Compromised Agency: Between Player and Character

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Introduction

Video games, as a medium, have come a long way since the heyday of Pong and Pac-Man. Of the literary value of those games, there is not much to say: Pong is a sport simulation and Pac-Man is at best the chilling tale of a yellow ball trying to consume his world while escaping the ghosts who pursue him and who will inevitably overcome the hero. In the forty years between the debut of Pac-Man and this writing, the limit of what video games are capable of doing has yet to be reached, nor does it look like it shall be reached in the foreseeable future. The medium, through both increasing complexity and ubiquity, has emerged as a focus of interdisciplinary study; a slew of different fields have a vested interest in video games for a multiplicity of reasons. This particular piece shall examine some of the literary value of video games.

The history of the field provides context to the position I shall take on the issue. Mirroring the debate over deconstructionism in literature, ludology, the study of virtual games, was divided into two major camps as it emerged as a field of study: narratologists argued that the rules, aesthetics, and purpose, were of secondary importance to the narrative video games created, and the more storylike a game, the better. On the other side of the debate, ludologists took the position that narrative is secondary to the game itself and the rules and structure which comprise it and that the story is of no relevance to the value or quality of a game (Juul). Inevitably, an unspoken and mostly rhetorical question was realized: why can it not be that both positions of study are legitimate to take?

That said, the notion of thinking in dichotomies still permeate video games, their study, and their culture. Questions of player versus avatar, console games versus computer games, online versus offline and the merits of each, of playable character versus non-playable character,
of player agency versus a fixed narrative arch, of the will of a player versus the destiny of a character, etc. It is an assumption among these dichotomies that the player, the human operating the game, is distinct from the avatar which the human player controls. However, this assumption of disjointed roles raises a problem of identity: who is the entity running about the screen, jumping and rolling and fighting to overcome obstacles? It is not the player, who sits outside viewing the screen, and it is not the character on-screen, who is incapable of action without the input from the player. In consideration of the narrative of video games, this distinction becomes inherently problematic: it seems almost impossible to consider the nature of one without also considering, or at least assuming, the nature of the other: The narrative exists for and of the avatar character, yet it cannot progress without the direct involvement and action of a human player. The simple question of 'who is the protagonist' becomes unanswerable.

I argue that the symbiotic relationship between player and avatar is based in deficiencies in agency. The avatar exists in a videogame with a vaguely predetermined ending: the game creates the fate avatar, of the greater decisions the avatar already made and will make in the future. The player often has no control over the ultimate outcome of the avatar's story in a narrative-driven game; the green-clad hero saving his kingdom from evil insurgents or foreign invaders cannot and will not leave the kingdom while it is under threat, as in *The Legend of Zelda* series. However, the avatar alone cannot take steps towards reaching this goal on its own. That responsibility falls to the human player; it is the role of the player to allow the avatar to take the steps necessary to reach the ultimate goal of the avatar character.

The term I have coined to describe this relationship between player and character is called *compromised agency*. The *compromise* both suggests the sacrifice of player and avatar of parts of their agency and also evokes the collaborative effort of player and avatar to achieve a
common goal: the progression of the game. This collaborative pair constitutes an entity which is neither entirely the human controller nor entirely the form of the avatar. This entity navigating the game which is composed of both player and virtual representation is what I call the agent, the figure which is the combination of the agency of the two beings operating within the game.

From a literary perspective the agent is simply the persona born of the theoretical merger of a character or narrator and the reader of a literary work, or, more closely, the viewer of a film. With the partial exception of choose-your-own-adventure novels, the reader has virtually no agency regarding the events of a novel. The character's ultimate goal and the steps that lead there are all predetermined, and the reader's only acts of agency is to follow along and interpret what is read. Video games, in this sense, do what is impossible in written literature by allowing the reader to take an active role in shaping and acting out the course of a narrative, becoming a player.

One can use this concept of compromised agency—the analogous combination of reader, character, and narrator—to explore literary and narratological mechanisms which can only be effectively realized by an agent and the literary elements which constitute a videogame’s story arc. The four games to be examined with this tool of the compromised agent are Bastion, Shadow of the Colossus (SotC) and its juxtaposition to its prequel/sequel Ico, and finally Dear Esther. By examining these games and the different natures of the agent in each of them, I intend to test my ideas of compromised agency and the agent as viable literary lenses and develop the literary merits of video games.

Ico and Shadow of the Colossus

To test and illustrate this idea of agent, an initial examination of it the agent in the context of different fictions is a logical first step to better understanding the concept of
compromised agency. In writing of fiction in video games, Jesper Juul differentiates the distinction between *fiction* and *story*, clarifying that in his usage “fiction [is used] to mean any kind of imagined world, whereas, briefly stated, a story is a fixed sequence of events that is presented (enacted or narrated) to a user.” The *Star Wars* trilogy, for example, is both a story and a fiction, while a still life painting could be considered a fiction, depicting only one moment in time, but not a story. Furthermore, he argues that “fictional worlds are imagined by the player,” meaning that the user is free to imagine the rest of a universe that isn't explicitly described. In the case of *Star Wars*, while not every planet is described, it can be assumed that they do, and the imagination is left to fill in the gaps (Juul 121-122). This distinction demands that the agent should be considered in the context of story versus fiction, and how compromised agency functions in relation to each of these ideas and how the player and character each facilitate the agent in this distinction. The first two games I wish discuss, *Ico* and its prequel *Shadow of the Colossus*, play with this idea of fiction versus story, and the intertextual nature of both, and examine the effects of this on the nature of the agent.

When considering a work in any media, it is important to consider the tropes at play and how a work engages these tropes, and videogames do have tropes unique unto the medium. *Ico* is, at its heart, the embodiment of a common mechanical trope in video games, what is called “the escort mission,” wherein the agent must escort a non-playable character (NPC) through an area safely. This trope is very often problematic because NPCs are often helpless and lose any competency, intelligence, and skills that the NPCs had prior to the escort mission, breaking both the coherency of the world and risking the player's investment in the agent. Juul describes fictive worlds in terms of *coherent* and *incoherent* worlds. In *coherent* fictive worlds, the rules and mechanisms of the game are explained as believable functions of the fiction. In *incoherent*
worlds, game abstracts are not rationally explained by the fiction of the game, such as why Mario has three lives, no more or less, in Donkey Kong (Juul 121). There is not necessarily a qualitative difference between coherent and incoherent game worlds, so long as there is consistency within the gameworld. Short missions commonly break down otherwise coherent worlds by adding incoherent elements, with the negative effect of wearing on the player’s investment in the game. Ico overcomes this breakdown in coherency and fiction by using and subverting common literary tropes of fairy tales to create a fiction around the mechanic which is satisfactorily coherent.

The main character, Ico, is cursed and for that he is locked in a castle and left to die, as per the traditions of his tribe. In his attempt to escape, he finds another trapped prisoner, a beautiful girl, and his goal then becomes escaping with the girl, the daughter of the evil magic queen who rules the castle—essentially a play on the trope of the knight in shining armor and damsel in distress. However, the play subverts this, common and commonly sexist trope by defining the relationship between the two as symbiotic. The girl, having been caged for years, is unable to escape the castle alone because she is helpless to defend herself against the Queen’s shadow goons who wish to recapture her. Ico is likewise incapable of escaping alone. Specific gates and doors will not open without the companion’s presence. Some magic, intrinsic in her, causes the doors to open. Without the girl, Ico is trapped, and therefore doomed, just as without Ico, the girl, Yorda, is doomed. The trope of the knight in shining armor is subverted by the interdependence of the two children. The narrative gets around the typical shortfall of the escort mission, the agent feeling restricted by unnecessary and limited NPCs by establishing Yorda as someone important to the agent, someone worth saving. The effectiveness of interdependency is facilitated by the fundamental principles of what a video game is:

“A game is a rule based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome,
the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable. (Juul 36)

What this means for the agent is that in the compromise of agency is that the character represents the rules of the game. The player alone is unable to exist or navigate in the fiction of the game and function as dictated the rules. That capacity only exists for the character, who is designed and fully equipped to face the obstacles of the game and interact with the fiction in which it is placed, but it is ultimately the player’s effort that is required for the game to be played; The agent is therefore the combination of a character who is able to exist in and contend with the rule-derived fiction and a player who is able and willing to contribute the skills and direction to work with the character to fulfil the character’s destiny in a story arc.

The rules of the game *Ico* are simple, the premise is so simple that alone they might not be considered compelling: solve puzzles and escort the girl to the end of the stage. Progression without her is impossible or will result in failure. Yet the fiction allows the game to be compelling to the player, because if the player does not care to save the girl, then the game is not played. This requirement for emotional investment further refines the definition of the agent: the agent is comprised in part by a character who is able to exist and operate in a fiction which is fundamentally defined by rules, and by a player who willingly agrees to adhere to the rules of the fiction and in playing and guide the character through to the character's destiny. This point is underscored in *Ico* near the end of the game when Ico walks by a small boat which he could take to safety. At this point in the story-arc, Ico and Yorda have been separated, the latter being recaptured by the Queen and the former being left for dead. In theory, it might be possible for Ico to get into a boat and flee, leaving the girl to her fate; however, there is no mechanical option for the agent to do this, even if the player wanted to do so. The reasoning for the agent’s decision to pass by the boat is twofold: first, the character Ico is choosing (or has chosen, based on ones
perception of the event) to go back into the castle and rescue his companion to whom he has become attached. Second, the rules of the game, as previously stated, require Yorda to be brought to the end of the stage. Together, the rules of the game reinforce the agency of the character in pursuing its fate. In this way the rules determine the direction of the narrative by using the rules to construct the character's contribution to the agent; despite the fact the player controls the agent directly, the character defines the limitations of this control through the rules built into the game; it is therefore impossible for the player to make the agent act in a manner which can be considered contradictory to the nature and destiny of the character.

If *Ico* demonstrates how limited the player’s contribution to the agent can be, then *Shadow of the Colossus (SotC)*, the prequel to *Ico* released several years later, demonstrates how greatly the player can contribute to the agent. *SotC*, like its predecessor, uses genre to create a fiction which justifies the twisting of a videogame trope. If *Ico* is supposed to be a fairytale demonstrating how to make an effective escort mission, then *Shadow of the Colossus* is without question supposed to be an epic, demonstrating how to effectively construct a boss battle, another trope that can also be difficult to execute effectively. To describe the trope in brief, it is common in action-adventure games for the agent, in the progression of the story arc, to fight through large numbers of small, weak enemies and encounter a number of more powerful “boss” enemies at key points in the game. The problem is creating a satisfying boss encounter which is both challenging and able to be completed by different players with varying skill capabilities; boss encounters can be too easy, too hard, repetitive, or simply fail to inspire the emotional responses befitting a climactic moment in the arc. *SotC* could be said to have made its mission to master and complicate the boss battle by making a game which consists of only boss encounters and the long, empty paths to get to them.
SotC takes a minimalist approach to almost everything it does, especially in consideration of its story. Virtually nothing is known about the character; his origins, family, and even his name are obscured to the player. The only thing known to the player is what the opening cut-scene reveals: that he has come a temple in a forbidden, sacred land hoping to resurrect a young woman, no matter the cost. He brings with him a magical sword of legend, which also has an unknown origin, a bow and arrows, and his faithful horse, named Agro. This lack of background would be a handicap except, returning to Juul, “... fictional worlds are imagined by the player, and the player fills in any gaps in the fictional world.” The game allows room for the player to fill in the fictive gaps, a feasible task given how many elements of the epic genre are evoked in SotC is of the genre at large; the series of battles evokes the trials of Hercules, the challenge of slaying each colossus lies in figuring out how, like clever Odysseus and his giant, and the odds of each encounter seem insurmountable, like David and Goliath. The horse's name, Agro, is suspiciously similar to Argo, the famed vessel of Jason on his quest for the golden fleece, and considerable time is spent traveling for sake of the journey, like Don Quixote (the final colossus is effectively a living building, albeit not a windmill).

The extent of the player filling in the gaps of fiction does not simply apply to the fiction of the world, but to the character itself. One critic, Brian Sutton-Smith, in writing on the rhetoric of the self in the context of videogames, remarks that videogames lend credence to and indeed strongly draw on the “possibilities for the flexible or pluralistic self” (Sutton-Smith 177). The great fiction of SotC which its simple rule and guiding premise -- *win against all odds*-- facilitates means that the nature of the character, his psychology, reactions, and motivations are largely unknown and must be filled in by the player; the player must assume a large proportion of the character’s self-identity. This colonization of the self further extends the concept of
compromised agency by indicating that the player provides--or, perhaps, gains-- the character’s sense of self and some capacity of free will. In this case, the massive investment of a sense of identity, of a sense of self, on the part of the player can be means that the player and the player's imagination constitute a vast percentage of the agent; the only part of the agent the character determines is the unwavering, driving will to press onward and save the young woman, at all costs. And the journey indeed costs the agent everything.

The deity with whom the agent bargains in the temple promises to revive the girl if the agent slays the 16 colossi which inhabit the grounds around the temple. While this seems to be a noble quest, a story of a knight in shining armor, the game becomes darker and more bleak with as each colossi is defeated. With the death of each, the agent absorbs a dark, shadowy, malevolent energy out of the newly slain colossus, increasing the agent’s physical strength and simultaneously disfiguring him. Further, several of the colossi are entirely passive, the agent is hunting these peaceful creatures. By the time the last of the colossi is confronted, the agent, or at least the player, is sure that what he is doing is wrong in some capacity, but the will of the agent, dictated by the rules, by the character, demands that the journey be completed. After slaying the last colossus, the agent becomes a colossus who is then slain by heros identifying themselves as the agent's tribesmen, subverting the notion of the infallible, good, and noble hero often associated with the epic and evoking the rhetorical question, 'who is the monster?' After his defeat, the agent is reborn as an infant with horns and the girl wakes up, taking the child and leaving the temple. For the player so heavily invested in the agent, the entire event is utterly draining, just as the agent is drained of everything. As for the horns, they server as a literary analogue as a kind of mark of Cain, symbol of one who defies nature, and as a connection to Ico. Ico, in his eponymous story, was locked in the tower because he was cursed: born with horns.
This connection is evocative. There is no clear explanation provided regarding how the two stories connect, such as, for instance, the origin of the evil queen in *Ico*; still, the connection is evocative and a source of debate among players of the games. Nevertheless, the connection of the story arcs provide a demonstration of the capacity for video games to have meaningful intertextual connections; the fiction of each game is enriched by the existence of the other, just as other epics add to the tradition which the game seeks to explore, and these external factors all can contribute to the creation of the identity of the agent. The most noteworthy example of intertextual influence on the agent in *SotC* lies in the name of the character, Wander, whose name is never mentioned or revealed within the game, but rather in the accompanying game manual which comes with the game, perhaps subtly challenging the practice of most players to disregard supplementary materials like the manual by providing useful information in it. Nevertheless, the existence of information important to the videogame’s agent that can only be found outside of the game modifies the idea of the agent being developed solely between the character within the game and the player needs to be qualified with the condition that external factors other than these two entities can influence the scope of an agent.

*Bastion*

“Proper story’s supposed to start at the beginning. Ain't so simple with this one.”

This first line of *Bastion* points to two of its most prominent characteristics: its story and its narrator. Whereas *Ico* and *Shadow of the Colossus* helped demonstrate how the character and the player influence the agent with regards to fiction, *Bastion* presents an opportunity to examine the ideas of narrator and ‘proper story’ and how they relate to the idea of the agent. That said, the story of *Bastion* revolves around the efforts of the young protagonist agent, known only as “the Kid,” to try and undo the damage done by an apocalyptic event, known only as the Calamity,
which almost totally annihilated the Kid's home an the surrounding countryside. Later it is learned that the Calamity was created by the Kid's own people to wipe the neighboring nation of people known as the Ura. However, what makes this story of Bastion so compelling is that it is, in fact, a story. In Half-Real, Jesper Juul argues that video games do not have a narrative in the sense that they tell a story of events, because they are events (Juul 158). While in the strictest sense Juul is right about the distinction, Bastion stands as an example of a videogame being a story that is simultaneously and experienced.

The first consideration of what an ever-present narrator entails for a videogame is the incorporation of the oral tradition, the oldest mode of storytelling, into one of the newest forms of narrative media. It is something very difficult to do in a videogame, or, at least, something that is hardly tried. Shadow of the Colossus, as dedicated as it is to the epic, could not fully incorporate the deep connection the epic genre has to the oral tradition; though, in truth, it probably could not have done so and have been as effective as it was; much of the power of SotC was born of what was not said, though the game did give respect to the oral tradition in that all spoken lines were in a language that does not exist on earth today, adding to the game’s fiction and perhaps nodding to the dead languages from which the epic traditions came. In contrast, Bastion’s extensive narration is able to be successful because the fiction of the world and the gameplay mechanics do not require the narrator to be effective; rather, the narrator exists as he does because it added the game the developers wanted to make, so much so that it became the defining feature.

That said, while the narrator may not be fundamentally necessary to the gameplay--more conventional methods of delivery could have made the game as effective, if less interesting--his presence nevertheless distorts the orientation of the narrative and the constitution of
compromised agency. In a majority of cases, it can be assumed that it is the character who ultimately controls the destiny of agent, and it is the player's responsibility to forge this destiny, and although SotC helped demonstrate how other elements can influence the agent somewhat, there is the assumption that it is only the played character and the player who compromise regarding agency and that the agent is a composite of just the two of them. However, the narrator also comes to the table in the creation of the agent, depriving the player and character of agency. The agent's fate, by virtue of being narrated, is assumed to be a foregone conclusion--the narrator already knows what will happen. This perceived omniscience two effects on the agent and player: a disoriented sense of agency and of temporal placement: This game--which is being played by the player in the present--has already happened, and the events, though unknown, are seemingly already determined. This effect could be jarring enough to divest the player from the agent entirely, but because although the story has already happened, it is told in the present tense as things are happening in-game; and besides, the story is still of the agent; however, this game, this story does not belong to the agent, it belongs to the narrator who is speaking of the agent.

After completing the first level, running along a crumbling wall, the narrator announces the Kid's arrival at the Bastion, the heart of the city where everyone agreed to meet in case of emergency. The narrator then explains that the Kid found only one other survivor there, an old man—the narrator himself. The possession of agency, already in question for the agent, is challenged further as the narrator identifies himself not as some omniscient being, but as an actual (non-playable) character in the world, who watched these events unfold remotely from the Bastion. The agent, it would seem, does not have agency in this fiction. The reason this is conceptually problematic is because, as Sutton-Smith phrases it, “Play and the freedom of private thought and action have come to be inexorably bound together” (176). This notion of
unity between play and freedom means the challenge to the agent here is at the end of the component player, whose perception of freedom of action is challenged. A further conclusion is that in order to be part of an agent, the act must be voluntary on the part of the player and the player must be able to at least perceive freedom in the actions of the agent.

In practice, of course, the player does in fact have the ability to direct the story that is told; it’s what makes the illusion so effective. If the agent does not pick up an item, for example, the narrator will not say that he picked up an item. If the agent picks up an item, the narrator will say he picked up the item. While this might seem a mundane point, it continues to call into question the scope of compromised agency. Until this point, it has been assumed that compromised agency refers to a contract in agency that is strictly between the player and the character whom the player controls. However, the indirect agency over the narration—being able to influence the narrator’s story with optional content and decisions explored by the player—includes the role of narrator into the negotiation of creating an agent, even if the narrator is not the character the agent embodies.

The character of the narrator explains to the Kid that the devastation of the Calamity can be undone by retrieving the crystalline Power Cores that power—or powered—the city-state of Caelondia (pronounced SAY-lon-DEE-uh) and bringing them to the Bastion to add to its power which will fix everything. Further, the narrator character directs the kid to look for other survivors, and convince them to come to the Bastion as well. In video games, this mechanic of being asked to find something and bring it back to the person who asked is actually a trope known as a “fetch quest.” These quests are often problematic and unpopular as they can be repetitive and meaningless if executed poorly, and are normally easy to acts for the agent to perform, technically speaking. The fiction helps overcome this commonly weak trope by
assigning strong importance to the quest, and the rules of the game make the process anything but easy for the agent, resulting in a sense of accomplishment when success is reached.

Eventually the Kid finds a man labeled the Survivor in the ruins of the city and brings him back to the Bastion. The narrator indicates that it is only at the Survivor's arrival that names are exchanged—the Survivor is named Zulf and was the Ura ambassador to Caelondia, and the narrator finally reveals his own name: Rucks. Prior to this, the character of the narrator located in the Bastion is only labeled as the Stranger, which is slightly problematic. If Rucks is narrating this story, why would he ever refer to himself as the Stranger, when only the agent could consider him as such? Part of the reason is that this is the story of the Kid, so from the Kid’s perspective Rucks would have only been known as the Stranger before his introduction; however, a more complete reason lies at the end of the game.

Before addressing that reason, however, further developments complicate the story with the discovery of one final survivor, the Singer, as she is only found when she is heard singing to herself. We are told her name is Zia, a girl of Ura descent born and raised in Caelondia. What is strange about her introduction is that the agent does, in fact, hear her singing before finding her, the first time a voice other than Rucks' is heard in the game in any capacity; Rucks recounts all discussions between other characters himself, in his voice, but the singing is presumably hers, breaking the strict role Rucks has as the teller of the story. Again, the significance of the inclusion of another voice will become clear later.

Eventually, Zulf discovers it was the Caelondians who cause the Calamity with the intent of wiping out the Ura, and coerced Zia's father, an Ura, to help in the process. Apparently, her father had other ideas, and though the Ura suffered from the Calamity, most of the damage was inflicted on Caelondia. Zulf returns to his people, who attack the Bastion and then steal the last
crystal needed to activate it, so the Kid, unsurprisingly, must go and get it in the final stage of the

game. As the final level progresses, as the Kid ventures deeper through the heart of the vengeful

Ura stronghold, Ruck's narration abruptly begins to become less and less omniscient. Each

section of the final stage is indicated to be chronologically separated by days, and the narrator

explains that the Bastion does not have the power to show what is happening to the Kid. Further,

he directly addresses Zia as the person to whom this story has been told. A message on a loading

screen around this point indicates that while the two wait for the Kid to return, Rucks tells stories

to Zia to pass the time. Very suddenly, and with no change in the rules of the game, the state of

the agent and the compromised agency in this case has changed; Rucks is no longer the narrator

of events which have passed; everything he has narrated up until the end happened concurrently

with the ongoing events the agent is facing fighting the Ura, and that the agent has full
deterministic agency in determining the end of the story, and to this end the agent is presented

with a choice to make: to save Zulf, who his countrymen have turned on for leading the Kid to

their stronghold, or leave him to die.

In this final sequence we see that Rucks has relinquished the role of narrator of the story
to the agent, giving the player back the perception of freedom of action, and for the first time the
agent is given choices to make. This new freedom to dictate the story is a second time in the
agent’s final return to the Bastion at the end of the game. The Kid can talk to Rucks, who speaks
his mind, and, more significantly, the Kid can talk to Zia, who speaks with her own voice, rather
than Rucks’ normal paraphrasing. She is in fact the owner of the voice heard singing when she
was first met--apparently she did it to accentuate Rucks’ telling of the story-- and it is here that
the Kid, having done all of the hard work, is presented with the choice on how to use the Bastion.
The Bastion has two abilities available with all of the power of the crystal. The first ability is to detonate the cores, dislodging the Bastion and turning it into a flying machine, so that the survivors can start a new life elsewhere. The second is to use the power of the Cores as Rucks, who designed the Bastion, has intended to all along. The Cores are immensely powerful and remember and see all things, ironically having true omniscience in this game of narrators, and the Bastion could be used to tap into the power and memories of the world residing in the Cores and restore the world to a time before the Calamity, in hopes that the Calamity will not happen the next time, and that all the people who died in the Calamity and since then will live again. For a first playthrough, it makes the most canonical sense to choose the latter option and restore the world; to which Rucks says to the Kid, “...I'll see you in the next one.” Regardless of which choice the agent makes, beating the game once unlocks a gameplay mode called “New Game Plus”, which starts the game over from the beginning, except the agent retains all acquired powers, weapons, upgrades, etc. in this new playthrough. More interestingly, there are subtle changes to the story Rucks tells. These changes are noticed immediately, as new game plus begins with blackness, where Rucks' voice is heard again saying, “I'll see you in the next one,” followed quickly by several instances during the narration where Rucks experiences deja vu which were not present in the first telling. The differences in playthrough makes replaying the game a requirement to understanding the full implications of the story and canonically including a rational for the common practice of replaying a game.

Of course, it is not unique for a work to require rereading, reviewing, or, in this case, replaying to fully unlock the meaning of a piece. Michael Riffaterre discusses this exact topic in connection to poetry in his book, *Semiotics of Poetry*. In it he explains how one uncovers “*semiosis*” (Riffaterre 4), higher-level significance, in a poem. “The semiotic process really takes
place in the reader's mind, and results from a second reading” (4). He notes, “As he progresses through the text, the reader remembers what he has just read and modifies his understanding of it in light of what he is now decoding” (5). What is true for Riffaterre's rereading of a poem stands equally true for the replaying of *Bastion*. This new game, canonically created from the last, first evokes the idea of a deterministic universe, where there is only one outcome of events and the idea of free will is meaningless, and which validates the lack of free will felt by the player throughout the game. The assumed lack of choice the agent has as the subject of Rucks' narrative encountered in the first playthrough is reframed as a story that does not belong to the narrator, but to the crystals of the Bastion, and by extension the world and the universe. In this second playthrough, the fact that Rucks experiences deja vu and the Kid has all of the gear which he had at the time of the restoration in the first playthrough suggests that memory is not perfect, even in the case of crystals with powers over spacetime. This evokes the oral and epic traditions again, showing how stories change and grow with each retelling. However, this is not to say that memory is faulty and problematic, because it has major influence on the quality of compromise agency in this second playthrough.

In this new game, all of the characters, including the player character, and other major actors have forgotten the events of the first playthrough, with one exception. The player remembers, and it is the player alone who knows the entire story and therefore possesses omniscience of a narrator; it is known in this playthrough that not even Rucks knows how the story ends. Naturally, because the player has seen and done all of this before, the agent now possesses greater agency, controlling his own fate. Meeting Rucks as “the Stranger” in this second playing recontextualizes the story. Rucks is known only as a stranger until the player learned his name, and being described as the Stranger in his own telling makes more sense when
the game is viewed instead as the story of the agent with a naive human player, and this second playthrough is a retelling of the first, with all the exaggeration and evolution oral stories undergo, mechanically represented by the retained weaponry and also by the improved skill of a player who has already completed a game. In this second playthrough, the player is silently telling the story of the first playthrough. Further, other notes stand out glaringly which might have been overlooked in the first play-through. For example, early in the game Rucks addresses his audience once in passing as “ma'am,” consistently placing his audience as Zia from the beginning. Upon reaching the ending, the agent, now with a wiser player who knows the doomed, cyclical fate of restoring the world, can choose the other option, to instead continue the adventures of the Bastion and the survivors elsewhere, expanding the fiction of the world, ending the implied infinite loop of restoration, and, almost ironically, ending the game’s story arc. In effect, it’s leading to an answer to a commonly asked, idle question, “If you could change anything in history what would it be?” The answer being is that the past cannot be changed. However, by choosing the option to fly away on the Bastion at the end of the second playthrough, the agent also creates a paradox the notion of a deterministic world established by the first playthrough because the player knows better this time around, and therefore causes the agent to break the infinite loop that would be required of a story where free will doesn't exist. This second playthrough reveals a property of the player in the creation of the agent which was previously unexplored, that the player also, generally, holds the role of narrator.

If nothing else, *Bastion* demonstrates the necessity of replaying as being equally important to understanding videogames as Riffaterre contends that rereading is important to understanding poetry. That said, poetry is not equatable to videogames; while they are both means of transmitting meaning to the reader and player respectively, they are vastly different mediums,
and their similarities and differences are worth exploring. First, a poem will not change, and are generally designed to convey meaning as a closed unit (Riffaterre 2). While this can be done with most videogames, there are exceptions, as in *Shadow of the Colossus*, and by using combinations of imagery, text, and kinetic activity, videogames are a multimedial in their presentation of meaning. However, there is one key similarity which can be derived from another theorist, Cleanth Brooks, which makes an observation about poetry, “The poem... [is] an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction about experience.” This idea that poems are experiences directly and fundamentally connect to what a videogame is: an experience. This shared definition, that poems and videogames are by nature experiences allow for comparisons between the, as they both are experiences in artistic media. *Dear Esther*

In order to try to understand the gravity of *Dear Esther* one must understand the basic nature of the differences in points of view as they apply to games. In videogames, referring to the point of view almost entirely refers to the position of the camera in relationship to the on-screen character. A brief analysis of the perspectives encountered in the games examined so far will help illustrate why perspective is important in the consideration of the agent and how *Dear Esther*'s use of it is remarkable. In *Shadow of the Colossus*, the camera follows the agent, always and entirely focused on the agent, sometimes shifting to allow the player better view of the colossi; otherwise, it is virtually impossible to orient the camera such that the agent is out of view. The player's controls only allow the camera to rotate around the character, with the character as the vertical axis, always the center of the space, always the center of the story. This fixated orientation reflects the aggressive focus on the agent as the protagonist as an agent, unwavering in his mission, the centerpiece of the epic. *Shadow of the Colossus*’s agent-centric
camera use contrasts significantly with that of its predecessor *Ico*, wherein the player has greater control over the camera, to the extent that the camera can be moved so that the agent is entirely off-screen; however, the camera does not follow behind the agent, but rather is positioned such that it appears loosely anchored to a fixed point in the environment, slightly divesting the player from the agent; in this divestment, *Ico* as an agent retains much of his own identity as a character, while *Wander* absorbs much of his identity from the player, just as he absorbs eldritch power from the slain colossi. Further, the motion of the camera in *Ico* evokes that of a turning head, as if paying homage to the childlike awe the agent must feel in this enormous castle, of a child moving his head to take in its surroundings, highlighting the domination of the fiction, the castle, over the characters.

In *Bastion*, the camera is fixed in what is called an isometric perspective, looking at the three dimensional world at a fixed angle; imagine a chessboard viewed from a 45 degree angle, over the shoulder of the player. One can imagine this as the perspective of the narrator, Rucks, as he looked on from the Bastion, and is also the perspective of the narrator, the player, in the replaying both recalling the events of the Kid.

Each of these perspectives are in what is considered to be different forms of the the third-person perspective in videogames. *Dear Esther* is a game in the first person. Astrid Ensslin points out the distinction:

In relation to videogames, and especially 3D videogames, a distinction is made between first person point of view (or 'vision'), where the player sees the gameworld through the eyes of their avatar; and third-person point of view, where the player adopts a camera view [generally situated above and slightly behind the avatar.] Clearly, the degree of identification with the avatar tends to be considerably greater in first-person than in third-person (149).

The idea of 'heightened identification with the avatar', in my terms of compromised agency, involves greater player investment in the agent by gaining direct access to the eyes of the
character, effectively requiring the player to invest more in the self by experiencing the game from a more humanistic and less abstract perspective. One side effect of this first-person perspective is that there is no view of the character, reflecting how naturalistic vision does not allow the unaided view of the face. The character's appearance is therefore conveyed by other means, such as through cutscenes, aiding in giving the self an image in third person cinematic cutscenes (as in *Halo*), through the use of mirrors or mirror-like effects (as in *Portal*), or through images in other forms of media, like in a game’s advertisements or its box art (as in *Half-life 2*). Alternatively, a game with this perspective can have an anonymous protagonist image but prevent the player from experiencing cognitive dissonance by providing a view of the characters hands and held items (as in *Bioshock*). These means of providing a player in the first person perspective images of the character, even partial ones, enable the player to directly assume the body of the character in these iterations of the agent and the agent’s formation. *Dear Esther*, however, employs none of these mechanisms, leaving the player without a character with whom to compromise, effectively corrupting the formation of the agent. The player accustomed to contributing to the agent's identity is forced to experience the game as part of an incomplete and half formed agent who is perpetually dogged by the unspoken and arguably unanswered question, “Who am I?”.

Because the agent lacks a character component, the ability to which the agent can interface with the world is extremely limited; in fact the only interaction with the fiction in the game is that the agent possesses the ability to walk through it. The only hope the agent has of becoming complete is to piece together an identity from the story and fiction, but even that possibility is denied, at least in a readily understandable manner. The game begins with the 'agent' standing on an abandoned island before an abandoned lighthouse on a ramp leading from
the sea. As the player --for agent does not seem to be an appropriate term here-- explores, letters are read aloud by a disembodied and unidentified male voice. Some of the letters are unaddressed and perhaps are not letters at all, maybe just diary entries, though more than a fair number of others begin with “Dear Esther,” grounding this narrative as one in both the epistolary and oral traditions of literature. Now, there are a number of different narratives told by the enigmatic narrator, whose identity is unknown, and all of which interconnect with each other, and, more confounding, with the fiction. The island has as much to tell of the narrator's story as the narrator himself, to the extent that the story and fiction are inseparable, causing the idea of reverse-engineering an agent to become all but impossible.

I am quite comfortable in describing *Dear Esther* as a “literary videogame,” among small but growing subset of games which Astrid Ensslin describes as a conceptual “‘paradox’ because literature and computer games are entirely different receptive, productive, aesthetic, phenomenological, social and discursive phenomena.” Games like *Dear Esther* are designed --or at least treated by critics-- as projects of “artistic hybridity” (151). *Dear Esther* both affirms this idea of paradoxical artistic hybridity by combining literary and artistic traditions with the first-person videogame, a form traditionally regulated to blockbuster first-person shooter, and challenging it by regulating the player to an observer status akin to the viewer of film or reader of literature.

The rules, the mechanics of the game are simple: explore the island, retrace the narrator's path towards the highpoint of the island, the flashing red beacon atop an aerial (more commonly known as a radio tower in the American vernacular), and try to make sense of the presented world through close examination of the island coupled with a close reading of the narrator's text. This game qualifies by her standards as a literary videogame because it “[is] primarily played...
but also feature some distinctive poetic, dramatic, and/or narrative-diegetic elements, which require players to combine the psychological modes of gaming and close reading” [153]; however, the inability for the player to affect the world in any meaningful way calls into question the definition of the act of playing a videogame. While Bastion contained significant diegetic elements in its presentation, it did not do so in a way which required a very close reading. Dear Esther, on the other hand, places the player in the position where great attention must be payed to detail to answer more and more pressing questions by effectively breaking the mechanism of the agent normally required,. In other words, the game requires close-reading and establishes close-reading and analysis as a game mechanic.

Unfortunately, a full close-reading of Dear Esther would be so extensive as to subvert the efforts of this writing; there are too many narratives, too many interconnecting letters, too much imagery, too many allusions at play, at interplay, to the game justice with any brevity; one example passage chosen out of literally dozens within the game. In fact, only half of one passage can be afforded, though even that will prove extensive to unpack. This passage was chosen because it, in part, speaks to the player’s agentless existence and the intertwining identity of the narrator and the island, of story and fiction:

Dear Esther. I have found myself to be as featureless as this ocean, as shallow and unoccupied as this bay, a listless wreck without identification. My rocks are these bones and a careful fence to keep the precipice at bay. Shot through me caves, my forehead a mount, this aerial will transmit into me so.

The first thing to note is the punctuation of “Dear Esther.” The use of a period breaks from the formal and correct method of address in a letter, using a comma. This punctuation suggests that “Dear Esther” in this message not only serves as an address, but as a memorial comment, that the narrator is recalling the memory of Esther, who is very heavily implied to be dead. The first full sentence serves to establish the identity of the narrator with the island, the sub-plot surrounding
Esther's death, a car accident, and the agent. The ocean is indeed featureless with the exception of one buoy with a blinking light, as is the agent, who has no character identity save a vague insertion of a player. Considering the the bay shallow and unoccupied evokes the agent's predicament regarding its identity; there is no deep development of the player character involved; in fact, there arguably is no character. However, the comment contradicts with all of the waters surrounding the island, which are all very deep, suggesting that there IS an unspoken, hidden depth to the the agent. It may be that the unacknowledged player within the agent is what actual depth of the water. That the narrator is wrong regarding the waters depth establishes him as an unreliable narrator, an idea played with in other letters. The listless wreck refers to the narrator's own emotional state facing the loss of Esther as well as his own omitted name, the fatality of the accident which claimed Esther, and, once again, the incomplete and dysfunctional identity of the agent, who is also a wrecked vessel washed up on shore.

The second sentence evokes a similar multitude of concepts. First, it is known that the narrator has, or at least had, kidney stones which he received treatment for while Esther was alive, one potential and more literal reason for what seems to be a switch between rocks and bones. Another medical consideration in the reading: on his journey, the narrator breaks his leg after falling from a cliff, and is plagued by it as he continues to traverse the island, before reaching the precipice, the aerial, which it is assumed he jumped off, an act repeated later by the agent. A further implication is that this is his island, either metaphorically or literally, and that the island constitutes the core of his identity, and the island, his broken leg, keeps him alive because it is an obstacle to his death, an obstacle which the agent must also traverse. The connection of the narrator's identity with the island, with the ungrammatical use of “me” in the final sentence of this excerpt, which I read here as a substitute term for “my.” The island is
riddled with caves and tunnels, and are depicted elsewhere as representative of the lifeforce of the island, under the mount where aerial is located, suggesting that his mind will influence the course of his body and the course of the island towards the death associated with the aerial, and therefore the course of the agent tracing the narrator's footsteps. The interplay here develops the indistinguishable nature of fiction and story, an how the interplay extends to the player’s presence in this world, and underscores the sometimes confounding complexity of the fiction in this world.

Unfortunately, close readings and analyses of *Dear Esther* are rather difficult, not only because they are extreme dense, but also because the game severely complicates the process of close reading by altering the monologues and some elements of the scenery and imagery with each playthrough the game; the agent cannot encounter every combination of variations in text and imagery on just one or two playthroughs; the game would require extensive replaying, by my estimation on the order of dozens of times in order to get every possible piece of the narrative and their possible combinations. This vast multiplicity of story interpretations also has the added effect that each individual player will come away from the game with a unique portion of the possible evidence available, thereby promoting greater discussion, debate, and discourse over the unique experiences of the game and validate *Dear Esther*’s effort to be considered a literary game and promote the acceptance of videogames, particularly first-person games, as art.

Returning to the ideas of Riffaterre and the necessity of rereading in order to perform a close reading, *Dear Esther* demonstrates a fundamental quality of videogames: that play is mutable; no two play-throughs are ever exactly the same, even if internal elements are static, because of the human input and the influence of the narrator in a game, be the narrator the agent or another entity, providing an overwhelming amount of interpretive content that cannot be
reaccessed; only fragments of readings are possible during the course of play. *Dear Esther* uses this property to make text mutable, in a manner that only a videogame can, and calling upon experimentalist works in literature designed to alter and challenge how texts are read, requiring a potential critic to modify and rethink standard notions of what a text is, of what a game is. The mutable nature of the videogame by virtue of player engagement is what the *Dear Esther* highlights as one focal mechanism with which unique artistic endeavors can be taken to explore untested potentials in the medium.

To the idea of compromised agency and the agent, *Dear Esther* demonstrates its complexity by creating a game in which there is no compromise or creation of an agent, challenging the very idea of what agency for a player is, of what agency for reader is. The game is a ghost story. It is a ghost story because game tells haunting and intertwining tales of death, grief, guilt, and rebirth. It is a ghost story because there are literally ghosts, literal shadows that flit across the countryside of the island, noticeable provided the player is paying attention to the correct detail at the moment. Finally, the game is a ghost story because that’s what the agent is in dear esther: a characterless sense of self wandering almost aimlessly through a world-- a soul without a body.