AGENCY IN PLAY

Communicating Agency in Videogame Advertising

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Agency in Play: Communicating Agency in Videogame Advertising
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1. THESIS STATEMENT

The popular and promotional discourses that attended the advent and ascendance of videogames (game-capable computers, consoles, and games themselves) as a cultural and commercial centre of gravity consistently and saliently foregrounded the *agency* that these devices and texts purportedly conferred upon users, and advanced the putatively "active" *player* as the prevailing subject position of contemporary media use. Focusing on a four-decade span of discourse pertaining primarily to Nintendo, this project employs a *media governmentality* framework to investigate how cultural, commercial, and corporate institutions imagined and cultivated "ideal" conceptions of *players* and *agency* based on the acquisition of *agential capacities* through media use to crystallize a "new relationship to media" (Mouthrop 57), and set the conditions for *technocratic citizenship*.

2. INTRODUCTION

On March 6th, 2012, Canadian software developer Bioware, a subsidiary of industry behemoth Electronic Arts (hence: EA), released *Mass Effect 3* (*ME3*), the final entry in their revered sci-fi role playing game trilogy. *ME3* was an instant blockbuster, selling one million copies within a day of its release (Albanius n.pag.), and garnering glowing reviews: "a remarkably satisfying conclusion to a beloved trilogy, and a poignant and memorable [RPG] in its own right" (VanOrd n.pag.).

Ten days after *ME3*'s release, however, Gamespur.com reported that an exercised *Mass Effect* aficionado, later identified as Spike Murphy, was contesting claims made in the game's advertising. Promises of *narrational agency* (Murray 133) had formed the lodestone of *ME3*'s on-line marketing: You, the player, were to "[e]xperience…an emotional story unlike any other, where the decisions you make completely shape your experience and outcome"; further, where your "choices drive powerful outcomes…including relationships with key characters, the fate of entire civilizations, and even

radically different ending scenarios."[1] To Murphy, these guarantees were grossly overstated: despite profuse paths, the game contained only three relatively indistinct diegetic termini, and therefore constituted false advertising. "After reading through the list of promises about the ending of the game [Bioware and EA] made in their advertising campaign," Murphy testified, "it was clear that the product we got did not live up to any of those claims" (qtd. in Smith n.pag.). Murphy filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), later delegated to the Better Business Bureau (BBB), and encouraged his fellow gamers to follow suit. "[A]fter the terrible ending that was in no way the product that had been advertised…and the lack of any kind of response from Bioware/EA to address this, I felt [that the complaint] was one of my only recourses" (ibid.). Similarly aggrieved fans levied complaints through regulatory agencies such as the ASA (England's version of the FTC), and others vented their spleens by petitioning Bioware to offer alternate endings (Makuch n.pag.).

Deemed "one of the gaming industry's greatest media events of 2012" (Carvalho 137), the *ME3* controversy was debated by game reporters, critics, and scholars alike, and even rattled the upper echelons of Bioware's management. Company co-founder Dr. Ray Muzyka called the *contretemps* "unprecedented," and *ME3* creative director Casey Hudson posted a quasi-conciliatory statement on a Bioware fan forum. EA and Bioware subsequently released a new ending free-of-charge; a downloadable narrative patch that modified the game and mollified players.

Where is *agency* located in this controversy? A sociologist might celebrate a cohort of disenfranchised subjects leveraging their collective power to challenge institutional intransigence. From a technoscientific angle, such as Actor-Network theory, agency could be said to be distributed across a "socio-technical [arrangement]" (Callon 4) of material *actants*, organic and inorganic alike, drawn together into "particular concrete, contingent relationships" (Behrenshausen 882). New media

[1] http://masseffect.bioware.com/about/story/

and game studies scholars, after citing Murray's definition of agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (126),[2] might point to the various forms of control accorded "interactive" devices and their *ergodic* texts (Butsch; Newman; Eichner; Aarseth). The capacity to configure narrative vectors in videogames, such as the claims that precipitated the *ME3* controversy, could be said to hinge on a *paradox* — a tug-of-war between the countervailing forces of "the strong player control required for a good interactive experience and the strong author control traditionally required for good drama" (Koenitz et al. 29) — much like the "estranged symbiosis of action and structure" (Abrams xiv) central to sociological theories of agency. From a psychological perspective, did the game's advertising constitute a form of persuasion that established the agential capacities players were meant to expect, scaffolding their self-perception as agential subjects; what Bandura calls *self-efficacy*? That *ME3*'s failure to deliver on its advertised promises led players to *feel* a loss of agency (Murray; Bruni and Baceviciute) suggests that agency, rather than quantifiable or innate, is primarily *perceptual.* "In order to be capable of agency," in other words, "it is necessary to perceive oneself as an agential subject" (Eichner 47).

Indeed, the crucial influence of the game's advertising in advancing agential expectations was quickly lost in the kerfuffle. IGN.com commentator Colin Moriarty, for example, dismissed the dispute as a matter of player "entitlement," a position that Kain contends "glosses over entirely the fact that players had been led to believe that the choices they made in all three games would affect the outcome of the final chapter" (n. pag.). While *ME3*'s advertising was not the only factor contributing to agential expectations,[3] Murphy's statement and the ensuing conflagration indicate that the promotional discourses surrounding the game were nonetheless significant. These discourses

[2] Murray's notion of *narrational agency* is meant to account for the shift from fixed and linear (i.e., print) to fluid, poststructural, or, borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, *rhizomatic* digital narrative structures.

[3] These expectations could have been derived through prior entries in the *Mass Effect* series, other popular Bioware properties (e.g., *Knights of the Old Republic*), experience playing similar types of games, etc.

starkly illuminate how industrial video game producers imagine *agency* and *players*. The four decade span of popular and promotional discourses that attended the emergence of videogames — game-capable computers, consoles, and games themselves; commonly referred to as *playable media* — as a cultural and commercial centre of gravity offer an indispensable glimpse into how agency has been, and continues to be, communicated, negotiated, and contested in our contemporary moment.

Given its epoch-spanning lineage, dating at least as far back as Greek antiquity (Hewson 12), it comes as little surprise that *agency*, commonly defined as the *capacity to act* (Giddens; Callon; Butsch; Eichner), is a recurring concern in media and communication scholarship. Agency appears especially pertinent to the "new relationship" (Mouthrop 57) engendered by the proliferation and domestication of so-called "interactive" media. In his monograph on American audiences, Butsch makes a notable pivot from a sociological conception of media as epiphenomenal to agency, to media as capable of *conferring* agency. *Technologies of agency* (Newman 466), such as the remote control and VCR, grant users new and unique control: to extend ourselves in space; manipulate time; participate as appropriators, repurposers, and redistributors of content. The thrust of this conception is that it is through the use of "interactive" media devices that we "acquire" agency (Eichner 25).

This theoretical approach, however, drives us into an ontological rut, with agency variously framed as intrinsic to, or facilitated by, media, texts, users, or some combination thereof. These oscillating disputes have reanimated longstanding debates about agency in other disciplines. The *narrative paradox*, for example, recapitulates a conundrum traceable to Marx: How can any structure "produce actions that fundamentally change it" (Ahearn, qtd. in Eichner 24)?[4] However, the ongoing confusion is at least partly attributable to Murray's influential but impoverished definition, which

[4] Marx — who observed that people "make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please…under circumstances directly chosen by themselves, but under circumstances found, given and transmitted from the past" (qtd. in Ahearn 31) — remains the intellectual standard bearer for many sociological theories of agency.

remains "the starting point for many…approaches to videogame agency" (Eichner 124, 123). In some quarters, her definition has endured as an analytical bottleneck.

Ahearn suggests that one means of breaking the logjam is to consider agency as a chiefly *discursive* phenomenon. Agency, Ahearn notes, "is not a quantity that can be measured [and…] researchers should focus on delineating…different ways in which agency is socioculturally mediated in particular times and places" (39). Defining agency as the *socioculturally mediated capacity to act*, Ahearn investigates how linguistic resources communicate and constitute agential values and ideals, elucidating, in turn, how and in what ways agency is historically and culturally contingent.

This project examines discourses mobilized to articulate and advance an agential relationship between "interactive" media and users. Rather than scrutinize "interactive" media in themselves, and bracketing inquiries as to whether they "deliver" agency, I focus on the popular and promotional discourses that attended the proliferation of a particularly beloved form of "interactive" media: videogames. The *agential capacities* constructed and communicated in these discourses, from the launch of the Atari 2600 in 1977, to the release of the Nintendo Switch in 2017, congealed around an "ideal" subject: *the player*.[5] As Foucault surmised, discursive practices "systematically form the objects of which they speak" (*Archaeology* 49). As such, videogame discourses represent "a dynamic communicative space for constructing…the subjectivities of those who play" (Kline and de Peuter 260, 261). This discursive site illuminates how game *players* and their *agency* were imagined, and how contemporary media use more broadly was reconceptualized in terms of *agency* and *play*.

The *playering* of media audiences is especially salient in popular and promotional videogame discourses. Atari's initial campaign stressed the transfigurative break between "passive" television

[5] In the interest of producing, perhaps, "a homogenous public for national advertisers" (Spigel 6), this "ideal" subject is primarily privileged, caucasian, and male. See: Chess; Ennslin; Kinder; Kline and de Peuter; Kocurek; Sarkeesian; Scharrer; and Shaw.

watching and "active" videogame *playing* in the slogan: "Don't watch TV tonight, *play* it!" This rupture was reaffirmed in a *20/20* segment entitled "Nuts for Nintendo." During a post-mortem between anchor Barbara Walters and correspondent John Stossel, Walters says "Now I know how you're spending the holidays: watching Nintendo." Stossel quickly corrects her: "*Playing* Nintendo."

In 1983, the videogame industry cratered, and it was two years before Nintendo waded into the toxic marketplace with the groundbreaking Nintendo Entertainment System (NES).[6] The NES helped propel the migration of video gaming out of public arcades and into the home, giving the industry a firmer toehold in middle-class American households, and paving the way for future incursions by SEGA, Sony, and Microsoft. To secure its market dominance (then roughly 80% of the videogame market, and 20% of the American toy market *in toto*), the legendarily proprietary Nintendo unleashed "an unprecedented intensity of promotional practice on interactive game culture," leading to the "systematic development of a high-intensity marketing apparatus" (Kline, de Peuter, Dyer-Witheford 111, 118, 120). This sprawling promotional machine — print and TV advertising, a 1-800 tip line *cum* data trawling system, a game testing centre, cartoons, merchandise, a dedicated magazine (*Nintendo Power*), the 1989 feature film *The Wizard* — "rivalled any in the consumer marketing industries"(Kline, de Peuter, Dyer-Witheford 116, 118, 120). While Nintendo initially figured game play as a family affair, as competition with upstart SEGA intensified, *players* and *agency* were reimagined and redefined across myriad capital-intensive marketing campaigns.

Considering *agency* as the *discursively constructed capacity to act*, this project applies a *media governmentality* framework to elucidate how these discourses, as the glittering surface articulating underlying systems of thought (Hacking 90, 91), implicate videogames as mechanisms

[6] The console's name was, in itself, a discursive gambit. The videogame market was considered so broken that Nintendo branded its American console offering an *entertainment* system.

"to shape conduct and create ethical subjects" (Packer, "Conditions" 15). This Foucauldian approach reveals how cultural, commercial, and corporate institutions imagined *players* and *agency* according to the terms of *technocratic citizenship*. This *technorational* conception of agency coagulates around three distinct, overlapping themes mobilized to (re)define our relationship with *playable media*:

- *Agency as Emancipation*: Media delimit a sovereign adolescent space, liberating (teen) *players* from adult surveillance, and accelerate sexual maturation. Some campaigns reorient moral panic discourses such as *addiction*, reframing them as attributes of the technologically savvy and sophisticated media consumer.
- *Agency as Embodiment*: Agency is attained through space, corporeality, and mobility; *players* are figured as embodied beings occupying both material *and* virtual spheres. Media either obviate domestic constraints (e.g., walls), or allow players to transcend them altogether.
- *Agency as Authorship*: Players engage with systems to create and modify in-game objects, configure narrative vectors, and are groomed into expert choice-makers. Romantic/neoliberal notions of authorship are reanimated, framing play as an engine of production.

These themes speak to anxieties endemic to periods of techno-social flux, in which media serve as "arenas for negotiating issues crucial to the conduct of social life" (Marvin 4). "New" media pose the same overarching concerns: What can we *do with* these media, and what will these media *do to* us? As we navigate digital ecosystems comprised of opaque technocratic regimes, oblique license agreements, invisible algorithms and surveillance mechanisms, dilating corporate cultural property rights, and own machines that we lack the tools to open (or are legally prohibited *from* opening), framing media as the engines of our agency, and media use as *play*, has obvious advantages. Suffice it to say at this juncture that the discourses deployed to sell *playable media* represent an arena in which the changing, context-specific meanings and values associated with agency are debated,

negotiated, and, per their *promotional* purpose, ideally *assuaged.* As the controversy over *ME3* indicates, *playable media* are nuclei around which larger debates about contemporary agency, and the *playering* of media audiences, continue to swirl.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Given agency's epoch-spanning lineage, this literature review is in no way comprehensive. Focusing on how agency has been theorized in *sociology, technoscience, psychology,* and *"new" media and game studies* highlights changing relations of power in which agents are entangled, and the "problems" that discrete conceptions of agency have been marshalled in response to.

3.1. The Agency Paradox

"The paradox of human agency," writes Abrams, "is hardly a new discovery…it is the empirical common denominator of a vast body of social analysis which has obstinately refused to be relegated or confined to any single formal academic discipline" (xii). As with his sociological contemporaries, Abrams' inquiry into the "estranged symbiosis of action and structure" (xiv) is animated by Marx's maxim that people "do not make [their own history] just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances directly chosen by themselves, but under circumstances found, given and transmitted from the past" (qtd. in Ahearn 31). How, asks Abrams, can one render an account of agency that recognizes "that history and society are made by…individual action *and* that individual action, however purposeful, is made by history and society" (xiii, emphasis in original)?

3.2. Sociology and Practice

Sociology sought to dislodge Enlightenment humanism's focus on means-end rationalism by way of Cartesian existentialism. As such, agency was tied to *intentionality*, to agents pursuing conscious goals through rational, reflexive forethought. Sociology, by contrast, situates human agents in the

larger social/sociopolitical structures in/through which action necessarily transpires. Contrary to the free-floating subject central to means-end rationality, sociology posited agency not as a cognitive phenomenon apart from time and space, but as a process — or, per Giddens, a *durée* (26) — indivisible *from* time and space. Through this lens, agency and structure are *mutually constitutive.*

In Bourdieu's *praxeology* (or practice theory), the *habitus* enfolds this reciprocal influence of agency and structure. The *habitus* — "systems of durable, transposable dispositions" that generate and structure "practices and representations" (qtd. in Eichner 26) — integrates actors into social contexts through *practices*, and *practices* (fluid, context-dependent modes of engagement) reproduce (and potentially transform) those contexts. A given context requires, and thus *produces*, particular practices; sets of dispositions that agents are compelled to adhere to. Bourdieu's model is important in three key respects. First, the *habitus* emphasizes embodiment as central to agency. Second, Bourdieu frames dispositions as mostly internalized and pre- or non-reflexive. Because action is prescribed by the *habitus*, it is largely routinized. Third, though agency and structure are mutually constitutive, and while Bourdieu allows that new practices can emerge, the routinized nature of action means that structure is prescriptive. This speaks to the aforementioned "problem" with which sociology is concerned: How are agency and structure not only mutually constitutive, but *transformative*? If structures produce agents, how can agents transform structures?[7]

Contrary to Bourdieu, Giddens' influential *structuration model* underscores the *reflexive* character of human agency; i.e., the capacity of agents "to understand what they do while they do it" (xxii). Rather than framing all action as reflexive, Giddens divides action into two epistemic modes: *practical consciousness* (which comports with Bourdieu's *disposition*); i.e., "all the things

[7] Proponents of *performativity*, including Austin, Goffman, and Butler, also propose that agency is constrained by the preordained "roles" actors are called upon to play in interactional contexts. Agency is not determined by a context in itself, but the various "identities" one is called upon to adopt within them. As with theories that frame agency and structure as mutually constitutive, performances not only reproduce the "role," but the context that required it.

which actors know tacitly about how to 'go on' in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression," and *discursive consciousness,* which encompasses the self-reflexive and articulable bases for action (xxii-xxiii). By differentiating *intent* (the "reflexive monitoring and rationalization of action") from *motive* (the (often ineffable) "wants which prompt" action), Giddens controversially severs agency from intent. "Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place" (9); what Eichner refers to as the "could have acted differently faculty" (28). For Giddens, agency comprises a causal capacity to *alter* outcomes through action (and presumably *inaction*), "to 'make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events" (14) without necessarily knowing what that outcome will be. Because many of the consequences of an action are unforeseeable, the signature characteristic of agency is that those consequences are attributable to our capacity to act in itself.

Here, too, action is at once enabled and constrained by structure, defined as "recursively organized sets of rules and resources" (Giddens 25). As with Bourdieu, Giddens stresses context. Agents "draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts," and each context delimits the "scope of control" available thereto (11). While structures facilitate, shape, and constrain action, action reproduces and legitimates those structures: "When I produce a grammatical utterance," Giddens notes, "I draw upon the same syntactical rules as those that utterance helps to produce" (24).

Though *structuration* has weathered its fair share of criticism (Emirbayer and Mische; Archer), Giddens' formulation of agency as the *capacity to act* (irrespective of intent), has had a lasting impact. However, larger questions concerning the transformative potential of agency are left unresolved. If structures condition action, and action reproduces structures, then how are structures, much less entrenched, hegemonic institutions, potentially challenged, upended, and or transformed?

Amending Giddens' *duality*, Archer contends that neither "parts" (social structures) nor

"people" (agents) are reducible to, or epiphenomena of, the other. Archer's *social realist* framework foregrounds "the independent properties" of structure and agency by positing the self as "prior to, and primitive to, our sociality" (7). By conjoining Bourdieu's primacy of embodied practice with an emergent reflexivity that echoes Giddens' *discursive consciousness*, Archer argues that subjects are capable of distinguishing "between self and otherness…subject and object…[and] the self and other people" (8). This reflexive appreciation of the self as distinct from, and thus not wholly constituted by, social structures induces us to contemplate the transformation of those structures.[8]

In parsing the constraining (but not deterministic) influence of structure, other scholars stress the *projective* or "creative character" of agency (Joas, qtd. in Eichner, 25). How, in other words, are agents equipped to imagine varied outcomes to action(s)? Emirbayer and Mische's *relational pragmatics* model proposes a nuanced appreciation of reflexivity as contingent upon the "temporal nature of human experience" (1012). Contrary to Bourdieu's prescriptive *habitus*, Emirbayer and Mische argue that agential capacities "assume diverse empirical forms in response to the specific contexts within which action unfolds" (1004). This rests, in part, on an appreciation of agency as

> informed by the past (in its "iterational" or habitual aspect) but also oriented toward the future (as a "projective" capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a "practical-evaluative" capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). (Emirbayer and Mische 970)

While stating the (perhaps somewhat obvious) point that past experiences inform present actions and future possibilities, Emirbayer and Mische underscore an important criterion for the mutually transformative relationship between agency and structure: That they are *doubly constituted.* As a *process* or *durée*, and dependent upon past experience(s)/outcome(s), the selfsame or similar

[8] Like Giddens, Archer stratifies agency according to resource allocation. At birth we are assigned a "factual grade of agency" (Eichner 105), privileged vs. non-privileged, through unequally distributed resources. Giddens acknowledges that agency, in terms of its "transformation capacity" (qtd. in Eichner 29) depends on access to resources such as technology and knowledge, and social and cultural factors such as social station, gender and race.

agential capacities can be creatively employed across multiple structural contexts, and profuse agential capacities can be employed within the selfsame or similar structural contexts, and in each instance produce unique (if unintended) outcomes. This diversity of contexts, actions, and outcomes informs the agent's capacity for "imaginative and critical intervention" (Emirbayer and Mische 973).

Though not a sociologist, de Certeau is similarly concerned with agency's transformative potential, especially the repertoires of action made available to, and appropriated by, the politically disenfranchised. de Certeau contends that even when operating within preformulated and obligatory vocabularies, marginalized agents can still produce unique and unpredictable utterances. In what he terms "poaching," de Certeau champions the transgressive potential of "*ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order"; tactics with which the weak subvert the strategies of the strong (xii-xiii, emphasis in original). This is not necessarily to pose a direct challenge *to* power, but rather to reorient its undergirding apparatuses; an adaptive behavior likened to those of insects, plants, and fishes that "disguise or transform themselves in order to survive" (de Certeau xx, xi).

Echoing Giddens, de Certeau likens his framework to an investigation of "the *construction* of individual sentences with an *established* vocabulary and syntax"; i.e., as agency exercised within an established structure (xiii, emphasis in original). While he concedes that, as Foucault argues, "the grid of 'discipline' is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive," de Certeau proposes multifarious contrapuntal "ways of operating" that constitute forms of resistance (xiv). Even in a "dominant cultural economy," appropriation is potentially transformative (ibid.).

3.3. Technoscience, Attribution, and *Agencement*

Common to the preceding theories of agency is the centrality of the human subject, an anthropocentrism that technoscience contests. As with corresponding inquiries into whether agency is uniquely human, *technoscientific* or *posthuman* models such as Actor-Network theory (ANT)

conceive of agency as attributable to, and diffused among, a plurality of material *actants*.[9] If action is increasingly outsourced to a constellation of devices, many of which (seem to) "act" on our behalf, and if human action triggers a torrent of invisible, computational processes, then it seems fair to ponder who, or *what*, possesses *agency* within this "heterogenous array of elements" (Shiga 42).

ANT proposes "a generalized symmetry between humans and objects" (Eichner 37), with agency distributed "rather than a fixed property of certain entities" (Shiga 41). While ANT adopts the sociological privileging of context — who/what is acting depends in part upon the situation under examination — it jettisons sociological pillars such as reflexivity (Shiga 43, 47); i.e., those most closely associated with humanness. The emphasis on context, further, leads to a de-differentiation of constituent actors. ANT is not especially concerned with meting out agential influence in terms of how or to what degree any constituent *actant* acts, or the qualitative difference between the "type" of agency a given *actant* possesses or exercises. To the contrary, Latour writes that because every *actant* acts in concert, "it is never distinct who and what is acting, when we are acting" (qtd. in Eichner 38).

By rejecting reflexivity and intentionality, ANT ostensibly abandons Giddens' notion of agency as *intervention*, whereby human agents contemplate action and causality in ways that machines and computers cannot. *Object agency* would seem to skew more to Bourdieu's sense of *disposition*: a computer only fulfills preprogrammed actions, and cannot "choose differently." Further, an object's lack of temporal consciousness means that it cannot "learn" from past experience(s)/outcome(s) in weighing present and future actions. In supposing every constituent *actant* equal, ANT arguably conflates agency *with* structure. Objects that otherwise structure action,

[9] "Increasingly at the heart of this question is the evolving definition of 'materiality' as mediating the relationship between bodies and agency. A key theoretical incommensurability exists between a perspective that partially locates agency in the relational capacity of sensing and feeling humans…that construes human and nonhuman bodies as actants in an institutional network; a perspective that places a body 'with' agency as an effect of a larger biopolitical regime; and a perspective that defines agency as provisional and radically relational arrangement between objects" (Walsh 5).

from a machine to a medium, are, in ANT, *actants* acting in concert and, thus, equally. We are left to wonder, therefore, if these heterogenous actors, though they act in tandem, exercise agency equally, in the same way, and/or to the same "ends."[10]

Other *technoscientific* approaches sought to amend ANT's flat ontology while retaining its distributed conception of agency. While maintaining ANT's entanglement of agencies, Rammert and Schulz-Schaffer propose a *graduated model* that stratifies higher (human) and lower (object) capacities (Eichner 40). Models such as *auteur-fiction* and *attribution* frame agency as partly perceptual. That is, though we know machines lack consciousness and reflexivity, we nonetheless *ascribe* these characteristics to them; effectively (affectively?) construing them as any other flesh and blood interlocutor (Eichner 42).[11] This perceptual incongruence speaks to an curious quirk: A propensity to conceive of agency as inseparable from its conscious and cognitive — i.e., *human* — dimensions. In a sense, *technoscience* comes full circle, symbolically (re-)situating humans at the centre of agency. Ascribing object *actants* "human" qualities suggests not only that *human-ness* remains central to agency, but also a predisposition to perceive agency as quintessentially human.

Callon proposes an intriguing variation of ANT by invoking Deleuze and Guattari's *agencement.* By defining *agencements* as "socio-technical arrangements when they are considered from the point [sic] view of their capacity to act and to give meaning to action," Callon introduces his own *graduated model*: "Asymmetries between agencies may be considerable. Certain agencies… can be likened to macro-actors capable of strategies, of instrumentalization, while others are reduced to points…condemned to repetition, to automatic behaviours" (4). Because *agencements* concern

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[10] ANT scholars are aware of the skepticism that this conflation provokes. "The claim that artefacts 'act," writes Shiga, "may not raise many eyebrows…insofar as it is accompanied by a recognition that this kind of action differs in important ways from human action" (47). While admitting differences "between human and nonhuman entities," ANT disputes "the asymmetrical view of the social world as constituted by human actors who impose their will upon passive artifacts" (43).

[11] To wit, wan early iPod's erratic hard drive, and short battery life, a form of "resistance" (Shiga 43)?

both the relations between *actants* and the production of meaning that emerges through their interplay, Callon's version enfolds components whose meaning-making potential cannot be reduced to "mere" materiality, and that transcend, therefore, Latour's simple human/object binary.

Take for example Callon's inclusion of "marketers, packagers, advertisers, designers, merchandisers, sellers, etc." within his "web of entanglements between the agencies" (6). How should the influence of these *actants* be ascertained? Behrenshausen similarly adapts the *agencement* in his analysis of agency in videogame play. Pushing back against the tilt toward binaristic player-centric analytical models that posit games "as a 'collision' or 'clash' between…player-agent and game-structure," Behrenshausen frames the "gaming situation" as, per Giddens, a *process* enfolding "configurative practices, human and nonhuman bodies, algorithmic logics, circuitry, enunciations, *marketing discourses*…mythic narratives, architectural formations, affects, [and] flows of both electricity and capital" (887, 882, emphasis added). Agency does not inhere in any one element, but emerges through their interaction, naming, as such, "the organization of capacities for action" that an *agencement* potentially permits (Behrenshausen 883). Though they are often materially instantiated, are *marketing discourses* objects? Assuming that their capacity to produce meaning does not lie only or principally in their materiality, how might their influence be ascertained?

3.4. Psychology

For Bandura, "the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of one's life is the essence of humanness" (qtd. in Eichner 45). Though, pace Giddens, Bandura includes *intentionality* as one of agency's four key properties, so too does he share sociology's exaltation of *reflexivity* as a "core property of agency" (qtd. in Eichner 47).

Bandura frames agency as principally *perceptual.* Contrary to *auteur-fiction* and *attribution*, Bandura's *self-efficacy* concerns *self*-perception; i.e., "the capabilities individuals believe they have

to accomplish the goals they are pursuing" (Stebbins 152). For Bandura, agency "exists" insofar as we perceive ourselves capable of executing (or, conversely, *not* executing) agency. "In order to be capable of agency," Eichner notes, "it is necessary to perceive oneself as an agential subject" (47).

Whether characterized as a *feeling* or *illusion*, terms that Eichner considers commensurate with *perception* (115), Bandura found consistent correlations between high degrees of *perceived* agency and the successful completion of tasks, concluding that "behavior corresponds closely to the level of self-efficacy change, regardless of the method by which self-efficacy is enhanced" (127). If self-efficacy is alterable (if enhanced, presumably it also be diminished), then new questions emerge: How do perceptions of efficacy form? How are they constructed, communicated, and circulated? By what means or methods are they altered?

Bandura contends that judgments of self-efficacy are derived from four principal sources, one of which is "verbal persuasion and…social influences" (126). Verbal persuasion, as simple as a recovering patient being informed by a doctor as to what they are capable of, suggests that human agents can "acquire" agency (Eichner 25). (Note that this persuasive voice emanates from an expert, authoritative source, situated in a particular institution, according to a particular system of thought.)

3.5. "New" Media and Game Studies

Building on the bedrock laid by Habermas, Butsch initially draws on sociological theories to frame (collective) agency as arising from the intersection of audiences and media; congregation at a theatre, for example, as the precondition for social action (*Making* 13). Here, media provide the occasion for, and locus of, assembly, but are peripheral to the activism that assembly potentially precipitates. The "paramount…relationship is among audience members rather than between audience and entertainment" (Butsch, *Making* 12).

Butsch then shifts his focus from public loci of reception to private milieux. Television

augurs the fragmentation of content consumption: As viewing migrates from the "public" living room into the "private" adolescent domains of the basement and bedroom(s) (a diffusion to the periphery reflective of its increasingly marginal cultural status), the TV divvies the domestic space among its familial constituents. Here, Butsch makes a conceptual pivot, linking the proliferation of "interactive" media with audience *activeness* (which he later defines as synonymous with audience *agency*). "[I]n the late 1970s, television itself began to change, as cable, VCR and remote controls gave audiences greater control," inciting the turn to "active television *use*…[from] previous passive television *viewing*" (Butsch, *Making* 91, 277, emphasis in original). Contrariwise to his earlier formulation, Butsch now supposes that enhanced control over previously "fixed" content constitutes a shift from what media "*do to* audiences [to] what do people *do with* media" ("Agency" 83, emphasis in original). Accordingly, these agency-granting media, more akin to tools or instruments, propose "musical or performative" modes of engagement (Wardrip-Fruin 228). The key question provoked by "interactive" or *playable media* — Where does agency inhere? In a medium, or the people using that medium? — formed the axis around which subsequent analyses of agency turned.

Jenkins consolidates Butsch's twin notions of media as precondition for collective agency, and *technologies of agency,* in *participation.* As formerly "passive" consumers "take media in their own hands" (17), they are equipped to appropriate, repurpose, and redistribute cultural content. The participation facilitated by these media-conferred capacities inspires, in turn, an active and engaged citizenry.[12] In Jenkins' conception, the more "interactive" the medium, the more agency it confers; the more agency, the more participation; the more participation, the more egalitarian and democratic

[12] Butsch prefigures this move, stating that absent public, communal contexts of reception, "entertainment itself becomes the intermediary for group action" (*Making* 290). However, Butsch seems dubious as to the substance of the agency such intermediaries confer, asking whether they deliver "actual power or simply more maneuverability" (*Making* 278). Moreover, because these technologies do not *collectivize* audiences, they "are unlikely to produce more significant changes in the power of audiences" (ibid.). Later, however, Butsch aligns the abandonment of the passive audience paradigm with 60s era social and political activism: "With so many actively challenging authority…the image of the conformist, passive, media-manipulated mass man lost relevance" ("Agency" 91).

the society. As with *produser*, *prosumer,* and *interactor*, *participant* defines the relationship between "interactive" media and users by conflating (cultural) agency with consumption.[13]

Though agency is often invoked to explicate the relationship between "interactive" media and users, *interactivity* remains a fraught and contentious term, as it suggests a rupture between "old" and "new" media. If the latter are "interactive," then the former, by implication, are not.[14]

> All classical, and even moreso modern, art is "interactive" in a number of ways. Ellipses in literary narration, missing details of objects in visual art, and other representational 'shortcuts' require the user to fill in missing information. Theatre and painting also rely on techniques of staging and composition to orchestrate the viewer's attention over time, requiring her to focus on different parts of the display. (Manovich 56)

According to van Dijck, "[t]he implied opposition between passive recipients defined by old media…and active participants inhabiting digital environments…is a historical fallacy" (43).[15]

Nonetheless, agency — chiefly the extent to which "interactive" media were heralded as conferring agential capacities upon users — became a lodestar in "new" media research, game studies, and neo-narratology. Murray's inquiry into the mutation of narrative from primarily fixed and linear (i.e., print) into fluid and *rhizomatic* forms capitalized on many confusions engendered by "interactive" media. Similar to Butsch and Jenkins, Murray surmised that computers, the ultimate *technology of agency*, granted players new and compelling forms of control over formerly fixed content. Consequently, this conferral of control necessitated a new subject position: *interactors*.

Given their newfound, media-conferred agential capacities, Murray wondered whether

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[13] More akin to de Certeau's sense of resistance *within* preexisting structures, perhaps, these subject positions nonetheless stand in stark contrast to sociological emphases on resistance and revolution. For Jenkins, participants act not primarily to overturn institutional powers, but to contribute to and perpetuate them.

[14] See Zimmerman, "Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline." It is also worth noting Galloway's framing of interactivity as most germane "to an active medium…whose very materiality moves and restructures itself" (3).

[15] While conceptually untenable, *interactivity* illuminates how a supposed "new relationship to media" (Mouthrop 57) invigorated the shift from putatively "passive" subject positions (*reader, watcher, listener*) to "active" ones (*player*). My purpose is neither to perpetuate the debate over "interactivity," nor to analyze "interactivity" as an empirical feature or quantifiable characteristic of media technology, but to discuss the discursive construction of this agential relationship.

interactors should be considered "authors of the work [they] are experiencing" (152). Murray designates the designers of digital narratives *procedural authors*, analogous to choreographers that "[supply] the rhythms, the context, and…steps that will be performed" (153). In exercising their newfound *narrational agency*, *interactors* are likened to dancers employing a "repertoire of possible steps and rhythms to improvise a particular dance" among the preordained patterns the system permits (133, 153). An *interactor* is, at best, the "author of a particular performance," a type of authorship Murray posits as *derivative* contra "the originating authorship of the system itself" (155). Murray concludes that while *interactors* are "not the author of the digital narrative…the interactor can experience one of the most exciting aspects of artistic creation – the thrill of exerting power over enticing and plastic materials. This is not authorship but agency" (153).

As Murray was swept up into the narratology-ludology debate, *narrational agency* and questions of authorship continued to cause friction. Manovich is even more severe than Murray, delineating *artisan authorship* (the Romantic ideal of "authentic creation," which entails "making something from scratch") from *industrial authorship* ("creativity as selection," which entails "selecting combinations of different options"); a sort of authorship by assembly line (120). Because all possible permutations already "objectively" exist in a database, users cannot create original works, but are simply "activating…a part of the total work that already exists" (Manovich 61, 128). *Narrational agency* is, in a sense, an illusion. Aarseth is equally skeptical, noting that though "hypertext reading tends to be portrayed…as a kind of co-authorship," *ergodic* texts (to use his oft-cited neologism), the traversal of which require comparatively *non-trivial* effort, still adhere to preestablished paradigms "of authors, readers, and texts" (77, 78). *Agency* hinges on whether players transform texts "into something that [producers] could not foresee or plan for" (Aarseth 164).

Tensions over the narrational responsibilities assumed by *interactors* persisted. Pearce

pondered whether digital narratives represented "an abdication of authorial control, or a shift in the definition of 'author'" (151). Further, if *interactors* assumed authorial positions, could or should they claim ownership over the texts they (co-)configured? Pursuant to Manovich's lamenting the imperilled ideals of Romantic authorship, some scholars advocated for the proprietary rights of players. Latowska contends that copyright should extend to any and all objects created by way of content generation systems available within, or peripheral to, videogames (28-9). Contra Manovich,

> [p]layers who author game modifications…or build elaborate avatars, objects, and environments are not merely choosing a particular pre-authored sequence already fixed within the game's code. They are creating works of authorship as part of the process of videogame play. (Latowska 24)

Consequently, the neoliberal logic of *time as labour* infiltrated certain conceptions of game play. T.L. Taylor writes that many players perceive a correspondence between time invested in generating digital objects and the real-world monetary value of the products of that labour. When *players* sell said objects, such as avatars, via on-line auctions, "what is actually being sold is the time any given player invests in obtaining," or creating, "an item, not the item itself" (Taylor 232).[16]

The repercussions of these disputes are on full display in producer-player skirmishes such as the *ME3* controversy. While in that instance the industrial Goliath capitulated to David's pelting, both T.L. Taylor and Milner frame culture as a battlefield on which players remain at a steep disadvantage, even when their collaboration is explicitly solicited. Studying online player-producer forum interactions[17] during the creation of *Fallout 3*, Milner found that despite developer Bethesda's appeals to fans as collaborators with "a voice and a valued role in the production process," fans

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[16] While advocating for the authorial-*cum*-proprietary rights of players could be perceived as a means, per Jenkins, of levelling the playing field between players and producers, framing player-generated objects according to neoliberal ideals figures those objects as commodities first and foremost, endorsing commerce as the "natural" arena of operation and negotiation.

[17] These forums were a form of promotional discourse in/through which a certain set of thematically relevant agential capacities were constructed and communicated.

quickly recognized their position as "marked by disproportionate power" (736). Viewing Bethesda's corporate-mandated collaborative opportunities as profoundly superficial, fans felt like little more than "marginalized outsiders" with no true sway over producerial prerogatives (Milner 736, 732).

The *non-trivial* effort and "pleasure of influence" (4) that Aarseth ascribes to players, as well as Murray's definition of agency — a *de facto* fallback that remains "the starting point for many recent approaches to videogame agency" (Eichner 124, 123) — are frustratingly vague and therefore inadequate. Agency, as such, "remains an enticing, underdeveloped concept" (Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2). Of the commendable attempts to course-correct (Wardrip-Fruin et al.; Harrell and Zhu; Mateas), Eichner mounts the most valiant effort, furnishing a robust overview of agency's varied theoretical and disciplinary moorings. Ultimately, however, Eichner cherrypicks and cobbles together a preferred set of attributes, redefining agency as a primarily textual phenomenon. Consequently, theories of agency are stuck in an ontological rut, with agency variously conceptualized as intrinsic to, and/or facilitated by, a medium, text, person, or some combination thereof.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The preceding literature review establishes a groundwork for apprehending how aspects of these theories of agency have been taken up and reworked to articulate the relationship between users and "interactive" media. While "interactivity" remains a key concept through which agency and media use were linked, rather than scrutinize "interactive" media in themselves, and bracketing questions as to whether they "deliver" agency, this project focuses on discourses that attended the emergence of an especially popular form of "interactive" media: videogames. Eschewing conceptions of agency as a "natural" property or possession of persons, or a quantifiable characteristic or empirical feature of media technology, this project examines agency as a *discursive construction*. The popular and

promotional discourses that attended the advent and ascendance of videogames as a cultural and commercial centre of gravity, from the launch of the Atari 2600 to that of the Nintendo Switch in 2017, foregrounded the *agential capacities* that these devices "delivered" to players (while eliding their coincident constraints); capacities organized around themes of *emancipation*, *embodiment*, and *authorship*. This discursive site brings into bold relief how *players* and their *agency* were imagined, constructed, and communicated by cultural, commercial, and corporate institutions to advance a technocratic conception of agency and catalyze a "new relationship to media" (Mouthrop 57).

In this section, I argue that Foucault is most relevant to an analysis of these discourses. If, as Foucault claimed, discourses "systematically form the objects of which they speak" (*Archaeology* 49), then a *media governmentality* framework illuminates how discourses are marshalled to cultivate technocratic citizen-subjects that "will in turn develop the aims of government" (Miklaucic 327). First I will discuss several Foucauldian concepts that scaffold this framework, then I will briefly map how Foucault has been applied to media and communications scholarship. Further, I will discuss one *media governmentality* study, Ouellette and Hay's *Better Living Through Reality TV*, in detail.

Before proceeding, I will make three theoretical proposals regarding agency and discourse:

1. Per Ahearn, agency is at least partly *embedded in language and linguistic resources*, and accordingly is *historically- and culturally specific*.
2. Per Bandura, agency is at least partly a matter of *self-perception*, and as such is *alterable.*
3. One means of shaping, influencing, and altering agential self-perceptions is "verbal persuasion" (Bandura 126), including popular and promotional discourses. These discourses represent a key resource through which contemporary *agency*, per Ahearn, is inflected, contextualized, shaped, and/or defined.

4.1. Discourse and Power

In no way alien or inimical to theories of agency, discourse is subtly woven into several canonical studies of the subject. Charles Taylor notes that discourse "helps *constitute* our lives. Certain ways of being…are only possible given certain linguistic resources" (10, emphasis in original). Giddens writes that not only is discourse embedded in day-to-day activities, but is "partly constitutive of those activities" (xvi). Butsch concurs that discourse contributes both to how (agential) audiences are constructed, and "how audiences conceive themselves" (*Making* 2). Ahearn examines how agency is inscribed in language, underscoring how agency has been "socioculturally mediated in particular times and places" (39). Discourses, says Eichner "construct subject positions, which enable relative forms of agency. …agency can be thus regarded as a discursive creation" (30).[18] Despite exemplary studies of representations of children, childhood, gender, and race in videogame advertising, there are as yet no analyses regarding how *agency* is similarly constructed and communicated.

One of Foucault's chief concerns is *power*, in particular "how power has been historically constituted and resisted through governmental rationalities, forms of knowledge, and practices of the self" (Packer "Conditions" 2). In Foucault's conception, *power* is not a cudgel wielded by the mighty over the weak, or a "mechanism of oppression" (ibid.), but a force that binds subjects in reciprocal relations. Power and resistance are mutually constitutive: Without power, resistance is redundant; without resistance, there is only obedience (Foucault, *Interviews* 441). Instead of a conjunction of

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[18] This is in not to suggest that agency in game play is purely discursive. Agency has also been conceived as a *design* concern; i.e., how designers consciously calibrate a medium's distinct affordances and constraints to condition player control. Lauwaert observes that toy designers "try to configure the user and uses…by anticipating and defining user preferences and inscribing these into technical design" (13). Thue et al. claim that "the key to encouraging [agency] in interactive stories lies in managing the perceived relevance of the decisions that players make while they play" (210). To paraphrase Buckingham (qtd. in Turner 151), game designers not only create games, but players. (For an ethnographic account regarding how "The User" is conceived by industrial actors during the process of product design, and how intra-industrial competition affects this process, see Grint and Wolgar.)

Players also imagine and circulate perceived agential capacities among themselves, capacities further refined through experience. Recursive engagement with games conditions players' expectations of not only what games can do, but what players can do *in* and *with* games (Wardrip-Fruin et al. 8).

powerful and *powerless*, we find a *power/resistance* dyad; an intersubjective formulation of power predicated on a conjunction of *agential* subjects: "an action upon an action, on existing actions or those which may arise in the present or future…a way of acting upon…acting subjects by virtue of their action or being capable of action" ("Subject" 789).[19] Though this relation is one "in which one person tries to control the conduct of the other," control is not tantamount to oppression or subjugation; rather, "relations of power are, above all, productive" (Foucault, *Interviews* 441, 220).

> Power operates as a network…distributed across the spheres of authority that manage social subjects and problems through specific devices, skills, techniques…and technologies. The spheres of social management set guidelines and rules…and foster regimens through which the conduct of subjects is regulated and regularized. (Ouellette and Hay, *Better* 9)

Discourse is at once an apparatus *and* object of power: Power is exercised *through* discourse (in its constitutive capacity), and also acts *on* discourse (by regulating what can be said, and how). While this project considers *players* and their media-conferred *agential capacities* as products of discourses that constitute and perpetuate relations of power, disputes such as the *ME3* controversy serve as reminders that discourse is not infallible. Indeed, during such events the discursive façade falters, and the *constructedness* of these objects are exposed. Foucault himself conceded as much:

> We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can be *both an instrument of power and an effect of power*, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing power. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart. (qtd. in Eichner 30, emphasis added)

4.2. Problematization

Problematization — "the process by which something comes to be thought of in terms of a problem to be solved through analysis and which is caught up within contested claims of truth and falsity" (Packer "Conditions" 18) — represents Foucault's conceptual pivot away from *ideology* as the

[19] To this Foucault adds that power "is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free"; insofar, that is, as they maintain the capacity to resist, and thereby perpetuate (and potentially morph) the relation ("Subject" 790).

motive force of social, political, and economic transformation.[20] "Problems" incite the reorganization of systems of thought, truth, and power; schisms out of which new subjects, publics, practices, institutions, instruments, experts and authorities emerge (Foucault, *Archaeology* 177, 176).

Rather than evaluate "interactivity" as a quantifiable characteristic or empirical feature of media technology, or dismiss it as a "myth" (Manovich 56) and "historical fallacy" (Ahearn 43), I consider "interactivity" as a set of discourses that arose in response to the media-induced "problem" of *passivity.* Passivity had come to define the relationship between Western audiences and mass, broadcast media.[21] From this vantage, "interactivity" recasts the apathetic, acquiescent "couch potato," anathema to the industrious, entrepreneurial subject central to the neoliberal American ethos, as the "'interactive' citizen" (Ouellette and Hay, *Better* 211).

Likewise, contemporary conceptions of *play* and *players* partly arose is response to perceived "problems," such as curbing inclinations toward "free" play as a potential trigger for sexual experimentation. The *problematization of play* was equally animated by emergent social, pedagogic, political, and economic concerns surrounding shifting conceptions and categorizations of children and childhood. Did play "serve no cultural or social function save distraction" (Bogost viii)? Was play a necessary precursor for socialization? Did play help to consolidate the nuclear family? (Were parents play*mates*? Should parenting be more play*ful*?) Was play central to cognitive fortitude (e.g., Piaget's four stages of cognitive development). Did play help children learn (according to institutional imperatives)? Did play secure safety through sequestration, protecting children from multifarious existential dangers? Was play a "mechanism of governing," shaping conduct, behavior, and morality (Packer, "Conditions" 17)? Who should and shouldn't play? What, ultimately, is play

[20] The problematization of madness, Foucault wrote, "could not be properly accounted for simply by talking about ideology. …there were practices…that sent me back to the problem of institutions of power more than to the problem of ideology" ("Interviews" 439). That said, Foucault does address ideology in *Archaeology* (184-6).

[21] I.e., "television's perceived association with…a sedentary lifestyle" (Ouellette and Hay, *Better* 478).

for? What kind of *citizen* does play produce?[22]

Some of these "problems" are reanimated in popular and promotional videogame discourses, and merged with extant fears surrounding the potentially corrosive effects of domestic media: Was *play* properly public or private? Was play a force for socialization and family bonding, or an individual pursuit to hone and refine aptitude, intelligence, and dexterity? Were videogames moulding a generation of lazy, distracted, *passive* non-citizens (characterized by the demographic category "teen")? Were videogames addictive, and/or a form of machine-assisted masturbation? Could consistent exposure to representational violence lead to real world violence? Did videogames further entrench play in domestic contexts? As an extension/modification of television sets, did consoles invigorate the familial fragmentation induced by the migration of television to the domestic periphery, and the demarcation of sovereign adolescent spaces (the bedroom and basement)? Many a moral panic was revivified, the purported boons of "activeness" are troubled by the portrait of the solitary teen, sequestered inside "his" bedroom, tethered to a machine, controller clenched in hand, staring obsessively and unblinkingly at a screen, mutating into a menace to both self (addict) and society (mass murder). Were we truly controlling the machine, or was the machine controlling us?

4.3. Subjectivity

As they "systematically form the objects of which they speak," so too do discourses define "the situation that it is possible for [subjects] to occupy in relation to…various domains or groups of objects" (Foucault, *Archaeology* 49, 52). Per his famous example of the *author-function*, Foucault argues that treating in flesh-and-blood authors leads one down the slippery slope of hermeneutic biases ("meaning"), presumed psychological insight, and mistaking as "natural" historical constructs

[22] "Middle-class anxieties about the misuse of play…begin to dovetail with the Marxist critique of consumerism from this time [the 1850s]. If play persists in modern culture, including adult play, it does so under a shadow of disapproval and suspicion, becoming increasingly marginal" (Kirkpatrick 46-7).

such as the *oeuvre.* The *function*, by contrast, denotes "a set of relations and expectations" invoked *in relation to* authorship, forming the "unifying principle" (Foucault *Archaeology* 221) in a network of "arrangements (e.g., copyright) and assumptions (e.g., melancholic genius)" that at once "[verifies and legitimates] such arrangements" (Packer, "Apparatus Model" 91).

As this field of relations grows more entrenched and normative, subjects *self-subjectivize* (Foucault, "Subject" 777-8).[23] Though "subjects constitute [themselves] in an active fashion through practices of the self" — including "practices of liberation, of freedom" — they can only do so in adherence to preexisting formulations; those predicated on "models…proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his [*sic*] culture, his society, and his social group" (Foucault, *Interviews* 441).

Packer extends *subjectivization* to media technology through Daston and Galison's work on the co-constitution of scientific instruments the "epistemic virtue" of objectivity. This "co-dependent relationship between technology and subjectification…determines what technological forms get developed for use while simultaneously legitimating an understanding of the world that is fundamentally mediated by those same technologies" (Packer, "Conditions" 14). Subjectivity is similarly central to Agamben's appraisal of Foucault's *apparatus*, which illuminates "the necessarily historical production of 'subjectivities' coinciding with the use of specific technologies," and the correlating process of "how users become 'objectified' through the accumulation and generation of data/knowledge facilitated by such technologies" (Packer, "Conditions" 14, 19).

In this frame, *the player* is both the subject necessitated by videogames, and the object that videogames produce. The more videogames are played, the more *players* assume a key position in the ecology of cultural production and consumption, economic valuation, political tugs-of-war, and

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[23] "What I wanted to try to show was how the subject constituted itself, in one specific form or another, as a mad or a healthy subject, as a delinquent or non-delinquent subject, through certain practices that were also games of truth, practices of power…" (Foucault, *Interviews* 440)

scholarly curiosity: What "data" do *players* generate? What cultural and community affiliations do they make manifest? What characteristics do they embody? How do *players* come to be "known," and come to know themselves, as nodes in larger networks of power?[24] This project will investigate how popular and promotional videogame discourses, as an essential component of the field of relations comprising videogames, contributes to the constitution of a *player-function.*

To initiate the mapping of the subject position *the player*, is worth observing that *play*, like *agency*, is a historically- and culturally- contingent concept. Sutton-Smith argues that play needs to be "placed in context within broader value systems" (qtd. in Bogost 52), and notes the proclivity of Western cultures "to promote object play so extensively" (105). The *problematization of play* has, in some respects, been propelled by the objects and machines that Western players tend to employ, and the shift from "free" to object- and machine-mediated play. "[S]tudying [videogames] involves recognizing that they have fashioned a new role for play in contemporary culture and that they are themselves shaped by the current position of play and games in that culture" (Kirkpatrick 42).[25]

Games catalyze ways of "knowing" according to the logics of rules, goals, competition, gain, loss, victory, defeat, and survival; are outcome-oriented, and "have results [that] play does not" (Perron 249). Games hold together the agonistic, agential, and aleatory in riveting tension. Components of game play largely under our control, such as action, choice, strategy, skill, dexterity, coordination, and/or collaboration, dynamically intersect with those determined by luck, chance, randomness, and consequence. Further, game play is predicated on an *agreement* that its governing

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[24] The transmutation of narrative by digital media and videogames illustrates certain facets of this subjectivity. Not only did "interactive" or *configuration-dominant* narrative upend (print-centric) tenets of narrative study, but many scholars proposed that poststructural, *rhizomatic* story forms — no longer frozen syntactic sequences, but mercurial worlds or architectures or systems — profoundly altered modes of engagement and interpretation. The causal link between player input and the malleability of objects, environments, and narratives engendered a self-conception of *players* causal agents and expert choice-makers; "as the center of events, as the driver of change and progress" (Klimmt 251).

[25] Bogost, for example, contends that videogames can "change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world" through *procedural rhetoric* (ix). "Procedural systems," he writes, "generate behaviors based on rule-based models," and *procedurality* "is the principal value of the computer, which creates meaning through the interaction of algorithms" (4).

structures and rules are *transparent*, players consciously "test the free space of movement within a more rigid structure" (Zimmerman 159). While this movement occurs within set parameters, it also entails probing the boundaries and the flexibility of those parameters; even, as with cheating, outright infracting them. In games, the symbiosis of action and structure is not, per Abrams, estranged, but the very precedent that makes play possible.[26] Simply put, games are media, they formalize, structure, condition, regulate, and even *discipline* play (Perron 252).

In both its free and mediated forms, play is tethered to self-reflexivity: play is consensual, "freely chosen" (Kirkpatrick 42), voluntary (Huizinga 1), and conscious (Perron 241). Play is often framed as a liminal or intermediate activity, a *magic circle* that at once "transcends the immediate needs of life" (Huizinga 1), and is a "rehearsal for life" (Murray 144). Moreover, play is framed as fundamentally "non-productive" (Eichner 63); as contradistinct from, even the antithesis of, labor. As such, play is typically (though not always) situated outside the contexts of capital and production.

4.4. "Polio Comes Home: Pleasure and Paralysis in Candy Land"

In her article about the conception, packaging, and promotion of Candy Land, developed by an adult polio patient as she convalesced with similarly stricken children, Kawash demonstrates how the preceding concepts interrelate. As with other toys and games of its era, Candy Land "reflected a cultural orientation toward 'wondrous childhood' — an image of childhood as a time of innocence and wonder cultivated by, and mediated through, the continuous stream of novelties and delights provided by consumer culture"; one that nourished children's "natural" predilections for object-enhanced play (Kawash 189). This "wonder," however, was juxtaposed with the existential threats stalking children in innocuous public places. "The threat of polio," writes Kawash,

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[26] "Perhaps this is also the attraction of performance, of instruments, as a way of talking about digital objects that produce great variety. Performance, and especially improvisational performance, is different each time — and yet we understand that it is structured. Perhaps this is also the attraction of discussing work in terms of playability — in terms of the potential of, and structures for, play" (Wardrip-Fruin 247).

> catalyzed an anxious undercurrent in ideas about children and children's play at midcentury. The notion that children were innocent and wondrous,…fundamentally distinct from adults in their capacities and qualities, and…should be protected from the cares and responsibilities of the adult world for as long as possible implied an enormous inherent danger. If children were unique, they were also uniquely vulnerable. (ibid.)

This atmosphere of dread, disease, and demise invigorated "the increasing confinement and control of children's play that characterizes childhood in the second half of the twentieth century" (ibid.). These *problems* catalyzed shifts and reorientations regarding *play* and *players*, which are clearly reflected in the game's discursive facets. Candy Land's initial packaging evoked scenes from *Hansel and Gretel*, capitalizing on that story's themes of childhood adventure and autonomy. Some magazine advertising for Candy Land featured children playing alone (as one would have found them in the polio ward, figuratively "abandoned" by their parents), contrary to how board games had been promoted prior thereto. Other ads revived the preexisting "family fun" trope, depicting children playing with (i.e., under the supervision/surveillance of) parents (Kawash 207). In both cases, play occurs *indoors*, figuring the Western, middle-class, suburban home, rather than the threatening outdoors, as the "proper," preferential space for play. Furthermore, the game's manufacturer and distributor, Milton Bradley, for the first time assigned categories of "age and ability," a demographic delineation of childhood according to developmental criteria (Kawash 208).[27] Similar delineations between play as properly *familial* or *autonomous*, and the demographic categorization of players according to institutionally devised criteria,[28] are highly visible in popular and promotional videogame discourses.

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[27] Miklaucic argues that such delineation is a key mechanism of government (333). As populations are *policed*, i.e., classified and codified (Miklaucic 237), the resulting categories are both assigned and produce particular *problems*, and come to constitute, orient, and animate "[economies] of power relationships" (Foucault, *Interviews* 259).

[28] In particular, the demographic category "teen" is crucial to the (initial) construction of *the player*: a house-bound pseudo-adult with limited economic responsibilities, flush with disposable income, wielding sway over family expenditures; at once in the thick of the brambles of institutional education and developing an autonomous, self-directed social existence; privy to, and partaking in, a dilating spectrum of (sub-)cultural affiliations, etc.

4.5. Governmentality, Culture, and Media

Packer proposes two means of adapting Foucault to media history. The first is an *ad hoc* "toolbox approach" by which "concepts, such as disciplinarity…or panopticism [are] applied to the historical dimensions of media forms and technologies" (Packer, "Conditions" 2). The second combines "Foucault's two primary historiographic methods, archaeology and genealogy…to investigate the historical processes of mediation, the creation and use of media technologies, and/or the rise and fall of media institutions" (ibid.). This latter *apparatus*-oriented approach is exemplified by Packer's own *Mobility Without Mayhem*, one of a constellation of Foucault-insprired efforts in media and communications research that includes Mattelart's *The Invention of Communication*, Peters' *Speaking Into the Air*, and *Cultures in Orbit*, in which Parks applies archaeology and genealogy in her scrutiny of satellite technology, imaging, and imaginaries.

As Foucault's reach widened, his disciplinary applications grew more granular. In studies of popular culture, Foucault becomes a grindstone upon which to sharpen our understanding of Sydney's (at once denuded and restrained) sexuality on the TV show *Alias*, or as a scope through which to scan Bond's sojourns through space. In the latter example, Hay surmises that Foucault

> is useful for studying popular culture as a terrain and an object of 'discursive formation' and historical 'regimes of truth,' asking what authorizes and delimits *popular rationalities*, and what knowledge remains unauthorized, illegitimate, and secret outside or beyond the technologies, networks, and institutions of those rationalities. (164, emphasis in original)

Most germane to this project, *governmentality* concerns how people and populations come to be seen as objects of government, and, as per Foucault's conception of power as *action upon action*, how government institutions and agents cultivate and condition conduct so that people and populations learn to govern themselves. *Governmentality* encompasses

> the proliferation of techniques through which individuals and populations reflect upon, work on, and organize their lives and themselves as a condition of citizenship… Foucault

> used the term to elaborate his view that power emanated from expertise, or the knowledges and procedures associated with social institutions. …truth claims were specific not only to particular societies but also to particular institutional "rationalities." In their capacity to authorize knowledge as truthful, institutions exercised an authority over their subjects. (Ouellette and Hay, *Better* 9)

As these techniques equip populations to self-govern, they come to constitute "the freedom of the actor in itself" (Bratich, Packer, and McCarthy 39), the *freedom*, that is, to exercise freedom "correctly" (Ouellette and Hay, *Better* 15). By disseminating *technologies of the self*, freedom and agency are reformulated "[as] technical achievements that involve working on, watching over, and applying oneself in particular ways" (ibid.). As such, *governmentality* suggests a somewhat more "conscious" or concerted effort to modify behavior by promoting particular behavioural models.

Here, agency once again hinges on a paradox: Agency is only attainable by learning, internalizing, and adhering to prefigured sets of rules and regulations. In this formulation, "acquiring" agency entails first delimiting, and thus *circumscribing*, the parameters of that agency.

Though Foucault conceptualized governmentality in terms of state institutions, he did not posit "government" as synonymous *with* the state. *Governments* encapsulate the "broader sphere of practices in which claims to particular forms of knowledge are invoked in the context of attempts to direct 'the conduct of conduct'" (Bennett 61). The logics that inform what sort of subject institutions endeavour to groom (Packer, "Conditions" 15), and the "specific ends" to which agents' freedom is oriented (Ouellette and Hay, *Better* 60; Bennett 58), are contingent on, and relative to, the government in question. These government formations, the *logics* and *rationalities* that underpin the subjects they seek to cultivate, and the "techniques of the self, knowledges, [and] practices" and "devices, skills…and technologies" designed to induce said cultivation, are historically- and culturally- specific (Ouellette and Hay, *Better* 9, 78; Bratich, Packer, and McCarthy 6).

Media governmentality, as the name suggests, considers this same cultivation of conduct, and

the grooming of citizen-subjects, through "institutionally embedded uses of communicative, cultural, and media practices" (Packer, "Conditions" 15). Studies by Brady (media in the National Museum of the American Indian), Hunter, Hay (books and television, respectively, as *technologies of governance*) (Packer, "Conditions" 17), McCarthy (the positioning of televisions in commercial spaces to orient and channel consumer traffic and influence consumption), and Butsch (the taming of overly "active" theatre audiences)[29] surface intriguing tensions between the citizen-subject these institutions *imagine*, and the one they might be said to produce. While this could be seen as two sides of the same coin (to produce a subject, the institution must first imagine them), this is not to assume that the *imagined* subject is successfully generated; i.e., that media/practices fulfill an intended effect. The constitution of the subject is partly a matter of focus. Wagman, for example, begins with an existing subject, the Canadian *artist-administrator*, and reverse engineers that subject to extrapolate the institutional logics that produce it.[30] By and large, however, analysis of subjects imagined in institutional discourses do not reveal the "existence" of that subject, but the imperatives, strategies, and systems of thought undergirding and guiding its conception and composition.

This *imagined, ideal subject* comports with Foucault-inspired strands of cultural studies scholarship that treat in audience ontology. The television audience, for example, is a construct of "those who speak for it, those who research it, those who try to attract it, and those who try to regulate and protect it"; i.e., "critics…academics, the television industry, and the broadcasting regulatory bodies" (Hartley, qtd. in Turner 162). For Bratich, audiences are produced through

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[29] Butsch demonstrates how *governmentality* intersects with sociological conceptions of collective agency. As audience activeness came to be perceived as a threat — because theatre served as a precondition for assembly, and assembly for social action, concerns arose that the collective power this medium potentially facilitated "might be applied to larger economic and political purposes and threaten the social order" — upper-class fears of "working-class sovereignty" led to a concerted mid-19th century effort to tame audiences through the circulation of disciplinary discourses such as "rowdyism" intended to civilize audiences (Butsch, *Making* 5, 8).

[30] Wagman's piece is a useful reminder that a *governmentality* approach need not presuppose *neoliberal* logics. Given its taxpayer-funded granting model, overseen by arms-length government agencies such as the Canada Council, the Canadian cultural sector is undergirded by *socialist* logics, and their attendant bureaucracies, first and foremost.

problematization, and "[constitute] a fundamental part of public policy, educational initiatives, corporate production, cultural programming, research funding, even the interpersonal protocols of families in the domestic sphere" (244).[31] In imagining audiences, institutions "invoke a whole set of beliefs and assumptions about how people respond individually and collectively to mediated communication," assumptions that "set in motion how media industries are organized and what sorts of content and hardware are produced" (Packer "Conditions" 18). These assumptions can have a flattening effect, producing, as Spigel writes, "a homogenous public for national advertisers" (6).

To be clear, my analysis of *players* and *agency* will not centre on real-world, flesh and blood subjects, but how *players* and *agency* are *imagined* by corporate, commercial, and cultural institutions. I am not concerned with whether such *players* and *capacities* objectively exist. Rather, this project interrogates the discursive construction of *players* and *agency* in order to reveal and analyze the governmental logics and rationalities animating their promulgation. The overarching goal of any given *government* is to cultivate subjects that, by accepting and applying the proposed practices and techniques, will reproduce and perpetuate a particular government's principles and prerogatives in order to secure it's longevity. In Miklaucic's phrasing, irrespective of the type of government under scrutiny, a "government's aim becomes the development of individuals such as that these individuals will in turn develop the aims of government" (327).

4.6. *Better Living Through Reality TV*

My framework is chiefly informed by Ouellette and Hay's analysis of reality TV as a "cultural technology[32] that…governmentalizes by…soliciting [individuals'] participation in the cultivation of

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[31] Bratich compliments this "ontological-constructive" perspective — i.e., that hegemonic discourses produce subjects — with an ontology of audience subjectification: "Rather than assume that the discursive production of subject positions exhausts the field of audience study, the ontological approach seeks to examine the material field of practices performed by the referent of the term audiences, however elusive that referent may be" (245).

[32] *Cultural technology* frames television as at once an "object of regulation, policy and programs designed to nurture citizenship and civil society," as well as instrument to accomplish the same (Ouellette and Hay, *Better*14).

particular habits, ethics, behaviors and skills" (*Better* 13). Set against the horizon of the erosion of the American welfare state, and attendant reorganizations of state and private power,, the authors argue that the *self-actualizing* citizen-subjects imagined in/through reality TV instantiate neoliberal ideals according to the virtues of empowerment, entrepreneurialism, and self-sufficiency. Subjects embody "the 'reinvention' of government in neoliberal capitalist democracies," by enacting "post-welfare" ethics, ideals, and aspirations (Ouellette and Hay, "Makeover" 471, 472).

Similarly, my project analyzes the constitution of "ideal" subjects and capacities through the prism of popular and promotional videogame discourses produced by cultural, corporate and commercial institutions. I read these discourses as one resource through which "techniques for managing the various aspects of one's life" are proposed and advanced (Ouellette and Hay, *Better* 12). I will consider how *players* and *agency* facilitate "governing at a distance"; i.e., rather than the imposition of force, populations are taught to govern themselves (ergo, governmental power is diffuse and non-centralized), and the paradox that this principle precipitates: To be exercised "correctly," agency must first be defined and delimited; to be properly "free," subjects must learn to play by the rules.[33] As with reality TV, this project proposes that videogames constitute a "cultural technology" deployed to cultivate "habits, ethics, behaviors, and skills" (Ouellette and Hay, *Better* 13), and contour and condition our relationship with "interactive" media.

While Ouelette and Hay are concerned primarily with *neoliberal* government, I perceive *players*, *play*, and *agency* as objects over which corporate, commercial, and cultural institutions compete with one another to define. The objects are, therefore, defined and redefined in/through changing relations of power between these institutions.

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[33] The authors emphasize "game playing" as a key logic informing the composition of the "ideal" neoliberal subject: "Learning, mastering, and performing the 'rules of the game' is tantamount to successful performances of membership and citizenship" (*Better* 224, 174). Ouellette and Hay even propose the *citizen-player* as one variant (*Better* 213).

4.7. Technocracy

Ouellette and Hay surface the neoliberal logics animating reality TV content. By contrast, this project concerns *technocratic* imperatives, and how these imperatives orient the cultivation of particular ethics, practices, and behaviors in order to set the terms for technocratic citizenship. Simply put, these discourses imagine media use, and our relationship with media technology, according to principles of *play* (media are *fun*; enable us to *create*; the terms of engagement are *transparent*), and *agency* (media make us *active*; capable of *action*; we 'play' with them, they 'give' us agency). The more "natural" this relationship comes to seem, the more we accept media as the "proper" source of our agency; the more we exercise media-conferred *capacities*, the more this relationship is legitimated: Media put us in control, make us powerful, and set us free.

Kirkpatrick defines *tecnhocracy* as "an organizing principle…in which experts and technical systems hold sway over important social decisions" (61). By contrast, I do not define *technocracy* as governance by technicians and computer engineers (though their expertise is crucial), or technical systems themselves. Rather, I invoke the term to describe a "sphere of practices" (Bennett 61) encompassing the intersecting logics of cultural, commercial, and corporate institutions that seek to perpetuate the interests of *advanced techno-capitalism.* This is capitalism made possible, and driven, by digital media technology, organized around the production of digital media, as well as fuelled by the acquisition, production, and dissemination of content *through* digital media. *Technocratic government* is neither specific to a particular nation, nor located in any one region, but is protean and diffuse. Importantly, the *technocratic rationalities*, or, borrowing from Marcuse, *technorationalities*, animating this government are contingent on the centrality of media to everyday life and experience.

Accordingly, *technocratic government* imagines its "ideal" subjects according to values and facilities that enable them to function/flourish in increasingly *mediatized* environments and societies;

according, that is, to the values/virtues of *tech-savviness*, *(inter)activeness*, *autonomy*, *mobility*, *creativity*, *choice-making*, *productivity*, and *flexibility*, "one of the founding principles of global informatic control" (Galloway 100). *Players* are conceived as embedded in *mediatized* environments, the naturalization and normatization of which is one of technocracy's principle "ends." This is a self-perpetuating cycle: Our occupation of, and acclimation to, mediatized environments and existences foments a deep dependence on media. Consequently, media become both the source of, and solution to, any and all problems. Agency is most "correctly" and effectively exercised *with* and *through* media. Because agency, in this formulation, is conceived as a product of, and facilitated by, media use, agency is increasingly *technologized*; i.e., construed as an *effect* of media technology.

This formulation of media use as *agentic*, and users as *players*,[34] represents an effort to set the conditions of citizenship, and assuage the demands placed upon subjects in ever-more mediatized environments. "Modern life is extensively regulated by complex physical technologies that most people neither comprehend nor believe they can do much to influence," which incites "dependence on specialized technicians" (Bandura 143). Indeed, in some respects digital and computer media are "coterminous with the idea of society itself" (Kirkpatrick 61). Confounded or overwhelmed by technological opacity and complexity (in terms of both the assembly and functionality of devices themselves, and the corporate actors that manufacture them), we "grudgingly relinquish control to technical specialists," a self-perpetuating cycle inciting discontent, "apathy," "helplessness," and factionalism (Bandura 144, 145). The integration of sophisticated media technology into every facet of daily life, and our resulting dependence thereupon, would seem to benefit immensely from the discursive framing of these devices as innocuous, comprehensible, accessible, and *fun*. We may not

[34] The term *user* has pejorative origins. *User* was initially invoked by computer hobbyists and hackers to designate those lacking technical savvy and oblivious to the inner-workings of their machines; Luddites, in other words, who preferred machines "with easy-to-use interfaces [and] intuitive controls. The user here shades very easily into the 'consumer' who is guided to seductive retail web-sites rather than having to think in technical terms." (Kirkpatrick 122).

know how our devices work, help effectuate their planned obsolescence, are sometimes legally prohibited from *opening* them — not to mention the wealth of data we willingly provide — but *playering* ensures that we *feel* as though we control our machine(s), and not the other way around. Technocratic conceptions of *agency*, as articulated in discourses emanating from "capital-intensive and technology-driven economies of global, vertically integrated markets" (van Dijck 54), mutate agency from a precursor of collective action into the organizing principle of our relationship with media. *Agency* becomes both the distraction from, and antidote to, the frustrations and anxieties of mediatized existences. *Playering* is a form of pseudo-enfranchisement bolstering *self-efficacy* in an age of rapid technological flux and corporate monopolization, obfuscating the degree to which we are fettered by the opaque mechanisms, apparatuses, and algorithms intrinsic to digital media. Indeed, the foregrounding of the *capacities* putatively conferred by *playable media* coincides with a bracketing of the constraints they invariably impose. Further, technical competence is ever-more entwined with *cultural* competence; with our ability to *participate* as citizens *and* creators.[35]

5. METHODOLOGY

In this section, I will briefly discuss videogames in terms of their cultural and industrial importance, and how they intertwine with the history of personal computing. I will specify the term "popular and promotional," and delimit the scope of my archival research, and outline key research questions.

Nowhere is the *playering* of media audiences, the articulation of technocratic conceptions of *agency*, and the relationship with *playable media* this agency undergirds, more visible than in the popular and promotional discourses that attended the emergence of videogames as a cultural and

[35] In what reads as a rebuke to Jenkins, van Dijck claims that "[a] more profound problem with ascribing participatory involvement and community engagement to users per se, is its neglect of the substantial role a site's interface plays in maneuvering individual users and communities" (45).

commercial centre of gravity. While it could be argued that agency is not unique to advertising for videogames — is, in fact, what *all* advertising endeavours to do: trumpet the fancy new freedoms conferred by the product, while eliding/omitting all coincident constraints — these discourses articulate an acutely *trans-substantive* effect. For example, ads for the Atari 2600 declared: Don't watch TV tonight. Play it!" Though it is the TV that has been rendered an extension of the console, the slogan suggests that the true transformation is that of the *media user* from "passive" watchers into "active" *players*. A 1988 *20/20* segment titled "Nuts for Nintendo" ends with a post-mortem between anchor Barbara Walters and correspondent John Stossel. "Now I know how you're spending the holidays: watching Nintendo," says Walters. Stossel quickly corrects her: "*Playing* Nintendo."

From the airing of that segment in 1988, the videogame industry has ballooned into a $74B *per annum* global behemoth, the third most lucrative entertainment sector after broadcast and cable television.[36] One market research firm confirms that "as the industry has changed, so too has the audience…now that gaming is mainstream, audience behavior is different, too. Today, people don't just consume entertainment but increasingly play an active part in it."[37] Given their "interactive" nature, scholars such as Behrenshausen attest that videogames are "a particularly appealing object around which research regarding the 'active audience' might emerge" (873).

The history of videogames and digital media are intimately entwined. Videogames are often framed as a gateway to the domestication and mainstreaming of personal computing; as having profoundly influenced the materiality of computing and the aesthetics of interface design; and of "promoting the idea that computers could be 'fun'" (Kirkpatrick 67, 118). "Games," writes

[36] In 2015, four multinational conglomerates — Sony ($11.5B), Microsoft ($10.2B), Nintendo ($4.6B), and Electronic Arts ($4.5B) — accounted for 42% of total videogame market revenues.

[37] http://superdata-research.myshopify.com/products/global-games-market-report-may2015

Kirkpatrick, "were conspicuously central to the process whereby computers were converted from machines of big government and social control into tools of democracy and personal empowerment" (64). In other words, there is no *technocracy* or computer culture without videogames.

5.1. "Popular and Promotional"

Popular and promotional videogame discourses articulate and advance technocratic conceptions of *players* and *agency*, defining our "new relationship to Media" (Mouthrop 57) according to themes of *emancipation*, *embodiment*, and *authorship.* These themes inform how agency is conceived in our contemporary moment, and how self-governing citizen-subjects are meant to exercise (media-conferred) agency "correctly." According to this conception, *players* are symbolically liberated from parental surveillance, the confines of domesticity, suburban topographies, the material tangles of media arrays, and are enlisted as author-collaborators in the production of cultural content.[38]

I define *popular and promotional* as a category of discourse produced by cultural, corporate, and commercial institutions in order to figure *players* and *agency* "as objects of desire" (Silverstone and Haddon 63). Put simply, the chief goal of these discourses is to underscore the appeal of *playable media*, frame *agency* as conferred by these media, and promulgate *the player* as the "ideal" subject position for contemporary media use.

While some of these discourses contain mild critiques, most assiduously exalt the *agential capacities* that *playable media* purportedly deliver, while eliding/omitting coincident constraints. As such, this site reflects the *techno-utopianism*, or "electronic sublime" (Carey 107), that often attends the emergence of new technologies. My interest lies not in the "empirical" truth value of these discourses, but in how these *imagined*, *ideal players* and *capacities* reveal the logics and imperatives

[38] While *players* instantiate the logics animating technocratic government first and foremost, *productivity* suggests that this governmental formation enfolds and instrumentalizes certain neoliberal logics.

animating technocratic government. How, in other words, does discourse authorize knowledge as truthful, and support the ability of government to exercise authority, manage subjects, and regulate and regularize conduct (Ouellette an Hay, *Better* 9)? Interrogating discourses produced by cultural, corporate, and commercial institutions allows me to unpack the epistemological assumptions and rationalities underpinning the production of *players*, and that equip *players* to produce themselves.

Again, my concern is not whether these discourses achieve an intended effect. As Spigel notes regarding the integration of TV into mid-20th century homes, while "popular representations cannot definitively demonstrate how people actually used television…they do begin to reveal the discursive conventions that were formed for thinking about a new medium during the period of its installation" (186). No new medium arrives in a vacuum, but enters into, and unsettles, preexisting arrays, jockeying for position and prominence in already-established ecosystems (Kirkpatrick 56). If media, as Marvin argues, are "constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication" (Marvin 8), then discourse both reflects and participates in the negotiation and reconfiguration of these shifting networks of relations; are a *resource* available to be drawn upon to inform both how we conceptualize the place and purpose of videogames in increasingly mediatized domestic and day-to-day lives; and the constitution of subjective identity and cultural affiliations in relation *to* videogame media (Kirkpatrick 119, 122).

The corporate, cultural, and commercial institutions under scrutiny should not suggest a stable or monolithic effort to figure *players* and *agency*. While this project focuses on discourses surrounding Nintendo, other "high states, high-gloss" (Bogost 180) industrial producers will enter into the mix, including: Atari, SEGA, Sony, Microsoft, and Electronic Arts. Not only are these corporate actors fiercely competitive, but battles were sometimes waged *within* companies. It is through the lens of competition, contestation, conflict, failure, and controversy that this project's key

themes begin to clearly congeal.[39] As such, excavating this site yields protean, mutable, divergent, and contradictory discursive conceptions of *players* and *agential capacities.*[40]

While the question of whether videogames "objectively" deliver agency is irrelevant, analysis of conflicts such as the *ME3* controversy exposes asymmetries between the capacities *players* are led to expect by game marketing, and the capacities that games are *perceived* to deliver.[41] I read this incongruence as illuminating the *limitations of discourse* by bringing scrutiny to bear on the integrity of its construction. This project takes into consideration the contrasting verdicts rendered by the BBB and ASA regarding the *ME3* controversy, which reveal that the values and vernacular deployed to communicate *agency* in videogame discourses remain vague, unstable, and open to interpretation. While regulatory agencies are meant to serve as a check on discourses disseminated to popularize and promote videogames, they also legitimate commerce as the "natural" arena for negotiating the integrity of these discourses. By elaborating and perpetuating technocratic logics and rationales, regulatory discourses form an essential component of a technocratic government's network of power.

Further, certain discourses may serve multiple purposes beyond popularizing and promoting *playable media.* Fan forums, for example, facilitate the congregation of online communities, serve as interfaces between players and producers, *and* promote videogames.

5.2. Archival Research

This four decade span, from the launch of the Atari 2600 to the release of the Nintendo Switch in

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[39] The *ME3* controversy exposes a major discrepancy between how the game's "goals" (Bruni and Baceviciute 16) were conceived by its creator-developers at Bioware, and the marketing team at EA. For an account of how the rivalry between SEGA and Nintendo contributed to the constitution of the "hard core gamer," see Harris' *Console Wars: Sega, Nintendo, and the Battle that Defined a Generation.*

[40] SEGA's Digital Kid, for example, "expects technology to be different every single day. He can't remember anything before MTV and the PC. He eats shock rays for breakfast, [and] the internet is his lunch"; i.e., the mediatized citizen-player *par excellence* (Olaffson, qtd. in Harris 544).

[41] Bruni and Baceviciute write that when the control players expect falls out of synch with the control endowed by a medium, "players will *feel a loss of agency*, meaning that their intentions and expectations in relation to the system will not be fulfilled" (16, emphasis added). Agency, or the *perception* thereof, requires synchronicity between what the system permits players to control, and the control that players (are led to) expect when engaging therewith.

2017, enfolds a broad and diverse discursive spectrum including: print, television, and internet advertising; manuals and packaging; mainstream news reports, feature films, and online fan forums. Because this time frame encompasses the inception of the mainstream videogame market, earlier discourses reflect a period during which institutions endeavoured to define the role and purpose of domestic videogame media and their presumed *players*. The near-collapse of the industry, and the ebb and flow of industrial competition, precipitated various efforts to *re-define players* and *agency*.

While I am drawn to this site in part because of its size, in the interests of a feasible project, I will impose several limitations. First, this project will focus primarily on discourses surrounding Nintendo products, and discourse produced by Nintendo and its affiliates. Founded in the late 19th-century as a playing card company, Nintendo later morphed into a uniquely successful videogame producer. It has outlasted earlier market leaders (Atari), fended off fierce competitors (SEGA, which abandoned console production in 2001), and has been manufacturing consoles longer than both Sony and Microsoft. Often credited with singlehandedly resuscitating the videogame industry after the 1983 crash, in order to secure its market dominance in the 80s and 90s (roughly 80% of the videogame market, and 20% of the American toy market *in toto*), Nintendo managed third party game manufacturers through "lock-out chips" and a cartridge monopoly, and unleashed "an unprecedented intensity of promotional practice on interactive game culture," leading to the "systematic development of a high-intensity marketing apparatus" (Kline, de Peuter, Dyer-Witheford 112, 111, 118, 120). This sprawling promotional machine — print and TV advertising, a 1-800 tip line *cum* data trawling system, a game testing centre, cartoons, merchandise, *Nintendo Power* ("by 1990…the biggest-selling magazine for children"), and the feature film *The Wizard* — "rivalled any in the consumer marketing industries" (Kline, de Peuter, Dyer-Witheford 116, 118, 120).

While Nintendo is a compelling object of inquiry for its longevity, market dominance, and

marketing savvy, the company has also consistently reinvented itself. This is reflected in the company's multifaceted discursive history. While Nintendo initially figured game play as a family affair, as competition with SEGA intensified, *players* and *agency* were reimagined and redefined across myriad capital-intensive marketing campaigns, including the constitution of the *hard core gamer*. With SEGA vanquished, Nintendo veered away from claims to the most powerful hardware, and redoubled its focus on new forms of control and mobility, a lineage that now extends from the Game Boy through the Power Glove, the Wii, and now the Switch.

Though Nintendo is a Japanese company, I will limit my inquiry to English-language North American discourses. This is partly because I am an English speaker, but moreover because *players* and *agency* are culturally-specific conceptions. This project, therefore, focuses how *players* and *agency* are discursively constructed in a North American context. A principal resource will be three historically popular videogame publications: *Nintendo Power* (1988-2012), *GamePro* (1989-2011), and *Electronic Gaming Monthly* (1989-ongoing). These magazines are of interest not solely for the advertisements published therein, but as quasi-promotional apparatuses in and of themselves. As the industry evolved, a symbiotic relationship developed between these publications and game producers: each depended upon the other, and on the health of the industry as a whole, for survival.

Many of the research materials that comprise this corpus are available on-line, and I have already begun to compile my archive. This archive will be supplemented by materials available in special collections at three U.S. libraries: the John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Marketing, and Advertising History (Duke University, Durham); the Computer and Videogame Archive (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), and the Strong National Museum of Play (Rochester).

5.3. Research Questions

This project is guided by the following key questions:

1. In what ways are *agency*, *play*, and *player* historically- and culturally-contingent concepts?

- How was the use of "interactive" media contextualized in terms of *agency* and *play*?
- How were "interactive" media framed as capable of conferring agency upon users, and how were these media-conferred capacities marshalled to define a "new relationship to media"?
- What subject positions have prior conceptions of *agency* and *play* produced, and how do *technorational* conceptions draw upon and repurpose these preexisting formulations?

2. Why is *agency* construed according to themes of *emancipation*, *embodiment*, and *authorship*?

How are these themes central to *technorational* conceptions of *agency* and *players*?

- What specific *agential capacities* are privileged in popular and promotional discourses? What capacities are bracketed? What constraints are elided or omitted?
- Why are these *capacities* mobilized to scaffold the *imagined, ideal player*? How have *players* and *agential capacities* changed, diverged, synthesized, and come into conflict over the time frame under scrutiny? How are gender, race, class, and age still brought to bear on these constructions?

3. How are videogame discourses marshalled as mechanisms of governance?

- What institutions, actors, and experts constitute this network of power?
- How do discourses enable *technocratic government* to cultivate citizen-subjects and regulate and regularize conduct? How do they effectuate "governing as a distance"?
- How has the *playering* of media audiences proven leaky, and contoured and conditioned the material configuration of media, and media use, more broadly?[42]

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[42] Consider the recent material reconfiguration of the Apple TV remote to emulate the Nintendo Wii-mote. Further, the agential capacities that scaffold our self-perception as *players* transcend gaming. Even the presumably "passive" medium such as theatre is has proven open to the *playering* of audiences.

6. CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter provides a preliminary introduction to *agency* and *play* as they have been constructed and communicated over a four decade span of videogame discourses. I will index the suite of concepts relevant to my theoretical framework, describe my methodological approach, and provide a brief synopsis of my chapters, and how they have been broken down according to three key themes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter details how *agency* has been conceptualized in *sociology, technoscience, psychology,* and *"new" media and game studies*, elucidating the networks of power in which agents have been entangled, and the "problems" that these context-specific conceptions of *agency* were marshalled in response to. This chapter concludes with analysis of how *agency* was reformulated to define the "new relationship" between "interactive" media and users.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This chapter elaborates the suite of Foucauldian concepts that constitute my theoretical framework, *media governmentality* in particular. After defining "popular and promotional," and outlining the scope of my archival research, I will detail the relevant *agential themes*, and suggest "problems" that these themes were marshalled in response to.

Chapter 4: Agency as Emancipation

This chapter examines how videogame discourses embellished the emergent demographic category "teen" as agential *citizens-in-training* (Ouellette and Hay, *Better* 98). While early NES advertising stressed the centrality of the family in videogame play, SEGA's "twisted humour" forced Nintendo to reconceptualize players (Kline and de Peuter 258), and companies launched campaigns appealing to "rebellion and independence" (Kline, de Peuter, and Dyer-Witherford 119). Adolescent autonomy

and *emancipation* became recursive themes in videogame advertising, leading to the constitution of the "hard core gamer," an exclusively white, young, privileged, individual, independent male (Chess; Kinder; Kirkpatrick; Kocurek; Sarkeesian; Scharrer; and Shaw).

Videogame discourses isolate *players* from other family members, and situate play in sovereign adolescent spaces (i.e., the basement or bedroom). Accordingly, *players* escape adult oversight, both literally and figuratively "losing sight of family obligations" (Kline and de Peuter 264).[43] Marketing frames play as a proxy for sexual gratification, primarily via overt masturbatory references, suggesting that *players* are brought to full maturity through videogame play. These discourses preserve the safety and stability of suburban existence, while constructing and tapping into a new consumer category through tropes of independence and sexual liberation.

Players are figured according to preferences for violent game content, and per a nascent tech-savviness. *Players*' ability to ascertain sophisticated features of hardware and software (e.g. graphics processing) allow them to assume the position of "resident technology expert" (Kirkpatrick 121), further stratifying the family according to technical acumen. Certain marketing campaigns appropriate "moral panic" rhetoric, repurposing *addiction* as an enticing and "mature" attribute.[44]

Chapter 5: Agency as Embodiment

This chapter explores spaces of play, the bodies that play, and the accessories that, modify, shrink, and dilate their ambit. Nintendo is often at the forefront of innovations in *control* and *mobility*, through devices such as the Power Glove, the Game Boy, the Wii, and the Switch.[45] Their attendant discourses emphasize the constraints of material and domestic space, and *players*' entanglement in

[43] Parents, who neither know how the machines work, nor are capable of playing them, are excluded from play except as the procurers of expensive hardware and cartridges.

[44] The "symbolic conventions for compulsive and addictive play" construct gamers as building a "strong, often obsessive, bond with 'gaming' as a way of achieving control and subcultural membership" (Kline and de Peuter 263).

[45] A 2017 Super Bowl ad for the Switch revives a longstanding gender bias in videogame advertising, featuring a full compliment of cross-generational male players before any female players appear.

media arrays, conceptualizing *agency* according to materiality, space, corporeality, and mobility.[46]

By liberating *players* from the wires tethering them to consoles, ads for wireless controllers discursively extend *players'* mobility within their (now) *constrictive* sovereign space. Nintendo's failed *Power Glove*, proposed as a "seamless" bridge between the corporeal and virtual, is one in a series of accessories that transforms (male) bodies and movement into mechanisms of control over virtual environments and objects. Notably, this embodied agency requires the breaking down of bodies into sensory, perceptual, kinaesthetic, and haptic components, renewing, for example, the primacy of hands. These devices also often require myriad additional devices such as infrared sensors, devices that elaborate and complexify preexisting media arrays (those that the player is supposedly being "freed" from), at once "naturalizing" the mediatization of domestic space while also literally shrinking the available physical space in which *players* are permitted to move.[47]

Accessories and portable consoles effectuate agency either by *removing* material constraints (such as walls, which are often the first boundaries to be discursively obliterated), or by allowing *players* to transcend those constraints altogether. Nintendo's landmark Game Boy promised theretofore unknown mobility while eliding constraints such as battery life (one of its signature selling features), and the incompatibility of its screen with natural light. Further, while *ideal* bodies are "freed" from controller-bound postures, these devices still coerce *players* into specific corporeal and situational positions. Accordingly, this chapter examines Nintendo's Virtual Boy, its worst-ever selling console. This device affixed *players* to a (glaringly red, headache- and seizure-inducing) 3D *gamespace*, while physically immobilizing them within the *playspace.* Advertising for the Virtual Boy saw the animate console literally binding its (for some reason primitive) player in cables.

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[46] Videogame play, it should be noted, always entails a complex conjunction of "human sensory and motor functions with computer interface [apparatuses]" (Kirkpatrick 82).

[47] Concerning *docile bodies*, Foucault writes about the imposition of "subtle coercion" upon "individual bodies…of obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself - movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity…" (*Discipline* 137)

Chapter 6: Agency as Authorship

Renowned developer Warren Spector recently claimed that he is "part of a medium nothing else can do: collaborative storytelling" (qtd. in Mawson n.pag.). This mantle was taken up by Ken Levine in the creation of Narrative LEGO: "narrative-driven games that are highly replayable" (n.pag.). *Collaborative storytelling*, as such, stands as the ideal to which videogame design currently aspires.

In narrative-centric videogames such as *ME3*, *players* were granted enhanced and expansive *narrational agency* to define and direct story trajectories and meanings. Lacking a linear through-line or "ultimate moment," Murray worried that *rhizomatic* perambulation precluded the possibility of a "single encompassing version of a complex human event" (169). Manovich claimed that making *players* responsible for "[representing] the world and the human condition in it" was authorial outsourcing (44). Such responsibility, however, emerged as a coveted feature of videogame play, so much so that *narrative agency* forms the lodestone of many present-day advertising campaigns, from triple-A series such as *The Witcher*, to titles from independent publishers such as Telltale Games.[48]

These discourses construct *players* and *agency* according to Romantic, neoliberal conceptions of authorship, and intellectual output and property, figuring *players* as *creative* and *entrepreneurial* cultural consumers. The discourses surrounding configurable game narratives posit *players* as expert meaning- and choice-makers. Awareness of the causal impact of our actions in videogame diegeses foments a "reflexive understanding of ourselves as choosing subjects" (Miklaucic 332). The discursive exaltation *replayability*, as with Giddens' *could have acted differently* criterion, is less about meaning-making than the very emphasis on causal choice-making itself. Eichner makes a direct correlation between this "mastering of choice" and "the feeling of agency" (219, 211).

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[48] The collision of games and narrative also contributed to narrative's *medial turn*, most apparent in Ryan and Thon's call for a medium conscious narratology that accounts "for the ways in which contemporary narratives are crucially shaped by the affordances and limitations of the media in which they are realized" (2). Further, the quality game narratives emerged as a crucial criterion of videogame criticism and fan commentary.

Tensions over *narrational agency* and the "authorial" roles assumed by *players* were renewed as some games integrated content-generation systems permitting players to create unique virtual objects, environments, and avatars, and modify existing environments and objects. In claiming that this constitutes original creation, and that these objects should therefore be subject to copyright protection, Latowska effectively renews Romantic/neoliberal conceptions of authorship as oriented toward the production of (intellectual) property subject to legal codification and jurisprudence, and discursively posits videogame play as another engine of production. Though I noted earlier that play is often epistemologically distanced from labour, issues of *player* "authorship" have blurred these boundaries, effacing "the conventional distinction between work and play" (Kirkpatrick 25). Noting the stigmatization of *hacking*, Kirkpatrick surmises that *modding* maintains a patina of legitimacy because *players* mod within corporate bounds, and even advance corporate interests by "[prolonging] the life of media commodities, [and] introducing the kind of superficial changes that stimulate extra interest in games that would otherwise be coming to the end of their shelf lives" (124).[49]

While this chapter is framed by the release of *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, Nintendo's first expansive open-world game, and the only major title attending the launch of the Switch, this chapter focuses on how advertised promises of *narrational agency* precipitated the *ME3* controversy. The incongruous verdicts rendered by the BBB and the ASA indicate that the values and vernacular of agency in videogame advertising remain vague and open to interpretation. Further, this controversy suggests that *agential capacities* inhere the possibility of being redirected against the discourses in/through which they were constructed. Under certain circumstances, *players* are willing to take up the cause of their own enfranchisement: If you "activate" players, players may take action.

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[49] Here we are reminded of Van Dijck's claim that "user agency is defined more than ever by the capital-intensive and technology-driven economies of global, vertically integrated markets" (54).

7. TIMELINE FOR COMPLETION

August-September 2017	Chapter 1, Draft 1 Chapter 2, Draft 1 Chapter 3, Draft 1
October, 2017	Chapters 1, 2, & 3 submitted to Dr. Wagman for review Archival research: John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Marketing, and Advertising History; the Computer and Videogame Archive, the Strong National Museum of Play
November, 2017	REVISIONS: Chapters 1, 2, & 3
December, 2018	Chapter 4, Draft 1 Chapter 4 submitted to Dr. Wagman for review
January, 2018	Chapter 5, Draft 1 Chapter 5 submitted to Dr. Wagman for review
February, 2018	REVISIONS: Chapter 4 Chapter 6, Draft 1 Chapter 6 submitted to Dr. Wagman for review
March, 2018	REVISIONS: Chapter 5
April, 2018	REVISIONS: Chapter 6
May, 2018	Submit draft of full dissertation to Dr. Wagman for review
June-July, 2018	REVISIONS: Full dissertation draft
August, 2018	Submit dissertation (Draft 2) to committee members
September-October, 2018	REVISIONS: Dissertation draft, implement committee changes
November, 2018	Submit copes of dissertation draft (defence) to department
December, 2018	Defence; submit final dissertation draft to Grad. Studies

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