text *The Lancelot-Grail Cycle* is an excellent example of this. This five-volume cycle, consisting of the romances *Estoire del Saint Grail*, the *Estoire de Merlin*, the *Lancelot propre*, the *Queste del Sant Graal*, and the *Mort Artu*, has been criticized as “one of the most disjointed European literary works ever written.” The incoherence for which some criticized the *Lancelot-Grail cycle* is actually its strength: open-endedness. Although operating within the medium of writing, the Cycle’s creators were still markedly influenced by oral perceptions of story and variance. They had no intention of writing a definitive Arthurian text, nor would they have conceived of their work as such. Instead, the creators of the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* approached their work with the mindset that prevailed among medieval storytellers, scribes and writers: ideas that today we would call ‘remixing,’ ‘derivation,’ or even ‘fanfiction’—the idea of working with materials created by another, and being free to do so. Paul Zumthor describes this mindset as “mouvance.” “The scribe could add sections to the text he copied, becoming in a sense an author in his own right as he recast his model into an ‘original’ version of the tale, and the author could redo his own work without clearly distinguishing the original from the rewrite.”

103 Instead, many medieval writers (because again, not every scribe improvised; some were expected to copy out manuscripts as closely as they could) were interested in ideas of *mouvance*, of “textual variability,” or the inability to pin down one ‘right narrative.’ The method of dissemination both

103 Burns xx-xxi
reflects and reinforces this belief. Relatively few of the Cycle’s manuscripts contain all five of the romances that comprise the cycle, and various combinations of these five, and parts thereof, make up the bulk of the versions that exist today.

Like the Lancelot-Grail Cycle, Skyrim may seem repetitive, disjointed, and lacking in unity to an outside observer. Indeed, the average playthrough of Skyrim would make a very poor movie, just as Lancelot-Grail makes a poor novel to modern sensibilities. Unlike Lancelot-Grail, however, Skyrim has had the benefit of being judged according to its medium specificity. As game theorist Henry Jenkins has pointed out, “the tight control over viewer experience which Hitchcock achieves in his suspense films would be directly antithetical to the aesthetics of good game design.” For example, Skyrim gets away with being repetitive because, as Henry Jenkins writes, “Within an open-ended and exploratory narrative structure like a game, essential narrative information must be redundantly presented across a range of spaces and artifacts, since one cannot assume the player will necessarily locate or recognize the significance of any one element.” As Jenkins points out, in media where one cannot be sure where and now the audience will experience it, there must be a multilayered environment, one in which the audience will be neither lost nor lead around on a leash. Therefore, game critics consider Skyrim a good game for the same reasons that E. Jane Burns says literary theorists dislike Lancelot-Grail. A better way to think of texts like Lancelot-Grail, however, is as if reading it were akin to watching someone else play a videogame.

I am not the first to see these types of similarities between folktales and videogames. Many designers, for example, have taken to reading the works of mythologist Joseph Campbell

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104 Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture”
105 Jenkins
as a sort of prescriptive manual for game design.\textsuperscript{106} Jenkins has written that “games fit within a much older tradition of spatial stories, which have often taken the form of hero’s odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives.” He also points out that “such works exist on the outer borders of literature.” This is true; these sorts of works thrived in a culture where textuality still bore close ties to oral communication, where the media were able to support the spatially encoded open-endedness that the writers intended.

Figure 2.1: The first page of Laud Misc. 108’s *Havelok the Dane.*


http://medievalromance.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/The_earliest_surviving_English_romances
Figure 2.2: Feast at St Denis, given by Charles V in 1338; the illumination shows the dramatic interludes of a ship at sea and the taking of Jerusalem which were staged in the hall. From a manuscript of the *Grandes Chroniques* finished in 1379.  

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Chapter 3: The Mechanics of Play

*Bot if thou be so bold as alle burnes tellen,*
*Thou wyl grant me godly the gomen that I ask bi right...*
*...If any so hardy in this hou holdes hymselfen,*
*Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in his hede,*
*That dar stiffly strike a strok for an other,*
*I schal gif hym of my gyft thiys giserne ryche.*

109

*Press ‘X’ to not die!*110

A storyteller standing before a crowd, hands empty but mind full of words, weaving a story from memory. A scribe hunched over his *lectio*, quill and ink in hand, writing on a sheet of vellum. A game designer slouched in a wheelie chair, typing lines of code on a computer. All three may be engaged in creating what we have come to call a “quest narrative,” performing “narrative architecture” through the use of lush, geographically-oriented imagery, blow-by-blow accounts of fierce combat, and an array of symbols and signifiers both familiar and strange to their audience. Their end results are so similar. But the technologies with which storytellers, scribes, and game designers create their piece seems irreconcilably different.

In the last chapter, we discussed how videogames and folktales trouble the divide between authors and audiences by using the devices of combat and travel to give audiences an active role in the creation of the story. In this chapter we must address the delivery technologies employed by folktales and videogames that enable these interactions. Henry Jenkins describes delivery technologies as the following:

> History teaches us that old media never die—and they don’t even necessarily fade away. What dies are simply the tools we use to access media content—the 8-track, the beta tape. These are what media scholars call delivery technologies....Delivery technologies

109 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 272-3, 285-8
110 This is an internet meme that originated from game reviewer Ben Croshaw on *EscapistMagazine.*

http://www.escapismagazine.com/videos/view/zero-punctuation See also:

http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PressXToNotDie
become obsolete and get replaced; media, on the other hand, evolve.¹¹¹

To understand the structural resonances between folktales and videogames we must address their differences in delivery technology. However, in looking closely at oral and digital modalities I hope to show that although the technology differs greatly the logics and construction are strikingly similar.

Delivery technologies are, in a sense, human-made extensions of the human mind, extensions which alter our perception of the content. For example, Sigmund Freud, in his General Psychological Theory, describes notepads, a delivery technology, as “a materialized portion of my mnemonic apparatus, the rest of which I carry about with me invisible.”¹¹² Further, media studies scholar Marshal McLuhan defines a medium as “any extension of ourselves” in the same manner. For McLuhan, a medium modifies or amplifies exiting communicative abilities. Thus, no medium exists independently; rather media form a complex web of development and interdependence.¹¹³ I find this way of thinking about delivery technologies particularly apt because Jenkins’ distinction allows us to separate the delivery technologies of folktales and videogames—oral storytelling and handwritten manuscripts, and complex hardware and stored data, respectively—and look at the medium that has evolved from Homeric epics to LAN parties: a medium defined by play. Just as everything from a string tied around one’s finger to writing pads to computer documents are extensions of our “mnemonic apparatus,” so both folktales and videogames are articulations of our basic need for play.

It may seem obvious to state that the technologies used to deliver folktales and videogames is very different. But even though these technologies operate in different ways, their

¹¹² Sigmund Freud, “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic Writing Pad’,” General Psychological Theory, 207
structures are still remarkably similar. Consider, for example, the ways in which videogames and folktales are stored and transmitted.

First of all, there was no original ‘creator’ of a folktale. The stories are a result of years and generations of thought, history, collaboration and retelling. Videogames, on the other hand, were designed by a specifiable group of people. Their elements were put together by a group of people with the conscious intention to leave parts of their media artifact open-ended. With folktales, the open-endedness is inherent. Authors and creators didn’t have to design the open-endedness; it was a function of their oral culture. As Walter Ong says: “For primitive man, happenings occurred. Today we program happenings. With all the inner-directedness we can muster, we plan unplanned events, and we label them happenings so that we will be sure to know what is going on.”\(^\text{114}\) A medieval storyteller saw his role as a remixer, or guide through extant materials and potentialities. This differs from videogames, where the creator of these “happenings” can be more reliably traced. Even in videogames, however, there is a culture of sharing and appropriating that challenges literary notions of copyright. This is an attitude that can be traced back to the self-titled ‘hackers,’ some of the earliest videogame programmers. Hackers envisioned the internet as a means to equalizing access to all information, and empowering individuals to seek information for themselves. In keeping with this belief, all of their work was open-source, collaborative, and eschewed ideas of copyright and authorship.\(^\text{115}\) This idea of treating a performance as just one of many possible versions even carries into early manuscript culture. Jonas Carlquist, for example, has pointed out the similarities between digitally enabled hypertext and the logics of manuscript layout. “Many medieval manuscripts were not intended to be read sequentially in their entirety. Rather, the reader was supposed to use


\(^\text{115}\) Chaplin, Heather, and Aaron Ruby, \textit{Smartbomb: The Quest for Art, Entertainment, and Big Bucks in the Videogame Industry}. 
the text as a mere tool, a catalyst, to ponder other works.” For this reason, Carlquist argues that medieval manuscripts live more naturally in the hypertextual world of digital space than in a printed edition. Books are best suited to linear perusal, and the cultural expectation of a modern codex is that it contains a cohesive narrative. Digital technologies, therefore, according to Carlquist, give students of medieval literature a closer approximation of the period’s textual culture.

The incompleteness in these types of media belies a consciousness of the physical presence of readers and players, whose journey through the text is an important part of the text’s construction. Both videogames and medieval conceptions of storytelling that sprang from oral folktales create an open-ended system, or database, of story elements that can be rewritten and reperformed. But these performances look quite different from each other. One is a performance of physical bodies, the other of virtual bodies. But because the storyteller and player are often either physically close to each other, in the case of a bard addressing an audience, or the same person, in the case of a live-action role play, decisions affecting pacing can pass more easily between actors. In a videogame, however, designers externalize and codify such pacing choices in the form of triggered events and NPCs, thus limiting players’ abilities to directly impact the plot. What will happen in *Skyrim* if the player does nothing but watch? You’ll stand there for a long time, until eventually you’re probably killed by bandits or wolves. Videogames require active audience participation in order to proceed. Bards, on the other hand, because they do all their processing in their own heads and can react to far more possibilities than a videogame can be programmed to recognize, have more freedom to continue on their own. Although the

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practicalities of teller/audience interaction differ because of the mechanics, the theory of interactivity remains prevalent in folktales and videogames.

On one hand, computers can process much more information than a single human storyteller could. Therefore, during any given playthrough of *Skyrim*, the computer is providing the player with more information and more options than a bard can offer his audience. As *Elder Scrolls* lead developer Todd Howard told Joystiq Magazine:

> We have a ton of processing we're doing that isn't on the screen... Most games, all your processing you see on the screen, but we're calculating a thousand NPCs. Do they want to travel from one city to another? Is there a dragon coming? Technically, we want to be pushing the game and have it look new and look exciting, while also processing all of the stuff you can't see ... in case something happens.\(^{117}\)

In other words, the imaginative power of any number of authors has been codified, and programmed into the videogame’s processor. One player of *Skyrim*, therefore, can play in a world far more elaborate and dynamic than that which a single bard or writer or dungeon-master could devise.

This higher processing power is evident in the hero avatar. *Skyrim* allows for incredibly nuanced character design by giving players control over everything from the shade of the avatar’s skin to the shape of the avatar’s cheekbones. The Dragonborn in one playthrough of *Skyrim*, therefore, may be a blond-haired, axe-wielding male Nord as seen in most of the game’s advertisements\(^{118}\) (Figure 3.1), or it may be a dark-skinned female Redguard magic-user (as in my own playthrough). However, whether or not a game allows for this level of customization, the range of all possible character features is already written into the game’s code, thereby imposing a theoretical limit to the player’s imagination. Although offering a seemingly more

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\(^{118}\) See, for example, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCd2xiqI95A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCd2xiqI95A)
detailed variant of the hero’s body as site of agency, this type of character creation is just a remediation of what medieval players were doing in their own stories.

This brings us to the flipside of the computer’s higher processing power. Computers may be able to provide more information at a time than a storyteller, but because each distinct piece of information must be programmed individually into the computer, the storyteller is better able to create new information. In an oral system, new events, characters and designs can be employed as fast as a player can think of them. In this sense, there is vastly more creative processing power in the human brain than in any computer—particularly because in an oral system, not only is the storyteller’s brain processing the story, but the audience’s brain is ‘rendering’ it. In a sense, a word is worth a thousand pictures.119 To implement the same thing in a videogame, players must modify, or ‘mod’ the game code, expanding it to accommodate their new visions. The computer has the power to compute the location of every bandit, bear, and dragon in Skyrim and render all encounters between them, but the computer cannot account for NPCs doing things like getting married, having children, or leaving the kingdom of Skyrim altogether. Folktales, because they are less technologically advanced than videogames, in some ways offer more freedom. In oral storytelling, to imagine a character is to insert it directly into the folktale’s amorphous canon, without the middle step of programming.

The Arthurian character of Lancelot is a perfect example of adding a character to a story’s canon. The earliest texts about King Arthur—Gildas’ history, the Welsh Mabinogion, and Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regnum Brittaniae, make no mention of this French knight. His first appearance is in Le Chevalier de la Charette, a French romance by Chretien de Troyes

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119 Thanks to my adviser Professor Tom Ellman for this elegant observation.
for his patron, Marie de Champagne. In Chretien’s story, a nameless knight succeeds where the great knights Gawain and Kay have failed in finding and rescuing Queen Guinevere. He then duels the evil Meleagaunt for her freedom, and upon seeing Guinevere’s face finds the strength to defeat him. Queen Guinevere eventually falls for him as well, thus setting up a lover’s tryst in Guinevere’s tower that recurs in almost every Arthurian story afterward: the lovers are caught, and Lancelot must duel the challenger to preserve the Queen’s honor. Although clearly based on conventions of courtly love and medieval justice, the character of Lancelot is an intentional invention that has nevertheless endured centuries after Chretien de Troyes presented the story to his patron. How many other Lancelot-like original characters have popped in and out of medieval traditions, based on the individual imaginations of the people who participated in telling the story?

Despite the difficulties of modding a videogame the practice is still widespread among fan communities. Some games even come with built-in user interfaces for modding, often called developers’ kits. These may range from giving players tools to remix existing aesthetic features into new characters and landscapes, to giving players access to the code itself. In the case of Skyrim, for example, Bethesda released a developers’ kit separate from the game itself that players can use to edit the game by interacting with objects and characters by their ID numbers in the code.

Those who go a step farther along the spectrum from ‘audience’ to ‘author’ and modify, or ‘mod’ videogames, via sanctioned developers’ kit or not, often share their work on the digital

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122 The idea of inserting a new character is also popular in the internet phenomenon known as fanfiction. See: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/OriginalCharacter A common theme in fanfiction is for the author to insert him/herself, or an avatar thereof, into an existing story. The trend is known as a “Self-Insert Fic.” For more information see http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SelfInsertFic
commons in the form of YouTube videos, screenshots, and downloadable content. Gaming magazines such as Gamespot even publish articles celebrating the best mods, often including links to where the mod creators make their programs available to others.\(^{123}\) Far from reprimanding such behavior, Bethesda and the vast majority of other videogame studios encourage fan modding. According to Howard, the majority of *Skyrim*’s developers have modified their own play experiences with fan-made mods.\(^{124}\) This is an extraordinarily striking example of the fluidity of author/audience.

The slower nature of communication in the middle ages made it unlikely that an individual storyteller would be able to so richly modify his work with the work of his recipients, as is the case with *Skyrim*. However, the idea that gamers refer to as ‘modding’ is still essential to medieval storytelling. With videogames, we make a distinction between the developers and the modders because our culture has rules and ideas about intellectual property laws that require us to identify a specific creator. For medieval people, however, the notion of ‘modding’ was so intrinsic to the nature of storytelling itself that there wasn’t even a specific term for it. What Zumthor has named ‘mouvance’ is a natural part of role-playing.

The interactive and open-ended nature of videogames and folktales demands a commons in which the various interactors can share their experiences. Unlike in a book discussion, where the participants are all discussing the same text, storytellers and videogame players may have had vastly different experiences with the same text. At any point in the middle ages, any number of people could have been ‘playing’ *Havelok the Dane*, whether that meant a bard telling it in epic, interactive verse with a participating audience; young children playing ‘knights’ with sticks

\(^{123}\) [http://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/noeo9/i_just_had_my_skyrim_moment_ass_naked/](http://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/noeo9/i_just_had_my_skyrim_moment_ass_naked/)

\(^{124}\) Xav de Matos, “Bethesda’s Todd Howard on Skyrim’s biggest development hurdle, fan-made mods, and what happens next.”
in the yard, a scribe copying out a previous text with his own personal additions. But any one of these players has no way of telling what anyone else is doing with the story at any given moment. Therefore, to communicate people had to be in a physical common ground. In the medieval period, this commons had to be a physical space. Storytellers had to be physically next to each other to experience each others’ stories. As literacy became more prevalent, manuscripts were able to become a sort of commons; storytellers could read copies of another writer’s work and use it as a prescriptive text for their own written work or performance. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regnum Britanniae*, for example, was a widely disseminated text that greatly influenced Arthurian mythology, from literature to folklore.

Thanks to digital technologies, the commons need not be physical. Instead, the internet provides us with a virtual commons. Sites such as Reddit.com have become a place to share anecdotes (see figure 3.2), complaints, and everything in between. The internet provides players with a forum to discuss their play experiences and share the personal narratives they have developed. It is possible for *Skyrim* players to have an entire conversation, whether in person or via internet threads, about their unique in-game experiences. Thus the commons moves onto digital space, but the underlying notion remains: a place to compare and discuss works, to hear other stories, to find new inspiration and to share your own creations.

In theory, videogames and folktales are open-access; anyone who wants to play can do so. In reality, however, different social, economic and practical realities operate to limit the freedom made possible in the magic circle. In oral storytelling the role of ‘player’ becomes distilled into ‘teller and ‘audience’ when factors such as education, wealth, training and prestige come into play. As society evolved the role of storyteller became a profession for which training was required to operate at the expected levels. As Walter J. Ong points out: “In using these

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125 [www.reddit.com/r/skyrim](http://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim)
materials poets and other oral performers only carry to a special height of perfection a skill which to a greater or lesser degree all members of a primary oral culture practice.” More complicated and elaborate forms of play were usually reserved for either higher-class people with more free time and access to education, or to the professional jongleurs hired to entertain them. Even here, however, the line between teller and audience remains blurred. Bards, scribes, and other storytellers were expected to conform to their patrons’ requests, and patrons often directly commissioned or described the types of stories they desired. Consider the example of Edward III’s “Round Table” pageant. Here, kings, lords and knights with widely varied literate ability interpreted and performed stories of King Arthur in a live-action role-play. In all likelihood, written texts were consulted and used to prescribe rules and boundaries for their play. In this game, however, the access was not determined by one’s literacy or knowledge, but instead by social rank and military prowess.

Although you no longer need the king’s permission to play them, videogames are also complicated in terms of practical access. Theoretically, with videogames there is still a ‘teller,’ i.e. the designers, and an ‘audience,’ i.e. the players. Here, the practical realities of digital technology require user input. In other words, an oral storyteller will keep on telling his tale without active audience participation; instead, the audience is acting passively, and the storyteller reacts to their expressions or cultural expectations. In a videogame, however, there is a middle man between the teller and audience: the computer. The computer needs input from both for there to be a story; it needs a designer to construct the game program and a player to activate that program. Unlike Edward III’s LARP, a videogame designer would say her games were open-access to everyone. However, the reality is that only people with access to the expensive

\[126\] Ong 286
hardware required can actually play. Further, to play a videogame requires a technological savvy that must be mastered before the specifics of any one game can be attempted.

What these media do have in common, though, is that participant’s skill level has a direct effect on the narrative produced. A better oral performer with a better grasp of the story elements circling in cultural memory will weave together a better story. A scribe with better writing skills will produce a better manuscript. And a more skilled gamer will produce a better, more sophisticated narrative in her medium as well. So in theory, both of these media are open-access and based purely on skill. The social realities of videogames and role-playing games, however, is that they operate within a material, cultural sphere, where inequalities and prejudices impact users’ ability to participate.

Up until this point we have been talking about the extratextual apparatuses of folk tales and videogames and how they operate in the social sphere. Despite the obvious difference in delivery technology, the two media operate in similar ways. This is because not only are their extratextual forms similar, but the way in which the stories themselves are stored, composed and reproduced are strikingly similar. At their most fundamental levels, both folktales and videogames are comprised of a system of narrative elements. This is a function of their nonlinearity. Instead of being transmitted as a linear narrative, these media exist as databases of elements—ranging from technically specific elements like rhyming patterns, kennings, and game mechanics, to narratival systems of characters, locations, and plot possibilities.

This is why there is no authoritative ‘original’ or ‘best copy;’ because folktales and videogames are not stored as performances. Every telling of a story, whether orally or creatively on paper, every playthrough of a videogame, is an iteration of the formal elements that comprise
the medium’s true nature. Both medieval forms of storytelling and videogames exist abstractly as systems of elements that are put together each time they are performed.

Folklorist Vladimir Propp was the first to identify folktales as comprised of a series of interchangeable units. Each tale is a sequence of events produced from these many possible narratival nodes. By looking at folk tales in this way, Propp was able to sift through the prolific amount of existing folk tales and distill them into common elements. These elements range from meter and rhyme to specific phrases, such as Homeric formulas like “rosy-fingered dawn” and “tamer of horses,” to character types: evil uncle, adulterous queen, fair unknown, to recurrent plot formations. Walter Ong describes them as:

the standardized narrative themes which epic poets have used (the arming of the hero, the hero’s shield, the message, the summoning of the council, and so on) and which, more surreptitiously, historians still use today, since without pre-existent themes to determine what of all the potentially infinite possibilities a narrator is going to attend to, there would be no way to lift up for inspection any strand at all in the unbroken web of history.\(^{127}\)

These formulas are all present in the fabric of a videogame as well, but in this case the digital and preprogrammed nature of the delivery technology requires further formulas: ways in which the computer tracks and calculates battle stats, distances traversed, experience gained and items acquired.

The onset of literacy altered, but did not eradicate the use of formulas and other oral devices. Rather, “the onset of literacy marks the beginning of a powerful, flexible (and still continuing) interaction between orality and literacy.”\(^{128}\) As early manuscript culture was a direct remediation of oral storytelling, traces of this database-focused system still endure. Manuscripts—particularly early manuscripts—were often about working from an array of

\(^{127}\) Ong 288  
preexisting instances in order to create a new version. Here, however, parchment serves the same purpose as memory, thus enabling writers to use prose instead of easier-to-remember poetry. Although sometimes manuscript scribes did strive to directly copy other texts word-for-word, this notion of respecting ‘original’ versions was far from standard. Instead, scribes often felt free to modify, rearrange, and draw from other sources. There was little formal desire to seek an ‘original,’ because there was no concept of ‘original.’ Anything written down was a variant that could ultimately be traced back to an oral story, which by nature has no ‘original.’

Similarly, Mark Amodio offers this definition of oral poetics: “the powerful supple, and highly associative expressive economy [that] enables poets efficiently to bring worlds of traditional meaning(s) to their narratives by deploying a vast array of compositional devices, some as small and highly tradition specific as a single lexeme or phrase and others as large and widely shared among discrete traditions as story patterns.”

He discusses the Old English Brut by Layamon, a written text, as an example of the creative yet systematic functionality of oral poetics. The text is thoroughly literate—Layamon adapted it from Wace’s Roman de Brut, itself an Anglo-French version of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regnum Britanniae. However, even though Layamon clearly went line by line through Wace’s text, he also reworked it. “Layamon does not merely and slavishly translate the Roman de Brut; rather, he recreates it.” For Amodio, this recreation is made possible by the forms of poetic articulation enabled by oral poetics.

Echoes of oral modality still resound in videogames. They consist of a collection of rules, such as the calculation that a player’s stamina will decrease at a rate calculable according to the player’s level and the weight of her armor and weapons. Just as oral stories’ poetic meter

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130 Amodio “Introduction” 18
and recurring phrases serve to guide and shape the teller’s experience, so the coded rules of a
game serve to guide and shape videogame play. Robert F. Nideffer discusses how game
mechanics can be viewed in this way, as a sort of database:

“The classical computer science definition of database refers to
any organized store of data for computer processing. Data are
taken to be items upon which operations may be performed within
a computing environment. It is not too much of a stretch, then, to
claim that any of a game’s resources—the images, models,
textures, sounds, interfaces, and code base—can be thought of as
elements of a database, as they are all part of an organized store of
data upon which the game engine performs operations, primarily—
though not exclusively—in relation to the user input.”

Videogame databases are often much larger than databases of stories like the Odyssey or the
Havelok story, because more discrete and specific variables can be stored in a computer’s
memory. Because a computer program can handle more variables than a human, videogames
seem capable of producing an infinite array of possibilities. Consider, for example, the many
possible physical appearances of the Skyrim avatar. However, in truth each variance is the
product of programming specific variables into the game. It is little different than the way
medieval storytelling operates—Propp’s structural units are here the individual lines of code.
With folktales, the units are being processed and put together in the human mind, whereas with
videogames, the brain is aided by the computer’s processor, to which the gamer is connected by
the controller. As Mary DeMarle points out: “In the future, it may be possible to render true
nonlinear interactive stories by procedural methods, but at the moment, such mechanisms are
fanciful at best.”

Designers often use the term ‘tree’ to describe the narrative structure of videogames. It is a term borrowed from computer science to illustrate the branching nature of the possible narrative paths. Conversations, although linear when played through, exist in game data as nonlinear “dialogue trees.” Plot points, again while linear when played through, since the player is bound by a linear progression of time, are stored in the game as “decision trees.” Therefore, these types of games are often referred to as ‘branching storyline’ games. These are enormously complicated undertakings, as each possibility has to be inserted into the game’s code as a narratival element, and the number of elements can increase exponentially. Modular storytelling is a different kind of narrative structure in videogames in which the designers create individual modules, or events, which exist quasi-independently and can be experienced in any order. Unmanageably long dialogue trees and decision trees can be avoided with modular storytelling. But the essential structure is the same—programmers are working with Proppian narratival elements that are intended to be rearranged, redone, and reused.

Thus we can see that the underlying theoretical operations of both folktales and videogames are strikingly similar. It is merely the mechanics of each that give rise to differences. One difference we must recognize is that videogames’ systems of elements were designed by a finite and calculable number of people with the specific intention of being editable and replayable. In the middle ages, however, these systems of elements arose naturally from the reality of oral poetics. There was no master designer, for example, who specifically crafted the Havelok story to be variable and reinterpretable. It simply is. In this chapter we have looked at the mechanical realities of videogames and folktales, and discussed the differences and similarities in the ways that they operate. We have looked at both videogames and folktales as being both a medium and a delivery technology, and we have discussed how their differing
delivery technologies shape their stories. But if we abstract past the delivery technology, what defines the underlying media? In the next chapter I argue that, in an abstract, theoretical sense, folktales and videogames are the same medium, insofar as both of them are defined by the interaction of database and narrative.

So there are stylistic differences, insofar as folktales and videogames enable different kinds of spontaneous storytelling. However, the base function, that which the media technologies enhance and facilitate, remains the same. Marshall McLuhan writes of media as extensions of ourselves, capable of more, perhaps, but still performing essentially the same function; similarly, the computer is an extension of the otherwise invisible apparatus that has always procedurally generated our stories: imagination. Computers enable role-playing on a larger scale, but they do little to fundamentally change the nature of the storytelling as a structured and rule-bound yet creative role play.
Figure 3.1: A promotional poster for *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.\(^{133}\)

\(^{133}\) CITE. [www.bethblog.com](http://www.bethblog.com)
Figure 3.2: A screencapture of a fan anecdote from playing Skyrim.

http://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/noeo9/i_just_had_my_skyrim_moment_ass_naked/
Chapter 4: ‘Play’ as the Act of Drawing Narrative from Database

“I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We’re in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: ‘Let’s hear about Frodo and the Ring!’ And they’ll say: ‘Yes, that’s one of my favourite stories. Frodo was very brave, wasn’t he, dad?’ ‘Yes my boy, the famousest of hobbits, and that’s saying a lot!’”

As we have seen, students of both videogames and oral storytelling—Henry Jenkins, Jonas Carlquist, E. Jane Burns, and Mary DeMarle, to name a few that have been mentioned thus far—have observed that their media are not linear in the way that children of the post-printing press era have come to expect. Instead, these scholars—and developers and performers concur—argue that they are comprised of interwoven and largely interchangeable elements. In the last chapter I discussed the practical mechanics of both folktales and videogames and how each processes, handles, and shares its elements with its audience. This chapter talks about how these sets of elements that comprise what we call a folktale or a videogame can be referred to as a database. Using this terminology gives us a way of talking about the difference between the game *Skyrim* and a person’s individual playthrough, and between the story of Havelok and its extant versions in Laud 108, Arundel and every unrecorded performance of it. *Skyrim* and the Havelok story are databases; to ‘play through’ the database is to produce a narrative. In its barest essentials, both videogames and folktales constitute a medium wherein users are presented with a database that they may traverse, and sometimes modify, in order to create a personalized narrative.

Theoretical conceptions of ‘database’ and ‘narrative’ as a way of understanding media were first outlined by Lev Manovich in his article Database as Symbolic Form.” In it, he sets up database and narrative as irreconcilable opposites, going as far as to call them “natural

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enemies.”  

Narrative he conceives of as the “traditional form of human expression” that has been eclipsed by database. Because most new media privilege database, Manovich associates the two, equating narrative with “old” media like literature and film. He writes:

> Indeed, if, after the death of God (Friedrich Nietzsche), the end of Grand Narratives of Enlightenment (Lytard), and the arrival of the World Wide Web (Tim Berners-Lee), the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we would want to develop the poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of this database.

Thus Manovich frames a discussion of database and narrative as a discussion of ‘new’ versus ‘old’ media; that is, the digital technology of the 20th and 21st centuries versus the linear media of any time before that. Although at the end of the article he discusses ways in which pioneering artists may, in the future, be able to “merge database and narrative into a new form,” the crux of his argument retains these historical distinctions. Manovich offers this model of history with respect to symbolic form:

![Diagram of narrative and database]

Essentially, that there was narrative, and now there is database. Being “natural enemies,” they do not coexist.

On the subject of videogames, Manovich argues that the narratives perceived by players are merely “shells” masking computer-like performances. Videogame are computer programs that, in order to execute its actions, “demand that a player executes an algorithm in order to win.” They are not explicitly databases, then, according to Manovich, because they do not allow users

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137 Lev Manovich 39
138 Manovich 40
139 Manovich 58
140 Manovich 42
to negotiate their databases freely. Instead, “the user is trying to build a mental model of the computer model.”¹⁴¹ Ideas of narrative, play, and performance have no part in Manovich’s understanding of a player’s relation to a videogame.

Building on Manovich’s theory but departing from it in significant ways, N. Katherine Hayles posits database and narrative as “natural symbionts.”¹⁴² Although different media privilege one over the other, Hayles treats both database and narrative as necessary ingredients to making a media artifact. She writes:

Because database can construct relational juxtapositions but is helpless to interpret or explain them, it needs narrative to make its results meaningful. Narrative, for its part, needs database in the computationally intensive culture of the new millennium to enhance its cultural authority and test the generality of its insights.¹⁴³ According to Hayles, database can be seen as the ‘back end’ of a media artifact, and narrative as the ‘front end.’ The “new media” that Manovich described as lacking narrative simply ask the text’s recipients to do the narrative-formation on their own.

Ed Folsom also expands on Manovich’s idea of database as a singularly digital form. Unlike Hayles, whose definition is broad enough to incorporate the mindset medieval storytellers held towards their stories, and yet is still rooted in computer technology, Folsom conceives of database as information, not just digital information, pointing to the works of writers such as Walt Whitman. In this way Folsom is able to conceive of Whitman’s works as “a kind of preelectronic database.”¹⁴⁴ He observes:

[Whitman] treated each line like a separate data entry, a unit available to him for endless reordering, as if his lines of poetry were portable and interchangeable.… Just as Whitman shuffled the order of his poems up to the last minute before publication—and

¹⁴¹ Manovich 42
¹⁴³ Hayles 1603
¹⁴⁴ Folsom 1574
he would continue shuffling and conflating and combining and separating them for the rest of his career...so also he seems to have shuffled the lines of his poems, sometimes dramatically, right up to their being set in type.\textsuperscript{145}

Folsom concludes that Whitman was “an early practitioner…of the database genre.”\textsuperscript{146} And yet he still conceived of his works as poems, as discrete narratives, in outward presentation if not in interior composition. From Hayles’ and Folsom’s ideas of database and narrative throughout history, we can conceive of the two as a spectrum instead of a dichotomy. Whitman’s work can be considered an attempt to ‘find’ or ‘refine’ narratives from his perceptual and mnemonic databases.

J. R. R. Tolkien, another writer who pioneered the reemphasis of database in modern storytelling, approached his stories from a different angle. Tolkien sought to create a mythology akin to that of medieval Europe from which he then, like medieval storytellers, produced narratives. C.W. Sullivan III argues:

Like traditionally recognized folk performers, Tolkien was using material that he had been conversant with, quite literally, from childhood....Thus, when he came to write \textit{[The Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings]}, it was after many years’ apprenticeship in the halls of academe; and when he wrote about the dwarves, he knew their names and the pattern of their story from a lifetime of experience, just as a ballad singer knows the verses or the quilt maker knows the pattern.\textsuperscript{147}

Of course we cannot argue that \textit{Lord of the Rings} falls under the genre of pure folktale. Rather, Sullivan points out that Tolkien’s works stand apart from the genre of novel, which he describes as “an essentially reality-based narrative, ultimately Aristotelian in its structure and well-made

\textsuperscript{145} Folsom 1575  
\textsuperscript{146} Folsom 1575  
Tolkien’s relationship with his material is rather like archivist-turned-performer, who has immersed himself in the database of folkloric tradition and then from that tradition produced a narrative of his own. Tolkien’s works themselves are very conscious of their role as pieces of a larger and more complicated mythological textuality. The books themselves, for example, are positioned as the literary creations of the characters Bilbo and Frodo Baggins. In the books, characters also reflect on the other narratives that spring from their adventures. His works presage videogames in a very interesting way. Not only has he defined the aesthetic of modern western fantasy, but his methodology, his focus on database as a means of producing narrative, can be read as a predecessor to the sorts of productive interactive fiction enabled by digital technologies.

Tolkien’s work is a conscious recreation of medieval textuality. Like Whitman, he contests the idea of authoritative texts, instead evoking a conception of database akin to medieval thought. In Tolkien’s works, medieval concepts of variable textuality as seen in folktales and early medieval genres begin as database. As do videogames. In medieval stories and videogames, however, even the fluid authorial control that Tolkien and Whitman reserved for themselves over their work is instead turned over to the audience whose relation to the text is a complex spectrum of passive observance and active participation. Though their works emphasize database, narrative is always present as the product of interaction with database. Manovich, however, in his understanding of database and narrative as mutually exclusive, passes over the ways in which they work together in Whitman’s work. Although he does briefly acknowledge oral epic poetry like Homer’s *Odyssey* as a sort of database, he understands such poetry as only a database-like encyclopedia of geographic terms and religious figures, for which the poem’s narrative is little

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148 Sullivan 13
149 Manovich 52
more than a mnemonic device. Instead, I argue that an epic poem or folktale such as The Odyssey or Havelok existed as a database with which all medieval people were familiar to one degree or another. From this database, storytellers made a narrative of *Havelok* each time they told the story. The Havelok story does not live on the Laud 108, or the *Estoire d’Engleis*, or the Arundel manuscripts. It lives in cultural memory as a database, and the versions in the various extant manuscripts are examples of iteratively produced narratives.

Perhaps the best example of the way stories exist as databases in cultural memory is the story of King Arthur. There is no ‘right’ or ‘original’ way to tell this story. There are only certain facts and events, themselves subject to variance, that comprise the common knowledge and background of the story. Arthuriana is a database consisting of characters (Arthur, Guinevere, Mordred), places (Camelot, Avalon, Camlann), and events (sword from the stone, uniting England, tragic death) that writers used, reused, restructured and reordered in their various retellings. Even more significantly, the Arthurian database was expandable as well as malleable. Though today we think of the Round Table and Lancelot as essential elements of King Arthur’s story, in fact the idea of a round table was added by Layamon in his *Brut*.150 And Lancelot is entirely absent from early Welsh and Old English accounts, appearing first in Chretien de Troyes’ twelfth century middle French romance *Le Chevalier de la Charette*. His character proved enormously popular as well as flexible; different authors used Lancelot to examine notions of courtly love, chivalry, and chastity, some proclaiming him the paragon of knights and others blaming his sins for the collapse of Arthur’s kingdom. For every Lancelot and Gareth and Palomides that successfully became integrated into the cultural database of Arthuriana, who knows how many Sir Fredericks, Sir Harrys, Sir Whoevers were, in local oral stories, Arthur’s best friend, Guinevere’s brother, Mordred’s good twin? We have no way of knowing how many

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narratives bloomed from the ever-growing cultural database about the adventures of King Arthur, but the presence of their peers who left their mark in ink is evidence to the culture of ‘playing’ stories that created them.

Linear media do contain a database as well. However, it is a database that is not open to interactivity from the audience. Rather, the database remains “private-access,” so to speak, for the author only. The author draws from this personally assembled database to produce narratives to deliver to audiences. Consider the example of Disney theme parks based on literary works, as Henry Jenkins discusses in his article “Game Design as Narrative Architecture.” Here, we return to the principles of spatiality as discussed in chapter 2 to discuss databases as play-spaces: “The amusement park attraction doesn’t so much reproduce the story of a literary work, such as *The Wind in the Willows*, as it evokes its atmosphere; the original story provides “a set of rules that will guide the design and project team to a common goal.”151 This example illustrates the presence of database in linear media as well as “open-database” media. Here, the Disney architects have found a way to access a database that was previously intended to remain untouched, couched behind the narrative of *The Wind in the Willows*. They have created a new iteration of the *Wind in the Willows* story by reading the text that the author intended to be singular as a database; the architects used that narrative to reconstruct the database from which Kenneth Grahame was working.

The examples of the King Arthur legend and the *Wind in the Willows* theme park exemplify Hayles’ understanding of the active process of “querying” a database, treating it as “a powerful source constantly spawning new narratives.”152 To contradict Manovich’s claim that databases “do not tell stories...in fact, they don’t have any development, thematically, formally,
or otherwise, that would organize their elements into a sequence,” Hayles identifies the missing link that unites database and narrative: a user, an audience, a player. Without a person to interact with a database, it remains a collection of geographic terms and religious figures, lines of code, lists of objects, environments and models. But when an interactor navigates a database, a narrative is always produced, because this navigation is always a linear, temporal act. A database exists out of time, but an interactor always traverses it linearly within the bounds of time. A database is intended to be, in Hayles’ words, “queried.” She writes, “the great strength of database, of course, is the ability to order vast data arrays and make them available for different kinds of queries.” This is exactly what oral poets and bards trained themselves to do. They were living receptacles of information, able to produce a story from the data in their heads at the urgings of their audience; able, as well, to modify, edit, and embellish their tales as they performed them per their audiences’ reactions or requests. Therefore we can see that Manovich’s history of symbolic form is too rigid and modern. The media of the predigital past are far from uniform. The age of the narrative that Manovich defines as “the past” is best understood as the premodern and modern eras, from late manuscript culture and the printing press up until the proliferation of computers. This diagram is a better illustration of the relationship between database and narrative through time:

![Database and Narrative Diagram](image)

The database of folktales, extant in cultural memory, is directly analogous to the database of videogames, extant in digital space. *Skyrim’s* databases contain lists of places, divided into political entities called Holds; of races, each classified with a special numerically calculable

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153 Hayles 1603
‘racial power,’ and of roles that the player character can embody (or not embody) through play. The variance may be broader in detail across Skyrim than it is across Havelok, but in both cases the storage method is the same. This shared use of database is what has lead to the thematic and formal similarities discussed in the last chapters: the geographic awareness, the focus on the hero’s body, the search for ways to share variant playthroughs, the construction based on discrete elements in a system. The key trait of both is the performance of narrative from this database, an act that Manovich calls “algorithm” and reduces to a mechanized process. But to play a videogame is indeed to play it, to act out a narrative from the database. Videogames do not prescribe narratives, like linear media do. Instead, they invite players directly into the database. When gamers ‘mod’ a videogame, or manipulate the code to create new events or instances that the programmers did not account for, they are doing what Chretien de Troyes did to Arthuriana when he ‘modded’ the British legend to contain the French knight Lancelot.

Manovich is forced to define play as algorithm because his definition of database has precluded any inclusion of its so-called enemy, narrative. However, Hayles’ understanding of narrative as temporally fixed, and database as temporally fluid, is a more apt explanation. In both folktales and videogames, the rules of the game exist out of time. Huzinga uses this same rhetoric in describing the “magic circle” of gameplay. While the database exists in a nonlinear, timeless place, the act of creating a narrative from it is a linear one, that stands apart from life’s interactions but still exists chronologically parallel to it. Says Hayles, “Bound to the linear sequentiality of language, narrative complicates it through temporal enfoldings of story and fabula.”

These concepts of ‘database’ and ‘narrative’ can be used to define videogames and folktales as different means of expressing the same genre: a genre defined by the interactivity

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154 Hayles 1606
between database and narrative. Building on the terms and definitions put forth by Hayles, I suggest the term “open-database storytelling.” This understanding of media such as the Havelok story and *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* emphasizes their structural and historical links without allowing the different technologies to separate modern and medieval forms of communication. A conception of open-database storytelling as genre also offers a new definition of play as the act of making a narrative from a database. This idea of play dovetails with the ideas presented by Johan Huizinga and Munby, Barber and Brown that play was a significant and central component of medieval lifestyle and communication. This definition of ‘play’ covers both open games and closed games. Both types of games consist of a database of rules, cultural commons, and, in the case of open games, narratival elements. Each time the game is played, whether it is baseball or *Skyrim*, a narrative is produced.

Both database and narrative are present in every storytelling medium. One means of distinguishing media is the amount of access the audience is allowed. According to this definition, videogames and folktales can be understood, formally and spiritually, as the same medium, which I call “open-database storytelling.” In this type of storytelling, interactors are invited to play in a database. ‘Play’ is the act of forming a narrative out of a database, born of the interaction between the two. When that act becomes mechanized—when, in fact, it becomes ‘work’ and not ‘play,’ it is an algorithm. But the question of how to define ‘work’ versus ‘play’ is the subject of an entirely different paper. Here I will limit myself to a genre-specific argument for the case of “open-database narrative” as a lens for understanding stories with this particular relationship between narrative and database.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

_Gentle breath of yours my sails_  
_Must fill, or else my project fails,  
_Which was to please._[155]

After so neatly discussing narrative and database as theoretical concepts, and having proposed a definition for the perennially elusive concept of ‘play,’ the conclusion is a good place to reproblematize the tidy divisions we may have inadvertently fallen into.

First, the very concept of ‘oral storytelling’ and folktales is ambiguous territory. Ideas of ‘orality’ and ‘literacy’ are a shady spectrum, not a cleanly cut dichotomy. From paintings on a wall to knotted string, oral memory was supported and fleshed out with physical devices. Consider the writer of _Havelok the Dane_ in the Misc. Laud 108. Is this text a recording of an oral performance, or was the writer operating entirely within a literate sphere, even though his material was of a folk origin? Ananya J. Kabir, for example, contends that the poem was written in a style that imitated oral methods.

Its ostensibly oral features of thematic and lexical formulaicity not only appear too meticulously assembled to be the unplanned residue of an ebbing oral tradition, but also betray, in their very excess, an anxiety about orality and literacy as competing technologies of power and social control. The text’s frequent references to its own status as oral performance enhance this oral self-fashioning, which is simultaneously undercut by a narratorial voice that resonates with our understanding of the fictionality of medieval literature as the consequence of its in-creasing writtenness.[9] This approach allows us to reassess the formulaic style, thematic concerns, and realism of Havelok as manifestations of a feigned orality.[156] Kabir’s arguments highlight the difficulty of identifying ‘oral’ and ‘literate.’ For this reason, the use of the word “folktale” throughout this paper has in some places been problematic, since I am dealing with a broad swath of medieval literature that includes folktales, romances, songs, lais,

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and drama; even prose of the late Middle Ages, such as the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, evinces oral methodologies to some degree. The question of language was also an important marketing consideration in the Middle Ages; Latin gave a text more authority and credence, but limited its readership. Vernacular, while considered more “vulgar,” could potentially reach wider audiences. And among vernaculars certain languages were privileged over others. For several hundred years after the Norman Conquest of 1066, for example, the kings and lords of England did not speak English. For example, Layamon’s *Brut*, written after the Conquest in a consciously non-French, traditionally Anglo style, was probably intended to hearken back to the proliferation of Old English literature under King Alfred, as well as an attempt to legitimize Old English as a spoken language and a means of communicating stories. In the Middle Ages, a time of transition and interaction between orality and various forms of literacy, texts often struggled to operate on various levels to cover multiple genres and audiences.

Videogames, too, are not separable from linear media. The gaming magazine IGN published a fairly good run-through of the various linear media that have strongly impacted modern gaming. Although these influences were largely thematic and aesthetic instead of overtly formal, a close look at most games reveals their roots in film and science fiction.¹⁵⁷ Since it is unlikely that videogame developers are directly mimicking or drawing from medieval media theory, films and novels have served as more direct inspirations. Games such as the *Call of Duty* series, for example, is considered a very ‘cinematic’ game, and critics are divided on whether or not this is a good thing. The question becomes more complex when we consider games such as *Heavy Rain*,¹⁵⁸ which marketed itself not as a videogame but as an “interactive movie.” Thus the sort of self-reflexive consideration of genre found in medieval texts is present in digital texts as

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well. Videogames are not idealized open-access databases; often certain narratives are privileged over others because the idea of a ‘correct’ narrative have pervaded modern media for so long. Consider the aforementioned *Skyrim* advertisements, where the hero is depicted consistently as a large white male. With no way to visually represent the multiplicity of the *Skyrim* avatar’s visual identity, Bethesda’s marketers have chosen a specific narrative to sell their game. How to market and present a changeable character has been a problem for other games as well. Bio-Ware came under fire for representing the main character of their *Mass Effect* games, Commander Shepard, as a white male even though the game allows for character creation almost as variable as *Skyrim*’s. The fact that advertising for *Mass Effect 3* included “FemShep” as well as “BroShep” was significant for many fans. Even then, however, the advertising could only present a finite number of Commander Shepards. How does one visually convey that there are no set visuals to convey?

The genre of ‘videogame’ is also in some ways as unstable as that of ‘folktale.’ Just as folktales have given rise to genres of romance, lai, ballad, and drama, videogame stories have found their way into other media as well. The *Halo* story, for example, though originally conceived of entirely as game, has become a series of novels. By publishing novels based on their characters of Master Chief and Noble Six, Bungie runs the risk of corrupting the purity of their empty-shell protagonists. Players of the *Halo* games are able to map their own emotions and reactions onto the character they are embodying. When reading a novel, however, the reader is experiencing not their own version of the characters but the author’s. In this sense, the difference between playing *Halo: Reach* and reading *Halo: The Fall of Reach* is the same as

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either creatively performing the Havelok story or reading *Havelok the Dane* from the Misc. Laud 108.

In a sense, then, this complexity is something that open-database media have in common. They operate as highly variable and fluid intertextual stories. But on some level, don’t all media? Even then we must consider the possibility of transforming linear narratives into open-database narratives. The example of the *Wind in the Willows* theme park at Disney was already discussed in chapter 4. But making databases out of narratives has become a widespread cultural phenomenon of the digital age. Henry Jenkins discusses this phenomenon in his book *Convergence Culture*: “Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands.”¹⁶¹ He goes on to discuss the process of creating narratives from databases, situating the activity within the minds of the media consumers:

Convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives.¹⁶²

This is the process by which oral poetics are produced. This is the process by which we play videogames—albeit in this medium our mental processes are aided and supplemented by a preprogrammed computer.

Fanfiction is an example of the indecipherable line between database and narrative. Fanfiction writers treat linear media like databases from which they can produce new narratives.

¹⁶¹ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*. 3.
¹⁶² Ibid. 3-4
In this case the authorial text is clearly identifiable. Fanfiction writers take this narrative—referred to as ‘canon’—and treat it like a database from which to produce new narratives, or ‘fanon.’ Writers experiment with alternate beginnings or endings, different relationship pairings, new characters, or altering the physical laws of the story to produce new versions. Thus, one can find fanfiction about J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series that rewrites the books in ways such as: what if Harry was a girl; what if Harry died at the end of Book 4; what if Harry and Hermione were in love; what if “I” the fanfiction writer were a student at Hogwarts; what if Harry were a vampire, or a clone, or an alchemist. A dizzying array of fanfiction narratives can be produced from the same linear story. Jenkins calls these types of fanfiction “role-playing,” pointing out their potential of:

exploring a fictional realm and as a means of developing a richer understanding of yourself and the culture around you…Much as an actor builds up a character by combining things discovered through research with things learned through personal introspection, these kids were drawing on their own experiences to flesh out various aspects of Rowling’s fiction.164

Thus even the prevalence of narrative over database in linear media like movies, television and novels is contestable, thanks in large part to digital technologies whose intrinsic editability invite participation. Henry Jenkins writes of this ‘convergence culture’ that”

If, as some have argued, the emergence of modern mass media spelled the doom for the vital folk culture traditions that thrived in nineteenth-century America, the current moment of media change is reaffirming the right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture like the older folk culture of quilting bees and barn dances, this new vernacular culture encourages broad participation, grassroots creativity, and a bartering or gift economy. This is what happens when consumers take media into their own hands.165

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164 Jenkins 176
165 Jenkins 132
Jenkins’ observations show that our traditional conceptions of media are breaking down, merging and resurfacing in new and ever more fluid ways. The black-and-white conception of narrative and database offered by Lev Manovich is simply not viable in a multimedia digital age, in a time of what Walter J. Ong calls “new orality.”

All that said, the term ‘open-database storytelling’ can still be a useful means of sifting through these various types of media. It may be imperfect, but it serves as another lens through which to understand the role of play and the playing of roles throughout history. Conceptualizing stories as “open-database” provides a trans-historical framework for comparing media artifacts from disparate technological eras, particularly preliterate and digital media that are rarely put side to side. It is my hope that more game designers will look to older forms of performance and game to inspire new digital constructs. Further, I believe that scholars of folklore and early literature would be interested in videogames because of the structural resonances the two media share.

The similarities between the two have already been remarked on. Of course, this is partly due to the aesthetic links between the two, as described in the introduction, which can be trace through the popularity of J. R. R. Tolkien’s works with table-top RPG creators and early designers. But the structural resonances that belie a preoccupation with knights, dragons and damsels in distress are still a powerful, if less-studied, presence in RPGs. This quote from a review of *Mass Effect 3*, in which Kate Cox defends the game’s largely unpopular ending by attempting to reframe her audience’s conception of ‘game,’ is one such example:

>The full story of Shepard, the whole *Mass Effect* trilogy, as it turns out, is neither a romance nor a tragedy. The closest analogue is an epic. Myths and legends handed down over centuries, told by parents to children, by prophets to followers, by bards and singers to halls full of eager ears. The story will always end the same way, will always have the same moral, the same sweeping vistas and
battles, but the details — ah, the details. Don't those always change in the telling? Shepard was a woman. A man. Dark-skinned. Pale as moonlight. In love with an asari, a turian, a fellow human. Kind and generous, ruthless and bold. She saved the council and pitied the geth. He destroyed the krogan and saved salarians. And no matter what, Shepard defeated Sovereign at the Citadel, escaped from the Collector base on the far side of the Omega-4 Relay, and came at long last to be standing with the Catalyst, there to decide the fates of all.166

The transformations and variances that Cox mentions are a result of *Mass Effect*’s existence as *play*, as a media artifact that gets its structure from its player-audience. Early medieval storytelling operated in the same way, with this unique and strong relationship between teller and listener that blurs the line between the two. Shakespeare’s character Prospero refers to this interaction when, at the end of *The Tempest*, he addresses the audience with a request:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,  
And what strength I have's mine own,  
Which is most faint. Now 'tis true  
I must be here confined by you  
Or sent to Naples. Let me not,  
Since I have my dukedom got,  
And pardoned the deceiver, dwell  
In this bare island by your spell;  
But release me from my bands  
With the help of your good hands.  
Gentle breath of yours my sails  
Must fill, or else my project fails,  
Which was to please.  
… As you from crimes would pardoned be,  
Let your indulgence set me free.167

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Glossary

Algorithm: (see also ‘play’) Lev Manovich defines algorithm as the actions a videogame player takes to achieve the game’s established goals. I argue instead that the process he calls ‘algorithm’ can be defined as either work or play, depending on the player’s attitude to her task.

Database: (see also ‘narrative’) Lev Manovich identifies database as the symbolic form of the digital age and the “natural enemy” of narrative. N. Katherine Hayles, on the other hand, defines database as

Delivery technology: Henry Jenkins defines a delivery technology as the means by which a message is transmitted. For example, the Harry Potter stories have been transmitted via multiple delivery technologies, including print novel, eBook, audiobook, and film.

Folktales: “By folklore we understand the art of the lower social strata of all peoples, irrespective of the stage of their development. For peoples before the formation of classes it is their entire art taken together.”

Havelok: When unitalicized, it refers to the character named Havelok. Saying “the Havelok story” refers to the tale of Havelok as a cultural artifact. Different versions of the Havelok story will be referred to by their titles in the manuscript: i.e. Havelok the Dane (Laud 108), Le Lai d’Havelok (Arundel), or L’Estoire des Engleis.

Lancelot-Grail: An abbreviation for the series of five romances referred to as The Lancelot-Grail Cycle. Other names for the cycle include The Vulgate Cycle, the Prose Lancelot, and the Pseudo-Map Cycle.

Medieval: the period of European history stretching from approximately 500 C.E. to 1500 C.E., or from the fall of Rome to the Renaissance.

168 Vladimir Propp, Theory and History of Folklore, 5.
Mouvance: The idea that no one ‘correct’ version of a story such as Havelok the Dane exists, but rather that the story moves within and through the extant versions. Coined by Paul Zumthor.169

Narrative: (see also ‘story’) The telling or performing of a story as mapped to time.

Open-database storytelling: A genre in which users interact with a database of narratival and game data (either developed by a specific group of people or accumulated naturally within the cultural sphere) and from this database produce narratives which can be compared and discussed between players.

Orality: Ong specifies two different types of orality: “the orality of preliterate man [is] primary orality and …the orality of our electronic technologized culture [is] secondary orality.”170

Play: Suits defines it as: “to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favor of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity.”171 Kolve, recognizing the difficulty that theatre scholars have had with the term, defines it as: “something amusing.”172 Through the course of this paper I offer a definition of play as the act of producing a narrative from a database.

Role-playing: Bernard Suits categorizes ‘role-playing’ as an “open game” as opposed to “closed games” that require …. like tic-tac-toe, Pong, and baseball.

Romance: A genre of poetry in the Middle ages. Quite different than the “Romantic novel.”

Romantic: Evolving from Romance literature but departing from it in its post-Gutenberg linearity and authorial emphasis.

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169 Paul Zumthor
172 Kolve 12
Skyrim: When italicized, this refers to the videogame *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, by Bethesda and released in November 2011. When written plainly, it is a reference to the fictional kingdom of Skyrim in which the game *Skyrim* takes place.

Story: (see also ‘narrative’) I use the word ‘story’ to refer to the collection of narratives and accounts that comprises a single story entity. For example, the King Arthur ‘story’ appears throughout the Middle Ages in various genres, styles, and attitudes. The game *Skyrim* is a composite story that is played through in discrete narratives. The story of Havelok is a story that has been told in many versions.
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