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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

COMMUNAL NARRATIVE PLAY IN PERENNIAL GAMES

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

COMPUTATIONAL MEDIA

by

Bjarke Alexander Larsen

September 2025

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Abstract

Communal Narrative Play in Perennial Games

by

Bjarke Alexander Larsen

Online communities tell stories with the games they play. As continual updates, recurring monetization, and platforms for community discussions have flourished, we have seen a rise in video games using ongoing development to tell stories and have a community interact with those stories and build upon them. In this dissertation I study this phenomenon, which I call *perennial games*—storytelling experiences which are perpetual, continuous, and tell an ongoing, communal story where everyone influences its future in big and small ways. I study this especially as it has grown in the years 2010-2025 in the modern rise of the live-service game, which has exploded in popularity. This is a format of storytelling that tells stories in unique ways yet also in ways that hark back to serial fiction, professional wrestling, traditional mythology, and more. Through a three-pronged focus I study: 1) the games as narrative experiences and how they facilitate narrative play through their design, 2) the communities who play them, how and why they play with the narrative and stay in these worlds for decades, and 3) the development, investigating the many joys and challenges of telling an ongoing story, following the inevitable oscillations as developers interact with the community. Through this multifaceted approach, I illustrate how perennial games cultivate community by inherently trading their mystery for familiarity, creating strong social bonds

through the communal experience of uncovering, cataloging and deciphering mystery. Pushed forward by the inherent myth that these games will continue to change, the communities around them strain against an increasing lack of mystery, both seeking the safety of their social bonds while yearning for that which brought them there in the first place. Perennial games can be alluded to as a developed garden, requiring maintenance and care, each year taking a subtly new shape, molded by its inhabitants and its caretakers, always a bit more wild than anyone can manage on their own. As it grows the people inside it grow ever more dependent on its continued existence, until the promise that kept them there breaks.

To Mom and Dad, for everything.

To the Light and to the Rats: You are anything other than the Wrong Hands.

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I still remember the exact moment the idea for this dissertation project popped into my head. It was the Black Hole in Fortnite, a game I do not play, nor have any interest in. Instead of simply shutting their servers off for an update, they fictionalized it, threw the entire game into a "black hole". It turned on a lightbulb in me. It was *storytelling*, yet not a kind of storytelling I knew how to describe. I realized the game I was playing, Destiny, was doing it too, on a much grander scale. It was not until much later I realized that what I experienced as a child in World of Warcraft was this same thing. So in some roundabout way, I wish to first acknowledge Epic Games, for making a different game than they intended. I wrote a tweet the day the Black Hole happened, exclaiming boldly to the world that I wished someone would pay me to research this. And hey, I found that someone. They might not know it but UC Santa Cruz paid me (a literal fellowship) to play Destiny. Don't tell the Engineering department, okay?

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Chapter 1

Introduction

"You don't need a PhD to play Destiny."

Tyson Green, Game Director for Destiny 2, June 2025

THE CITY IS STILL CURSED. In 2018, six people braved all odds and killed a dragon, who with its dying wish cursed the Dreaming City. Those six people were players of Destiny 2, just six out of millions who tried to be the first to defeat “Riven”, a corrupted dragon we had been tasked to kill. When they did so, the rest of us, thousands and thousands, cheered on live streams and social media before we realized killing the dragon was only the beginning: We had been lured into a trap. What unfolded after takes much longer to explain and is not important. What is important is understanding that this was the experience of a community. All of us cheered for, gasped at, and recovered from this moment. And we, the community, were the ones who had to grapple with understanding what this curse meant, how we fought back against it, and ultimately, how we learned to live with it, because the curse is still not a solved

problem. It is a fact of life in the world of Destiny. It has become another part of the ritual of play. Seven years later, the Dreaming City is still cursed¹.

None of the individual concepts that made this moment what it was—live events, online communities of fans, constant updates to games—are new. We see people band together, cheering for a common cause in sports. We see tons of fans connecting, sharing their love of a story across serial fiction. We see frequent updates to games in live-service games. We have seen virtual worlds where players form their own societies. Yet, what is unique about a moment like this, which a game like Destiny thrives on, is the unique combination of all of these elements. The community coming together about an unending story they are themselves a part of, that they live with day by day. In this work I aim to explore this unique intersection of dynamic storytelling and sustained player involvement.

Over the last 10-15 years, we have seen the rise of ongoing storytelling across a large variety of media, with many of the absolute biggest names in entertainment, from *Fortnite* to the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* to *Minecraft* to *Star Wars*, experimenting with how to keep audiences returning to the same worlds. Media companies have realized they can make a lot of money selling an ongoing, continuous experience. And it is not merely in media dedicated to storytelling, but across industries that are trying to sell continuous experiences and across communities who want to create it for themselves. We see it across fandoms (Hellekson and Busse, 2014; Gray et al., 2017). In internet folklore (Chess and Newsom, 2014; Blank, 2012; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014) and ARGs

¹The epigraph quote is from this interview https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mB_EeHshh.

(Aardse, 2013; Hansen et al., 2013; Javanshir et al., 2018). In serial television and soap operas (Hayward, 1997; Mittell, 2015; Kelleter, 2017; Carey and Adam, 2008). In K-pop (Ringland et al., 2022). And in sports (Dohrmann, 2018; Gleaves, 2017; Greenway, 1985) and professional wrestling (Sehmy, 2000; Oliva and Calleja, 2009; Oglesby, 2017; De Garis, 2005). To understand these experiences is thus not just key to understanding the current media landscape, but, I wager, key to understanding modern (western) *culture* as it is right now and will be in the future.

These experiences can be incredibly rewarding and fruitful and giving. Players find lifelong friends through these ongoing communities (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Boellstorff, 2008; Hayward, 1997). They can find romantic partners (Boellstorff, 2008). They organize their daily routines around the social circles they form through them (Dibbell, 1998; Taylor, 2006). They can become lifelong fans of fictional characters, and alter their life or mindset or values based on the stories of that world (Geraci, 2014; Schaap and Aupers, 2017; Hayward, 1997; Mittell, 2015). They will spend hours in these worlds because they find it rewarding to live in a meaningful space that matters to them and where they might matter (Hong, 2015; Nitsche, 2008; Glas, 2013; Saler, 2012). At the same time, however, and often for the same reasons, these experiences can be dangerous. They can be intoxicating. People have and will damage themselves and others to partake in riveting, toxic communities that form in online communities, and thus we need to be vigilant and careful in the designing and care-taking of them (Busch et al., 2015; Turpeinen, 2023; Sparrow et al., 2021). We have seen the danger of communities harassing individual developers after minor patch changes (Siu, 2017;

deWinter et al., 2017; Laato and Rauti, 2021). We have seen marginalized community members get shunned and torn apart (Dibbell, 1993; Koster, 2018; Grayson, 2025). The early fear-mongering about gaming addiction spiked because of the continuous experience of MMOs (Kuss, 2013; Nardi, 2010). The authors of these experiences have a responsibility to be mindful of this (Koster, 2017; deWinter et al., 2017). You can hold a lot of sway over your audience when you dangle the end of a 10-year plotline in front of them, and they will do unhealthy, harmful things to experience it if you are not careful.

I know this is all true because I have witnessed first-hand the power of continuous narratives. I grew up in the “golden age” of MMOs. I played *World of Warcraft* in elementary school and Runescape before that. Destiny has been an active part of my social life for over 6 years. I am unavoidably part of the “Harry Potter generation”. I have seen friends around me equally enraptured. It is undeniable that longform, ongoing media has affected my life throughout its entirety. The idea of an evolving, shared story we grow up with is part of who I am, continuously reflecting upon, criticizing, praising, discussing, and contemplating a story that is still being told. I have experienced being a part of a community all experiencing the same story, where those who tell it are active participants in that community. I have seen people’s lives be enchanted as their routine actions become imbued with meaning and social bonds. The stories told in these worlds can become life-altering myths that shape how we see the world.

The experiences I discuss are perpetual, temporally continuous and tell a single, ongoing story with a community of players. As games, they are sometimes called

“live-service” games or “games as a service”, but I wish to avoid this term to more closely describe how they are experienced as stories, rather than describing their distribution. Thus, I have decided to name these experiences something else which captures their ongoing growth: “*Perennial*” experiences, or perennial games. This more closely captures how they feel; like a cared-for plant which grows in predictable patterns yet changes year over year. This has the added benefit that we can compare beyond games into broader perennial experiences, across serial media and sports and mythology.

I choose to look at perennial *games*, though, because of how perennial storytelling has come to the forefront through games in the last 10-15 years. Modern perennial games, like World of Warcraft, League of Legends, Destiny, and Fortnite, are cultural touchstones, and have redefined and reshaped the medium and entangled themselves in larger culture. While the virtual worlds and MMOs of the 90s and 2000s were extensively studied by anthropologists and game scholars (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Taylor, 2006; Bartle, 2004; Nardi, 2010; Boellstorff, 2008), this modern incarnation has received far less scholarly attention. It is thus paramount that we properly investigate this specific moment in time to understand how this happened, what the possibilities within this form are, and how it has shaped our culture. I am shifting my viewpoint of these digital, online worlds as virtual “places” as they were often viewed in the 2000s, to being perennial experiences which tell ongoing stories. To do this, we need to understand how perennial experiences work, to develop a language on how they can be designed to be effective, inclusive, and healthy. Perennial experiences can create thriving communities where people feel a part of something greater, and give people a

chance to *play* with each other, with the world, and with narrative.

I consider this “narrative play” of a community key to the perennial experience. The communities play with the storytelling: They make up new stories, they discuss what is true about them and what they mean. They act out the pre-scripted stories and interpret them, become part of them, and mold them into reality. The authors might create the stage the players play on, but the players will affect the stage as surely as animals walk through nature, creating paths in their wake. Because perennial games are not a static stage but a morphing and shape-shifting one that must push the old aside to make room for something new. A stage that never looks the same way twice and yet is repetitive and cyclical, a stage that has friction, that breaks and heaves, that is sometimes held together with duct-tape. A kind of stage that exists not to display but to play *with*.

Perennial games are not individual but communal, and thus I am here also leaning on an existing communal practice as a key lens: Myth. Mythology is a communal storytelling practice which does not only create stories but discourses, which construct cultural truths about the world, told and retold by communities to explain the world they live in. It intertwines the fiction of the narrative with the communal experience of it, and helps us see how narrative is shaped in an experience which repeats through countless retellings, shaping the myth into reality. Myth thus serves as a powerful lens to understand perennial narratives and narrative play, because myths are formed through narrative play, as both players and developers, over time, affect the shared mythology of the narrative world. We create myths with a perennial game through the

interplay of the author, the players, and the game itself, and these myths in turn affect our experience of it.

You may not need a PhD to play Destiny, as Tyson Green said (see chapter epigraph), yet what Destiny (and many other perennial games) do to cultivate their communities and tell ongoing stories is worthy of study.

1.1 Research Questions

Based on all the above, my primary research question is thus:

How do players and developers doing narrative play with perennial games as they have been developing in the years 2010-2025 cultivate community and how is that play complicated and enabled by the ongoing development of mythology around that game?

Or in short:

How does narrative play in perennial games cultivate community?

I will answer this through three directions, all under the primary lens of this dissertation, myth and perennial games. As will be shown in section 2.2, these three directions correspond with the three (inter)actors of a perennial experience: The audience, the author, and the game itself. Each of these directions is focused on their own sub-question, which I will briefly cover here:

The first direction is to understand the *games* themselves, and how they as storytelling artifacts create the possibility space for narrative play and emergent myths to arise. We cannot understand the possibilities and flaws of storytelling in perennial games without understanding how their design leads to certain narrative play or not.

Thus, we must first understand how this is happening in current and previous perennial games through a deeper analysis of the games themselves. I choose to focus on the two games *Destiny (2)* and *Final Fantasy XIV*, with the following question:

Direction 1: How have perennial games facilitated narrative play?

The second direction is one of *community*. It is important to understand how the community itself performs narrative play and experiences the narrative of a perennial game, and thus the work will be focused on understanding the players, through qualitative studies of the people themselves. Myth will be used as a lens here to understand how the communities are shaped around the myths they are part of creating, and how that informs their collective understanding of their experience. Thus, the research question for this direction is:

Direction 2: Why and how do communities create mythology with a perennial game through their narrative play?

The third and final direction is to understand how the *development* of a perennial game itself affects the experience. Perennial games, as “live-services” are developed through a fundamentally different approach than traditional, fixed products and the developers will need to respond in real time to events occurring in the game. In essence, the developers, too, are partaking in a kind of narrative play with their community. I seek to understand this through informed, personal practice. Hence, the final research question:

Direction 3: How does the live development of a perennial game itself utilize narrative play?

These three directions should not be seen as exclusionary but combinatory, each exploring this primary question in three separate ways, to approach a more holistic picture of narrative in perennial games. By answering these three questions we can approach perennial experiences with a greater understanding of all the elements that help create them, thus more comprehensively answer the research question. Before we proceed, however, I will need to add some context on this dissertation in the current moment of 2025, and how perennial games are already shifting from what I am studying here.

1.1.1 The Intended Audience

This research is meant to serve several audiences. First of all, one primary audience for this work are people studying, teaching, or understanding games, or interested in knowing how games tell stories. This work will identify and discuss storytelling practices in games which are otherwise rarely discussed as narrative vehicles, and it will thus prove useful to people wishing to discuss, disseminate, or think about narrative in games in general. The second intended audience is game developers themselves, especially those who make live-service games or narrative games, who can learn much about how this form functions and has functioned, and how the design structures of ongoing multiplayer games can be used to tell stories in practice.

Yet, the audiences of game studies and game developers are only part of the intended audience. As mentioned, and as will be clear (see chapter 4), perennial narratives expand far beyond games. Thus, this work will be relevant to people trying to build not just games but *communities*. And even more specifically, trying to tell stories with and for communities, for any reason. Many of the findings here will be directly applicable or modifiable into other contexts, such as HCI, anthropology, Engineering or, really, to anyone trying to build an (online) community for any context or reason, be they television writers, webcomic authors, influencers, academics, local shops hosting community events, or even dungeon masters running tabletop campaigns, and many, many more. The lenses and framing I present in this work of myth, ritual, and play I see as fundamental to how communities are formed in ongoing narrative experiences. Thus understanding the dynamics of these processes is important if you wish to build better, more engaging, and safer communities and tell stories with and for them. While some findings will be unique to how games operate, many of the findings can be extrapolated outwards into practices of media, community, storytelling, and culture.

This is all to say, I am not focusing on games in this work because it is only applicable to games. I focus on games as a consequence of scope and self-admitted bias (see section 1.4), yet this should not be seen as exclusionary. My focus on games serves more as a lens of focus, highlighting specificities with which others can pick and choose from as they will. I will return to the differences between game communities and other communities later (see section 21.4.1). The following section will provide further context on why it matters to study ongoing storytelling in games *right now*.

1.2 On the Moment

When I started this project in 2020, it seemed like live service games might take over the entire game industry (Schreier, 2017a), much to the lament of many who enjoy the traditional, focused single player experiences they had grown up on². In the late 2010s, League of Legends and mobile games (estimated 3 players billion worldwide (Ball, 2025)) and Fortnite (110 million monthly players (Astle, 2024)) had changed the industry forever. With major companies like EA and Sony betting on live-service projects, claiming single player games were dead (Makuch, 2017), it seemed it was causing a landslide shift that is still felt today. No longer were games defined by their launches, no longer was a game doomed if it did not review well. This was the era of “failed” projects rising from the ashes, like *Rainbow Six: Siege*, *Destiny*, *No Man’s Sky*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, and (as people often forget) *Fortnite*³. This coincided with an explosive rise in the overall revenue in the games industry that far exceeded expectations, from \$79 billion USD in revenue in 2010 to \$197 billion USD in 2021 (Ball, 2025)

Yet now, in 2025, we look at a different picture. We look, first, at an industry in freefall. This is not just live-service games (although, it is also) but the Western game development industry is currently collapsing under its own weight of continued exponential growth over the last 20 years. As the detailed presentation by Ball (2025) highlights, this growth lasted until 2021, and then it stopped. Within this growth

²And, hey, I enjoy those too!

³I here refer to the initial release of Fortnite, which later became known as "Fortnite: Save the World", a wave-based co-op survival game. This released to medium acclaim and praise yet did not change the world, until two months later when Fortnite’s Battle Royale mode (now just called "Fortnite") launched.

(and as a partway cause to it) is live-service games, which promised continued and consistent revenue streams through constant updates, keeping a single game forever fresh for players with the promise of ever-expanding content. This gave companies, for a time, a way to grow outside of stagnating prices for boxed product games⁴, as companies each placed bets on creating the next "forever game". And as new games continued to crop up, entire new genres were established (from MOBAs to Battle Royales to "looter shooters") and live service games seemed to work—until they didn't. Increasingly high profile failures arose and new games seemed to last shorter and shorter until they were pulled offline, culminating in the infamous example of *Concord* going offline after only two weeks of live service (McWhertor, 2024a,b). Meanwhile, the existing live-service games established throughout the 2010s were still ongoing and continuing to get updates, and, importantly, still played.

In one of the report's most illuminating statistics, in 2023, 60% of all playtime of PC and console games (Xbox+Playstation) were on live-service games released before 2019, with another 16% of playtime on games released in 2019-2021 (Ball, 2025). Players in 2025 still play live-service games, but they play the *same* live-service games they already did. Breaking through with a new one is becoming increasingly difficult in a market where players already have their communities and friends and rituals of play. Players are still playing the games released in the initial explosion of live service games and have little reason to switch.

Of course, you can find counter-examples. The surprise success of *Helldivers*

⁴And it seems now we are at the precipice of companies going back to increasing boxed product prices (Zimmer, 2025).

2, shortly after Concord, was a joyous example of a live-service game actively using the live-service model to provide a unique experience, actively playing with players through their “Galactic War” system⁵. Nevertheless, I am writing this dissertation about an industry that seems decidedly less likely to produce new successful live-service games than when I started, and yet struggles to find anything else to fall back to.

With this dissertation, I am not aiming to solve this problem of the game industry. Instead, I am aiming to illuminate an aspect of it which has rarely been discussed in the financial reports and discussions on the efficacy and value of live-service games: Their ability to tell stories and create communal narrative experiences. This can help explain both how the video game industry grew in this manner and paradoxically also why it stagnated. Thus, one of the key benefits of looking at the game industry right now, contrasted to any other perennial media, is that its current status can tell us something very important about perennial experiences in general, and how they develop. Because, as we will discuss in section 22.1, the very same effect that causes these games to be so popular, binding communities together, causes them to eventually stagnate if not challenged over time.

The significance of my work in this moment is thus twofold: In understanding how perennial experiences tell stories with their community, I will offer answers that help understand how communities create stories and develop a strong sense of belonging and communal home in online media. In this we can understand some of *why* 60% of all playtime in 2025 goes to games developed before 2019, and why these communities

⁵This was in fact not unique, but reminiscent of older design philosophies of players directly “game-mastering” the world of the players, as we will discuss later (section 7.1).

continue to exist. Secondly, I will study the successes and failures in perennial games and how it has impacted developers and players. This can in turn be used to reflect back onto what makes storytelling in perennial experiences at large matter to their communities. Ultimately, these findings will help offer lenses and guidance and frameworks for building better communities around more inclusive, engaging perennial experiences in the future, which do not as easily create toxic environments led by compulsion or pressure, but by genuine interest, satisfaction, and comfort.

1.3 Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation is structured into five parts. The first will be introducing the primary necessary literature and context of perennial games, the core lens of myth, as well as similar forms of media which will prove useful. The next three parts will cover the primary directions of study, each discussing perennial games, the communities, and the development, respectively. Then, we conclude and summarize the entire dissertation in the final part, bringing all previous work together.

Part one (chapters 2–5) is about covering the necessary background. Chapter 2 will focus on defining perennial games as a term and how I have used it throughout my work, including reflections on how it has changed over time. This includes a comparison with similar terms and descriptions of how perennial games tell stories. Chapter 3 will discuss the core lens of mythology which will apply to the rest of the work as a fundamental lens. Chapter 4 will review similar forms to the perennial game, as much

can be learned from studying previous media forms. This includes investigating serial fiction, sports and wrestling, emergent narrative, and "internet narratives" (including YouTube videos, ARGs, music, and more). After these introductory chapters, chapter 5 serves as a brief interlude, which will define the fundamental theory of communal narrative in perennial games, contextualizing each future direction of the dissertation through a preliminary understanding of how perennial games cultivate community.

Then, the dissertation will dive into the three major directions which will focus on each research question in turn. These function independently, and can thus be read in any order, yet are designed to be interlocking and therefore only together do they provide the full picture.

The first direction (chapters 6–11) is about the games themselves. After a brief introduction of this chapter's case studies (chapter 6), we will cover a brief historical overview of perennial games (chapter 7), which will help outline the differences in design ethos across historical perennial games and the modern ones. Then, we will discuss the concepts of space and ritual (chapter 8) as they relate to storytelling, which will serve as the primary analytical lens with which we will study these games. Next, I will perform an in-depth analysis of the perennality of the two games at the core of this dissertation: *Destiny* and *Final Fantasy XIV* (chapters 9, 10, 11). This analysis will discuss how they have each told stories over time and how their communities inform and interact with this narrative, and ultimately, how the fictional narrative of the game reflects its perennial aspects, its design, and its development.

The second direction (chapters 12–16) focuses on the community. Fol-

lowing a review of the previous work on online communities and the magic circle (chapter 12), discussing how communities play with narrative in perennial games, this direction will focus on the work I have undertaken to understand the community of one perennial game: *Destiny 2*. I will cover the intensive ethnographic and qualitative work I have done since 2021 to understand the *Destiny* community, including a survey, interviews (chapter 13, 15), and a long-running online ethnography (chapter 14). The findings from these will be covered individually in turn, before discussing how each of the findings from these studies can be taken holistically (chapter 16).

The third direction (chapters 17–20) will investigate the development of perennial games. This starts with a literature review of game development studies, specifically focusing on the shift to live-service games (chapter 17). Then, I will describe and discuss a series of interviews I conducted with game developers (chapter 18), which will be used to discuss the many joys and challenges of perennial game development. This will inform my personal development efforts (chapter 19), covering the development of my own original game *“Telegram from the Choir Train”*. All of this will be used to discuss what I have named the “life-cycle” of perennial games (chapter 20), which will help describe the fluctuations of a perennial game over time, as well as cover the many challenges of perennial development.

Part five (chapters 21–22) will then discuss the entire work holistically, and reflect on how each direction answers the research questions and provides greater insight into how perennial games cultivate myth and community (chapter 21). The limitations of this work, what I failed to cover and what could be covered in future work will also be

discussed here, before speculating about the broader impacts (chapter 22) of this work outside of games and the immediate cultural artifacts discussed in this work alone.

1.4 Positionality

Much of this work is about communities of diverse groups of people, be they players of online games or developers. In studying this, it is necessary to consider my own position and reflexivity, especially as I act as a member researcher as is standard in ethnographic research (Charmaz, 2006; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Boellstorff, 2008). I do not claim to provide a complete view of the communities I have studied, but rather a subjective, contingent view of what I have seen. Thus it is necessary that I explain in greater detail who I am and how I got here, and provide you with an understanding of my inherent assumptions about life, video games, and the world, as this no doubt colors all of my work in this dissertation.

First off, starting with the basics, I am a cis, straight, White Danish man. I am 32 years old as of the publication of this dissertation. Due to this, my experience on the internet is very privileged. I am never harassed for how my voice sounds online. My accent, similarly, can pass as “American” and thus I, despite my name, have an easy time blending in in most situations where the expected normativity is White, straight, English-speaking, and Guy (read: Most of the internet). That said, I am socially anxious and rarely speak in social settings with strangers and thus rarely use voice chat (or even text chat) in games not with my friends. Much of my growing up

happened in relationship to the internet and in response to it, and a place where I learned much about my tastes, my sensibilities, and my viewpoints. I cannot claim to have the experience of a marginalized person on the internet and I cannot claim to speak to their experience. What I can do is listen and pay attention, and I have many friends and people I play with who identify as marginalized, be that through being gay, trans, queer, of color, international, or otherwise. Living in America for the past five years has given me a much greater appreciation for how little I know about these experiences and the importance of understanding them.

I was born in 1993 and I have played video games my whole life. And while I have played so many different kinds of games it is impossible for me to recount here, for the purpose of this, there are really only two games that matter: World of Warcraft (WoW), and Destiny 2. As a child (in the formative years of 12-15), I played WoW until around the release of Wrath of the Lich King (in 2008), with occasional dips back in during Cataclysm (2010) and Battle for Azeroth (2018). This experience of WoW in my elementary⁶ school years was instrumental to what I appreciate about games in general. While there were many high moments and grandiose spectacles from WoW that I remember fondly, such as the Opening of Ahn'Qiraj, or the release of Burning Crusade, it is not only the bright moments which matter most, but the daily life of it. The hours I spent in *Warsong Gulch*, playing at being a strategist. The one quest where I helped a turtle across a desert. When I ran around with a friend in Orgrimmar, asking high level players for pittance gold to buy the expensive mounts. When I made silly

⁶In Denmark, we have one school for our 1-9th grade until high school, and we do not differentiate between elementary and “middle” school.

machinima for no one but myself. And then even later, after I stopped playing, and I continued to follow the story of the world long after I stopped playing. In some ways, this work would have never happened without these memories. I have little desire to play the game today, because I now see what I was enthralled by back then in so many other places. It is still this phenomenon I want to understand, it is still this “*something*” World of Warcraft managed to do that I am chasing.

Secondly, I play Destiny, and have since 2017, when Destiny 2 released on PC. While I joke that the Black Hole event in Fortnite (Webster, 2019) was what caused me to be interested in live-service storytelling (see Acknowledgments), that would not have happened was I not already playing Destiny. For in Destiny, I found the “something” that World of Warcraft had initially sparked, the feeling of being a part of a greater, evolving world, of being able to live inside a myth of our own making. Throughout the work on this dissertation I was part of—and an admin of one of—several smaller Discord communities with whom I played Destiny. And while they changed and shifted in nature over time, it has remained true that many of them are people I would consider friends, and their perspectives on and activities in the game have directly colored and influenced my own time with the game, both in terms of my viewpoints but also directly in my practical ability to play the game, as it is with those people I have done raids and countless other group activities, which would not have been possible without them.

I *like* Destiny. This might sound like a strange statement to highlight, yet I do consider it important to indicate that I did not do this scholarship out of an obligation or entirely from an academic desire to understand a new phenomenon I was unfamiliar

with. I do enjoy the playing of Destiny and I played before this dissertation and I will likely continue to play it afterwards.

1.4.1 Academic Positionality

I am a deeply interdisciplinary researcher. So much so that I have often struggled defining my methods and inspirations to any individual audience because I am inevitably pulling from several schools of thought, traditions, and methodologies at once. I was trained in media technology, a practical education focused on the development of media using technology, and through that I discovered interactive narrative as a scholarly field—with its interdisciplinary roots (that I was unaware of at the time) stemming from game studies and computer science and AI research (which in turn has roots in psychology and engineering). This led me to game studies (which has roots in humanities), following traditions of understanding games as artistic expressions and designed, cultural objects. I made social simulations (Larsen et al., 2015) and wrote meta-reflections on emergent narrative (Larsen et al., 2019). I am (and what a sentence this is) a child grown up post-"ludonarrative debate" (Frasca, 2003b), grown up within the inherent fracture this created, within the natural inclination to attempt to mend this “divide” between games and stories, and find alternative understandings which reconcile them. Much of my master’s work was about this very thing, whether I wanted it or not. I studied under professors who came from film and VR studies and cognitive psychology, who each informed my relationship to narrative and how I understand interaction, virtuality, storytelling, and play. I learned from the internet, as I read or

watched analyses of games by folks like Austin Walker (2015), Brendan Keogh (2012), James Clinton Howell (2007), Cameron Kunzelman (2019) Jacob Geller (2019), Chris Franklin (2019), and many others, who took the study of games seriously and applied thoughtful analyses to them as I had seen done on other media, without the pretenses of it being abnormal or quaint to do so.

During my time in university, and for the years after, I learned game development, both the practical tools of engines and programming, and the complicated processes of production, teamwork, and organising groups of people towards a creative project. I learned how to do creative writing and explore the process of crafting stories into the world based on ideas. This has informed me greatly in understanding the processes of creativity, and how ideas become implemented objects, and the difficulty that entails.

As I undertook the work of this dissertation, I had to learn many new methods due to the nature of what I was studying. As I moved into the realm of communities I had to approach it from angles that understand communities. I leaned heavily on anthropology and ethnography, especially the foray from anthropology into video games in the 2000s by people like Boellstorff (2008); Nardi (2010); Pearce and Artemesia (2009); Taylor (2006) and Bainbridge (2012) investigating MMORPGs as sites of ethnography, as sites of society. Today, ethnography is much more commonly appreciated as broader than physical sites, with online ethnography (or netnography (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2022)) being more commonplace. Using my own subjectivity as part of the research is an inherent part of my work, and thus these methods were a natural fit for me.

I here also owe much to fandom studies and community studies (Gray et al., 2017), which have inspired me throughout to understand and appreciate the productive and ever-lasting power of fandom, while also being acutely aware of its negative tendencies (Hellekson and Busse, 2014; Ball, 2017; Jenkins, 1992). Jenkins wrote that he wrote about fans *"both as an academic (who has access to certain theories of popular culture, certain bodies of critical and ethnographic literature) and as a fan (who has access to the particular knowledge and traditions of that community)"* (Jenkins, 1992, p. 5). I am much the same way. I have played games my whole life and many of the games I discuss here I played before I studied them academically. Finally, I have also been inspired by work in cultural studies and media studies, such as that done by Noah Wardrip-Fruin (2020), Soraya Murray (2020, 2021) and others. I do not think the work on mythology and serial studies done in this dissertation would have been possible without the introspection these sources have given me over the meaning of media in culture, and the place of games inside it.

I am also (and this is perhaps controversial to mention but I cannot see how I would be honest without) deeply rooted in my upbringing. Here I especially owe much to my father, a trained toxicologist turned Professor of Participatory Innovation, whose research has endlessly inspired me to dig deeper, understand the many complexities of the mundane, to appreciate the social relationships that govern everyday interactions. His work on complexity, inspired by the philosophies of Hegel, Goffman, Mead, Elias, and Dewey, is ingrained in me in ways I am still untangling to this day. While I do not explicitly use many of these sources in this work, astute readers will undeniably be able

to spot the connections if you look carefully. This upbringing is often why I feel dissatisfied with both pure qualitative and quantitative methods, and why I have found myself estranged by many typical scientific methods. Instead, I found much comfort in reading Svend Brinkmann (2014)’s *“Doing without Data”*, which describes working abductively, rather than inductively or deductively. Working abductively means stumbling over the particular, finding a situation which does not conform to your understanding, and asking questions about how it could be so. I find most of my life I have been working abductively without realizing it. I have always been more focused on the particular, always learned from personal experience rather than experiment. I wanted to study narrative in live-service games because they appeared in front of me, and I did not understand them. These past 5 years have been me trying to explain that situation. Fornite, a game I don’t even play, turned their game into a black hole for over 36 hours, and here I am, five years later, turning this moment around in my head again and again.

1.4.2 Notes on Method

While I will be discussing the specificities of methods in the relevant chapters, I wanted to take a moment here to discuss my general framing surrounding methodology in scientific work, which informs how and why this dissertation is structured as it is.

In studying something as vast, contextual, and ever changing as perennial games, I knew using static, one-shot methods was not going to work. As we will see in the chapter defining perennial games, their very essence relies on the interplay between several factors and thus focusing too narrowly on one was going to miss out on

potentially critical context. I have opted to employ different methods for different areas of this work as fit best the need at the time. Thus, my research pulls from different strands of research with differing goals and metrics of success. I have tried to alleviate that as best as I can, yet because of this complexity, it deserves some extra words to describe how these methods are situated in my work.

Since I am researching both complex media objects, the communities surrounding them, and the development process of them, and furthermore doing that through the lens of myth, I am inevitably relying on my own perspective. Barthes, who read mythologies in (his) modern society (see chapter 3) stressed that his readings of myths in society are necessarily subjective and contingent: One can only read a myth as it appears here and now to oneself (Ford, 2022, p. 29). This is my fundamental view as well: I am reading perennial games from a subjective, contingent perspective.

When studying communities, I am leaning on a constructivist understanding of qualitative inquiry (Charmaz, 2006) and data in general, meaning I do understand and acknowledge my own part of the process of *constructing* the data I am gathering, not merely collecting it. The findings of this dissertation are unique to how I have conducted this research. This does not mean they are invalid, merely that they are situated. The work of ethnography, as Boellstorff (2008) says, generates *situated knowledge*. This is also true for the interviews I conducted. As Briggs (1986) says, assuming that interview procedures can be both entirely reliable and valid is a fallacy, as this would require assurance that each participant understands the meaning of each question equally, which is difficult due to the varying socio-cultural contexts they may be in. Thus, ensuring

validity requires asking different people the question *differently* (foregoing reliability). In doing so, we as an interviewer stand “*as a co-participant in the construction of a discourse*” (Briggs, 1986) and are not merely “extracting” data from an individual. All of the data and findings in this work are constructed by me, in contextual relationship with the subjects I was studying, in this specific moment in time.

Secondly, I am studying live objects which morph and change with each month and thus what I was able to do at any given time was dependent on the possible activities within the game(s). Thus, this work is dependent on the mere fact of when I did it: I studied Destiny 2 and Final Fantasy XIV in the years 2020-2025, and these games were something specific in that time they were not before and are not after. I do want to highlight this because it showcases just how differently I needed to treat the reading of these games. Even if I ignored all the community discussions and “simply” investigated the ludic properties of the games I investigated, I would still have issues with what the game “was” at any given time. And while I could plan somewhat based on expected release schedules, these would change. In fact, my dissertation schedule changed several times because of Destiny’s changing schedule, as I literally had to adapt when I did what based on when Destiny released content. That, perhaps more than anything, shows how studying perennial games works⁷. Furthermore, this is not just affected by the games, but also the online contexts in which it is done. As Ringland et al. (2022) argues, social media like Twitter and YouTube use cultural signifiers as part of their

⁷Another fun anecdote along these lines: For a presentation, I wanted to get a picture of a particular part of Destiny 2 in daytime (normally something that changes every so often in real time). So I logged into Destiny, only to realize that the current event in Destiny meant that it was eternally night in that area for the next 2 months. Thus, I never got my picture in time for the presentation.

recommendation algorithms, and filter content based on opaque processes. As I did online ethnography, I was being given certain parts of the communities and not others due to this algorithm. Therefore, this work is, by its nature, not reproducible, and was never intended to be. I aim to be clear and transparent about my methods, but this is not to allow reproducibility but merely for others to understand the perspective and position within which these findings were constructed.

Finally, I am a creative as well, and so I wanted to utilize that skillset as part of my research. This follows a long tradition (especially in Computational Media) of artists and computational practitioners as researchers (Mateas and Stern, 2003; Mason, 2021; Kreminski et al., 2020; Compton et al., 2015; Junius et al., 2022), something also seen in the methods of research through design (Gaver, 2012). This further provides me with an additional situated perspective as I can and have been part of the processes of making and maintaining a perennial game. As Mason (2021) highlights, many of the advancements in interactive narrative have been made through the development of creative artifacts (and the tools used to make them). The value of this form of research is often judged differently than the value of empirical or philosophical science, as *“the existence of a new genre of artifact is itself proof that an invention has occurred”* (Mason, 2021, p. 10). Thus, the need for (and efficacy of) evaluation in the sense of empirical assurance that the artifact “does what it was intended to do” is not sensical within this logic—the existence of the artifact is the proof itself. As a creative work, it does need to be played (as we will see, that is a requirement for a perennial game) and so I do not mean that it should sit in a vacuum and “exist”, yet it does not need rigorous user

studies to determine its worth. The value of the creation of the game I made, Telegrams from the Choir Train, comes in the from its existence as a novel artifact, and of what I learned from it, which will be shared and connected to the other findings. This is intended to function as learnings for future designers of perennial games, who through reading this will understand in more detail the experience of developing a perennial game.

This is all to say this work may perhaps appear eclectic or sporadic, covering many different methods, with each direction potentially covering a dissertation-worthy methodology on its own. I did not choose this diversity of methods due to an outgrown ambition (though, some might argue that I am too ambitious for my own good), but rather because I do believe there is value in the vagrancies of interdisciplinarity which are lost if we pick only one primary method. It would have meant that the remaining parts would be stronger on their own, but it would also mean the holistic understanding of the area in question would not have been as full. This does come at a cost: There is value in deeply doing one thing well. Yet, I do not think I, personally, could have done this work any other way. I do sincerely believe there is value in asking larger questions than one cannot definitively answer, and learning something in the process of attempting. I did not set out on this project to completely and definitely map a territory in such detail that it would not need to be mapped again. I set out to draw a map by hand of a space I had not yet seen depicted, using tools that had not been used together. I believe such a map is also useful. I will leave it to others to do the cartography omitted herein.

1.5 Terms and Lenses

Before we proceed into the heart of the matter, I will discuss a few of the key terms and lenses that will recur throughout this dissertation, which will help contextualize my framing of the work. This section is called terms and “*lenses*” because I subscribe strongly to the notion defined by Stacey Mason (2021) of viewing the world not through boxes, marking borders and exclusions, but through lenses. Instead of asking the question “*Is a ____ a ____?*” we ask the question “*If we view ____ as a ____ blank, what can we learn?*” For example, instead of marking clearly what is and is not a game, we can instead view something *as* a game, discuss it with the language of games, and see where that takes us.

This heavily frames much of the work in this dissertation. If we view live-service games as narrative experiences, what do we learn? What do we learn if we view them as sites of narrative play? What do we learn if we view those played narratives as myth? These are the kinds of questions that led me onto this work and this is how I have undertaken it, not by defining these games *as* myth, but by exploring what it means *if we view them as such*. Thus, do not treat definitions in this dissertation as de facto or complete, but rather as lenses I define because doing so is useful for understanding the subject of my analysis.

The terms and lenses we will discuss in this section are “narrative play”, a foundational term throughout this work, followed by a delineation of the differences between the terms author and player, the differences between the virtual and the real,

before finally understanding how I look at community.

1.5.1 Narrative play

If we have narrative "instruments" (Kreminski and Mateas, 2021a), it is logical that we have narrative play. Constructing narratives with narrative instruments would be narrative play—that is what we do with musical instruments. But as Kreminski shows, there are more ways to experience narrative instruments than a pure author (creator) relationship. That would be like saying the only interaction with an instrument is composition. We play existing pieces on instruments. We can fulfill prescribed roles in games, executing predefined scripts. But we also do more than “play” on instruments. Practice. Repair. Ignore. Improvise. Work on. Warmup. Exercise. As an interactable object, as a social object, instruments might be designed for one purpose, but they get used for many others—both to facilitate and move towards that activity, but also in subversion of it. This is present in games too, as we already have research showing how “games” are larger than just “played activities” (Calleja, 2012; Taylor, 2006; Pargman and Jakobsson, 2008) (see Section 12.2). We can play in games and we can not play in games. This kind of reworking, too, is narrative play.

But play is much larger than games or musical instruments. Sicart’s view on play shows how it is appropriative (Sicart, 2014), it is able to turn objects not meant for play into played objects. We can turn almost anything into a musical instrument by hitting it rhythmically. We can turn any space into a play-space, changing its meaning through made-up yet socially agreed-upon rules. In the types of games we will be

looking at (perennial games), this type of play will also be present, shown through players interacting with the game outside the game, turning aspects of their daily life, websites, real-life spaces and real-life interactions into parts of the play-spaces, where the players are playing with and around the narrative of the game. This, too, is narrative play.

Narrative play is, in broad strokes, when a person is “playing with narrative”, whether that be pre-scripted narrative or improvised, whether that be wholly compositional or directed. The narrative play I am focused on here is simultaneously more broad than play on instruments and more specific than free play. I am focused on experiences where players are not composers or writers but actors. Where the play happens not on instruments but stages—play-acting rather than playwriting. Stages allow for movement but still provide a frame, they allow creativity and expression but their boundaries are more set, a script and a director is more in control. Events are introduced from on high that alter the story. The players are not in charge of the foundation, but merely their own actions inside it.

1.5.2 Author and Players

Throughout this dissertation, I will be talking about authors⁸ and players a lot, and therefore it is important to understand how I view these complicated subjects.

Much of the work I reference in this dissertation often describes the players or the audience as “something more” than a passive audience (Jenkins, 2008; Pearce and

⁸I use author and designer and developer here interchangeably, as the person or people in charge of creating the experience.

Artemesia, 2009; Taylor, 2006; Castronova, 2008). Sometimes this lands on the idea of “co-authorship” or ‘co-creation”, where players (or audience members) are considered part of the creative process on par with the authors of the experience. This is prevalent in the literature on virtual worlds and online communities (as will be discussed in chapter 12) (Jenkins, 2008; Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Taylor, 2006; Castronova, 2008), who saw the great possibilities of communities of players gathering together to take “ownership” of their online spaces, and could mold and adapt them. This often seemed liberatory and powerful, giving control back to the “audience” after decades of “mass media” in the control of authors (can be seen in e.g. Hayward (1997), criticizing the Frankfurt school’s criticisms of mass media when discussing soap operas (section 4.1)⁹). Even in areas like wrestling (section 4.2), the audience have sometimes been considered “co-authors” (Oglesby, 2017). Emergent narrative, too, can take the perspective of a player taking on the role of author (Kreminski and Mateas, 2021b) (indeed we saw this in narrative instruments). Acharya and Wardrip-Fruin (2019), who looked at TTRPGs and other “co-creative” worlds and games, discusses how players become co-creators in the experience, and craft the narrative and world of the game alongside it, or while playing.

I should emphasize I do not dismiss any of this work or this idea of co-creation. However, it is less applicable for the work I am looking at, and to properly understand perennial games, this metaphor of “co-creation” is less helpful. I consider the experience of playing a game, even one with heavy player-expression and ability to customize and

⁹And to be fair, I agree with many of Haywards points here.

modify the experience, different from that of creation of the thing itself. I say this partly as a creative myself, who has designed games and written stories, and how I often in the play of an experience, or in the “experiencing” of that experience, feel different than I do in the raw creation. In play, in narrative play even, you are responding to an existing thing, which has predetermined rules and expectations, and even in subverting those rules, you are still responding. There is an author you are paying attention to and responding to, asynchronously or not, and there is an inferred author function at play (I will discuss this in section 4.1). When creating something new, while you are inspired and influenced by the work of others, the creation is not in direct response to a previous author and it is not within the bounds of that world. I consider the role of the player of a game closer to that of an actor in a play. They have been handed a script (a set of rules on what to do) and yet have a range of expression available to them within those rules which affect the outcome of that experience (see section 8.6). Inspired by the work of Nic Junius (2024), I would see the role of the actor expanded before I consider them an author, doing the same work of a scriptwriter. I am not trying to take away power from the players here. Their contributions to the play of a game (especially a perennial game) is vital to its existence, yet by arguing that this power is the same as that of the authors of the experience (which it can sound like when we say “co-author”), we are losing important nuance to understand the differences between them. As we will see throughout this dissertation, the players are instrumental to the experience of any perennial game, yet what they do is not the same thing as the developers of that game. By focusing on player co-creation, it is often too easy to dismiss the author and I do not

wish to do that here¹⁰. Therefore, I consider the players of the game “players” and the developers of the game “authors”. A difference between “player” and “audience” also exists, which will be discussed when relevant in section 2.2.

Furthermore, this does not mean that those who are players cannot be or become authors, as seen in the rich production of work fans can do, in fan fiction (Yin et al., 2017; Hellekson and Busse, 2014), user generated content, and modding (Taylor, 2006; Chen, 2010; Glas, 2013, p. 145-146), which can take on a unique life on its own. Yet when they do so, they are performing in a different role than as a “player”, and conflating the two can lead to a misinterpretation of the player’s role in general.

I am here dodging an important question of “ownership”, as discussed by scholars like Taylor (2006) and Glas (2013). I am doing this because I largely do not see players as “owning” the games they play, although I do understand this discussion is much more nuanced than that. For some scholars the idea of players “owning” their worlds, and being a key constituent in its production and future creation, for example through voting for future design changes, was an ideal (Jenkins, 2008; Taylor, 2006). To counteract this, I will refer to Nardi (2010), who responded to this idea: *“I cannot speak too highly of democracy as a political system, but artistic production is, to me, another matter; it is inherently singular, anomalous, moving on the edges of culture”* (Nardi,

¹⁰A clever reader will spot my use of Barthes later, especially in the mythology chapter, and note that the Death of the Author (Barthes, 1994) is auspiciously lacking here. While this deserves more discussion than I have room for, I think perennial games are one of the key complications to Death of the Author as a concept, as we will see throughout this dissertation. The audience never omits or forgets the author, and the “inferred author function” (section 4.1) is ever-present within the community, and the game only exists in this constant negotiation between an active author and an active audience. That the work is surrendered to the audience after it has been released and submitted to the audience is only half the picture in a perennial game.

2010). I concur with this take. I see perennial games, first and foremost, as a form of artistic production and not as something that should be “owned” or “controlled” by its audience. It is interacted with and shaped and molded and discussed by that audience, but that is a different matter entirely. I want to focus on the narrative experience of these games as a narrative experience that has an authorial intent and is crafted as such.

1.5.3 The Virtual and the Real

Throughout this dissertation, I will use the terms *virtual* and *real* (and “*real*”, in quotes), so they deserve some further elaboration. The term “virtual world” became the predominant way to discuss what happens online or on the internet. I have long held a discomfort with the word “virtual” for this use-case, due to its common misuse as the opposite of “real”. This has long been known to be problematic and false (Boellstorff, 2008). As Taylor (2006) said “*What happens in virtual worlds often is just as real, just as meaningful, to participants*” (Taylor, 2006, p. 19). The contexts of our outside world are inextricably part of our online presences and what happens online can very much affect our offline lives, and vice versa. The binary tries to define a difference between being “in the virtual world”, where you control a digital avatar in an online space, and “out of online world”, where your flesh and bones body moves around¹¹, yet fails at capturing this accurately. The term “virtual”, as Boellstorff highlights, refers to *potential*, defining something that is in effect the same thing without in “actuality”

¹¹Perhaps, the very cyberpunk term “meatspace” is be the most apt. Crass, certainly, but you get what I mean much more directly than “real”.

being it. Other terms, like “digital” or “synthetic” or “artificial” or “cyberspace”¹² have been suggested (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 17), yet many of these are more egregious in making the virtual seem fake or unreal¹³. Boellstorff ultimately admits that defining new terminology here is a losing battle. It is in common usage online to refer to one’s “real life” (or IRL) as just that, using the term “real” in this manner. And so I, like Boellstorff must concede that despite our academic inclination to complicate and nuance, these binaries are used in everyday language, and thus if we study everyday language, we cannot but “play along” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 19), despite also attempting to deconstruct.

As mentioned in the introduction, and as will be elaborated in chapters 7 and 8, the terms “virtual world”, as a complete, secondary space to our own, is not as applicable to my study of perennial games. Thus, while still used as a term, especially when describing more traditional online community scholarship, I rely less on an understanding and delination between a virtual world (with a 3D avatar), the rest of the internet, and the physical world.

1.5.4 Community

Community is central to my research question, yet the notion of what a community *is* is arguably just as difficult to define as games (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014), and I will thus not spend a great effort on the particularities of that definition (though

¹²Or *metaverse*. But that word has now lost all impact.

¹³Of these, “digital” is closest to being useful, yet as Boellstorff highlights, digital is not applicable for describing the cultural logics of the world (online or not). If we are to study how communities behave in online worlds, we cannot merely consider them digital.

I will discuss this a bit in chapter 12). Despite its emphasis in my questions and study, community as an academic term is much broader than I have space for in this work. My emphasis on games means I leave out much work done to study communities in other fields, such as anthropology (Geertz, 1972; Boellstorff et al., 2012), HCI (Ringland et al., 2016a, 2022), fandom studies (Jenkins, 1992; Gray et al., 2017; Hellekson and Busse, 2014), etc. For example, Ringland et al. (2016a,b)'s work with the "AutCraft" community showcases the detail of HCI work in this field, approaching many similar points as I will be making in this work, yet with a broader lens than how game studies understand communities. The way the moderators of the Minecraft server create a safe space for the community and help cultivate that community echoes much of what this work will be about, albeit through a different lens. This example showcases how much this work can translate between academic spaces, as studying how to understand or build for community, collaboration, or belonging is a frequent common denominator across a wide variety of scientific fields.

This said, since I am asking how to "cultivate" community, it is worth asking what that means and, more importantly, how to know if we have succeeded. It is difficult to accurately quantify community (Tran, 2025); we can talk about the amount of people, the amount of posts, etc., yet the largest populations do not inherently imply the most fruitful communities¹⁴. As Tran (2025) says, a community is more than a group of people, and it requires active, recurring engagement to maintain. As noted by

¹⁴In case it is not clear, I am implicitly talking about online communities in this section. It has long been known that communities need not be spatially co-present (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 180-181) and do form online in a variety of ways (Kozinets, 2015; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). I am intentionally not defining "online community" as separate or unique from non-online communities.

Kozinets (2015), talking about everyone who posts on YouTube as part of a "YouTube community" can easily stretch the definition to unusable terms, yet we nevertheless *can* talk about and study a sense of community on YouTube. And to confuse things even further, as we will see in this dissertation, people talk about or identify themselves as part of "a Destiny community"; a community, ostensibly, of people who play the video game Destiny, yet who that is and is not is not as easy to identify with clear boundaries. As Kozinets (2015, p. 10) reminds us, a community is fluid and unstable, and people will drift in and out of identifying as part of them. They are always *made up* of individuals, even if we cannot identify who those individuals are in a concrete or quantifiable sense. Thus it is important as we attempt to analyze a community to not describe a static or constant phenomenon, despite how its members might discuss it as such.

Psychologically, people have discussed a "sense of community", a feeling of being part of "*a larger dependable and stable structure*" (O'Connor et al., 2015). Crenshaw and Nardi (2016); Crenshaw et al. (2017) talks about how the players of World of Warcraft felt a loss of this "sense of community" due to changes in the game (as we will discuss in chapter 7), yet this was decidedly not because the game was less played or less popular, but rather the opposite: They were missing the time when social interactions were smaller and more personal, when they felt comfortable talking to strangers or felt socially engaged in everyday interactions with others. This is an individual sense, contrasted with the interpersonal activity of that community, which can be seen not in feelings but in artifacts *produced* by that interaction. Communities create discourse, content, fanfiction, fan-art, discussion posts, memes, and so on Pearce and Artemesia

(2009); MacCallum-Stewart (2014); Hellekson and Busse (2014); Jenkins (1992). This is not a community by itself but rather traces of communal activity: They produce these artifacts not merely for themselves as individuals but for the community—for the other people they consider themselves to be with. The World of Warcraft community did not stop producing such artifacts during the time where some players felt a loss of its "sense of community".

Both identifying this sense and identifying the production of a community are valuable ways to begin identifying whether a community is cultivated, as it showcases both the emotional power and activity of a community. As my lens of myth will showcase (chapter 3) the myths a community creates about itself (themselves) are also strong indicators of a community being cultivated, as these myths are what people establish their identities around, and thus build their "sense" of belonging with. The stronger the communal activity upholding the myths, the stronger these myths bind people together and the stronger the feelings about those myths. In other words, the two questions worth asking to understand how a community is cultivated is how do its members *feel* about the community, and what do its members *do* as a part of that community. Both of these questions can be identified in myths.

With these terms and lenses defined, we are ready to proceed into the first part of the dissertation, to understand what perennial games are and how we are studying them.

Part I

Understanding Perennial Games

Chapter 2

Perennial Games

"Hey guys, whats up. [...] I found the best spot to farm rare, uncommon, and yes even legendary engrams, extremely quickly here in Destiny."

ImAverageJeff. From the YouTube Video *Destiny - "BEST LEGENDARY ENGRAM FARMING GUIDE" | "Treasure Cave Loot Cave Engram Farming" [PATCHED]*.

September 15th, 2014

"The speed at which the community organized around this activity was inspiring and humbling to us."

Bungie, *Destiny 1.0.1.5 Patch Notes + Dev Notes*. September 25th, 2014

"There's treasure here. There's got to be."

Wilhelm-7, *Grasp of Avarice, Destiny 2*. December 7, 2021

ON SEPTEMBER 15TH, 6 days after Destiny had released, several YouTube

videos¹ were uploaded showcasing a new "farming spot" in Destiny. Quickly seen as a "treasure cave"—or as it became known later "The Loot Cave"—players discovered that they could shoot at infinitely spawning enemies inside a specific cave, which would drop random loot continuously without players having to move an inch (ImAverageJeff, 2014). Any player could, without much effort, level up their characters and get virtually infinite rewards with this method. And while this was repetitive, it was undoubtedly effective, so the story of this place spread quickly. It did not take long for players to load in already finding strangers standing by the cave, ready to join in on their wordless yet social grind. And it spread outside the game as well; people who did not play Destiny had heard of "The Loot Cave" (I did not play Destiny at the time and I heard of it from general gaming podcasts). Bungie, the developer, responded quickly, patching out the loot cave by September 25th, yet they also acknowledged the moment this event had created around it. Players would later venture into the cave to find a pile of corpses, a subtle but clever gesture from the developers, telling the players that their actions had indeed been noticed and was now part of the world (Gach, 2020b). It was a gesture that showed the naked truth to the world: Their actions mattered and had changed the world, despite how innocuous they seemed.

And they could have stopped there, and this was the end of the story for many

¹The quote shared above is from, to my knowledge, the first YouTube video documenting the Loot Cave from Destiny (ImAverageJeff, 2014). Another video was also uploaded on September 15th, by The Completionist. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohA-Zad22Ik&ab_channel=Completionist. This was uploaded at 3:41 PM, though, whereas the video from ImAverageJeff was uploaded at 7:11 AM. Furthermore, there are likely more videos, and it is likely that the rumor of the loot cave had been spreading or independently found by smaller communities beforehand. The area where the loot cave is was in the beta for Destiny, and some players anecdotally have said they were already using the loot cave for farming in the beta. However, from what I have found, there is not any online documentation or guides showing the loot cave before September 15th.

years. However, in 2021, 7 years after those memories had been created, players found something new inside the loot cave. Players could enter the same cramped space with the same corpses but this time find a secret entrance (Hornshaw, 2021). This opened to an entire underground cavern, an expansive, sprawling space full of "loot", that has been corrupted. This Dungeon, named Grasp of Avarice, tells the story of the fictional character *Wilhem-7* who got enthralled by the promise of the loot in the Loot Cave but went mad with desire. The players fend off against the many traps he had set up so no one else could steal his "treasure", to find his ultimate demise at the end. Now, the community story had become fictional, as the rumor of the allure of "infinite loot" was something a fictional character had heard and lost his mind over.

This story, unfolding over 7 years, responding to a community event, to an *exploit*, is the kind of storytelling that can only happen in perennial games. This could have never happened without the communal spaces that exist outside the virtual world of Destiny, and without the developers responding and reacting to players over time. The following chapter will define perennial games for our purposes, and describe the elements that cause such a story to be. First, I will briefly cover the definition and why it has been defined this way, and use this to cover some key understandings of how I view these experiences, their authors and the audience. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by comparing perennial games to other, similar terms from previous work.

2.1 Defining Perennial Experiences

To define perennial games, it makes sense to first define perennial *experiences*, as I consider them. Experiences are broader than games, yet many experiences are similar to how perennial games function, and defining them as such will make it easier to compare outside of games. Thus, it helps to understand what the broader definition of *perenniality* is. The shortest definition of a perennial experience is as follows:

A perennial experience is an ongoing narrative experience, which is perpetual, temporally continuous, establishes a universal chronicle and a shared world or fiction.

To name some examples, I consider sports, professional wrestling, reality TV, soap operas, Twitch Plays², long-running book- and tv-series, and comics to all be examples of perennial experiences. Perennial *games* are thus perennial experiences which are also games³. I consider the games *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment Ltd., 2004), *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009), *Blaseball* (The Game Band, 2020), *Destiny* (Bungie and Activision, 2014), *Magic: The Gathering* (Wizards of the Coast, 1993), and *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) to all be examples of perennial games⁴.

The word "perennial" is chosen because it encapsulates the perpetuity and recurrence of these experiences: They repetitiously add new content (a new TV episode is released, a new update to a game, a new sports match is played), but it is never

²This is meant in the "Twitch Plays Pokémon" sense, a phenomenon that is less popular now, yet arose at the same time as *Destiny*.

³As defined in section 1.5, I am intentionally sidestepping "what is a game" (Aarseth and Calleja, 2015). I hope the list of games I discuss helps illuminate what I mean by games.

⁴Referencing the earliest release date for all perennial games is inherently misleading, as these games change. Therefore, whenever I reference a specific example, I reference relevant version number or date-identifying information, along with supplemental material showing recorded cinematics, dialogue transcripts etc. as there might be no way of experiencing this inside the game experience today.

fully repetitious—it is always a new match, always a new patch, always a new episode. The plant metaphor is very intentional: Each year a perennial plant might look the same to an outside viewer, as it grows a new leaf, loses it, and grows it again. Yet each time, the leaf is subtly different, each time the plant has grown a little further, become a bit more crooked and unique. And each time the caretaker of that plant has grown to understand it more than they did a year prior. This term also highlights that it takes *time* for perennial experiences to develop and change. A single update might not drastically change the status quo, but over many, the fabric of their universes slowly becomes something new. Perennial games are not a new genre of video games, in the popular understanding of genre as defined by the primary interactions (such as "Shooter" or "RPG" (role playing game)) (Clearwater, 2011; Whalen, 2004), nor a genre of storytelling as defined in film studies, by stylistic similarities, e.g. "Horror" or "Western" (Whalen, 2004). The perennial nature of a game is not defined by its gameplay, as a perennial story is not defined by its storytelling content. Rather, it is a form of experiences many genres and media can perform, and it is in fact often transmedic (Ryan, 2015; Jenkins, 2008) in nature (although it does not have to be).

These requirements are a set of functions of the temporality and universality of its narrative content. The requirements are as follows:

- **Perpetuity.** These experiences are perpetual. They do not have stated end or explicit final goal: League of Legends has no obvious ending in sight. New content, events, episodes, or updates can always add to the experience, and the audience

can always expect more for one reason or another. They *might* end, as City of Heroes did in 2012 (Cryptic Studios, 2004), but the ending is arbitrary rather than planned from the outset. They might conclude individual story-arcs or end storylines yet new stories can and might be told in the future. (This excludes most narratives.)

- **Temporal Continuity.** These experiences are tied to real-world time (Zagal and Mateas, 2010) rather than experiential time (Nitsche, 2007). The fictional space persists even when the audience is not actively engaging with it: Wrestling matches occur without you watching them, the "World" of Warcraft is there despite you being in it, Doctor Who episodes aired before you watched them. The story does not retract or repeat, it always appears in sequence and does not go backwards⁵. The fictional time might not flow 1:1 with the real world (though it can, in e.g. Destiny), but it is operating in a similar fashion to the real world in the sense that it does not revolve around a single person's perception—even the author's. It is *always* progressing forward and changing, intermingled with the time of the real world. A common signifier is how these experiences have live, missable moments (Ziebart, 2011; Rousseau, 2020; Webster, 2019) where you "had to be there" (Tassi, 2020). (This excludes static spaces and stories that only progress when engaged with.)

⁵Spin-offs, flashbacks, reboots, or alterations of the timeline muddle this significantly. The existence of such narrative devices could signify a lack of temporal continuity, but we can still view the audience experience as linear and sequential regardless.

- There exists a **Universal chronicle**⁶ that is shared by all participants. While there might be audience-individual events and narratives, there is a large-scope chronicle of diegetic events that the author and entire audience has access to and can agree upon as true. (This excludes single-person games such as Dwarf Fortress (Adams and Adams, 2006) or table-top role playing games (TTRPGs)⁷.)

The experiences have further two delineations based on their representation of their fictional worlds. They have either “virtual worlds” as defined by Pearce (2011) and Klastrup (2003) (as persistent, inhabitable online spaces (section 8.4) or not:

- **Shared Virtual World.** There is one identifiable world (even if it is instanced on servers) that all players exist within, with shared geography they all traverse equally. Within this is experiences like Destiny (Bungie and Activision, 2014), Second Life (Linden Lab, 2003; Pearce, 2011), EVE Online (CCP Games, 2008), and World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment Ltd., 2004).
- **Shared Fiction.** There is a shared fictional space, but it is not a virtual world—it is not traversable or inhabitable. Yet there is still a requirement of a single shared, unified idea of the fiction, that stems from the universal chronicle. Within this is experiences like Blaseball (The Game Band, 2020), League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009), sports, and Doctor Who (BBC et al., 1963–Now).

⁶The word "chronicle" should be understood in the same sense as in Ryan’s work on curated stories (Ryan, 2018): A chronicle is not a narrative by itself, but rather a series of events that can lead to a narrative when storified.

⁷Non-game experiences are almost exclusively universal—non-universality seems to be an affordance of simulation.

A few edge-cases will illustrate the margins of this definition.

Sports might not seem fictional, and they are not in the sense that they are "made up". Rather, sports are fictionalised because the audience and the players create and partake in stories about and inside them. The shared fiction should be understood in the sense that there is a shared fabric of events, a common understanding of the players at stake and a shared narrative they are involved in. This is very much the case in sports, which will be covered more in section 4.2.

Serialized fiction such as television or book series, like Doctor Who, bends the temporal continuity requirement significantly, as there is less direct correlation between the temporality of the fictional space and the real world. Yet, the waiting time in between episodes affects the story experience, causing continuity-esque effects: The writers may change story beats based on how the audience responds and the audience has to actively wait for the next episode. This is part of the perennial experience. Serial fiction will be covered in section 4.1.

The universal chronicle requirement can, likewise, be removed for other effects. A game like "Mountain" by David O'Reilly (O'Reilly, 2014) is an example of a "personal" perennial game. In it, the player "takes care" of a mountain where elements change over time when the player is not looking, similar to a Tamagotchi (Akihiro Yokoi , WiZ). Here, each instance is unique to each player, so it is a personal chronicle despite perpetuity and temporal continuity being in full effect. Groups, similarly, can have shared chronicle of, for example, a unique TTRPG campaign.

As these edge cases show, I would like to amend onto these requirements some-

thing I did not consider when I wrote this definition initially (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021), yet have considered to be true since then. There is value not in considering this definition as a binary, but rather a potential spectrum of "perenniality" of an experience. An experience, for example, can be very long-running, yet with a determined ending (thus not perpetual), yet this still as more perenniality than a single 2-hour movie. The more an experience lives up to these requirements, the more perennial that experience is. Much serial fiction, for example, has a planned end in mind from the outset, and while that might be thought to then be excluded as a non-perennial experience, it will be more useful going forward to think of it as "less perennial" than a fully perpetual experience. I am here very intentionally appropriating verbiage from Marie-Laure Ryan's understanding of "narrativity", seeing experiences as "more or less" narrative, rather than either-or (Ryan, 2006). As we move on to discussing other similar media in chapter 4, it will be useful to keep this in mind, and see how much other media can still be useful to understand perennial games, even if it does not fulfill each requirements completely; there is still useful things to learn about temporal continuity from experiences that are not perpetual, and so on.

2.2 The Trifecta of Influence

All perennial stories share a trifecta of control between an author (refer to section 1.5 on the meaning of author), a game/world/system/story/space, and an audience, who all interact in real time *over time*. This is visualised in figure 2.1. Across any kind

of representation of the fiction is a shared diegesis that author and audience agree upon as being “part of the world”, which is wherein events can shape the universal chronicle, although the specifics of that can be and are up for negotiation at run-time (there is in fact *only* run-time for these experiences as a whole): When something goes wrong in the world of Destiny, it has already happened, and the authors (Bungie employees) have to fix it in real-time.

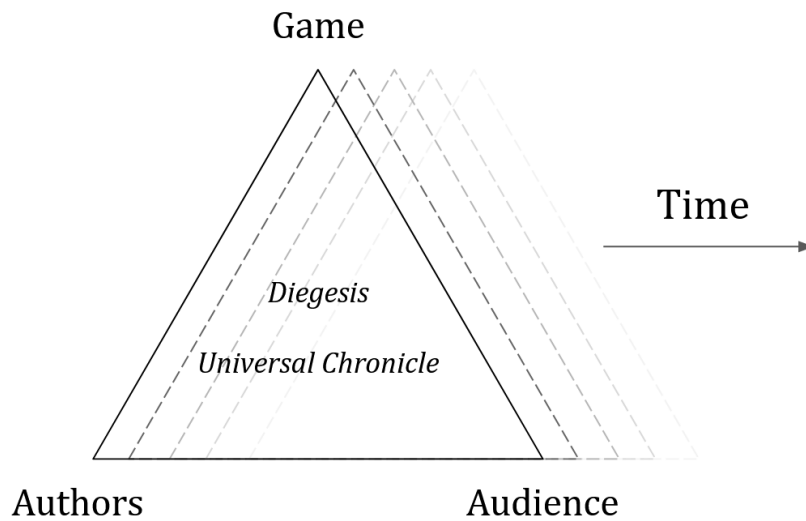


Figure 2.1: This triangle shows the trifecta of control as shared between the author, the game or system, and the audience, as they negotiate the diegesis and universal chronicle. These then evolve concurrently over time, as shown by the figure’s third dimension, which shapes the experience through the control all three exert.

The author, the game, and the audience are all progressing forward through time, during the experience. In a traditional narrative process, the author grows and changes during development, then publishes a "fixed" story to the audience, who then are influenced by this story moving forward. But in a perennial experience, all three continuously move forward in time, change and mold the experience as they do. Each

aspect of the experience is consistently reflected by the other two. Perennial experiences embody the old saying "*no one steps into the same river twice*"⁸, through their very design.

As a natural consequence of this three-part interaction, the storytelling process is an ongoing social negotiation between the three parties. The creation of the universal chronicle, thus, is a social, cultural process that happens over time. This will be a strong theme throughout this dissertation: The development of the perennial narrative is a consequence of this inter-relational process between these three entities.

Note the use of the word "audience", rather than "players". The primary interaction with a perennial experience is moreso that of an audience, than as players. Sports or wrestling are useful examples of audience-bound storytelling. Sports are well known as emergent storytelling phenomenae (Aylett, 1999) but the perennial experience of a sport is bound to the audience: They are the people who we'd say have the storytelling experience of the sport. It is not tied to the playing of an individual match, but rather the story arcs that spring forth over a season, over multiple seasons. One match might be pivotal to that story, but it is through the context understood by the audience that the experience comes to life: The players are not who the experience is for. The players actuate the experience; they are, in other words, actors of the game, and thus belong more in the game part of the trifecta.⁹

In video games, many people who play them are both players and audience (and thus occupy two spaces in the trifecta). This is the commonly understood experience

⁸This quote is commonly attributed to Heraclitus, yet the actual quote and attribution is disputed.

⁹This doesn't discount players: Play is necessary for the perennial game to function.

of playing a game: We enter a world and act within it, to see the outcome of our actions. We play for an audience of ourselves, and a single person thus fulfills both roles. But it is important to note that when we are talking about *playing* these experiences, it is a different action than *experiencing them as stories*, even if both can and will occur simultaneously. A player of a game like Destiny is interacting with the gameplay systems, whereas the audience for the perennial game of Destiny is experiencing the storytelling. For many players, this happens concurrently, as it is part of playing for them to experience the story, read the lore cards and learn about the fictional world. Yet, you could play without paying attention to the story or the *reverse*; read lore cards on a website (like <https://www.ishtar-collective.net/>) and watch lore recaps by My Name is Byf (2011–Now) on YouTube to experience the story without participating in it. To what extent this happens in reality is out of the scope of this paper, yet it can still deductively and anecdotally be understood as a possible way to experience these stories¹⁰. Furthermore, a player joining later and learning about previous events other players did in the space, can be said to have a pure audience-relation to those events, since they did not participate in them.

Being an audience does not mean they are non-interactive. While a player can play for months without story advancement and the story then can suddenly shift drastically without player input (we will see examples of this chapter 9), these experiences are still fundamentally interactive. We will see more examples of this (see section 4.2).

¹⁰I can anecdotally add that I for years kept up with the narrative of World of Warcraft after I had stopped playing in Cataclysm. While I cannot say how frequent this kind of behavior is, it is undoubtedly something that happens.

2.2.1 The Spectrum of Perennial Experiences

To illustrate the complicated relationship of control between author and audience, perennial experiences can be mapped onto a two-dimensional spectrum of control, which can be seen in figure 2.2. This is an example of how to think about the long-standing question of authorial control (Bruni and Baceviciute, 2013; Louchart and Aylett, 2003; Aylett, 1999) in perennial experiences, as perpetuity in no way simplifies the matter. The horizontal axis shows the authorial control, with sports (very little authorial control) in one extreme and serialized fiction (much authorial control) on the other. Note here that the aspect of control mentioned is specifically over the outcome of the experience: In football, those who make the rules have little control over the outcome of a match, despite how much control they have on the rules themselves (which might influence future matches). On the other axis is the spectrum of audience control which tells us how much in control the audience has over the outcome of the experience.

While there are experiences where clear lack of authorial control leads to a high degree of audience control, there are also experiences where neither is in full control; sports and sports-like experiences like Blaseball and wrestling being the most obvious examples. The authors and audience each have a degree of control, yet there is an element with much more to say: The emergence of the system itself. No individual player, coach, audience member or television promoter of a football match is in total control over what happens. The game is decided by many players and systems coalescing into an emergent experience (Aylett, 1999) that is in no-one's entire control. In Blaseball,

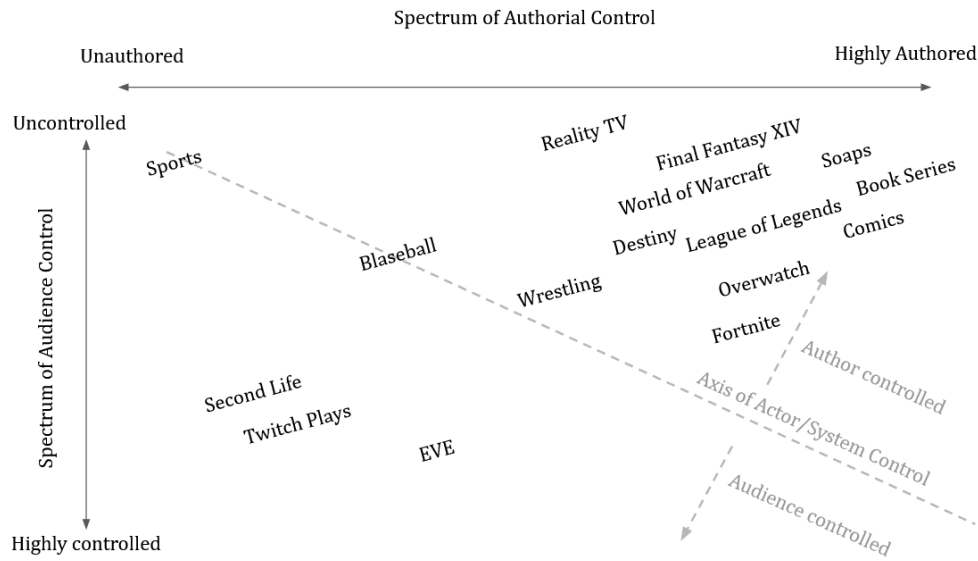


Figure 2.2: This two-dimensional spectrum shows the various degrees of control the author has (horizontal) and the audience has (vertical). While an inverse correlation that less author control means more audience control exists in many cases, it is not always the case, as highlighted by the diagonal line in the middle, which focuses on experiences where neither have complete control. Note that the specific placements of the experiences are exhibitory and should not be considered exact.

the randomness of the game gives a high degree of uncertainty for both the audience and the creators (Manning and Ashwell, 2021). Similarly, in wrestling, neither the wrestlers or the writers or the audience are in full control of the experience (Mazer, 2005; De Garis, 2005). This is an example of how less authorial control does not necessarily lead to more audience control, and while it is most clear in sports-like, a degree of it happens in any perennial experience, not the least due to the perpetual, unpredictable nature of time.

This definition, and these illustrations will be returned to over and over again throughout this dissertation. However, before we move on to applying them, it is worth to take a look at existing literature that has covered similar areas of ongoing narrative.

2.3 Similar Terms

While perennial games is a new term, scholarly work on on-going, long-running narratives is not. Therefore, I will briefly cover previous terms used for various media, and briefly discuss how they differ from and compare to perennial games.

2.3.1 Vast Narratives

Vast Narratives, as defined by Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin (2009) in the book "Third Person" discusses narrative experiences that are "vaster" than a single season of television, a single game experience, etc. However, in the book they are more explicitly defined on its narrative content and presentation than perennial experiences are. They discuss cross-media universes like *Marvel* or *Doctor Who*, which I can see both fitting as perennial experiences, yet they also include the TV show *The Wire* as one of their primary examples. While undoubtedly serial fiction, the vastness is not related to its perennial nature. The show covers the politics and society of Baltimore *vastly* by covering it from many, simultaneous angles, from areas like drug crime, harbor unions, schooling system, political spheres, and journalism. It is the *content* that is vast, and thus we enter territory that perennial experiences avoid: The actual specifics of content, genre, play, or activity. The perennial definition is one of format rather than content. That said, there are many correlations, as most of their examples of vast narratives, like World of Warcraft or Doctor Who or superhero comics, are often highly perennial.

2.3.2 Serial Fiction

Serial Fiction, and seriality in general, will be covered in much greater detail in section 4.1. Yet, here, we will briefly mention its commonalities. Serial fiction covers stories that are told serially (or in series), with regularly repeating episodes, and is a term commonly used in media studies (even so much it has its own sub-field of "serial studies"), historically discussing serial media in television, comics, radio plays, and fiction. And while some have made strides into working serial fiction into games (Kelleter, 2017), it is generally not a common lens in game scholarship. There are many similarities between seriality and perennality: They are both discussing the format of the experience, and they share (a form of) temporal continuity, universal chronicle, and a shared fiction. The core difference between seriality and perennality is in its specificity: The narrative has to be conveyed in serial form—implying independent units released in a series. While this can be true for perennial experiences, many transmedial experiences, ARGs, or video games, are more continuous, with steady and non-uniform updates and changes. Some serial media, furthermore, is also not perennial, such as shorter serialized books (discrete sequels or a trilogy, for example), which have a defined beginning, middle, and end, with no further additions or assumption of perpetuity.

2.3.3 Transmedia

Transmedia is a widely spread term generally covering media experiences that travel across media types. Its most common attribution is to Henry Jenkins, who defined it as follows: *"Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements*

of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story." (Jenkins, 2007) However, as Mittell points out, transmedia has often come to simply mean *"a story told in one media with supporting media besides"* (Mittell, 2015), with even examples like retellings and adaptations being possible candidates (pushed back against by others (Ryan, 2015))—which is quite different from Jenkins' original intentions of a story that "systematically" uses multiple delivery channels for a singular purpose (Jenkins, 2007). Transmedia is a very widely applicable and yet also vague term, and while it is undeniable that many perennial experiences are transmedia, they do not have to be, and transmedia as a term does not have to be perennial either (a singular once-told story told through a movie and then a comic book would not qualify as perennial).

2.3.4 Media Convergence

Media Convergence is the term from Henry Jenkins (2008)' 2006 book "Convergence Culture", describing how he saw the transitions of new media at the time, and how that spoke to the potential of the media landscape in the future. With "convergence", he was describing a process by which "multiple media systems coexist and where media content flows fluidly across them" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 282). Jenkins had wide-reaching aspirations with this term, reaching across everything from serial fiction to technology to politics, seeing the new audience as an active contributor in the "participatory culture" of the future media landscape. However, as discussed by (Glas, 2013), many of these

assumptions about the empowering and emancipatory power of participation neglect the fact that participation by nature is not inherently progressive, intrinsically motivated, nor beneficial to those participating. Thus, this term is both too broad to properly compare and leads to potentially idealistic notions of user-authorship.

2.3.5 Live-service video games

Live-service games is a term popularised in the 2010s (Dubois and Weststar, 2022; Schreier, 2017a; Cai et al., 2014), as ongoing services with continuous updates and revenue streams, rather than individual productions. Generally, most perennial games are live-service games by definition. In order to tell an ongoing narrative, the game is sold as a service. In fact, it is often the other way around: The game is developed as a live-service, and thus it needs a perennial narrative to serve itself (more will be written about live-service games in section 17.1.1). The core difference between live-service and perennial games as terms is thus one of focus. Live-service emphasizes the distribution itself, harking back to other similar "as a service" models outside of games (Choudhary, 2007; Bernevega and Gekker, 2022), contrasted with the non-service model of production, in which a ware is sold to a customer. It is thus not about the *experience* of engaging with it. The term "perennial experience" is intended to do this refocusing; putting emphasis on the actual ongoing narrative experience of the product, rather than how it is sold.

2.3.6 Unfolding Texts

Lance Parkin uses the term "unfolding texts" (Parkin, 2009), defined by (Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983) to describe long-running fictional series like Sherlock Holmes, James Bond and Doctor Who (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, 2009). It is defined as *"fiction based around a common character, set of characters, or location, that has had some form of serial publication"* (Parkin, 2009). Parkin specifically states that a single series is not enough to be unfolding, it needs multiple distinct series, often in different media or made by different creators. Parkin focuses on Doctor Who, a series created over such a long time span it has had multiple creatives managing it over time, with entirely new casts of characters and plots, yet with recurring themes and motifs. Unfolding texts is very similar to serial fiction, in terms of its relationship to perennality, as unfolding texts as Parkin defines them are all serial—it is merely a subset of serial fiction that is also an unfolding text. As a brief aside here, Parkin specifically mentions wanting to avoid using the term "franchise" for this, as it gives connotations to marketing and merchandising rather than narrative, which is similar to my reasoning for not using live-service as a term—describing the distribution itself does not describe the experience of the audience.

2.3.7 Evolving Narratives

Frank Kelleter (2017) argues that popular serial fiction should be described as "evolving narratives", to emphasize their evolution over time: They *"adapt to their own consequences, to the changes they provoke in their cultural environment"* (Kelleter,

2017). Most interestingly, this biological term highlights to Kelleter how serial fiction narratively "fails" to conclude or finalize itself. It continuously evolves, its primary mission being to survive and adapt, avoiding an end at all costs (counter to how most narratives strive to end). We will discuss this more in the serial fiction chapter as well (section 4.1).

2.4 Narrative in Perennial Games

As I have discussed in the introduction, the specific version of the perennial game I am focusing on (the modern perennial game of the 2010s-2020s) is even more narrow than the broader definition of what a perennial game can be, and this difference will be discussed more in chapter 7, yet it is enough for now to understand that they are perennial games with a greater authorial and fictional focus than "traditional" virtual worlds or non-narrative live-service games.

Throughout much of the writing on MMOs by anthropologists in the 2000s (which will be covered in chapter 12), there was often a dismissal of the authored storytelling potential of the games studied. At the height of research into *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft* (Pearce, 2011; Klastруп, 2003; Taylor, 2006; Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Lohmann, 2008), many described MMOs as unable to tell stories in the "traditional" sense. One primary problem identified is the problem of persistence: The world often stays the same regardless of what players do. They kill an NPC and it respawns, because it needs to for another player to do the same. As

Aarseth said: “Azeroth [*The "World" of World of Warcraft*] is oblivious to its player inhabitants. They leave no lasting marks, monuments, or even graffiti. . . .” (Aarseth and Günzel, 2019). Yet, even at the time, it was acknowledged that the world could change, occasionally, when the developers deigned it to. MacCallum-Stewart (2009) mentions an early example of this in World of Warcraft, where a character eventually disappeared in a patch after players had killed her in a raid hundreds of times. As seen in Lohmann (2008), this is often attributed to player agency: “*The fact is, that very little of what you do in the average MMOG, affects the story in any meaningful way*” (Lohmann, 2008). They seemed to demand (or at least expect) a degree of player agency or influence in order for the storytelling to become “meaningful”. Yet, this is a rather strange argument considering storytelling functions just fine without agency, and merely offering interaction is not a guarantee for agency.

As argued by Glas (2013), this is a conflation of two different notions of time, using Juul (2005)’s notions of “play time” (how long it takes to play through) and “fictional time” (how long it takes in the storyworld fiction). World of Warcraft appears to conform to our experience of time because the social space of the virtual world operates identically to it. However, the world is caught in a loop of respawning enemies and resetting changes (at various speeds, even) that the fictional time seems stagnant—until Blizzard moves it forward through one change or another¹¹. In this way, the fictional time can be said to be decoupled from play time, entirely. However, while this was con-

¹¹I should note Glas further complicates this by noting that player instrumentally does improve through the repetitious killing of respawning NPCs, meaning we can view players own journey as a on separate fictional time as that of the game at large. However, this does not matter too much for my argument.

sidered a problem for storytelling, this decoupling in no way spells such a doom. Many (if not most) traditional stories have decoupling in time it is experienced (in Chatman's terms "discourse") and how long it spans in story terms ("story time"), and we are in fact quite used to experiencing stories that play with this difference for effect. The issue, rather, was likely due to the scale of the fictional storytelling was over a much larger time-span than most researchers at the time were used to (and, to be fair, World of Warcraft's early fictional changes were small compared to the ways the fictional world can change today).

The lack of storytelling potential was also seen in design descriptions of MMOs, such as Bartle¹² saying "*...virtual worlds do not have, nor ever can they have, narrative in the conventional sense. They're places. Players can act out narratives of their own within them, but the virtual worlds can't impose a three-act structure or anything like it.*" (Bartle, 2004). Koster argued something similar with his types of narratives he saw in virtual worlds as being either "expressive" (letting players tell their own stories and expressing themselves in the world) or "impositional" (where the story is more predetermined by a designer) (Koster, 2018, p. 296-307). This is likely due to a difference in design ethos of old school virtual worlds, putting much more emphasis on player-created-and-moderated spaces than modern games. This is clear in Koster's writing, as he was fascinated by how players formed communities and told their own stories in the early MUDs he played and developed, and wanted to continue facilitating this kind of play. Many of his well-known stories from the time are all player-driven moments, like

¹²A key figure in early MMO design and academia, well known for his player types (Bartle, 1996) which are still referenced today.

the famous "A Story About A Tree" (Koster, 2018, p. 242-244)¹³.

Thus, I believe another major reason virtual worlds did not tell stories, to say it a bit frankly, was that designers of the original virtual worlds simply were not interested in doing so. They were interested in the idea of creating an online social space, where players told their own stories and made their own fun with the tools they were given. This is not a problem in itself, as the pursuit of virtual worlds is a perfectly valid endeavor, but it has come with the consequence that most early exemplary virtual worlds de-emphasized the storytelling, and thus it was devalued as a possible design goal. Koster did question whether "impositional" online worlds could be possible (Koster, 2018), yet did consider them very difficult to implement if so.

This was also often attributed to (or went in concert with) an expectation that players "didn't care" about narrative in MMOs. As MacCallum-Stewart said "*many players, more focused on the ludic content than its narrative, are happy to consume the text passively without really paying attention to the related narrative.*" (MacCallum-Stewart, 2009) This notion is also mentioned by Costikyan (2007), yet as we will go into more detail with later (chapters 3), 13 and 14), this idea is challenged when you investigate the actual motivations of players. Sure, some players do not care about the narrative, yet it is a far cry from "everyone" and even those who self-proclaim to not care often are impacted or emotionally or socially involved in the narrative events regardless.

¹³This story of an in-game memorial to a dead player of Ultima Online is doubly famous (and doubly fascinating) because it was later found out that the person presumed dead, and whom the memorial was for, was likely not dead at all (Koster, 2018, p. 245). Yet, as Koster argues, the feelings people had of grief and mourning and feeling of loss (since the player was gone) were nevertheless real.

Ryan remarked much later how “*online worlds are ahistorical spaces full of players who live and make stories, but there is very little interaction between these individual stories*” (Ryan et al., 2016), showing how this is still an idea that appears in more recent scholarship. Beyond MMOs, little academic work has been done on the storytelling in modern live-service games, with only the occasional published work directly engaging with the kind of authored storytelling I am discussing here (Tamer, 2023; Compton et al., 2023; MacCallum-Stewart, 2009; Church, 2014). Many of these games, such as Fortnite or Rocket League or Minecraft, are broadly not considered “narrative”, and I do agree I would be hard pressed to say they are experiences with much narrativity (Ryan, 2006), they are not the only examples of live-service games. To complicate this, games like League of Legends or Overwatch or Rainbow Six: Siege—competitive games where individual matches are not broadly narrative—includes an increasing amount of narrative components on their periphery, with an ongoing narrative told through tv shows, comic books, cut-scenes, web blogs, social media interaction, and more. And of course, live-service games wherein the storytelling are a core part of the playing the game, as is the focus of this dissertation, with games like Destiny, Final Fantasy XIV, Warframe, and many others, has received little to no academic work which focuses on the narrative experience.

I can also anecdotally add that the idea that Destiny has a story worth paying attention to is something I often have had to explain or clarify to people who have no experience playing the game. Thus, while storytelling has become much more a part of live-service games, we are still a long way from a common and well-grounded

understanding that live-service games can tell stories as a default mode, rather than as an exception or as periphery.

To contrast, and as counter-example to all of the above, here is a story from the universal chronicle of *Destiny*, showcasing perennial storytelling: In 2017, early *Destiny 2*, Mithrax¹⁴ (Bungie, 2017–2021) was nothing more than an unnamed NPC of an enemy faction who chose to not attack us on sight (Bungie, 2017b, 2017), and over the years he has slowly revealed his identity and intentions, turning him from a rogue ally (Bungie, 2019d, 2019), to an insubordinate rebel helping us overthrow a new tyrant (Bungie, 2020b, 2020), to being fully allied with the players and given asylum in a part of the human city (Bungie, 2021a, 2021). The story of Mithrax is a conventional story of learning to trust an unexpected ally; it just took 3.5 years to unfold. Furthermore, Mithrax’s story did not end there but instead his story has and is continuing to develop since 2021, with recent developments (in 2023–2025) focusing on his difficult relationship with his daughter, who is interested in the history he wants to abandon, and a curse he has been trying to hide. To take another example, we today have the power of seeing all the changes that happened to the “World” of *Warcraft* in the 17 years since its inception, and it is no small story. Kings (plural) have died (Blizzard Entertainment Ltd., 2004; Blizzard, 2016, 2011, Legion, Patch 3.3.0). Entire continents upheaved (Blizzard Entertainment Ltd., 2004; Blizzard, 2010, Cataclysm). Ancient trees burned to the ground (Blizzard Entertainment Ltd., 2004; Marshall, 2018, Patch 8.0.1). This was not something a player could experience in 2004, when the game released. This

¹⁴In case any *Destiny* lore people are reading, I am aware his name is spelled Misraaks in Elikzni. I am choosing the “human” name for ease of reading.

highlights a crucial property of perennial storytelling: It is *slow*. Spending mere hours or days with any perennial experience—even “long” hours by traditional game standards—will not reveal its true nature, and it is therefore vital to let them take their time: It is only over *time* their worlds develop, which is how the storytelling happens. This is what viewing games as perennial experiences gives us: We can see that what was previously considered a static world in snapshots has rather obvious parallels with experiences like wrestling, sports, or serialized television, and there are important lessons from these we can draw.

However, perennial storytelling is severely more complicated than laid out here, as the experience of this story is rarely so neat and linear, and is covered through repetition, complicated diegesis, community interaction, and much more. In order to understand better how this kind of narrative functions, we need to understand the lens which helped me understand how to read narrative in this format "not suited for narrative": Mythology.

Chapter 3

Mythology

“...legend holds that the greater and lesser moons are respectively the goddess Menphina and her loyal hound, Dalamud. Since time immemorial, the two have been engaged in an unending dance across the heavens.”

Oliver Goodfellow, Gridania Raven (Fictional Newspaper, FFXIV)

ON AUGUST 24, 2013, THE MOON DALAMUD CRASHED into the world of Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV)¹. This happened for a couple of reasons. The developers, Square Enix, were going to “reboot” their game from its initial failed state, to “A Realm Reborn”, which required them to reshape a lot of the game into something else, effectively being an entirely new game². They thus wanted a reason why the old servers were no longer accessible, replaced by something new, a both fictional and nonfictional reason for why the world had changed, and the solution became this: A Mooncrash,

¹The quote above is from the article named "Dalamud Nigh". https://ffxiv.gamerescape.com/wiki/Dalamud_Nigh.

²Much of this information comes from the excellent YouTube documentary on the history of FFXIV, produced by noclip (Noclip, 2017a).

causing a Calamity, caused by The Garlean Empire wanting to destroy Eorzea—which would partly fail, but forever change the world. Players could, months in advance, look up to the sky and see the moon approach them in real time, getting closer and closer, until the fateful day when the servers shut down, and players would watch the final battle to stop the moon, the heroic sacrifices made to save what could be saved, and then later, log in to a new, reborn world. The developers did not need to come up with a fictional reason for this event, but they did. And they went even further: The new game takes place 5 years after the Calamity, and many of its events occur because of this originating event—the original game is part of the fictional history. It is an instigating event of one story and the end of another³. Because the original Final Fantasy XIV is no longer playable: Only A Realm Reborn exists now. The old world was effectively, actually and fictionally, wiped out by the moon. Furthermore, there is no way to re-experience the moon’s crash: It happened once, in 2013 and never again will any player relive it. It can only be seen today through videos, screenshots and retellings (more in chapter 10). I share this example first for a couple of reasons that will be elaborated throughout this chapter. It is an example of the developers performing narrative play, taking a real-world constraint and turning into a narrative moment. It is a clear example of perennial storytelling, of the world changing over time (a more drastic example than most) and the players responding to it. And most importantly for this chapter, the Fall of Dalamud, the stories of the world before it and what came after, is a great example of how perennial games create mythology, shaping a community’s sense

³In fact, the cutscene of the final battle has ramifications all the way until the end of the story, as we will explore in section 10.

of identity, belonging, and social structure, through constant communal storytelling.

This chapter will dive into what mythology is, and how I am using it to understand perennial games. First, we will discuss the academic origins of the term, and how it has come to mean many different things, from its colloquial uses to its academic connotations. We will break these down to understand which parts are useful and fruitful to take forward. We will then look at how mythology has been used in game studies in general, before moving on to how I have used mythology in my work for perennial games, and how it helps reframe the "problems" of perennial storytelling.

3.1 Introduction To Mythology

As Segal (2004) says, a common everyday understanding of "myth" has become as a falsehood: A story that was once believed to be true but is false (Segal, 2004). This is not what I mean by myth. Instead, I want to approach myth in the more (post)modern sense of a collection of symbols, stories, and cultural expressions that tell us something about our society and cultural values.

For this part of the literature review, I am very reliant on Ford (2022)'s deep investigation of mythology as used in his dissertation on myth in video games. Ford, in turn, references the papers of Frog (2018) and Ulliyatt (2007) as well, and these will be referenced as needed. Ford's structure provides a good basis for understanding the different kinds of myths and how they have been used throughout history, so this section will follow a similar structure, for ease. As Frog said, *"the concept of myth has*

emerged as a fundamental frame of reference for Western thinking about the world and about how people in different cultures structure their experiences of the world” (Frog, 2018), and has been used for hundreds of years, yet its usage is more modern than we may assume. The etymology of the word, from Greek “mythos”, does not mean “story”, yet was used in ancient Greek to contrast “logos”, and thus encompassed, speech, thought, discourse, conversation, story, and more (Frog, 2018). This word was later appropriated in the 18th century to define "mythological" (classical) stories and fables associated with gods and the supernatural. The Age of Enlightenment, rife with both a desire for rationalism and fantastical stories of the colonies, further transformed the word into stories about the fantastical and obscured, and became the opposite of rational truth (even if that truth was "Christian religion" (Frog, 2018). This concept of relating to “other” cultures as mythological, often with a negative connotation, is an important, problematic notion that has followed the word myth since this definition: "Civilized cultures" have "rationality" where "others" have mythology, which, as Frog (2018) mentions, is important to move away from to properly study myth in modern contexts. Ulliyatt notes that (western) definitions of myth are generally based on Greek Mythology (which Christianity was actively distancing itself from), leading many definitions of myth to be based on how Greek mythology functioned (seen for example in how the Norse pantheon is often compared to the Greek despite being structured quite differently) (Ulliyatt, 2007). Yet, today, the word has taken on many meanings of its own. Folklorist Lauri Honko (1984) defined myth as a *"a story of the gods, a religious account of the beginning of the world, the creation, fundamental events"*

(Honko, 1984), yet myth has lost many of its religious connotations later (Segal, 2004). Through structural sociologists, and folklorists like Claude Lévi-Strauss (1981a, 1955), Bronislaw Malinowski (1954), Campbell (2008), Jung, Eliade (1963), and Propp (1968 (2010), myth has been rethought away from religious stories into stories that can “*teach us a great deal about the societies from which they originate*” (Lévi-Strauss, 1981a), into being not stories at all, but shaped by everyday cultural expression (Barthes, 1977). To understand these moves, I will go through Ford’s five understandings of myth, which help understand how differently myth has been interpreted throughout time.

3.1.1 Myth as Text Type or Genre

The first understanding of myth is a very common one: “*Myth is a type of story. All myths are stories, but not all stories are myths*” (Ford, 2022). Eliade discussed how these stories are from a “sacred history”, being about events that happened in “the beginning of time”, or in mythic time. This is the understanding of myth as those of stories of gods and religious entities who lived before humans, often used to understand why parts of the world are the way they are. However, this does not have to be purely prehistoric. Ford highlights Berger, who uses Eliade’s definition to discuss the myth of America, as it formed into a nation, distancing itself from Europe, which led to the understanding of American identity, as directly seen in the concepts of the American Dream, etc. Berger highlights how this was constructed through a series of dichotomies, with America as the future and Europe as the past, America as a culture of individualism, innocence, and nature, contrasted to Europe’s conformity, guilt, and

history. This is very much stereotyped and simplistic, but the point is that this is the story told (from an American point of view), to understand their identity and place in the world. It thus becomes a story with a “cultural truth”, elevated and central to a culture’s understanding of itself, even if it is not explicitly “true” (as in, follows events that actually happened or follows actual cultural phenomenae).

3.1.2 Myth as Archetypal

This understanding of myth is most commonly associated with Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell (2008), who saw myths as events, figures, and motifs that spring from a set of hidden psychological universals. Mythological stories, fairytales, etc, are thus expressions of these hidden “archetypes”, as Jung called them (Ford, 2022). Campbell took this even further in the “monomyth” or as it is commonly known today “The Hero’s Journey”, the idea of a single, archetypal narrative that connects all stories. These ideas have been heavily criticized. Outside of the number of problematic biases in many of these ideas, often privileging Western mythologies and storytelling, Segal (2004) observes that Campbell never applies the full pattern to even one myth. Campbell’s ideas are influenced by his general world views (as a white, western man, with potentially problematic views), with the titular hero as a “rugged”, “doing it by himself” guy, with little room for collective action, or space for marginalized people, etc. Yet, as Ford (2022) mentions, the Hero’s Journey “*has become a self-fulfilling prophecy*” through its sheer popularity. As commonly referenced, the Hero’s Journey was a direct inspiration for *Star Wars*, and countless other modern stories today, (including video games, like

Journey (thatgamecompany, 2012)), it has taken on its own meaning. The “myth” that it is a universal myth has become so prevalent it is its own myth, shared popularly in modern culture so often that it is used as a common shorthand. Ford, however, highlights that these theories were predominantly descriptive, trying to find universal patterns between existing myths, which causes problems when people try to use it as a prescriptive blueprint.

3.1.3 Myth as Explanation

Myths are often used as methods to explain universals of the world. The most well-known of this kind is creation myths, explaining how things came to be, yet many myths also explain why we as humans or the world or things in it are the way we are. This understanding, according to Segal (2004), was popularized in the 19th century approach, yet is also seen in 20th century literature. Often this follows problematic assumptions of a “primitive man” seeking answers in myth, lacking a scientific explanation. Frog (2018) highlights that this usage is not much different from how *The Big Bang theory* is used in modern, western science: As an explanation “in lieu of a better one”. Yet commonly “science” and “myth” are still put in opposition with each other in this paradigm; with myth being seen as inferior, un-empirical, and closed off to other possibilities. Frog warns that this usage thus misunderstands what cultures are doing with myths. Myth as explanation is powerful exactly because it provides an explanation where we are lacking one, giving people a sense of understanding which can ground our sense of identity in an origin. How “true” this origin is matters less as long as the

identity it provides feels true to our understanding of self (for example, the Big Bang feels more true to our modern western selves than the idea that the world was created in 7 days).

3.1.4 Myth as Structure

Understanding myth as structure is most commonly associated with structuralists like Claude Lévi-Strauss (1981a) and Vladimir Propp (1968 (2010)), who were investigating the common similarities between mythological stories across the world. Note, this is different from Campbell’s approach because Lévi-Strauss and Propp were not trying to create a single, unifying myth, yet rather to understand the individual patterns and modular elements that exist across (yet, as Dorson (1973) argues, they share similar goals). Propp is well known for his study into the morphology of folktales (Propp, 1968 (2010), identifying the functions of characters in traditional folktales (which Ford counts as within the same realm as mythology). Ford calls this “narrative sheet music”, which especially Lévi-Strauss was looking for to show that *“mythical thought can be as logical as modern science, [...] the difference lies not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of the things to which it is applied”* (Ford, 2022, p. 444, Levi-Strauss, 1955, Read in Ford), thus arguing against the idea that myth belongs to “primitive” societies. Furthermore Lévi-Strauss helped lead to the notion of myths as “models” (Dundes, 2005, Read in Ford), moving beyond them as stories and events. The criticisms of this is similar to criticism of structuralism in general: It downplays and forgets specificities and contingencies, trying to find a centre or “origin

truth” for how society functions, and, as Derrida says, seeks to impose order to that which has none (Ford, 2022).

3.1.5 Myth as Discourse

Mythology studies, too, had a post-structuralist turn, that, in post-structural fashion, moved away from universal ideas into more contextual ones, looking not only at traditional storytelling, but modern forms of media and culture. In modern academia, mythology studies investigate much broader topics (Segal, 2004), and we can see examples of mythology in modern cinema (Hirschman, 1987), or as political strategy (Kjellgren, 2021) or in the play of video games (Asimos, 2018; Krzywinska, 2006; Geraci, 2014; Ford, 2022). Frog sees this shift by seeing myth as discourse, moving away from myth as stories to myth as symbols and signs. He identifies Roland Barthes (1957a) as being pivotal to this move. Barthes, breaking from most other myth scholars before him, investigated contemporary myths (of his time) in society, rather than considering myths as classic or stemming from history. By doing this, he reconsidered myth as a “type of speech”, an expression, or discourse. Barthes studied everyday cultural objects (or more accurately, signs) like toys or wine⁴, and found how the myths surrounding these general symbols and signs are constructed by the society using them. Barthes sees mythologization (the creation of myth) as a process by which a particular understanding of the world—including values, customs, rules, and so on—is *naturalized* within a particular community. This happens through enactment of the understanding through

⁴And professional wrestling, we’ll get there (section 4.2).

stories, rituals, art, structures, rhetorics, etc. It is important to mention that these individual objects and activities are not myths themselves, yet they are reflective of a mythology that is important to that community. We thus “express” myths throughout cultural production, be that a story or a piece of art or a tweet. Barthes uses the word "naturalization" to highlight that the process of mythologization is a process which turns the cultural value into a "natural" truth. The mythic seeks to make otherwise arbitrary or cultural signification seem a part of the natural order, as a fact of life rather than an interchangeable premise. Myth has a “decontextualizing impetus”, and seeks to remove the context and contingencies, to feel timeless and universal. It does this because it is a second-order semiotic system, existing on top of our existing (linguistic) semiotic system of signs and meanings, a “meta-language” that uses the signs of language as its signifier—not destroying the previous sign but re-presents it, re-signifies it into a mythological meaning. As Ford says:

“Myth is semiosis that pretends to not be semiosis. [...] In order to make its object seem natural a crucial part of naturalization is not only to de-contextualise, but precontextualize. The myth must appear to predate the circumstances in which it arises, else it is not natural but artificial and arbitrary.” (Ford, 2022, p. 37)

It does not matter that the causation here is nonsensical, because the process of naturalization, by acting like a semiotic system, makes it “seem” natural. This, to Ford, gets at the center of what myth does: *“transforms history into nature. Contingency into universality. Arbitrariness into causation. Ought into is. Discourse into ontology.”* While this is not a comprehensive description of what myth *is*, it gets to a core of what myth does: *“Mythology is about the construction of truth”* (Ford, 2022, p. 31)

3.2 The Creation of Myth

This has an important consequence for how Barthes considers myths: Myth can only latch onto that which already exists. To Barthes, acts of creation or transformation cannot be mythological. This is different to what, for example, Tolkien considered himself to be doing. Tolkien advocated for *the active construction* of myths, using the term "mythopoeia" (myth-making) (Aupers, 2015), to call for the powerful yet deliberate construction of secondary worlds that nevertheless speak to our own. He once saw his stories of Middle Earth as a possible myth for England⁵. However, as Ford mentions, we do not consider *The Silmarillion* to be an actual myth of England (regardless of Tolkien's intentions). The reason for this, to Ford, lies in the context of Tolkien's work as stemming from him as an author. We know it came from Tolkien and we know who he was. Despite how much he was emulating the mythmaking process, we do not see this as a "naturalized" myth. Yet, as also acknowledged by Ford, the artificiality of this emulation may fade over time. While the specifics of Tolkiens world is not considered exact myth, much of Tolkien's work and influence is. Just see Tolkien's immense influence on the entire genre of fantasy, Dungeons and Dragons (and thus the entire genres of video game RPGs and TTRPGs), and our understanding of the Middle Ages: *"Tolkien's 'conmyth' has proven so influential over the last decades that it has fundamentally and often unconsciously shaped our view of the Middle Ages as a whole"*

⁵This is often attributed to a letter Tolkien sent to Milton Waldman, in which he wrote of this idea. However, later scholars have disputed whether this was actually his true intent or merely something he pondered and discarded, as Tolkien scholar Luke Shelton discusses <https://luke-shelton.com/2022/02/12/why-calling-tolkiens-work-a-mythology-for-england-is-wrong-and-misleading/>.

(Ford, 2022, p. 47). Authors are not consciously reproducing and naturalizing these myths on purpose, yet it is almost an inevitable factor of being a part of a society that you will be a part of this naturalizing process through (re)production of existing myths over time.

If we look at modern storytelling, many modern fictional worlds use the language of mythology in their creation. Modern fictional worlds have "mythologies" or "lore bibles"—grand, canonical documents that define the history and reality of the fictional world. This fiction is undoubtedly constructed and authored, yet as it interacts and blends with the discursal myths, the cultural expectations and larger societal "naturalized" myths, it is not so clear a boundary as we might think. Thus, it is important to mention there is a distinction here, between a deliberately authored "myth" (which Barthes would not call myths), and the social contingent myth which arises through a naturalization process which can be attributed to no one in specific, yet arises from cultural and social interactions over time. I will discuss this more in section 3.5.

Before, we conclude, Ford has two metaphors which are helpful: Ossification and Fossilization. Ossification is the process by which myths come to be and change, which is being compared to how soft tissue forms into bone. A new myth is soft and malleable, when people do not yet have much at stake. Over time, they harden and become fixed, as people start depending on them, build identities and careers and structures around their existence. Thus, it solidifies and begins to exist in a society built around its shape, which makes it much harder to move and adjust. It has thus ossified into bone. Fossilization is the same process, yet over a much longer time period. Ford's

example is our modern society looking back at Greek mythology. Greek mythology has fossilized into a state where we no longer actively change it or consider it “our” myth, yet we are using it for cultural references, rather than altering the myth itself. Due to a separation in time and/or culture, myths thus turn from bone into fossils.

Before we enter the realm of games, it is important to mention an important relation of myth to a concept that will recur throughout this dissertation as well: Ritual.

3.3 Ritual and Myth

Early sociologists and myth scholars such as William Smith, E.B. Tylor and Frazer (Ackerman, 2002; Frazer, 1922; Segal, 2004) discussed the connection between ritual and traditional mythology. In what has been named the "myth-ritualist theory" the function of myth was seen to make sense of ritual, as a way for societies to explain their customs (Segal, 2004). Another view is seen in Campbell: *“ritual is simply myth enacted”* (Campbell, 2004; Rusch, 2018). As Segal (2004) notes, the various interpretations differ on whether they consider myth or ritual primary and the other secondary, yet, ritual has long been closely tied to religion and mythological storytelling. See Nagy (1992) for a modern interpretation of the myth-ritualist position. I am here not interested in weighing in on this debate one way or another, but ritual is useful because ritual is itself strongly tied to play and games, and thus this connection needs to be explored.

Ritual has been used in media and communication studies as a powerful fram-

ing. James Carey identified ritual as a second mode of communication different from transmission (Carey and Adam, 2008), aiming towards the maintenance of society over time (rather than messages over space). Inspired by Durkheim, Goffman, Turner and others, numerous scholars such as Couldry (2005), Silverstone (2003), Larsen and Tufte (2004) and Rothenbuhler (1998) have investigated how everyday media usage is experienced ritually. Couldry (2005) introduced the term "media rituals" to describe the ways media influences social life. Rituals are described as patternized actions or performance (Rothenbuhler, 1998) that not only describe social order but "naturalize" and "legitimize" it (Couldry, 2005) (echoing Barthes). In modern scholarship, scholars like Trillò et al. (2022), Burgess et al. (2018), and Gibbs et al. (2015) have expanded this term to include "social media rituals". Trillò et al. (2022) define this as "typified communicative practices on social media that formalize and express shared values". Turner identified that modern rituals were more sporadic and characterized by playful experimentation (Larsen and Tufte, 2004). This understanding of rituals is decidedly useful in games, too, as they are also rituals of interaction, experimentation and practice, mediated through games.

Huizinga directly discusses play as a kind of ritual (Huizinga, 1956), also seen in Wagner (Wagner, 2014). Rettberg compares the recurring events in a game like World of Warcraft to real-life ritual events such as weddings and funerals as players will experience them many times yet have shifting relationships to over time (Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008a). Through this lens, communal storytelling experiences arise through ritual repetition of play. Thus, by looking at how rituals are formed in games, and how

the communities understand, interpret, and maintain these rituals (for themselves and others), we can understand something about how the community interprets the game they are playing. My view on ritual is strongly informed the work I did with Nic Junius, both on their prior paper on the topic (Junius et al., 2021) and the paper we wrote together (Larsen et al., 2023) as a recurring, repetitive activity that is given contextual, social, or cultural significance, turning mundane activities into more meaningful ways to relate to the world⁶. Rituals in games are informed by the design of the game, its affordances and design constraints, but also in subversion to them, as communities discover optimal strategies and new ways to play unintended by the developers, and thus seeing how the player rituals are formed in relationship with the design of the game is crucial to understanding how design impacts the ritual play of community.

Ritual will be a powerful aspect I will return to in chapter 14 and section 8.6, yet for now I will leave it here as a a part of how myths are created and maintained. For now, let us broaden out our scope to see how these many understandings of myth has and can be used for game studies.

3.4 Myth in Games

Myth is no stranger in game studies. Several scholars, including Krzywinska (Krzywinska, 2008, 2006), Rusch (Rusch, 2018), Asimos (Asimos, 2018) and several others (Geraci, 2014; Aupers, 2015; Cragoe, 2016; Ford, 2021; Wallin, 2007; Harrington,

⁶A framing I have never forgotten since Nic said one day it was an analogy of the difference between mere repetition and ritual as the difference between "taking out the trash" and "garbage day". One is a rote, repetitious activity, the other has imbued meaning *in* its repetition.

2016; Ford, n.d.) have applied various aspects of myth to games, such as in the fiction, social contexts, rituals, shared history, and personal stories.

As mentioned, mythology is heavily used in worldbuilding, and this happens in games, too. Games like World of Warcraft, Mass Effect, or Shadow of the Colossus *have* mythology (Rusch, 2018; Krzywinska, 2006; Geraci, 2014), i.e. they have history and "lore" (Rimington and Blount, 2016), ancient beliefs and stories of gods that impact the world. This is true of Destiny and Final Fantasy XIV, and many perennial games as well.

Yet, the understandings of myth explained in the previous section have seen application in game scholarship. Rusch (2018) sees games as potential guides to a meaningful life, just as traditional mythology would have, leaning on the psychological aspects from Campbell and Jung, to how games can affect contemplation and reflection in a player. Harrington (2016) uses Barthes' understanding to inspect the notion of the "4X Gamer" and how this specific genre of game has established its own mythology on how it is played and talked about, creating a social context of how a game "should be" played and is played. Ford specifically discusses how the naturalized myth is more readily accepted in games: Because games are simulations and systems we accept their underlying assumptions as "true" because we have to in order to play the game. The example he gives is the optimal tax rate of a city in SimCity is around 11 percent (depending on income). This is obviously a statement, which if uttered outside a video game, would incur debate, yet as part of a video game, it must be accepted in order to play at all. This to Ford, makes games particularly mythological: *"The simulation makes*

an implicit claim to truth (or at least fidelity to truth), but is really “not more objective than any other medium” (Rusch, 2017, p. 35). This kind of masking is important to the function of myth, whether that is seen insidiously or not.” (Ford, 2022, p. 63). The way games present myth makes it appear similarly to the Barthesian understanding of myth: As true statements about the world, inherent, pre-existing, and natural, yet are not so.

Cragoe (Cragoe, 2016) inspects the mythological relations to tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGS) and finds several similarities between myths and RPGs, such as how they provide people with a sense of shared history and common symbols, or facilitate a sense of cultural empowerment through portrayal of common cultural heroes. I will not go over these in detail, but this list serves as a good comparison point for what myths do, and continue to do in modern society. Cragoe sees role-playing in live RPGs as “modern mythmaking”, and while TTRPGs are different than perennial games, the differences are revealing: *“Whereas particular traditional tales tend to have some level of generational tenacity, a particular story told in an RPG game rarely lives on for long (outside of the memories of the participants themselves)”* (Cragoe, 2016). This is one of the reasons why I find perennial games to be a very apt example for mythology: Their universal chronicle and temporal continuity causes this “generational tenacity” for much longer than an individual session or group. True, the time-frames of most perennial games are considerably shorter than most well-known myths (the longest I am aware of is the MUD Achaea, created in 1997 and still running (Reed, 2021), giving it a 25 year old history, a mere speck in contrast to traditional, fossilized mythology spanning

millenia, and even most ossified myths of today). Still, many of the reasons why people engage with live RPGs that Cragoe mention are also applicable to MMOs: *“Through the creation of a cultural system of production, solidarity, and agency that is endemically pleasing to the participants, we ensure the continued existence of cohesive and mutual social life”*.

I also want to highlight Alex Jaffe (2024)’s recent GDC Talk about "Player Mythologies". This design talk discusses how designers can see the "player fantasy", a common design term when discussing what feelings designers wish to evoke in players, as a direct "player mythology". Contrasted to the "thematic fantasy" of the game, which is what players pretend to be, the mythology is about what mythological idea players actually "become" when they play that game. A common examples is how a fighting game evokes a mythology of being a "martial artist", learning arcane, difficult techniques and using them to overcome your opponents. Jaffe intentionally describes this mythology has happening "IRL", and talk about the journey a player goes through in their long-term experience with the game over time. This is different than a player playing Civilization wanting to "feel" like a leader of a country, because their actual activity is not much like that of an actual leader. Whereas, a leader of a guild in World of Warcraft, as Jaffe mentions, is very much living out that mythology in their life, becoming that through their own play. Jaffe does not say this outright, but live-service games and perennial games (or "life-style games", perhaps) are quite adept at evoking these ongoing player mythologies, as the long-term engagement helps build up this "long-term" journey, as players live out their fantasy, and leave a "footprint", in

Jaffe's terms, on the players life.

3.4.1 Asimos' Contemporary Mythology

Vivian Asimos (2018) looks at video games writ large as "contemporary myth". *"We see myths as able to be reconnected to, told and retold, and played out by its audience. Video games provide a new medium for myths to inhabit, and its audience can directly interact with it. They play with myth."* (Asimos, 2018). Myths to her are *"narratives which are used by a community or an individual in order to structure their understanding of themselves and the world around them."* (Asimos, 2018), thus leaning on a "myth as structure" lens. Her primary reference, thus, is Levi-Strauss—which she says social science still has not fully recovered from. Levi-Strauss defined the terms implicit and explicit myth: The implicit myth is the personal, ritual action of myth, while the explicit myth is the written form expressed in stories and narratives (Lévi-Strauss, 1981b). Because of a heavy linguistic bias, the concept of implicit myth was thus far too underdeveloped in Asimos' view. She then also leans on some of the later re-interpretations of Levi-Strauss such as Galinier (2004), who posits ritual as considerably more important than Levi-Strauss claimed, and Wagner (2014), who reads playing games *as* a form of ritual (and thus implicit myth), and Miles-Watson, who redefines implicit myth as *"that which inspires and develops personal narratives of experience"* (Asimos, 2018; Wagner, 2014). Asimos thus understands implicit myth as something useful for games in bringing into attention the active role of the player in gameplay, as a personalized narrative. Explicit myth, reversely, is very literal: The scripted,

authored narrative. This split is thus strongly correlated to the player-story vs authored story split seen in emergent narrative and interactive storytelling works (Aylett, 1999; Jenkins, 2004; Louchart and Aylett, 2004a; Ryan, 2018; Louchart et al., 2008; Eladhari, 2018; Walsh, 2011; Swartjes, 2010; Kreminski and Mateas, 2021b; Larsen et al., 2019; Murray, 1997; Koenitz, 2015a,b) (see section 4.3). Implicit myth for Asimos, is further delineated into two kinds, where one half is the strictly personalized narrative (what I have called the afterstory (Larsen et al., 2019) or what we see in retellings (Eladhari, 2018; Kreminski and Mateas, 2021a)), and the other also includes “*the actions taken, or the gameplay*”, which is most likely akin to something like systemic emergence or the chronicle seen in Ryan (2018).

Asimos’ primary argument about these distinctions, is that they are deeply interwoven and should be looked at together in any analysis. Her focus of analysis is single player games like Resident Evil VII (Capcom, 2017), Dark Souls (From Software, 2011) and The Wolf Among Us (Telltale Games, 2013), with the argument that even these games are not played in a vacuum: Communities and myths arise around these games too, both for the individual and for communities. Her example, too, has an interesting point. She analyzes two very different Let’s Play’s of Resident Evil VII, one which focuses on entertainment, storytelling and experiencing the authored narrative, whereas the other is more focused on the gameplay mechanics of, e.g. inventory management, and little attention paid to the background story. These show two varying experiences of “the complete myth” (the combined outcome of explicit and implicit), and either is equally valid as experiences. At first glance, this seems almost a trite conclusion from a

game studies lens: Obviously these two experiences are equally valid. However, I might raise the question to a critical reader: Would they both be considered to be experiencing the narrative equally? This is what Asimos does by shifting the perspective from narrative to myth: In myth, a “narrative-light” experience is no less complete. The myth vocabulary thus allows a re-shifting of the argument. I am not claiming that the act of inventory management or creating a Let’s Play is “mythology” in itself, but rather that this is the material out of which the mythology is made. The myth of the game is not solely the “fiction” but also directly gameplay-specific elements, such as mechanics, inventory, damage numbers, and even extradiegetic elements like achievements. This, too is part of the implicit myth, part of the play experience, and part of what is used for mythmaking. The myth is thus able to stay intact regardless of diegetic breaks in the authored narrative. The myth is malleable and resilient towards breakages—it is in fact made to break and be rebuilt. Answering the question I raised about Krzywinska’s work, Asimos would then say that *both* exist. Explicit myth, the explicit fiction as a piece of mythic fiction in our world, and the implicit myth, the players’ experience, narrativized into myth.

I am, though, a little wary of this split. While it is useful from a definitional standpoint, it is too close to existing emergent narrative scholarship, and thus suffer from similar problems, such as an overreliance on the individual’s experience (omitting social and cultural contexts). This split, even in stances where we say we look at “both”, will inevitably lead to attempts to separate author and player stories, which leads to the same fallacies that interactive storytelling and game studies scholarship has fallen into

regarding this for decades now. I will return to this at the end of this chapter in section 3.1, yet both Jaffe and Asimos' view of myth here is largely, personal and individual. And so, in order to broaden our perspective to community, let us investigate scholars who looked at mythology in MMOs.

3.4.2 Krzywinska's Mythos

Contemporary to the anthropological explosion of research in MMOs, Tanya Krzywinska (2006, 2008) was making strong connections between MMOs and the mythic. In her evocatively titled paper "*Blood Scythes, Festivals, Quests and Backstories*", Krzywinska (2006)'s main argument is how the mythic plays a primary role in MMOs in "*making a consistent fantasy world in terms of game play, morality, culture, time, and environment*". Borrowing from Kaveney (2005)'s idea of a "thick text", she shows how World of Warcraft (her primary example) uses myth in many ways that permeate the experience and provides a rich context for its play. She provides no single definition of the mythic in her descriptions but rather describes how World of Warcraft uses mythological structures and worldviews from pre-existing myths (Celtic, Greek, North American, Nordic etc.). WoW shares a similar ontology of gods or the supernatural who affect the world of mortals, that simultaneously extend into the "real" world through symbolic meaning, intertextual references, extending beyond any one single story, but provides a basis for many. The MMO also does this inherently, through its invocation of the "hero's quest"-aesthetics in the player's goals and actions, that tie together the mechanical actions and the fictional worlds together: The mythic (background) is what

explains why you are doing what you are doing, for whom, how that ties into the state of affairs of the realm at large, etc. Players are not just inputting actions to make a blank slate's health to go 0, they are slaying *Arthas, The Lich King*, a character with mythological meaning built up over years, and that has great impact to its audience. Importantly, WoW is not only fictional but persistent and social: *"myth, fantasy, and reality meet and manifest in what we do and how we act and interact with others in the game."* (Krzywinska, 2006). Any action a player does in WoW is part of its reality, by the virtue that other, real humans are there too and can interact with you. Thus, any action becomes real—and this blends in with the fictional elements. Krzwinska uses the nebulous term "worldness", one she shares with Klastруп (2003) and Pearce and Artemesia (2009) to describe these games' worlds. They are more than mere narratives; World of Warcraft has a history, both in terms of its mythology that extends beyond (and predates) the player's influence—including multiple previous games that shares its fiction—that outlines multiple views of this history and competing or collaborative worldviews, an "assemblage" of fictional races and cultures, that imbue and embed the world and the gameplay, inform the perspectives of the characters and in turn the players (it is, for example, not possible to have a neutral relationship to the cities of the opposing faction in WoW, as they are forever hostile towards you).

Like Krzywinska, I take a fundamental view throughout this that *"it is common for players to understand the quest format in both narrative and other, more functional and experiential terms (e.g., a means of gaining better equipment and experience points); one is not reducible to the other, but instead they create a gestalt that better reflects in*

conceptual terms the multifaceted experience of playing the game” (Krzywinska, 2006). She directly uses myth to bind the allegorical and material, the fictional and the functional. She ends her paper on a challenge: *“having a material presence in this fictional world alongside other players with whom we interact raises all kinds of questions of a philosophical nature about the relationship between fantasy and reality, but that’s a quest for another day...”* (Krzywinska, 2006). Perhaps a philosophical unraveling of reality is too much for today as well, but the core concept of the “mythic” is that it holds this inherent duality inside it: It is both real and not, and, rather than a focus on whether the story itself is true, it is undeniable that the narrative has a true function in society. To discuss this further, we need to touch on another aspect of communal storytelling and practices, which is strongly related to myth: Religion.

3.4.3 A Note on Religion

Myth and religion are often implicitly related, but the relationship is a contentious one (Segal, 2004). Myths might be part of a religion, or they might not, some stories in a religion might be myths, some might be “legends” or “folktales” based on who you ask Segal (2004). Religion is a much broader system of rituals and beliefs and customs moreso than it is a series of stories or symbols, even though it often includes myths. Like the structuralists used myths to understand something about society, here the primary interest is not in religion per se⁷, but rather religious *functions* in society,

⁷I will note that throughout these examples, the religious studies are quite colored by a western, Christian perspective of Religion, not necessarily through direct mentions but moreso out of a Western bias. I am unfortunately unable to broaden my scope at the current moment, well aware that other religious practices such as the Jewish Torah or Theravada Buddhism would be very interesting in terms

and how we can see how virtual worlds are able to fulfill some of them. There are three primary scholars I want to walk through who have looked specifically at religious functions and virtual worlds, and their speculations are quite relevant in this context.

3.4.4 Geraci's Virtually Sacred

Robert M. Geraci, in his book “Virtually Sacred” (Geraci, 2014), looks at World of Warcraft and Second Life (Linden Lab, 2003) through the lens of religious practice. The ultimate conclusion is that “*World of Warcraft is virtually sacred: a digital arena for secularized, quasi-religious practice*” (Geraci, 2014). Note that this is not, as he notes, making a grand claim that WoW is a “religion” in the vein of Christianity or even Scientology, but merely that there are many of its operations that can be viewed as fulfilling religious functions. There are parts of WoW that function like religion, and fulfill a similar role in people’s lives, while not pretending to be an actual religion (because it is masquerading as play). Geraci brings up a few crucial elements that support this argument.

The first and perhaps most obvious of these is the mirroring of social functions of religion in any massively multiplayer game. Social grouping through guilds, with organized activities like raids or dungeons requiring social action and dependence, is very present in MMOs and virtual worlds, as established by the range of anthropological work that Geraci also leans on (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2006; Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi and Harris, 2006; Cole and Griffiths, 2007; Carr, 2012). Geraci’s

of their communal storytelling aspects.

point with this is that virtual worlds thus have the ability to impinge on the social role of religion in society: Instead of gathering in churches, we gather in raids, and perform a ritual activity every week with a community of like-minded people who can provide guidance and structure to life, which can extend far outside the game. This can be a strong aspect of religious communities, yet is modernly done in many ways—and virtual worlds can be seen as one of them.

Echoing (and referencing) Krzywinska, Geraci shows how players of World of Warcraft actively get to see themselves as part of a grander story, and that even mundane and “profane”⁸ activities like grinding or crafting or farming take up a more sacred or meaningful role because the player can see a clear meaning behind the activities: They are strengthening their characters, building the toolkit to fight *Arthas*, a character they have known about and wanted to fight for 7 years (Geraci, 2014). Geraci is critical of the idea that players do not care about the overarching narrative of an MMO. He brings up a distinction by Costikyan (2007) of two types of narratives in MMOs: The overarching narrative and the individual quests a player is doing. Costikyan concludes that players do not care much about the first part, but Geraci’s survey results seem to indicate that this is very much not true of all players, and he supports this with the religious angle. Being part of something greater and more meaningful than we are able to do in our, mostly, normal lives, is a big draw to these types of games. In real life, it is sometimes difficult to find a greater meaning in the daily chores, but in a virtual world, even boring actions can take greater meanings because they are weaved in a

⁸This is using Durkheim’s distinction of sacred/profane (Durkheim, 1912), something Sapach (2015) also does to investigate World of Warcraft, although her findings are far less thorough than Geraci’s.

larger tapestry of storytelling, of which the player can feel they are playing a part.

Geraci continues to take this argument into transhumanist ideas, something especially seen in early discussion on Second Life. Religions often have transcendent themes, of becoming something more (more pure, more holy) than we are in our corporeal life. Virtual worlds, here, offer a chance at some of it: here you can become a god yourself, or something close to it⁹. In a charitable take, we can see how this functions in the ample scholarly work on identity and bodies in MMOs (Carroll, 2016; Ensslin and Muse, 2011; Hutchinson, 2013; Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008b; Pearce and Artemesia, 2009), and how players often use virtual characters as idealized extensions of themselves, often being something they could not be in real life. However, transhumanism can be and is heavily criticized, so I do not wish to dwell on this topic.

3.4.5 The Disenchanted World

This idea of being part of a greater narrative references a much older idea that echoes through much research in religion in virtual worlds, which is Weber’s notion of a “disenchanted world”, mentioned by both Geraci, Aupers (2015), and Saler (2012). To summarize Weber’s point, as read through these sources, the modern (mostly western) world¹⁰ has become increasingly secularized and non-religious, non-mystical and non-magical. Virtual worlds, in contrast (and this is Geraci (2014) and Aupers (2015)’ point) offer a chance at living, if ever briefly, in a world that once again has something that the modern world is missing: A sense of purpose, a chance to exist in “*a cosmos*

⁹How true this is, is up for debate, yet this will be discussed more in chapter 7.

¹⁰And remember Weber is speaking to the 20th century, not our current time.

of epic meaning” (Geraci, 2014), or harkening back to “a time when life mattered” (Hong, 2015)¹¹. As Geraci said: “*myths are the thing through which character’s (and thus players) actions make sense*” (Geraci, 2014). Note here that Geraci is very much talking about the backstory, the lore, the fictional characters of the game as part of what sets this mythical expectation up, but it is the players’ actions that fulfill them: The myths provide the context players insert themselves in. This, to Geraci works because virtual worlds have “real histories”, which the players can reference and situate refer to, which goes beyond their own: Life goes on in a virtual world when a player does not engage with it, and a real sense of place is established through this passage of time.

This idea of dealing with a disenchanted world through fantastical media is not new. Saler (2012)’s historical covering of how turn-of-the-century (1890-1940) literature such as Sherlock Holmes, Lovecraft and Lord of the Rings, gained a lot of traction at the time precisely because of its ability to inject enchantment into a world that was becoming increasingly rationalised, where it was no longer acceptable as an upstanding member of society to, say, believe in fairies. Saler covers in great detail how the fan communities that developed around Sherlock Holmes and Lord of the Rings in many ways were quite similar to those we see around perennial games and other media today, just using physical letters or debate clubs rather than forum posts and chat servers. It is not a unique feature of MMOs to create enchantment. However, it is now much more possible to "enter" these worlds than were possible before, as the very object that is being mythologised *is* what people play inside.

¹¹ Another reading of myth and history, namely that virtual worlds are an “*invocation to a time "when life mattered"*” (Hong, 2015). More on this later.

This notion of using virtual worlds to combat the mundanity of modern life is thus not a new idea, nor something uniquely seen in video games, yet rather perhaps just a newer incarnation of the same idea. To Geraci and maybe others, this newest incarnation might be more (more successful, more impactful, more "real") than previous ones, but I would advise caution into thinking too highly of this idea. I don't want to make any claims that video games or virtual worlds are exceptional or unique in their ability to enchant the world.

Next, I will bring up another read on religion in virtual worlds, which will bring forth a final, crucial point about how they function as myths.

3.4.6 Aupers' Religious Play

Stef Aupers has, along with collaborators, written a series of papers on religion and World of Warcraft, based on a series of in-depth interviews with players about their relationship to religion in the game (Schaap and Aupers, 2017; Aupers et al., 2017; de Wildt and Aupers, 2016; Aupers, 2015). Aupers wants to look at religion directly, with a focus on the players and how they perceive religious game narratives (and not philosophical arguments on what myth and religion is). They find several ways players react to religion in their play (Aupers et al., 2017; Schaap and Aupers, 2017), listed here:

- Performance: "trying out" other religions or playing a religious character despite being non-religious oneself, or vice-versa.

- Learning to be more open-minded about other perspectives on religion. This is especially true as a large part of MMO players self-identify as atheists or agnostics, and seeing how the various races and cultures in WoW use religion as part of their society can be insightful.
- As a gateway into “religious quests”; using the game as a way to find your meaning in life. This is not meant in the same way as Geraci, but rather that a player for example was inspired to pick up Buddhist practices after researching the Tauren belief systems in the game. This might also be compared to Rusch (2018).

This last part leads into another of (Aupers et al., 2017)’s points: How religion has made a move from passive consumption in "mass media" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997) towards more "active engagement" in new media (echoing (Hayward, 1997)). Religion in the modern western world has also moved away from a passive dominance of Christianity into a milieu towards more active participatory choice. People choose their own religions frequently and even often “bricolages” or mixes of religions as “*religious consumption a la carte*” (Possamai, 2003). This reflects another hypothesis by Aupers, namely that people, even if they are non-religious, “want to believe” and are allured by the prospect that there are real gods to believe in (Aupers, 2015).

Aupers comes from a much different tradition than most discussed here, using cultural studies sources such as Stuart Hall (1980) (especially the idea of “decoding/encoding”) to explain player phenomena, and also relying on a series of modern academic work on new religious practice in fiction-based religions (Partridge (2006), and esp.

Possamai (2003, 2005), who in turn used Baudrillard to see how people constructed “simulacrums” of religions out of popular culture artifacts). The primary assumption this challenges is the clear distinction between reality and fiction: Consumers—fans—of fictional properties like Lord of the Rings or Star Trek can be argued to actively turn the texts into a reality that feels real (Jenkins, 1992), what Possamai calls: “hyper-real”. Markham (1998) argued that online environments cannot be said to be “not real”, and any kind of binary separation of these as real or not is not sufficient. This is tied to another frequent word that surrounds religion (and not much else in this topic), namely that of *belief*. During (2002) shows how “*once a particular text is deemed to be fiction, then it is impossible simply to believe in the reality of fictional events*” (During, 2002) (read in Schaap and Aupers (2017)). As Geraci said, World of Warcraft makes no allusions towards becoming a “real” religion. People do not “believe” in the gods of WoW, the way they would the Christian god. However, I want to contrast this with a quote one of the participants in Aupers’ interviews says:

For me there is a fundamental difference between the gods in WoW and the gods in real life. The gods in WoW exist and the gods in real life do not. And that sounds like I’m being a petty, sort of atheist douchebag making a point, but it’s not exactly like that. [...] In both WoW and in Terry Pratchett’s Discworld [fantasy novel series; JS/SA], gods exist. And gods exert power. And if you piss off [sic] a god, the god will strike you with lightning. (Schaap and Aupers, 2017)

“The gods in WoW exist”, is the primary point here, to contrast with the idea of belief. Because this, naturally, is only true *within the fiction* of WoW. The gods of WoW exist as much as Arthas exists, and as *little* as he does¹². Here is the complication,

¹²I have, like this interviewee, also stumbled upon the strange notion that in fantasy worlds (literary

though: The player, a real person, interacts with Arthas, and performs real actions when in a raid group to kill him—and thus, if the gods of WoW exist as much as Arthas, then the gods are also real in the sense that they are part of the player’s experience, and thus part of the real world in the same sense that the World of Warcraft is. As During says, there is no sense of real or unreal we can firmly plant these categories in, as they intentionally operate on both axes at the same time.

3.4.7 “Real Enough”

You might wonder why it matters so much whether the gods in Azeroth (or any other fictional game) are real, yet I bring this forward because it is similar to something I have once discussed. In my Perennial Games paper (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021), I discussed how it was precisely the “diegetic muddiness”—that what is part of the world is up for discussion at run-time—is part of the appeal of perennial games. It is not a negative quality that breaks their narratives, it is rather a part of their strengths. We will discuss this more in section 4.2. I cannot help but notice the reflection of this argument once again when looking at myth and religion in MMOs. It is precisely the fact that MMOs are “real-not-real” that make them prime for this kind of religious, mythological discussion. They are fake enough that it exists within play (and is thus safe and inviting, non-dangerous and explorative), but it is real enough that it matters (people care about it, find meaning and connection with it—it is more than frivolous).

and games), the gods of their religions tend to be real in the world with provable consequences upon the world, in contrast to our world’s religions, which are mostly exclusively based on belief in the unprovable. This might be another way that we can see how people “want to believe” (Aupers, 2015). Maybe this is one of the secret reasons that these questions fascinate me.

We will return to this, also, in section 12.2. Hong (2015) has valuable insight here: Using discussions on the real by Žižek (2002), they conclude: *“I refer to it here as a sense of “real enough”: We are able to play as if we believe this could have been real. The desire for the real does not take the form of earnest angst, but a willingness to dive knowingly into video game spectacles of “when life mattered.” and later “the invocation of a mythic time when life mattered comes hand in hand with a postmodern attitude of real enough. I end by suggesting that what is at stake is not the “realness” of games, but a politics of engagement with the real writ large.”* (Hong, 2015)

The "realness" of virtual worlds have in fact never been at stake. As I will show later (chapter 12), virtual worlds have been real enough from the time they were ASCII text on black backgrounds and little else. Arguing the realness of virtual worlds only matters in the context of arguing whether *fiction* is real, not whether the actual world itself is¹³.

With these uses of mythology in game studies and beyond defined, we can narrow our scope to perennial games, and begin to understand how I view mythology as useful to studying them.

3.5 The Layers of Myth in Perennial Games

From the above, it is clear there are several things we can talk about when we say the word myth. For my purposes, my view aligns most closely with Ford and Barthes, as myths being stories, discourses, media, messages, and signs, told by and

¹³As I discussed in section 1.5, this is why the concept of "virtual world" is contentious.

for communities, to explain the world they inhabit, and these signs communicate their shared history, values, norms, and perspectives¹⁴.

Where I take slight distance from Ford and Barthes is that I also want to consider the active construction of myth as valuable. Mythmaking is the active construction of mythological stories by the community and authors. These are often fictional, yet they can and will spill over into the non-fictional realm. telling, re-enacting, retelling, or experiencing those stories with each other. The way I want to use myth captures several of these facets, both its fictional storytelling traditions and its discursal, communal, and cultural functions. Ultimately, I see the power of using “myth” in its ability to, in a single word, encompass a more holistic, entire view of narrative play, that does not only talk about a played or designed narrative nor a communal, lived experience, but rather something else: Something that is in play, redefined and reshaped like a myth, something that is both real and fake, something that succumbs to the powers that be and becomes them. It has to include a double-move towards and away from the player. The moment the player makes a choice, it is in context to a design, and the moment the designer makes a choice, it is in context to a future or existing player. There is myth because it has a communal and individual function beyond the game itself, a meaning that reinforces both the play and the design, it is a false story we reject and a true statement we believe. As Koster said, *"we come back to myths not because they are true, but because they are True"* (Koster, 2018, p. 245).

¹⁴Ford prefers using the words “myths” or “mythology” rather than the singular “myth” to highlight that this is not a single unifying, complete myth, but a large set of possible myths that are being discussed, changed, and debated, consciously and unconsciously, in real time, and I have much sympathy for this idea, as we will see below.

Yet, we need to rectify how this works, and thus I define two layers of myth as I see its use for perennial games. You can see a figure of this in 3.1. These layers avoid Asimos (2018)’s split of the implicit or explicit myth, the split mentioned by Geraci, and the strict discursal focus of Ford, to incorporate play and fiction more foundationally, and yet tries to avoid leaning on a player or an author.

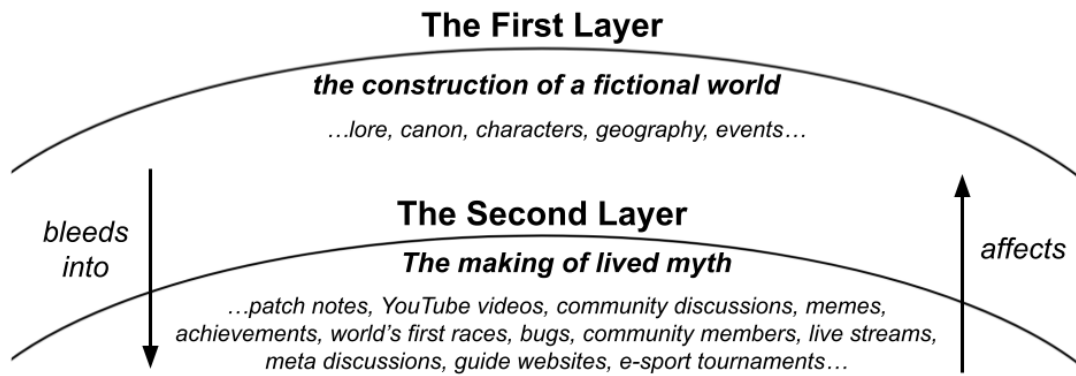


Figure 3.1: The two layers of myth in perennial experiences. The first layer is the construction of the fictional world through text and lore and deliberation, and the second is the lived myth that develops as a consequence of play.

The first layer is the *fictional* myth. This is the realm of creative invention by authors, that create the myths inside games. It is the fiction, the lore, the backstories and fabric of the fictional universe. The fictional myth is the “canon” of the universal chronicle (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021) of a perennial experience. This mythmaking is closely related to J.R.R. Tolkiens “mythopoeia” (Aupers, 2015), which is the careful

and deliberate construction of new fictional mythology that aims to say something about the world. This layer is Bungie authoring narratives in *Destiny*, by creating the gods and their domains. This layer is what the actions of players gain meaning by (Geraci, 2014; Krzywinska, 2006), and where we can view their lore and cosmology as revealing about their creators and the people who play them, as in traditional mythological studies (Lévi-Strauss, 1981a, 1955; Campbell, 2008). However, it is not only the domain of authors, as the players and audience play with the fiction, too, and through fanfiction, deliberation, and play, they affect and create new fiction. Crucially, the role of the audience is also often to *maintain* the fiction, to deliberate it and hold it to account, to update wiki sites and discuss narrative developments. *Blaseball* (The Game Band, 2020) is a prime example of the audience directly participating in and maintaining the fiction through their own actions, and the developers responding to this through future authored events. Characters started with no more than a randomly generated name, and the fans alone created the backstories that influenced future events (Manning, 2020; Kreminski and Mateas, 2021a).

The second layer is looking at the game as an object of myth-making *in play*. This includes everything that is part of its play, and which is inherently “*non*”-fiction as it is stories lived by real people. All player activities in a game, such as questing, grinding, and raiding, and socializing and inventory management are included in its play and this sits in context to the mythical meaning established by the first kind of myth, even kinds of play that are not seen as traditionally narrative¹⁵. Asimos shows

¹⁵As I will show in section 4.3, it is useful to compare Geraci (2014)’s idea of history with James Ryan’s notion of emergent narrative as “nonfiction” (Ryan, 2018), as the case is similar: People create

an example of how two kinds of Let's Plays both create myths (Asimos, 2018), despite only one of them engaging overtly with the fictional element of the game. Krzywinska shows how the play of the game is affected by previous players, even without direct influence: Battles play out differently based on experience, based on best practices or the current "meta", that affect a player's given choices, even if established outside the game (Krzywinska, 2006). Jaffe (2024) shows how these myths involve the very lives of players, living out their desired experiences through these games and how they play them. The second layer of myth is expansive: It includes everything that is part of the play of a game, even that which is not directly "playing the game": Patch notes, YouTube videos, community discussions, memes, achievements, world's first races, bugs, prominent community members such as YouTubers and live streamers, meta discussions, guide websites, esports tournaments¹⁶) etc.

The intention here is not to state that these aspects are inherently mythical, but highlighting that these are the tools with which the myths can be made. The second layer is powerful because it highlights those aspects of a game that are not typically seen as "narrative", and frames it as part of a potentially narrative experience by framing it as mythological. The creation of a "meta" in any game is a good example mentioned by Krzywinska: We must submit to the "*powers that be*" (Krzywinska, 2006) if we are to play efficiently—or intentionally counterplay against it. In any case, we reflect on the established myth. A meme, such as the infamous "Leeroy Jenkins" from early World

(curate) stories from a wealth of material events.

¹⁶Esports could be viewed as its own mythology, as a sports narrative on its own, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this.

of Warcraft (Schreier, 2017b) is part of the community's shared understanding of the game: It is part of the experience and used and reused as people play together. This *is* the enchantment of the world (see section 3.6.2). We are able to take something fictional and *play* with it, make it real, and thus feel like we can make our lives a little more magical. This is often seen as the activity of the audience, although authors can and will participate, and in fact, any update to the game can be seen as a part of this mythmaking, a further event to create myths out of. In a perennial game, the individual myths of players can intersect with the broader myths of the community, as a player can rise to "mythological" status (in the case of Leeroy Jenkins), or an individual player's myth can involve other people, as the example of the "leader" mythology mentioned by Jaffe (2024) shows. In a perennial game, the individuals myths thus often involve other people, as other people might be why people show up; to compete against, to collaborate with, or to exist around.

The fictional myth (the first layer), importantly, does not follow the processes discussed by Barthes and Ford, and is not mythological in the sense of being culturally resonant (other than narratives themselves being part of that culture, and thus responding to the cultural mythology writ large). Rather, fictional mythology tends to *resemble* the mythological stories, without following the naturalization processes that turn them into actual cultural myths. The fictional myths, in Ford's understanding exist as fictional stories part of the greater mythology of culture, and are a part of the overall naturalization of cultural myths. Yet the second layer, which operates in function much closer to how he describes myth, is different in another way, in that it predominantly is

subcultural. Where Ford discusses how games exist in the larger culture, the myths of a game might only exist within the culture of that game. For example, "meta" of any game, or its individual cultural memes and myths, are often unique to that subculture, and do not necessarily cross out into the broader mythological cultural landscape. Of course, it does not exist in a vacuum, and players and authors migrate between subcultures, so we cannot say any one perennial game's second layer is isolated, yet it often creates its own myths *about itself*, rather than spreading outside the larger culture.

Let me explain the difference between these two layers with an example, as well as clear something up about the definition of perennial games. Live service games like Rocket League (Psyonix, 2015) or Counterstrike: Go (Valve, 2012) or Minecraft (Mojang, 2011) were not brought up as perennial games in chapter 2. Yet, arguably, they have perpetuity and temporal continuity, and a form of universal chronicle. The contention comes in how we understand the *fiction* of these games, as compared to other perennial games like World of Warcraft or Destiny, which have a clear fictional world or lore. A game like Rocket League has very little in terms of fictional content, but it does still have a clear perennial experience. In the terms of the mythological layers, Rocket League has very little in terms of the first layer, but it is still a perennial game as there is a lot in the second layer. Take an example like the "flip reset"¹⁷, a technique that was discovered by the community, unintended by the game's rules. Over time, this technique was discovered, practiced, and then popularized to the point where

¹⁷A flip reset is a maneuver in Rocket League whereby the player regains their ability to flip in the air by touching all 4 wheels on the ball mid-air. Normally, you have to land on the ground to regain the ability to flip the car, yet this technique allows potentially infinite (practically 2-3) flips in the air with enough skill, giving a lot of possible control for an attacker to move the ball in unexpected directions.

it is now a common and expected part of high-level play. There are iconic flip reset shots, players who perfected it, and many different variations that are useful in various scenarios. This development over time is part of the mythology, the universal chronicle of Rocket League.

The difference between this and the type of perennial experience that happens in e.g. *Destiny*, where the perennial developments are about fictional characters and events, is that in Rocket League there is no discussion of what is "true". When the second layer interacts with the first, however, there are elements that are up for debate and it is here the diegesis becomes muddy as "real" people interact with "fictional" beings. Yet, it cannot be said that Rocket League has no fiction ever, as there is always the possibility for people to create a layer of fiction where none is intended (see how players create lore of *Minecraft* despite being given very little to work with (theatakhan, 2016) or the story of "Herobrine" (Morton, 2021))¹⁸. I will recall the idea of a "scalar" narrativity (Ryan, 2006) and perenniality defined in section 2.1, as experiences can be more or less perennial. Rather than saying that Rocket League has no story I would rather say it has low narrativity and this leads to a thinner first layer of myth than *Destiny*, but there is always the possibility for people to create a layer of fictionality where none is intended.

As seen from this example, the second layer of myth is created and maintained through play. However, the first layer of the fictional world is not exempt from play: It

¹⁸A fictional, folkloric character players claimed to see in early *Minecraft* worlds. This was never proven true and developers disavowed its existence, yet players enjoyed spreading the story, similar to a Bigfoot sighting. The story of Herobrine further matters for a story we will discuss in the future (section 4.4).

is in large part through “narrative play” that these myths are upheld, through retellings and mythic repetition, etc. It is also the first layer of myth that *draws* the player in, entices them with the promise of magic: Here in this world, you can be a wizard (or a rocket powered car, and who doesn’t want to be that?). The first layer can also affect the second through establishing accepted norms or preferred play patterns through the fictional myth, which are then upheld (or subverted) by the community in the second layer.

These two kinds of myth cannot be separated, and it is where both kinds of mythmaking combine that perennial games shine. In particular, when the second layer of mythmaking becomes *about* the first, and the first is *affected* by the second. Leeroy Jenkins, originally a person from a comedic video of a raid gone wrong that became a meme because of his recognizable shout, was later introduced in Hearthstone (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014) on the same level as any fictional character in World of Warcraft (Schreier, 2017b). The Fall of Dalamud, mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, is another great example of a myth that functions in both layers inherently, through its conception. It is both a scripted and authored event by the developers that is part of the fictional fabric of the universe of FFXIV, but it is also an event uplifted and retold to mythological status by its players. Players share stories of "how it was" before the moon fell, making claims both fictional and factual about its state. Destiny has countless examples of players engaging in an activity and then that becoming “canonized” through the game’s lore acknowledging such actions later (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021)¹⁹.

¹⁹In this sense, the two layers almost operate similarly to Barthes (1957a)’ semiotic systems, with the second layer being a secondary system on top of the first, using the storytelling of the first layer to

This is the true magic of perennial games, as it relies on perennality to function: Mythmaking takes *time*, and it is only possible to affect the first layer of myth if there is a built-in affordance to change it, and that can only happen over time. The myth of the second layer can emerge from any game, and the first layer happens in traditional fiction, but it is only in perennial games with fictional elements that we see *both simultaneously*. Players create new myths in the moment that alter the fictional world and how they play. This is something that can only exist with perennality and fiction combined. I do not argue that this is entirely unique to perennial *games*, as the examples that Saler (2012) brings up also show signs of this kind of experience, and professional wrestling, as discussed by me (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021) (section 4.2), also include fiction and perennality. Yet, games are unique in that they are, well, *games*, allowing an inherent play with systems and an inherent expectation of interaction, as well as its own unique challenges with development.

Before I conclude this chapter, let us discuss in a bit more detail how this understanding of mythology helps clarify some core tensions of perennial games, and especially, storytelling in perennial games.

3.6 How Myth Helps Perennial Games

There are four main advantages to viewing perennial games through the lens of myth: First, it avoids assuming a false player/author split that is frequent when studying storytelling in perennial games. Second, it helps to explain why we play perennial games

create myths in the second.

and the immediate attraction of *playing with* myth. Third, mythology has an inherently complicated relationship with truth and reality that also fits well with the complicated diegesis of perennial games. Finally, it solves what has been perceived as a major issue with storytelling in perennial games, namely that of repetition.

3.6.1 The Author/Player Split

Myth provides an inherent binding between the traditionally narrative and the traditionally ludic. Krzywinska emphasizes how WoW situates its fiction firmly in the mythic, through its creation of an illusion of a coherent world in cultural, spatial, and temporal terms, yet this has gameplay consequences: *“Through a web of intertextual and intratextual signifiers, the game invites players to read the world and gameplay tasks as “myth,” and like myth these have allegorical and material dimensions”* (Krzywinska, 2006). Krzywinska and Geraci, as discussed, show how the practices and play of games can be seen as mythological or sacred. Since the actions in games have mythological meanings (in the second and first layer), the individual actions of players become intertwined with the myth, and cannot be entirely separated from it, and the quests and activities of players are understood both in fictional and mechanical terms. In other words, the play of a perennial game affects both layers of myth at once, and they cannot be separated easily. This has implications for understanding the relationship between players and authors.

It might seem natural to assume that the first layer of myth is for authors and the second layer is for the audience, but as already shown in examples in the previous

section, there are counter-examples to both of those assumptions. Players affect the fictional myth and authors affect the lived experience. In fact, authors are as much part of the lived experience as any audience member, as they are also experiencing the development of the lived myth first-hand alongside the audience. It cannot be said that any layer belongs to any specific participant. The two layers of myth are more orthogonal, or at least divergent, to players or authors. Both the audience and authors have the capability to affect, be part of, and engage with both layers of myth. One example of this is Destiny's Loot Cave (see the beginning of chapter 2).

The two layers of myth do not show who is in control of the mythmaking process, but rather what part of the experience it affects. These two layers are what is *at play* in a perennial game, it is what everyone changes when they engage with it. Even actions as simple as reading about the fiction helps enforce it, maintain it and strengthen its power, just as listening to a myth would help propagate it through society.

This is not to say that authors and audience members have the same kind of control over the perennial story—they are very different roles, still. The two layers show *what is*, not how it comes to be, and who is in control of what. The advantage of this is that it avoids the assumption that players are static “consumers” of the myth or that the authors are entirely the “gods” of the myth, as neither is the case.

3.6.2 Why We Play

Myth provides a very strong case for why perennial games are so enticing to play, and so successful as products.

As shown in the section on enchantment (section 3.4.5), perennial games allow something people have been searching for decades in the modern world. Krzywinska (2006) and Geraci (2014) discuss how MMOs inherently invoke the “hero’s quest”-aesthetics, and let the player “be part of something greater” or give them a chance to exist in “*a cosmos of epic meaning*” (Geraci, 2014). Note, too, that this goes further in the social settings of MMOs. While any single player video game lets the player be the hero, in MMOs, players can become a cultural phenomenon, sharing heroic aspects not just fictionally but socially as well, as they can become *that* player, known for achieving an impossible feat (or failing to do so) (see examples in section 11.1.3.1).

And the notion of *play* is important. Aupers (Aupers, 2015) shows how it is specifically the voluntary, inconsequential, non-important attitude of play that allows this experimentation and exploration. We can *play* with myth in perennial experiences because “it is only” a game. Players are well aware that they are not materially affecting the outside reality, but it is precisely this awareness that allows them to play with the fictional reality. As Saler (Saler, 2012) showed, in response to a disenchanted world, players needed fantasy to be pointless (yet sensible) to allow themselves to engage with it in a world increasingly funded on rationality. Because the world of Destiny takes place in a video game, it is acceptable for many to pretend to be a god-slaying space wizard. And furthermore, the promise of being part of an ever-evolving, *lived* myth, being *there when it happens* is something that perennial games excel at, through their temporality, and ability for players to inhabit spaces (Geraci, 2014; Nitsche, 2008).

3.6.3 Real-not-real

To Geraci, this playing in an “epic cosmos” only works *because* virtual worlds have “real histories”, which the players can reference and situate themselves in: Life goes on in a virtual world when a player does not engage with it, and a real sense of place is established through this passage of time. It is not *just* play. As Krzywinska also said, *real* things happen in these worlds (Krzywinska, 2006), and while they happen in mythological contexts, the events are not “fake” or “unreal”, but in fact quite actual, they are “*real enough*” (Hong, 2015). This “real-not-real” nature of myth is part of what causes their allure and enjoyment: They are fake enough to be fictional and exist within play (and is thus safe and inviting, non-dangerous and explorative), but are real enough that it matters (people care about it, find meaning and connection with it—it is more than frivolous). We will return to this in section 12.2.

Furthermore, the pseudo-historical nature of these games cause a strange effect to happen upon the veracity of their events. They are still undoubtedly fictional, yet there is something true about them. To understand what I mean, here is an example of an event that happened in *Destiny: We shot down the Almighty*²⁰ (Bungie, 2020a). This is true. It did happen. Every player (myself included) who was part of this can attest to the fact that it happened. Therefore, while the world is fictional, as Krzywinska said, “*we nonetheless do “real” things in that world*” (Krzywinska, 2008) (you can also refer to the Fall of Dalamud from the beginning of this chapter as another example of this). This statement is different from most narrative events as it is not an individual experience: It

²⁰A space station on a collision course with Earth.



Figure 3.2: Screenshot from *Destiny 2* showing the live event where the *Almighty* was shot down. Showing me and other guardians watching the event in the sky. Taken June 6th, 2020 by me.

didn't happen separately to each person—yes, each player had their unique perspective on the event, but the event itself is part of the universal chronicle: Every player who played in the seasonal event helped gather the required resources, and every player who was in *Destiny* at 10 AM PST on June 6th, 2020 saw the Almighty explode in the sky (Bungie, 2020a) (see figure 3.2). And any player who was not can only hear the story of it. This is how perennial games become historical; become mythological, and create the first layer: They create events which become myth. The destruction of the Almighty, the fall of Dalamud (Square Enix, 2013; Nelva, 2019, Pre-patch 2.0 and transition to *A Realm Reborn*), the black hole in *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017; Webster, 2019, Oct 13-15, 2019), the opening of the gates of Ahn-Qiraj (Blizzard Entertainment Ltd., 2004; Ziebart, 2011; Rousseau, 2020, Patch 1.9.0) are all examples of the most mythological of these types of events: They were big, earth-shattering (literally) events that changed the fabric of their universes. They are foundational myths upon which their universal chronicles stand. These myths are kept alive through records and retellings and *become* myths through player action.

Mythology, too, has a complicated relationship with truth. It is baked into the very word (and the source for the meaning of the word as falsehood) that mythological stories are *false*, and yet there is still a grain of truth to them. However, as mentioned in an interview with Kate Orman in the book *Third Person* (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, 2009), traditional mythologies contradict themselves a lot, and timelines of mythological stories was often blurry and the state of the world is inconsistent from one story to the next²¹. This is the case for MMOs and perennial games too. Different parts of a community can have multiple, co-existing explanations for events, and *Destiny* is a prime example of whole lore books with intentionally false accounts of happenings (Bungie, 2018b, 2019b). And yet, one does not need to spend a long time in any “lore” community to notice their frequent obsession with “the canon” (Destinypedia, 2022; McSpazz, 2022)—knowing what is true and what is false (more on this in chapter 13). Multiple versions of the same story are rarely accepted, and rejected upon discovering one of them as a lie. “Retconning”²² can be seen as a great sin and consistency often as a great virtue. This is perhaps ironic, considering traditional mythology’s own internal inconsistency. Yet, it is precisely this contradiction—the discussion of what is real given a complicated foundation—that is fundamental to perennial experiences. There is a built-in tension with the mythological and the audience’s desire for knowledge, and this is, once again, *part* of the perennial experience. What happens in a perennial game

²¹And so does *Doctor Who*, which is what Kate Orman is talking about, another example of a perennial narrative that, through the course of its runtime and multitude of media, has contradicted itself, while fans have tried to keep a resemblance of “canon”.

²²“Retroactive continuity”: Changing a previously established truth about the world to serve a new narrative purpose. This could be innocuous, like changing the previous off-screen location of a character, to severe, such as reviving them from death.

is both real and not real, and it is impossible to define it fully as either.

3.6.4 Repetition

The fact that events in perennial games repeat has been a major point of criticism for their efficacy as storytelling media for a long time (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021; Lohmann, 2008; Bartle, 2004; Krzywinska, 2006) (section 2.4). Events in MMOs happen over and over again as players repeat events ad infinitum; Even important story characters like *Arthas the Lich King*, are killed every day. How can storytelling make sense in such a world? To Krzywinska and Geraci, this does not spell the demise of storytelling in WoW. Rather, through the mythical lens, we can see a power in it. Krzywinska notes how “*as with retellings of myths, battles are fought over and over again, and in this there is a cyclical/recursive organization of time*”.

Geraci recalls Mircea Eliade’s work how participation in a religious society is about ritually retelling or reliving the stories again and again. Rather than treating this as a break in the narrative construction of the world, we can instead see repetition as a “retelling” itself. Players relive mythos of World of Warcraft through their play, and thus ritually repeat the great events of its history. As we would retell a great myth over and over again, so too, does the players of any perennial game reenact its events. Each repetition can be viewed as a retelling or a *re-enactment* of the event: A ritual, performed over and over by the players, to commemorate and immortalize the event itself, much as ritual serves myth in religion. Rituals and repetition are in religion a primary way through which myths are experienced (Segal, 2004; Eliade, 1963).

Similarly, we experience perennial games by (perennially) playing their content over and over again, and this is how their myths are absorbed, created and take form. Naturally, these re-enactments and retellings have the power to change what we think about the original event, as well. Repetition is thus not a byproduct but a necessity to establishing the myth of perennial games. We will see this throughout this dissertation.

And just as rituals change over time in religion, the *powers that be* affect the second layer of myth, to affect how the ritual is performed every time. New strategies are discovered and new reasons to go through the raid may be found or implemented into the game. Nevertheless, each subsequent repetition is not the same as the event itself, but a reflection, a re-enactment.

This chapter covered the usage of myth which will be used throughout this dissertation. Going forward, it will be valuable to keep in mind the two layers of myth, the first focusing on the idea of fictional myth as constructed, and the second of myth as discursal, showcasing how communities propagate and naturalize their own values through mythology. However, before we begin using this to study perennial games, we need one more detour into other, similar forms of media, which will also prove useful.

Chapter 4

Like Forms

“Serial form is defined by the gaps between installments.”

Jason Mittell (*Complex TV*, 2015, Page 110)

THESE CHAPTERS WILL INVESTIGATE similar forms of media, formats, or art to perennial games. I do this to establish fundamental comparison points, tools and valuable lessons we can extrapolate into perennial experiences and games, which scholars and authors of these other media have already investigated and explored. There are many experiences, both historical and current, that can teach us valuable lessons about ongoing narrative and communal experiences, some of which have been telling ongoing stories for much longer than video games have existed. This can help us understand many things about how current perennial games already work, or can work in the future.

This chapter will cover serial media and serial fiction (section 4.1), which can tell us about how telling perpetual stories affects the narrative experience and structure

of that story, as well as investigate the interactions of authors and audiences. Secondly, I will cover sports and wrestling (4.2), which teaches us about the mythological construction of fans and the muddy diegesis of fiction crossing over into reality. Thirdly, I discuss emergent narrative 4.3, which, while often not perennial experiences, shares a similarity in the way it curates events into narratives. Finally, I discuss "internet narratives", a broad form of storytelling that uses alternative forms of media, imbuing them with ongoing narrative which then create perennial experiences in a variety of media.

4.1 Serial Fiction and Serial Television

I will start with serial media. Serial fiction is defined by Jennifer Hayward (1997) as “*an ongoing narrative released in successive parts*” (Hayward, 1997, p. 3). This is commonly understood as narrative media that tells a story over a series of installments—chapter releases, TV episodes, etc. Seriality is a much explored area in media studies, and stretches as far back as Charles Dickens up to modern day television (and perhaps, depending on the author, video games (Kelleter, 2017).) This chapter will lean on several sources on serial fiction, predominantly Hayward (1997), Mittell (2015), Saler (2012), and Kelleter (2017). Hayward discussed seriality throughout the last 2 centuries, starting with Charles Dickens novels, through 1930-50s American newspaper comic strips, and ending on 1990s soap operas. Mittell discussed the modern era of "complex TV" starting with series like *The Wire*, *Sopranos*, and *Lost*. Kelleter discussed seriality more broadly in our modern time, looking at serial television, and even drawing

comparisons with games. Saler did not discuss serial media as such, yet his findings on early fandoms and Sherlock Holmes specifically are still very relevant to this context, and will help draw out connections to modern perennality. Hayward (1997), avoiding a comprehensive and closing definition, highlights several “Wittgensteinian family resemblances” of serial media as follows:

- refusal of closure.
- intertwined subplots.
- large casts of characters.
- interaction with current political, social, or cultural issues.
- dependence on profit.
- acknowledgment of audience response.

The comparisons to perennial media might already be obvious. I will not detail each of these resemblances, but rather we will discuss them throughout this chapter. An important point to highlight before, however, is that the immediate definition of serial storytelling predates digital technology and modern-day “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2008), as it concerns forms of media that came to be far before the internet affected them. Yet, as we will see, the internet did affect serial media as well, and how it did so can also teach us about perennial experiences. Serial media is especially useful as a first comparison point with perennial games, as it is a form which is undeniably

narrative and has been so from the start, and thus we can see how ongoing narrative is structured, authored, and interacted with *over time*.

4.1.1 Community

The most important part of serial storytelling, which most writing about it circulates around, is its ability to create community. Hayward (1997) identifies two major reasons why the serial Dickens novels became as popular as they did. The first was a crafty and advantageous use of the new printing press technology to print and market novels in individual chapters as whole books were too expensive for the average person, but they (or someone they knew) could afford individual chapters month by month. This was compounded by the second reason for his success, which was the major industrial shift, turning people from villagers into workers, moving them to urban areas to work in factories, away from the few dozen people they would meet every day. As Hayward mentions, this was not a change that provided instant socialization. “*Early urbanites in many cases shared nothing but poverty and profound alienation*” (Hayward, 1997, p. 32). What these serial narratives could then do was provide these people with a common topic of conversation, through one of the most important powers of serial fiction: “*It cements social bonds, providing neighbors or workmates who might otherwise have no interests in common with an instant topic of conversation*” Hayward (1997, p. 31). Hayward notes this for American newspaper comics of the 1950s, quoting a reader talking about the power of these comics as a conversation starter and icebreaker,

allowing an instant common ground between strangers¹.

This communal power of creating and cultivating a community we see reflected again and again in serial media across time (and indeed, as seen in chapter 3) echoes much of the idea of storytelling as socially binding as well). These arguments we also see reflected in Saler (2012)’s arguments on the power of turn-of-the-century fiction to “enchant” the daily life of the “rational” modern person, who could not as easily accept fairy tales and mysticism, yet still feels drawn to stories about larger-than-life events they did not feel in their every day. Much of this communal power stems from a very simple fact of serial fiction, as Hayward highlights:

Dickens’s characters could seem closer to readers than many of their fellow workers or neighbors, and readers could watch these characters struggle with poverty, joblessness, homelessness, death of loved ones, and so on. Much of the power of serial fiction was a consequence of its sheer duration: Readers became familiar with the characters whose doings they followed week after week or month after month for a year or two. (Hayward, 1997, p36-37, emphasis mine)

Mittell says this slightly differently, but with the same connotation: “*Serial form is defined by the gaps between installments, where viewers are forced to pause from the diegesis, thus interrupting “downstream” immersion*” (Mittell, 2015, p. 110). The fact that it exists for a long time with consistent breaks where engagement is broken allows for people to come together and discuss. It happens in the moment and *when not watching*, but surrounding it, permeating through daily life. That is the communal power of serial fiction, and that only exists because it *keeps going* and *allows a gap*

¹To mention a more recent example, when asked what I study to people who don’t play games, I have often brought up the example of how it felt to watch Game of Thrones when it aired. The communal zeitgeist of meeting up to work and discussing last night’s episode over lunch or at coffee-breaks, or seeing how people reacted on Twitter.

between installments.

Hayward notes that viewers tend to lose interest in soap operas when unable to discuss it with others, highlighting how it is often the post-watch discussion and socialization that is more important than the content itself. This socialization is often also enough to keep viewers watching “bad” shows, or watching shows through a bad season. The concepts of “hate-watching” or Cloud (2010)’s concept of the “irony bribe” become relevant here too, seeing how people can watch something with the consciousness that what they are watching is bad yet enjoying it because of its lack of quality. Viewers use humor to preserve their pleasure in unrealistic, degrading, or just plain uninteresting storylines (Hayward, 1997, p. 169). This often has a communal aspect as it is often in the laughing at the show *with others* that this truly manifests as enjoyable².

4.1.2 Audience Work and Memory

Hayward makes the observation that much serial fiction, especially comic strips and soap operas “*were created to vanish*” (Hayward, 1997, p. 135). As daily or weekly installments there would always be more content coming, leading each individual installment to not matter. Especially in early live television, it was difficult to re-experience previous installments, as you had to wait for the rare rerun. Yet even without, “*the sheer volume of textual production virtually negates the possibility of re-experiencing earlier installments*” (Hayward, 1997, p. 135). What this means then, is key: “*Thus readers become reliant on other fans, who may be able to confirm or correct fading memories of*

²And Game of Thrones, once again, delivers.

past storylines,” (Hayward, 1997, p. 135) further creating a communal experience.

As Jason Mittell (2015) (and Hayward to some extent) highlights, modern technology changed these viewing habits. As DVR, streaming, and internet forums have enabled stronger communal memory, authors can now to a much higher degree expect the audience to know previous plot points than they could have before. This does not mean that serial fiction has necessarily become easier to follow. As Mittell’s book is primarily about, this functionally increased the complexity of television, as TV show producers created increasingly less comprehensible shows, even embracing “*a degree of planned confusion*” (Mittell, 2015, p. 164), and expecting the audience to pay attention. Hayward highlights how a pleasure of soap operas and serial fiction is to “puzzle out” what is going to happen. Mittell uses the term “*forensic fandom*” for this behavior, as the audience will often come together to piece out what is happening in a story. This is not relegated to the text itself, as fans frequently refer to the meta-layer of production schedules, actor relationships, and other real-life events to help piece together reasonings for why things are happening now, and what could happen in the future. Saler (2012) argues that one of the earliest forms of this can be seen in the Sherlock Holmes fandom throughout the 20th century, who formed societies and groups discussing the works of Conan Doyle beyond the mere texts, and trying to discern the facts and truths of the fiction, probing at the details of the writing and filling in the “*lacunae*”—the missing information, thus turning it from a series of books into a “shared, ongoing project” of work, for which there was always more for fans to do³.

³The Sherlock fandom is indeed one of the earliest known uses of the term “*canon*” in the fictional sense of “what is part of the storyworld”. We will discuss this more in section 13.1.

Most popular serial narratives spawn a “parasite industry” (Hayward, 1997)⁴ of reaction videos, recaps, forum posts, fan-work, magazines, radio shows, podcasts, websites, conventions, cosplay, and so on, all about this one narrative and for the existing audience of that narrative. Key to this is that the joy of watching soaps (and serial narratives in general) is to both engage in the work itself and these paratexts, acquiring the knowledge to understand the narrative on a meta-level (Hayward, 1997, p. 186). Some of these turn into “orienting paratexts”, a term from Mittell (2015), highlighting key artifacts, most often created by fans, which become important to the audience’s understanding of that work. Mittell’s core example is the fan-wiki, which often becomes a first-stop for many fans to understand a piece of media outside of the text itself. This work outside the series itself can take on the form of an “*oddly collaborative competition*” (Hayward, 1997), as the viewers want to dig behind and uncover answers that the authors are purposely trying to hide from them. Mittell discusses a text’s “*drillability*”, meaning how much there is, intentional or not, to “drill” into as a fandom and seek answers to, which very well may vary from show to show. “Drillability” can present itself in ways not designed into the run-time of the show, but expand beyond. Henry Jenkins (2008), in his book on Convergence Culture, discusses a sub-community of Survivor fans who were trying to “spoil” a new Survivor season before it aired, using behind the scenes knowledge, participant interviews, satellite images, and more to discover where a season takes place and who wins, before it was public knowledge. Here, the

⁴“Parasite” has negative connotations, but it is not meant like that here. Hayward (and I) mean it more so in the sense that it is an industry entirely reliant on the continued existence of the host industry—The fans cannot exist without the narrative they are producing content about.

“competition” of the relationship is heightened, as the fans are actively trying to outdo the show producers and uncover their secrets, while they are trying to hide them. Yet, the producers, aware of the game, purposefully play along and throw the community off the scent by providing false information and toying with their expectations. In a situation this heightened, the meta-information of the show almost becomes “the point” of watching, and the actual viewership more so an exercise in confirming or disputing what was uncovered in the spoiling.

Paradoxically, despite the ephemerality of serial narratives, they are also “*absolutely reliable*” (Hayward, 1997). The audience can expect a consistent schedule of new content, which speaks to the true nature of serial fiction: “*A text so ephemeral, and yet so absolutely reliable, creates an unprecedented kind of narrative experience.*” (Hayward, 1997, p. 136). Each individual installment does not matter by itself, and in fact reading only a single installment of a serial, the reader gains almost nothing (Hayward, 1997, p. 136) because it is only in the context of its history that each episode matters⁵. As Hayward says, people are often introduced to serials through other people initiating them into this history, implying that the work itself does not. In fact, it often requires community to be initiated into a long-running serial narrative, echoing a common refrain about most live-service games: You have to play with friends. This fact already, at the moment of introduction, makes the experience communal. In fact it is often communal first, and narrative second. It starts from a point of a social interaction, and turns into

⁵Personally, this point resonates deeply with me because it was one of my core arguments early on about why the narrative in *Destiny* mattered despite it seeming like it did not. Playing *Destiny* for any length of time in a single session, even long hours by traditional video game standards, will not show you the quality of its narrative.

a narrative experience.

4.1.3 Narrative Structure

The nature of seriality has shown to cause notable and consistent changes in the structure and production of the narrative when compared to non-serial media productions. In television, instead of relying on a traditional 5-act structure across an episode or season of a soap opera, they began utilizing multiple 5-act structures within the same show, interweaving and overlapping each other, always making sure that if one was ending, another (and ideally more) had begun. This was to ensure that viewers always had something new to look forward to and would never reach the “depression” of closure (Hayward, 1997, p. 152). As Hayward says, this paradoxically continuously arouses a desire that audiences know will never be satisfied. As Kelleter (2017) says, commonly we see it as desirable for stories to have endings and closure, and tend to (at least intellectually) value an ending, and yet we also desire something new. As Mittell (2015) says, narrative success for a serial show means being able to continue, not coming to an end. Serial television “*perpetually defers desire in order to promote continued consumption*” (Hayward, 1997). This is further due to a strong financial incentive to continue—something we will discuss later in this section.

In Hayward’s investigation, she finds how Dickens’ writing was noticeably affected by its serial publishing. Dickens would “test out” characters, relationships, and plot lines in early chapters, before scripting the full storyline for them, seeing how his readers reacted to those characters early on, which he would then use to inform how the

rest of the story should develop. While historical records of the readers of Dickens novels are mostly lost to history, we do have clear historical evidence that he was listening to and responding to his readers, reading letters sent by them and would adjust his stories based on their feedback (Hayward, 1997). Dickens is known to have seen it as part of his mission to be “in tune” with his readers and speak to them where they were. This is also seen in the comics Hayward investigates, with the author Milton Caniff being quoted saying “*In a real sense we involve the reader as much as an audience participation show in the theater or on television. Our reader loyalty is less overt, but has a longer life expectancy.*” (Hayward, 1997, p. 105). This comic also notably changed its representation and reflection of China (where it was set) due to reader responses informing the author (an American who had never been to China) about its reality. Another famous example is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s “resurrection” of Sherlock Holmes, after purposefully killing off the character in *Reichenbach Falls* (Saler, 2012, p. 112), yet bowing to the peer pressure of fans to write more Sherlock stories. Well before the age of “interactive media” audiences knew they had the ability to sway the narrative.

It is well known that producers of television series, soaps, and reality tv read the forums and fan posts of fans and consider it for future writing (Jenkins, 2008; Cloud, 2010; Mittell, 2015; Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2024b). This kind of reaction-based storytelling is seen over and over again in serial fiction and perennial experiences, from the more egregious examples of the *Westworld* writers rewriting a season because someone guessed the ending (Maine, 2017), to soap operas “trying out” characters and relationships to see if viewers responded positively to them. In live-service games, we know

of many examples of this happening, if not intentionally then at least accidentally. As chapter 18 will discuss, many developers saw players respond to a character differently than expected and changed the story afterwards.

Kelleter discusses how serial fiction tends to be “recursive”. By this he means that it makes continual readjustments based on previously established information, repeatedly reinterpreting its own past (even sometimes changing the past) in order to continue. Serial fiction, then, becomes “about itself”. “[*Serial television*]'s (*structurally*) *recursive operations and their (economically) competitive operations literally force them to pay attention to their own evolution and, as part of this, to the material and technological conditions of their continued existence.*” (Kelleter, 2017, p. 18) This happens both structurally and for economic reasons, as it becomes important to pay attention to what was (financially) successful in the past to be able to continue it in the future: Give the audience what they want, and to know what that is, you refer back to your own past. This self-referencing becomes increasingly rewarding for (and only for) the existing audience, meaning the story increasingly becomes about itself for those who are already part of its audience. What this means, narratively, then, is that the storytelling of serial fiction inherently and continuously reflects on, refers to, reworks, or reinterprets its own past, making it more and more difficult, structurally, for it to be about anything else than itself.

4.1.4 The Inferred Author

After a discussion of the contentious history of the term “implied author”, looking at Chatman and Bordwell in specifics, Mittell (2015) defines the idea of the *“inferred author function”* to avoid this debate while articulating a valuable insight about how fans discuss authors and fiction. As Mittell says: *“I believe that many viewers themselves “indulge in an anthropomorphic fiction” by constructing authorial figures within their viewing practices”* (Mittell, 2015, p. 107). When discussing a narrative, the audience will discuss the intentions or base their expectations on “an author” regardless of how well this author exists or is visible to them. Viewers use the *concept* of authorship, regardless of how the work was actually authored by “an author”. The inferred author function is *“a viewer’s production of authorial agency responsible for a text’s storytelling, drawing on textual cues and contextual discourses”* (Mittell, 2015, p. 107) Especially in modern narrative production, where any individual author is difficult to clearly state (as is the case in modern television series and video games), this concept becomes even more important. The audience use this inferred author function for a range of purposes, both attributing quality and praise, to manage expectations, and as an excuse or reasoning for mistakes. Mittell mentions how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fans would use the phrase “Trust Joss” (meaning Joss Whedon) when confusing plot points or seeming mistakes occurred in the show, attributing some authored meaning they were not seeing yet—regardless of whether the mistake was because of Joss Whedon or not. Some modern series, like *Buffy*, *Community*, or *Game of Thrones*, get very public “authors”,

mostly in the form of showrunners⁶, that become who the audience will typically name in these instances. However, the inferred author function still exists without this public face of the production. As noted in chapter 14, *Destiny* players often describe Bungie as a "singular" author, despite how visibly this is not the case. In the gaps of serial narrative, this inferred author function becomes an important point of discussion for fans, used as an argument and topic in equal measure to support their views on the show (in any direction).

However, the audience can also have a difficult relationship with the author. Saler (2012), when investigating the Sherlock Holmes fandom, found one of the earliest examples of a fanbase "rebellious" against the author and taking the work into their own hands, despite the wishes of the author—to the extent they considered Sherlock Holmes (the fictional character) more important and more "real"⁷ than Conan Doyle. Conan Doyle, growing tired of his fictional creation, wanted to move on from it several times, yet the fans kept the character alive through their own production even after Conan Doyle retired the character for good (arguably, they still do this day).

⁶Mittell notes how the "author" of a television show is generally attributed to the showrunner or producer, not the director, as is most common in films, due to the nature of television production. I will remind here that I intentionally am using the word "author" broadly, also including designers, showrunners, etc.

⁷This is, in some instances, meant literally. Saler (2012) shows examples of fans genuinely believing Sherlock and Watson to be real people, sending requests to help them solve cases etc. Yet, as he also highlights, there were a large amount of "ironic" fans, playing pretend that he was a real person despite knowing contrary.

4.1.5 Critics HATE Serial Media! And Capitalism

As serial media is frequently popular media, it is little surprise that critics often find it disagreeable. Yet it is worthy to investigate how deeply rooted this distaste is. As early as Dickens, we have examples of critics denigrating his writing as inferior, comparing it to an addictive drug. (Hayward, 1997, p. 5). Hayward shares a quote from Gramsci, writing in the 20th century about serial novels, a quote both so funny and reversely insightful it is worth to share in full:

Now it is a lachrymose literature only suitable for stupefying the women, girls and youngsters who feed on it. It is also often a source of corruption ... It may perhaps have influenced the increase in crime among adolescent loafers... In short, the serial novel has become a rather nauseating commodity” (Hayward, 1997, p. 7) (from Gramsci, 1985)

Note here especially the genderization and infantilization of the medium, that strikes true of much criticism of serial and popular media throughout history: It is not worthy of an honest appraisal because it is for children, for women, for boys, presumably implying it is for those who have not yet developed a critical sense or “proper” taste of what “good” art is. Hayward (1997) highlights how much of this criticism follows similar arguments as that of the Frankfurt school (with scholars like Adorno and Horkheimer (1997)), criticizing mass media in the 20th century as being all-dominant, turning viewers into mindless, passive husks. Much of criticism against serial narratives has this bent as well. It is “produced”, not “authored”⁸, it is visibly and nakedly capitalist in its perpetual deference of a conclusion and promotion of continued engagement. It was made for people to consume, perpetually, forever, for them to watch advertisements or

⁸Calling back to the notions of authorship in television noted by (Mittell, 2015).

pay subscriptions, not out of the value of the medium itself. We have seen this similar criticism rise again and again with every new medium and format that approaches serial narrative. Scholars and critics have dismissed television, TTRPGs, sports, comics, soaps, wrestling, video games, live service games, for the first many years of their existence (and indeed you can still find people who dismiss much of this media for those same reasons). As Hayward notes, we can find at least *“one-hundred-and-sixty-odd-year history of critical denigration of serial fiction”* (Hayward, 1997, p. 5).

Before we dig further into the capitalist angle (because that is very much a fruitful angle to untangle), there might be one more reason to keep in mind for why critics have disliked serial media. Hayward brings out the example of Tillotson, who points out how reviewers of the time struggled with their relationship to Dickens. They were not necessarily disinterested, yet the sequential, part-wise releases put them in difficult spot for doing their jobs: *“If they reviewed the novel during publication, they risked premature judgment; if they waited for completion, their criticism might well be superfluous”* (Hayward, 1997, p. 24). This speaks to something very true about criticism of serial and perennial experiences: How do we criticize an experience that is intentionally incomplete? What use are critics when they cannot provide a cohesive argument about a work until after you have already experienced it with your community? It is perhaps not so weird they disliked serial fiction if the very nature of their job was being put into question by its existence. While I am not defending the baseless accusations thrown at serial media over the years (and many of them are indeed either misogynistic, puritanical, xenophobic, or simply fear-mongering), this provides an

interesting perspective as to why critics may lash out when confronted with a medium that cannot be appraised within their framework.

This is not to say there did not or does not exist criticism of serial narratives, yet it takes different forms. Rather than reviewing or appraising the entire work, as early as Dickens we find examples of a new form of reviewer, writing commentary on individual chapters week-by-week in the newspaper, providing reviews, discussion, and predictions for the future narrative (Hayward, 1997, p. 33-34). This, as Hayward rightly points out, is part of the experience of the narrative, as these reviews are closely related to the narrative itself (being in the same or similar place where the narratives were posted). This helps shape and inform the public perception of the narrative, and shapes expectations about what the chapters are, can be, or should be in the future. There are strong parallels to modern day influencers in this role, as these weekly reviews are very similar to modern day content, often in the form of reaction videos, reviews, or live-streams where an influencer will give thoughts on the current narrative. Rather than providing criticism on the whole work, this form of criticism becomes part of the ongoing experience, a crucial (orienting) paratext that often is part of shaping the audience's reception of the work in general.

However, let us return to the question of industry, because it is undeniable that serial form is a capitalist, industrial form. Dickens has been named "*the first capitalist of fiction*" (Hayward, 1997), and Hayward, Mittell, and Kelletter all mention the close ties between capitalist production and serial narratives. It is a form born out of a capitalist capability and produced with the very capitalist expectation of continued consumption

(and thus expected continuous profit). The modern form of the serial narrative has risen in large part due to the rise of capitalism. Hayward mentions that this is indeed “*an ideal form of narrative presentation under capitalism*” (Hayward, 1997, p. 12). Kelleter expands on this notion, explaining how the cultural production system of capitalism is echoing a core problem of serial storytelling: Translating repetition into difference. Capitalism functions by continually inventing new forms of consumption, repetitively (recursively) providing new reasons to buy the same products. “*Serial storytelling seems to be a central praxeological hub in the shaky yet traditionally potent alliance between market modernity and the idea of popular self-rule. This is so because serial media, interactive from the start⁹, embody what may well be the structural utopia of the capitalist production of culture at large: the desire to practice reproduction as innovation, and innovation as reproduction.*”

This connection between capitalist production and serial narrative is an indisputable fact we have to wrestle with when discussing serial narrative and perennial experiences, as we cannot untie it from its production. It is undeniable, too, that many live-service video games were created from a profit-seeking ambition of a steady flow of income from subscriptions, lootboxes, battlepasses, etc., and developers often had to work within the boundaries of that form to tell the narratives they could. I also do think it is important to not state the capitalist mode of production as given or expected

⁹Kelleter intertwines this with a larger point he makes throughout about the interactivity of serial media. Through the intertwined feedback loop of the production responding to the reception of the audience, the creation of the media becomes “interactive”. As a student of video games, I find this point rather trite, as the mere notion of “interactivity” in itself is rarely as useful a metric as people claim it to be (see section 7.2).

or “natural” in any way, nor do I aim to endorse it. Yet, I also do not think this fact damns the form irreparably. Hayward very accurately states that focusing entirely on this aspect of serial narrative neglects the other half of the story: The very real pleasures that capitalist production exploits. The satisfaction of an ongoing narrative, the communal glue it can provide, the many fan-practices surrounding such a work that arise out of passion and interest, the functions these texts serve outside of their profit after they have been sold. Yes, serial narrative is a form designed for profit, yet people buy it for a reason beyond the mere words, images, and text of the work itself. This is exploitable, but that does not mean that the core pleasures within are unworthy of exploration, nor that the people feeling those pleasures are wrong or mindless or dumb for feeling them. Furthermore, I would add onto Hayward (1997)’s point the very real narrative pleasures that occur from *telling* narratives in this form. As will be covered in detail in chapter 18, there can be immense pleasure as an author in telling a story with an engaged, ongoing audience, which you are responding to in real time, on top of other pleasures of telling deeper narratives that explore much larger areas than what is possible to cover in a one-shot setting, and the ability to change and adapt on the fly. These pleasures exist outside any profit-motivations, and are often motivated purely by creative force.

Therefore, while I do not want to mitigate or neglect the very true facet of perennial experiences that many of them are created inside and through a capitalist mode of production, and generally exist for continual profit, there is a value in investigating the creative, human, and communal aspect that nevertheless exists in spite (or

perhaps because of) the mode of production. The perpetual deferral of closure, the constant response and dialogue with an audience, the communal glue it fosters, and the continual dependence of further production does change the narrative experience and the way you need to tell stories, as shown, yet this leads to different types of stories, not inherently "worse" ones. This is valuable knowledge going forward, as we will see these exact same dynamics play out in perennial games.

This idea of the fraught relationship with capitalism of perennial experiences, combined with the understandings of the inferred author function, the effects on narrative structure, and the importance of the communal aspects of serial media, are the primary lessons to bring forward to perennial games. These will be relevant throughout this dissertation, as these dynamics are often very similar if not directly the same across perennial games.

Next, we will discuss another similar form to the perennial game, which will give greater insight into the audience's perspective of the experience, tying back further to the mythological and religious angles: Sports.

4.2 Sports and Wrestling

This section will investigate sports and professional wrestling as forms of perennial narratives. First, I will discuss sports as narrative, ritual and myth, seeing how the surrounding stories told about and within sports create a perennial experience. While the fictionality of sports is less present than serial fiction, many of the perennial qualities

still apply and we can see many allusions to the communal narrative aspects that make perennial games compelling in the first place. Then, I will move on to wrestling, which, as a blend of sports and fiction, creates a unique experience utilizing the strengths of both, while also muddying the very notion of fiction itself, which we can use to discuss the strange diegetic properties of perennial experiences when they are at their most intertwined with the “outside” world. These two comparisons will help clarify the audience experience of perennial games even more strongly, describing it through language of ritual and spirituality and mythology, as we discuss how fan-bases arise around sports to build up and maintain the communal myth of the experience.

4.2.1 Sports narratives

As Gleaves highlights, sports is one of the universal features of human social existence. As far back as we have signs of human civilization, we can find signs of competitive physical activity and games. And it is no secret that sports tell stories. It is almost a universal truth to the point it feels redundant to clarify it; the countless reports of sports games, the rise and fall of teams and players, the surprising underdog victories and the reign of dynasties, are all clear in the mind of anyone who watches sports. How this narrative happens over time warrants a closer look, as it develops in much the same way a perennial game creates myth.

When we talk about sports, what we tend to mean is what Allen Guttman identifies as “modern sport” (Gleaves, 2017), which is essentially Western competitive sport. This naturally misses a huge range of possible activity, both those non-western

stemming from other traditions and played for other reasons, yet also many “western” sports which do not fit into the traditional competitive, athletic molds. Gleaves (2017) mentions, for example, “life-style sports” such as rock climbing or skateboarding as kinds of sport that are often not taken seriously, either academically or culturally, when discussing the importance of “sports”. Gleaves and Greenway (1985) both highlight how Ancient Greek sports rituals were not necessarily concerned with who won or lost, or keeping track of how far a javelin was thrown, but rather the performance of the ritual itself.

Gleaves wants to discuss *why* people play sports. Drawing on Geertz (1972)’s seminal text on Balinese cockfighting¹⁰, he highlights that “what sport is about” is laden with meaningful experiences, which are shaped into narratives about the sport, but more importantly about ourselves. It is, as Geertz said, “*a story they tell themselves about themselves*”. Gleaves discusses how this narrativization can be both individual (“I am a basketball player”, “I identify as a Chelsea fan”), collaborative (made together with others, reflecting upon their stories and identities), and communal¹¹ (“we are a community who plays soccer”, “we play defensive football”). This echoes both in the expressions of the dominant form and those that break away from it. Gleaves showcases the example of a Jamaican marathon runner, breaking away from the tradition of Jamaican sprinters which nevertheless remains (and is reinforced as) the established

¹⁰This text, and Geertz in general, is an undercurrent for a lot of my work, as this essay and texts on ethnography are important sources for the work we discuss later in chapter 14). Much of this dissertation owes a lot to the many connections people have drawn to ethnography and play (Taylor, 2022) from Geertz’ work.

¹¹He also calls these “collective narratives”

collective narrative of Jamaican runners.

These “meaningful narratives”, as Gleaves call them, create a normative standard the community builds around, and these narratives are used when people discuss what should and should not be part of the sport and the community. As you may have already realized, this sounds awfully close to the understanding of mythology discussed in chapter 3. And indeed, this is not the first time connections from sports have been made with myth and religion.

As Greenway (1985) supposes, if an alien anthropologist saw the significance and attendance of sports stadiums, they would likely assign a religious function to them. Greenway’s essay discusses the ritual and narrative qualities of “sport spectacular” (a term he has from Alyce Taylor Cheska (1979), meaning the added cultural significance of sports through the surroundings of the arena, uniforms, bands, radio and television broadcasts, and news reporting, etc.). Sports are more than the motions of the game itself, but gain heightened importance from the surrounding context and culture. This significance is gained, to Greenway, through the ritual construction of sports, that functions similar to religious rituals, just manifested differently in a secular culture:

“A secular culture which does not trust explicitly sacred symbols to express its rituals will express them in symbolic forms which it believes does express reality, and sports is one of those forms. A culture which attaches importance to statistics will employ statistics in its rituals, albeit in a stylized manner. If we believe the world to be simple, mechanical and regular, the symbolism of our rituals will reflect this assumption. The ritual nature of sport has not changed since the Greeks, just the symbolism expressing it” (Greenway, 1985)

Greenway discusses how the symbols of the sport spectacular create binary

oppositions, first from the outside world (spatially, through arenas or borders, and temporally, through arbitrary clocks or temporary events), and secondly oppositions within (“our side” versus “their side”, the good team versus the rival, etc). These oppositions create the significance, making the movements of a ball or the value of a score matter to the spectators in a way that only matters inside that ritual frame. These binary oppositions, to no great surprise, appear very similar to the binaries found in structural narratives. Echoing Saler (2012) and Aupers (2015), the ritual construction “creates meaning in a way the world outside seldom allows” (Greenway, 1985). You know if your team wins or loses. The ritual, through its repetition and ceremony and assumed separation from daily life, upholds a nostalgic understanding of itself—the world is chaotic and complicated and difficult, yet within these boundaries the goals are clear and we can feel the catharsis of a win or a loss on its own, meaningful terms. The narration of sport is part of this, too: “*The narration of the sport spectacular is essential to its ritual success, in that the narration both extends the spectacular outside the arena (though the listener/viewer shares the isolation) and completes it by linking it to the past*” (Greenway, 1985). Announcers create drama and make the past part of the present¹².

¹²I also want to highlight something that is often omitted (or at least not paid as deep attention to) in discussions on sports, which is that all (competitive) sports are fundamentally *games*. Removing the spectacular and the religious and the ritual, we still have individuals interacting with a system of rules, creating emergent interactions. Everything already discussed (and that will be discussed) about games, their interactions and their ability to tell stories, applies to sports inherently. This feels redundant to mention here, yet I cannot help but notice how little the texts discussed here describe sports as “games”. Several of these texts, such as Oriard (1994) and Gleaves (2017) and Greenway (1985) discuss the narratives sports produces as somehow “unique” to sports, putting the narrative qualities over that of other cultural production such as music or arts or popular culture. Gleaves (2017) argues that sports is the only activity that creates narratives as “primary mode”, whereas other cultural forms of productions do not because those serve purposes even if they were not to deliver narrative, yet sports primarily serves to deliver narrative, and other intentions secondarily. This argument is rather nonsensical to me, and

Of course, an actual separation from “daily life” is impossible, and as long as sport has been culturally relevant it has been influenced by and is influencing that culture. For some examples, see Zirin (2014) book on how the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics affected Brazil, undeniably tying the sport into massive cultural, economic, and societal impacts. Also see the work by Oriard (1994), on how American Football is bound in the American sense of self, or C.L.R. (James, 1993)’ account of playing cricket in the colonial West Indies, tying the sport into race, politics, identity, and colonialism.

Sports is no more innocent than the rest of cultural production, and yet, the narratives told about sports, its ritual and mythological presentation, helps create and maintain this “mythological” understanding. Greenway (1985) reminds us that “*all ritual is conservative*”. In the mythical repetition, in its inherent looking back and reflecting on the past and making the past part of the present, it will uphold the validity of the past as an important frame, and the very ritual is held up precisely because we once again want to enter the magic circle where our meaning is clear, obvious, defined, and well-articulated (as I will discuss in section 12.2).

Making these connections even more clear, the paper by Falcous and Masucci (2020) investigated Tour De France through the lens of myth, reflecting on Barthes (1957a)’s original essay from *Mythologies* on the very same topic. In 1957, Barthes

I hope the entire project of this dissertation helps to illustrate why. I have no interest in claiming the proficiency of one medium, format, or production over another, especially not in saying one is “more narrative” than another. Narrativity—and perennality—is something orthogonal to the medium itself, and narratives can arise from sports as well as music and fine arts and non-competitive games and youtube videos (as we will see in section 4.4). This narrative can emerge entirely organically, as in sports, or be steered by authors (as in wrestling and serial media), yet is in all cases not an inherent, essential part of the experience because of what the experience *is* but rather because it is experienced by *people* who narrativize it.

wrote on how the mythologization of Tour De France made the sport into an “epic narrative” (in the greek sense), a story about “heroic” figures who were larger than life and beating impossible odds with inhuman capabilities. The stories that arose from these events, likewise, were tales of heroism, sacrifice, treachery, and so on. This, as Falcous and Masucci note, is still present in much modern writing on the sport, comparing riders to ancient Greek heroes¹³ or describing the people as superhumans, in a fight with the mountain itself (Falcous and Masucci, 2020). Falcous and Masucci, however, are reflecting upon this myth today critically, using a cultural studies approach to interrogate how this myth has survived and faltered during the many changes in the sport since the 50s. Especially, as they focus on the “spectre” of doping scandals over the past many years in the sport has tarnished the clean view of these cyclists as heroic superhumans. However, Falcous and Masucci, using Barthes, note how myth has an ability to adapt to new circumstances, and thus the stories of doping take on a meaning reflecting the old: Doping is an ill for the sport precisely because it betrays this historic, ideal image of the cyclists. Many modern cyclists condemn others for using doping because it damages the image of the sport , or because it is “cheating” (Falcous and Masucci, 2020). Doping, however, is just the most high-profile issue, and there are other complications brought up by Falcous and Masucci, such as the intense pressure on bikers to perform and ride injured to not be removed from a team, or the small advantages that are gained which are not considered active cheating yet nevertheless are not quite as “heroic”, all leading to an intense environment where doping can become

¹³Using Greek or Roman associations for athletes is not unique to cycling (Oriard, 1994).

more attractive in order to stay successful (let alone staying *active*) as a cyclist.

Once again, the power of myth lies in its ability to circumvent and reincorporate these narratives into the larger myth while keeping it intact. Barthes noted that myth is “chameleonic” - it is able to morph to account for shifting circumstances. “*Systematic cheating, deception and dishonesty within cycling can be framed as a threat to cycling from beyond its core essence, and hence can be accommodate without disruption to the core tenets of the mythology that underpins the sport’s popularity*” (Falcous and Masucci, 2020, p. 1159) (emphasis in original). Even more importantly, the myth obscures the systemic nature of these narratives by obscuring the workings of the industry that produces a need to do doping in the first place. Falcous and Masucci discuss how popular culture is precisely that because it is able to avoid complexity and contingency, relying instead on the “comfortable” myth of a heroic narrative to sell itself to an audience. Nevertheless, the stories of the other side exist, yet become precisely that: “The other side”. Taking on not a meaning of normalcy or expectation, but one of spectacle and controversy—something which also sells quite well.

Another aspect to sports that is worth touching upon is the fans of sports and their community forming around the sport. Dohrmann (2018)’s book “Superfans” covers a range of fans of sports, in a variety of (mostly American) sports, and how fans create their communities. I want to highlight the story of the “*Timbers Army*”, the fan club for the Portland Timbers MLS soccer club, and how it started from one soccer fan, Steven “Nevets” Lenhart, who wanted to watch soccer in Portland at a time when there was no professional soccer team there. In 1990s, FC Portland had shut down

due to financial trouble. When the city got a soccer team for the smaller A-league as an attachment to a baseball team in 2001, there were about 8 people running the fanclub, whose numbers slowly grew due to a strong enthusiasm: *“The group’s most vital skill was Lenhart’s ability to convince others to see something seemingly unimportant—a minor league soccer team—as the most important aspect of their life”* (Dohrmann, 2018, p. 10-11, emphasis original) . Importantly, the small time nature was also a strength as a bonding agent as *“the fans never knew from one season to the next if the team would exist”* (Dohrmann, 2018, p. 11). After some local buzz in 2004, there were about 50 people in the stands for each game. When, in 2008, there were talks of renovating the stadium to allow for a MLS-sized team in Portland, the fans rallied around this decision and were instrumental in pushing the city council vote in favor. As of the writing of Dohrmann’s book (2018), the Portland Timbers have become *“one of the jewels of the MLS”*, a franchise and a fanbase that other teams are looking to emulate. The importance of this story is in showing how the fans are crucial to the continued existence of the thing itself. Portland Timbers have never been one of the greatest teams in the MLS, or had many star players, yet because of the grass-roots building of the Timberland Army, the club is a major success. Other teams have since looked to the Timbers for advice on how to recreate their fanbase, yet as the book says, the advice is often not what they want to hear: *“Go find your Nevets¹⁴, and then get out of the*

¹⁴As a fun aside, I was humored to read the nicknames of the original fangroup members, with names like “Lendog”, “Drum Man”, “Ricky the Postman”, “Aussie Mike”, I am reminded of esports and internet handles, which have been considered unique (and a barrier) to video games, streaming, and esports as a storytelling medium. Upon reading this, it seems it has always been the case that people give nicknames to each other.

way” (Dohrmann, 2018, p. 17). The mythology around this fanbase is important—the idea that the Timberland Army is one of the greatest fanbases in the MLS and the mythology around Nevets and the original group is a powerful story that draws people in, and makes you want to be a part of a community like it. The grass-roots nature of this is key to its growth and passion: It is self-reinforcing, growing because of its welcoming and organic nature, presenting as “merely” a fun group of friends passionate about a common interest.

As Dohrmann notes, it is rare we can track the origins of a fandom as we can with the Timberland Army, as most are old enough and created organically enough one origin is impossible—more similar to mythological stories. Yet Nevets has never tried to claim ownership over the Timberland army, and so the community, and the story around it, takes on a life of its own—something which each member of the fangroup can feel like they are a part of.

In reading this I was also reminded of the documentary series *“Sunderland ‘Til I Die”* (Fullwell 73, 2018), about Sunderland Football Club, and more centrally, their fans. The documentary does a great job of showing how the fandom of this club is not just a commitment to a sports team, but a central part of daily life for many people in the city, many of whom (due to an aging population in a ship-building town that lost its ship-building industry) have little else to cheer for. The successes and failures of the club, thus, *are* the successes and failures of the city, and it permeates all parts of life, from the morning radio to conversations over lunch to the weekly mass at church. As Dohrmann says *“for many people, a fan group has usurped church*

membership or another community organization as the primary binding agent in their lives” (Dohrmann, 2018, p. XIII). Their community, the way they meet other people and socialize, is through being a fan. It is through being a fan they get to socialize, it gives them a reason to engage with the local community, support each other and be “part of something greater”.

4.2.2 Wrestling

Depending on your familiarity with it, wrestling might seem like a sensible or strange inclusion alongside sports. While it has key differences (namely that it arguably is not a "sport" at all¹⁵), it is here because it nevertheless shares the semblances of sport as ritual, despite its entirely different execution. Note that we are specifically talking about "professional wrestling", as exemplified by the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc, 1980 (As Titan Sports) and similar, as an entertainment product, and not the concept of wrestling matches by themselves. Wrestling is historically much older than television, stemming from carnival games (Sehmby, 2000; Shoemaker, 2014), and then brought into sports arenas not unlike boxing or other combat sports. Where wrestling differed, however, was a turn of matches becoming “fixed”, and, purportedly, “fake” (Sehmby, 2000; Mazer, 2005). The matches were no longer left up to the skill of the fighters, but rather decided beforehand. However, as Roland Barthes (1957b) noted already in the 1950s (yes, indeed, in *Mythologies*, once again), this did not turn wrestling into a worthless endeavor. It merely turned it into something other than sport;

¹⁵The WWE branded itself as "sports entertainment", deliberately distancing itself from the scrutiny that comes with being a "real sport".

something where the actors know the outcome beforehand: A spectacle; performance; a story.

In Barthes' day, however, wrestling matches were still singular experiences, with every match being its own confined story. Wrestlers might carry personas across matches, but the story had to be complete in one sitting. Not so much today. With the advent of television, as Jenkins notes (Jenkins, 2005 (1997)), professional wrestling took a turn into the long-form, and became "*a form of serial fiction for men*" (Jenkins, 2005 (1997)). With a weekly format and consistent characters across matches, a new avenue of storytelling opened up to wrestling, and they could begin telling stories that spanned months, even years. The characters could not only stay consistent within story arcs but have arcs themselves, and change over time as fans grew to like or hate them. This is the form of wrestling that is a perennial story. Each wrestling match is but an event in the grander story that occurs over months, years, as the characters, the actors, the writers, and the audience develop in real-time. It is perpetual and temporally continuous: Each week continues the story as new wrestlers arise as old ones fade away. It is always told in real-time even when it isn't live which causes its diegesis to become all-encompassing.

4.2.2.1 The Diegesis of Wrestling

As with sports, a wrestling match is at first glance very clearly defined: It takes place in an arena, in a "ring" surrounded by stands, cheered on by excited fans. Yet, any viewer of wrestling knows that confining wrestling purely to the arena is a mistake. Any match can enter and exit the ring, but more importantly, the storytelling

of wrestling is not confined to the matches. Wrestlers stay “in character” outside of the ring too, and perform interviews, public performances, social media profiles etc. as their character, to the point that their character becomes inseparable from the person. As Morton said in an interview from 1998, *“if you shake hands with Ric Flair, you are shaking hands with two facets of Ric Flair: the actual and the fictional one.”* (Mortensen, 1998; Oliva and Calleja, 2009). This is further complicated and detailed by the concept of “kayfabe”, a well-known and used term in wrestling lingo (Sehmby, 2000). To “keep kayfabe” is to act as if and pretend that the storytelling of wrestling is real—that is, that the matches haven’t been prescribed (Sehmby, 2000; Oglesby, 2017). In narrative terms, this maintains the illusion of the storyworld and the suspension of disbelief. When a wrestler maintains kayfabe, they act as if they were fighting for real and only lost because the other person was better (or cheated), and not because a writer deemed it so. The tricky part comes in the fact that it is not always clear-cut what is part of the kayfabe and what is not. Because you can always claim after the fact that everything is and was kayfabe, everything can very easily become so. A scene might be written to play out a certain way, but when a real accident happens on stage, as it did when Owen Hart’s harness failed in 1999 (Mazer, 2005), then the storytelling—and thus the storyworld—has to change, too, and all of a sudden the in-world characters have to relate to a real-world event. That event is thus “brought into” the universal chronicle, taken to be part of the kayfabe. This also happens intentionally. When a wrestler is an actor in a movie (as “The Rock” or “Hulk Hogan” and more have done), that is undoubtedly a real-world event that happens outside the world of wrestling—and yet, the “wrestler” is

also starring in the movie: The movie can and will be referenced by other wrestlers mid-show, mid kayfabe (Oliva and Calleja, 2009, Monday Night Raw, November 24, 2008). Thus, this off-script, out-of-world event is brought into the storyworld and co-opted to be part of the storytelling.

The diegesis¹⁶ of wrestling is thus continuously muddled by wrestling itself: Its universal chronicle in some senses is able to co-opt the universal chronicle of the world itself, as its temporal continuity runs in parallel with the real world and there is often no discernible distinction between what is real and what is kayfabe: It is both. This is a consequence of its perennial nature: Perpetuity and temporal continuity is what causes this effect of kayfabe, that, as Oliva and Calleja said, *“produces a tendency to expand this 1:1 ratio to the fictional person/actual person as well.”* (Oliva and Calleja, 2009). It is quite natural to do so, as the distinction between them is difficult to discern.

As Mazer (2005) talks about, fans are very privy to this diegetic muddling. It is indeed a joy for fans to try to “suss out” what part of the performance was scripted and what wasn’t, while also letting themselves get swept up in the spectacle (Mazer, 2005). In this sense, the joy of wrestling is similar to that of perceiving a magic trick: You enjoy being fooled, and you also enjoy trying to guess how they did it but you don’t necessarily want the answer (Kuhn, 2019). This detail tells us something important about the experience of the audience: They are well aware of the diegetic boundary-crossing that is consistently happening, and they themselves partake in the understanding that this is a diegetically strange experience, where every entity is diegetically aware of their role

¹⁶Diegesis is here understood in the terms from Kleinman et al. (2019).

and function, while executing it as if they are not. This is not a negative; this *is* the experience of wrestling and at the core of why it is engaging.

We see this effect all over a perennial game like Destiny. The pace and temporal continuity of Destiny (also operating 1:1 with the real world) causes its world to flow interchangeably in and out of diegesis with the outside world, as its events are forever tied to real-world events. Yet, it gets much weirder. You could (until recently (Bungie and Activision, 2017, Beyond Light, Patch 3.0)) go back and re-experience The Red War from 2017, in a motion that simulates re-watching an old wrestling or sports match for nostalgia or historical reverence, as it, fictionally, only occurred once. Likewise, as in most online games, many missions can be repeated ad nauseum for rewards, without explanation for how the enemies reappear (with some rare exceptions, where respawning is actually fictionalised within the world of Destiny (Bungie, 2018a), making the instances where it is not even stranger). Destiny's temporality also causes its fiction to be impacted by the real world: Its 2020 expansion got delayed by two months because of the Covid-19 pandemic, causing the entire fiction of Destiny to "wait" until it was ready, with no diegetic explanation. Another example is how the official Twitter account of the developer Bungie had been "overtaken" by a fictional character from the world of Destiny, and spoke as if they existed in the real world (Valle, 2021; Murray, 2022). The specific examples of how the diegesis breaks are different, yet the fictional implications of respawning villains and recurring events are not necessarily any diegetically stranger than the incorporation of real-life movies into the fiction of wrestling.

4.2.3 The Interaction of Wrestling

I am not the first to draw comparisons between professional wrestling and video games. The DiGRA paper by Oliva and Calleja (2009) showed how video game terminology could describe wrestling, and had a direct comparison to MMOs. Petten looked at wrestling with a frame of interactive narrative structures (Petten, 2010).

The major difference between wrestling and most video games, as Oliva and Calleja (2009) pointed out, is that players are actively playing an MMO, yet in wrestling, the audience is "only" an audience in a more traditional sense. They are not the wrestlers, as they would (often) be in a video game. Instead, they uphold a role much more similar to that of a sports audience: They cheer on matches, root for their favorite, boo on the villains, and so on.

This does not mean that the audience experience is passive (just as we would not say the audience of a sports match is passive or inert). The story of Daniel Bryan is an often mentioned example of the power of the audience to change the outcome of a wrestling storyline (Oglesby, 2017; Sciarretta, 2019), bringing the wrestler Daniel Bryan, who the writers had written off, into the forefront and even causing him to win the title, purely because the fans demanded he be on the show. The writing of Mazer (2005) and the account of previous wrestler De Garis (2005) also shows how wrestlers in the ring are constantly taking the audience reaction into account mid-match, and changing their performance based on the audience. Are fans getting bored? Pick up the pace. Is the villain underperforming? Let him show off a powerful move.¹⁷ While the long-form

¹⁷Mazer and De Garis disagree on how this specifically plays out, but in both instances, the fact that

storytelling of wrestling might be more asynchronous, the matches themselves are live and thus function in direct reaction to audience behavior. Yet, the asynchronous nature also matters, because the audience is still present and engaged, even when not inside the stadium. On social media and other channels (Sciarretta, 2019; Oglesby, 2017) the audience is sure to let their opinions be known, which will in turn affect the storytelling of the authors. This is perpetuity, in effect: As long as the audience perceives a story as "not done" they can and will attempt to influence it.

Sports or wrestling are useful examples of audience-bound storytelling, which is part of the reason why it is helpful to divide our understanding of "players" and "audience" (see section 2.2). The perennial experience of a sport is bound to the audience: They do not play the game, yet they are the people who we'd say have the narrative experience of watching the sport. It is not tied to the watching of an individual match, but rather the story arcs that spring forth over a season and over multiple seasons. One match might be important, even pivotal, to that story, but it is through the context understood by the audience that the experience comes to life: The players actuate the experience (as actors), but they are not who the experience is *for*.

This is the fundamental reason that wrestling and sports can be used to understand the perennial experience of games. The experience of being an audience of wrestling or sports is remarkably similar to being an audience member in *Destiny* or *World of Warcraft*—and while an audience member is often *also* a player in a video game, it is helpful to understand that the narrative experience is *for* an audience perspective,

the wrestlers are directly concerned with the live reactions of the audience is true.

not the individual player in the moment acting out the story. Secondly, wrestling is a very useful example for the diegetic properties of perennial experiences because the diegetic muddiness is so apparent in wrestling.

The narrative of sports forms in a particular way, which we have not fully discussed in detail. This, however, can be discussed through another form of narrative which shares remarkable similarities with sports and perennial games: Emergent narrative. While not perennial in nature, emergent narrative tells us how perennial experiences form narrative out of their historical events.

4.3 Emergent Narrative

The next form I will discuss is not (often) done in perennial experiences, as many emergent narratives are personal and simulation-based, not communally experienced. However, the comparison I wish to draw here is in how we can understand emergent narrative's ability to create narratives out of simulated events as similar to how perennial narratives are created out of communal events. As we will see in the below section, emergent narrative can be understood to unfold similarly to how *history* unfolds, with a series of events that get *storified* into legend. Importantly, like perennial experiences, the way these histories unfold is *designed*—not in detail but in shape. This storification effect (or mythologization) is what is similar between emergent narrative and perennial experiences, and thus it is worth it to take a second to understand how this works.

For much of this chapter, I am relying on work I did in 2019 on emergent narrative (Larsen et al., 2019), as well as the excellent work done by James Ryan (2018) and Max Kreminski and Mateas (2021a); Kreminski et al. (2020) on the field of emergent narrative before and after.

Emergent narrative is a well-researched aspect of narrative play and interactive narrative, primarily concerning itself with the narrative that can "emerge" through play of a game or system. Emergent narrative is a large field with multiple, varying definitions (Aylett, 1999; Walsh, 2011; Ryan, 2018; Kreminski and Mateas, 2021a; Swartjes, 2010; Eladhari, 2018; Larsen et al., 2019), which I will briefly untangle in the following.

The origin of Emergent Narrative in the field of interactive storytelling is often attributed to Aylett (1999)'s paper from 1999¹⁸, and then further expanded (Louchart and Aylett, 2004a,b; Louchart et al., 2008; Suttie et al., 2013; Louchart et al., 2015), which demonstrates how narrative can "emerge" out of the events of an interactive experience. Their classic example is seeing narrative structures from a football match, like a late substitution scoring the winning goal. This ability for games and simulation-esque systems to create interactions and events that emerge into narratives is a powerful idea that has since proliferated throughout both games, narrative studies, interactive storytelling etc. (Jenkins, 2004; Aylett, 1999; Walsh, 2011; Ryan, 2018; Koenitz, 2010; Swartjes, 2010). However, the term is more contentious and complicated than it seems.

Outside Aylett and Louchart's definitions (Aylett, 1999; Louchart and Aylett,

¹⁸I say often attributed because an older source is T.A. Galyean III, who coined the term in their PhD dissertation on Narrative Guidance of Interactivity, from 1995 (Galyean III, 1995). However, while their use and definition is interesting, they do not have a focus on emergence the same way Aylett had.

2004a), we see conflicting and differing definitions from Koenitz (2010, 2015a), Ryan et al. (2015) (as well as Ryan’s updated, altering definition in 2018 (Ryan, 2018), Walsh (2011), Swartjes (2010) and others (Larsen et al., 2019). To reconcile these many definitions, I clarified the elements of emergent narrative as follows in my 2019 paper (Larsen et al., 2019) (as well as introducing the term *afterstory* yet that is not important for my argument here). We can use this to understand the fundamentals of emergent narrative, delineating the different parts that create narrative as a game is played: James Ryan et. al., in 2015 (Ryan et al., 2015), made this definition: “by ‘*emergent narrative*’, we mean the application area characterized by digital, fundamentally interactive systems whose narratives emerge bottom-up”. Here he is more talking about the area of research (a turn Aylett and Louchart later also did (Louchart et al., 2008)). Quickly, we see emergent narrative both as a research field, as a concept, and an emergent narrative by itself. This final distinction was one James Ryan included in his definition of the term in his PhD dissertation (Ryan, 2018):

“[Emergent narrative is] the methodology characterized by computational systems in which narrative emerges bottom-up from the interaction of processes in underlying simulations that typically feature autonomous characters (or, alternatively, the actual narrative material produced by this method).”

This definition is relevant for two reasons: Firstly, the mention of the term as meaning two different things in one, but also another: Ryan here has no inclusion, nor a need, for a user. Ryan does not require interaction, which is something Aylett and Louchart did. The user can be purely passive, while the system creates behavior that we read narratives out of.

1. There's a world, a design, a system that can construct a large (but finite) amount of possible events and world states. This world (game / design) is designed by people who intentionally placed content and rules within the world to run with certain behaviors and with certain kinds of schemas, but ultimately, it is left to run by itself or in interaction with a user.
2. The world runs its simulation, with or without interaction as a self-contained emergent system wherein events occur, creating emergent behavior.
3. Those events form what Ryan calls a chronicle: A series of events. This is *not* an emergent narrative, nor is it a story.
4. Those events are curated, sorted and accentuated into an experience akin to a story by the experiencer. This is a narrative experience. The system here has conveyed a narrative to the user through its system. Vitaly, this can happen *during* play or after play, and both are equally valid and, probably, happen in equal amounts. If it happens during, it has the possibility of feeding back into the events and thereby altering the chronicle real-time.
5. This experience ultimately leaves the player with what we will call an afterstory. It exists in the mind of the user and there alone. They can then choose to retell it to another person, at which point it will be relayed as a new (retold) narrative.

I detail this list of elements to highlight what I mean when discussing "emergent narrative", since the term has been defined and understood in a myriad of ways, as

shown. What I will concern myself with in this work is primarily the second step of simulation (which in a perennial setting can be understood as the live operation) and the fourth step of curation, or "storification".

From this, there are two important lessons to bring forward.

In James Ryan (2018) curationist perspective on emergent narrative, a system will generate events through the course of play which are not themselves a narrative. These are then curated (often by the player) into a coherent narrative (this process is also called "story sifting" (Kreminski et al., 2020, 2022), especially when done programmatically). Importantly, James Ryan compared emergent narrative to non-fiction, seeing how historians also "curate" narratives out of a larger sum of total historical events, choosing to angle and focus their narratives by which events they curate. While Ryan and Kreminski were interested in proceduralizing this process, I am not. Rather I see this curation process as a crucial part of the mythologization and narrative of a perennial experience. Perennial events are often "non-fiction" by definition, as they happen to real people and can be viewed as historical events. The emergent narratives that arise perennially are often "lived experiences" by players (Ryan, 2018), retold as matter-of-factly as historical events. We see the comparison most strongly in games with lower authorial control and high degrees of emergence, such as EVE Online or Blaseball, but can definitely still appear in more authored experiences like Destiny (see Loot Cave described in chapter 2), and even entirely authored events like the Fall of Dalamud in FFXIV (Nelva, 2019). This was not a systemically emergent event, yet it is nevertheless a historic event that players shape their own mythological narratives and

sense of community around.

Another comparison to emergent narrative I would like to make is Max Kreminski and Mateas (2021a)’s term “Narrative instruments”: Tools players can “play” to create emergent narratives. As mentioned, the “narrative play” I discuss is a direct reference to narrative instruments 1.5.1. In perennial games, however, it is not an instrument played by a single performer, but by a whole community, including the authors and the audience, along with what the game itself creates. Individual play sessions for every player only matter in context within the larger universal chronicle, and thus the curation and play is inherently done by a community. Because of the amount of people there is an inherent requirement for a “lag” between the participants, especially as the developer becomes involved. Perennial games are *slow*, compared to traditional emergent narrative, yet by understanding them as large, lumbering, unfolding emergent narratives, we can see how they similarly can be operated like instruments—or perhaps more aptly, like orchestras. Each individual contribution is not meaningful by itself, but over time, little by little, the shape of the narrative shifts, as each performer and audience member reacts to the new situation at hand.

As the audience and the authors learn of their ability to affect the narrative over time, they slowly improve their ability to use the narrative instrument they are playing with, turning the play more sophisticated, always done in live response to the play of the other(s). As they do this they collectively refer to the ever-growing amount of historical events from the past which are mythologized and recontextualized over and over again, shaping the collective narrative of the game. The individual events of a

perennial community are not narrative in themselves, but over a long enough view, we can see how these events are curated into narratives for and by the community.

This form of curation also happens in our final similar form to the perennial experience. This form is much more nebulous, lacking a formal definition yet nevertheless showcases key perennial properties. This form has gained popularity in recent years and can inform us about the cultural contexts which currently are used to proliferate perennial narratives.

4.4 Internet Narratives

This final similar form I wish to discuss is not based on well-established pre-existing literature, as each previous section was. Instead, this form is a much newer format of narrative which has largely arisen with the rise of the modern internet (although, as with the rest, we can find precursors). In broad, the form of narrative I am investigating here is narrative (perennial) experiences arising through forms otherwise not considered narrative media, yet nevertheless delivering on a perennial, (authored) experience of ongoing storytelling. These narratives are more difficult to define as there is no well-established definition for me to work from. Instead, I will take the tack of describing the form through examples, approaching a series of resemblances and a loose taxonomy of traits and features this kind of narrative has. The reason we look at this form of media here is because of how it can teach us a final important lesson about perennial experiences, which is their inherent ability to *infiltrate* media.

Let us start with an example: The popular Let’s Play series “*Shadow of Israphel*”, also known simply as the “Minecraft Let’s Play” by Yogscast. In 2010 the YouTubers “Yogscast”¹⁹, first known for their World of Warcraft streams, branched out with the new popular streaming game of the time: Minecraft. While it started like a traditional Let’s Play, soon mysterious events started appearing, first in episode 6 “The Mysterious Tree”, where a tree had been planted in front of their house—something any Minecraft player would know can’t happen on its own. More mysterious events occurred: Furniture got shuffled, they received ominous warning letters, until they eventually saw another character in their world—a villain who seemed intent on attacking them for unknown reasons. Over time, they found other villages, met more characters (all roleplayed by other members of the Yogscast crew) and journeyed on an entire narrative adventure. As Esther MacCallum Stewart notes, this gradually turned the series into a narrative story or a “roleplay adventure”, more akin to a televised LARP. They never once “broke character” and continuously pretended they were just “playing Minecraft”, even though it was obvious to any ongoing viewer that there was more going on. Over 3 seasons, the story took many turns and they met a host of supporting characters, fought a villain with a horde of undead minions and much more—all within the confines of a Let’s Play.

I share this story because it is one of the few of these types of examples written

¹⁹Yogscast today is much larger than a YouTube channel, and have since branched out into a number of ventures, including as a video game publisher. I should disclaim here that I am friends with a developer who got their game published by the Yogscast publishing arm. This was long after *Shadow of Israphel* and I have not watched or engaged with Yogscast content since the late 2000s, yet thought it was worth a mention.

about academically (even if it is only 2 pages in MacCallum-Stewart (2009)’s book), and because it was one of my first exposures to this form of narrative as well. I vividly remember the feeling of watching a “regular” YouTube video suddenly turning into something else, and the excitement, mystery and elation upon seeing it unfold. While MacCallum-Stewart’s descriptions cover the details well, I cannot help but remember how momentous this felt in the moment, how it felt like they broke open the ceiling on what a Let’s Play could be (when that was not even a common term yet), how riveting it felt to not fully know how much of it was planned and how it was done. How far were they going to take it? Who were controlling the other characters? Even fully understanding that this was an artifice there was much excitement, as in wrestling, in sussing out what was and what was not part of that artifice. How much was planned into the future? And of course, this was on top of the mere narrative excitement of “what was going to happen next?”

I want to reiterate again that it was not because we believed it was real that it was enjoyed, but rather because we *wanted to*. Saler (2012), once again, provides insight. One of Saler’s major points is the idea that the modern experience of narrative shifted due to its need to “enchant” rational reality with rational means. Rather than “suspending disbelief” as explained by Samuel Taylor Coleridge²⁰, a modern audience (of the 20th century) went the other way. People knew it was fake but willingly let themselves believe, yet did so with an ironic “double-consciousness”, an “ironic imagination” as Saler calls it. This ironic imagination is what allows people to believe that

²⁰From *Biographia Literaria*, 1975, read in Saler (2012, p. 30).

Sherlock Holmes exists and act as if he did, despite knowing he does not. We are never once deluded into believing it due to this ironic stance, yet intentionally allow ourselves to be delighted by the magic trick. Like for the many magic shows and carnivals²¹ and shows of public deception, “*the public was amused even when it was conscious of being deceived*” (Saler, 2012).

This same ironic imagination has taken hold of the modern internet narratives, yet their layering and meta-awareness has continued to expand, as culture has become increasingly post-modern and self-referential. As MacCallum-Stewart highlights, the layering of narrative happening in *Shadow of Israphel* is quite sophisticated. There is, at first, the layer of the game *Minecraft* itself, with its expectations and systems and emergent properties. On top of that is a performative layer of a Let’s Play, of two streamers performing play-acting and creating an emergent, improvised story of their trials and tribulations working with those systems in *Minecraft*. On top of this is a third narrative layer of fictional characters, constructed in the shadows and never breaking kayfabe, always pretending the fictional world is how it is “meant to be”—which exists entirely within *Minecraft* yet is never created by the game itself. And finally, there is the communal layer, of the viewers crafting theories and fanwork and excitement about all of this. All of these layers interact seamlessly with each other and yet viewers are seldom confused, and viewers willingly engage with all the layers simultaneously.

This layering of double (triple?) consciousness is emblematic of the types of narratives I am discussing here. They always use multiple layers of narrative, building

²¹Likely, the same kinds of carnivals that led to the evolution of professional wrestling (Sehmbly, 2000; Shoemaker, 2014)

additional layers on top of existing ones, for effect, using one (or more) mediums for storytelling regardless of what that medium was originally intended for.

To expand the scope of what I am discussing here, I want to highlight the different examples of this kind of storytelling I have found so far. This is by no means a comprehensive list, but helps cover the range of possible kinds of narratives I am discussing. As many of these are esoteric or niche if you do not know them or maybe do not know how they are (or could be) narrative, a brief description will be offered.

YouTube Essays/Videos/Streams

Notable Examples: Shadow of Israphel, Patrick H. Willems, How To with Jon Wilson, You Suck At Photoshop

As already explained in the opening example, these tend to masquerade as traditional YouTube or video series, such as a tutorial on Photoshop or video essays about movies, and use that format to tell a narrative by slowly introducing consistent and serial elements from one video to the other. In the example of Patrick H. Willems, his video essays started fairly traditional, with him talking to a camera, yet over time, he involved his roommates and friends and eventually told a multi-year story of an interdimensional coconut taking over the world, culminating in a feature-length movie entirely produced by him and his team. These are often intentionally obscure and hide the fact that they have an ongoing narrative at first, masquerading as traditional videos, yet slowly unveil their true nature over time. This can be clearly seen in the video series "How To with Jon Wilson" or "You Suck At Photoshop" which present as a simple tuto-

rial or help video, yet as players watch they uncover their "true" nature. Furthermore, while some aspects are likely planned, several of them also improvise and continue the narrative as they go along, seeing how the audience responds in a similar manner to serial fiction.

Music

Notable Examples: Kpop (aespa, LOONA, BTS), King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard, Coheed and Cambria, MILGRAM

Several musicians and bands have experimented with ongoing narratives in their music, such as Coheed and Cambria telling an ongoing narrative about a fictional world across their albums, with accompanying comics and written stories. Kpop has been increasingly experimenting with more and more narrative elements, such as *aespa* providing an alternate reality and alter egos for all their members, or the “BTS universe” telling a fictional story using each member. MILGRAM here deserves a shout out as well for their use of interaction, telling an ongoing story where they let viewers vote on narrative outcomes which then affect the narrative in the next album.

ARGs

Notable Examples: Petscop, The Beast, Ilovebees, Majestic

ARGs are perhaps the most “traditional” and well known kind of this type of narrative, having received much academic attention (Aardse, 2013; Javanshir et al., 2018). I include it here because ARGs have the same tendency of “hiding” narrative in

the world, presenting itself in “normal” websites and hiding in plain sight. Of special note here is the term “rabbit hole” commonly used in ARG design (Szulborski, 2005), to talk about the moment a player discovers there is hidden meaning in what they are seeing, and thus falling down the rabbit hole.

Fashion

Notable Examples: HAMCUS, Eyepatch Wolves

Some fashion brands have been experimenting with ongoing narratives and consistent fictional worlds in their clothing, such as HAMCUS, with each line of clothing covering a different part of their world and evolving an ongoing timeline. Eyepatch Wolves is a merchandise line from popular YouTuber “Super Eyepatch Wolf” which tells a fictional story through the release of new merchandise, slowly expanding over time—which is very much on par with the types of media he discusses on his YouTube channel.

Internet Reality TV

Notable Examples: Jerma’s Dollhouse, <OnlyFangs>, Twitch Plays Pokémon, VTubers

Drawing much inspiration from Reality TV, this form is primarily instigated by streamers, youtubers and influencers, and is often using themselves as the primary “actors”, playing themselves. A popular example of this was “Jermas Dollhouse”, a “Sims”-inspired multi-day live event where the streamer Jerma “trapped” several other

streamers in a house where every room was streamed 24/7. <OnlyFangs>, on the other hand was a multi-month long stream-event where many streamers got together to play WoW Classic: Hardcore²², and on the way creating a lot of Reality-TV like rules and customs and rituals (with accompanying punishments if you failed to live up to them). Twitch Plays Pokémon was a great example of fostering a communal narrative through a central stream without much authorial control yet with carefully controlled design of its systems, as fans took the experiment much farther than the creators likely ever imagined. The entire subculture of VTubers also deserve some attention here (and frankly, more than I can give them) for their blending of the VTuber character with the real-life person behind it, often creating Wrestling-esque double-personas which are impossible to distinguish.

Again, this is by no means a comprehensive list and there are likely more types of this form of narrative I have entirely omitted or am unaware of. Hopefully this serves as a starting point for the commonalities between them, as we can start to see some common features, listed below:

- **An ongoing, perennial narrative.** Unsurprisingly for this list, the first feature is that all of these experiences tell an ongoing narrative. Each installment adds further narrative in some form. The nature of these installments and the narrative

²²World of Warcraft Classic: Hardcore is "WoW Classic", meaning how the game was in 2004 (with few tweaks) on launch before expansions, and "Hardcore" means that every character dies permanently. As it took months to level a character to max level in Classic WoW, this can mean a major commitment into a character which you can lose forever due to a single mistake. This naturally induces a lot of drama and tension to what is otherwise relatively rote gameplay, which is part of why this was so successful for streaming.

is the most vague of any experience we will discuss in this entire work, yet there is undoubtedly something progressing a narrative along serially and perennially.

- **New Media** Most of these experiences use some form of “new media”, often relying on the internet to disseminate to an audience, and commonly using a newer kind of media where narrative has not (yet) been commonplace, as seen in *You Suck At Photoshop* and Patrick H. Willems. Even in the examples where the primary media is traditional (such as music production) the auxiliary narrative is often told in new media forms. This often leads these kinds of narrative to “feel” experimental and new, even if the storytelling content and themes are traditional and expected, yet feels new due to the format and presentation.
- **Can be appreciated without understanding the meta-narrative.** New audience members can often enjoy the “core” experience without full understanding of the overarching narrative, as each installment can in some form stand on its own. An album or a youtube essay etc. works without the full context, yet is often enhanced by this understanding. This also allows further onboarding as new audience members can “jump in” at any time. Though it should be noted that often the more involved the narrative becomes the less this is the case, and the more newcomers struggle to understand the context.
- **Communally experienced.** All of these experiences are intended for a communal audience who experience them at the same time, together, and therefore most of these experiences rely on this sense that there are other people witnessing the

same, strange phenomenon. The continuous discussion during and after the live events is paramount to the experience itself, and indeed is the experience for many people. The unpacking of the many layers of narrativity and what is artifice and what is not is an intensely communal experience, and these experiences often rely on and directly set up the platforms and places for communities to engage with each other about it.

- **“Liveness”, “you had to be there”** While many of these can be experienced after the fact, their core value lies in when they first air, and being in the moment with the community, experiencing the unknown together. This leads to a sense of “liveness” and zeitgeist in the moment, similar to watching a live sports match or concert, which is impossible to recreate after the fact. This matters a lot to the experience and it often elevates what is otherwise relatively “simple” media experiences or narrative structures. This is especially heightened by the often surprising elements these experiences utilize, obscuring their true nature to an audience and then revealing it to them in the moment.
- **Authored, intentionally crafted experience.** Most of these experiences have some intentionality in their creation. While this might not be fully planned from the outset, and may well be improvised during runtime, there is some authorly intention (and thus the audience discusses an inferred author function). This even extends to the idea of performance, as in Jerma’s Dollhouse, where there might not be scripted events yet there are still actors with intentions and a desire to

entertain an audience.

The requirement of an author is the fundamental thing that differentiates these experiences from folklore (Blank, 2012) and purely community-created experiences such as *Slenderman* (Chess and Newsom, 2014) or *SCP Foundation*²³. Much work has also been done on these experiences on the internet (Chess and Newsom, 2014), yet they are identified specifically because of their organic, folkloric creation. The experiences I'm discussing here need some level of authorship, even at the level of acting, to qualify as a perennial experience. This I do, admittedly and primarily because of my focus in this dissertation, but I do so for a reason. When there is an author, there is an entity that is aware of its power as an author, and an entity the audience is aware of as an author. It is not just fan creation, conspiracy theories, shipping charts, etc. There is somebody/something playing along and pushing back, and there is an expectation that there is an authority which can react and push back towards the community. In the terms used in the serial media section (section 4.1), there is an inferred author function discussed and utilized by the community, which they organize around. There is a canon and a fanon (see section 13.1). While purely emergent community creation is great fun, it is something else when that creation is discussed in relation to an entity they perceive to have a different power than they do. This power-difference the author creates is part of the important aspect of the perennial experience, and the experience of this relationship is precisely what I am interested in when looking at perennial experiences.

²³"Secure Contain Protect", a community-managed wiki, documenting supernatural events, presented entirely as facts yet is entirely fictional, with everyone buying into the "kayfabe". See <https://scp-wiki.wikidot.com/>.

Fans can (and will) invent lore about anything, but when there is a perceived author (or inferred author function) they expect they can respond back, the relationship shifts, and what they invent and what they consider to be possible changes. To refer back to the trifecta defined in section 2.2, perennial experiences work in the relationship between an audience, an author, and a game, and thus missing one of these elements breaks the dynamics needed.

While one might argue that events like unscripted internet Reality TV do not have an author because no one is writing the script, I will remind here of the author-audience spectrum defined in section 2.2.1. While Reality TV is much less directly author-controlled, it is not audience-controlled either. It is instead in the middle, along the axis of actor/system control. The people performing in Jerma’s Dollhouse are in control of what they do and what happens to them, and do so in response to an audience, yet also do so in expectation of what is going to create “better content”, or what the audience will like the most. This is not an entirely free choice, but contingent on what has come before, and what they perceive the audience as. While this is decidedly less planned than something like how the Music examples create scripted narratives for each album, the improvisation done in Reality TV is still controlled and managed by the actors who have intent and a desire to “tell a good story” in the moment.

4.5 Summarizing Like Forms

To briefly summarize this entire chapter, I will provide a list of the most important points to remember going forward in the dissertation as we discuss perennial games:

- Ongoing narratives foster community by giving people *something to talk about*, by providing a recurring, engaging narrative experience that never ends.
- The narrative structures used to tell this kind of story are different than traditional media, as the authors will use previous audience response to inform the future, perpetually defer endings, while also being increasingly referential towards the past.
- The author is continually referred to as an author despite not being a single person, nor having direct intention or ability to affect that which they ostensibly authored. Yet, the fact that the community considers an author function changes their experience of the narrative greatly.
- The ritual experience of the recurring, expected event is key to the mythological construction of the narrative, creating a fictionalized border between the outside world and that of the narrative.
- Fictional stories operating in real time inevitably blur their diegesis with the real world, and this is a key joy of perennial experiences.

- The construction of narrative in perennial media can be likened to that of history, curating a series of immutable (yet uncountable) events into narratives, by and for that community.
- Perennial experiences can occur in any media form, as long as it has the capability of ongoing events experienced in relationship to an author function.
- Perennial experiences are modernly an undeniably capitalist form, shaped and enabled by the need for increased financial gain, yet this does not mean it does not have communal, experiential value for its participants.

With these points made, we can move on to the final chapter in this first part, which will put the primary thesis of this dissertation into clear focus, relating all the previous chapters and setting up the context for the rest of the work.

Chapter 5

Caring For The Garden: How Perennial Games Cultivate Community

"Players made the pilgrimage to the garden in order to leave tokens of their grief. Code was changed so that items left in this manner became permanent parts of the world."

Raph Koster, A Story About a Tree (Postmortems, 2017, Page 243)

WITH THE THEORY ESTABLISHED, and comparisons made to other media forms, we can understand the fundamental research question of this dissertation: How perennial games cultivate community through narrative play.

The rest of the dissertation will dive into detail with this question from different angles, yet before that I want to establish a birds-eye view on the topic which will help guide the discussion throughout. With the established theory, we can say something fundamental about perennial games and how they work, which we will then corroborate and build upon in the following sections. Within this chapter, I will give one fundamental

idea I consider to be a truth about perennial games, and one major metaphor that will be used throughout the rest of this dissertation. The idea is the following:

Perennial games trade mystery for familiarity.

Any perennial game starts in a state of mystery, surprise, and possibility. This attracts players, it is exciting and enticing, it causes players to ask questions and come together to find the answers. As chapters 14, 15, and 16 will show, questions invite players to fill in gaps and discuss what could happen next. Yet over time, this mystery is naturally lessened, eroded and “what could happen next” is more and more known and expected. The game becomes more predictable, familiar and safe. It is a home, it is where people live and where they exist and where they find their friends. The community filled the gaps with their own thoughts, turning the questions into their own answers. This familiarity thus creates attachment, bonds, and enforces care with the system. This is often why people stick around long after the mystery erodes. As Pearce said there exists a *"shift from playing for the game to playing for the people"* (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009, p. 127). This familiarity is shaped naturally through the erosion of the mystery: The community is shaped through its coming together in breaking down, establishing, and forming relationships over the mystery—of what the game is, what it could be, and how to understand it. In this collective effort, bonds are formed and familiarity is established. This familiarity is across the whole trifecta of interactions: It is with each other in the community, it is with the game (object/process) and the developer (author (function)).

However, this trading of familiarity leads to a problem, because the audience

came to the game with the promise of mystery. And while the familiarity is a strong bond that binds them to the experience, if the desire for mystery is not satiated, it will fester and rot. As chapters 18 and 20 will discuss, this is why developers are constantly under pressure from players to refresh and change the game, update their processes, methods and content to maintain the sense of surprise that initially attracted players. If not, the players will do so themselves (which may or may not be in ways that are harmonious with the developers intent), or leave. Secondly, the developers themselves are under pressure to make new content for the continued existence of the thing itself, because players expect it and because they need the recurring revenue it creates. As they do so, they are fighting the inherent inertia of the perennial game, which trades mystery for familiarity. This inherent inertia is so powerful the same amount and kind of content released year over year is not enough: It has to change *and* stay the same. It has to, as Kelleter (2017) said, find difference in repetition. This can very much be in tension with the need to introduce new content (to sustain development) as newer, different content takes longer to produce, is more risky, and uncertain, yet might be necessary for the game to survive long-term in order to satiate the need for mystery. This tension is also why players are incentivized to stay with the game much longer than they want to, the familiarity keeping them bound (or at least, making them feel bound) to stay longer and see what might happen next, in case it has a chance to revitalize those old feelings, already turned into nostalgic memories shared with old friends.

It is similar to the ossification described by Ford (2022). In the beginning, the trifecta of a perennial game (section 2.2) is moldable, it contorts and gives way as the

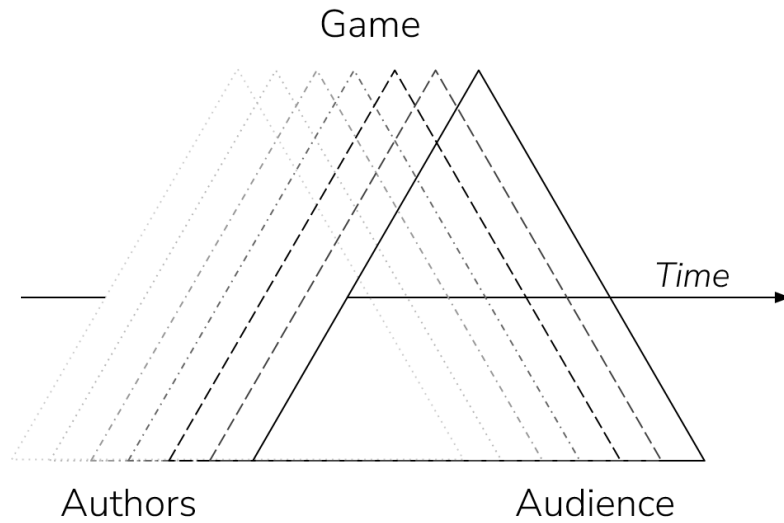


Figure 5.1: A visualization showing the evolution of the trifecta of a perennial game over time, ossifying into a more fixed shape as the game continues, if that ossification is not challenged or subverted.

audience and authors find new ways to exploit it, and the game acts in ways surprising to them. Yet over time, as the game is played and developed and understood, this shape crystallizes, its edges becoming sharper and harsher, its boundaries harder to cross. This is visualized in the adaptation of the trifecta in figure 5.1.

The demystification of the game is inherent and inevitable. It is done because it is what players want to do. They want to understand, optimize and learn the game. As Glas (2013) discusses, players inevitably boil the experience of play down to its instrumental components, find the fastest way to solve quests, stripping them of their fictional veneer and turning them into challenges of *“hyperproductive demystification”* (Glas, 2013, p. 99). This also creates community as those very guides are shared with the community and help establish norms, expectations of play (damage optimization

strategies, best practices, social customs). This also builds familiarity. And while Glas does not focus on the narrative in this section, the very same idea happens in the community’s fictional understanding: Players discover, disseminate, and strip the narrative of its discursal properties, and turn it into facts, concepts, and ideas. They take dialogue and turn it into motivations, take cutscenes and put their facts in timelines and on wikis. As we will see in section 13.1.1, they desire the certainty of knowing what happened in the world.

You might consider it a contradiction that players intentionally rob themselves of the mystery they came to the experience for. This is no contradiction. Game designers have long been aware how players are very good at “ruining” games for themselves through hyper-optimization (section 12.1.3). This is the inherent force of familiarity: This is how players handle mystery, *why* they want more mysteries in the first place: The play is in this trade, it is why we come to the mysteries. Players see a gap and they want to fill it. We can’t help ourselves. Later, I will discuss this tension through the concept of the “masquerade of play” (section 12.2), an idea that helps us understand why people play games, which manifests in perennial games as a constant, recurring factor. This notion takes the idea of play as a voluntary, ideal concept as an illusion we uphold in order to be able to do it at all. We want to play so desperately we play a magic trick on ourselves, intentionally fooling ourselves because we want to be fooled, letting the fiction of the game “enchant” our experience, giving it meaning and power.

This is done through the building of mythology discussed in chapter 3, which happens concurrently and constantly and in discussion between the players, the devel-

opers, and the game itself. The experience of play here is shifting all the time, and needs to in order to keep up with the rising and falling tension of the mystery and familiarity. It oscillates between moments of mystery and familiarity, between simplicity and complexity, between spectacle and routine. This is not surprising or strange, and it is not something you can defeat, as a developer or a player. The game will become familiar, and it, in order to continue as a product, will create new mysteries, which in turn will become familiar. If any of these cease to fulfill their function, the game will, slowly or quickly, collapse.

5.1 The Garden Metaphor

This brings me to the key metaphor I want to introduce, which is the idea of a perennial game functioning like a *planned garden*, and developing and playing this game is like caring for this garden. This metaphor is inspired by things like gardening games (Kreminski et al., 2018), and the very word “perennial”, which I keep returning to. A garden is more than a plant: It is large and beyond the scope of any one individual, it can have hidden corners and nooks which are not known to most people, and also have large open spaces filled with guests and patrons and gardeners. It is slightly too big to be kept in a single, holistic view, and each time something is changed something else is affected in an unexpected way. A part of the garden can be ignored, until it grows and grows and spills into other parts, turning more wild and unknown or it can be trimmed and maintained, kept proper and simple and smooth. There are things you

can do as a developer and a player but weather also impacts it. It is slow and takes time and things you do will take months and years to bear fruit. This metaphor highlights the importance of *maintenance*, highlighted by Carey and Adam (2008), in a perennial game, as unchecked, the game will morph and mold and decay. This maintenance is both on the level of development and of play. There are recurring, repetitive activities you have to do as a player in order to keep up to date, maintaining your ability to know the garden and all its intricacies. The garden needs trimming and pruning and shaping, as some players might stomp too much in one part and thus developers need to shift the paths or change their incentive structures to lead players to another place. If you want to change the shape of the garden you do that through and in between these ritual tasks.

Players come into the garden to admire its views, and to understand it, and to learn how it works, and how to navigate its paths. In the beginning, the garden might be wild and unexpected, yet the more they walk, repetitively, the more they “solve” its questions and learn its mysteries. However, the garden is designed, not entirely wild, and its paths have been orchestrated. While a weed will crop up here and there, there is intention behind the garden and an expectation of how players will interact within it. Those expectations are broken or true, and so the developers will shape the garden, again, in response to how the players interact. This is important because the shape of the garden informs how it wants players to play in it. As will be discussed in chapters 9,10, and 11, the garden tells the players which paths are noteworthy and which ones are less important, which plants should be sought after and which ones not. This shape

is not entirely up to the developers, but found in this conversation between the players and the developers, as the players will inevitably decide for themselves which plants they care for, which paths they find important. Yet this is not necessarily a “conscious” choice, or a deliberate one. The structure of the garden informs all parties, intentionally or not. In other words, *the garden tells people how to walk in it*. The shape of the paths determines the sightlines, what people see and how loud they talk, and what they talk about. Through this shape, always moldable and shifting yet nevertheless present and real, it is part of creating what community exists in the garden. Any one garden is specific and attracts a certain kind of person, and the community in the garden, through discussion and culture and mythology, is shaped by the garden itself. The values of the garden shape the identity of the community, in concert, in tandem, in conversation. Yet, nevertheless, the community tends to, as the myths ossify and grow, echo the mythology of the work (intended or not), to slowly answer the important questions: What should our garden look like? What kind of play is allowed here? What kind of community are we?

These questions are not answered by the developer. They are not answered by the player. They are not answered by the garden. They are not answered because they are never answered, and always in motion and in discussion, yet all three have influence on them and affect them. I want to emphasize, crucially, that I am not saying “the developers are at fault for how their community behaves” or vice versa. The shape of the garden is not something entirely up to anyone. Some elements of the garden were decided before they both stepped inside it, some elements were chosen

without understanding their consequences. But I do believe it is true that the shape of the game, the values of the game, the mythology around it, and how it manifests in play, does shape the inevitable community that forms within it. As we will see in examples through the next three parts, different perennial experiences have formed different kinds of communities, attracted to what their specific experience is like, and formed and shaped by those expectations. The art creates the community.

The rest of the dissertation will cover the three major directions I undertook to answer my research question and build these ideas. The first direction will cover the garden itself, how the design of the paths can be read and can be mirrored in the play of the community. It will discuss how the ritual patterns of its design are constructed to facilitate the play of those entering it. The second direction will cover the people visiting the garden, how they help shape and break those rituals and how their work and play uncovers the mysteries and creates the familiarity. Finally, the third direction will look at the gardeners, and how their ongoing maintenance is done in response to its visitors, and the joys and challenges of telling stories that last forever within the same garden.

Part II

Direction One: The Game

Chapter 6

Comparing Two Modern Perennial Games - Why and How

"A single word is etched onto the inside of the weapon's casing: 'Soon.'"

Weapon Description for *No Time To Explain*, Destiny: The Taken King, 2015

THIS DIRECTION WILL INVESTIGATE perennial games through the the comparison of two modern perennial games: Destiny and Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV). This comparison will cover how these games support and create narrative play in their design, narrative, and systems, specifically focusing on core perennial features like ritual play, space, and narrative, in order to answer the first research question of this dissertation:

How have perennial games facilitated narrative play?

These two games have been chosen for a couple of reasons. These are both great examples of the modern perennial game which were developed and run concurrently in roughly the same time period. FFXIV released in 2010 (or 2013, depending, as I

will explain), and Destiny released in 2014. They have since then told each a major storyline that ran, for both games, roughly 10 years, with 2022 seeing the release of the *Endwalker* expansion for FFXIV, and *The Final Shape* in 2024 for Destiny, each concluding their respective story lines. Both games thus have roughly equivalent time periods and lengths of their storytelling, and have had a conclusion to their first major story arc, and thus we can consider their stories as a “whole”, with a beginning, middle, and end. Furthermore, as we will get into, both games share a surprising amount of themes and follow surprisingly similar narrative structures over the course of their development, despite being vastly different games with vastly different mechanics, style, monetization, and release structures. I should also mention part of the reason these two games are picked is because of my familiarity with them. They happened to be two of the games I have played the most in recent times, and thus it is easy for me to draw parallels between them. This familiarity, as it will be in the ethnography (section 14), is a strength in that it allows me to draw upon a rich history of memory and reflection on my own experience with these games. Playing “enough” of a perennial game for this kind of analysis requires an amount of prolonged engagement that few other games (or activities for analysis) require. Therefore, while it is undeniably convenient for me to sample two games I am inherently familiar with, it is arguably also part of the reason this analysis is even possible. I will shout out some other games that would have been worthy candidates as modern perennial games, yet were not chosen for a variety of reasons: Warframe, League of Legends, Rainbow Six: Siege, World of Warcraft, Blaseball, Overwatch, Helldivers 2, Genshin Impact, Honkai: Star Rail, Guild Wars 2,

Elder Scrolls: Online, Eve: Online and so on. Each of these games could have been valid targets for a similar analysis and I encourage anyone with an interest to attempt it.

6.1 Method

The method of this comparative analysis warrants some discussion. In short, what I consider myself to be doing here is what I have named a “comparative perennial analysis” of these two games. This form of analysis will take elements from ludic and communal analyses, and focus on the perennality of the experience, and how this functions, investigating the temporal, communal, and ritual aspects of the games, and how they create the narrative.

This will not be a traditional ludic analysis or close reading, as restricting ourselves to the game is not the most useful for a game like this. As Wong (2025) says “*an up-to-date analysis of an MMORPG’s narrative cannot be restricted solely to how it unfolds in-game,*” because it unfolds outside the game as well, in the community, on social media, on forums, videos, and live streams. Analyzing the narrative of a perennial game requires not just playing it but being an *audience member*, paying attention to the narrative experience in the cultural discourse surrounding it over years. These analyses of Destiny and Final Fantasy XIV will thus be different than a traditional ludic analysis. While there are some important things to learn from the rules and mechanics of these games, especially in their structure and general systems, diving deep into the moment-

to-moment mechanics is not the most fruitful angle of approach. Instead, we will discuss the games as perennial experiences, which requires us to understand how their spaces, structures, and changes over time cause perennial storytelling.

There will be three primary points of focus on my analysis:

Space: Understanding a game is, inevitably, about understanding its space. As I discussed in chapter 8, games are unavoidably about space. As descendants of virtual worlds, perennial games are no exception, and the definitions of their space is vitally important to understanding how they operate as perennial games, as most of the interaction from players is within the defined space. And more importantly, how this space changes over time is usually the primary way perennial games change, as they open new areas, close or change old ones, and allow new interactions in existing space.

Ritual: As the paper I co-authored with Nic Junius explains, communal ritual play is a deeply ingrained activity in perennial games. Most of these games operate on ritual, repetitive activities, which help build community and shape the narrative experience. It is thus immensely fruitful to investigate how these rituals are formed and how they change over time, and how the narrative is conveyed through them. The design patterns we identified in that paper will be used throughout this section to discuss how the ritual activities of these games shape the narrative experience.

Myths and narrative themes in the community: As we will see in both games, the themes of the narrative, what they are about and what messages they are conveying is reflected in the community mythology of the games themselves. This may sound like two separate issues, yet they are undoubtedly linked as I will show, and by analyzing

them together in this way, we can see how the shaping of the game’s narrative, its values and ideals, becomes reflected in the community, and vice versa.

6.2 A Note on Positionality: How I Played Them

On top of the the positionality mentioned in section 1.4, a few notes are necessary on how I played these two games, as this will contextualize the analysis going forward.

I started playing Destiny 2 in 2017, when it released on PC. I have never cared to play shooters on console, so I did not play Destiny (1) at all. Yet, I watched streamers, especially Giant Bomb, play it, and I was intrigued. Destiny, even in its early form, had an allure. Its sense of ambience was immaculate, it was full of incredible proper nouns like “spinmetal”, and weapons named “Black Spindle” and “Touch of Malice”. I wished I could play it. So when the sequel was released on PC, I jumped at the chance. Unfortunately, as I will discuss, vanilla Destiny 2 did not have a lot of staying power and so I did the end-game raid a single time and fell off it. That was until a friend group needed a 6th for raiding shortly before the first expansion and I was pulled in. This was in 2018 and I have played Destiny ever since then, playing every single season and expansion to at least some extent. My activity has risen and waned, and I tend to play more around new major releases and only keep up tangentially when there are lull-periods. I have to date (August 27th, 2025) 1,471 hours in Destiny¹. I am primarily

¹According to <https://wastedondedestiny.com>, which tracks active in-game playtime from the Destiny API.



Figure 6.1: A picture of both my Destiny and FFXIV characters. Taken spring/summer 2025.

playing for the narrative, and have played all the seasonal narratives (except maybe 1 or 2 I was disinterested in), and I would often play the game once or twice a week throughout a narrative season, engaging with the game almost like serial television, tuning in for a new episode. Outside of that I am primarily a raider, which means I play socially with a regular group of friends (which has shifted over the years), doing weekly raids and other challenging activities. I dabble in all other modes in Destiny and there is nothing in the game I have not tried. I would consider myself competent at the game yet I am not a top-tier player. I do not grind much so I rarely have the best-in-slot gear, yet I have completed one day-1 raid (though, arguably, the easiest one), and I have done master's level content, and soloed some dungeons.

Final Fantasy XIV, on the other hand, I have a quite different relationship with. I have played only a single Final Fantasy game before XIV (which was Final Fantasy XIII), and thus have very little history with the series beside this. I knew of

the story of its development, mostly from the *Noclip* documentary (Noclip, 2017a), and was tangentially interested as a fan of MMOs, but otherwise did not play it until March 2021, at the glowing recommendation of a friend as I started this research, and hearing the general chatter about the strength of its storytelling. I would then play through the entire story of the game in the years 2021-2024, playing through the Endwalker expansion, yet I was not concurrent with it, as I was still in earlier expansions at the time. I have since caught up and played the “Dawntrail” expansion concurrently with everyone else in 2024, yet this is beyond the scope of this analysis (as Dawntrail is not part of the first 10 year-story). I have to date (August 27th) 686 hours in Final Fantasy XIV. I played it more sporadically than Destiny, sometimes spending many hours in a month going through the story, yet some months I would barely play. After finishing the main story, my patterns of play were similar to Destiny in that I do a weekly raid with friends, and sometimes keep up with end-game content yet only rarely. I am nowhere near as skilled in playing Final Fantasy and there are many things in the game I have not done, yet I would not say I am incompetent.

I started playing both games because of friends and I still do because of friends, which I feel is important to mention as that is an inherently perennial (and serial) experience. The social bonds are why I continue to play both games and I would likely have stopped long before was it not because of the regular social experiences I get to have by playing them. While I here talk about the narrative, and the narrative is deeply important to me, the narrative experience is an augmentation on top of the fundamental fact that both of these games are social glue first and foremost, and were crucial to me

maintaining a relationship with several people, many who live around the world, and some I have never met in real life.

With all that said, there are a few more matters to address before we can dive into each game. To fully establish the context for this analysis, we will first understand the history of where these games sit, and then we will discuss the concepts of space and ritual play, as necessary for the analysis. Then we will discuss Destiny and Final Fantasy in each their own chapters, respectively, before discussing them comparatively.

Chapter 7

A Short History of Perennial Games

"RAINZ!!!! Some day I will get my revenge! When it happened, I was in shock and disbelief. I did not know what to do. I could no longer speak. I could not resurrect myself. I was in my office alone."

Richard Garriot, 2013, Response from Reddit AMA on his death in Ultima: Online.

WHILE I PERSONALLY want to focus on modern perennial games in my work, there are useful lessons to be learned from understanding what the first major perennial games were and how they differ from modern designs. This will help us understand how the design itself has traditionally helped facilitate play and what kind of play perennial games historically has incentivized, and thus how that has shifted over time. The original MUDs and early MMOs of the 90s and early 00s had a quite different design ethos than what we see in modern perennial games. They were making “virtual worlds”¹.

¹The quote above is from the following Reddit AMA: https://www.reddit.com/r/IAMA/comments/1aztzm/i_am_richard_lord_british_garriott_creator_of_the/.

These worlds were also test-beds for many of the phenomena we see repeated in modern online communities, being highly experimental sites where people came together to form their own communities, figuring out the rules of those spaces on the fly. Issues like moderation, community management, rule enforcement, online etiquette, conveying tone, etc. were all discussed in this era, with many of the conventions of this carried on to today. Thus, it feels prudent to at least spend a few moments to understand this history, and how we got to the games we see today.

7.1 The Early Virtual Worlds

As mentioned by (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014), the first online multiplayer games that had a persistent world, and thus are considered the precursors to modern MMOs, were the "Multi-user Dungeons" or MUDs, the first of which were simply called "MUD" (later known as "MUD1"), which began development in 1979 (Taylor, 2006)². MUDs, which trace their lineage back to tabletop games like Dungeons and Dragons (Taylor, 2006) (as does most of gaming), were entirely text based worlds, where players could navigate, chat, and do quests entirely through textual actions, similarly to parser games, which grew into popularity at the time. However, with the internet in its early stages, it grew slowly, first to students at universities, yet MUDs spread quickly during the 80s, as computers and internet connections grew more common. Newer MUDs, like Tiny-

²For a much more detailed view on the history of early online worlds, see Koster's Online World Timeline: <https://www.raphkoster.com/games/the-online-world-timeline/>. Although do note that this timeline is comprehensively including important "inspirations" such as the release of Lord of the Rings and Snow Crash, which is mostly humorous today.

MUD from 1989, put emphasis on socialisation and worldbuilding, offering more customization, and serving as the precursor to the even more flexible and reprogrammable subgenre of "MOO"s (which just stands for "MUD, Object Oriented" (Taylor, 2006)), and this expansion into various subgenres and types continued well into the 90s.

It would take a while before graphics became the norm in online worlds, yet an early research experiment in 1985 with Lucasfilm's *Habitat*, showed the possibility of a shared, graphical world (Morningstar and Farmer, 2008). While more limited in player-freedom than its MUD counterparts, it still offered some key early lessons for online virtual worlds. For example, a lesson emphasized here was how *"a cyberspace is defined more by the interactions among the actors within it than by the technology with which it is implemented"* (Morningstar and Farmer, 2008). This lesson, echoed again and again by authors like Dibbell (1993), Golub (2010), and Koster (2018), is that the fidelity of the representation of the virtual world does not actually matter nearly as much as you might think. The moment another person is talking to you across a screen, regardless of if that talking is conveyed in fully rendered 3D animation or monospaced colored text on a black background, that it is a *person* is what matters. We will return to this idea in section 12.

Yet as graphics evolved, it brought with it mainstream success, in what many consider the first major breakthrough in popularity for these types of games with *Meridian 59*, *Neverwinter Nights*, *Lineage*, and especially, *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems, 1997). *Ultima Online* was a graphical, online "MMOG" (Massively Multiplayer Online game) (before that term was popular, yet many today consider this to be one of the first

MMOs (Taylor, 2006)), released in 1997, and reaching over 100,000 players, far beyond what the early graphical online games or MUDs had been pulling. Ultima Online thus became one of the first major games to experience the many complications that come with such a large community, for example player protests, server sharding³ real-money trading, and community management, as well as many of the design questions that permeated virtual world design for years to come: "Should players be able to kill each other?" "How much can players change?" and so on.

I want to highlight a key "mythological" event from Ultima's history, which is the Death of Lord British. Lord British was the self-given name of Richard Garriott's character (Koster et al., 2018). At the launch of the game, he gave a speech at the public square of the game, at which point he was slain by one of the players. This was meant to be impossible—he was supposed to have immortality—yet, the player found an exploit at which point Lord British, the ruler of the fictional land and the developer of the game in one, lay dead at the feet of the players. This, the developers cleverly used as an omen: This world was now the players', not the developers. Lord British did not resurrect (as he easily could have) but stayed dead, and thus symbolically granted the power of the realm to everyone who watched. This origin story—or "origin myth"—was key to the self-identity of Ultima Online, as a game where the players were "in charge".

This is an example of another common trope in early perennial design, of developers being fictionally part of the storyworld, which was very common in MUDs.

³This is in fact where the term server "sharding" comes from, as Richard Garriott wanted a fictional reasoning for why the world was separated into different versions of itself, and thus created a narrative backstory of the world being shattered into different "shards" as if a crystal had been shattered (Koster, 2018).

Often presenting as “gods” Bartle (2022) or “immortals” (Koster, 2018), they would directly interact with players, in-world, as characters, yet with far more power than a normal player, yet often directly influencing the world through personal action (in a callback to how Schaap and Aupers (2017) discussed how the gods of virtual worlds often exist fictionally, see section 3.4.6). Other examples of this can be seen in *Asheron’s Call* bribing players to continue the story (NeverKnowsBest, 2022; Ross, 2018), or the stories from MUDs like *Achaea* (Reed, 2021) and LegendMUD (Koster, 2018).

These stories are emblematic of the design ethos of the MUDs and MMOs of this era. Bartle (2004, 2022) and Koster (2018, 2017), two well-renowned early virtual world designers, talk about how they were first and foremost “makers of worlds”, not game designers or storytellers. They designed spaces in which things could happen, designing the societal, economic, and spatial structures for players to move around within but less so focusing on telling pre-authored narratives or designing pre-authored challenges in those places. That was up to the players, who were conceived as being able to live in those worlds. Many of these early virtual worlds were not necessarily focused on combat or progression, but let players make their own goals in the world, like letting players make shops and cities in *Star Wars Galaxies* or *Second Life*. This could also lead to actions that were potentially harmful to others, such as freeform player killing in *Ultima Online* (Koster et al., 2018) or “blighting” in *Second Life* (Boellstorff, 2008).

Virtual worlds, especially in the earlier tradition, were very aspirational about their “worldness”. If we look at the stated design goals of early virtual worlds like *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems, 1997) or *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003), they were not

shy about what they were trying to make: A second world, like our own but different (Geraci, 2014; Taylor, 2006; Boellstorff, 2008). Richard Garriott, one of the founding developers of Ultima Online, said in an early interview: *“Ultima Online will be, I believe, the very first ever, completely virtual world for the mass public to go live out alternate lives in.”* (N/A., 1997) As a successor to MUDs, many of these initial virtual worlds were highly freeform, without any clear goals, but also allowing players much more control over their events, happenings and behavior. Games like Ultima Online, that allowed freeform player interactions, killings and stealings, etc. (Nitsche, 2008), or Achaea, that had giant player-and-developer-played storylines where players were given the powers of gods (Reed, 2021) or Second Life, which allows players to create their own entire islands, places, businesses and ways of life, to the slightly more controlled but still very freeform games like Everquest, Star Wars Galaxies, (Lastowka, 2009; Taylor, 2006) etc.

After Ultima Online’s success, a huge explosion of MMOs were released during the 2000s, to varying degrees of success and with varying elements of gameplay, player-freedom, and design aesthetics. Notable of these are Asheron’s Call (1 and 2), Everquest (1 and 2), Dark Age of Camelot, City of Heroes, EVE: Online, Star Wars Galaxies, and of course, the one that changed the landscape once again: World of Warcraft.

7.2 Modern Sensibilities

There is no specific point we can say the design sensibilities of virtual worlds changed. Rather, this happened as a slow, gradual shift. Some could argue a major

shift came in the release of World of Warcraft, as Nitsche (2008) also mentions, which streamlined and focused many of the parts old-school MMOs. But really, it has been an ongoing process from each iteration to the next, with not just WoW, but Everquest and each subsequent MMO after, which influenced the design of the others. TL Taylor (2006) noted how these changes were already happening in the original Everquest. In the early days of Everquest, traveling across the world was time-consuming or expensive to do for a single person, and thus some people became “taxi”-drivers, that could teleport players to places for a fee. This "job" got eliminated when the game introduced a systemic, cheaper way to teleport. Another example is how Everquest no easy way to trade with other players, so they self-organized a “market alley” in a particular street where an organic market would grow (Taylor, 2006). This became a major social hub and a site of much social interaction. When the developers introduced an easier-to-use in-game auction house, this market street became desolate. These two examples are just two of how Everquest in general was designed to force social interaction and require interdependency from players (NeverKnowsBest, 2022; Taylor, 2006), and also shows how this changed as the systems changed: A “better” (more efficient, easier to use) system led to less player interaction, less friction leading to less communication. Crenshaw and Nardi (2016); Crenshaw et al. (2017) also finds this shift happening in World of Warcraft, where early on, one had to post in the general chat channels and hope others responded, and then organize logistics on how to get to the dungeon in question. This took time and was cumbersome, but led to social interaction with other players. When World of Warcraft introduced the automatic "Looking for Group"

system, a player could now press a button, be matched with 4 other players and get automatically teleported. Convenient, no doubt, but also less social⁴. Little to no communication becomes a norm, quickly, when it is not necessary. We can find many other examples of how the design of the systems impacted player behavior and thus how the spaces of the games were used (Scott, 2012; Packer, 2014; Steinkuehler, 2006). We can see an extreme of this in *Destiny*, in which most of the player-to-player interactions are removed or disabled. Text chat is disabled by default, meaning few people use it, and activities that allow matchmaking with strangers do not require communication to complete, whereas the ones that do, simply do not allow matchmaking and it is thus expected one finds a group elsewhere⁵.

Yet, another important shift has also happened which is worth noting: Today's perennial games are not MMOs to the same degree. Other genres have taken over. Live-service game design today is not dominated by MMOs as they were in the 2000s. Instead, the modern live-service landscape is dominated by MOBAs (*League of Legends*, *Dota 2*), Battle Royale (*Fortnite*, *Apex Legends*), Looter-shooters (*Destiny*, *Warframe*), extraction shooters (*Escape from Tarkov*) and competitive shooters (*Call of Duty*, *Overwatch*), as well as scores of smaller genres and indie games (*Among Us*, *Lethal Company*, *Rocket League*, *Helldivers 2*), and so on. And here is where the perennial refocusing helps us because these new genres might not be MMOs, but they are still

⁴And you can see the nostalgic power of *World of Warcraft Classic* to see how some players do miss this kind of friction. Players missed the "sense of community" (Crenshaw and Nardi, 2016) this offered.

⁵This, ironically, has the reverse effect of recreating the general and guild channels from previous MMOs in third-party tools like *Discord*. And this is a further example why, in order to understand the play of *Destiny*, one must also investigate *Discord*: It is an unavoidable part of its play. Thus is the spatial expansion of space a necessity. But there is one more expansion these descriptions of the virtual world hints at.

perennial. These are all games that have dominated the current markets, and they are a far cry away from that initial dream of virtual worlds: Gone are the player-created, free-form worlds. Gone is the expressive ability to manage social structures and societies. It has been subsumed by something else. To be fair, there are still MMOs that command regular attention and playerbases (such as World of Warcraft, Final Fantasy XIV, Guild Wars 2, Elder Scrolls: Online, and EVE Online), yet they are no longer the dominant form. Some perennial games like EVE: Online (CCP Games, 2008) still thrive on player-run events and social interactions, but it is not the mainstream for these kinds of experiences. One newer part of games that does hark back to the old-school social spaces is found in VR, especially through games like *VRChat*, a comparison also seen by Koster (2017). We can also see this in user-generated spaces like *Roblox* and custom Minecraft servers. While these are fascinating in their own right, they tend to not lean into perennial narrative elements, though.

I am not describing all of these differences to show a superiority to the previous design aesthetic or the current ones, merely to showcase how the trend of perennial games have changed dramatically, to highlight why me discussing the modern perennial game is noteworthy as compared to the studies of virtual worlds. The popular design philosophy of virtual worlds for games has changed, to become milder, less punishing, less freeform, and less demanding of social interaction. The modern perennial games are much more reliant on authored content, and audiences thus expect authored content to a much higher degree. I am interested in trying to capture this design aesthetic and understand how it has evolved out of the past into a shape that seems almost

unrecognizable. There are several possible reasons for why this has happened, which likely all play a part.

Part of the reason for this gradual change is that these games have become more popular. Raph Koster (2018) talks about how many design choices in original MUDs were possible because there were no more than hundreds or thousands of players. Today, we are looking at millions of players, in many cases, and for that, an unbalanced, freeform design will crumble into unplayability. As these worlds grew in scale, they became less and less manageable for a developer, and thus it was necessary to maintain more control in order to maintain a somewhat consistent experience for most players. As Koster (2018) mentions, part of the issue was that earlier MUDs often let individual players grow asynchronously in power compared to other players, whether through GM/mentor roles or by making rare, limited items only few players could obtain. Thus, the individual power difference between players could be skewed in truly unfair ways by design, and this was sometimes abused for personal gain (Koster, 2018). Koster later reflected that giving players these kinds of “admin” powers could be too easily be abused at scale (Koster, 2017) and this is perhaps one of the reasons this phenomenon has mostly been phased out in larger MMOs.

Another reason might be the heightened awareness of developers and expectation from players to improve and change the game consistently. In old MMOs, the amount of intervention seen from developers could be much less than we see today. A key example is how Lineage did nothing to stop rampant player killing of new players, so guilds set up their own structures to “patrol” new player zones to stop invaders

(Steinkuehler, 2006). This kind of harmful, emergent behavior (griefing) would likely get patched out within a few months in any modern MMO, not giving enough time for the players to organize themselves⁶.

Another reason might be the shift towards console development, and the possibility of persistent online play and regular updates on consoles providing a lucrative market. Most of the games I am discussing in this dissertation are available on consoles, and were intended to be console games, either as primary market or strong secondary market, because of the large amount of players who played on console in the 2010s. Console development is far more restricted in what they allow players (clients) to do, and thus typically have much less expressive gameplay. This is not impossible, as games like *Dreams* (Media Molecule, 2020) sees players create entire games with their systems, yet it happens in "walled gardens", where the developers are in control of what is possible. Direct modding on a console or reprogramming or injecting code into a game is much more difficult and not allowed by the console manufacturer, leading to a ban/restriction on online play.

Also of relevance here, as Tamer (2023) notes, is the rise of online internet games like *Club Penguin* and *Farmville* and later mobile games like *Candy Crush* and *Pokémon Go*, as they also paved the way for continuous updates and regular engagement from players. Mobile games, provided very malleable platforms for experimentation in

⁶Another example of this is seen in the realm of power balancing, where the modern design sensibilities often dictate that developers are quick to adjust and change the balance of players' tools so no tool stays powerful for too long (Hazzikostas, 2025), compared to a competitive game like *StarCraft: Brood War* (not a perennial game, but nevertheless a useful example), which has not received balance changes for 12 years yet nevertheless the power asymmetry of the three main races balances itself out over time as players find new strategies and counterstrategies.

monetization strategies, content delivery, laying the groundwork for much modern live-service structural design, and being much more tightly controlled by a developer, often with little intention of providing a malleable world for players to inhabit, but rather give a continuous stream of content to enjoy (and pay for).

Finally, a reason might be the shifting media landscape leaning towards long-form storytelling and experiences. The rise of "zeitgeist" TV shows like *Game of Thrones* or the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* has helped "train" audiences to pay attention to long-form storytelling, month over month, across a variety of media. As discussed in section 4.1, the modern internet's capability to allow communal discussions around complicated narratives is another enabler of this. As shown in section 4.4, these kinds of narratives have begun to appear in all forms of media and experiences, and audiences have increasingly become aware and familiar with its form. Live-service games themselves have no doubt been a part of this, as well, as they have acclimatized an entire generation of game players to expect and desire continual updates for their games.

Contemporary designers have had to adapt themselves to this new reality, and there are many challenges in making a modern perennial game, especially when coming from a "traditional" boxed-product mindset (Wilhelmsson et al., 2022; Dubois and Weststar, 2022; Truman, 2023), as I will discuss in chapter 18. Some of those lessons are elements that they have had to relearn again from the old MUD-developers, yet some of them are altogether new challenges, that asks open questions on how to make successful perennial games and how to tell stories with them.

Another aspect I want to mention is how modern perennial games showcase a

break from the ideal of convergence media and participation (Jenkins, 2008; Glas, 2013) which old school virtual worlds fit right into. The rise of the early MMO coincided with the utopic readings of how "new media"—participatory and community-oriented as it was—were going to "emancipate" users, and grant them creative control over their experiences, actively collaborating with authors and no longer being "passive consumers" (Jenkins, 2008). However, this ideal did not seem to occur. Modern perennial games are decidedly not more emancipatory or "community-governed" than they used to be and in fact, this has largely has rather trended the other way. Glas (2013, p. 39) highlights how creative productions from the audience are actively appropriated by developers, how this can be exploited as "free labor", providing value to what they are selling without compensating those involved, as the social networks and communities are now *"embedded in and entangled with corporately owned control spheres"* (Glas, 2013, p. 39). Today's market of games is more governed by capitalism and the games they publish are more controlled by the companies owning them than they could have hoped for. Of course, as Glas discussed in detail, this notion of ownership is much more complex, as players *do* have a say in the evolution of their world, even if they do not legally or practically own any part of it or are unable to control it—since the developer relies on them to play in order to keep the world running, their power as players is not to be understated. Yet, it is a decidedly different power than that of a "co-creator" or "equal participant" as envisioned in the 2000s. This might sound tragic, but I do not intend it in that way. It is what it is. As noted, these games are also decidedly more *popoular*, with vastly higher player-counts than Everquest or Ultima Online could have dreamt

of, and I do see value in that by itself. Popularity, while often derided, does also imply accessibility and inclusivity. Modern perennial games are designed to be much more accessible than their traditional counterparts, and while there are still plenty of issues with accessibility and inclusivity in these games (of which I will only really scratch the surface as we discuss the challenges of perennial game development in section 20.6), they have made considerable attempts to widen the amount of people who can and will play them.

In this chapter, we covered how the design of perennial games has shifted from an "old-school" design aesthetic which emphasized player-driven emergence, friction, and secondary worlds. Modern perennial games, however, are made for much larger audiences, and are streamlined and accessible, telling authored narratives, yet often disavowing or disabling features that cause friction and require moment-to-moment communication. This shift is caused by a number of factors, such as increasing player-counts, more frequent updates, console and mobile game development, and the increased acceptance of ongoing narratives. This design aesthetic is important to understand how modern perennial games facilitate play: Not through their open-ended virtual worlds but through their ability to tell ongoing narratives and adapt to their communities. To understand that further, we will dive into how the spaces and rituals of these worlds are created.

Chapter 8

Space and Ritual

"You're in our world now."

Tagline for *EverQuest* (Daybreak Game Company et al., 1999)

TO ADDRESS HOW PERENNIAL GAMES facilitate narrative play, we need to discuss some elements which make up games. There are a number of elements I could focus on here, from mechanics to systems to narrative, yet here I will focus on two specific aspects that I consider fruitful in for discussing perennial narratives: Space and Ritual. These will be useful for the game analyses in the latter part of this direction. We will start with space.

I refer to space for a couple of reasons. First, space is an inherent, unavoidable, defining part of games. As Aarseth said: “*What distinguishes the cultural genre of computer games from others such as novels and movies, in addition to its obvious cybernetic differences, is its preoccupation with space*” (Aarseth, 2001). This is a sentiment echoed by many others, including Adams (2003); Nitsche (2008); Schell (2008). Second, space

is a rather unique category in games research in that it is the one time narrative has consistently been inseparable from the ludic aspects of games. Ludologists have always touted the importance of space (Aarseth, 2001) in studying games and space is also one of the defining categories in narrative (Ryan, 2009; Meyer, 2016). Even at the height of the ludonarrative debate (Frasca, 2003b), it was admitted that space was the one place games and narrative conjoined, as Juul said: *“Space is a special issue between rules and fiction [...] [L]evel design, space, and the shape of game objects refer simultaneously to rules and fiction. This is a case where rules and fiction do overlap.”* (Juul, 2005). Space is thus a unique gateway into talking about both the fictional and formal aspects of games intertwined in a single construct. Finally, space is perhaps the most obvious category to talk about in regards to perennial games: As already mentioned (section 2.4), the primary academic descriptions of most studied perennial games are as spaces or places—as virtual worlds. I will challenge this view with a *temporal* expansion of space. We need to understand how space changes over time in order to truly understand perennial games. However, I also need to apply a *spatial* expansion, by reinterpreting what is included when we talk about the space of perennial games, because it goes further than the “virtual world” or the the 3D-visual representation we typically only associate with the digital space.

This section will first take us through a short history lesson on space in games studies and how it has been influenced by the “spatial turn” of cultural studies, before we delve into the number of ways space can be analyzed and understood in games, such as architecture, phenomenology, and semiotics.

8.1 The Spatial Turn

The primary figure to define space in the modern age is Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith (1991). He defined space as socially constructed (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith, 1991; Aarseth, 2001) in the 60s and 70s¹, and created through “spatial practice”, and thus highlighted 3 ways of understanding space: The first being material or present space, which was in opposition to conceptual or imaginary space, but then a third category was formed from these two: A symbolic, representational, collective and lived space, also defined as cultural, symbolic, and collective (Günzel, 2019)².

Fig. 1: Triad of Space according to Lefebvre and Soja

Spaces	Forms	Modalities	Equivalents
1 st	Spatial practice [<i>pratique spatiale</i>]	perceived [<i>espace perçu</i>]	subjective real everyday live/nature
2 nd	Representations of space [<i>représentations de l'espace</i>]	conceived [<i>espace conçu</i>]	objective imaginary urbanism/cartography
3 rd	Representational spaces [<i>espaces de représentation</i>]	lived [<i>espace vécu</i>]	collective symbolic lifeworld/culture

Figure 8.1: Lefebvre’s Triad of Space. From Günzel (2019).

Lefebvre was, along with Foucault and others of this time, part of what has later been named “the spatial turn” of academia, primarily in the humanities and cultural studies (Günzel, 2019; Warf and Arias, 2008). The spatial turn is in broad strokes

¹This was published in French, and influenced French contemporary philosophy, but according to Günzel (2019), it was not until Edward Soja’s later translation that Lefebvre’s thoughts became really popular and influential in the English speaking parts of the world (Günzel, 2019).

²And you may notice some similarities between this and the Barthesian understanding of myth (section 3.1.5).

a redefinition and reinsertion of the importance of space as a fundamental category to understand society, capitalism and social structures (Warf and Arias, 2008). This was in reaction to an earlier historicism of the Enlightenment that (over)emphasized time in the structuralisation of human experience through a linear understanding of time (later = more progressed, better, more civilized). Space thus becomes “anti-historical” (Flynn, 2004; Massey, 1994), and can no longer be considered subordinate to time or the social (Harvey, 2006; Soja, 1989).

These kinds of movements had lasting impacts through many fields, including narratology. With thinkers like Lotman (1990), Foucault (1986), and Bahktin (Meyer, 2016), space was redefined narrative, a medium often defined as *temporal*³ by nature. As Parker (2018) describes, while many narrative thinkers have mentioned space as a vital category, such as Todorov, Genette (1983), Barthes (1977), etc. many do not spend as much emphasis on it in their actual analyses as they do time. Yet, as Parker and Ryan demonstrate through their frequent revisiting of space (Ryan, 2009; Parker, 2016, 2018; Ryan et al., 2016), it is an inescapable and crucial category of narrative.

8.2 Space in Games Studies

Game studies, while both a newer field and perhaps more inherently space-cognizant, cannot be said to have had a clear spatial “turn” but rather, space has been

³One of the common descriptions or definitions of narrative is “a series of events” which inherently presupposes a temporal order (Ryan et al., 2016), but does not define a spatial one, even though we cannot imagine a narrative not taking place in... well, a place. It is, as Parker (2018), mentions buried in the definition “event” itself; an event is a change *in place*.

seeped into the definition of games from the very beginning. In 1998⁴, Aarseth (2001) borrowed Lefebvre’s concepts and defined how we can talk about a first, (simulated) physical space, a second (imaginary) abstract space, and a third “aesthetic” space of games. “*As spatial practice, computer games are both representations of space (a formal system of relations) and representational spaces (symbolic imagery with primarily aesthetic purpose)*” (Aarseth, 2001) (read in Ryan et al. (2016)). Others, too used Lefebvre’s 3 types of space, such as Miklaucic (2006), who looked at SimCity like a representation of space, or Stockburger (2006), who saw the first space as the physical medium of game devices and the second as the narrative, or Huber (2009), who expanded Lefebvre with additional 3 orthogonal categories that could be used in a 9 by 9 grid (figure 8.2), or Gunzel, who shows how games can be seen as “spatial concepts” through this. Huber’s, especially, deserve some recognition for its quite comprehensive mapping of the various types of space and traversal in a game (he was looking specifically at Final Fantasy X and X-2 (Square, 2001, 2003)), as can be seen in figure 8.2. This could quite easily be applied to many perennial games, such as Destiny.

Other understandings of space are also prevalent, though, such as Aarseth et al. (2003)’s later typology of space of “perspective” (vagrant or omnipresent), “topography” (geometrical or topological), and “environment” (dynamic or static), as part of his multi-dimensional typology of games, or Günzel (2008)’s 3 steps to describe space. Shared among those two is an angle of perspective and understanding the difference between

⁴As Günzel (2019) notes, this is not the first mention of space in games. Wolf (1997) in 1997 talks about space in games from from the perspective of Bordwellian film studies, to define what can be considered “on-screen” and “off-screen”. But this is the first use of concepts directly from this spatial turn.

	Material space (experienced space)	Representation of space (conceptualized space)	Space of representation (lived/played space)
Absolute space	Rendered 3-D space; physics; buildings, trees, grass, road; barriers, walls, and rivers that effect navigation	Map displays; intertitles; landscape features; textured spaces; city layouts; reference to spaces in FAQs, walk-throughs, and guides	The game world and its fiction as an object of contemplation; literacy of game space and ability to interact with it confidently—the space created by mastery; the learned map, becoming traversable with minimal attention
Relative space	Modes of transportation and acceleration: chocobo space, airship space; scaled space (from overhead map to walking space to battle space)	Airship destination menus; nodes and linkages; zone transitions; hidden and revealed spaces (secret doors, corridors); minigame (Blitzball) spaces	Affective play spaces: melancholy, anxiety/tension—sense of threat/excitement in high-risk zones and boss fights; shifts of attention motivated by changes in level of threat and comfort; cutscene spaces ¹
Relational space	“Battle space” versus “traversing space”; transitions in scale; blockages and transitions between zones and modes	Narrated space; ² the fictional accounting of fictional space; aestheticized space, rendered architectures, and landscapes	Collective and personal memory; pre- and postcataclysmic spaces; zones of return; sublime spaces

Figure 8.2: Huber’s modification of Lefebvre’s Triad, here with an orthogonal dimension of three other kinds of space, showing all the possible ways to understand space in Final Fantasy X and X-2.

interactable and non-interactable space, as a crucial point in analyzing game space. McGregor and Akira (2007) defined another typology of different spatial patterns such as “challenge space” or “contested space”, that are inspired by architectural use of space to understand patterns of how spaces are used based on their definitions. Nitsche (2008)’s patterns of space in games, such as “Arena” or “Maze” or “Rails”, also fit these criteria. A commonality is that they all focus on how the space is *used*.

This echoes a common stance in spatial studies in games, that has been drawing on phenomenology, as exemplified by Flynn (2004) or Leino (2013) or Resmini (2021), drawing on Crick (2011), a strand later taken up by scholars like Keogh (2018). The point here is that game worlds are experienced bodily: *“A game world can be roamed like the physical one, and thus is experienced as an inter-enactment as well as an embod-*

iment" (Resmini, 2021). It is phenomenologically experienced, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) would say, with the body as the zero-point (Flynn, 2004; Leino, 2013), from which everything else begins. The player *inhabits* the space of the game moreso than merely a representation of a subject: The player *takes up* space, too.

8.2.1 Architecture

Architecture is another natural comparison between spatial design in games, as architecture is not just about designing spatial structures, but thinking through how spaces will be used. Nitsche (2008) explains how this can be applied, by showing how Ching (2014)'s architectural descriptions fit well to games⁵. Resmini (2021) uses both an architectural approach and also references Lynch (1960)'s much older typology of spatial primitives (paths, edges, nodes, districts, landmarks) that form the basis for how we understand space as people. Resmini uses these to describe the space of three different games in a similar genre to show how different use of space can lead to quite different experiences in games that otherwise are quite similar.

Architecture has also been approached in game narrative, through Henry Jenkins (2004)' seminal "*Games as narrative architecture*", which alone can be said to be a key reference in at least 2 different interactive storytelling approaches⁶. This paper, while not directly concerning itself with classical architecture it is a paper that does show how games as constructed spaces can be used for narrative outside the under-

⁵And anecdotally, I can say that I have also been exposed to Ching's architectural frameworks in a Level Design class.

⁶Emergent and environmental storytelling.

standings of narrative as temporal plots. This is another clear example of how space cannot escape being both fictional and functional, and it is also an example of looking at the space as how it is used.

8.2.2 Literary Studies of Space

Space can also be analyzed through two other views: Viewing the space as text or viewing it as a semiotic sign, both of which are drawing from literary or cultural studies of space. The first is understanding the semiotics of space, as exemplified by the work of Lotman (1990), used to analyze the space of games by Meyer (2016) and Schrape (2019). Lotman described how spaces could be understood as a “semiosphere”, a semiotic universe consisting of codes and language connecting and relating to each other (Schrape, 2019). This is marked by boundaries, which create binary distinctions through spatial relationships that signify meaning: A high castle vs a low field, a good village, vs an evil swamp, etc. Here, the topology, semantics, and topography can all merge into a “semantic field”, that can be analyzed to understand the meaning of the game space through its many features. Ryan et al. (2016) use this in their recent work too, but also criticize this boundary crossing as being potentially too broad to be useful.

The second view is that of looking at the space as *text*. As exemplified by the visual and cultural studies approaches from Soraya Murray (2020) or Mukherjee (2015), one can view the landscapes, spaces and places of games as meaningful in a cultural context, and as telling about the world we live in. As constructed spaces, every part of them can be used to understand something about the context and conditions under

which they were made. Lastowka (2009), too, shows how even a game like Everquest (a perennial game) can be viewed as a text: *“a field of symbols and structures that precede its interaction with an audience and also guide the manner in which an audience uses the software, we must also come to appreciate that Norrath [the world of Everquest] is something more than a platform for community formation and communication.”* (Lastowka, 2009) This is naturally something quite well known in traditional narrative, as this is often the primary function of spatial analysis, as well as ways of echoing the characterization in the story, as seen in concepts like the “Seelenlandschaft” (soul landscape) (Domsch, 2019). And here is a part of space that is no different from narrative: Space in games is just as constructed as it is in literary fiction. Murray (2021) is critical of how space is used, though, as she sees a subordination of space to gameplay, which strongly affects the reading of the space. The game serves the user, first and foremost, and so we become, as Murray quite damnedly states, predators in the landscape, scanning it for viable resources, only interested in it in the terms of its game-value.

8.3 The Space Outside The Game

These examples have all so far exclusively concerned themselves with the space in the (digital) game itself (with maybe the exception being phenomenology as that does not forget the body outside the digital world). Contrast this with Nitsche (2008)’s definition of space in games, in his book on the topic “Video Game Spaces”, for which he defines five layers or planes of space: Rule-based space, mediated space, fictional space,

play space, and social space. Through the inclusion of fictional, play and social space, Nitsche looks outside the internal operations of the game (which is in the mediated and rule-based space) and looks at the player (and who they are playing with). The fictional space happens in the mind of the player, the play happens with their body, and the social space happens in relation to another human being while playing during a multi-player game. Nitsche (2019), in a later essay, takes this even further and describes how our real play spaces are influenced by our (potentially digital) play. It is very obvious in categories like pervasive games and ARGs how real space can be affected, but his points here are how we can also consider how our living spaces are set up to allow for and accentuate play, through for example the setup of furniture and he asks that we should “*consider game-worlds as co-inhabitants of our living spaces*” (Nitsche, 2019).

This leads to my first expansion of space. As Nitsche has already shown, we cannot define our space simply by what is rendered in the 3D environment. But it is even broader than he defined it too. His “social space” is still confined to the interpersonal space that exists *while playing*. Rather, I want to continue the move he begins by introducing the real world space as part of the game space, even when not directly part of the play. As I discussed in section 3.5, elements outside the game influence the play of the game heavily. The story of the Uru Diaspora covered by Pearce and Artemesia (2009) is another good example of this. Their virtual world closed down, and yet their story was not over, as they kept migrating to other realms, using third-party spaces to communicate across time. One might say this has nothing to do with the space of the initial game they met in, but this would not be entirely genuine: They came

together because of the promises made by that space. Pearce describes in detail how the aesthetics and values of that world attracted them in the first place and without it, they never would have met⁷. I am not saying that all the places they gathered after *Myst Online: Uru* disappeared is part of the space of *Uru*. But rather how we cannot define the space of the game as the sole and only arbiter of interaction between the players, as the only space within which they play. Nitsche's comments on how the real space is influenced by the games we play is important here, and I want to take that into not just the physical world as he does but also the digital, non-virtual world—or, the internet. These kinds of spaces are affected by the game and they simultaneously affect the game itself. Feedback is given to the developers, guides on how to play are released that change the meta, and so on. We can see this in any perennial game. Naturally, as players explore the world and play with it, they expand the possible spaces beyond what is controlled by the initial authors. This is not something entirely new, as we can see earlier mentioned scholars like Nitsche (2008) or Pearce and Artemesia (2009) discuss it, but we can also see it through newer work like that of Gursoy (2020), who looked at the narrative developed in patch notes alone. Yet, these other spaces deserve a much closer and comprehensive look, because these spaces all have their own limitations too. Social platforms like YouTube, Twitch, Twitter and Reddit have plenty of limitations and built-in affordances, expectations and constraints. They are inherently different than the authored space of the game, and yet can never escape them, and they influence the

⁷I do think there is something to be said here about chaos or trauma bringing people together, as well. It is not an infrequent occurrence to see stories of how perennial games “were bad” initially (*Destiny*, *FFXIV*, *Rainbow Six: Siege*) but improved over time with the community and the community being stronger as a result. I will return to this in chapter 20.

narrative play. In viewing the narrative play of the game and the mythology the players are creating, we must not limit ourselves to only what happens in the 3D environment, but it has to include other aspects in our view of space, too.

To showcase these spatial aspects, we can return to the previous example of the Loot Cave from chapter 2. This is a great example of the various ways the spaces of the game and the outside community impacted the play of destiny. Despite how quickly it was patched it was already a mainstay in the community, spreading through YouTube guides like wildfire. These kinds of videos tend to proliferate well in perennial communities: Ways to optimize play and "farm" experience or items is a common type of guide done for and by the community. It is, perhaps, a way we can see Murray (2021)'s "predatory" look quite clearly: Players did not see the cave for the loot. However, the cave itself also matters. The architecture of the cave, what allowed this easy spot to stand and shoot, was only possible because of how the cave was architected. It, from a semiotic point of view, serves quite elegantly as a *cave*. A dark and cramped area where monsters spawn, in direct contrast to the open and expansive space the player stands. It serves as a boundary between interactable and non-interactable space, as monsters spawn in from an impenetrable "gate" in the back of the cave, yet the player can only interact with them once they walk out into the cave itself. This is another reason why these spaces are worth looking at: The affordances of these spaces impact the game, too, through the the interconnected relations that develop across these spaces. The loot cave only happened in the spatial design of the space itself, *and* with the communal spaces that exist outside the virtual world of Destiny.

Of course, the space changed and expanded when they first introduced the pile of corpses, and later the entire secret dungeon underneath the Loot Cave, fully buying into and building upon the idea of the myth established by the community. They built on it too, with the new dungeon leaning heavily on pirate iconography to sell its theme of a maddened treasure hunter looking for "buried treasure", expanding upon what the community had done with new layers of fiction.

8.3.1 The Internet as Place

Some considered the 3D environments of virtual worlds to have more "place-ness" than the internet. Nitsche said "*an event is not happening "on the web" but is localized in a game world*" (Nitsche, 2008). This is also seen in how Geraci (2014) talks about space and religion, as he notes how virtual worlds granted the "place" required for religious practice. The internet, to him, is a "non-place". It does not have space or orientation, it is not mappable in the same way a virtual world is. Geraci then references Eliade who had shown how religion relies on spatial relations quite heavily: We orient ourselves in the world based on our religious understanding. The church is in the *center* of town. Sacred places in the world become the *center* of that religion (Jerusalem, Mecca, etc), which the rest of the world is oriented towards. To Geraci, the internet cannot provide this, but virtual worlds can, and this is part of why virtual worlds provide a stronger religious function than was previously possible on the internet alone. Nitsche ends up in a similar point through Brenda Laurel (2013), who also uses Eliade to talk about how virtual worlds could allow the creation of "sacred sites".

Later, Nitsche uses Norberg-Schulz (2019), to discuss how this placeness turns into a practice of identity: *"If a player has developed a consistent identity in the online world of Everquest, then the virtual space of Everquest has become a "place" for this particular player through the process of identity creation."* (Nitsche, 2019). For a new player, the consistent massively multiplayer world of Everquest might be a beautiful playground to explore, a space to master. For the longtime player, the game world has also become the home for countless social encounters with other players. This combines the religious angle discussed in the myth section to Vella's notions of dwelling in quite a neat manner.

However, I will here disagree with Geraci about the necessity for virtual worlds. While "the internet" does indeed not have inherent placeness, individual *places* on the internet very much can. Specific communities that are technically little more than chat-servers, such as forums or Discord servers, can become places much in the same way that Nitsche describes a place forming through a person's identity-formation within it. We get to know the people inside it, we get to rely on them, get used to its affordances and limitations, habituate our access to it, and we get to call it a home. We can see examples of this in many ways throughout internet culture and studies. Notable examples include "The Forge" (White, 2020) or Pearce and Artemesia (2009)'s Uru Diaspora already covered, or even major gaming forums like NeoGAF or Something Awful, which also became (in)famous for a certain type of community (Groen, 2015). This is another reason the spatial expansion is necessary, as merely understanding the internet as a nebulous "non-space" is not enough. We need to understand the *specific* places that serve the communities of perennial games, and how they do so.

8.4 Virtual Worlds - Space in Perennial Games

“Virtual world” is the predominant way to describe worlds like those in World of Warcraft or Destiny, and done so from the dawn of their research by the influential works of people like Celia Pearce (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009), Klasturp (2003), Taylor (2006), etc. Pearce and Klasturp, who spent much effort on defining the virtual world, does so in detail, and many lean on their work and use the term often as shorthand. Klasturp’s (the more concise of the two) is:

A virtual world is a persistent online representation, which contains the possibility of synchronous interaction between users and between user and world within the framework of a space designed as a navigable universe. [...] “Virtual worlds” are worlds you can move in, through persistent representation(s) of the user, in contrast to the represented worlds of traditional fictions, which are worlds presented as inhabited by real people, but not actually inhabitable. (Klasturp, 2003)

Many of these terms repeat in Pearce and Artemesia (2009)’s: Persistence, inhabitability, spatiality, navigability (explorability and mappability), and sociability. They are places you inhabit, you do not merely spectate or perceive them, but the only way to engage is to participate (what Pearce calls “consequential participation”). They are persistent, both in the sense that they stay consistent, but also in that they exist outside participation too. They are always, in their views, mimetic, mappable and navigable, with continuous space that can be explored at leisure (barring constraints placed by the rules of the game). A virtual world is a fiction, because it is constructed and (re)presenting a fictional world, but it is also a social, performative space, and a space for a game (Klasturp, 2003). Some virtual worlds are decidedly less fictional

(like Second Life) compared to others that rely on their fiction to define them (like World of Warcraft or Lord of the Rings Online (Standing Stone Games, 2007), relying on pre-existing fiction, but it can also be entirely original fiction such as in Destiny or FFXIV).

Another term they both use is the nebulous term “worldness”, which we also saw Krzywinska (2006) use earlier to describe the connective tissue of the world to its mythos. Pearce defines it loosely as what makes a virtual world “feel” like a consistent world, a more-than-the-sum-of-its-parts element that ties it all together. Klastrup tries to define this a bit more stringently but ends up in a similar place: *“...the experience of “worldness” appears to be related to the feeling of presence and engagement in the virtual world, an experience which is the result of the particular world design (how the world is presented to us as a tool to play with), the interplay between agents and interaction forms available in the world (the world as game and social space), and the accumulated experience of “lived life” in the world (interaction-in-time and the continuous performance of persistent characters in the world).”* (Klastrup, 2003). It is about individual feeling and experience rather than material reality. It is about lived life and a feeling of coherence and completeness that belongs more or less to the individual in experience. There are countless ways to break down the coherence of the virtual world: Loading screens, out-of-bounds areas, invisible colliders, inaccessible affordances, limited vocabulary, impossible geometry (caves larger than their outsides allow, etc.), and so on. The point is not that these worlds are coherent, but that they *feel* coherent. Nitsche (2008) describes how virtual worlds become places, something not all game spaces become in-

herently. He sees this as an effect of the social interaction that happens in these worlds. People grow to know them, and through the social interactions establish meaning inside them, and thus begin to consider them their own, something we will return to in chapter 15.

8.4.1 Dwellings - Space as Home

This echoes Vella (2019)’s paper on dwellings in games, on how games are so often considered to be about travel, navigation (Manovich, 2002), quests and exploration, which he calls “hermetic”, using a word from Casey (1993), and that they are not predominantly “hestial”, that is, about being-at-home, or taking place in dwellings. However, some games have the capacity to turn the hermetic into the hestial, as players become increasingly familiar with an existing environment, beginning to learn it like the back of their hand. An example Vella brings up is a player of Minecraft (Mojang, 2011) getting so used to their previously daunting cave-system they now navigate them effortlessly, almost instinctively. Vella does not talk about multiplayer worlds, but I do think here it is worth pointing out just how much virtual worlds can become dwellings. Because of their temporal nature, perennial games especially will become a place and will become a dwelling for those in it. And yes, this is obvious in the big well-known social hubs like Ironforge (Blizzard Entertainment Ltd., 2004) or Limsa Lominsa (Square Enix, 2013), but I see it extending further: A raid that was puzzling and challenging the first time becomes second-nature after the 30th. You know all the challenges, you

know where to stand, where to jump, where to cast your spells and when to dodge⁸ Because of the persistence and temporal engagement with these games, I do consider it an eventuality for anyone who plays them long enough that it becomes a sort of dwelling, a second home. Their spaces are not static, but they are consistent and present and fixed enough for them to become reliable fixtures, and for people to learn about them over time.

8.5 Non-static Space: Virtual Worlds in Change

I have already covered how virtual worlds we considered to not tell stories or change (section 2.4, and how I see myth as a potential lens to alleviate these concerns, especially surrounding repetition and permanence 3.6.4. Understood in spatial terms, the idea of a "static" virtual world has some unfortunate implications. Seeing space as contrary to time leads us into similar thoughts as pre-spatial turn thinking: If it is not progressing linearly in time, it cannot be narrative. It is similarly a potential problem with over-structuralisation of space: If we begin to see space as something that by definition is against time, a virtual world cannot tell a story *because* it is a space. This is categorically untrue. But, before I dismiss it entirely, let us investigate a little closer how these spaces change, because the original criticisms were not wrong that they do repeat; it is just a question of how.

In traditional narrative, once the hero slays the monster, we expect the monster

⁸And this avoids talking about the very literal player housing that exists in several of these games, such as FFXIV (Lucas, 2020).

to stay slayed. Not so in most virtual worlds: The monster is revived for the next hero of equal strength and measure to slay as well. What changes, as Glas (2013) highlights, is the character. The hero becomes a little stronger. Gets a new pair of boots. And thus the change stays with the players, it stays social, it remains. But, as I have demonstrated in my perennial work (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021), this is looking at the space in too narrow of a timeframe: Taken upon a long view, all of these spaces have changed and will change. A patch might remove the monster, and cause a volcano to explode behind it. A previously lush area might become deforested. A populated space station might go derelict. But what this doesn't mean is that it removes the repetition. It merely replaces it. Now, instead of killing a monster over and over again, the players might delve into a dungeon in that same area, over and over again. Something new has arisen, but it, once again, is not removed from repetition, yet in the *change in* repetition we can see a story.

Most perennial games are by no means simple in these regards. Server sharding, instancing, phasing, retconning, disabling of content, the removal of content and the re-introduction of that content, the ability to view the same place in multiple states of time, are all examples that complicate this considerably, but they do not alter the fundamental fact that I as a player can do the same activity over and over again with little to no explanation for why I can, nor does it change the fact that the world might be drastically different in a month. And this is also by no means consistent across examples of perennial games. Destiny treats repetition and change differently than FFXIV, which again is nowhere similar to League of Legends or Fortnite or Apex: Legends (Respawn

Entertainment, 2019). Part of analyzing these games, one should look at what is repeated and what is not, why that is repeated and what that means for the players. Repetition here is a factor because it is such a frequent occurrence in perennial games. It can be said to be part of their defining traits, inherent in the “perennial” moniker: Something repeats over and over again, and yet each time is different. Play thrives in repetition. Feedback loops, interactions, turn orders, progression, core mechanics, are all based on or described with repetition: Something recurs, and it is in that structure we can play. And it is precisely also seeing what does not repeat, what changes and what becomes new, that allows us to see how perennial games change over time.

To understand the space of a perennial game, then we can employ all the strategies mentioned in early part of this section, but it is also vital that we keep in mind this temporal expansion, understood through how the world changes and how it does not. The worlds *change* over time, and how they change and why is crucial to their experience. World of Warcraft, in 2017, altered its entire levelling structure to be more freeform: Players can now choose where to go to level whenever, and the world will scale with them. Without having investigated this in detail, I claim that this *must* change the way we experience the space, but we do not yet have a clear enough idea of *how*. This is what I mean by calling for an analysis of the change and repetition of the space. Another example is Destiny 2’s removal of areas, which is a now common aspect of playing the game. Huge parts of Destiny 2’s world has been removed from the game, present in 2017 but now lost to time—it has entered the “Content Vault” as they literally call it. They will furthermore reintroduce older content again (pull it out

of the Vault), maybe changing it or adjusting it to the current story (as they recently did with the Leviathan spaceship) or not (as they did with the Vault of Glass raid from Destiny 1).

To understand this repetition in spaces, it will be very useful to understand how these spaces are engaged with in this repetition: In ritual activities.

8.6 Communal Ritual Play

Communal play and rituals are a core part of how the repetition unfolds in perennial games. As games with less traditional narrative structures, perennial games often utilize design patterns that encourage communal storytelling through repetitive activities. These patterns can be extrapolated to understand how these rituals strengthen a community, creating more powerful stories that connect people to each other as well as to the work of the narrative.

This can be compared to work done in single player narrative research on the ways players' relationships to games change over repeated playthroughs (Mitchell and McGee, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2020; Junius et al., 2021; Kleinman et al., 2018), showing the power of narrative understanding through repetition. This work showcases how the repetition of games is a part of their interpretation as a player, and repeating the same activity over and over changes your personal relationship with the game. Interpretation, however, is not exclusively an individual act and entire communities can engage in the practice while playing games, collectively creating new meaning out of (re)experiencing

the same story. As I am discussing perennial games, this kind of collective interpretation is what is in focus.

To understand the narrative design patterns that encourage collective interpretation of games, I collaborated with Nic Junius on a paper on what we proposed to call *communal ritual play* as a lens to analyze narratively-oriented, multiplayer games (Larsen et al., 2023). Such a lens allows us to expand the ways narrative design of space create modes of storytelling that encourage the collective sharing and interpretation of in-game experiences. Furthermore, this lens enables us to more deeply understand the way multiplayer narrative design draws players into engaging with these games' stories which are often multimodal and feature hidden or otherwise non-obvious elements, frequently requiring a collective effort to discover in the first place. When narrative elements are used in these multiplayer games they are often told through fractions of a story when experienced a single time, requiring repeated playthroughs or engagement with a community, or sometimes both, to begin understanding the full story being told. Additionally, we focus on *ritual* as the mode of play as rituals, like many multiplayer games, are built for the express purpose of repeated enaction of events and the narrative of multiplayer games rarely exists as a single linear story (see section 3.3). These design patterns strongly help foster a community's interpretation of a narrative, yet are rarely connected directly to narrative experience, instead often being interpreted as part of the repetitive space. Yet, by viewing them as communal rituals, we can see the latent narrative inside.

To construct the lens of communal ritual play, Nic and I turned to theatrical

performance practices and literature around ritual and myth. From these, we could form an understanding of what is compelling about revisiting stories which can then be applied to existing multiplayer games, which have communities built around their interpretation. Theatrical performance practices work within the constraints of the play script, which provides a framework for telling a specific story, while performers form their own interpretations of the roles to find novelty and bring the narrative to life (Levin and Levin, 2002; Bogart and Landau, 2005; Rimer et al., 1984). Likewise, storytelling traditions from mythology are strongly tied to ritual and retellings (Eladhari, 2018; Larsen et al., 2019), as communities would retell and re-enact myths continuously, to both expand their understanding and convey their meaning to the society (Segal, 2004; Geraci, 2014; Krzywinska, 2006; Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008a) (see chapter 3. As myth has already been covered extensively, the following definitions will draw more from theatrical performance, and myth will be used throughout the chapter). By drawing from ritual, myth, and performance practices, we can expand our understanding of how people collectively interpret stories from a small group of specialists to much wider communities of varying expertise levels engaging in this form of novelty seeking and interpretation.

We identified three narrative design patterns using the lens of communal ritual play in the paper (Larsen et al., 2023): *Incomplete Information*, *Not Helping the Player*, and *Building for Player Expression*. Each of these patterns focuses on a different way designs encourage players to form communities around narrative experiences created through ritual play. These patterns will be covered briefly below, and then will be

returned to when I discuss the comparative analysis of *Destiny* and *Final Fantasy XIV*, which were both common case studies for these patterns (section 11.1). You can read more information on how these patterns were synthesized in the paper.

8.6.1 Incomplete Information

The design pattern of incomplete information emphasizes not providing a single player with all the information they need to comprehensively understand the game across a single playthrough. Rather, the complete experience is obtained through repetition, wherein players experience new pieces of content, different ways to solve similar problems, or find hidden objectives, making the multiple repetitions a somewhat new experience each time. Players are often given a material reason to re-experience the same content over and over, such as getting new rewards, or new narrative information. Each repetition has set goals and expectations with the potential to uncover a new perspective on the content, much the way new productions of existing theatrical scripts, including historical and ancient texts, are performed today (Chemers, 2010; Bogart and Gay, 2014; Rimer et al., 1984) or how myths are retold over and over again yet each time it can be adjusted and changed for current contexts (section 3.6.4). This potential for a revelation is what creates the ritual experience, yet within that there is room for flexibility and play because the performance of players collaborating is in focus. The repetition gives leeway for designers to not give a player all the information in a single attempt, as it can be expected they will repeat the ritual multiple times. The existence of secrets or hidden objectives also gives an incentive for players to re-experience it as

they know they might find something new. While this approach might contradict traditional game design wisdom, withholding information with intention can help lay the groundwork for players to engage in communal ritual play.

It has the following sub-patterns:

- Distributing info across players or repetitions.
- Hiding information.
- Repetitive group activities relying on teamwork.

8.6.2 Not Helping the Player

Another way games can encourage players to be in community with each other is to intentionally inconvenience or trouble them, making it harder to accomplish their goals by themselves. This design pattern focuses on the obfuscation of necessary information, creating friction around basic actions or narrative material. By telling the player the best way forward or not telling the story in a linear fashion, it makes it more difficult for an individual player to understand what to do and what is going on. This is not necessarily because the information is secret, such as in the first design pattern, but rather because the game provides inadequate guidance on how to understand its systems or narrative. By presenting narrative elements to players in pieces and out of order, overwhelming the player with too many disparate pieces of information, one player is not expected to understand the entire experience by themselves, akin to the nature of a play script requiring multiple perspectives and interpretive specialties to

collectively transform a script into a finished theatrical work (Chemers, 2010; Bogart and Gay, 2014; Bogart and Landau, 2005; Rimer et al., 1984). This is where a player begins relying on the community to map out and collectively understand the connections between each disparate element, as well as optimize strategies for how to play through the game, communally making sense of the mythology of the game.

It has the following sub-patterns:

- Not giving guidance on optimal paths.
- The (Back)story is fractured.
- Forcing players through shared difficulties.

8.6.3 Building for Player Expression

Player expression is a powerful tool to let players experiment and make their own narratives or fun, such as seen in *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) or *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011). In a communal setting, however, player expression can take on a new life and grow beyond an individual player's choices. How players act and dress and customize their characters can become a part of the legend and ritual of playing within the community. This design pattern focuses on letting players' deviant play (Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008a) be used for narrative purpose. By letting players express themselves, use suboptimal strategies or equipment, perform unoptimally or breaking the rules, they can shape their own identity through their play and define their relationship to the game's world and narrative by making concrete decisions about who they are in manners

reminiscent of the way actors and productions draw out themes through performance (Chemers, 2010; Levin and Levin, 2002; Bogart and Landau, 2005; Rimer et al., 1984). In communities, these identities then become reinforced in relationships with other people, and through the repetition of play. A game can create folk heroes by letting players help each other, through messages or cooperative play in repetitive trials, where any players' deviance will stand out in subversion to the expected monotony, creating myths. Creating systems for even deeper player expression, such as player-made crafting is a powerful way to allow this expression as well, and can have great communal benefits, letting players create their own ritual experiences and new ways to engage with the fictional worlds.

It has the following sub-patterns:

- Folk heroes.
- Crafting and creating.

These patterns are a crucial part of the way the space of perennial games are designed, as we will see throughout the two analyses in the next two chapters. To briefly summarize this chapter, we investigated how space has been defined in game studies, to understand the myriad ways one could focus on space in the analysis of games, before discussing some key expansions such as looking at the space outside the game itself, and considering how a space changes over time. Secondly, I discussed communal ritual play patterns of design, which is useful to understand how the space in perennial games is utilized for repetitive, ritual activities, and how that very repetition is used to facilitate

play. Next, we will investigate the two games Destiny, and Final Fantasy XIV, looking at their how their communal narrative has developed over time, using these concepts as well as the lens of myth defined in chapter 3.

Chapter 9

Destiny

“A sword is everywhere edged, but the pieces of a bomb do not look at all like weapons until they are assembled.”

Mara Sov, *Tyrannocide V* (Destiny 2: Forsaken, 2018)

DESTINY IS A VIDEO GAME DEVELOPED BY BUNGIE, published by Activision, in 2014 for the Playstation 3, Playstation 4, Xbox 360, and Xbox One. It received two minor DLCs and two major expansions (The Taken King in 2015 and Rise of Iron in 2016). Destiny 2 is a video game released by Bungie, published by Activision (until 2018, and as of July 2022, published by Sony), for the Playstation 4, Xbox One¹, and (after a few months delay) PC. Destiny 2 received 7 major expansions, one each year, including much additional content throughout its lifespan. I will discuss Destiny (Bungie and Activision, 2014) and Destiny 2 (Bungie and Activision, 2017) as a single franchise and universe. The story is a direct continuation, and they exist in the

¹And later, Playstation 5 and Xbox Series X/S.

same narrative world, so there is little reason to distinguish between them, other than distribution. Thus, when I say "Destiny" going forward, unless with specific mention, consider me talking about both or either game interchangeably.

This chapter will discuss the narrative and communal history of Destiny over these past 10 years. This will be the first half of the comparative analysis of modern perennial games, with the second in chapter 10. Destiny showcases a strong example of the modern perennial game and how it facilitates play through its space, ritual design, and communal myth-making.

Destiny has been extensively studied in certain areas, such as identity (Carroll, 2016; Jedruszczak, 2016), player profiling and modelling (Schaekermann et al., 2017; Drachen et al., 2016; Sifa et al., 2018a; Tamassia et al., 2016), social media (Wallner et al., 2019a; Drescher et al., 2018; Canossa et al., 2019) player networks and communication (Pirker et al., 2018; Wallner and Kriglstein, 2018; Birk et al., 2016; Touns et al., 2014; Schiller et al., 2018; Perry et al., 2018; Wallner et al., 2019b), economics (Miller, 2016), competitive multiplayer (Sifa et al., 2018b; Ravari et al., 2017), skill development (Stafford et al., 2017; Joshi et al., 2019; Kokkinakis et al., 2017), character creation (Schwind et al., 2015; McArthur et al., 2015), archaeology (Emery and Reinhard, 2015; Reinhard, 2018), and visuals (Lee et al., 2014; Tatarchuk, 2014; Misztal et al., 2020), yet, on its story has only been said it was poorly received at launch (Bowey and Mandryk, 2017), before my work on perennial games (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021).

However, Destiny is and has been a primary case study throughout my work

because it over time has turned into a *quintessential* perennial game. The former Game Director for Destiny, Luke Smith, defined Destiny as an "*Action MMO in a single, evolving world*" (Bungie, 2019a), and while the genre itself doesn't matter to its perennial status, the notion of a "single, evolving world" is telling. It is perpetual and on-going, and its temporal state is 1:1 with the real world: 1 day in our world is 1 day in the Destiny fiction; events that happened a year ago, happened a year ago in both². To understand how the universal chronicle in Destiny is formed, we need to understand how the game tells its stories.

Destiny's position in the spectrum of control (figure 2.2) shows how it is a perennial experience with quite heavy author control. This authorial power is exercised in several ways. Destiny employs well-trodden avenues from narrative video games, like dialogue and cut-scenes and scripted missions—yet often only for yearly expansions and pivotal moments—combined with depictions of the world through "lore cards", item descriptions, and embedded text, which are often accounts of happenings in the world by fictional characters, either current or historical. However, the assembly of these narratives into a sensible chronicle is, for the most part, left to the players, such as when the lorebook "Truth to Power", released to the players over months, yet was slowly revealed to be full of lies (Bungie, 2018b, Patch 2.0.2.1 and onwards). The following is a rendition of a book chapter I wrote for the *Psychgeist* book on Destiny (Kilmer and Kowert, 2025), which will be useful to understand how Destiny's narrative and its

²This is evident through a range of dialogue and interactions (Isthar Collective, 2019; dooby_rams, 2018), for example a character referring to the Traveller coming alive "*a year ago*", in 2018, referencing an event that happened at the end of the Red War, in 2017 (Isthar Collective, 2019).

community metanarrative are deeply intertwined, which will serve as the foundation for the comparative analysis.

9.1 Guardians Make Their Own Fate

Spurred on by the false words of an ancient God, “Bagel4k” stood alone in front of Dûl Incaru. He stood alone because he had to. That was the gambit: Get to level 999, and kill Dûl Incaru alone. However, he was not actually alone. Watching him was the entire Destiny community, more than 20.000 people cheering him on through Twitch livestreams and more on reddit posts, guided by community content creators like Gladd, Chevy and Zupah (Gladd, 2019). But he had to fight the boss alone, because that was what the god had demanded. We—the Destiny community—had been told this would “*unlock the true ending of The Dreaming City*” (Bungie, 2018c). We did not really believe that. We knew that following the dare of *Savathûn*, the *God of Deceit*, was most likely a bad idea, and that was naturally why we did it.

Destiny is a game with many stories like this, of real players achieving the impossible. The fictional narrative of the game, of space wizards battling gods in the solar system, is a backdrop that interweaves with a much more direct narrative of the game itself, its development, and its community. That community story of how people play the game and talk about it has run as a metastory across the full 10 years of Destiny, and is as relevant to the current state of Destiny as any fictional character or story arc, and it is difficult to disconnect the two. This community story,

like Destiny’s fictional narrative, is messy and complicated, and not what anyone had originally intended. Despite the marketed ambition and the “10 year plan”, the many structural changes of the game and the complicated studio history of Bungie led to a different manifestation than anyone could have planned for. What’s more, this messy story of Destiny’s community and development reflects its fictional ambitions. The narrative of Destiny is about complexity and ephemerality, growing through failure and overcoming adversity through diversity and social bonds. The community is at its best when it breaks the expectations of what is possible and creates theories and stories that forge new bonds across the internet.

Defeating Dûl Incaru did not unlock the true ending of anything. Bungie had not planned for players to get to level 999 anytime near when the dare was written³ and so the game had no unique response to Bagel4k and the many viewers. Instead, we received a “congratulatory” blog post several days later that had been “infected” by Savathûn who taunted us for even trying (Bungie, 2019c). In an ideal, imagined Destiny, we might want stories like these to change the fictional world. We might want the developers to have planned for every outcome, to have honed the game to its most ideal version. Yet, Destiny has always been at its most interesting when its plans are broken and when the game, its developer, or its community surprises and changes and adapts. A community moment like Bagel4K’s duel with Dûl Incaru could not have happened in a carefully planned out and rigid version of Destiny’s narrative. This

³Max level at the time was 600, with each expansion usually only increased 100-200 levels. However, plans change, Destiny 2 changes, and through a new leveling system introduced in the 2019 expansion, it was possible (although exceedingly difficult and time-consuming) to reach level 999. So of course a player did it after a month and five days.

messiness is part of the experience of Destiny, and it is inevitably wound up into the fictional aspirations of its story. Destiny’s fiction, inside its mythical sci-fi trappings, is a complex, philosophical narrative about forces fighting for the “ideal shape” of the universe. As I will discuss in this chapter, messiness is not just a function of the fiction of Destiny but something that is built into its very core, into even the name itself.

9.1.1 The “10-Year Plan”

From the moment Destiny was announced, it was ambitious. As the developer of one of the most successful shooter franchises in gaming in *Halo*, Bungie immediately positioned Destiny as something bigger and more ambitious than previous projects. It wasn’t just a single, contained experience. It was going to be a persistent, shared, living world that was going to evolve over the next 10 years (Bungie, 2013a,b). There was a focus on an ongoing story beyond a traditional narrative experience. “*We hope the stories that people will tell won’t necessarily be about the fiction, but will be about the things they’ve done together.*” (Parkin, 2013). The developers were explaining the importance of every weapon and how seeing a weapon in a player’s hands would make you “*understand where they came from and what they went through to get there*” (Bungie, 2013b). This notion, that every weapon was going to tell a story, became a running theme in the previews (Klepek, 2017). During the beta, players asked if you could trade weapons, to which Bungie replied: “*Nope. We want you to earn ‘em. You should be able to tell a badass story for every sweet jewel in your arsenal*” (Bungie, 2014a). As the tagline for the game implied, they wanted the players themselves to “*become legend*”.

Bungie touted an ambitious “10-year plan,” in early marketing which was corroborated with internal production plans from their contract with Activision (leaked due to a court case (LA Times, 2012)), indicating that Destiny was going to have new content for the next 10 years and a budget of \$500M . The game’s universe was originally intended to “unfold” over 10 years (Bungie, 2013a), with a new game that would continue the story every two years, providing frequent DLCs, updates and expansions that would change week over week. While long, ambitious plans are commonplace among live-service games today, such a design choice was a novelty in 2014 and nearly unheard of for console games. It "wasn't" an MMO⁴. It was a shooter. A \$60 boxed product for consoles. It felt like a marketing gimmick. How could they guarantee there would still be players interested 10 years later? How would there be enough content to fill that amount of time?

And yet, this ambition is exactly what enticed people before the game launched. Before you could buy it, it rode the combined expectations of a new narrative shooter from the best developers of the genre, coupled with the promise of an online, emergent experience. Players hoped that this game—from the combined forces of the developers of Halo and the publishers of Call of Duty—might just create the “future” of games (Stuart, 2014). And then people played it.

⁴While Bungie are comfortably using the term MMO to describe their game today, they were rather scared of using that term publicly until 2019, as seen in this livestream from Bungie (June 6, 2019) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0wVt0cnDTg>. I speculate this is because of the connotations this would have, making players think of the more traditional MMOs, which required strong social commitments, and they were trying to sell a game to the console market.

9.1.2 The Game with the Story on the Website

Destiny was released on September 9th, 2014 and was critically panned. While most upheld its quality as a shooter, praising the gunfeel, moment-to-moment gameplay, graphics and art direction, everything else was “hollow” (Gerstmann, 2014) and “unimaginative” (VanOrd, 2014) , with repetitive, boring missions, confusing loot systems, and lack of things to do (Ingenito, 2014; Webster, 2014). To players and reviewers, it failed both as an MMO—as there was little social interaction and reason to grind for gear—and as a single-player narrative. By far, the biggest point of criticism was the story. The narrative was meandering, and did not make sense, dropping you in its repetitive missions with “*space opera mumbo-jumbo*” (Gerstmann, 2014) and few notable characters—and the ones that were present had dialogue like the often memed quote “*I don’t have time to explain why I don’t have time to explain*” (Bungie and Activision, 2014). It felt incomplete and like the individual parts did not connect. In one word, it felt messy.

And yet, there was plenty of *lore*. Behind the campaign was a deep background narrative, not directly in the game but hidden in “Grimoire” entries that players had to read on Bungie’s website. These short, flash-fiction-esque entries would elaborate upon the world and its characters, providing evocative, powerful sci-fi concepts and ideas about the history of the world, much of which is still relevant to modern day Destiny. As Gamespot said, Destiny seemed to have “*better stories to tell in the past, long before you set foot in it*” (VanOrd, 2014). The game, as it was, felt unfinished and half-baked.

There was an initial sense of dismay and shock. People were appalled that this was what Bungie has been working on all this time? Uncertainty of what Destiny was going to be was not just a public question, but an internal question at Bungie, as well. In the years that followed, it became increasingly clear how troubled the development of Destiny was, evidenced in part through detailed reporting by journalists like Jason Schreier (2015, 2017c).

Yet, as will prove to be the case many times again in Destiny's history, the first impression is rarely the final one. In mainstream discourse, many people abandoned Destiny as a failed experiment, hoping that Bungie would "get it right" the next time. However, Destiny had one major thing going for it: players stuck around. Despite its lamented reviews, a subset of players kept playing due to the allure of incredible shooting mechanics and randomized loot in a gorgeous, evocative, sci-fi world. From these players arose Destiny's early community, a diverse and impossible-to-define group that found themselves gathered as much in spite of the game as because of it. The players knew Destiny's problems and they played it anyway, coming together to find the joy in what they had. The most obvious example of this is "The Loot Cave." I have already described this in the introduction to chapter 2 so I will not spend detail on it here, however, the importance of this moment cannot be understated. This was the first moment Bungie saw what happened when the community took the game into their own hands, and they were as quoted "humbled" to see this (Bungie, 2014b). And while it was patched, it served as a blueprint for many other similar moments Destiny would see for years to come, of players finding and gathering around an exploit or social event,

and had Bungie respond by patching yet not punishing the behavior.

What early *Destiny* did have, was *potential*. *Destiny* provided a lot of mysterious environments and powerful imagery in their “mythical sci-fi” (J. and Barrett, 2013) setting. The Grimoire entries provided strong, evocative concepts like the ruthless “Sword Logic”, philosophical discussions on why robots were granted emotions (Bungie, 2014c), and the ever present, silent orb called the “Traveler” hanging above Earth. If you paid attention, there was so much untapped potential in the world of *Destiny*. *Destiny* was messy and incomplete, but it could go anywhere, become almost anything. It was pure potential, released in a box. But importantly, it now wasn’t just Bungie’s mess: It was the community’s, too.

The first few years of *Destiny* were ones of correction, as Bungie adjusted every aspect of the game to make it into something closer to its promise. In particular, the well-received expansion of “The Taken King” saw the reported player counts rise from 13 million in 2014 (W., 2014)⁵, to 25 million in 2015 (Karmali, 2015) and improved almost every aspect of the base game, providing more coherent storytelling with a compelling villain and likable characters, a mysterious new area full of secrets, and new reasons to play it week after week. By 2016, *Destiny* had a strong, committed fanbase to welcome the *Rise of Iron* expansion. Yet Bungie had a contractual obligation to fulfill. They needed to develop a sequel⁶.

⁵All numbers here are from official announcements from either Bungie or Activision, sharing numbers of registered users. Neither Activision or Bungie has ever released actual sales data on *Destiny* or *Destiny 2*.

⁶However, this extended recovery period meant that *Destiny 2* released in 2017 and not 2016 as per the original contract. It only took two years for *Destiny* to change the initial 10-year plan.

9.1.3 Destiny 2

Destiny 2's problems were almost reversed from Destiny's: It launched to general critical acclaim (Legaire, 2017; Plagge, 2017), but its players did not stick around⁷. Its story was coherent and full of character, yet it provided few mysteries and reasons to keep playing.

The weapons of Destiny 2 were changed from having random traits to fixed traits, meaning once you had a particular weapon, there was no reason to hunt for another one. Aspirations to chase better, alternative versions of gear were lost. The story ended conclusively, with the villain defeated and the solar system saved. After players finished the narrative campaign and its raid, Destiny 2 was devoid of new mountains to climb, new questions to find answers to, and new mysteries to discover beneath the rocks. In many ways, it was an over-correction to Destiny 1. Destiny 2 made sure players were guided through a solid opening experience yet left them without a sense of uncertainty or mystery afterwards. If Destiny 1 was a game that could go anywhere, Destiny 2 was a game that went nowhere.

After losing thousands of players every week, Destiny 2's initial release was followed by two underwhelming DLCs. And in similar fashion to the first Destiny, Bungie spent the next year trying to salvage the situation. The two most interesting stories from this moment in Destiny showcase how it began to claw its identity back from the brink by reintroducing magic and mystery. A weapon called "Prometheus Lens" was

⁷No concrete player numbers are released from this time (unsurprisingly). However, a trend graph from a GDC talk by Justin Truman (Truman, 2023) shows the active weekly user count in February 2018 to be around 30% of the launch numbers about 6 months later. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLbvMWEAoyY>.

much too powerful when it was released, capable of dominating all PvP arenas. This was escalated by a Reddit user who dared Bungie to make the weapon accessible to all players via the weekly merchant, *Xur* (Evanf1997, 2021a), which they then did. This led to one of the most chaotic weekends in Destiny’s PvP history, nicknamed “Laser Tag,” as players disintegrated each other with the weapon’s red-hot laser before it was nerfed to a more moderate state. Furthermore, all players who participated in Laser Tag earned a unique emblem to let other players know “I was there”. With little else to offer, this weekend became a galvanizing, memorable blink that broke the monotony and brought back some of the magic of early Destiny when each weapon felt magical. Later, Bungie introduced the well-regarded “Whisper” mission, a secret mission that players had to discover for themselves through a series of arcane actions dependent on a random public event, leading players to find a hidden, secret area that led to a brand new, powerful sniper rifle. This brought some of the mystery back to the game, letting players speculate and wonder about what other secrets upcoming content might hold.

Yet, these were small additions, and many players were still not happy with the state of Destiny 2. And so, Destiny 2’s first expansion *Forsaken* was poised—and required—to do to the sequel what Taken King had done to Destiny 1. And it did. As a prime example, *Forsaken* brought the lore into the game, moving text-based lore from the external website into the Destiny 2’s interface. While presenting story in a screen full of text was not a feature many players engaged with, the accessibility inherent in such a change should not be understated. Yet, *Forsaken* had more tricks up its sleeve. At the end of one of the most grueling raid races in Destiny’s history, where the best

players in the world struggled for almost 24 hours to slay a dragon, a surprising twist was unveiled. The dragon, capable of granting wishes, granted one final wish upon the world. As described in the very beginning of this dissertation (chapter 1), the area known as the Dreaming City was cursed, forever trapped in a 3-week timeloop of corruption, in which it is still trapped to this day. The impetus of this event was when the first team finished the raid. The actions of a team of six players forever changed the world of Destiny, with the rest of the community watching. We, the players, had been implicated in the fictional events. It was us who slayed the dragon. And we were left for weeks to figure out what the narrative implications were, as we discovered more secrets in the Dreaming City, finding entire new dungeons and activities stemming from the corruption we unknowingly triggered. The community's desire to undo this mistake led to a number of community-driven theories and experiments, and it was one of these that drove Bagel4k to kill Dûl Incaru at level 999. By speaking much more directly to our past and future actions, Forsaken blended the mystery with a sense of player agency, giving us the ability as players—Guardians—to impact the world.

Forsaken is one of the most well-regarded expansions in Destiny's history and events like the Curse of the Dreaming City is one of the many reasons why⁸. Even if you cared less about the narrative, the events in the Dreaming City impacted every player and how they played.

⁸And it was also at this time that I got invested into the narrative.

9.1.4 Light vs Dark

While it is not possible to outline the entirety of 10 years of storytelling, I will briefly explore a fundamental crux that surrounds all of Destiny’s narrative in this period: The “battle” between Light and Dark. Since the beginning, Destiny has been a story of the Guardians wielding the Light against the tides of Darkness. The Light or the Dark are not the armies themselves, but rather should be viewed as forces, tools, and (meta)physical powers in the universe that impact it for good and ill.

These forces are what grant the players their abilities. When a guardian summons a beam of lightning, they are channeling the Light into the world as an actual, tangible force, bending physics to their will. Destiny uses the word “paracausal” to explain these phenomena that defy cause and effect. The forces of Light and Dark are both defined by paracausality: They are able to break and bend the rules of causality and physics. This is meant very literally. In Destiny’s first raid, “The Vault of Glass”, the players face a machine race called the Vex, who are capable of calculating every possible future inside this “vault.” Inside they simulate the actions of others and unmake any future they do not desire. Anyone who enters can thus never leave, creating a perfect prison entirely controlled by the Vex.

However, the Vex can only calculate every possible *causal* future. Paracausality escapes this clause. As players successfully use their powers to escape imprisonment, the resonant text “*Guardians make their own fate*” appears on the screen as players rush out to kill the final boss. This is a powerful moment, because it marries the gameplay of

successfully completing the mechanics with the narrative fulfillment of the Guardian's journey. The players, both narratively and mechanically, make a new fate for themselves. The Vault of Glass is an exemplar for how Destiny employs paracausality: Not merely as a narrative hook but as the fundamental force through which the players enact change. When players change the world, it is through causing paracausal change. They are changing their, well, destiny (this is, ostensibly, why the game is called "Destiny" (My Name is Byf, 2017)). Guardians make their own fate. When the fiction says "Guardian", you can substitute it with "Player", and Destiny's writing has always been very conscious of this fact.

Beyond this, the concepts of Light and Darkness represent major philosophical concepts in Destiny's world that can be explained and extracted in numerous ways. A (very) abbreviated explanation is that Light represents complexity and Darkness represents simplicity. The Light is a gardener, a force of growth that creates life in complex shapes, while the Dark culls that which is too weak to survive, reaping that which cannot flourish (Bungie, 2020c). Serving the Dark means chasing the simplest, most effective solution. It is sharpening the sword into the sharpest possible blade. Following the Light means giving into complexity and failure, assembling ineffective tools into weapons, and accepting difficulty. Following Darkness to its ultimate conclusion, as exemplified in the villain of Destiny's current story (The Witness), means pursuing a perfect, complete, unchanging universe where everything that exists is pristine and unchangeable because it is in its simplest and sharpest possible form: A "Final Shape." The Light revels in change and ephemerality, in inefficiency and complication, enjoys

the process of play rather than a particular end result, and any such Final Shape would render any such process impossible(Bungie, 2020c).

9.1.5 The Imagined Destiny

When people started playing Destiny in 2014, they imagined what the game could be, considering the possibilities of a 10-year plan and what continued development would lead to. This “imagined” Destiny was, inevitably, always going to be more interesting, more rich, deeper, and more varied, than we would eventually get. Across a decade, this force shaped a community around not just what the game was, but what it could be. What it promised itself to be. What the developers promised it to be. And what players hoped it could be. And this idealized Destiny is where the shape of the community echoes the fundamental juxtaposition present in the game. The community imagines a “perfect Destiny,” a Destiny with eternally evergreen content, with new, detailed activities every month, with a robust and balanced and healthy PvP scene, with mysteries around every corner and explanations within their grasp. They imagine a Final Shape of Destiny, one which is in itself ideal and yet always promising more.

A shape that is both complete and ever-changing is, however, a paradox. Although the community does not truly believe that such a game is possible or “right around the corner,” this desire shapes the expectations for what is to come. When Destiny was new, the possibility space for what Destiny could become was wide-open. It could go into any direction and turn any leaf. As such, the possibility space for this Imagined Destiny was much, much wider. Yet, with each expansion’s release, we got

closer to those 10 years concluding, and each time learned the limits of what the game's development team can provide, and demystified Destiny's universe a little more. The closer Destiny got to its end, the less the imagined Destiny existed.

Destiny's seasonal structure was a major part of the last many years of Destiny, and yet they were not part of any original plan. Each season perhaps tried to perfect the formula but in doing so, it undid itself: The perfect formula is "different" each time, and the Destiny community, as people, desire change and difference within their repetition. And so, Bungie has needed to adapt, changing a well-working system for... well, for the purpose of change itself. Seasonal content, furthermore, is ephemeral. It disappears and changes and any seasonal event was designed to be played in the moment, instead of remaining evergreen. In other words, Destiny's seasons never made Destiny a sharper version of itself, but a more complex one. Each season reinvented what it could be, shaped what tools it had into unrecognizable shapes, and taken mechanics or areas from raids and turned them into story missions⁹. The creation of Destiny does not follow the logic of Darkness, but the Light. Destiny has increasingly shown that it is not achieving—or pursuing—a perfect ending, a "Final Shape" of Destiny. Instead, it has needed to constantly reinvent itself, shape unrecognizable tools into weapons, and accept its imperfections. And to complicate matters, any plan breaks in contact with the players. Destiny players have always been excellent at breaking the game. The moment an exploit is discovered, whether that be infinite loot glitches, AFK farming,

⁹The most obvious example of this is the Seraph's Shield mission from Season of the Seraph (December 2022), which took mechanics and locations from the Deep Stone Crypt raid, released 2 years prior, but this is by far not the only example.

holding characters hostage (Chandler, 2022) (see section 14.2.3.1), or entering raids with twice as many people as intended, a new way to play is found. And frequently, these discoveries are embraced by both the players and developers. This creates unique moments in time, where the game broke away from its expected path.

This truly came together in the most spectacular fashion in late 2023, in what has been dubbed “*The Craftening*”. In the weekend of 15-17 September, 2023, news spread of a bug in the weapon crafting system, which allowed the creation of weapons the system was not designed for, leading to combinations of weapons that couldn’t—or shouldn’t—exist in the game normally (Fallout Plays, 2023). For example, you could create a shotgun with the frame of an assault rifle, leading to a gun that shoots as fast as an automatic assault rifle with the bullet-spread of a shotgun with every shot—long story short, it was very powerful (and this is a relatively benign example). As one might imagine, this was not the intended behavior of the crafting system. It very quickly transformed the game, because people could combine any craftable weapon with another and take these abominations into any situation, completely upending the intended play experience of every part of the game. Every PvP match, every raid, every strike, every activity any player did with another player, even if they did not use any of these crafted weapons themselves, was affected by those who did. For a weekend, Destiny was a different game, unplanned by its developers, unexpected by its players. For some, it was annoying, as they couldn’t play the game they expected. Yet others welcomed the chaos and enjoyed this moment in time where the rules of the world had changed.

It is difficult to find a better example of the chaos and complexity of the Light. Every craftable weapon could be combined, changed, and morphed. Every combination potentially leading to new, complex interactions with unforeseen consequences¹⁰. This was the most imperfect universe. It was Destiny at its most messy, at its most incomplete and unplanned, and players reveled in it. In a way no one had planned, Destiny’s fictional themes, indeed perhaps the original promise of the early marketing, was fulfilled in a tremendously silly way. For a weekend, every gun was a story. For a weekend, the players made their own fate, took the systems of the game into their own hands, and crafted with it unimaginable creations. The Craftening is perhaps the most paracausal event in Destiny’s history.

9.1.6 The Destiny We Made

The greatest irony is that despite all the broken plans and changed schedules, the 10-year plan succeeded: In 2024, 10 years after the original Destiny launched, the expansion “The Final Shape” released, concluding the major storyline of the “Light and Dark Saga”. The game adapted, changed, created expansions, added seasons, and adjusted year by year based on what was possible, probable, and desirable. Bungie released itself from its contract with Activision in 2019 and was bought by Sony in 2022. They only developed 2 games, and instead made 5 annual expansions to Destiny 2, with 4 seasons each year since 2018. We went through a global pandemic. And still,

¹⁰It is truly a testament to the stability of Destiny’s infrastructure that the game did not break more than it did because of this. Players could crash their own instance, but that was about the extent of the actual harm they could cause, and all weapons were reverted to a non-paracausal state after the fix.

the 10-year plan succeeded. The conclusion, too, being about “The Final Shape” is apt for this point too. The fictional story is about us stopping the villain from causing an eternal, fixed ending of all of the universe, and us as players breaking this ultimate fate and building for ourselves a new, uncertain universe where we do not know what will happen. As Cayde-6¹¹ says at the end, in a humorous yet poignant quote “*show that shape it ain’t final*” (Bungie, 2024).

The fiction of Destiny is important. It sets the stage for what players do, it creates stakes and characters people cheer for, provides context and makes people care about the world beyond its mere mechanical interactions. Yet, what the narrative of Destiny cannot do—or at least not do easily—is respond to the community at a moment’s notice. Thus, there was no fanfare or confusion upon Zavala’s face when players approached him with a gun that should not exist. There might be fictional reflections upon The Craftening in the future (it would not be the first time Destiny’s characters have done that). However, as it stands, that weekend existed as a blip in time, where Guardians made their own fate and broke the rules of the world. That shape was not final, either.

Even if it can’t respond at a moment’s notice, the fiction gives us context for the actions of the community. As Guardians exist in real time, their actions are irrevocably tied to the fiction of the game—they indeed are in the fiction. While thousands play every day and most stories don’t rise beyond close friends or tight-knit clans, some rise up and truly become legend. Despite how “little” the game changed, Bagel4k’s story of

¹¹A prominent character in the Destiny narrative.

defeating Dûl Incaru forever made history as the first player to achieve the impossible and had a “god” speak directly to us because of his actions. These stories are not clean or ideal, but rather, the opposite, and it is because they break with the expected that they are memorable.

The many stories we can tell of these 10 years are not what anyone predicted, but they are *ours*. They belong to the community, the developers, and the players. These stories are what the game was and has been, warts and all. Destiny is at its best, not when it is perfect, but when it is imperfect. It becomes more than a game when it breaks a little and the community embellishes. Truly, as desired since before the game was released, the best stories of Destiny are those about the things we’ve done together. The battle between the Light and the Dark, between complexity and simplicity, is not just one fought out in the fiction, but in the metanarrative as well. The game both wants to be complex, surprising, ingenious, variant, and unrecognizable, yet also elegant, brilliant, polished, fine-tuned, and obvious.

The community has always wanted the game to be different from what it is in its present moment. When it is too confusing it needs to be more concrete. When it is too concrete it needs to be more mysterious. Destiny has been walking this tightrope since its inception, and the fiction tells us that it will never keep perfectly balanced. Sometimes, the game has leaned a little too much towards one or the other, becoming too stale or becoming too chaotic. As long as Destiny exists, it will waddle in this oscillating movement, forever shifting direction, always hoping for the possibility of more and aiming for an Imagined Destiny that is too complex to ever solidify into

being. And, of course, as long as guardians exist in the world, there is always the possibility for the paracausal.

We will return to this idea of an oscillating balance in chapter 20. For now, this chapter highlighted how Destiny has facilitated the play of its community through its ongoing development and narrative theming, how that is messy and complicated, yet nevertheless the game succeeds in harmonizing the two into a greater whole. This served as the first half of the comparative analysis.

Chapter 10

Final Fantasy XIV

“No more shall man have wings to bear him to paradise. Henceforth, he shall walk.”

Venat, *"Thou Must Live, Die, and Know"* (Final Fantasy XIV, 2021)

FINAL FANTASY XIV: ONLINE is a video game released by Square Enix in 2010, for the PC¹. It received no major expansions, and only a handful of patches throughout its two year life-span. *Final Fantasy XIV Online: A Realm Reborn* is a video game released by Square Enix in 2013 for the Playstation 3², later Playstation 4 and 5, and PC³. It has, as of 2025, received 5 major expansions and tons of recurring patches. As is common today, I will refer to this new version simply as “Final Fantasy XIV” (FFXIV)⁴ and the original version from 2010 as “1.0”. FFXIV 1.0 is no longer playable

¹It was announced as having a later release on Playstation 3, yet this version never arrived.

²Playstation 3 support ended in 2017.

³And much later Xbox Series consoles on March 21st 2024.

⁴I should also highlight here that Final Fantasy XIV is just that: The 14th Final Fantasy game. While the majority of these games are not perennial games (only XI before it was also an MMO) but rather single-player RPGs, FFXIV owes a great amount to the series that came before it. I will largely not discuss the Final Fantasy series at large in this section, yet much could be written about how FFXIV borrows from the long lineage of this series, and how the seriality of that itself is part of its design. However, for this work, I generally consider FFXIV to be its own game and not part of a series.

in any form, as the servers were taken entirely offline. The story and world, however, is a direct continuation and takes place in the same universe as FFXIV: A Realm Reborn (and all expansions after), using many of the same characters and storylines, and so it makes little sense to separate the two, other than distribution.

This chapter will discuss the narrative and communal history of Final Fantasy XIV over these past 10 years. This will be the second half of the comparative analysis of modern perennial games, with the first in chapter 9. Final Fantasy XIV showcases another example of the modern perennial game, yet one that differs from *Destiny* in many ways, and yet facilitates play through space, ritual design, and communal myth-making just as well.

Final Fantasy XIV has received some scholarly attention, such as research into using it for teaching (Mortimore-Smith, 2020; Maache et al., 2024), playstyles and personality types (Flor, 2023; Vanderlei Fernandes et al., 2020; Kaufmann and Diez-Morel, 2022; Wang et al., 2021; Korkeila, 2017), identity and self-expression (Bäckman, 2022; Guan, 2024; Hutchinson, 2013), roleplaying (Tate, 2019), localization (Vichot, 2024), gender (Bunyea, 2020), relationships and sex (Zhou and Sharma, 2025; Badalone, 2023), hauntology (Appignani et al., 2015), music (Chang, 2018), and allegory (Huber, 2022). On top of this, one reading of FFXIV is especially relevant to this work, the paper by Wong (2025), on how a specific quest takes on special meaning due to its metacontextual relationship to how the game is played and how the community interacts. I will discuss this in depth later in this chapter.

Final Fantasy XIV is an MMORPG in the traditional sense of that term, mean-

ing it plays much like a game like Everquest or World of Warcraft, with third-person camera, hotbar-based and cooldown-dependent combat. It was a sprawling amount of options, with a large world to explore, hundreds of quests, crafting and gathering systems such as fishing and leatherworking, minigames, personal and group housing with an interior decorating system, and so on. It is perpetual and ongoing, with an ongoing story being told since its inception in 2010. This story, unlike Destiny, does not follow a clear 1:1 temporality with the real world, and is more unclear in when and how its narrative time progresses, much as discussed by Glas (2013) on World of Warcraft. FFXIV is placed similarly in the spectrum of control to Destiny (see section 2.2.1), being mostly authored, and in fact skewed more towards authorship than Destiny, due to its strong reliance on cutscenes and dialogue for storytelling, and its lesser degree of response to player behavior.

Final Fantasy XIV is useful as a comparison to Destiny because it is both similar and very far apart. FFXIV has taken its traditional MMO trappings and turned it into the ongoing narrative it is today: A narrative that involves and utilizes the format and functionality of an MMO in its fiction, while also telling a very authored and intentional story about cooperation, struggle, and overcoming difficulties. FFXIV's story is used not just to tell a narrative but as a reflection of how its players play the game and how the designers *want* its players to play the game. It is a story about accepting pain and hardship, about not taking the easy solution and learning to work together with those different than yourself. Throughout this chapter, we will investigate how the story of FFXIV as a game has followed a similar path, struggled through impossible

odds and come out the other side through amicable dialogue and empathy. And we will see how that journey is reflected in the fiction of the game, and how that ideal has been planted into the game from its very beginning.

10.1 Final Fantasy XIV 1.0

Final Fantasy XIV 1.0 began development as a follow-up to the fairly successful Final Fantasy XI from 2002, the first Final Fantasy MMO and the first MMO ever to be released on consoles. The development of FFXIV 1.0, as has been well documented after the fact, was troubled, with great individual parts that did not cohere into a unified package, nor seemed to be produced with a cohesive vision and understanding of the other parts (Noclip, 2017b; Yoshida, 2014). As the most often memed example, a plant in 1.0 might have as many polygons as a complete character model. This meant that the game, while pretty, had a very low amount of objects in any scene, and yet still it ran quite poorly, furthermore bogged down by a slow, unresponsive UI. As the later interviews with developers indicated, they were aware of the problems with the game, yet many realized either too late or were powerless to change directions in time, and so the game shipped in a state many were unhappy with.

Unsurprisingly, Final Fantasy XIV 1.0 was not well received. PC Gamer said *“The kindest thing that can be said about the Final Fantasy MMO is that it has a good intro movie. That movie doesn’t take ten minutes to load, it maintains a constant framerate and you don’t have to traverse a labyrinth of menu screens to play it. In*

short, it's everything the game isn't." (Senior, 2010) Gamespot's Kevin VanOrd⁵ simply said: *"You shouldn't be playing Final Fantasy XIV"* (VanOrd, 2010). The game had a slow, obnoxious UI, there was little sense of where to go or what to do. It was technically impressive and pretty, but there was nothing to do other than repetitive grinding and basic missions. And while it boasted decent numbers at launch, these quickly dropped, and the game was very obviously a failure for Square Enix. The creative director and lead producer were both removed from their positions, and in stepped a new creative director with a desire to change the narrative and right the reputation of the company and franchise. They were faced with a dilemma: Keep working on this broken foundation, or abandon it for a new venture. They also knew, however, that a failed mainline Final Fantasy game would be damaging to the brand long term, and so abandoning FFXIV altogether was not an option. Instead, they decided to do something even bolder: While maintaining and updating the current game, they would, in the background, remake it entirely, building up the necessary foundation for future growth. The name of this new creative director was Naoki Yoshida, otherwise known as "Yoshi P", and he will turn out to be a key part of this story. As revealed in the later interviews and talks (Yoshida, 2014; Archipel, 2020; Noclip, 2017b) on the game, he and the other developers realized that the architecture of 1.0 was so fundamentally flawed that patching it would ultimately prove unsatisfactory and never produce a good game. As they were doing this, they also addressed another problem, which was the lack of communication to fans. While there had been official forums for the testing periods,

⁵In incredible serendipity, Kevin VanOrd would also review Destiny for Gamespot 3 years later.

there were none for the launch of 1.0. In attempts at reconciliation with the community, the developers started doing “Live Letter with the Producer”, a recurring live stream where Yoshi P and other developers would chat directly with fans, hear their concerns and speak on how they were addressing them.

Despite the massive failures of the game, a small dedicated group of players did stick around, and they appreciated this turn of events, and as the first patches started to get released, they saw that the game was indeed improving. Many of the most egregious problems of 1.0 got addressed, and the game, as reported by the community, got to a state where it was worth sticking around for. They could see a brighter future ahead of them. Yet, it was a long time coming, and they had still no idea what was actually in store.

10.2 Mooncrash

A challenge the developers had with the remake was how to make sure they both honored existing players (their most loyal fans, who had stuck with them through the worst times) and make them excited about the continued future, while also presenting a fresh entry-point for new players. If you have read along until now, you already know the solution they came up with (see chapter 3). If not, it might still be the one thing you have heard about Final Fantasy XIV, and it is likely its most unique story. When 1.0 was released, there had been no plan to end the game. Instead, as developer Michael-Christopher Koji Fox said, the trick was to *“make it seem like that was always*

the plan” (Noclip, 2017a). The moon of Dalamud was designed to sit far in the sky, a potential mystery for the future, until it was not. Players at the time had no idea, as they saw a star in the sky get brighter and larger with each new patch, what was about to happen. Even as “A Realm Reborn” was announced in summer 2012, it was not clear what this approaching omen meant, or how they were going to solve it. As it got closer, it became obvious it was the moon Dalamud, bright red in the sky. As the storyline of 1.0 reached its conclusion, it became clear the moon was part of the evil plot of the villain, yet the players still thought this was something they were going to stop, or prevent. That’s how stories are supposed to go, is it not? Yet, the moon encroached, getting ever closer. Yet, they were told, no, they were not going to stop it. The world was going to end, and then be reborn in a new FFXIV, named "A Realm Reborn" the next year. Not long after, the slated final days of 1.0 started, on November 1st 2012. That week, chaos ensued. The major cities were attacked relentlessly by monsters, which were (in a tremendous callback to old-school live development (section 7)) spawned live by the game developers, and yet players rallied to defend their last safe havens as they saw the moon now larger than anything in the sky, mere moments away from crashing. During this, players formed “The Great Gobbue Wall”, a wall made out of player-characters all riding their “Gobbue” mounts, presenting a bulwark against any spawning monsters. As a developer said, no matter how aggressively they spawned the monsters, players found a way to defend (Noclip, 2017b). Meanwhile, through all of this, a haunting choir song could be heard in the background, an omen of the event to



Figure 10.1: Picture of the Great Gobbie Wall. Screenshot from the Noclip documentary (Noclip, 2017b), Episode 2 at 30:19.

come⁶. And then on November 11th, 2012, the server shut down, to never be reopened. Hours later, the cinematic “Answers” was released, showing the fate of the world: The final battle against the Garleans, the moon breaking open and revealing the terrible monster inside, and how it was saved through a great sacrifice, ushering in a new age.

Development of A Realm Reborn could now finish in earnest, and the game was thus in a hiatus until summer 2013, yet this dramatic conclusion had done just what it needed: Generate excitement, once again, for the future of FFXIV.

10.3 A Realm With a Future

A Realm Reborn released on August 27th, 2013. Reviews this time were much more positive. While they were not raving, they appreciate that this game had returned from the brink into a competent MMO (Thursten, 2013; Vincent, 2013). While it was

⁶This played across all regions at all times, no matter where the player was. A beautiful homage and way to make this final moment even more dramatic.

not revolutionary or groundbreaking, the fact that it was “good” at all was a cause for celebration. This too, was seen in the community, which once again flooded to the game and this time stuck with it. As the game could for the first time proceed towards a brighter future, they would establish many of the expectations and structures that are still in place to this day: The release of a major expansion once every 2 years, followed by a series of (usually 5) major patches roughly 4-5 months apart, with minor patches in between. The first expansion *Heavensward*, would release on June 23, 2015, to critical acclaim. After this, it seemed that both the developers and the community, for the first time, could breathe. Not in the sense that it was over but in the sense that they could see a consistent future for the game: No more hail mary’s were required, no more did the game needed to be “saved” from the brink. Enough trust had been established for the game to not implode upon any minor misstep, and both players and developers trusted that they had the best interests in mind. And so, the game settled into a groove. The next three expansions, *Stormblood*, *Shadowbringers* and *Endwalker* were all well received and continued the game’s rising trajectory in success, player counts and community reverence. Throughout this, a positive sentiment arose among the players, perhaps more so than seen in players who “merely” enjoy the game they play: They felt “lucky” to be there, thrilled to be part of this arising game with a miraculous story. This is perhaps most effectively shown through the now emblematic meme of Final Fantasy XIV, a simple copy-pasta⁷, which became popular after Shadowbringers and especially

⁷A "copy-pasta" is a type of internet meme, in the form of a pasteable piece of text, sometimes with light changes, yet following a familiar format. See <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-criticallly-acclaimed-mmorpg>.

in the anticipation of Endwalker, which sounds as follows:

“Have you heard of the critically acclaimed MMORPG Final Fantasy XIV? With an expanded free trial which you can play through the entirety of A Realm Reborn and the award-winning Heavensward expansion up to level 60 for free with no restrictions on playtime.”

What this meme especially was emblematic of, is the fact that the community of Final Fantasy XIV *loves* FFXIV. This might sound redundant to even mention, yet when comparing to most other popular online games, the difference is quite stark: Most players of games like League of Legends, Destiny, Dota, etc. are more likely to have memes about how people keep playing a game they dislike, rather than about *how much* they like it. It is so much I would go so far to say this relentless positivity is a rather unique aspect of the FFXIV community, and something we will return to in this chapter, because it seeps into much of the game and the community’s understanding of itself.

The story about Final Fantasy XIV, throughout much of its history was a story of two sides: The first was its calamitous beginnings and resurrection from the ashes, and then later, as time went on, it became the story of the "Greatest MMO You Weren’t Playing". During the period 2017-2020, during an especially rough time in World of Warcraft’s community, a massive amount of content creators went from WoW to FFXIV, either temporarily or permanently, partly inspired by this myth of the game: There was another MMO that might, actually, finally, rival World of Warcraft⁸. This, combined with the tremendous success of the Shadowbringers expansion (which many FFXIV players consider to be a high mark) meant a sky-rocket in player interest and

⁸World of Warcraft did not end, of course, and in fact still sees success to this day, and many of the players and content creators who experimented with this shift now play or dabble in both, as it turned out the market could sustain 2 successful MMOs as they often do not operate on the same timeline.

community growth.⁹

Increasing interest and growing player counts, of course, means that a myth of obscurity is unsustainable, and eventually, it became a game “people were playing”. This becomes especially ironic and self-referential during the launch of Endwalker, the most hyped expansion in FFXIV history, as the culmination of the 10-year story, which launched with... massive server queues. While the game had experienced queues for releases before, this was on a much different scale, as players reported waiting for 6+ hours to get in to play. I, personally, can also remark that I remember waiting in 4000+ long queues, and planning logins many hours before I expected to actually play. It became such a problem that the developer paused the free trial and the ability to purchase the game (Gilliam, 2021), until the server queues were resolved. As a humorous response, players started sharing a modified version of the meme, asking people to “*please unhear about the critically acclaimed MMORPG...*”. In case anyone had any doubts, this was a final proof that FFXIV was beyond successful—so successful, in fact, it started to have the problems that come with success: Overloaded servers.

As is their custom, Square Enix (and Yoshi P) were quick to issue sincere public apologies and over the next years strove to improve their server architecture, which largely succeeded (The next expansion, *Dawntrail*, had queues at launch but they were much diminished and other server problems were almost non-existent).

Final Fantasy XIV never purported to have anything resembling a 10 year plan. For a time, it seemed unlikely it would have more than a few years of existence.

⁹This was in fact also, when I started playing the game, carried on by this increasing hype and praise from friends.

The scrappy nature of the first 3-4 years of the game meant that any prolonged plan had to wait, as both developers and the community were not certain anything would exist beyond the next installment. However, as the game stabilized, this started to change, and you could see the gears of planning and foreshadowing starting to take place. While Heavensward is mostly its own self-contained story, *Stormblood* sets up complications with one of the primary antagonists, the Garleans. The expansion after, *Shadowbringers*, on the other hand, directly sets up major mysteries that are not resolved until Endwalker, clearly showing a complete plan. The early narrative of A Realm Reborn, feels rather incomplete and meandering. Several storylines and characters are set up and yet do not receive major payoffs, and many storylines within it feels like padding or treading water before the major events. A critical example of this is a questline about finding supplies for a banquet, such as wine and cheese, with characters sending the player character on a convoluted series of tasks to accomplish this, and yet it ultimately ends up being a "test" before the player can proceed to the actual task at hand, with the banquet itself not having much relevance. Playing ARR today, you can see that this was meant as a stop-gap, something that needed content because the primary focus was on fixing the core of the game first. However, this also is done for another reason: They likely did not know where the story was going to go at the time. As mentioned, they did not know if the game would even last another 2 years after this, so setting up 10 years of content seems foolhardy at best. As we saw in the section on serial fiction (section 4.1), a common strategy for serial storytelling in the beginning is to seed possible stories without knowing the full scale of them yet, to see how the

audience responds. It is very likely that a similar approach was taken here.

However, before we continue, it is important to understand what the narrative of Final Fantasy is.

10.4 The Narrative

In this section I will discuss the narrative of the first major saga of Final Fantasy XIV (what I here will call the "Answers Saga")¹⁰, starting in A Realm Reborn, and ending in Endwalker. This story is too expansive to describe in great detail, so I will here try to focus on the broader narrative implications. It is also important to clarify the structure of this narrative. FFXIV's story is told through the "Main Story Quest", commonly known as the "MSQ". There are plenty of optional content in FFXIV, yet the only way to "progress" the main narrative is through the MSQ. The MSQ also locks a lot of content behind it, as, for example, playing late-game raids will often require a certain part of the MSQ completed before you can do it. This is all to say that while there are other activities in FFXIV to do upon a new release, much of the game's design (and the community, as I will get to) is telling you to do one thing: The MSQ.

The story of Final Fantasy XIV is a story about the meaning of life, and why life is worth living amidst all the suffering living creates. Each villain offers a different answer, ranging from the ultimate "life is not worth it and thus all life should end", or "any sacrifice is worth avoiding suffering" to the nihilistic "therefore all that matters is my own enjoyment in life". Much of the story is about the heroes coming to terms with

¹⁰This story arc has not been given a name in marketing like the "Light and Dark saga" in Destiny.

the reality of the suffering and learning their own answers to this question.

Initially, however, the story is presented as a much simpler story about Light and Darkness. The player, presented as a "Warrior of Light" is firmly on the side of the Light, protecting the realm from the forces of the Darkness. The character starts as a new adventurer¹¹. While the goals eventually become more noble, it is worth pointing out that, from a player's perspective, the reasoning for becoming an adventurer is framed as fairly selfish. In the introduction, the player is asked why they took up the path of adventuring and the three dialogue options are "to gain power", "to win glory", and "to amass a fortune". The game, from the very beginning, is aware of the player's motivations as something which can be framed as selfish, or at least, if nothing else, thrill-seeking¹². As we go through the first couple of expansions, however, and save the realm from a variety of threats, our role as Warrior of Light grows, in literal fictional reputation as other people start to recognize or have heard of the legend of the main character before meeting them. Yet, this simple narrative does not last. Our role as Warriors of "Light" is questioned in the Shadowbringers expansion where we fight the Light rather than the Darkness, and our allegiance to our god *Hydaelyn* is brought into question when we learn that she is no different than the many monsters we have been fighting throughout the narrative.

As part of this complication, we learn how Hydaelyn came to be, in the back-

¹¹If the player played in 1.0, they would be an adventurer from then, brought into ARR, yet this only matters for flavor.

¹²For clarity, I should add there is a fourth option presented to the player, which is "..." (indicating silence), which can be interpreted a number of ways. Likely, the developers left this in in case the player did not feel comfortable presenting themselves with these three options, yet my point still stands that these three are the ones they chose to present at all.

story of the long-standing villains, the Ascians, who are the last 14 people of a precursor race who lived in the world before time, in what they considered a perfect utopia without scarcity or hardship. Yet, one of these *Ancients*, Hermes¹³, were obsessed with finding the meaning of life, and found no answer within his utopia, a world with a very strict collectivism, making everyone wear the same clothes and pursue the same goals, which did not suit him. He began searching the universe for other life, hoping to find their reasons to live. The answer, however, terrified him. He found no answer in the universe, instead only death and decay, hundreds of previous civilizations in ruins after they failed to build a world without suffering. This radicalized Hermes, who began to believe life ultimately was not worth it and springs forth a plan to end everything. This brings forth "The Final Days", draining the world of "Aether"¹⁴ The other Ancients, faced with their doom try a desperate final act: Sacrificing half their population to summon a being powerful enough to halt the Final Days and maintain their utopia. They try to summon *Zodiark*, a great monster of Darkness, extending their world without pain. Yet, this does not work either.

Music is very important to the identity of Final Fantasy XIV. From the beginning, the music has been at the forefront of the game, often carrying core motifs and messaging through lyrics and arrangement. There are a host of leitmotifs¹⁵ used throughout the series carrying important narrative context through the many years of storytelling. The most crucial one to understand for us, however, is a single track named

¹³Many of the Ancients have names from Greek mythology, or at least Greek names.

¹⁴Aether in FFXIV is complicated, but a reader can treat it here, essentially, as "lifeforce".

¹⁵A recurring melody or theme used in music to denote or reference a character, setting or similar.

Answers, generally considered the “main theme” of FFXIV. This played, first, in the cinematic for A Realm Reborn, which showed the Fall of Dalamud, and the sacrifice made to keep the world alive. *Answers* is an orchestral piece with a male choir asking desperate questions about the meaning of life, with lines like “tell us why must we suffer” and “how can we carry on if redemption’s beyond us?” These questions are answered by a single female voice, providing guidance: “Look to those who walked before to lead those who walk after” and, most poignantly in the end, where they sing together:

*Thy Life is a riddle, to bear rapture and sorrow
To listen, to suffer, to entrust unto tomorrow
In one fleeting moment, from the Land doth life flow
Yet in one fleeting moment, for anew it doth grow
In the same fleeting moment
Thou must live
Die
And know*

I mention this song in great detail because it is, in many ways, the bookends to the narrative of Final Fantasy XIV. As mentioned, it was first heard before A Realm Reborn was released, and the second time it was heard in full, was in Endwalker, during the pivotal cutscene where the fate of the world described above, is revealed.

Because, as the Ancients try to summon Zodiark to stop the end of the world, one voice cuts through and thwarts them: Not to destroy the world, but because she knows sacrificing half their population to prolong utopia was a false choice to begin with. The person who does this, who comes to embody our god Hydaelyn, accepts that the world includes suffering, declaring that “*no more shall man have wings to bear him to paradise. Henceforth, he shall walk*” (Square Enix, 2021c). By this, she actively

invited in suffering, allowing humankind to suffer, and through that, forging their own path through that suffering, to an unknown future.¹⁶

This decision is what everything in Final Fantasy XIV hinges on. The few Ascians who remain, clinging to their past, are desperate to bring back their fallen utopia, and in so doing are willing to sacrifice anything and anyone to get there, while we, followers of Hydaelyn, accept suffering as a natural fact of life, finding our *own* meaning despite it. The player's allies and friends, named the *Scions*, and the many other characters you meet throughout the game, learn to work together despite their differences, often requiring diplomacy and trust and extended sequences of politics to work out how to settle ancient grudges and rivalries, yet time and time again, they manage, and over the course of the many hours of story, the Scions amass a larger and larger set of allies to depend upon, without sacrificing any of their individuality.

Throughout the story, and especially in Endwalker, the villains ask the Scions why they continue on despite suffering. The true brilliance of FFXIV is it does not provide a singular answer to this question. Instead it provides "Answers", as the song is aptly named. As Alisae says to Zenos (a villain who has fully adopted a fatally nihilistic attitude): *"What meaning there is to be found in the petty vicissitudes of your existence must be gleaned by you and you alone."* (Square Enix, 2021a) There is not one answer, FFXIV says, but as many as there are people, and it is up to you to discover it for yourself. G'raha, another of the Scions, pointedly says *"What is it that makes me, me? [...]* For me, that is being here with my friends. Full proud of how much we've grown

¹⁶I do not have the space here to explain the actual logic of how this happens, but safe to say it is magic, and inherently bound in how the magic in FFXIV works.

together" (Square Enix, 2021b).

While the Ascians strive for a world without suffering, where there are no choices to be made because everything is simple and still and eternal, Hydaelyn and the Scions offer a different approach, one that admittedly invites suffering and accepts hardship, yet one that is more fulfilling all the same.

And this is where we once again can draw the parallels between the fiction of the game and the metanarrative. Final Fantasy XIV is not a game that has had a smooth launch, and a game that requires struggling to get through. The idea that you need to literally *walk* to its end is baked into its very DNA.

Its story argues that the way to paradise is through shared suffering. The metaphor of *walking* is used very deliberately to indicate that the path is not easy, yet worth doing. And the players of Final Fantasy XIV has indeed been through a shared suffering together, as everyone has experienced the ups and downs of its developments, or trudged through the slow parts of the MSQ. And through doing so, they have met other people who are making the same journey, and formed bonds through that hardship.

10.5 The Community Sentiment

As mentioned previously, there is something unique about the Final Fantasy XIV community, compared to most communities around online games. This is a difficult thing to pin down exactly and I do not have any empirical data on this (and I would think it would be exceedingly difficult to empirically prove this in any case) yet I am not

alone in making the statement that the FFXIV is relentlessly positive about the game and the developer, as said by Wong (2025): *"There exists the general sentiment that the studio has managed to cultivate a positive relationship with its players."*]. Contrary to most other games, where you are quick to hear stories of people wanting to avoid strangers and feel like they are unwelcome as beginners, the FFXIV community is, in general, incredibly welcoming and open to new people. As you play through the game, you will need to complete dungeons and trials¹⁷, yet most players are accepting and willing to help and explain to newcomers how the fight works, and patient when things go wrong¹⁸.

While it is even more difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons for this, I think we can point to some likely possibilities. The first, is the origin myth of the game. FFXIV almost did not happen. It almost crashed and burned right as it started, yet the few people who did enjoy it and found community within stuck with it and saw it rise from the ashes, and saw developers who were endlessly grateful of these players who stuck with them through hard times. They saw a team of developers who rewarded them for being there, and a game that did not demand of them to endlessly play and pay for the privilege. Many fans of FFXIV, for a long time, were glad that the game existed at all, and this is expounded over and over as it did not just exist but thrive, as the game got better and better, literally seeing the fruits of their commitment. To lightly paraphrase Dohrmann (2018), discussed in section 4.2, because fans of FFXIV had been on the brink

¹⁷Group fights, requiring 8 people, that are often quite difficult and requires mechanical understanding, especially later on.

¹⁸I am basing this on my own experience, the experience of others I have talked to, and public conversations about the game on YouTube videos etc. (Cox, 2021).

of losing their game, they appreciated the game even more. Another reason for this is the community moderation policies and enforcement. As Wong (2025) says, the FFXIV developers take a strong top-down stance against player toxicity and aggressively enforce their policies to punish antisocial behavior. The customs and etiquette in FFXIV were developed over years with a relatively smaller community, that then spread organically through the many new players, which is to be very accommodating towards new players. Every new player has a little “sprout” icon next to their name, letting everyone else know they might be inexperienced. Furthermore, it is considered rude to rush ahead if a new player is watching a cutscene in a dungeon¹⁹, and it is also considered rude to leave or not help through a dungeon, despite it taking longer than you expected because of new players.

The final factor in this community outlook, is their perspective of the developer. While Square Enix (and the even less personable studio name *Creative Business Unit III*) is rarely spoken of in praising tones by the community, the front-facing people the community know are. There is specifically one man that one cannot avoid talking about when discussing the community-developer relationship of FFXIV: Naoki Yoshida, or just “Yoshi P”. The myth surrounding Yoshi P is undoubtedly greater than the man himself, but his impact on the community is clear. He joined the development team after the launch of 1.0, and was the creative director and producer during the entire time of the patching of 1.0, the launch of A Realm Reborn, as well as the next 5 expansions. Many fans consider him the “savior” of the game. As shown in the Noclip

¹⁹I can say I have only experienced this around 3 times, and two of those times the person who did it apologized profusely upon realizing their mistake.

documentary (Noclip, 2017b), he came in with a plan and a vision for how to salvage 1.0, and committing to relaunching the game in ARR was in part due to his advocating for it. Yoshi P is for most fans the face of the FFXIV development team, and he is generally widely beloved, and it is clear the affection is mutual. As Danny O'Dwyer said in the documentary: *"His respect for fans of this game [...] is clear to see"* (Noclip, 2017b). He has always been the first to address fans directly, both about changes (as he started the still ongoing "Live Letter From the Producer" series), and the first to apologize in case of issues such as server congestion or controversy (such as around banning of streamers due to the use of mods, etc.). This creates a very specific kind of inferred author function (section 4.1 for FFXIV, where Square Enix might be mentioned occasionally, when fans talk to and about the developer, they often invoke "Yoshi P" directly. For example, a common meme is how the job "Black Mage" often gets buffs because players know it is Yoshi P's main class²⁰. FFXIV players undoubtedly trust Yoshi P in a similar way as we could see in the serial fiction section when fans invoked "Trust Joss", etc. (Mittell, 2015). Yoshi P, furthermore, is an easy person to like because he so clearly and effortlessly likes the game and likes his job, and wants it to succeed. During the launch of ARR, he broke into tears on stage in front of fans. During the first tournament of a new PvP mode, he sat, in front of the stage, on the floor, just watching, as a fan. Fans can track his player character and he visibly and openly plays the game regularly, which is something fans very much care about in a developer: They can see him as "just one of us".

²⁰And then in the recent expansion, as he reportedly has been playing more Pictomancer, that job seemed to be quite powerful, further fueling this myth.

All this said, it would be unfair to not mention the other public-facing developers that, while not as revered and discussed as Yoshi P., nevertheless are beloved by fans. Developers like the lead composer, Masayoshi Soken, the Localization Director Michael-Christopher Koji Fox, the Global Community Producer Toshio “Foxclon” Murouchi and many others. Several of these developers are not shy of making fun of themselves or not seeming professional, as they on several occasions has made public performances either singing their own songs in funny voices, or recreating community memes of people dancing to their music. These developers have spent a great deal of effort and time making themselves very public (and vulnerable) to fans and the fans have responded in kind. This positivity towards the developer echoes through the positivity of the game and is self-reinforcing—a player might not like a specific change or a current storyline, yet the trust that “Yoshi P” will deliver is there and ever-present. The myth surrounding the developer is almost more important than the state of the game.

10.6 The Function of Narrative in Community

Understanding both the narrative and the community allows us to assert something rather powerful about their connections. Wong (2025) lays out the case for this in a recent paper, discussing a specific questline in FFXIV and how it is a great showcase for the unique narrative potential of an MMO, telling the story over years, while it also reflects the developers and the community’s sentiments through its very design and

storytelling. This quest, spanning 3 releases across 4 years, exclusively in side-stories, is a horror story of a party of adventurers, very much set up to be a mirror of the player's potential parties, goes horribly wrong due to a toxic and negative attitude. This follows well-known community archetypes in FFXIV (and MMOs) in general of the "foolish tank" who rushes head-first, or the "incompetent healer" who fails to keep the others alive, and even includes a cutscene of a character "rage-quitting" out of the party in anger of the others' failures. A year later, the players unlocked a re-interpreted version of the same dungeon, where the healer had gone mad from her rejection, turning into a terrifying dungeon boss²¹. The rage-quitter, in the meantime, was forced to reflect on his complicity in those events. This story can thus be read as a cautionary tale on what happens if you act like that, and thus to Wong functions almost like "social engineering", programmatically introducing players to how to perform in a party with other people. As Wong says *"the Tam-Tara Deepcroft arc represents a fascinating point of convergence, with the game's terms of service effectively written into a cautionary tale that self-reflexively gestures toward its own officially sanctioned model for online interaction"* (Wong, 2025). Wong notes how it is common knowledge that many other aspects of design, such as the design of the space, governs how people move in it (see section 8), yet the inherent understanding that narrative affects community like this is less common. Yet, here is a direct example of the developers very overtly doing the same through the narrative. The power of this, as Wong highlights is how the players continue to engage with the story of this quest through their collective conversation

²¹Another great example of using repetition to tell a story.

about it. A wonderful detail, which Wong highlights is that if players are in a certain point in the quest, they might see the ghost of the healer character throughout various parts of the major cities in the game. This rare occurrence, only appearing if you are at a specific part of the quest and only sometimes, leads to a powerful moment, almost like a literal "ghost sighting", which is then shared on social media like reddit, revitalising the discussion of the quest and its themes once again.

I would like to extrapolate this out to the entire major narrative of the Answers arc, as the story of Final Fantasy XIV is one about accepting the difficulties of life and overcoming them through shared social bonds, and the game's design and its community resonates with this entirely. Playing through the MSQ of FFXIV is sometimes a struggle, and requires trudging through a series of difficult, meandering quests that at many times feel pointless in the moment. It is a game where you are forced to play with strangers to progress and rely on them to continue forward. This is part of the experience and necessary to have fun with the game. The narrative reflects on this experience directly, and tells the player that the struggle is part of it and it is up to themselves to find their own meaning in that struggle. Yes, this quest might not seem worthwhile, yet any player can make it worthwhile through their struggle, finding what joy they can have. Players of FFXIV have a unique bonding experience, reflected all in completing the MSQ, in the narrative, and in the fact that the game still exists at all: "We're here. We made it, together." The narrative reminds us to cherish this fact, to appreciate how our collective journeys here put us in the same place, despite our difficulties in getting here. Final Fantasy XIV does not tell us the answer to why the journey is difficult, it

tells us that there are as many answers as there are other people you meet.

As I have described in this chapter, the narrative of Final Fantasy XIV resonates with how its community acts, which is something we also saw in Destiny's narrative. While the experience of playing Final Fantasy XIV and uncovering its narrative is quite different, it utilizes its own repetition and communal narrative to construct and celebrate its own community and myth. Now to fully unpack how these two games compare to each other and facilitate play, it is time to compare the two games in greater detail, in the next chapter.

Chapter 11

Comparing 10 Simultaneous Years of Perennial Experience

"A single word is etched onto the inside of the weapon's casing: Now."

Weapon Description for *No Time To Explain*, Destiny 2: Beyond Light, 2020

I HOPE THE IMMEDIATE COMPARISONS between the stories of the two games were already stark upon reading these last two chapters. Both Destiny and Final Fantasy XIV are games which had "disastrous" initial launches, yet maintained a tight community and managed to salvage its reputation by building player trust and revamping itself over time, through dedicated expansions and improvements. Both are thus games in their "second iterations", with a first version released 3 years prior. Both are games who have built upon this second iteration with heaps of expansions and patches. Both are games that told their narrative story arc over roughly 10 years. Both are games about Light and Darkness as its core narrative premise. Both are games that complicate this

initially simple premise over the course of its narrative. And both are games where the player starts as an unknown and ultimately end up fighting god at the end of the universe¹.

This chapter will provide the final contribution towards answering the first research question on how perennial games facilitate narrative play. It will discuss the elements that compare and contrast across these two games, correlating them with each other and the literature reviews covered in chapter 8 on space and ritual. It will also cover the similarity of their narratives and how this affects their similar yet differing mythologies, and what this tells us about perennial games in general. Before we get there, however, I will first discuss the rituals of each game, and seeing how the communal ritual design patterns of each game facilitate their narrative play. We will do this because the ritual design patterns are a key way to understand how their structural design is telling their stories, and how the repetitive gameplay structures lead to a narrative experience.

11.1 Rituals

This section will cover the design patterns that lead to communal ritual play within Destiny and FFXIV. These are part of the paper I wrote with Nic Junius (Larsen et al., 2023), yet this has been edited to focus more specifically on the two games in question here. Each of these patterns focuses on a different way designs encourage

¹In Destiny, it is not actually at the end of the universe and in FFXIV it is not explicitly a god but it might as well be in both cases.

players to form communities around narrative experiences created through ritual play, either through providing players with *incomplete information*, *avoiding helping them*, or *letting them express themselves*. Refer to section 8.6 for general descriptions of these three patterns. This section will cover each pattern and how the games of Destiny and FFXIV use them (or not).

11.1.1 Incomplete Information

11.1.1.1 Distributing information across multiple players or repetitions

Seasonal activities in Destiny have ritual and repetitive affordances, as they can be done over and over again for rewards, yet the dialogue a player hears can differ. There are many permutations of voice lines that can play at the end of the activity, usually short 30-second dialogue interactions between relevant characters, conversing about current events, providing context, background or humorous insight. The only way to experience the entire story volume (Karth et al., 2022) is to do the activity multiple times, view video of others completing it, or talk with other players about what they heard. Furthermore, across a season, new dialogue will appear that you could not have heard in the early weeks, reflecting changes in the story. Thus, a player will have to repeatedly engage with the seasonal event, leading to a ritual experience. This model of new dialogue through repetition is also used in Hades to great effect (Junius et al., 2021).

Destiny also has an example of distributing information across players rather than repetitions. During the "Corridors of Time" event (Gach, 2020a)—a giant, com-

munity based 5000-piece jigsaw puzzle—each player would get a unique piece of the puzzle, at random. Thus, in order to complete the jigsaw puzzle, the community had to coordinate to gather all the pieces from thousands of players. This is a clear example of distributing information, since no player could hope to complete the jigsaw puzzle by themselves. ARGs² have also used similar patterns for similar effect.

FFXIV does not rely on distributing narrative across repetitions in the same way. Generally, all players can (and will) experience all parts of the narrative through their own, individual playthrough.

11.1.1.2 Hiding information

Destiny has many open secrets by design. A great example is "Public Events", 5-10 minute repeatable events that appear in the open world. Every Public Event has an initial, straightforward goal, e.g. to collect a certain amount of a resource or defend a point. However, every Public Event also has a "Heroic", secret objective, which is never explained in the game. An example is the "Glimmer Extraction" event, where the normal objective is to defeat enemies at 3 separate points. However, if you also blow up a non-assuming generator at each point, the public event will change to have a different objective altogether, which will give you better rewards. However, the only way to know this is a part of the game is to stumble into it accidentally, or—what is more likely—see another player do it. This is an example of how knowledge is shared through the community through repetition. Even something as simple as following the example of

²Alternate Reality Games, see section 4.4.

other players in the world is achieved because the events have hidden objectives and are repeatable. This kind of knowledge sharing is key to a game community like Destiny's, where these kinds of secrets become small nuggets of shared folk knowledge that can travel across all players organically.

Destiny also has many secret missions, where the developers will deploy a new mission in the game without notifying the players about this. Players will notice there is a new enemy, puzzle, or object in the world and begin to dig. This is spread on social media, prominent community members play it on Twitch, and thus everyone learns of this new activity without the game itself ever bringing attention to it.

FFXIV, similarly to the previous, does not rely on hiding information in this way and will typically announce new features publicly before they are added, yet the content of those new additions might not be shared.

11.1.1.3 Repetitive Group Activities relying on Teamwork and Communication

Some activities, such as dungeons or raids, both in Destiny and Final Fantasy XIV require teamwork, and/or trial and error. These difficult end-game activities are often designed with difficult mechanics that do not explain themselves to players, but it is up to the group to figure out how they work and overcome the challenge. No part of the games' design or UI tutorialize these mechanics to players³, but they are

³In fact, in Destiny we see several examples of the UI—typically used for guidance on what to do next in the mission—is used for narrative flavor, such as the Vow of the Disciple raid, where we are being taunted by the villain, for example saying "DROWN DROWN DROWN" or "Do Not Disturb the Caretaker" instead of how to solve the encounter (or even that you have to solve an encounter).

nevertheless vital to understand in order to complete the experience. When new players are introduced to these activities, then, it is common practice for the experienced players to take them through it and explain the mechanics (or "sherpa" them, as it is known in the Destiny community). And when a new player has been taught it, if they then join another group of new players, it falls to them to pass the knowledge on. Players can also intentionally go in without the required knowledge (going in "blind"), either because they enjoy the challenge of figuring it out themselves, or because they go in before the raid has been communally solved.

This is thus the ritual of these activities, as each players' role becomes clear through play and communication, and through the repetition the roles are strengthened, enforced and passed on to new community members. Across all parts of this pattern is the fact that the information gathered by a single playthrough of an experience does not encompass the whole, and one must rely on continual engagement either through repetitive sequential actions or in parallel (by other players) to understand the full breadth of what the game's experience has to offer.

11.1.2 Not Helping the Player

11.1.2.1 Not Giving Guidance on Optimal Paths

Destiny, notoriously, struggles telling the player where to go. A new player in Destiny could start doing any campaign from Shadowkeep to Final Shape, yet which one makes the most sense, or gives them what they need, is not well explained in the game. Another example is how weapons have hundreds of possible perk and statistic

combinations, and it is not clear which of these is "best" within the game. Rather it is up to the players to discover which paths and weapons are the best for any situation.

In Destiny and Final Fantasy, items can require multiple, long quest chains to acquire (Exotic weapons for Destiny, and Relic weapons for FFXIV). Thus it is unlikely a new player will simply acquire all the items they need to play most effectively through a normal playthrough, and they will thus use information gathered from other players about how they should go about gathering the materials and items they need in order to progress.

This also functions through giving an individual player more options than they can easily comprehend by themselves, and avoiding to tell them which of those options is the most optimal for their current situation, instead leaving them to figure it out on their own, or asking their friends. FFXIV (and Destiny, to a lesser extent) overwhelms a player in possible choices, obscuring simply through giving the player so many options any individual option does not present itself. The possible choices a player can take in FFXIV at any moment is so vast, from doing questing to FATEs⁴, to crafting, to ocean fishing on a boat (something you can only do at certain, unadvertised times), to going to the Golden Saucer, to going to your "Island Sanctuary", going on Hunts, solving treasure maps, decorating your house, attending night clubs or community events in neighbourhoods, deep dungeons, or the newly added "Cosmic Exploration", or many more. Any individual player will likely have to learn about many of these from other players, as you could have played the game for several hundred hours and never learned

⁴FFXIV's version of public events.

of their existence.

11.1.2.2 The (Back)story is Fractured

Gameplay secrets is not the only element that players need to rely on others to understand. Destiny has millenia of backstory, and furthermore has 10+ years of actual history, with events dating back to 2014, many of which are no longer accessible in any way inside the game. This means that if you want to know what happened in the story of the "Red War", which happened in 2017, you will have to rely on other players, either through descriptions or recordings, or so on. This often shows itself through watching recap videos like those by prominent lore YouTubers like My Name is Byf (2011–Now) or Myelin (2014–Now), to understand the past and present story.

And even if you are paying attention, the story itself is difficult to understand, obfuscated through layers of perspectives and metaphors. Outside the immediate cutscenes and dialogue, the story is told through "lorebooks", served in piece-meal chapters that require repeated activity completions (see *distributing information*), and are often told through the perspective of a character, and some of these books have proven themselves to be wrong or willful attempts at misleading the players. It is thus up to the community, collectively, to make sense of the story of Destiny.

The main story of FFXIV is generally much less fractured than Destiny's and the core narrative is much easier to follow, as FFXIV does not rely on this pattern nearly as much. However, there is still plenty of backstory and background lore to explore for players which does function in a more similar way.

11.1.2.3 Forcing Players Through Shared Difficulties

Compared to Destiny, players of FFXIV have a very different relationship to the main story. The main narrative is all present in 2023 in a form almost identical to how it was in 2013⁵. This means a new player will have to play through story content ranging from 2013 to now in order to be able to see the newest story scenarios their experienced friends are seeing. This is made worse by the fact that the early story is considered too long, slowly paced, and not rewarding by itself (JoCat, 2022; Pint, 2021). However, people are still very much being recommended to play through the “bad parts” to “get to the good stuff” in the later expansions, because the earlier events serve as important setup. Experienced players love seeing new players make it through the story (JoCat, 2022; Pint, 2022), and the community in general is very cognizant about not spoiling the experience for newcomers but letting them experience it for themselves, although they are also very aware what a slog it can be to get through.

As discussed in chapter 10, this leads to a rather specific community relationship towards the story. As a player of FFXIV, you *know* everyone has been through the same gauntlet to get to the current experience, regardless of when they started, and this communally shared experience is part of the bonding of that community. The entire main story is thus a completely *shared* experience for all players, and every member of the community has that shared background of knowing that they too trudged through a slow grind and made it out the other side. It becomes a rather different kind of ritual,

⁵Small alterations have been made, some superfluous quests have been removed and one optional questline has been made mandatory, but it is structurally almost identical. See https://ffxiv.consolegameswiki.com/wiki/Main_Scenario_Revisions.

a rite of passage, a mythological origin story all players share—echoing the actual origin story of the game itself (Noclip, 2017a).

While this was likely not the intended experience, it is clear that the developers are adamant about *keeping* the story experience this way, contrasting to many other MMOs like World of Warcraft or Destiny that have either entirely restructured or removed their initial campaigns as newer content has surpassed it in quality. Thus, while this is a very different way of achieving it than the other examples, this too can be seen as an example of not helping the player and thus creating communal ritual play through collective experience of hardship.

11.1.3 Building for Player Expression

11.1.3.1 Folk Heroes

Many multiplayer games have their own legendary community members, who become well known for one thing or another, either in of fame or infamy. The most well known of these across all multiplayer games is likely "Leeroy Jenkins", who became so well known he became a fictional character in World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment Ltd., 2004; Schreier, 2017b), or Elden Ring's "Let Me Solo Her" (Larsen et al., 2023). Destiny, too, has many local heroes or community members known for various parts of the game. The story shared in chapter 9 about Bagel4k shows one example of these. Yet, many other community members get known for specific traits, feats, or even just personalities or events, or being exceptionally knowledgeable about the lore (My Name is Byf, 2011–Now; Myelin, 2014–Now).

FFXIV has not just those known for completing hard challenges like well-known raid teams or individuals, but also people known for other, more silly endeavours. The streamer “RubberNinja” became widely known for eating eggs on stream one day (Colp, 2021), as he was gifted a box of eggs and proceed to eat them. Others kept giving him eggs and the stream stayed live with no other content than him eating eggs for several days, prompting the inclusion of an "eating eggs" emote in the game. Destiny, similarly, has introduced elements into the game based on community actions (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2022). FFXIV is also an example of the developers themselves not shying away from becoming folk heroes in the game, as several members of the development team have formed a band that plays the game’s songs live on stage at fan conventions and celebrations (Aoi, 2021). There is more room for developers to experiment with accentuating interesting player stories through affecting the game or officially supporting it, empowering and encouraging these stories further (Compton et al., 2023), as also seen in Destiny (Gach, 2020b; Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2022; Bungie, 2017a).

The combination of repetition and player expression is what allow the myths to arise. None of these stories would have become legend if they had only happened a single time and never been retold or re-experienced. Bagel4k became known for the singularity of the feat, and the persistence it required to reach level 999. RubberNinja became known for the length of time he was willing to commit to a repetitive act. The game creates a gap for a larger challenge to be overcome, a fruitful void (Baker, 2005) that players can take upon themselves to fill. It is thus through the repetitions of these

ritual activities, that nevertheless allow some form of expression (for example letting players enter raids meant for six people alone or wearing nonsensical outfits) that make them famous.

11.1.3.2 Crafting and Creating

Finally, one would be remiss to not mention the many ways player expression can be shaped through player-made activities. FFXIV is the greatest example of this. Players can own and customize their own houses, and some sub-communities spend great effort finding ways to bend the rather limited interior decorating toolset to their will. This housing system is also a playground for a variety of player-run scenes, such as sprawling night club, theatre, or fashion show communities (Reuben, 2020; Vitelli, 2022), the performance of play becoming literal theatrical performance or roleplay, inviting reinterpretation on what playing the game can be. These often do exist on a ritual basis, as night clubs and theatres might only be open on certain times. An even grander example of this is "Lunarcon" an player-run convention that exists entirely inside the game (Shenpai et al., 2021–Now).

This is all possible because of a flexibility of design of the game. By putting few restrictions on what a "house" can be, players are free to shape the space how they want, turning it into everything from cottages to aquariums (Zheng, 2022). The community then creates their own rituals about these. It should also be mentioned that the housing in FFXIV is finite, and acquiring a house is contentious activity that can be difficult, arduous and require immense resources and effort, often relying on repetition

and communal rituals to achieve.

Destiny relies on this pattern much less than FFXIV. Destiny barely allows any free-form creating in the same sense as FFXIV, and only allows transmogrifying and recoloring armor as self-expression.

11.2 Space and Repetition

The space in both Final Fantasy XIV and Destiny is fractured. Both games are built up in "zones", connected with loading screens. Yet, in Final Fantasy XIV, similar to traditional MMOs and virtual worlds, you can traverse large parts of the world through walking through its absolute space (here I am using the terms from figure 8.2), and walking through loading zones or taking ships or airships etc. to travel across much of the world. This is simply impossible in Destiny. In Destiny, most cross-map traversal happens through UI, through a representation of the relative space rather than the absolute space. In Destiny, you are fictionally travelling from planet to planet, teleporting in and out of specific, smaller areas and back up into "space". In FFXIV, you are traversing a landmass on a single planet⁶.

11.2.1 Repetitive Spaces

As I have done in the past (section 3, (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2022)), we can understand the inherent repetitions built into both of these games, fictionally, as "retellings" or re-enactments. Let us see how Destiny and FFXIV handles this. Destiny's

⁶With some exceptions.

baseline repeatable activity is the "strike", a short, 3-player mission that is done over and over again for rewards. These have a variety of difficulties (which have changed a lot over time), yet fundamentally are the same mission that, for the majority, took place fictionally at a single point in time, and each subsequent repetition is a re-enactment. However, as will be discussed in detail later (chapter 13), some strikes are "canonically" repeating, as the Fanatic *does* resurrect over and over again and thus there is a reason why we would have to do this mission over and over in the fiction. To complicate this further, this fact (that the Fanatic comes back to life) was only true for a certain point in time in Destiny's history, and after the events of Episode 2 in 2025, the Fanatic now no longer fictionally exists in the Hollowed Lair strike. Another, similar example is the "Vanguard Ops" strikes we were made to do by Caiatl in Season of the Chosen in 2021, where we were challenged to do repeating missions over and over to prove our worth. However, the season ended, and we did prove our worth, yet the strikes are *still* available in 2025 and can be repeated. This is unlike other seasonal activities, which were repeatable for similar reasons, such as the "Seraph Tower" events in Season of the Worthy, which were no longer playable after that year ended, fictionally aligning with the fact that the problem had been solved. We also see this handled differently within a single season. Season of the Haunted had 2 new activities, one being fictionally repeatable and designed as a "drop-in-drop-out" activity, where players would gather up with strangers to "contain" monsters haunting the derelict space station, and another where we would go on a single story mission to uncover the deep-rooted trauma of some of the characters. These story missions were, despite no fictional reason, also

repeatable—these can thus be viewed as re-enactments or retellings—yet this does not make sense for the activity designed to be repeatable within the season.

Final Fantasy XIV has another version of this through the "Wandering Minstrel". The game includes several more difficult versions of its important boss fights, typically in either the "Savage" or "Ultimate" tiers. These are much, much harder than their normal counterparts and require a dedicated group with consistent practice to complete. These end-game fights are accessed through a character named "The Wandering Minstrel", who fictionally is a character that recounts and retells the stories of the Warrior(s) of Light. Within the fiction, he acknowledges that as he is retelling these fights, he "embellishes" and adds more on to them than was previously there to make the story more interesting. This classic idea of the bard embellishing the story of a hero then takes on a literal meaning as the player then goes into the fight that they remember, yet it is much harder than it was the first time. This is an example of a literal retelling within the fiction, and acknowledged as such. Yet, it goes even further, to even be potentially new tellings, or re-imaginings of previous events. In the "Dragon-song's Reprise" Ultimate, a retelling of the events of the Heavensward expansion, The Wandering Minstrel deliberately retold the story with an alteration of its events, as players had to rescue a character who had died in the expansion to see an "imagining" of what the world would have looked like if he had stayed alive. However, outside of the Wandering Minstrel, most boss fights in FFXIV are already replayable in the game, and are replayed week over week for rewards, and this has no fictional explanation or context.

There is thus a discrepancy here, in *what kind* of repetition is happening, whether or not it is a retelling, and whether or not this is explained fictionally. A repeatable activity can be repeatable canonically, and then shift *out* of this status and become a retelling, without any mechanical shift in its design, but merely through a new contextual framing and a progression of the larger narrative. Importantly, this is not a mechanical or ludological shift, but entirely a fictional one: The repetition of events *always* makes sense ludologically, but only *sometimes* makes sense fictionally.

It is within this sometimes I find the most curiosity, because the real question is, why? Why try, sometimes, to make it fictionally sensible? Why bother at all, knowing full well there are examples where it does not, and yet the game still "functions" without it. People still play it, regardless. It is easy to dismiss this with an answer of "it obviously has to work like that" or "it's an online video game, players need to repeat it". While those are plausible answers, it does not answer why we bother to explain it *sometimes*. When each of these events were designed, someone had to make a deliberate choice on how to explain its repetition, if at all. To understand that, we need to remember the importance of myth. In explaining the repetition, the repetitive play of the game is allowed to affect the first layer of myth (the fiction). In doing so, the diegesis of the world becomes more intertwined with the outside world, becomes more a part of the actual part of play. In giving the players an explanation for their repetition, they are invited to further *play along* with that explanation. It intertwines the fictional history and the "real" history of the world, causing the players to consider their actions at any time to be part of the fictional reality. Understanding an Ultimate fight in FFXIV as a

retelling helps players contextualize their character's position, allows them to roleplay why they might partake in that retelling, or make sense of why this is happening to them. Note, this is not mandatory for the experience, but it allows the players to uphold the masquerade of play (section 12.2), and gives the "real-enough" sense they are looking for in entering the space of the game. But, furthermore, the discrepancy does something more. Within the *sometimes* lies a question for players to answer, and explore, which invites their narrative play. If *this* is explained as such, perhaps that can be explained as well? The games thus facilitate narrative play by creating a *gap* in logic, using the latent repetition as a fruitful void of potential, by crafting an experience that does not make complete sense.

The fact that strikes repeat was not called into question until the Fanatic strike brought attention to it. The fact that *one* strike made sense made all the others make *less* sense. As long as none of them were explained, or potentially, if all of them were, there would be no raised questions, and no possibility for players to fill in their own answers. A hypothetical perennial game where everything has a fictional explanation, would thus potentially be less interesting. The fact that Destiny and FFXIV strive to explain their repetition and gameplay within the fiction means that all the times they fail become more obvious sites of narrative play. I still remember a line by community "lore master" *My Name is Byf*, admitting that he too struggled to explain everything within the logic of the game, not knowing why walking behind a door saves the players from the "ontological weapon" the boss wields: *"There's gonna be moments where my best explanation for shit is 'because video games'."* (My Name is Byf, 2018). Yet, right after,

his example was countered by another person in the raid offering a joking explanation (that it was an ontological door), showing in real time how this kind of play works.

11.2.2 The Diegesis of Space

While it is difficult, and not really sensible to quantify "how much" a game canonises its gameplay elements, I do not believe it is controversial to say that Destiny canonizes itself to a greater extent than FFXIV. That is not to say FFXIV does not create several fictional explanations for its spaces, fast travel systems, and many other elements., yet Destiny is the only one of the two that operates on a 1:1 timescale with the outside world, and is the only one that attempts to canonize the player. This causes a shift in how we discuss the two worlds and their narratives.

For example, the way spoilers are handled in the two games is vastly different. In Destiny, because of its inherent ephemeral nature and the fact that the story progresses 1:1, it feels much closer to "history" than Final Fantasy XIV's, which feels much closer to a traditional fictional narrative, in how they are handled (see section 4.3 on what I mean by history here). For example, in Destiny, I, or most other community members, would have no qualms spoiling the plot of Forsaken to a new player, because it is necessary history and context required to understand what is happening in The Final Shape. A new player will and cannot experience this in the game themselves (it is not part of the possible space of the game). However, because a player is expected to experience Heavensward in Final Fantasy, spoiling it for a new player would be considered rude. Despite the fact that Heavensward released in 2015, three years before

Forsaken, it is still not considered *history* in the same way, and something each player should experience for themselves. The fact that it is not accessible in the game *makes* it history, and thus makes the idea of "spoiling" it moot. In other words, you can only be spoiled on what you can access. Thus the Destiny community's relationship to spoilers is much different than the FFXIV's, purely due to how the game affords them to play it⁷.

FFXIV has also never (yet) done what World of Warcraft did and reshape the existing world (Blizzard Entertainment Ltd., 2004; Blizzard, 2010, Cataclysm) (except, famously, that one time with the moon). Instead, the old areas have remained largely as they were in 2013, allowing players to experience the world as it "was". This also means, though, that new story, generally, has taken place in *new* areas. Revisiting an old area to see how it has changed has not really been done in FFXIV. Destiny has done this several times, most famously with the Leviathan, where we visited an old raid location from Destiny 2 vanilla (2017) in 2022 in the Season of the Haunted, seeing it overgrown and fallen into ruin. Notably, the old area had also been missing from the game for two years at this point, making it an exciting reunion for players. Destiny, as mentioned (section 8.5 remove things from the game into the "Content Vault" and may or may not return them to the game, and often they are changed if they do. This has, generally, not happened in FFXIV. This affects the sense of space, as any player knows that many areas in Destiny are temporal and ephemeral and the Destiny we have today

⁷For comprehension, I should mention that there are elements of FFXIV which are historical—how the town of *Revenant's Toll* was built over a series of patches after A Realm Reborn is something no player will ever experience, or the many mechanical changes to jobs over time, and of course, the experience of FFXIV 1.0.

will not stay the same. Reversely, in FFXIV, things *have* stayed the same, and thus the sense of history is not as present, the sense that things will change in the future not as prescient.

11.3 Myths and narrative themes in the community

It is striking, upon reflection, how similar the narratives of these two games are. As covered, both are games about "Light" and "Dark", who use these concepts in similar ways (as metaphysical concepts yet also forces that direct power in the world), and they are both games that start out with a simple premise of fighting for the Light against the Dark, yet complicates that over time, to utilizing Dark, even fighting *for* the Dark, to eventually finding the true villain to be misunderstanding the core premise of the universe. The ultimate villains of both games want to create a "perfect", still utopia, where life as we know it cannot exist because nothing is allowed to change. And these villains are defeated by a diverse⁸ of individuals who band together and struggle and succeed through... well, the literal power of friendship. Many of the things said by Meteion⁹, could be said by The Witness, the villain of Destiny, and vice versa.

And thus, we can wonder why they are so similar? Is it the fate of all perennial games to discuss these themes, and recreate these same narrative behaviors?

Of course, there are too many examples of the opposite to say yes. Plenty of

⁸Diverse not here meant in the sense of inclusivity but in that there are a set of individuals from different backgrounds and experiences, contrasted by the monolith of collective the villains represent. The cast of, especially FFXIV, is predominantly white.

⁹Meteion is the being Hermes summons to help him answer the meaning of life in the universe, and Meteion is the one who ends up carrying out the Final Days, dooming the world.

other perennial games do not discuss these themes in this way. However, when we relate this back to the lessons from serial fiction, we are reminded that certain elements of storytelling and story structure, do tend to repeat across and within on-going storytelling. Both FFXIV and Destiny utilize common soap opera tropes of resurrecting characters, both end up leaning on filler-arcs in between greater narrative beats, both start with simple, broad narratives that get focused and complicated, growing more insular and self-referential over time. They both start with a simple sci-fi/fantasy adventure story and, complicate their own narratives with reflections on the goodness of Darkness and Light, and end up utilizing plots involving time-travel and multiple dimensions. This increase of scope combined with the inherent self-referentiality of serial fiction *is* common across perennial games, and especially visible in these two. As discussed in the Destiny section, the possible scope of the Imagined Destiny has decreased over time, and this is also meant in the narrative: What stories we can tell has shrunk, as the cast of characters has become set, as the audience expects certain characters to be involved, as the narrative reflects back on its increasing history. Both are games where the early iterations (Destiny 1, A Realm Reborn, etc) had tons of potential, with storylines that could go anywhere and plenty of mysteries to uncover. And then over time, as the games needed to continue to supply content, keep answering questions, the questions were answered.

Why do they end up with such a similar message? I have no concrete answers, but I can make assumptions. Partly, this is a very prevalent message in popular media (especially games) in general. Similar themes can be found in *Mass Effect*, *The Avengers*

(another perennial experience, to be clear), plenty of anime, the *Persona* series, *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* (and many other JRPGs in general). Yet, partly it is a clever use of the format of the stories for effect. As discussed in both the *Destiny* and *FFXIV* chapters, the emphasis on collaboration and diversity and chaotic yet empathetic solutions to unclear problems is mirrored both in the narrative fiction, and in the structure of the game itself and how it is made. MMOs like *FFXIV* and *Destiny* rely on cooperation to do many activities, and through the camaraderie of finding and playing with new people are bonds made, bonds which makes future content easier to engage with, more fun, and makes people stick around. Thus echoing this fact into the fiction of the game just serves the experience in general, causing greater harmony between its pieces. When I stated that the development of *Destiny* follows the logic of the Light, I do not directly think this is an intentional aspiration by the developers, yet it is nevertheless the inherent outcome of perennial development: Perennial development in general ultimately follows a logic of complexity, complicating that which exists by adding more. It *must* to add more, by virtue of its perennial nature. The structure of the games themselves, as designed, leans into experiences of collaboration between chaotic, different entities, people with different lives, in different relationships, with different experience, coming together to work on a common challenge, understand a common mystery, fight a common foe. It makes sense this is what the storytelling would eventually be about, too. By fictionalizing this logic, the audience gets a language for understanding their experience, even if subconsciously, and they can see their material experience echoed in the fiction, creating a stronger link between the two layers of myth. This is effective because it harmonizes the experience

of players with what they are experiencing.

That said, these two games are not entirely alike in their mythology and themes. For example, it is striking how different the community sentiment is in FFXIV compared to Destiny. The FFXIV community's relentless positivity is a rarity in online games and Destiny's relentless negativity, unfortunately, rather common. If one of the reasons the FFXIV community is thankful of their game is that the game could have disappeared, is this not true of Destiny as well? Why then, are Destiny players not as thankful their game survived?

This is a question too big to answer in full, because it requires understanding online discourse in a way I do not have time to unravel here, but I do believe some answers can be found in the games themselves, and their development histories. The mythology of Destiny never became *this game almost did not exist*, despite its early failings. While fans regularly contribute The Taken King or Forsaken with *saving* Destiny, what they were saving it from was not *inexistence* but *mediocrity*. The 10 year plan assured that regardless of what happened, Destiny players were never really afraid that the game was not going to be. Final Fantasy XIV 1.0 *did* shut down. Destiny never did. The frequent (tiring) shouts of "dead game" rising from the Destiny community when it is on a down-swing is ironic, considering they do not expect the game to *die* in the same way that FFXIV would have if not for A Realm Reborn. Destiny's failings matter to its mythology, but it has taken on a different meaning than FFXIV's. It is, ironically, not until recently, when FFXIV has been so successful for years it seems inevitable that there will be more of it, and they released an expansion that was not

universally beloved in Dawntrail, where the community sentiment has started to shift ever so subtly towards the negative, with cries of "the game is over" starting to occur. It seems that it is when the community is assured their game will not end they are unhappy about its failings.

This may also be due to their difference in inferred author function. Bungie is treated very differently in the Destiny community than Creative Business Unit III, and especially Yoshi P. is treated by the FFXIV community. Where errors or issues in Destiny are quick to cause a "*bungo plz*" meme or otherwise blame the developer, in FFXIV, the community might blame the publisher Square Enix but never the actual developers, who they instead trust deeply, and mistakes in the game are something they trust will be fixed or improved. This allows FFXIV to have downswings and make mistakes because the players trust that there will be a returning upswing. When Destiny has a bad season it seems that ever-faster the players exclaim the game is "dead" and failing, which yet inevitably proves untrue when Bungie succeeds at surprising them with the next installment. The specifics of how these two developers have garnered such different myths is partly shown in the above text, yet there is likely also more to the story, and deeper cultural values at stake. Yet, as it is now, Bungie simply has to deal with a different reality of how their fans treat them than otherwise.

Importantly, this is not to say that cannot change. As we have seen examples of in this part, and will see examples of later (chapter 14), Bungie has succeeded in gaining trust from players through their own actions and speaking candidly to the community, and FFXIV has lost trust as it has gotten more popular and done what some consider

missteps, especially as seen in their latest expansion.

11.3.1 New Horizons

As described, both of the first major story arcs of FFXIV and Destiny ended in 2021 and 2024, respectively. This puts them both in the same precarious position; a position many other long-running perennial experiences has stood in and sometimes failed to execute on: Continuing after ending the promised storyline.

After The Final Shape, many players were satisfied with the narrative ending and conclusion to Destiny's arc, and thus stopped playing¹⁰. Many of them have not come back in the following year. Endwalker, similarly also ending with immense success, and many players took an extended break afterwards. The next expansion for Final Fantasy XIV, Dawntrail, did release last year (2024) and Destiny's new foray, The Edge of Fate, is about to release as of this writing (Summer 2025). These are both publicly announced as starting a new "multi-year" storyarc, both trying to capture the same ability to tell long, ongoing narratives over multiple expansions and seasons. And yet, Dawntrail was not nearly as well received as any other previous FFXIV expansion, with many disliking the narrative for one reason or another. It is too early to know exactly how Edge of Fate will land in the Destiny community, yet it is safe to say that both expansions face a massive hurdle: Making people who have cared about the same story for 10 years, care about a new one. Dawntrail introduced a slew of new characters, yet

¹⁰I don't have evidence for this but can anecdotically say I have heard this from several people and seen a noticeable downtick in activity in the communities I am a part of. I can also add that I have personally felt less motivation to play after the Final Shape.

most of them were not as beloved as the old cast, whom people have had decades to form relationships with¹¹. And while it is thus not fair to Dawntrail to make that comparison that is nevertheless what the audience does. They do not consider the possibility that they might fall in love with this character's arc in 4 years; they consider what they have in front of them now, which is only the beginning of a story. And thus any new introduction of a new major story arc has this major hurdle to overcome, and will likely lose some goodwill in the process of doing so.

Whether FFXIV and Destiny succeed in their ambitions to start these new storylines is unknown, and only time will tell. And as we will discuss more later (chapters 18.3.4 and 22), there is perhaps an argument to say that from a narrative perspective, the games *should* end at their narrative conclusion, on the highest possible note. Yet that simply is not the reality of a perennial game: It is a perpetual experience that must be capable of forever telling new stories.

11.4 Summary of the Comparison

This chapter has discussed how perennial games tell forever stories. Be it through the ritual design patterns of Destiny, providing new narrative information through its repetition, requiring a community to piece together a tapestry of clues, or FFXIV's ritual of passage enforcing players through the same gauntlet, building community through the collaboration this fosters. Both games facilitate and enforce

¹¹I have begun calling this the "Endgame Effect" as the most public example of this recently was seen in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's struggle to capture interest after Endgame concluded the narrative.

and encourage collaboration, yet do it through different means. This, importantly, also uses collaboration and community in *narrative*, something seen frequently in serial media (section 4.1), yet in games encouraging collaboration has historically primarily been seen in gameplay terms, as in Everquest and old school virtual world design (section 7.1). In modern perennial games, the *narrative*, too encourages and inspires teamwork and community, and does so very intentionally in its design. This can be seen in the (non)-explainable repetition so frequently found in these games (section 11.2.1), causing a fruitful gap for players to discuss, question and fill in together—in other words, causing narrative play.

The fictional narratives of these games then over time begin to reflect the community, as the stories become *about* working together against a common foe, further enhancing and reinforcing the design patterns through fiction. The "simple" narrative of their games is complicated by reality, which in turn is reflected and responded to in their own complications, as they want to reflect on yet also surprise the audience.

Yet, Destiny and FFXIV are different games, and the particularities and differences of their ritual design patterns changes the outcome of their experiences. The way space is frequently ephemeral in Destiny, creates a sense of motion and history not present in the permanence of FFXIV. How the two communities treat their authors, in response to how their authors have reacted to and interacted with them, also differs based on the communal myths of the games, which shapes the expectation of the future in different ways. The fact that FFXIV almost did not happen has given it a different sense of appreciation from its community, whereas Destiny's 10-year plan has made its

existence immutable from the beginning. Within this myth, the audience can do narrative play, yet how they can do so is facilitated and constrained by the ritual patterns of the games. In *Destiny*, it is not possible to go through the narrative from beginning to end together, yet in *FFXIV*, it is not possible to each experience different parts of the narrative individually. These decisions affect the experience of the players, and the myths they tell about the games, and ultimately, why they play at all.

This analysis serves as the primary contribution of this direction, which showcases how perennial games facilitate narrative play, through narrative design patterns of ritual play, encouraging and requiring collaboration through repetitive structures, and how their narratives over time become a reflection of this collaboration in the community. While this focused on these two games, these similar patterns of repetitive structures and ongoing narrative can be extrapolated across other perennial games, which also rely on repetitive gameplay. This can even be extrapolated outside games to other activities with repetitive engagement, such as sports viewing or wrestling or internet communities.

Now, we will move on to the next direction, where we will understand the audience, more deeply investigate how and why they do this narrative play, and how the communities are shaped around the design of these games.

Part III

Direction Two: The Community

Chapter 12

Play in Communities

"The moment I began to find World of Warcraft truly interesting was when two small icons appeared on the top right portion of my screen. [...] My son explained that another player had caused the icons to appear—they were "buffs", or temporary magic spells to enhance my powers. In that moment I became aware of other players."

Bonnie A. Nardi (*My Life as a Nightelf Priest*, 2010, Page 5)

THIS DIRECTION COVERS THE COMMUNITY playing perennial games, focusing on the second research question: *Why and how do communities create mythology with a perennial game through their narrative play?*. All perennial games are designed to be experienced communally, in interaction with other people, and this interaction is hugely important to how the experience is shaped for any individual, regardless of the design of the game. Thus, it is important for us to understand how and why these communities are shaped by their own play and their internal myth-making, which will tell us much about how online communities are cultivated.

We will investigate this by discussing the findings of 3 studies I conducted over the last 4 years with the Destiny community. The first is a survey conducted in 2022, the second is an interview study conducted in 2023, and the final is a long-running digital ethnography which ran over 2,5 years in the period of 2021-2024. These studies have been presented in two published papers (Larsen and Carstendottir, 2023; Larsen and Carstendottir, 2024b), and each paper will be detailed in each their own chapter (chapters 13 and 14). Furthermore, some unpublished findings from the interview study will be discussed in chapter 15. Then, we will connect the findings from all three studies 16 and discuss what they all can teach us about the community that plays Destiny, how they perform narrative play, and how their understanding of the game is informed by their continuous ritual play. Thus, let us define what "community" we are talking about.

When we talk about the players of an online game, or the audience of any perennial or serial experience, we often talk about a *community*. Community as a term has been defined and redefined many times, and studied through a huge range of research in sociology, anthropology, fandom studies, and more (Hellekson and Busse, 2014; Gray et al., 2017; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014; Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Boellstorff, 2008; Winter et al., 2021; Beenen et al., 2004) (also see section 1.5.4). As MacCallum-Stewart (2014) detailed in her investigation of the definitions of online communities, both dismissing online "virtual" communities as unrelated to offline communities and treating them the same has problems. She mentions the notion of a "community of practice" from anthropology as being useful (which Pearce and Artemesia (2009) also uses to define her idea of "communities of play" in her seminal book on the topic). Yet,

MacCallum-Stewart moves beyond looking at what a community of a game *does*, as she does not want to pigeonhole members into specific activity patterns (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009, p. 51), and acknowledges that clearly defining a community—virtual or not—is difficult. I will instead borrow a method from her book and define the specific communities I am investigating, the primary of which is the "Destiny community".

The Destiny community is, broadly, the people who play the video game *Destiny*¹. They play on a variety of consoles or PC, and meet up in game to complete activities. Players rarely talk in game, yet many players develop a common language through gestures (such as shooting to call attention to someone/something, and so on). Their primary social platforms are Reddit², where the game is discussed more broadly, the platform formerly known as Twitter³, where current issues are discussed, memes shared, and otherwise more short-form yet broad messages are handled. Discord is the primary social media used for organization of play. While there are large community-wide Discords, like the "LFG" Discord⁴ or the lore communities like the Ishtar Collective Discord server. However, many Destiny players have their own groups or "clans" (as is the nomenclature in the game), which is usually organised in their own private Discord servers. These clans may have their own communities with their own values, norms, and rituals. What I will primarily discuss in these next chapters, is the larger Destiny

¹Reminding here I mean both *Destiny* and *Destiny 2* when I say this.

²Common subreddits are */r/DestinyTheGame* or */r/DestinyLore* or */r/raidsecrets*.

³Many Destiny creators and players lingered on this platform for a long time, yet are now migrating to other places. During the entire period of the study, though, this was the primary social media platform

⁴"Looking for Group". Used to organize play groups of any kind. Has very set rules on the kinds of groups and language for built-in expectations of others (e.g. "KWYD" (Know What You're Doing)). It can thus often be seen as a harsh environment for new players or players unfamiliar with Destiny's systems.

community, as evident through public media, yet naturally borrowing from my own ethnographic findings from the communities I have played with (as discussed in sections 1.4 and 6.2).

Within the Destiny community, we can identify several sub-communities, such as (non-exhaustively) the PvP community, primarily focusing on the Player-versus-player aspects of the game, or the lore community, end-game raiders, the speedrunning community, or "Raid secrets", a dedicated group of puzzle-crackers that dig into the game's secrets and are often instrumental in solving community puzzles and datamining.

I chose the Destiny community for many reasons, some of which will appear in the individual studies, and some I have already mentioned (9). I will also refer to section 6.2 on my history with Destiny. Destiny has a unique community, shaped by its place as an online console shooter that is also an MMO, creating a specific genre of gameplay that was almost unseen at the time, yet has been iterated on much after. Destiny's narrative and gameplay ambitions are vast, trying to cater to such a large audience we can identify several splinter-communities as part of it, which intermingle and intersect at various points. What I can talk about is never the whole, nor perhaps even the individual, yet I have tried to comprehend the Destiny community as I know it, and have seen it and played within it since 2018.

Before we dive into these studies, however, we must review the previous literature on communities in perennial games, which is arguably one of the more well-studied areas of game studies, as well as discuss the boundary of play which is integral to how online communities in games operate.

12.1 The Studies of Communities

The idea that online communities are equally valid for research as in-person ones has been accepted in academia for a while now. However, this was not always the case. The gruesome story by Julian Dibbell (1993)—one of if not the earliest recorded piece of writing on sexual assault in a virtual world and its political consequences—shows how even "virtual" and "unreal" actions without corporeal consequences had a profound impact on the people who were there. The actions of a single user turned a virtual world, a digital “game”, into a place where something profoundly hurtful could happen on the whim of another’s ability to be terrible. It changed the community of *LambdaMOO* forever, and as Golub (2010) says, marks the point where the it turned the world from a “database” into a society. In truth, it had always been. The true consequence of the events and of Dibbell’s article is that it highlighted that which was always true about virtual worlds: *“what happens inside a MUD-made [read: virtual] world is neither exactly real nor exactly make-believe, but nonetheless profoundly, compellingly, and emotionally true”* (Dibbell, 1993). As Golub argues, virtual worlds become real not out of their fidelity or sensorial qualities (indeed, LambdaMOO, in which the titular event happened was only text, with no visuals), but rather a virtual place becomes real *“because players create collective projects of action they care about”*. (Golub, 2010)⁵ In other words, these places become real because they form communities. They’re real because real people are in them, real people who need to live together and play together and work together. And while there are differences between “real” societies and the

⁵Something also seen in the game *Habitat*, see chapter 7.

ones formed around virtual worlds, the people they affect are the same, and often in the same ways.

Dibbell (1993)'s account—beyond just this one story but further covered in his book (Dibbell, 1998) is further unique because it is one of the earliest accounts of an online community, before it was considered a relevant area of study. This was swiftly learned by the developers of the MUDs of the time, such as Raph Koster and Richard Bartle (who we also discussed in section 7), who quickly learned they had to treat their group of players as an ongoing community with wants, expectations, social agency, and political influence, yet it took longer for the rest of the world to catch on.

This changed (ironically) with graphics, as games like *Ultima Online*, *Lineage*, and *Everquest* turned the virtual worlds of MMORPGs into mainstream games. As this change happened and virtual worlds increasingly became sites where large groups of people gathered, academia truly opened its eyes to the possibilities for research. A group of savvy anthropologists and ethnographers began using games like *Everquest*, *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* as fruitful sites of ethnography. In the years 1996-2009, we see what is potentially the biggest explosion of research into the players of games coming from this avenue. Much of this research is fascinating and still relevant to this day, such as Pearce and Artemesia (2009)'s excellent account of the Uru diaspora, or Taylor (2006), Nardi (2010), and Bainbridge (2012)'s ethnographic accounts of *World of Warcraft*, Boellstorff (2008)'s of *Second Life* (and the ethnography handbook they collaborated on (Boellstorff et al., 2012)), or Klasturp (2003)'s of *Everquest* (Daybreak Game Company et al., 1999) and others (Chen, 2010; Geraci, 2014; Bartle, 2004; Castronova, 2008;

Krzywinska, 2006; MacCallum-Stewart, 2009; Lastowka, 2009; Costikyan, 2007). I do not plan on doing a complete rundown of all the insights gained from this research, but I will here highlight the major components that are relevant in this context.

12.1.1 Virtual Worlds as Sites of Anthropology

The first and perhaps most obvious insight is the idea that virtual worlds are valuable sites for anthropologists to study, on a similar scale as any physical, cultural site or place. Boellstorff (2008) in particular had a primary goal of his research into Second Life to establish the methodological basis for how ethnography can be conducted in a virtual world and what it means to conduct ethnography in a virtual world. He intended to study it within its own context, anticipating that the behavior present in Second Life would be contextual within the world and thus could be understood as within the world itself (rather than needing to understand the cultural contexts of "the person outside the screen"). In so doing, he wanted to demonstrate *"the existence of a relatively enduring cultural logic shared in some way by those who participate in Second Life, through their stances towards this cultural logic differ."* (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 64) In other words, he wanted to show that a virtual world like Second Life creates within it a unique culture, separate yet nevertheless influenced by the cultural contexts of the players. He wanted to explore using ethnographic methods such as participant observation and interviews to explore the "daily life" of Second Life players, avoiding the often sensationalistic focus on the extremes of play⁶. As they say in the handbook on virtual ethnography, *"what*

⁶The "sensational" kinds of play he mentions here are quite funny to modern eyes, as they were *"men participating as women; nonnormative sex practices like sadomasochism; persons earning large sums of*

interests us about virtual worlds is not what is extraordinary about them, but what is ordinary" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 1).

Boellstorff was not alone and surrounding him was a large cast of anthropologists taking similar interests in other virtual worlds. T.L. Taylor, two years prior, published her book on EverQuest, Celia Pearce (and Artemesia) wrote on Uru in 2009, and Bonnie Nardi wrote on World of Warcraft in 2010. Together, they all wrote the seminal book on virtual ethnography in 2012 (Boellstorff et al., 2012), capturing all their insights and methods into a single handbook. I highlight this because it shows the moment these academics were a part of, a moment wherein the interest and possibilities of anthropology in virtual worlds was at its peak, where it seemed that the world would go in a direction of more and more elaborate virtual worlds, allowing for more kinds of play in them, and more possible sites for cultural practice. As Bainbridge (2012) mentions, another who conducted research in World of Warcraft, attempts were made at holding academic conferences *within* World of Warcraft.

Another aspect of the anthropological entry into games here is that, in general, most of the researchers mentioned here were *new* to these games, and often new to playing games in general. This echoes the tradition of ethnographic research, of a stranger arriving at and learning about a cultural site different from their own (Golub, 2010). This is not a flaw, yet it does create a certain attitude towards these virtual worlds that prevail among many of their findings. T.L. Taylor mentions how she at first battled with immense motion sickness the first couple of weeks playing Everquest, *actual-world money through online enterprises"* (Boellstorff, 2008, 72). While these were surely more sensational in 2008, most are not surprising anymore.

because she was not used to the 3D movement in the game (Taylor, 2006, p. 11). She also reflects on how her choice of character class and race (initially made in ignorance) has colored her perspective on the world entirely, as she has been forced to engage with the world in a specific way because of those choices. I am not blaming her for inexperience here, but I do think it is fair to say that the average Everquest player does not have this experience. This is especially stark when Taylor recounts an experience of meeting two "powergamers", and feeling confused and out of touch with their conversations about the game, despite feeling like she understood the game well at this point (Taylor, 2006, p. 68). I am not saying this in any way invalidates or diminishes her research, yet it rather proves that the experience of playing a game like Everquest is so complicated and multifaceted that it takes years to become familiar with them, and one viewpoint cannot cover all possible angles of the experience. Instead, we can supplement, as the research by Chen (2010) did look specifically at "powergamers", following their collaborative learning practices as they do high-end raiding in World of Warcraft.

Boellstorff provides an interesting counter-reflection, in that while he certainly was new to Second Life when he started, *everyone* was fairly new to Second Life in anthropological terms, and by the time he ended his ethnography, he was one of the top 0.1% oldest avatars playing (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 86). Boellstorff also notes he has previous video game experience, which he specifically mentions as being helpful in his studies here. In some ways, no one was a "native"⁷ in virtual worlds at the time (although this does potentially forget the 10+ years of history a player could have in

⁷Boellstorff highlights that "native" is an outdated term in anthropological research, and so I do not mean to use it here as an actual term describing indigeneity.

MUD, which could serve as very real experience in graphical MMOs, as many of the conventions and social practices of MUDs carried over to early MMOs).

12.1.2 Social Spaces

This anthropological research, by focusing on the social aspects of games, did much work to combat many classical stereotypes of "gaming" as a solitary activity. Several of the monographs highlight the immense amount of sociality required to play any of these games, and how often even the most intense players would rely on and utilize social connections.

As anthropologists, they arrived into these world with a specific focus in mind, wanting to see not how the "game" functioned but how people behaved within them. This research predominantly cares about people and how their behavior in the virtual world created those worlds. Taylor does spend focus on how the design of the virtual world affects the play (which I discussed in section 7.2), yet predominantly, the focus is on the people, not the worlds themselves. Taylor highlights how, beyond the rules of the game itself, social practices, norms, and expectations would develop in the game, and a very real process of socialization was needed to become a "functioning" Everquest player. An example she mentions is how players would shout "train" if they were being chased by a large group of monsters, warning others to move out of the way to not get caught in danger (Taylor, 2006, p. 34-35). While this is in no way required by the game, it was considered a good custom and potentially rude to neglect doing. There are countless examples of this across virtual worlds and MMOs, often with some overlap across them.

This furthermore indicates how these places were considered social, full with social practices and cultural norms, within which one could become a "social outcast" if one did not follow.

Boellstorff shares a story of a player creating an "ugly" building in a neighborhood (known as a "blight") in Second Life, and how the other players in the neighborhood were upset and angry, and tried to get this player to move, in a dispute that feels surprisingly similar to actual communal land disputes, with one of the players quoted saying *"we care about this neighborhood [...] We live here."* (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 91). Boellstorff uses this anecdote to highlight the centrality of the "place" in Second Life, and how this idea that the players are building places with identities, relationships, cultures, and neighborhoods is essential to how people behave in the world. Contrary to earlier ideas of the virtual as unreal and without a sense of place, Boellstorff shows that something incredibly ordinary in the physical world—a community complaining about a blight in their neighborhood—is present in the virtual as well. While a player technically has the right to do with their land as they please, the social pressure of the community exists beyond those technical limitations, and thus the neighborhood, moreso than a series of plots of land, more than a series of 1s and 0s on a server in Linden Labs, is defined by the people living there and their social connections.

Taylor focused on how social interaction was an inherent aspect of the design of Everquest, as interdependence was built in to the game, with each player not being able to complete much by themselves, especially in the later parts of the game. This thus requires interaction with other humans, and thus being able to socialize properly.

This creates dynamics of socialization that expands to the general population, as “powerful” guilds in a server become symbols, both practically showing other players how to behave but also symbolically, building aspiration within newer players, or acquire specific reputations as “too aggressive” or elite etc. Furthermore, she also highlights how socially deviant behavior like griefing, something discussed by Boellstorff and Glas, is only made meaningful in these social contexts, because it precisely defies the social expectations of the rest of the population. Glas furthermore has an interesting account of himself creating a “twink”⁸ character, and how this “socially deviant” behavior (and whether it even was) caused reactions from other players. Taylor also mentions how “powergamers”, often the epitome of the “lone gamer” stereotype relies on a deep amount of social connection for their instrumental play, as they rely on other players to “do their job” and effectively optimize their strategies together, and thus put a great amount of trust—which takes time to build and maintain—in other people as they play high-end content.

Several of these studies discuss how the communities are built up around the rules of the system. The above stories are examples of this, yet an even more expressive example is from Steinkuehler (2006), who described the communal organising in Lineage around trying to stop player killing (this example was also briefly covered in section 7.2).

Because player killing was allowed by the rules, yet hampered newer players’ ability to

⁸“Twinking” in an MMO is *“using accumulated wealth and/or power of a high-level character to boost the performance of a low-level character.”* It is commonly used in PvP settings, creating a character that is low-level yet much more powerful than other characters they face (Glas, 2013, p. 103). While I have never “properly” twinked in my life, I do fondly remember being a level 30 Warrior in Warsong Gulch with the most powerful level 30 weapon, before they changed the battlegrounds to be levels 20-29 instead of 21-30.

enjoy the game, players began organizing to "hunt" the player killers, setting up actual guard patrol routines, etc. to make sure the areas were safe. As Nardi (2010) comments, this paradoxically has the effect that the developers no longer needs to address player killings as a potential issue, because a communal workaround had been instantiated. As Steinkuehler highlights, this doesn't remove the rule of player killing, but rather *"redoubled the rules' power"* (Steinkuehler, 2006, p. 72).

The design of the social spaces, and what social constructions and hierarchies it allows, is thus very important to how the communities and relationships in the world develop. Nardi (2010) shares a story of how, when World of Warcraft went from 40-man raids in vanilla to 10 and 25-man raids in Burning Crusade, that caused significant shifts in the social relationships in the guild she was playing in, as the guild, previously a fairly casual raiding guild that managed to pull together 40 people to clear raids, struggled with tighter restrictions on the newer raids, and greater division between the "elite" and "non-elite" players, sowing dissent throughout the guild that had not been there prior.

Finally, in this section, I do also want to highlight that this focus on virtual worlds as social spaces is precisely the same focus that has historically disincentivized analyses of their storytelling, as I discussed previously (section 2.4). While backstories and lore and the worlds were discussed, even in storytelling terms, it was not uncommon to omit or disregard the authored story of MMOs as a backdrop to the "main event" which was the stories of the communities and societies that took place in them. As they were *anthropologists*, it is no surprise that this is what they focused on, yet I feel it is important to mention that this does omit part of the existing storytelling of the worlds.

12.1.3 Blurring the Lines

While much focus was on the social aspects, some of the findings also addressed the playing of the games, often focusing on performance or mastery. Nardi (2010) focuses on "aesthetic experience" in her studies, a term she borrows from the pragmatist Dewey and her background in activity theory (Nardi, 2010, p. 42). She discusses how the players of World of Warcraft enjoys it because it allows them to do performative mastery, learning the systems of the game and competing, either against others or themselves (what Taylor called "powergamers", referenced earlier).

This often leads to a general use of performance metrics and third party tools which can be see across most of these games. From third party websites like *Allakhazam* (Everquest), *Wowhead* (World of warcraft), *Destiny Item Manager* (Destiny), *ffxivwiki* (FFXIV) and many others, which help players gather information about the game outside the game, seeing how to solve quests, item descriptions, guides for crafting and gathering, calculators for builds and fight setups, diagram tools and guides for boss fights etc., or simply maps on where to find locations or NPCs. Glas (2013) discusses these “paratexts” in detail, and how they have historically sometimes been considered “cheating” or at least deviant behavior. However, it is not “counter-productive” in the sense much deviant behavior often is, rather Glas consider it “*hyperproductive deviance*” (Glas, 2013, p. 90)⁹, as following these guides is often about finding the most optimized method possible, leveling up as fast as possible, doing as much damage as possible, etc.

⁹Note, this is a different yet related term to "hyperproductive demystification" mentioned in chapter 5. Both are about optimizing an aspect of play so much it turns it "against" itself.

This “demystifies” (Glas, 2013, p. 99) the game in Glas’ words, turning the game from an open question of emergent possibilities, into a fixed set of steps for progression to follow like a recipe. As Golub (2010) says, this move from players turn the game away from a “world” of sensory immersion, back *into* a database, designed for effective play and tuned for players to perform as efficiently as possible (which often is about scraping away layers that makes the world look more real). This highlights how the idea that we play *for* immersion or to merely "be" in the world in a naive sense is fraught.

I will here remind the reader of the shift described in section 7.2 of how MMOs shifted from being "more social" to "less social" due to the changes in design or, as Crenshaw and Nardi (2016) describes it "social affordances". This, argues Crenshaw, led to the players feeling a lesser "sense of community", as many of the older players were nostalgic for the time when group-play was not so focused on efficiency and metrics, but more on having a social experience. Yet, as she later discovered, this could not solely be attributed to the design of the game, as when players sought out private servers that recreated "vanilla" World of Warcraft, their play had still shifted (Crenshaw et al., 2017) to becoming more goal-oriented, more competitive, and more "hyperproductive", in Glas’ words¹⁰. Instead, she saw how the larger communal expectations of the game had shifted overall, which she attributes to neoliberal tendencies and ideologies in larger society, which has overall shifted the play of games towards competition, efficiency, and productivity. This is another way that the lines of the outside world can be seen to blur

¹⁰This is also noted about the official World of Warcraft Classic released several years later, which also visibly showed how differently players played the same game in 2020 compared to 2005 (Hazzikostas, 2025)

into the game.

Much of this research also remarked on the blurring of the lines between "play" and "work" that MMOs seemed uniquely suited to explore. As events like raids require not only showing up at a specific time and "doing your job" (Nardi, 2010, p. 100), they also often require preparation, either through studying the fight beforehand, or gathering the needed materials, gear, and consumables. Taylor (2006); Pearce and Artemesia (2009); Glas (2013); Pargman and Jakobsson (2008) and others have all remarked how this can begin to seem more like work to the players, rather than the traditional understandings of play as voluntary and free-form (section 12.2). This is in particular due to the social pressure and expectations that arise around MMOs: Once the performance of other people become dependent on you, you are no longer free to "play around" with that expectation as you were, without incurring real, social consequences¹¹. Glas recounts his experience failing to raid without the necessary mods, as the rest of the raid members would check if he had the right mods in order to "ensure" his performance would be what they needed. This, as he says, creates a system of "social control", even "social surveillance". He and Taylor highlighted that this is often not seen negatively inside the communities, as they readily adopt and use these mods, and the fact that they *can* mod the game can also be seen as a sign of user freedom¹². Glas also goes into detail with the process of "theory crafting", spending much dedicated time

¹¹As Dan Olson's evocative title on his YouTube essay on the topic suggests, it becomes "Rude to Suck at World of Warcraft" (Olson, 2022). Still arguing that it is "just" a game or voluntary or without consequences is thus much more difficult in this context.

¹²Yet, Crenshaw and Nardi (2016)'s account above do offer a disparaging view to that, showing that some players in the community do consider this social control problematic for their sense of community.

theorizing, calculating, and testing out potential strategies for raid encounters, damage rotations, and performance optimizations, the majority of which happens “outside” the game. A player might grab a log from the game as use it as their basis for calculations, and then eventually test their theories in the game, but the actual theory crafting “work” (and we can indeed call this work) happens in spreadsheets, equations, and software outside of the game.

Of course, the concept of work in virtual worlds can and has also become very literal in situations where real money becomes involved as discussed by several authors (Dibbell, 1998; Taylor, 2006; Nardi, 2010). Dibbell (2007)’s account of earning money through MMOs is resonant here, yet we have seen many other examples of this since. As Glas (2013) highlights, however, Real-money trade (RMT) is generally not allowed by the companies running these virtual worlds, and is thus often done on black or grey markets, often shunned or disliked by the communities of players. Castronova deserves a mention here as well, as one of the first people to discuss a virtual world as an economy earnestly as something to be calculated into a GDP (“gross domestic product”).

Finally, the lines are further blurred on what the virtual world is, and how the community is bounded by it. Pearce’s excellent account of the “Uru Diaspora” is the most clear example of this. Celia Pearce and Artemesia’s¹³ followed a group of players of the doomed MMO “Uru: Ages Beyond Myst”, as it closed down. The players were then forced to find other ways to keep their community intact, either connecting on social forums or websites, or in other games. In her detailed account, she shows clearly

¹³“Artemesia” is not a separate person but rather Celia Pearce’s virtual alter ego, and who she played as online. The book spends time explaining this choice of attribution and I thus want to honor it here.

how the game that all brought them together is not the border of their community, but they persist outside it, in other social spaces, in each others' memory, and eventually meeting in "meatspace". Pearce criticizes the idea of play as "unproductive" in this work, as the community she became a part of was intensely productive through their play: *"It can also be argued that play is, in fact, an cultural production, as players engage in the dynamic creation of entertainment experiences, in addition to the contribution of artifacts to the play environment"* (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009). Much of the "play" in virtual worlds, especially more free-form "co-created worlds" is *because* of the players creating that play in the first place.

Throughout much of this work, the blurring of lines between work and play is often discussed around the concept of the "magic circle", which we will discuss in the next section, as it has greater implications for my overall work.

12.1.4 Moving Forward

While we owe much to this research in understanding virtual and online communities, as described in chapter 7, the modern perennial games function differently than these virtual worlds did. First of all, while moves had already been made to incorporate out-of-game experiences such as theorycrafting and forums and voicechat, we need to extend this move even further and see the game as being *played* in these areas too, especially when looking at narrative play. In modern perennial games, the virtual world no longer has the centrality it was given in the early ethnographies. As Golub wonders, the early insistence on making the world seem "real" may have been a reac-

tion to justify this early ethnographic research, arguments used to make it seem a valid approach, harkening back to an ethnographic tradition of embedded into “enclosed”, isolated communities (Golub, 2010; Castronova, 2008; Boellstorff, 2008). This kind of justification, fraught back then, too, is no longer necessary.

In the following research in the Destiny community, you will see this in full effect, as players (and I) move freely in between the game and outside, talking on Discord and Twitter and Reddit while playing the game and without. Before we dive into this, however, we do need to understand something about how the *play* of communities works, which requires us to look deeper at a core concept of play in game studies: The magic circle.

12.2 The Masquerade of Play

This section will outline a specific part of play as it pertains to game studies. Play is a broad topic, yet, I want to focus on play in game studies, specifically looking at the boundary between play and not-play, and the term that has been described (and contested) as this boundary: The magic circle. I do this for one key reason. There is a strong correlation between writing on the magic circle and perennial games. In many cases, the examples mentioned as highlighting the problems with the magic circle *are* perennial games (MMOs, ARGs, etc.). This section will outline first what I mean by play, then go into what the magic circle is and where it comes from, then listing all the myriad of criticisms it has gotten over the years, and finally some of its defenders,

before I will summarize how and why the magic circle is even still relevant today. For this, I will be leaning on the many re-interpretations and reviews of the magic circle that has been done over the years, notably by Juul (2008), Stenros (2014), and Calleja (2012) who each reflect on many of the previous discussions of the magic circle as it has happened in game studies.

Play has been discussed throughout academia for a long time. From Caillois (2001)' types of play to Huizinga (1956)'s "playing man" to Bateson (1955)'s views on play and fantasy as some of the examples from the 1950s, up to today's game studies (Juul, 2008; Calleja, 2012), play is an inseparable part of games: After all, we *play* games. There are many nuanced views on what play is at large, which I will not spend too long on, other than to gather some of the primary attributes about play from it. Play is most often defined as unproductive but meaningful (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004), or it is productive in itself (Sicart, 2014; Pearce and Artemesia, 2009), non-serious (Huizinga, 1956), voluntary (Huizinga, 1956), paratelic (for its own purpose) (Sicart, 2014; Nieuwdorp, 2005), and personal (Sicart, 2014) or social (Ringland et al., 2022; Pearce and Artemesia, 2009), an active engagement (Suits, 2020), or producing affects (both painful and pleasurable) (Trammell, 2023). As can already be seen here, some of these definitions are contradictory, but the important point about play is not these distinctions. What I want to focus on for this review is the magic circle as it pertains to how we understand what is play in games and what is not. As we delve through narrative play, we cannot avoid more freeform kinds of play as well, but for right now, we will focus on structured play. There are some rules, defined either beforehand or during play,

that players relate their play to. I am thus distancing myself slightly from Sicart’s more romantic notion of play put forward in “Play Matters” (Sicart, 2014), although I do find that notion useful. Aaron Trammell (2023)’s notion of play as just as capable of causing pain as pleasure will also be important as we discuss the tensions and complications perennial, narrative play naturally causes between players and communities. But I, unlike both of them, am interested in games as a fundamental category of play. However, this fundamental category is not as clear cut as we might hope it to be, and in fact, the very idea of demarcating a boundary between play and non-play in games is a heavily debated topic that starts and, perhaps, ends with “the magic circle”.

12.2.1 The Origin of the Magic Circle

It is quite an accepted truism that the commonly accepted first inspiration for the magic circle is to be found in Johan Huizinga (1956)’s book “Homo Ludens” about play and culture (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Montola, 2005; Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). And this is true to the extent that is the first mention of the term “magic circle” about the concept of play as an example of how ritual play is different than the profane, non-magic world. However, here is the most common quote introducing the term “magic circle”:

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. . . . The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated hedged round, hallowed within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (Huizinga, 1956, p. 12)

The magic circle, as you may notice, is paid little attention. It is an example among many, not the key argument in Huizinga's statement. It is barely a keyword. It was surprising to me when I read this, knowing the influence it has had in game studies at large, that it came from such a small beginning. However, reading the many interpretations and criticisms of the magic circle, the cause for this becomes clear. As stated by Moore (2011), Stenros (2014) and others (Juul, 2008; Calleja, 2012), the more common understanding of the magic circle in game studies comes from Salen and Zimmerman's interpretation of Huizinga from their 2004 book *Rules of Play* (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). They directly cite Huizinga for this term but have a rather different definition for it than his (Stenros, 2014). Salen and Zimmerman took this image of a magic circle and used it as a metaphor to describe the separability of play systems. This boundary is fragile and prone to breaking, but distinct: There are moments of play and moments of non-play (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). As mentioned by Calleja, note this quote from *Rules of Play*: *"Huizinga used magic circle as one of his examples. we're going to use it as a shorthand for the special place and time created by a game."* (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004) A *shorthand*, they wrote. As Calleja further points out, this kind of separation does not suit Huizinga's overall claims with *Homo Ludens*. He talks about play in culture, how it reverberates through politics and war and religion, how life can be viewed as play. Marinka Copier (2005, 2007), a dutch academic who rereads Huizinga, shows how this mistranslation of Huizinga prevails throughout English game studies. Her primary point of contention is how Salen and Zimmerman bring up an example of a literal chalk circle on the ground to exemplify the magic circle, which is a

quite literal interpretation of a circle defining the boundary of play, which, to Copier, is a much too rigid understanding of Huizinga’s points. Huizinga, rather, described the inherent contradiction that play is both separated and part of “ordinary” life. Its role as an “interlude” in daily routine is an integral part of life in general (Copier, 2005). Huizinga’s magic circle is a “sacred space”, entirely metaphor, and it becomes too literal in Salen and Zimmerman’s descriptions. It is primarily this interpretation of the magic circle that has been criticized throughout game studies. As Stenros lucidly says: *“much of the criticism of Salen and Zimmerman seems to stem from their ill-worded explanation behind the choice of the term”* and, perhaps more strongly: *“It is hard to find a scholar who insists on a strict border between play and non-play”* (Stenros, 2014). Even Zimmerman corrected and addressed these concerns in a later paper in 2012 (Zimmerman, 2012). This concept, of a “magic circle” being a complete, hard boundary between play and life, is a phantom that no one seems to actually agree with.

12.2.2 The Myriad Criticisms of the Hard Boundary

Yet, there truly is no shortage of examples of people criticizing this viewpoint of play. The following table shows the major academic teardowns of the magic circle, their core reasoning or critique and their proposed replacement.

Reference	Reasoning/Critique	Replacement Metaphor or theory

Copier, 2005 (Copier, 2005)	Salen and Zimmerman mistranslated Huizinga's magic circle, which was never entirely separated from ordinary life.	Turner's liminal spaces. Play is a collection of performances or "ritual acts", that are socially constructed.
Nieuwdorp, 2005 (Nieuwdorp, 2005)	The magic circle is insufficient for pervasive games ¹⁴ , where reality is part of the game.	Turner. Liminal interface. "Paratelec & paraludic interfaces."
Montola, 2005 (Montola, 2005)	The magic circle is frequently expanded in pervasive games, but this is also present in historical examples, such as hide-and-seek.	Keeps the magic circle, but it requires expansion.
Castronova, 2006 (Castronova, 2008)	The circle does not include how information from the game affects the real life and world of the player.	"Membrane"
Malaby, 2007 (Malaby, 2007)	There is no division between play and life at all, through ethnographic studies of Greek gambling games.	Wants to shift games to not be a subset of play, but see them as social artifacts.

¹⁴"Pervasive games" describe games that incorporate real world locations or settings into their play, such as ARGs, AR, location-based games, etc. (Montola, 2005; Nieuwdorp, 2005). Montola defines a pervasive game as something that expands the magic circle, either spatially, temporally, or socially.

Copier, 2007 (Copier, 2007)	The magic circle hides the ambiguity, variability, and complexity of actual games and play.	Goffman's Frame analysis. Actor-Network theory.
Lauteren, 2007 (Lauteren, 2007)	Contemporary play is different from Huizinga's time, and we should not compare the two. We need to remember the structural similarities between work and play, which have been set in opposition with each other.	Play is a result of shifting spatial, temporal, and social boundaries that affect what is and is not viewed as play, culturally.
Lammes, 2008 (Lammes, 2008)	The magic circle is a simplification of the relationship between the game and the world.	"Magic node"
Juul, 2008 (Juul, 2008)	The magic circle is a mistranslated and rushed binary explanation of a more complex phenomenon.	"Puzzle piece."

Pargman and Jakobsson, 2008 (Pargman and Jakobsson, 2008)	Through interview studies of “hardcore gamers” they show how gameplay is viewed as decidedly ordinary and non-magical in many situations.	Goffman’s Frame analysis. A “no-boundary” hypothesis, describing situations in which everyday life comes to encompass game play
Woodford, 2008 (Woodford, 2008)	The emotions and experience of play continues outside the game and is influenced by the outside, the term is not describing any real boundary.	Existing concepts of intent and consent already suit the need for a boundary between play and not-play.
Taylor, 2009 (Taylor, 2006)	Questions the strict division between play and life, through ethnographic studies of MMOs. It is a more fluid distinction.	Calls for investigations of players intervening or participating in the game.
Consalvo, 2009 (Consalvo, 2009)	The magic circle doesn’t exist: It is an overly formal and structuralist way of thinking. Cheating serves as her primary example.	Goffman’s Frame analysis (through Fine (Fine, 2002)).

Pearce, 2009 (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009)	Through her ethnographic study of the Uru Diaspora, she finds how, in the real world, the theoretical sacrosanct circle does not apply.	“A porous circle”, or a series of nested, overlapping circles.
Moore, 2011 (Moore, 2011)	Considers the mobility of play, how people move in and out of play, and how experienced players perceive no magic circle.	Goffman’s Frame analysis. Baudelaire and Benjamin’s “flâneur”.
Calleja, 2012 (Calleja, 2012)	The magic circle is a misinterpreted, problem-laden metaphor that game studies should move away from.	Call for a move towards “more nuanced and analytically productive concepts” for digital games.
Creane, 2021 (Creane, 2021)	Looks at LARPs. Elements from games can “bleed out” into the real world or the real world can “bleed in” to the game.	A bleeding circle.

It is presented here in a table because I do not want to spend a lot of time on each critique, especially after we have seen how these critiques are essentially fighting a phantom concept¹⁵. However, some of the criticism is more nuanced and insightful and

¹⁵Upon reading this research, I could not help getting flashbacks to the Debate That Never Took Place (Frasca, 2003a). It seems game studies (and perhaps academia) seems plagued to discuss the phantoms of others.

does afford some merit to look into. The number of references is a point in itself. The magic circle is nothing if not pervasive in game studies. In 2009, Consalvo announced that “there is no magic circle”, and then 3 years later, Calleja, in “Erasing the Magic Circle”, tried to erase that which had already been eradicated. Clearly, neither attempt was successful. Even after all these attempts at modification and destruction, it persists. As Stenros mentions, it “*seems to be a useful, powerful metaphor, though it has not been clear what it is a metaphor for*” (Stenros, 2014). The timeline shows how most academic discourse on the topic has waned but it still pops up now and again, as in Creane (2021) and Ringland et al. (2022) (more on this one soon). It is a common refrain to explain the power of games and how they work (Zimmerman, 2012). The interest here for me is how the boundary is broken, and why a binary is insufficient, not if (as that is a given), and ultimately, why we keep returning to it despite knowing this.

First off, a majority of these works discuss a hard-boundary version of “magic circle”, even if they uncritically ascribe it to Huizinga, either exclusively or as well as Salen and Zimmerman. However, a couple, such as Copier and Lauteren do engage with Huizinga’s original version, and only Lauteren here is directly critical of that one (Copier in fact uses Huizinga’s to create her modification). Some, like Juul, Calleja, and Stenros, are explicitly aware of the distinction between the two versions of the magic circle, yet predominantly criticize the popularized one and omit Huizinga’s.

12.2.2.1 The Criticisms from MMOs and Pervasive Games

Many of the critiques come from MMOs (Pearce, Taylor, Castronova), or pervasive games (Nieuwdorp, Montola), as they were clear examples of these boundaries breaking down, which was perhaps less obvious than traditional games. It is here we often see “play” as work or as a chore, through grinding or farming (Taylor, 2006; Nardi, 2010), or as social obligation, such as raids you are expected to show up to, or that require certain preparation from you in order to participate in. As Calleja (2012) points out, it does not make sense to label all activity in a virtual world as “ludic”. Digital games are more than just played activities. Play is decidedly non-magical (Pargman and Jakobsson, 2008). Many MMO players, too, play them for social reasons, and do menial, ritual activities with others to experience social connections and bonds. The temporal continuity of these games—that they exist as part of daily life and (social) routine—makes a strong case for this. “Playing” the game thus means more than the act of doing the play activities prescribed by the game (Carr and Oliver, 2009). The category of “pervasive games” is a strong example of how the real world enters and influences the game. And, as explained by Nieuwdorp and Montola, pervasive games are frequently breaking or expanding the notion of what a “game” is and when a person is playing them. They might even be playing a game without realizing it, breaking the idea that play is always a voluntary, active state, as Sicart (2014) also mentions.

12.2.2.2 The Other Metaphors

Not all of these papers are only critical though, but offer solutions and perspectives on the magic circle that try to reframe in it a way that makes more sense to their way of thinking. This, for many, comes in terms of rephrasing the metaphor away from the “circle” to something else. Pearce and Artemesia (2009) explained how it was rather a porous circle that seeps information in and out, or Castronova (2008)’s idea of a “membrane” that allows transmitting information from the outside into the game. Juul (2008) rather proposes the “puzzle piece” as a complete re-imagining of the idea—a game is something that fits in certain contexts and not in others. Other metaphors have also been suggested, such as “soap bubble”, “thin line” (Nieuwdorp, 2005), or “magic node” (Lammes, 2008). These kinds of criticisms tend to want to keep some semblance of a boundary, but acknowledge that the concept of a “circle”, with the images of a hard boundary, is not useful.

Several, too, want to move away from the boundary all together, and instead offer other ways of understanding the relationship between games and play and ordinary life. This often uses other sociological concepts. One of those is Goffman’s frame and keys theory (Goffman, 1974), referenced by Copier, Pargman & Jakobsson, Consalvo, and Moore (and several of these also lean on Gary Alan Fine (2002)’s interpretation of Goffman for games), which in short is a way to understand how we organize and structure the world (frames), and how these are “keyed”, given additional, acknowledged meaning in space and time. Goffman defines “play” as an example of such a

keying (Goffman, 1974). Another common occurrence is Turner (1974)’s liminal spaces , exceptional spaces that are autonomous “realities” that are optionally entered into and transform some social and cultural attributes, used by Nieuwdorp and Copier.

12.2.3 The Positive Uses of the Circle

After all the previous, it perhaps seems difficult to understand why it is worth talking about the magic circle. And there is merit to rejecting the term altogether and going with another way of describing the relationship between play and non-play in games. However, there is also something sticky about the term, and something useful, specifically about the “magic” of it, that I will get to now. Next, I will show examples of the few of the people who, while acknowledging its problems, defend the use of the term “magic circle”. These are primarily Stenros (2014), Conway (2019), Aupers (2015), and Ringland et al. (2022).

Stenros (2014), through his very comprehensive review of the different interpretations of the magic circle, reaches his conclusion after evaluating the mental, social, and cultural borders around play. For him, the magic circle has its basis in a social contract, and it is only an implied or explicit social construction, which can be shaped and re-negotiated during play, as players are able to meta-communicate about the play activity as they perform it. This is not a unique take. Copier, Lauteren, Malaby, and Montola, all mentioned the importance of remembering how play is socially constructed, yet they wanted to move away from the term. Stenros’ primary difference is how he keeps the magic circle as part of his framework. He places the onus of creating the magic

circle on *people*. It is a socially constructed and negotiated boundary, and this is the only way to understand the magic circle fruitfully. He in fact rejects other interpretations (mental or cultural borders) as not part of the magic circle.

Ringland et al. (2022), a very recent example of a use of the magic circle, is actually not from game studies at all, but rather from HCI, and is thus a reappropriation of this view of the magic circle. They primarily lean on Stenros' interpretation of the magic circle as socially constructed, to understand the social play between the k-pop group BTS and their fanbase on social media. They define the boundary as intentionally blurry, messy and porous (echoing Pearce), and showcase how this play happens between fans and the group through live and asynchronous interactions. They, like so many before, end up not fully satisfied with the idea of a "circle" and replace with with a "magic shop", both a tongue-in-cheek reference to one of BTS' songs, but also a metaphor that suits how fans and the group "pick and choose" how their play operates, actively participating in the setting and destruction of boundaries. Despite this, they are considerably more positive on the magic circle, than most of the work we have seen here so far.

Conway Conway (2019) goes back to Huizinga's original meaning of play, highlighting how play relies on a strong willingness to commit to an as-if on the part of the participant: We play "as-if" the situation was real. To Huizinga, bringing in the real world into the game is often seen as being a spoilsport (cheating, playing for extrinsic motivations, etc.). A magic circle happens when play is shared, when the "*rules of play*" become solidified into more concrete shapes, giving it longevity, turning it into a "thing", a

"game". Video games are a special case as computers deal exceptionally well with rules, not with play. However, here Conway reminds us that play is a projection of meaning onto those rules, and video games, through their incredible precision, *"are successful by making magic perceptible"* (Conway, 2019). Video games are exceptional at mirroring modern hyper-rational society, giving us the means to play with it. They provide an *abundance* of meaning about the systems of society, creating the limited freedom of movement necessary for players to fully give in to the as-if of play. Conway highlights the example of "FIFA 16", as a game that not only mimics the original sport of football, but the televised spectacle and data-management of the modern sport. "FIFA 16" thus upholds the magic circle by letting the player play *as-if* the game was real, making controller inputs meaningful to a player with a modern understanding of society.

The final defense of the magic circle is by Stef Aupers (2015) (a name we already saw in section 3.4.6), who wants to uphold the magic circle for a rather different reason: Spirituality. Aupers, like Copier and Lauteren, engage with Huizinga's original definition of the magic circle, and explain how play was connected to the sacred: *"the concept of play merges quite naturally with that of holiness"* (Huizinga, 1956, p. 25), and, through a study of World of Warcraft, shows how this play can still be seen as separated from daily life. As also explained in section 3.4.5, Aupers details how the world has become increasingly "non-magical", "disenchanted" (Weber, 1946, p. 139), and less sacred. However, through WoW, Aupers sees a potential strategy for how play is an example of the sacred still living on in modern society, removed from its religious (as in, organized religion) connotations. The magical, enchanted world of WoW, encourages

players to step in and play inside it. However, this play is not as strict as the previous understandings of the magic circle, as we can at the same time as we play *“keep an ironic distance towards our playful behavior”* (Aupers, 2015). To Aupers, it is precisely this double nature of play that allows it to be a powerful strategy in a disenchanted world. *“play - in the frivolous meaning of the word - has become an alibi to cover up for the more serious, ultimately spiritual dimensions of play.”* Protected by a mantra of “it is just play”, players can allow themselves a safe space to engage and experiment with the sacred. The magic circle is thus legitimizing that which has otherwise been removed from society, and gives people a chance to “play” with the mythic, magic, the sacred, and the “ultimate values” these kinds of activities espouse.

12.3 What Is the Magic Circle Good For?

As Zimmerman (2012) says in the updated article, the magic circle is, at its core, a very banal concept, that *“when a game is being played, new meanings are generated”* (Zimmerman, 2012). So banal it warrants little debate. It is a design tool rather than a scientific accuracy, and when taken to an extreme, as a hard boundary that defines an unbreakable border between game and not-game, the magic circle is not a useful term. Yet, as shown, whatever else this boundary is, it is socially constructed, and this is accepted and agreed on, in large part, by both critics and proponents of the magic circle. However, the positive uses of the magic circle can help illuminate why people continue to talk about the magic circle. As Carr (Carr, 2012) says, *“players [...]*

frequently disagree about the game they are playing, while they are playing it". Defining the boundary between play and nonplay is inherently messy and complicated and it is done in shifting, recurring dialogue and *that is the point*. As play is negotiated and diverse and disruptive, there is no single form we can place around it. The point of the magic circle is thus not to place this border, but rather something altogether different: It helps us see *why* we engage in this complicated activity. The magic circle helps us show the *magic* of play.

Instead of framing the magic circle as a construct on how games are played, we view it as an *object* of play itself. Using the notion of the double-nature of play from Aupers and the "as-if" motivation from Conway, we can see how it is exactly the idea of the alluring, clear boundary that is attractive about games. Simultaneously, we also know that this boundary is unclear, porous, inherently fraught, and up for social negotiation at all times—but the concept cannot be entirely rejected for that reason. As Stenros also said, meta-communication about the game while playing is frequently occurring, and this is simply how the magic circle manifests itself. Not as a strict boundary, but as an object of discussion. To play a game is to define what the game is, and this always happens in motion, in negotiation, and incompletely. To borrow a word from post-structuralist thought, a game is always “becoming” (Braidotti, 2013; Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) through its play. While the rules of the game might be strictly defined in code, as Conway reminds us, there is a difference between this and the play of that game. The magic circle does not exist until it and its underlying game are being played with, in which case they are simultaneously constructed and negotiated

at run-time. We should clarify that while this is an object of play, it is not necessarily the only object, or the primary reason why we play, but rather a natural consequence of how play happens.

Play is attractive. The power of the magic circle is that it is socially constructed. We *want* to create a socially safe space for play. We *want* to enter this safe bubble, we *want* to enter a magic circle. As shown by Sicart (2014), Bateson (1955), Suits (2020), and Huizinga (1956), play is immensely powerful and human, regardless how we boundarize it. We *want* to play. The important part of the "magic circle" was not the circle (and the *circle* is truly the source of the majority of the criticism (Woodford, 2008; Stenros, 2014; Copier, 2005; Zimmerman, 2012)), but the *magic*¹⁶. We get attracted by the fact that it is "just" play, it is "just inside the magic circle". Yet, video games are rationally constructed, filled with rules and systems that our modern brains are also attracted to (Saler, 2012). And we stay because it is enchanting that which is outside, we stay because we, naturally, are outside the magic circle too, even as much as we use the circle to allow ourselves to play in the first place. One might ask why we should retain the entire term "the magic circle" and not take Calleja's or Woodford's advice to move away from this problem-laden metaphor? Why not call "this" socially bound concept something else? Because it is precisely this alluring quality of the double-nature of the magic *circle* that justifies it. It *is* a circle as an ideal, alluring, platonic shape, and *never* as an actual complete border. We are once again tricked by the allure of that which does not exist, trying to negotiate towards an idealized magic

¹⁶For due accreditation, this phrasing was said by Michael Mateas upon reading a draft of my Comprehensive Exam, and it is indeed a sharp observation.

circle wherein our choices have meaning. This is where Aupers's highlighting of the attractiveness of play for spiritual purposes become relevant (Aupers, 2015). We play in magical worlds to counter a disenchanted world (Geraci, 2014; Hong, 2015; Saler, 2012). We want to participate in "epic narratives" (Geraci, 2014; Krzywinska, 2006) because we so rarely get to do so otherwise. The magic *circle* can never exist, and this is precisely why it matters.

This is what I have called the "masquerade of play" (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2024a). The play is a trick we play on ourselves, to allow ourselves to enter a reality that is a little more magical than the one we otherwise would have. It is an allowance we grant ourselves, a token of acceptance. Because it is a *game*, because it is *fiction*, we may play with it. But of course, it is not entirely fake. We know this too, and it is part of the reason why it works: The "real enough" (Hong, 2015) nature of these worlds is crucial to making us feel more a part of them. The play is only there to uphold the masquerade, but we know well enough that even masquerades¹⁷ are real, too.

The magic circle *is* a problem-laden metaphor, because it, by definition, cannot exist as an actual, complete circle. One cannot play in a world entirely separated from "real life", and yet that is nevertheless what we attempt every time we play. And it is precisely because of that conflict that "the magic circle" is still a useful metaphor. People willingly enter a masquerade each time they play, each time adopting an attitude (a lusory one, if you will (Suits, 2020)) of accepting a frivolous yet powerful meaning

¹⁷The ironic medieval connotations of this term, prominently discussed by Huizinga as part of his studies of play (Huizinga, 1956), are not lost on me. A masquerade is, like jousts and tournaments, a pretend-play of something "real", evoking its fakeness through recognizing its play-quality (Huizinga, 1956)

laid onto "meaningless" actions purely because we decide socially that they matter, and yet continuously redefine how they matter. It is, in essence, a magic trick, a never-real object of discussion that allows us to believe in something, regardless of how irrational that belief is. The magic circle reminds us, in our modern age, about the importance of play as a magic, enchanting, alluring activity.

12.4 Concluding on Communal Play

This chapter first covered how online communities in virtual worlds have been studied, covering how virtual, online environments of any kind can create community due to the interaction between people, and thus can serve as sites of anthropology. These worlds created their own social customs, as the community participated in how they want their interactions with others to be, and what they would consider deviant behavior. They also showed how much of the play in virtual worlds blurred the lines between play and work and what was "inside" and "outside" of the game.

This was then used to discuss the magic circle, the concept frequently used in game studies to discuss this very boundary. This discussion was used to highlight how the discussion of this boundary is a social phenomenon, and thus discussing what play is and when play begins and ends, is a big part of the activity of the community. Communities of perennial games come together in the attraction to play, because they want to be enchanted *together*, with their friends, with the community. In the following section, I will cover various parts of how the Destiny community plays, looking at canon

and rituals and narrative. Throughout this, keeping this understanding of the magic circle in mind will be helpful, as much of this play occurs through the double-nature of play-as-ironic attachment. Much of what the community is doing is an ongoing, playful negotiation about what they are allowed to do in the world, what is considered play, and—as we will start with—what is even part of the world at all.

Chapter 13

What is Part of the World?

"Honestly, anything a Guardian does is canonical."

Anonymous Survey Response, 2021

THE FOLLOWING CHAPTER IS A RENDITION OF my paper "Everything a Guardian Does Is Canonical': Player Understanding of Canon in Destiny" (Larsen and Carstendottir, 2023), from 2022, presented at CHI-PLAY. Sections which repeat previous material have been cut. It discusses the notion of "canon" in relation to the Destiny community, which is useful to see how a community plays with a fictional world, even approaching something as core as what is a part of the world itself. This discussion further can be used to understand something about how that community sees itself, and more broadly the myths it tells about itself.

13.1 Canon and Fandoms

"Canon" is a term used by fandoms to identify the "canonical" texts of a franchise or property (Chaney and Liebler, 2007; Kahane, 2016; Hellekson and Busse, 2014). In fandom studies (Hellekson and Busse, 2014; Jenkins, 1992; Gray et al., 2017), canon is described as the opposite of the fan work (fan fiction, fan art, etc). It is the official, authored text that the fandom reacts to and builds upon (Chaney and Liebler, 2007; Walton, 2018) and is primarily connected to storyline consistency and continuity (Chaney and Liebler, 2007), and created by an authority, such as a single author or company (Shaw and Persaud, 2020; Walton, 2018; Walliss, 2012). While canon might be initially assumed as a binary distinction between fans and authors, modern fan studies consider the relationship more nuanced and complicated (Shaw and Persaud, 2020; Kahane, 2016; Hellekson and Busse, 2014; De Wildt and Aupers, 2017). Parts of fan works can become so accepted by the community it is called "fanon" (Chaney and Liebler, 2007), or even broach into the canon directly (Gach, 2020b). Fans, too, can have nuanced and self-developed ways of talking about canon, such as the "Watsonian vs Doylist" paradigms from Sherlock Holmes fandom (Donley et al., 2017; Duffy, 2017)¹, which has expanded to other online fandoms (Naylor, 2016). These discussions can be influential and controversial to the entire experience of the fandom (Walton, 2018; Walliss, 2012).

¹In short, the "Watsonian" interprets the texts as internally coherent, treating all questions about characters, motivations, and events as something that can be answered using the logic of the narrative universe. A "Doylist" perspective accepts an author wrote the text and therefore questions about the text can be answered through what the author may have been thinking at the time. This is commonly used to offer two different types of explanations for canonical incongruencies or "plot holes" etc.

Regarding games specifically, a "canon" of games or game studies in the cultural sense is common, such as (Parker, 2017; Frome and Martin, 2019; Karhulahti and Koskimaa, 2019; Koenitz, 2018), or even a "canon" of fanworks in games (Pace et al., 2013; Yin et al., 2017) (as also done by outside game studies (Fiesler et al., 2016)), but investigations of how games create a canonical story for players is rarer. Murray mentions it in terms of story paths (Murray, 2018), and in HCI there are several papers investigating "canon trajectories", meant as the authors' "intended path" through a game (Benford and Giannachi, 2008; Velt et al., 2017). In game studies, a few papers mention the canon of games like Mass Effect (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2012) or Gears of War (Ouellette, 2014). In FDG², one paper was found describing canonicity in the story-sense, but their example was fandom of Star Wars movies, not games (Salter et al., 2019). Kevin D. (Ball, 2017), investigated how the lore community of Bloodborne disagrees on the concept of authorship when their own interpretations are simultaneously treated as uncovering the authors' true intentions and their own authored work.

For perennial games, specifically, Greting et al. studied fanwork in Genshin Impact (Greting et al., 2022)—which is a perennial game—but focused explicitly on fanworks for the game and not the canon. There are examples of canonicity in ARGs (Hansen et al., 2013; Aardse, 2013), which have some perennial qualities, as they tend to blend the real-world passage of time as part of their construction. The study by John Walliss (2012) discusses how players see the canon of Warhammer 40k and how the community is fractured on whether they see fanfiction as needing to adhere to the

²Foundations in Digital Games.

canon or not. Perennial games are often transmedial, and there are studies of canonicity in transmedia as well (Vukadin, 2019; Young, 2016; Clarke, 2014; Parker, 2013; Poor, 2012; Švelch, 2022) but this is a much wider scope than a single perennial game and often has a myriad of ways of engaging with it as an audience.

Video games are a unique medium in how it affords canonicity in combination with play. Marc Ouellette discusses how video games afford players to play with identity (Ouellette, 2014)—and this is especially true of many perennial games like MMOs (Ensslin and Muse, 2011; Hutchinson, 2013; Carroll, 2016; Jedruszczak, 2016; Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008b). In games, players are thus performing inside the fictional world. This changes their relationship to the canon and how they engage with authored content and the fictional world. Players can deviate (Mortensen, 2008), transgress or subvert authorial intent, and this has been explored in game studies. There are multiple examples of such types of play, most notably in queer game studies (Ruberg, 2019a; Ruberg and Shaw, 2017). As a result, authorship can become complicated. In games, authors can intentionally affect how the game is meant to be played, by changing the spatial and temporal structures of the game (Ruberg, 2017). This allows them to react to players' behavior and adjust their plans for the narrative. However, Shaw and Persaud (2020) explain how authorship in games is difficult to pin down as any game is rarely created by a single person with a unified intent. Players' performance and play complicate canonicity when developers respond to the player community by altering the narrative of actions of the game. This complicates the authorship, the canon, and discussion around it even further. Games, thus, give

new ways for players to redefine their relationship to the work of the author (Walliss, 2012; Shaw and Persaud, 2020; Dym et al., 2018; Hunting, 2012). How this shapes the community's understanding of that canon is still uncertain, and this is especially uncertain in perennial games like Destiny.

However, there is an important addendum to all of this. Kahane (2016), while highlighting the traditional differences between a cultural canon and the canon of a fictional work, shows that these two concepts are more related to each other than it might seem at first glance. Kahane highlights how ancient Greek storytelling traditions formed a canon through oral storytelling, similarly to how a canon of a current fictional work is formed through the negotiation of fans today. The production of canon, in both senses, is about the work of collecting a surplus of material into a coherent body (Kahane, 2016). This notion of canon is tremendously useful for our purposes, as it highlights the constant *maintenance* a canon requires, as this is a neverending process of play and discussion. I find this tremendously useful for perennial games, as it ties together these elements of communal storytelling and play together. Canon is one of the elements that is *up for negotiation* in a perennial game by its community (it is indeed, part of the battlefield of negotiation (Glas, 2013). On top of this, canon is undoubtedly a term that concerns *narrative*, and fictional construction of a virtual world, and thus in investigating canon, we get a crux of social, narrative play, which concerns the narrative directly and obviously, and yet has cultural and structural impacts.

13.1.1 Canonicity in Destiny

Before we continue, a few things should be established about Destiny's canon. Destiny as a game, has already been described at length (chapter 9), so here I will merely reiterate its canonical properties. Destiny operates on a temporal scale matching the real, physical world (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021) and has fictional explanations for many "game-y" aspects, such as respawning, player versus player combat, and teleportation. Destiny has referenced actions of the players themselves, even when doing innocuous activities that are typically not part of the storytelling, such as dancing or idling in a social hub (Bungie, 2017a). Even repetitious elements such as recurring missions sometimes have an in-world reasoning for this repetition (Bungie, 2018a), and bugs and exploits has been given narrative explanations after the fact (Evanf1997, 2021b; Nichols, 2022; Gach, 2020b; Hornshaw, 2021; Good, 2014)³. Destiny has even hinted that the players themselves (outside the screen) are part recognized by some fictional characters (Wood, 2019). Together, these aspects make Destiny a prime candidate to study canonicity in perennial game storytelling. Destiny was chosen because of these unique canonical aspects, as this brings the canon to the forefront for the players, making it more likely they have considered opinions on the matter.

³And to showcase that the Destiny community is talking about canonicity, see the community's internal wikipedia's canon policy: https://www.destinypedia.com/Destinypedia:Canon_policy. Accessed 21st of February 2023.

13.2 Methods

This chapter explores the question: *What elements of the narrative or game experience do players consider canon in a perennial game, and why?*. Due to its complexity, here I focus on exploring how elements commonly associated with canonicity, such as authorship (Shaw and Persaud, 2020; Walliss, 2012; Chaney and Liebler, 2007) and storytelling methods (Walliss, 2012; Donley et al., 2017; Ball, 2017) relate to players' understanding of the canon in Destiny. Specifically, I focus on 4 sub-questions:

RQ 1: *How much is authorship impacting participants' consideration of an event as canon?*

RQ 2: *How much is traditional storytelling methods impacting participants' consideration of an event as canon?*

Storytelling methods refer here to aspects of traditional storytelling design in games, such as characters and dialogue and cutscenes, notes and story artifacts (Krainer, 2014). However, in exploring this I also consider non-traditional story elements outside the game such as loretext on websites or social media. Furthermore, as studies of perennial games reveal, a common cause of the difficulty in establishing its canon is the repetition inherent in their design, that seemingly contradicts with the forward propulsion of a story (Lohmann, 2008; Krzywinska, 2006; Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2022), leading us to ask:

RQ 3: *How does repeatability impact participants' consideration of an event as canon?*

Finally, to answer the question of why an element is considered canon, we must look at the arguments the participants have for and against this, leading to our final sub-question:

RQ 4: What are the arguments for or against an event being canon?

This study is done in two parts. First, an online survey was conducted to explore what players considered canon (RQ1-3), and then a semi-structured investigative interview to follow up and explore why players considered those elements canon (RQ4). Both studies were approved by the Institutional Review Board of UC Santa Cruz. Participants were not compensated, however part of the interview did consist of sharing the data from the survey which was of potential interest to the participants—this however was not communicated before the interview so it was not an incentive to volunteer as an interviewee.

13.2.1 Recruitment

The study targeted current or previous players of Destiny and/or Destiny 2. An interest in the story was not required to participate, however, the canon of Destiny is most present in its narrative. Players interested in the story are therefore an important target group. Thus, the survey was shared in communities where interest in the story was prevalent. Participants were required to be 18 years or older, and be able to read and write in English. The survey was shared through social media (Twitter, Discord) and within several Destiny player communities: 4 smaller player communities (10-100 members), and one large Destiny lore community (1000+ members). The surveys were

only shared in Discord communities where researchers had gained explicit approval from leading community members. Participation was entirely voluntary and did not impact their membership in these communities in any way. Further resharing was encouraged, for snowball sampling⁴. The survey was shared in the months September-November 2021.

Requests for interviews were shared in the same communities the survey had been shared in, with the same inclusion criteria, as the target group was identical, where participants could sign up voluntarily. The interviews were conducted 1 year after the survey closed (November 2022). Participants could have participated in both the survey and the interview, but as the survey was anonymous, the interview participants were not asked about their participation in the survey. In addition to anonymity, survey participation was a year prior by the time the interviews were conducted. I argue this is sufficient time to assume that participants participating in both would be reasonably unaffected by any priming or impact of the survey questions.

13.2.2 Survey

13.2.2.1 Format

The survey was an online survey developed in and shared using the Qualtrics platform. The survey focused on collecting information on participants' perception of different types of events from their individual experience, as well as Destiny's overarching

⁴A tweet got publicly shared by a popular Destiny lore community account, which boosted participation. The recruitment tweet can be seen at <https://twitter.com/BjarkeAL/status/1434933783791292421>.

history. Participants were given free form text to describe their experience in detail. For historical information, a categorization task was chosen. This design was chosen to account for and capture how players view the canonicity of both their individual behavior and the larger historical events of the game.

After participants gave their consent, the survey collected the participants' Destiny experience, i.e. their playtime statistics and activities. Participants were then asked to describe, via free form text description, three of their favorite or most memorable events from Destiny: A generally favorite event, a favorite narrative event, and a favorite social event (with other players). For each event, a follow-up question asked whether the participant thought this event was canonical. No prior definition of canon was provided to participants, as one aim of the study was to understand how they themselves understood the term. Canon is already a widely understood term within the Destiny player community and general game fandoms. As such, it was expected that players would know the term beforehand.

Then, the survey provided a list of events from Destiny's history to the participants. These events were chosen to cover a variety of event types that relate to elements of the narrative, authorship, repeatability, and other aspects of perennial storytelling. This list was generated by me based on my research into and prior experience with the game (see complete event list in section 13.3.4). Participants were given a randomly sorted list of these events and asked, for each, to sort it into "canon" or "not canon" categories, or a "don't know" if they did not recognize the event. The survey was pilot-tested by two Destiny players associated with the research team, to evalu-

ate the appropriateness of the language and whether the pre-determined events were understood as expected.

13.2.2.2 Data Processing and Coding

After collection, the qualitative survey data was processed and anonymized for coding and all identifying information was removed (i.e. player group names, personal names, or links to personal websites). Demographics and prewritten canon events data was charted with frequency analysis and descriptive statistics to get an understanding of the participants' Destiny experience and narrative interest. A narrative interest score was calculated from 3 likert scale questions.

The qualitative data from the survey of player's 3 memorable events was too dense to make line-by-line coding viable and thus a holistic (Saldaña, 2021, p. 142), simultaneous (Saldaña, 2021, p. 80) multi-dimensional coding approach was taken. This is adopting a method developed by Poole (Van de Ven and Poole, 1990; Saldaña, 2021), except here it is applied to multi-dimensional data instead of longitudinal data. To develop these dimensions, one researcher iteratively coded the responses, supported with discussion with another researcher, as recommended by Saldaña (2021, p. 35). These dimensions were designed to encompass various possible facets of that data that could be related to its canonicity based on the literature review, such as authorship (Shaw and Persaud, 2020; Walliss, 2012; Chaney and Liebler, 2007) and repeatability (Lohmann, 2008; Krzywinska, 2006; Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021). In total, 3 dimensions were developed. With these, the coding was done by 2 coders, where

Table 13.1: Table of the code dimensions developed for the coding. Each code dimension has a unique set of codes and thus IRR was calculated for each individually. The agreement is calculated from two reviewers, on 20% of the dataset using all dimensions. Further iteration was not possible due to time constraints. Disagreements in repeatability dimension were due to subtle disagreement on what constituted repetition between one-shot events and where repetition was theoretically possible but not commonly enacted/performed. Cohen’s kappa on this dimension with only 2 codes ("one-shot" and "repeatable") is 0.85.

Code dimensions	Nr of Codes	Percentage Agreement	IRR
Repeatability	3	72.46	0.54
In-game Activity	15	75.36	0.7
Authorship	3	98.55	0.93

each dimension was treated as its own codebook. One did a complete coding of the entire dataset and the other did 20% for IRR calculations (Hallgren, 2012; Armstrong et al., 2020), which was calculated via Cohen’s Kappa (Cohen, 1960), and found fair to excellent agreement (Fleiss et al., 1981). The exact IRR values can be seen in the results (section 13.3.2). These coding dimensions were correlated with whether the event was considered canon by the participant, using a chi-square pair-wise test. A Bonferroni correction was utilized to counteract the multiple comparisons needed due to the number of codes.

The dimensions, number of codes, and inter-rater reliability agreement can be seen in Table 13.1.

13.2.3 Interview

13.2.3.1 Format

The semi-structured interview was done online through the communication platform Discord, as the players already had familiarity with it. The main goal of the

interview study was to explore participants' reasoning for an event being canon, and the results from the survey were used to facilitate this. The results were compiled in an online spreadsheet to help interviewees to reflect on the community's views on each event. Each participant was given a consent form prior to the interview and then was asked to look through the results and say what they considered strange or curious or wrong about them. From that discussion, the interviewer asked follow-up questions into the participant's reasoning. The question was posed this way to get at the events with the most conflicting reported canonicity from the survey. These were deemed more valuable to learn the reasonings for and against because they likely had multiple arguments in either direction, contrasting to something players would think was obviously canon or not.

13.2.3.2 Data Processing and Analysis

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with Google's automatic transcription. One researcher quality-checked the transcription of all interviews by listening through them, corrected errors and anonymized them. These transcriptions were then analyzed. To categorize the arguments, the transcriptions were tagged based on whether an argument was for or against an event being canon. The tagged statements were then laid out in a table based on the event they referred to. From this table, the meaning of the participants was condensed for and against the various events being canon, ultimately resulting in a table that is agnostic of individual events, but displays arguments for and against any event being canon (table 13.5).

13.3 Results

A total of 118 participants responded to the survey, which ran from September 6th till November 1st 2021. 15 interviews were conducted in the timeframe of November 2nd to November 23rd 2022.

13.3.1 Survey Demographics

Mean Destiny playtime for all survey participants was 2076 hours (median 1626 hours), with a large variance (standard deviation of 1728), with lowest being 90 and highest being 10333 hours.

50.4% of the participants started playing Destiny during its official release in 2014. Another 20.5% marked 2017 (Destiny 2 release). The remaining 29.1% are distributed throughout the other years (2015, 6.8%, 2016, 2.6%, 2018, 11.1%, and 2019, 8.5%). No one marked starting in 2020-2021.

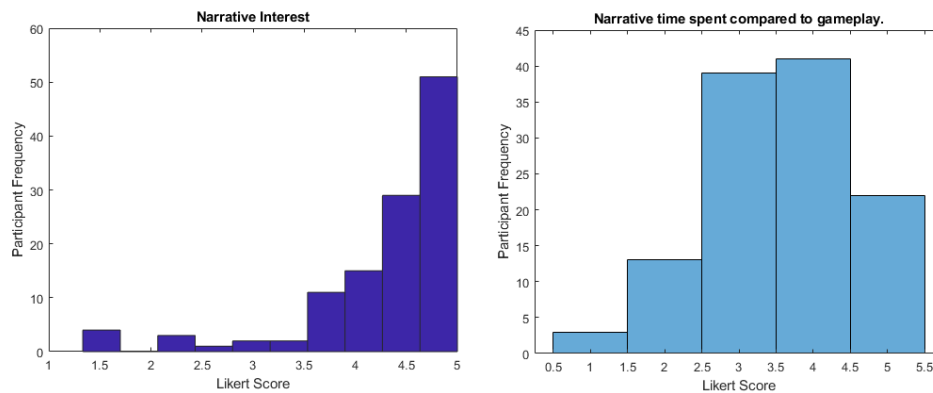


Figure 13.1: Left: Histogram of self reported measure of narrative interest. 3 likert scale values are combined to a single narrative interest score. Higher number is higher narrative interest. Right: Histogram of self-reported, estimated time spent on narrative vs gameplay of Destiny 2. Higher score means more time spent on narrative.

The participants showed a strong narrative inclination overall (107 participants (90.6%) had a narrative score above 3.33 out of 5). See Fig. 13.1). Many participants considered themselves as spending more time on the narrative compared to gameplay, with 63 participants spending more time on narrative (score of 4 or above) and 16 participants spending less time (2 or below); however, 39 participants reported spending similar time on both (between 2 and 4), which is more mixed than the interest score.

13.3.2 The Personal Events

All 118 survey participants were asked to report 3 memorable events in the three categories: Overall favorite moment (general), favorite narrative moment, and favorite social moment, resulting in 354 events. 5 were incomplete and removed, leading to a total of 349 events for analysis. Interestingly, 4 of the blank events were in the social category. Participants stated that they *"prefer[s] to play alone"* (participant 66) or *"I don't think I've got one of these"* (participant 88). Every participant supplied a general favorite event and only one did not supply a narrative event.

3 dimensions for coding were developed for these events, with 3 corresponding codebooks with 3 to 15 codes each⁵. The dimensions were as follows:

- Authorship: Did Bungie author the activity the participant were in or engaging with? Yes, no, or mixed.

⁵2 dimensions have 2 codes, only "In-game Activity" has 15 because of the many possible activities in Destiny.

Table 13.2: Table showing the results of all chi-square tests, showing correlations between the individual dimensions and the participants' self-reported canonicity. All results were significant under the bonferonni-corrected value of 0.0125.

Dimension	Chi value	P value
Authorship	46.14	<0.001
Activity	141.73	<0.001
Repeatable	64.74	<0.001
Category	123.87	<0.001

- In-game activity: The in-game name given to the activity the participants were doing at the time. This refers to the in-game activity itself, not the exact activity, i.e. a participant could describe goofing around in a raid with other players but the activity is coded as "raid".
- Repeatability: Whether the activity participants were describing was easily repeatable in the game or not. Yes, no, or theoretically⁶.

You can see the calculated IRR scores in section 13.2.2.2.

13.3.3 Correlations with the Canon

Each dimension was correlated with the self-reported canon-measure using a chi-square test for each dimension. The category of the event (general, narrative, or social) was also compared to the canonicity (see table 13.2). A correlation matrix of each code and its correlation to canon can be seen in Table 13.3.

All dimensions showed strong correlation with whether the event was consid-

⁶As discussed in chapter 11, repetitivity in Destiny is complicated, thus the inclusion of a "theoretically category". A series of activities in Destiny, such as story campaigns, are repeatable but if you delete your character and start over. This is different from events that are never repeatable, such as Day 1 raids or live events. It should also be noted that whether activities and campaigns had been removed from Destiny did not factor into repeatability. If an activity at some point was repeatable, it was coded as such.

ered canon. To inspect these relationships further, we dive into each dimension in more detail.

13.3.3.1 Authorship

The first point of comparison is whether participants considered their personal events canon compared to whether the activity was authored by Bungie. As expected, authored activities are predominantly judged as canon (184 yes, 64 no, 52 maybe), and non-authored activities predominantly not canon (6 yes, 28 no, 6 maybe). There remains some disagreement however, as there are still 64 events (21.3% of authored activities) in activities authored by Bungie which are not considered canon and another 52 (17.3%) that are maybe. An interesting example is from participant 111, who explained a story of a boss fight where the enemy stopped him from reviving his friend just in the nick of time. *"It felt like the enemies were thinking & reacting to my actions for once, just like how the lore makes them out to be."* This moment was marked as not canon by the participant, contrary to it being part of an authored, narrative campaign mission and the boss did a narratively appropriate action, but the participant sees this happening as a "coincidence" and thus is not canon.

13.3.3.2 Activity

Raids were the most popular activity mentioned across all events, and show mixed evaluation by participants regarding their canonicity (47 yes, 47 no, 28 maybe). For example, participants 27 and 28 both mention completing a raid for the first time

Table 13.3: Table showing the complete correlation matrices of all dimensions relationship to whether the events were considered canon.

Canon Correlations	Yes	No	Maybe	Percentage Yes
General	56	38	24	47.46
Narrative	111	2	5	94.07
Social	27	60	31	22.88
One-shot	79	30	11	65.83
Repeatable	58	65	42	35.15
Theoretically repeatable	56	1	6	88.89
Authored by Bungie	184	64	52	61.33
Not authored by bungie	6	28	6	15
mixed	3	4	1	37.5
all	1	5	1	14.29
campaign	51	1	6	87.93
community event	10	0	0	100
dungeon	1	1	1	33.33
gambit	1	1	1	33.33
lore	8	0	0	100
mission	22	4	8	64.71
out-of-game	7	8	2	41.18
patrol	1	2	5	12.5
pvp	0	10	5	0
raid	47	47	28	38.52
seasonal activity	32	4	0	88.89
social hub	3	8	0	27.27
strike	4	5	5	28.57
weekly story	5	0	0	100

as their favorite social moment, but one marks that as canon, the other as not (note that participants weren't necessarily calling the raid itself not canon, but rather their experience inside this raid). Participant 51 mentions a narrative moment in a raid *"when the AI gets pissed at you for intruding"* as canon but participant 93 says that *"helping players get their first raid clears"* is not canon. In contrast, the campaign or mission activities have a strong perception of being canon (Campaign 51 yes, 6 maybe, 1 no;

Missions 22 yes, 8 maybe, 1 no), whereas PvP⁷ (0 yes, 10 no, 2 maybe) or social hub activities (3 yes, 8 no, 0 maybe) do not. 8 participants also mentioned "lore" moments (i.e. moments only present in the backstory and not experienced in the gameplay) as their favorite, and all of these were marked as canon.

Several participants argued that *how* a moment was presented to them mattered. Participant 45 mentioned this as their favorite narrative moment: *"Andal Brask being mentioned in game, when for so long he felt like an abandoned character [...] I was so damn happy"*. Participants 59 and 62 also both mentioned as their favorite moments finally getting to meet a character "in-game" that had been introduced through the lore and only talked about in text, but never been present on screen, until that point. Participant 106 says this: *"I think the visceral experience of seeing the [reveal of character's fate] made it more impactful than any of the Grimoire⁸ entries."* This indicates that participants assign a greater level of gravitas to in-game moments versus those present in other parts of the lore, despite both being, ostensibly, considered equally canonical. We can also see this in the sheer numbers of events. Only 25 events (17 out of game, 8 lore) of all 349 (7%) were in activities not in the game.

13.3.3.3 Repeatability

Repeatable activities show heavy disagreement between whether or not they are canon or not (48 yes, 65 no, 42 maybe), whereas one-shot (79 yes, 30 no, 11 maybe) and theoretically repeatable activities (primarily campaigns) (56 yes, 1 no, 6 maybe)

⁷Player versus Player.

⁸The Grimoire is a common word for Destiny's lorebooks. See chapter 9.

are in majority considered canon. Participant 72, who shared a story of their first raid experience with others who had played through it many times, yet had little to no idea of the storytelling implications of: *"They'd teach me how to fight and if tell them about the Warpriest, Golgoth and the Deathsingers. My top gaming experience of all time."*. This event was marked as maybe canon. Participant 89 also mentioned the same raid as their favorite moment because *"it got me to read the hive book/bible on Ishtar⁹"*, which was marked as canon.

13.3.3.4 Category

Finally, the category of event was correlated with canonicity, that being either the general, narrative, or social events the participants were asked to write. When asked to describe a narrative event, participants predominantly describe something they consider canon (111 yes, 2 no, 5 maybe), whereas when they describe a social event, it skews more towards a non-canon event (27 yes, 60 no, 31 maybe). The general event shows a similar trend as authorship or raids: majority yes, but heavy disagreement (56 yes, 38 no, 24 maybe).

3 participants mentioned the canon directly in their responses. Participant 32 mentioned making their own "headcanon" (fan fiction) about their own characters, and how they fit into the universe. Participant 67 mentions how an event got "canonized" and how that changed their perspective on that event, since it "retconned" the potential other possibilities that could have happened. Finally, participant 79 mentioned the small

⁹A popular community lore website.

moments with strangers in social hubs and how those are canon to them, ending with the line *"Honestly, anything a guardian¹⁰ does is canonical"*.

13.3.4 Predetermined Events

For all 38 predetermined events, survey participants were asked whether they were canon or not. Participants could also say they did not know the event, in which case it has been sorted into NA, and not used for the percentage calculation. The results can be seen in table 13.4¹¹.

Events that can be classified as traditional video game storytelling methods, such as campaigns, cutscenes, lore, and dialogue, are predominantly seen as canon (>80%). E1-19 are all events told through those means. The exceptions are E7, E15, which are live community events with an authored, narrative component (along with E20). Contrast this to E31, which was a community event Bungie had no say or effect on, and the difference between this and E7 (43% and 99%) is stark.

The more striking results are those where the results are mixed. The difference in percentages between E30 (36%) and E21 (81%) is striking because they are gameplay-wise the exact same type of event. This difference of almost 40% percentage points exists despite how both are "strikes" in Destiny, i.e. short, repeatable missions that players do over and over again for rewards. The one difference between them is that the final boss of E21 has been given a canonical reason for this repetition, whereas E30

¹⁰"Guardian" is the fictional name for a playable Destiny character. Every player controls a Guardian.

¹¹As the text in this table is small, you can also see this data at the following link: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1pvfwMWaNMsaAigadepS89hcBW9WF9n-MaPKKN6C8BxBI/edit?usp=sharing>

Table 13.4: Perceived canonicity of the pretermined events. Sorted by canonicity, highest canonicity in the top.

E	Text as shown to participants	Meta-description	Author	Canon	Not	NA	%
1	The Collapse	Backstory	Bungie	114	0	4	100%
2	The Battle of Six Fronts	Backstory	Bungie	107	0	11	100%
3	The Death of Oryx, The Taken King (King's Fall)	Raid Boss Death	Bungie	115	0	3	100%
4	The Red War	Story Campaign	Bungie	118	0	0	100%
5	Cayde-6's death	Expansion Campaign event	Bungie	118	0	0	100%
6	The Traveller arriving in the solar system	Backstory	Bungie	116	1	1	99%
7	The Crash of the Almighty	Community Event	Bungie	116	1	1	99%
8	Clavis Bray's Diary and the events therein	Physical NPC Diary, part of an ARG	Bungie	108	1	9	99%
9	Visiting Mara at the Queen's Court	Weekly character visit	Bungie	112	3	3	97%
10	Guardians kill Skolas in the Prison of Elders	Repeatable Boss Death	Bungie	104	3	11	97%
11	The world's first completion of The Last Wish, triggering the curse cycle.	First Raid completion	Bungie	111	4	3	97%
12	The Traveller healing itself the day before Beyond Light.	Community Event	Bungie	109	4	5	96%
13	Eris' weekly communications with The Darkness (Season of Arrivals)	Weekly Story	Bungie	107	4	7	96%
14	The Gardener and the Winnower disagreeing on the ideal state of the universe	Lore event	Bungie	103	4	11	96%
15	The disappearance of Mars, Mercury, Titan, and Io.	Cutscene, Live story	Bungie	113	5	0	96%
16	You awakening in the Cosmodrome.	Player's Guardian being born	Bungie	111	5	2	96%
17	Zero Hour: Mithrax helps Guardians stop Eramis in stealing Outbreak Perfected.	Character event in repeatable mission	Bungie	111	5	2	96%
18	The Drifter's reactions in Gambit to Guardians siding with him or the Vanguard	NPC Dialogue during PvP match	Bungie	103	13	2	89%
19	The solving of the Corridors of Time puzzle.	Community Event Puzzle	Bungie	92	15	11	86%
20	Sparrow Racing League	Seasonal event	Bungie	92	18	8	84%
21	Guardians kill The Fanatic again (The Hollowed Lair)	Strike Boss Death, explained	Bungie	94	22	22	81%
23	Climbing to the top of Felwinter's Peak to get a fragment of SIVA	Exploration	Bungie	79	24	15	77%
24	Randal the Vandal	NPC named by community	Mixed	74	30	14	71%
34	"the helmet stayed on"	Disputed Lore event	Bungie	66	37	15	64%
25	"Bagel"soloing Shattered Throne at 999, and Savathûn's response	Specific player causing narrative response	Mixed	64	36	18	64%
26	The Witch Queen Reveal Trailer	A Trailer	Bungie	70	45	3	61%
27	Completing the weekly Escalation Protocol	Weekly Event	Bungie	65	46	7	59%
28	Your last Crucible Match	A PvP match	Bungie	51	60	7	46%
29	The Loot Cave	Exploit, patched and referenced	Mixed	51	61	6	46%
30	Guardians kill Braccus Zahn again (The Arms Dealer)	Strike Boss Death, unexplained	Bungie	51	61	6	46%
31	The community farewell party on the Farm, days before Beyond Light's release	Community Event	Not Bungie	43	58	17	43%
32	"Wolves Unleashed": When Lord of Wolves dominated the Crucible.	Weapon imbalance	Mixed	41	65	12	39%
33	You, the player in front of your screen, controlling your guardian	The player themselves	Not Bungie	43	69	6	38%
34	Caiatl taking over the official Destiny Twitter account and tweeting in character	NPC talking on Twitter	Bungie	29	78	11	27%
35	12-man raids	Bug	Not Bungie	26	87	5	23%
36	Another Telesco bug being found, Telesco being disabled.	Weapon Bug	Mixed	19	96	3	17%
37	The Devils' Lair strike getting re-added into Destiny 2	Reintroduction of old content	Bungie	16	94	8	15%
38	AFK-farming Forges for loot and lore	Exploit	Not Bungie	9	104	5	8%

(and most other strikes) have not (these specific strikes were also already discussed in section 11.2.1. The difference suggests that the participants pay attention to this kind of information. E24 (71%) and E25 (64%) and E29 (46%) were events where actions of players got a narrative response, even if those actions were not themselves narrative. E24 did have a precedence set by a fictional character, which may explain its higher percentage (Tassi, 2018), but otherwise the very mixed canonicity of these events shows that players actions are not even necessarily wholly considered canon with any kind of response. Player versus player (PvP) content, too, is quite mixed. E28 and E32 both are around 40% and both are events that took place in PvP content. E18 is also in a PvP activity, yet is purely dialogue, and has much higher canonicity, indicating that participants were conflicted in whether they considered player activities canon. The players themselves, outside the screen (E33) with 38% is further showing this, but it might also be considered surprisingly high because it is explicitly asking of something outside the digital. Yet, as we will see in the interview responses, there are reasons for this.

The 5 events that have below 30% in perceived canonicity have common themes: 3 of them can be considered exploits or bugs (E36, E38, E35), a Twitter event (E34), and a re-implementation of a mission activity in Destiny 2 from Destiny 1 (E37). The Twitter event is the most curious one as it breaks with the idea of authorship being key: The twitter messages were undisputably authored by Bungie, and yet the canonicity is so low. The interview responses can help illuminate this.

13.4 Interview Results

The interview participants were shown a table similar to table 13.4, and asked what they thought of these percentages¹². The fully canonical events (>90%) in the survey, none of the participants had any issue with, outside of a few confusions on some of them being lower than others (E16, for example being not 100%). The key results come in when we reach the more conflicted percentages.

The interview results will now be discussed in detail. For an overview of what participants considered canon in general, refer to Table 13.5, which shows the summarized arguments of the participants, for and against events being canon.

13.4.1 Canonical Bugs and Exploits

The Loot Cave (E29) (described in detail in chapter 2) is an example of an exploit that the developers later supported with changes into the game. It is important to mention that the major narrative response—the entire dungeon inside the loot cave—was done after the survey but before the interviews, and thus in the interviews, participants responded differently to this event, by saying that *now* it would probably be higher on the survey percentage. The reasoning for this is telling: *"It was responded to by Bungie"* (P12¹³). There now exists a plotline and a fictional character that references the Loot Cave, and this, in fact, makes it "more canon" (P3). Some participants would agree that the loot cave was not canon at the time of the survey, because it was *"just a bug"* (P5)

¹²As the interviews were recruited for in the same communities, the same narrative skew shown in the survey can be assumed for these participants.

¹³Participants in the interview section are referred to as P1-15.

Table 13.5: Table displaying the arguments for and against any event being canon. These arguments are not about a specific event but condensed from all arguments the participants gave.

Arguments For	Arguments Against
- Bungie responded to it/acknowledged it.	- Bungie have not responded to it/acknowledged it.
- I can think of an in-fiction reason why/how this could happen.	- it breaks character that is otherwise established.
- There is plot/lore/characters explaining this.	- it is not explained by the characters/-plot/lore.
- It is entirely in the game.	- it is outside the game.
- it affected everyone.	- it was just a single player's experience.
- it has happened so many times.	- it is just a bug/exploit/easter egg and those are not part of the story.
- it is consistent with the established rules of the world.	- the reasoning for this is entirely outside the world of the game.
- it is entirely done by real people.	- it is only done by people.
- It fits in the open world as something that just exists.	- as a separate mission it does not make sense.
- we learned lore-relevant details from this.	- it does not "feel" canon.
- the repetitions can be seen as a retelling/have other explanations	- the repetition does not make sense, happens out of time with the rest.
- it is known by everyone.	- it is marketing material, which feels outside the reality of the game.
- this character has an established ability to break the fourth wall.	- this character does not have an established ability to break the fourth wall.
	- it is only gameplay-relevant and does not fit in the narrative world.

or *"initially it was just an exploit"* (P7), or *"more like an easter egg than a canon thing"* (P9) at the time, and felt less like it belonged to the fictional world. Bungie's response, and the *quality* of this response, thus seems to have a large impact, as no one in the interview tried to argue strongly for it now not being canon. Another curious example of the same is Telesto (E36, 17%), which is a gun that is infamous for causing bugs. The fact that it was a bug is enough to make some question it: *"yeah, uh, technically the bugs aren't canon..."* (P8). However, during the first week of the interviews, an event in Destiny 2 changed their perception. Interview participants mentioned how Telesto

bugs event would probably have a higher canon percentage now. Similar to the Loot Cave, there was a response. P7 said *"I think Telesto bugs are now canon as Telesto has indeed taken over the game. We can no longer ignore it. It has happened"* and P7 said *"Honestly I feel this has happened so many times that I would probably say it is canon"* (P7)¹⁴. Similar things were said about the Loot Cave: *"I guess that makes me think of it as canon, is like it still feels like basically if you mention loot cave in relation to Destiny, people know what you're talking about. And that to me makes it feel like canon"* (P1). However, participants hesitated to call E36 canon even now, as it felt less canon than the loot cave. P12 said it *"was more of an obvious, like 'we messed up in the coding'..."* or P10 hesitated because there was less fictional evidence: *"I think it requires an NPC to acknowledge an issue for it to be considered canon"*. As P11 said *"it's not a story thing but it definitely happened"*.

13.4.2 Players in the World

E31 was a community-run party and not organized by Bungie. No in-game information informed about the reasoning for this party and it was entirely organized on Reddit. Thus, to many interview participants, these factors both contributed to agreement that this farewell party was not canon, highlighting again how Bungie's response matters. However, P7 did argue this was canon, for a reason that echoed through some other responses: *"it could very well just be canon because a lot of the storytelling of the game is kind of around what players do as well, as much as like the*

¹⁴Both of these examples of the Loot Cave and Telesto, furthermore, are prime examples of why perennial games cannot be investigated in snapshots and must be considered as happening over time.

actual narrative of the game".

We can see similar responses to E33, which asked whether participants thought they themselves, as the player in front of the screen, were canon. To some, this made perfect sense, as *"I am part of the story. [...] your guardian is part of the story, so you are part of the story, so you are indeed canon."* (P11). Some participants (like P3 or P15) also mentioned that there are indications of fourth-wall-breaking references to a "Player" in Destiny, that indicates some characters' awareness that there is an entity outside the screen. However, other interview participants said the opposite: *"I am not canon. I do not exist"* (P6) or *"I don't think you holding the controller makes you the guardian"* (P10). But, as P6 elaborated *"I mean that comes down to how we view our character right?"*.

We can also see this dispute in whether the Player versus player (PvP) activities were considered canon (E28, E32). To some, it was undisputably so, as PvP matches are explained and have reason for happening: *"The Crucible is just to train Guardians, right [...] it has to be canon"* (P5) or *"I think all of The Crucible matches are televised to the Last City. And they happen. And I don't see any reason why not. Seems to be a very well established piece of the canon."* (P9)¹⁵. However, even so, some participants who acknowledged this said that an individual match itself might not be canon. As P13 said *"playing PVP in Destiny just doesn't feel like interacting with the story particularly, or the world so much. [...] it slots more into the like part of my brain that played a lot of Counter-Strike in the 90s."* (P13) or simply *"it seems out of place on a like "is*

¹⁵PvP matches (called "Crucible matches") are explained as training matches for players, and are in fact said to be televised as sports to the average citizen on Earth in Destiny's fiction.

this Canon [list]?" . [...] it's just like, uh, it's not story related." (P11). The narrative, furthermore, does not react to any individual player action in a game in a meaningful way, as P8 mentioned: "I know they made it so that they made canon lore about the characters in the game going [to the Crucible]... but I'm not sure about individual characters, because there are, you know, so many Guardians". Said succinctly, "Had the question been "The Crucible" I would consider it canon. But it's "My Crucible match". I don't consider that canon." (P4).

One player activity everyone agreed was not canon, though, was AFK Farming (E38), which also had the lowest percentage in the survey. No participant supplied arguments for this being canon, only against, even those participants who considered player's activities as canon in general. This was because of how "acting out of character" (P3) this activity felt. As P3 put it *"it feels like going to a marathon and playing Scrabble on the side until the marathon time runs out. Like, why would you spend all the time signing up for a marathon and then play Scrabble? It doesn't fit"*. Participants saw the activity of AFK farming as so incongruous with what Guardians (players) were "supposed" to do in the game, to the point some participants did not consider this "playing the game" (P5, P6) that it could not possibly be canon, despite players—and even some participants themselves admitting to—doing such activity.

13.4.3 Outside the Game

Another element of contention were events that happened primarily outside the game. The fact that it happened outside was enough reason for some to consider

it not canon. A character talking on Twitter (E34) thus was argued as not canon: *"it's out of game so it's a little—seems a little not canon"* (P10). Some participants nuanced this, though, and said that *this* character talking on Twitter was not canon, but another character doing so *was*—because of differences in how those characters are perceived. The other character has through many lore examples shown tendencies to want to "break out" of the fictional universe of the game (and also was an example of one talking directly to the player and not the player character), and thus her presence on Twitter was more readily accepted than the character mentioned on the survey¹⁶.

A trailer for an expansion of the game (E26) was conflicted because players either saw what happened in the trailer as happened verbatim (or plausible to have happened), yet others were less sure it was as depicted. Even so, some of those participants still saw it as canon: *"I think it's metaphorical, but at the same time I guess you could say it's canon because it's set on her Throne World"* (P9), or that it was *"lore friendly"* (P10) and thus they could see it as canon. P1 though, struggled to see the trailer as canon because of its purpose as marketing material: *"the marketing stuff doesn't feel canon to me compared to like things that happen in the game [...] If we're treating the game is like a reality, the marketing stuff doesn't feel like it goes anywhere"*.

Encapsulating almost all of these, is the response to E25. This was an action by a single player, prompted by lore, yet only got a lore response outside the game. P15 was conflicted, saying they had no doubt *"Bagel did the work"* and wanted to acknowledge that as canon, but because there was only a response posted on Bungie's blog, where

¹⁶The second character, Savathûn, had not been on Twitter at the time of the survey (Murray, 2022).

developer news updates go, it was a little more difficult for them to wholeheartedly accept it as canon. As P4 said *"I wouldn't consider it necessarily lore because nothing happened in the game that affected everyone"*. Yet, others argued that the existence of the response itself—even outside the game—made it canon. And furthermore, the existence of the prompt—a taunt by a villain—established that action as *"within the rules of the universe"* (P6) and thus canon.

13.4.4 Repetition and Readdition

Repetition was another conflicting topic for participants. Some participants noted the difference between E30 and E21 as making sense—as they knew there was a fictional explanation for E21's repetition. Some participants acknowledged that the repetition of activities like strikes was confusing narratively, and had varying responses, either apathy *"it's just because it's a video game"* (P13) or *"part of the suspension of disbelief"* (P9), or just questioning *"the canon on strikes doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me"* (P10). P3 tried to offer plausible explanations, such repetitions being a retelling, a parallel universe, or a overwriting of how it happened originally, and either way, it was unquestionably canon (these three examples were all from P3, showing how some players have thought about this in detail). Others nuanced between different repeating activities, a singular mission repeating made less sense to them than an open world activity. *"I guess it's because it's open world-y, and you know... it's understandable that we'd have to consistently go back and repeat that activity"* (P10). P14 argued for a certain activity being canonical in repetition *"because Ana [a character] gave you stuff*

every single week and she told you like 'yeah you're doing a good job cleaning up out there' I guess."—whereas other repeating activities might not do so.

The re-addition of an old strike from Destiny 1 in Destiny 2 (E37) was uncertain for most interview participants, as many had no strong arguments either way. *"I would think it would be as canonical as us killing Braccus Zahn again [E30]"*, said P13. As P10 said *"what's the significance of that? [...] I don't know [...]. They had more space maybe"*. Yet, some players paused over the fact that the strike had changed in an expansion in Destiny 1, a change that was not brought into Destiny 2, and thus they were less sure what to make of it. P14 mentioned how there had been no fictional reason for it being brought back (something Bungie has done for the removal and access of other areas in Destiny's past) and thus considered this re-addition not canon.

13.4.5 Canon as More Than a Binary

Throughout many of these responses many participants discussed canon not as a direct binary of canon or not canon, but moreso as a spectrum. Something could be "more canon" or "less canon". New story-relevant information about the Loot Cave (E29) made it "more canon", not just "canon". It was not the case that E21 was canon and E30 was not; E21 felt "more canon" (P3, P6) than E30. Participants were several times hesitant to put an exact label of canon or not canon on an event (now that they were not bound by the survey's binary) and discussed arguments both for and against, sometimes landing in an uncertain territory, as seen in repetition or the Twitter responses (E34) or E37.

Some interview participants also defined canon for themselves during the interview, which is worth highlighting: *"...when I think about things that are canon, I think of story events that have happened..."* (P6), or *"I define it as ... like, in the story. Or in the lore, like, you know, explained somewhere* (P11). Many participants identified a clear distinction between a or "metastory" and the fictional "story". *"So like you've got the in-game narrative [...] And you've got the narrative which is things that happen that people do in the game that makes a story. Like the Loot Cave [E29] I'd describe as such because it's people doing stuff in the game that makes a story that isn't a direct narrative as part of the game."* (P3) Several participants were able to reason about this difference and brought it up, using slightly differing terms yet nevertheless talking about a similar concept. *"The narrative the community itself forms and it—that forms around the game [...]. In the same category would be the farm farewell party [E31], which is like events that people do that just are part of the whole storytelling the community has around the game, rather than the game itself"* (P7). P8 explicitly called this *"community canon"*. Some participants, too, like P9 saw an event as being able to happen in both, as a change in the efficacy of a weapon in PvP (E26) could both be seen as a shift in the "meta" of the game, but could also be fictionally explained as the fictional rules changing what was allowed and not allowed in the Crucible matches: *"Shaxx [the character in charge of the Crucible] would have gone 'no you can't use this it's too powerful stop it. It's ruining the games for everyone'".* P3 agreed, but did acknowledge that this was an assumption they were layering on top, and not an explicit in-universe explanation¹⁷.

¹⁷However, there are a few lore entries signifying this as what is happening, see https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinyTheGame/comments/swe8ix/theyve_made_the_stasis_crucible_nerfs_canon/. P10

Some participants also mentioned personal events, such as a single player completing a dungeon in E16 or individual PvP matches were canon "for them", as in, for that specific player, and defined a difference between canon in a universal sense and in a personal sense. P2 said *"I guess I would say that, yeah, my last Crucible match is canon to the way that I play Destiny but I don't think that it is canon to the story"*. Players might have their own canon of their experience, a canon of the community, and the story, and they do not necessarily all overlap.

13.5 Limitations

As is evident from the narrative interest results, the sampled participants are skewed towards people interested in the narrative aspect of Destiny. This is not necessarily an indication of the general narrative interest of the whole Destiny player population, but an effect of the recruitment. Therefore, while these findings are not generalizable to the entire playerbase of Destiny, they present useful data to understand how narratively engaged players engage with canon.

I asked for memorable or favorite moments, which leads to reporting of dramatic experiences, which most often occur during raids (a very dynamic part of Destiny). Raids are an activity that is always authored by Bungie and are repeatable¹⁸, and therefore certain codes in other dimensions are less likely to be present since they

mentioned they heard about this.

¹⁸Generally. Completing a raid on the first day of its release is not repeatable as there are unique rewards tied to this. If a participant mentioned completing a raid on "Day 1" this was coded as specific, not repeatable.

do not apply to raids. This results in raids to have higher representation in the data set and thus likely to have introduced some skew into the coding results. There also lies a limitation in the predetermined events, as this is not a complete list of all events in Destiny's history that could be considered canon, and thus may miss some potential categories. It was also more skewed towards narrative events, and there could have been more events that were likely to not be considered canon, such as fanfiction or individual gameplay moments.

Finally, as a study of canon in perennial games, Destiny is only one game, with a very specific relation to canon. Destiny's storytelling and gameplay affords and allows players certain kind of readings of what is canon and not canon, which cannot be said to be universal across all perennial games. I argue that the relationship I am describing between canonicity and authorship is likely to be generalizable to other games as it is done through storytelling methods other games can or are taking advantage of, i.e. cutscenes, dialogue, item descriptions, etc. However, it is important to reiterate that there are components that are somewhat unique to Destiny. Specifically, how Destiny's shapes its relationship to the players as part of its narrative, and its consistent commitment to making even innocuous player activities part of the authored canon.

Future studies of canonicity in other games, as well as how authored narrative is related and conveyed to the player, will allow for a more direct comparison and contrast with Destiny and subsequently enable a more nuanced study of canonicity in games.

13.6 Discussion

Each research question will now be discussed in order.

13.6.1 Authorship Impacts Canonicity Strongly

There is a very strong correlation between authorship and perceived canonicity ($p < .001$). However, this is complicated by several factors. All code dimensions correlated with canonicity, which points to the larger theme that any activity in Destiny is highly dependent on many factors, and it is not so easy to separate the authorship or the type of event nor say it is *exclusively* authorship that determines canonicity. From the interview responses, Bungie's authoring of an event was a frequent argument and important to their reasoning one way or the other. However, there were exceptions to this, including how out-of-game authored events had several arguments raised against them, and repetition that participants could not narratively explain which were difficult to fully embrace as canonical.

There *is* a strong relationship between whether something is considered canon and whether it is authored by Bungie, however, we cannot definitely say that authorship equates with canonicity for players. But it's important to consider that if something is not authored by Bungie it requires a substantial amount of investment or reasoning from players to be accepted as canon, either to the point where Bungie eventually does acknowledge it (i.e. Telesto, The Loot Cave) or under the assumption that all player activity is by default canonical. Authorship can thus be seen as having a strong impact

on perceived canonicity, but it is not the only factor one must consider.

13.6.2 Traditional Storytelling Is More Likely to Be Accepted as Canon

Traditional storytelling events are more often than not considered canon. When asked for narrative events, participants provided events they consider to be canon in all but 6% of cases (section 13.3.3.4). The events that are clearly traditional storytelling, such as lore or cutscenes or campaign missions, are strongly considered canon. However, other less traditional elements are much more conflicted, and not necessarily wholly non-canonical. Elements such as trailers or Twitter accounts overtaken by fictional characters are not as clear-cut as either canon or not, and the personal out-of-game events are equally split. It is clear that not all participants consider the boundary of the digital game to be the determinant of canonicity, but some still use it as an argument against. Yet, E8, which was a narrative text not found in the game, was considered entirely canon and no interview participants disputed this. This text, though, is similar to many of the existing lorebooks from the game, in contrast to the authored elements of E34 or E25, which were both rather unique and unlike other elements in Destiny's storytelling. Thus the *form* of the content also seems to matter.

The Loot Cave (E29) and Telesto (E36) are perhaps the strongest examples here, as the introduction of more traditional storytelling elements made argument for its canonicity stronger in the interviewees' minds. Therefore, like section 13.6.1, traditional storytelling methods can be said to have a strong impact on perceived canonicity, yet it cannot be said to be exclusively the factor. In fact, The Loot Cave (E29), Telesto (E36),

and Randal the Vandal (E24) are all examples of events that started as community action or happenstance, un-authored event, and were in various stages of being acknowledged by the developers. The data shows how these additions make the original event more accepted as part of the canon. E24 is the most accepted, as a character the developers have reintroduced multiple times, and then the E29, as it during the survey had started to be accepted as canon, and in the interview it was almost fully accepted. And then finally E36, which was not at all accepted as canon in the survey, yet the live event that happened during the interviews was actively adjusting perspectives as the interview happened.

That which is least likely to be considered canon is that which the players can find no plausible explanation for. Interview participants had no strong arguments for bugs and exploits like AFK farming (E38), 12-man raids (E35), the unexplained re-addition of an old strike (E37) or a character inexplicably talking on Twitter (E34). Thus again, the negative for this question showcases its potential: That which is *not* traditional storytelling requires more effort to accept as canon.

13.6.3 Repetition Can Be Canon if Explained

The most critical part to highlight for the question of repetition is the difference between explained repetition and non-explained repetition. The difference between E21 and E30, as already highlighted, is a striking example of how the explanation of repetition helps convince many of its canonicity. Even smaller acknowledgments, such as E27 (which is merely a character thanking the player for another week of service)

helped convince a participant of its canonicity, and thus it does not require *a lot* of explanation for players to be bought in. On the other end of the spectrum are events like E9 or E13, which were also repeated week-by-week, but were wholly accepted as canon without question because their repetition was part of the narrative structure. It is thus possible to make repetition canon, and so it is not merely the *act* of repetition that causes it to be considered non-canonical, but rather unexplained repetition. Even that, however, was often accepted as a "part of the game" or part of "suspension of disbelief" and therefore not something most players considered a vital flaw to their enjoyment of the narrative.

PvP, another repetitive activity, is an interesting case study for Destiny. In the favorite events, no one who mentioned PvP thought these events were canon. Yet, for the predetermined events, players in general were a lot more conflicted (E28, 46% canon). E25 is dialogue spoken during a PvP event, and this has a much higher canon percentage than the activity itself, indicating that while canonical things can happen during PvP, the activity itself might not be considered so. As mentioned (section 13.4.2), Destiny itself calls out the PvP activities within the lore, and while the interviews show that some do acknowledge Destiny's lore descriptions, PvP activities do not "feel" canon, or feel out of place from the rest of the storytelling—they are not traditional storytelling. Many of the arguments that make it canonical exist *outside* the mode itself, in lorebooks and extraneous character interactions. While playing PvP, it is not directly evident, and mostly presents itself as something that is often *not* canon.

Another crucial aspect to this is whether players consider themselves canon.

Both viewpoints were strongly articulated, from *"anything a guardian does is canon"* to *"I do not exist"*. This, as P6 mentioned, *"comes down to how we view our character"*. More pointedly, though, the reason why participants did not consider incongruous, repetitive player activities like AFK farming (E38) to be canon is fascinating. The idea that it broke with what they were narratively "supposed" to do indicates that players have a sense for how they are "supposed" to act, almost as a soft kind of role-play, and breaking that cannot be conceived of as part of the story, even in a game where innocuous players actions are frequently canonical. This we can draw back to the lens of myth (chapter 3), as this is exactly the kind of thing that is shaped like a myth: How players are supposed to act is something that evolves in ongoing, cultural negotiation between the game, the authors, and the audience.

13.6.4 The Arguments For and Against Canonicity

Here we can refer directly to table 13.5 for discussion. Participants often brought up arguments both for and against their own opinions, or were uncertain themselves. Or reversely, two participants might argue strongly with a similar point but reach opposite conclusions. Many of the arguments tend to be looking towards an authority or an authored proof that it has been established as canon and will argue against when not finding such evidence. More nebulous are the arguments about the internal sensibility of the world, and that it does not "feel" as much part of the world and thus is less canon, despite evidence to the contrary. This feeling of looking for an internal consistency they cannot find permeates many of the arguments against, while the argu-

ments for are often based on previous evidence or facts that prove something as canon. Canonicity is thus often something *proven*, in cases where it is uncertain, rather than *disproven*. Many of the arguments against, such as feelings or general attitudes towards the canonicity of PvP or exploits was only argued to be canon by those who had solid evidence of the opposite, often provided by the author but that did not always have to be the case. It is, however, assumed and seen as irrelevant to argue for in cases where it is a clear act of storytelling by an author, such as seen in the majority of the highly rated canonical events (E1-19). The fact that no participant tried to argue against any of these is telling. It should be noted that "it was done by real people" was used as an argument both for and against something being canon, and it thus depended on the participant's view of the player character and themselves in relation to the canon. Different participants landed on different sides of this debate, and there is no easy way to consider it. Destiny intentionally confuses this debate by subtly mentioning the player as an existing entity without ever making it explicit. One participant also mentioned how Bungie has a history of including the player in their storytelling, as they did so in their previous game "Marathon" (Bungie, 1994) and this could then be an argument for these subtle hints being proven true.

What is important to keep in mind with all these answers, however, is that the participants themselves often intentionally avoided the binary assumed in this study. As participants often argued for "more" or "less" canonicity, the assumption posed in the survey (that an event is viewed as either canon or not by players) should most likely be re-evaluated. This echoes the theoretical perspectives of canon from previous fandom

studies (Larsen and Carstendottir, 2023), and it seems that the average, story-focused player of Destiny implicitly already accepts similarly nuanced understandings. The understanding of various "kinds" of canon, as either the authored story or a "community canon" should also be mentioned in this purview. Several participants were able to effortlessly distinguish between several kinds of canon, with various levels of overlap. They also had no complications introducing the concept of a canon without an author—a concept otherwise rarely discussed in storytelling. These two kinds of canon show strong parallels with the two layers framework of mythological storytelling (see section 3.5) indicating that players might already be thinking in similar terms, albeit using a different vocabulary.

This chapter covered a study into the Destiny community's understanding of canonicity, showcasing how this seemingly simple concept is complicated, blurry, and up for debate within the community itself. This showcases empirically the point from the previous chapter that what the world of Destiny is is up for discussion and this discussion is very much part of the narrative play of that community. This is the first major part of how a perennial game community creates their own mythology. Next, we will broaden our scope of the community discussions and see how their play not just fits canonicity, but the communal ritual formation of mythology as well.

Chapter 14

Rituals of Play

“Someone is going to die.”

Weapon Description for *Spoiler Alert*, Destiny 2: Warmind & Season of the Lost, 2018 and

2021

THE FOLLOWING CHAPTER IS A RENDITION OF my paper "Community, Story-telling, and Play: Making and Breaking Rituals in Destiny 2" (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2024b), from 2024, presented at CHI. Sections which repeat previous material have been cut. This work relies on the understandings of ritual and media established in sections 3 and 4.1, as well as player-developer interactions discussed in chapters 7 and 8. It will also reference some work that will be covered in section 17.2 on community management. This chapter will report the findings from a long-running ethnographic study of the Destiny community, and how the recurring rituals of the game are made, broken, and reinterpreted by players and developers, and how players and developers communicate about the game with each other.

14.1 Methods

Before we proceed into the findings, we will discuss the methodology of the ethnography in detail, covering how the data was collected and analyzed.

14.1.1 Data Collection

I conducted the ethnographic fieldwork for this manuscript from December 2020 - August 2023. Over the period of approximately 32 months across different social media, I collected data through participant observations, including participating in Destiny community activities, capturing screen shots for personal reference, and writing field-notes on everyday practices and events as they occurred on Twitter, Twitch, Reddit, YouTube, Discord servers, and in-game (see Table 14.1). Participant observation was chosen for its ability to obtain rich descriptions of community behavior (Charmaz, 2006; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Pearce and Artemesia, 2009). Data was collected through the community and developer's posts on public social media, such as Twitter, Reddit, Twitch and YouTube, as well as public media shared by the developer on the same platforms and their own website¹. Following the nature of the various platforms, engagement varied in activity. Much engagement was more passive or sporadic, e.g. watching Twitch livestreams and reading chat, engaging with Twitter and Reddit posts, and watching YouTube videos. In-game engagement was done through actively playing the game with several groups, predominantly smaller Destiny sub-communities already known to the author beforehand.

¹<https://www.bungie.net/7/en/News>

I was responsible for all data collection as well as primary work on the analysis. I will refer to my general positionality statements (section 1.4), and that of my play-experience with Destiny (section 6.2), yet to iterate the primary points, this work was all undertaken through a constructivist (Charmaz, 2006), abductive (Brinkmann, 2014) lens, being part of constructing and developing the findings, with the intention of supporting the community and development of the experience, while making sure to protect all parties involved. Due to the nature of playing as a part of the field-work, this work was also inspired by autoethnographic methods of data collection (Hammad et al., 2021; Lucero, 2018), or "first-person research" (Lucero et al., 2019), relying on the reflexive consideration of my own experience during this time, as well as that of the larger community.

Time spent on each platform varied based on current events and community activity. Twitter, Twitch and Discord was engaged with approximately 1-4 hours a day, each, whereas Reddit, and Developer blogs had more weekly interactions (approx 1-3 hours a week). Playing the game, likewise depended on the current events in the game. During new expansions the author might spend as much as 40-80 hours over a week, during weekly seasonal updates it might vary from 2-20 hours a week, whereas during downtime, there might have been no engagement in-game at all. I, being a player of Destiny and a member of the community, engaged in a number of activities on each platform, such as watching live streams and videos of followed and recommended creators (from the "Home" or recommended pages), reading blogs and twitter posts, from both the developers and community members. See table 14.1 for full list of activities.

Due to this shifting nature of game engagement, the protocols of data collection would change depending on the activity of the community and developer updates to the game. As a long-time player, I have intimate knowledge of the cadence of Destiny's release schedule and used this to inform when and how data collection was handled. The extended period of ethnography meant it was not feasible to maintain the same intense level of community involvement every day and thus activity would wane in periods, but the understanding of the community and passive engagement through social media and friend-groups (whom I would often play with even in periods of downtime) would make sure to keep an ad-hoc presence and thus follow the pulse of the community. During periods of intense activity, I would write daily memos and save regular screenshots of the community talking about or playing through events. During less active periods, the author would keep an eye out for surprising events and watch a stream every week or so and note relevant details, but write less frequent memos following the lower cadence of the community. What data was recorded evolved, focusing on new developments and activities within the community and game. The first months of the study were focused on open exploration of how players engaged with the storytelling of Destiny. Over the course of the next year the questions of developer interaction and rituals formed from the data, and the collection shifted to focus on how players talked about the storytelling and interacted with developers as a part of these rituals. The type of data collected were typically Twitter/Reddit posts and comments, screenshots and notes of YouTube videos and Twitch streams (including chat messages). For video content, the author would take notes while watching, noting important phrasing or when players reflected

on the storytelling or development.

Due to the long-form nature of this work, the people I actively played with organically shifted over time, as other people would come and go and engagement with the game would change. This has had an impact on the data gathered, as conversations with close friends would naturally relate to the game and community at large, e.g. by mentioning community creators or events happening in the game while talking privately. It also affects the style and type of content I would be exposed to on social media, both through algorithmic bias and social osmosis.

14.1.2 Data Analysis

During analysis, data from my field notes, memos, screenshots were analyzed together. I used an iterative, abductive (Brinkmann, 2014) approach where emergent phenomena were identified, named, and categorized, inspired by the constructivist lens (Charmaz, 2006).

Throughout the process of data analysis and reporting, I, along with my advisors and members my close Destiny communities checked and verified the conclusions I made, in accordance to a member-checking process (Carlson, 2010; Birt et al., 2016).

The data analysis started with looking at the variety collected data through the initial question of "how do Destiny players and developers talk about the game with each other?", with key focus on the storytelling. From this, several key features of their interaction was extracted and used for further analysis. The data was coded for how developer interactions shape the game and story experience and how players

Table 14.1: Table showing the various platforms used by the Destiny community and the developers, listing what they each use the platform for, and the type of content present.

Platform	Community function	Developer activity	Content types
In-game	Playing the game (primary mode of engagement)	Developing future content, playing	Video Game
Twitter	Discussing current topics, airing feelings on current state of the game, interacting with devs	News, marketing, announcements, server updates, clarifications, questions for players	Posts, videos, gifs, images
YouTube	Guides, Video essays, thoughts and feedback	Trailers, marketing documentaries	Videos, comments
Twitch	Live streams, experiencing new content, live interactions with community creators	Little, Yearly Expansion announcements, in chat	Live streams, chat
Reddit	Community discussions	Mostly passive, occasional posting	Posts, forum discussions
Developer Blog	Reading news	Posting (mostly) weekly updates on new content, patch changes etc.	Blog posts, short stories
Discord	Closer community discussions, grouping with other players, voice chat while playing	Little (servers are usually private)	Chat messageboards and voicechat.

interacted with the game and the developers. After this, I used thematic analysis to identify key themes of developer interactions and play, and it was through this the key theme of Performing Rituals was discovered, as well as supporting themes on story teasing, the impact of spoilers and leaks, playing with the lore, and reacting together. The data was then reviewed and organized with these themes in mind and analyzed for indicators of ritual construction and conflicts, and how conversations and actions shaped or dismantled those rituals. Qualitative Displays (Dahler-Larsen, 2015) were constructed to visually understand the relationships between players and developers, and see how they interact, based on the data.

Following best practices, I was continuously self-reflexive of my position as a member-researcher, and position during the analysis, being aware of the social contexts and constructivist creation of interpretation during data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). I discussed aspects of the memos and data analysis with other researchers during analysis.

14.1.1.3 Ethics and Limitations

Several important decisions were made in regard to the ethics and presentation of the data in this work to prioritize community safety. Due to the various nature of the communities followed, different degrees of consideration for privacy needed to be upheld. Publicly, well-known community creators Twitter posts needed to be treated differently than private conversations in private spaces. The work primarily relied on publicly available data, and the work is exempt from ethics board approval because it involves

ethnographic observations of public social media data. What was not publicly available data was not recorded, and only described in my memos as daily self-reflections and autoethnographic experiences, yet never mentioning names or revealing details. Formal interviews were not conducted for this study for this reason, to keep the focus on publicly available data. However, it should be noted that this is a limitation of this study and future work in this area would be bolstered by conducting in-depth interviews with players and developers.

Transparency towards members of private communities was essential, and all private spaces I engaged with during the ethnography was told about their status as a researcher prior to any data collection, and updated on the research progress. Furthermore, when public data or new publications were available, this was shared. This kind of transparency is unfeasible everywhere due to the breadth and ad hoc nature of the platforms studied for public data, and so no attempt was done on public platforms to announce their status as an observer, as is the nature of online social platforms. Yet, anonymity is kept throughout this chapter for all data, and all conversations and direct quotes have been anonymized and paraphrased, unless otherwise noted. In the case of public personalities and community creators, anonymization has not been attempted in places where relevant content is discussed in the chapter, since they present themselves as public figures. All stories and vignettes presented in this chapter were derived from my field notes or memos during data collection.

As mentioned in the beginning of chapter 12, a broad limitation of this work is that it does not represent the entire Destiny community, but rather the smaller

sub-communities I was involved in during the time-period of the study. The Destiny community is a large, diverse playerbase, with many contexts, experiences, ways of playing, and values that cannot be described as a unified body of people and no one individual can be said to speak for the entire community. Therefore, when the chapter heretofore refers to the "Destiny community" or "Destiny players", I am talking about a subset of the total playerbase, who might have other perspectives and ways of engaging with the developers than captured here. It should also be mentioned there are likely a large group of players that do not interact on social media or with the developers in any meaningful, public way, and thus their perspectives are not reflected in the data. Likewise, Bungie is a large company and no single developer can be said to be responsible or talking for the entire game, company or franchise, and are not treated as such here. When I describe developers throughout this chapter, I mean everyone at Bungie who do work for the game, including less direct development such as community managers, social media managers, QA, marketing, PR etc. At Bungie, there are different teams for community management and social media (Ruppert, 2023), yet they will here be discussed more together as it is difficult to ascertain from the outside which department has done what. It is also important to note that many Destiny developers are players themselves. When this chapter describes “developers” and “players” it is describing when people do those activities, not whether they are also a developer. Thus a developer can be in the capacity of a player, talking to a developer, and this is a player-to-developer interaction. Throughout the period of the ethnography, there were reported instances of people who were previously players becoming developers and vice versa.

A final limitation is due to the quickly evolving nature of the subject matter. The ethnography only covers a limited time period in the community and this period is impacted by a range of external and internal factors, which continues to impact the community afterwards, such as employee layoffs by Bungie on October 30th 2023, which included several social media employees and community managers being let go from the company (Schreier, 2023; Tassi, 2023a). This happened after the period of ethnography ended, and is not present in the data.

14.2 Findings

In this section, I highlight how Destiny’s community and developers create rituals and patterns of play, play with these patterns to achieve or dismantle narrative effects, and how they communicate these patterns with each other. First, I will describe how the rituals are created through design and feedback, then show how rituals get disrupted through glitches and spoilers, and finally report how the communication between players and developers help support and break down these rituals of play.

14.2.1 Creating Rituals

A game like Destiny creates a number of rituals for its players through its design, that are reinforced through play and development.

14.2.1.1 Weekly Resets

The first and most prominent of rituals is the “Weekly Reset”: Every Tuesday morning (Pacific Time) the game “resets”. This is when new expansions, seasons, missions and events are released, and old ones are refreshed, allowing players to earn their awards again. A Reset can bring with it new features surprises, hidden secrets such as the “Vexcalibur” mission, where players had to find and solve a minor puzzle to unlock a secret mission. Yet, most Resets bring expected, familiar activities. Every week in a live season will release a new story episode², or a week might introduce a recurring week-long event (such as “*Iron Banner*”) or seasonal events, which appear in specific weeks during the year (such as Christmas or Halloween). This weekly reset was likely created partly for development and technical reasons, giving developers a time they can reset the servers, introduce “downtime”, and upload patches at an expected pace. Yet, it impacts how the game is played. The expected weekly cadence creates a strong ritual around “reset time” as players always know when new things are being added to the game. Every week has the potential to introduce something new and players will come together to play on Reset day to see what is there.

The weekly reset sits within larger ritual structures, as Destiny 2 releases 1 expansion and 4 seasons each year. You can see Figure 14.1 for an overview of these releases. Players will plan for upcoming weeks, scheduling in advance to organize play for new events or when it is a good week for farming³. Before a new expansion, the

²Readers unfamiliar with Destiny’s structure can think of a Destiny season like a season of TV, with a new episode of story releasing each week for 4-10 weeks.

³Playing the same activity repeatedly in a short span of time to accrue specific rewards.

most active players prepare by stocking up on resources and clearing out their inventory space. This is known as “vault cleaning”, and becomes a popular trend on YouTube and Twitch before each new expansion, as streamers prepare what equipment they bring for the new expansion, sharing with viewers what they decide to keep and why. This serves as advice, but also entertainment, because players will often keep various things in their vault for sentimental, embarrassing, or nonsensical reasons.

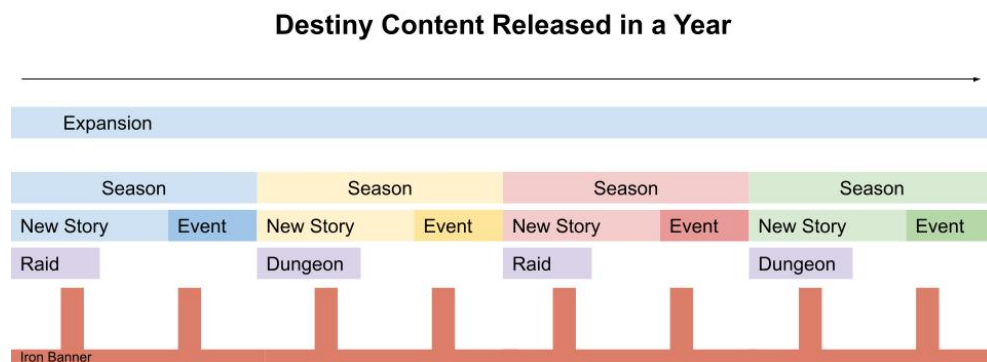


Figure 14.1: An overview of a typical year in a modern Destiny release cycle. Expansions are released yearly, with 4 seasons quarterly in between, each bringing with them some new story events, activities and either a raid or a dungeon. Seasonal events happen during seasons, often after the story events are over. Other smaller events, such as Iron Banner happen concurrently, two weeks per season. Destiny 2 has followed a schedule roughly similar to this since 2018 and through 2023, although it is likely to change in the future.

As an expansion releases, players rush to share best practices, build guides, and new damage numbers on social media. This culminates in the “Day 1” Raid Race, the race to see who completes the new raid first. Outside of the many players who try themselves, Day 1 is also the biggest streaming event in Destiny, where the game attracts over 500k viewers (Duwe, 2023), cheering the players on, and excitedly watching

the new spectacle.

14.2.1.2 The TWAB

Another key ritual is the release of the “TWAB” (This Week at Bungie)⁴ every Thursday. The TWAB is a news blog where the developers give insight into new features, balance changes, and otherwise keep the community informed about the current progress in the game. These changes were often so sought after that players would frequently ask the community managers and developers when the TWAB was going to be published on Thursdays, with streamers waiting to read it out loud with their viewers, leading to the meme “*Where TWAB*” being shared until it finally dropped. Players would share excitedly with each other when it was a “meaty” TWAB with a lot of new, important information, or be disappointed when the TWAB had little information to share, until next week when the anticipation would begin anew. To showcase just how much it became a meme, “Where TWAB” became self-referential as the developers themselves began asking the question before it had been released, and Bungie later also sold a “*Where TWAB?!*” T-shirt on their online store (Bungie Store, 2022), with some joking conspiratorial designs, leaning in on the joke.

⁴This was in 2023 renamed to “This Week in Destiny” (TWID), likely to differentiate from the new non-Destiny projects Bungie are releasing in the future. However, the name “TWAB” is still prevalent in the community, and the predominant name used during the ethnography and thus is the name used here.

14.2.1.3 The Danger of Predictability

The formulaicness of these rituals is a topic of discussion in the community. These formulas have been developed over time as the game has changed. While Destiny's release cadence has changed much since 2014, the seasonal model which started in 2018 has been fairly stable since then. In 2018 it was unclear to players what a season entailed, whereas after 20+ seasons, it is much more known what a season can be, and what the developers can feasibly make for a season. This has benefits, as players know what to expect and can plan ahead, yet it also has downsides. Many players will bring up fond memories of the secrets from the early days of Destiny or Destiny 2 as highlights of their playtime, such as the well-regarded "Whisper"-mission. This made the game feel mysterious and endless, as if new things could always happen. Contrasted to an expected release cycle, where players know how many new missions are coming in a season, this sense of mystery is slowly eroded, with only sporadic, occasional surprises.

Another example of this that showcases the developer communication even more clearly is the seasonal roadmaps. In the period 2018-2021, Bungie would release a roadmap with each season, similar to many other live-service games. This roadmap would detail what features would launch during the season, on the level of new gameplay activities, weapons, etc. Story information was not conveyed in the roadmap, but new activities and weapon releases were. However, even this backfired. For Season of Dawn (see Figure 14.2), a roadmap detailed a quest for a new Exotic⁵ weapon, whereas a secret event named "Corridors of Time", a giant, community-based ARG-like puzzle (Gach,

⁵"Exotic" weapons in Destiny are the rarest, most unique kinds of weapons.

2020a) was a surprise. The community was very excited, wondering what solving the big puzzle could lead to. When they learned it ended with them getting the exotic they had already been promised instead of something new, they were disappointed. Many players today look back on this event fondly, but some remember the sour taste of the reward, still. This balance between expectation and reality is what Bungie is straddling when they release a roadmap, as they want players to know what to expect but also want them to be surprised. After this and similar situations, Bungie has stopped supplying roadmaps to the players, leaving the contents of each season unknown until it happens. Still now they are experimenting with how much to tell players beforehand. For Season of the Haunted, in Summer 2022, they told the players nothing until one day before it launched, not even the name. Players had grown accustomed to at least a trailer one week before and some teasing through the TWAB about upcoming mechanics or gameplay changes, but this time they said nothing. Some players found this maddening, wanting to know how to prepare for it, whereas others found it refreshing and exciting. Other seasons, such as the Season of the Deep had its name revealed over 3 months prior, showing that the developers are still experimenting with what information to reveal when.

14.2.2 Breaking Rituals

This section will discuss how the rituals of play break down as players find ways to circumvent the intended patterns of play. An overview of player behavior and changes it causes for development relevant for this section can be seen in Table 14.2,

Table 14.2: Table showing the various things players do that disrupts the intended rituals, and how developers visibly react. This is not showing the developers' internal reactions, merely how their reactions are shown publically in the game over time.

What Players Do	Find spoilers and leaks	Find glitches and exploits	Create strategies and builds	Make story theories
How Developers react	Attempts to prevent	Fixes	Adjusts Balance	Plays on, teases for
How the game changes	Dismantles intended effect. Further Effort spent on prevention. Less hidden material in the future.	Changes how the game is played. Momentary up-ending of balance. Creating unique moments. Causes disruption in play.	Optimal strategies are changed, changes how players achieve their goals.	Subtly, if at all. Not visibly.

the game to change involuntarily. When possible, players and developers often try to incorporate these into the fiction of the game, or make fun of how the fiction begins to break down once this happens. When it was briefly possible for players to enter raids with 12 players, which is otherwise only possible with 6, there were jokes about how the fictional enemies were reacting to seeing this increase in Guardians. This event too, while technically a glitch, was seen as a highlight for many players, as it allowed a new, fun form of play that broke the expectations of what a raid was. Entering a raid with 12 players trivialized many of its encounters, and led to many moments of chaotic fun. Bungie let this bug persist for a few weeks to let players have fun, before eventually patching it before new content was released. Bungie has done similar actions with weapons that were too strong in PvP, leading to everyone using it (see descriptions of "Laser Tag", section 9.1.3). Instead of rushing out a patch, they declared it to be an

event and gave players an emblem⁶ for participating, after which they would fix it. One of the most infamous guns in *Destiny* is "Telesto", which has caused bugs at least 26 times as of 2021 (Evanf1997, 2021b), causing it to become its own meme, with players quick to blame Telesto for every new bug discovered. The developers got in on the joke in November 2022, and created a small in-game event where the gun ostensibly gained sentience, as popup windows appeared from the perspective of the gun "talking" to the players, spreading outside the game to the official *Destiny* Twitter account and press releases (Bungie, 2022a; Nichols, 2022). The Loot Cave (Gach, 2020b; Hornshaw, 2021) is also a prime example of a bug or exploit becoming part of the fictional reality of the game, first in a small, light-hearted way, then more seriously.

14.2.2.2 Spoilers and Events Out of Order

A more critical example of rituals breaking down the storytelling is how spoilers are handled. As a game telling a linear story, unfolding in real time, it could be said to function somewhat more like history (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021, 2022), yet players tend to want for an experience of traditional fiction, regardless. As new narrative episodes release, the community will maintain "grace periods" before being willing to discuss events openly on social media, similar to the release of a new TV episode. Public websites work around this too, using *Automod* on Reddit to warn about spoilers, warning up front about spoilers in YouTube videos, and the community lore archive *Ishtar*⁷ marks

⁶Emblems are small visual badges a character wears on their inventory and party screens, which can be seen by other players.

⁷<https://www.ishtar-collective.net/>

new lore entries with a spoiler warning. As time passes, this spoiler marking falls away, and players adjust what they consider talking about and not. Players will prod on whether a certain topic is available for spoiling yet or obfuscate information. As new seasons or expansions are released, older events become more foundational and players will discuss them more openly. This especially is true about content that is no longer available in the game, which is treated much more akin to historical events, without any considerations that a player might not have experienced it (this was also discussed in section 11.2.2).

However, saying that Destiny's storytelling is linear is only true under ideal circumstances. If a player keeps up every week with new events, the story is told as intended. However, if a player skips a season, or does not play it every week as it releases, parts of the game's ritual storytelling might break down. As an example, after skipping an entire season and joining in the next, the opening cutscene for the prior season might still play when launching the game, giving the player outdated information. New raids commonly cause a change in the world when they are completed for the first time, yet this change is immediate for all players, even players who have not completed the raid yet, leading them to see events "out of order", and sometimes being spoiled about the contents of the raid.

A more intended example of spoilers is seen in the presence of marketing material. Players, for example, knew the pivotal instigating incident of the *Witch Queen* or *Forsaken* expansions, 6 months before it "happened" in the fiction of Destiny because of trailers. When this played out in the opening missions, it was then not to any players'

surprise, even if the characters in the game had to react to it fictionally for the very first time. However, it is clear Bungie is intentional in what they show in their expansion trailers, as there were still several twists in the story for players to discover in each expansion, none of which had been spoken about beforehand through official channels.

How players deal with this varies. As a large part of the story experience is communal, players might want to know what is happening if they are unable to play, and thus intentionally “spoil” themselves through friends or content creators to keep up with the current conversation. Players, crucially, are aware of this, and are able to appropriate and reason about a story event’s “proper” place in the narrative arc, despite when they experience it. Many players will acknowledge that they saw things “out of order” or “got spoiled” or are seeing events that happened in the past. While they may lament that this happened, they are nonetheless able to comprehend the narrative, and these issues are thus rarely treated as negatives by the players. This, though, does commonly require help from others, and it is not difficult to imagine a single, disconnected player being confused if they are not paying attention to the larger conversation.

14.2.2.3 Leaks and Datamining

As Destiny is a video game on players’ harddrives, the data for a new season is stored on their computer weeks before they are supposed to experience it. “Mining” for this data is nothing new, but in Destiny it can be impactful for the general story experience. In the beginning of Season of the Deep, a cutscene meant for week 5 was

already on YouTube after week 1. Even if players did not want to see it, the YouTube algorithm might recommend it to them⁸. Some players avoid these leaks at all costs, wanting to experience the story as intended, yet others welcome it, and seek out these data mined revelations, and are eager to learn what they can as soon as it is possible to do so, even before it is supposed to have taken place. It is thus not uncommon in story conversations to check the group’s feelings on leaks, or have established boundaries in different spaces (such as Discord channels/forums where leaks are not okay and ones where they are), to accommodate for everyone’s preferences.

Players also treat different kinds of leaks independently. A leak that a new weapon is coming is treated differently from the fate of a story character. A player might welcome learning the first but shun the second. Before the Deep Stone Crypt raid, dataminers had discovered large parts of the areas the raid took place in, the names of several unique raid mechanics, and the names of the bosses, all before it was intended. Some welcomed this, wanting to be as prepared as possible, whereas others wanted to experience the new content “blind”, knowing nothing beforehand.

The developers tend to not approve of leaks for a variety of reasons. From compromising their data security to ruining carefully set up story pacing, leaks and datamining is often something that undermine Bungie’s ability to tell stories in the manner they want. Bungie has mentioned the difficulties of properly encrypting data can be too great to warrant it (Ali, 2022). Many players worried this meant that secret missions, often seen as highlights, were not going to be present anymore, matching

⁸This happened to me, and I heard similar stories from others.

existing worries (see section 14.2.1.3). As a potential counteraction, for the *Lightfall* expansion raid, the data miners found a model they assumed was for a boss. Yet, when the raid launched, no such boss was found, and the model was entirely unused in the raid. Speculation on why was abundant, and it is a common interpretation within the community that the developers intentionally left this model to lead data miners astray. Yet, the community has misinterpreted developer assets before (Clark, 2023) so it is unknown whether this is accurate.

Bungie’s communication and stance on leaks has been clear, and has resulted in bans, even for prominent community members (Tassi, 2023b).

14.2.3 Communication between Developers and Players

The community and developers communicate in a variety of ways. The broad overview of communication channels can be seen in Table 14.1, yet how these are used are of interest. This can be seen in Figure 14.3. Concurrently, and reciprocally, players and developers communicate all the time, both directly through social media, providing feedback or posting news updates, and indirectly through the game, as players behavior affects how the game is made and changes to the game affects behavior.

14.2.3.1 Playing with the Community

Some of the communication from developers to players is of an intentionally playful nature, and this is often where the storytelling overlaps with community relations.

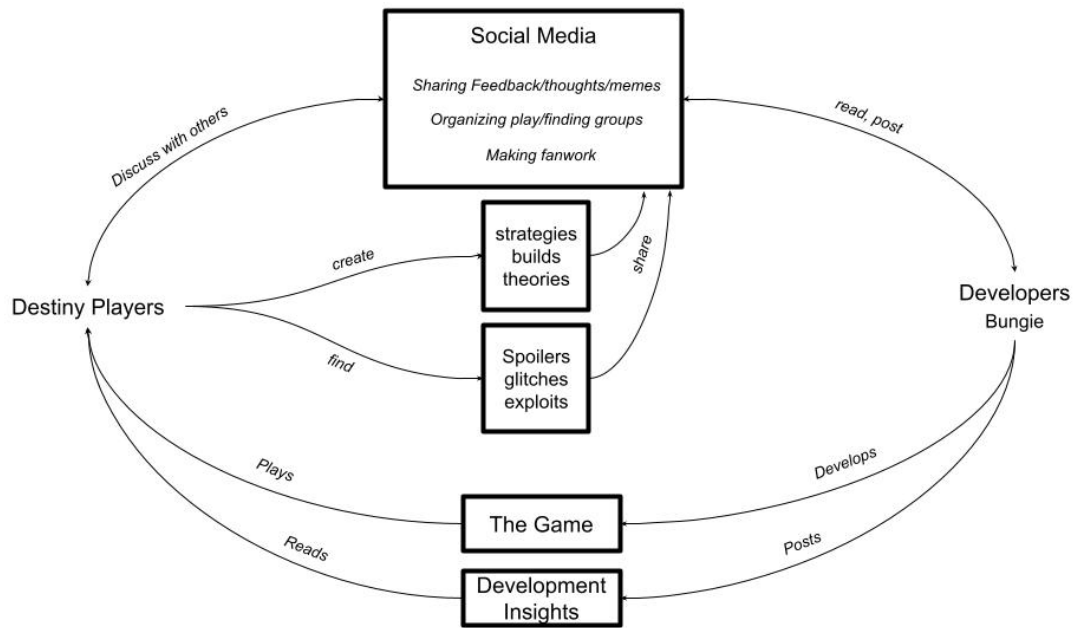


Figure 14.3: A display of the general relations in the Destiny Community. Various feedback loops exist from the developers and the community. New content in the game is released or shared through developer blogs, and this is consumed (played/read/etc) by the community. Through playing, players find bugs and exploits, and create strategies and theories, which they share with others. There is thus a complete loop for players discussing with themselves, and another larger loop going through the developers.

The most notable of these events was when a fictional character from the Destiny universe "overtook" the official Destiny Twitter account, and began speaking in character on the platform (Valle, 2021; Murray, 2022). Players responded to these positively, finding it fun when the characters responded, and prompting questions of whether this was "canon" or not, showing players are reflecting on the experience as part of the universe. Another similar incident was when a voice actor spoke in character to a team of players (Wilson, 2022). Another time, Bungie posted a "test" patch note, knowing players would not simply take that at face value, and included playful language

in the patch note: "*There are no hidden quests or things being added/changed*" (Bungie, 2022b), which naturally led players to scour the game for secrets. The Telesto incident, mentioned in section 14.2.2.1, is another example of this.

Players will also find ways to utilize the rules of the game for play. Every weekend, a character named "Xur" will appear in a random location to sell some rare items. Normally, Xur disappears on Tuesday morning at Reset. However, occasionally, Xur has sold items so rare players will have wanted him longer. Utilizing the unique server-infastructure of Destiny, players devised that they could occupy the instance in which Xur was, and as long as any player was present, Xur would not vanish. Players have, using this method, kept Xur "hostage"⁹ for days after he was supposed to disappear.

A final example in an event called *Dares of Eternity*. It was designed for experienced players, yet because of a design oversight, new players would be launched directly into this event without the experience, weaponry or skills to complete it. It took a while for Bungie to fix the issue, and in the meantime, the community to would rally to help the "blueberries"¹⁰, leading into this activity to helping them through it. The developers were quick to support this player-organization as well, granting out an emblem to all players who helped a new player through this activity until they could fix it.

⁹Players did indeed use the terminology "keeping him hostage" or "kidnapping Xur".

¹⁰"Blueberries" is the Destiny community's mostly affectionate term for new players.

14.2.3.2 Getting to Know the Game

As players get used to the rituals of play, they also get used to the style of the developer, and begin to know the quirks of the game and the development. Players talk about the developer more colloquially, saying "bungo pls" when they experience recurring bugs or development mistakes. This is almost to the degree of anthropomorphization (referencing Mittell (2015)'s notion of the inferred author function", see section 4.1.4), treating the developer holistically as an entity that has agency, talking about how "Bungie does X", how "Bungie doesn't care about Y", or "Bungie is incapable of doing Z". This is despite the fact that there are hundreds of individuals at Bungie, many of whom don't work on the same pieces of the game. This goes for both critique and praise, as praise is often done through highlighting elements that "Bungie does well". There are exceptions to this, e.g. when individual developers showcase a specific contribution, to which players might respond with feedback on that specific element, or when interacting with community managers, to which players give direct feedback.

And while much feedback is in the form of complaints, there is a side to this that is not explicitly negative. Some players have talked about how Destiny is such a well-known game to them they consider it a home, a place they stay in even if it is not in a good state, sticking with Bungie and Destiny like one would a sports team. The knowledge of previous patterns is used to predict future events. Predictions like "we haven't had a Cabal¹¹ Season in a while" might indicate that one is coming up soon. Another example is how players look at new items in the store for clues for upcoming

¹¹One of the alien factions in Destiny.

events, the most notable of this is the release of a gun literally named "Spoiler Alert", which players pieced together teased a future character death. Thus when this gun was re-released in Destiny 2, it brought much fuss (Bungie, 2021b). Examples like this show that the awareness is mutual: Both players and developers know that every element is scrutinized and that this can be used to tease, play, and communicate with the players. Players enjoy speculating about the future, and through knowing how Bungie communicates and releases content, get more material to speculate on. Everything Bungie does contributes to or breaks these patterns, and players will inevitably pick up on them.

However, the communication between developers and players does not always go smoothly, and this familiarity can have grim consequences.

14.2.3.3 Communication Breakdowns

The community goes through periods of praising the game and criticising it. When this is at its best, players provide respectful, constructive criticism and feedback to the developers, sharing insights into how they have enjoyed or disliked certain pieces of content, or not. Yet, as is present in all discussions about online culture, harassment and online toxicity (Turpeinen, 2023; Laato and Rauti, 2021; Siu, 2017; Aguerri et al., 2023; Adinolf and Turkay, 2018) is no stranger to Destiny's community either. When the game is at its lowest, in the community's eyes, this is shown most viscerally. The *Lightfall* expansion was received very negatively by many players, sharing much critique about how it had let them down. This was after the previous years' expansion *Witch*

Queen, which is considered one of the strongest expansions in Destiny's history by many.

While harassment has no place in any conversation, the harassment done in the Destiny community has sometimes approached egregious territories, as was publicly showcased through the 2023 lawsuit on harassment against a community manager from Bungie (Tassi, 2023c). This also came at a time after *Lightfall*, where the Destiny community reached a "boiling point" (Bungie, 2023) of outrage at the state of the game after a series of, in the community's eyes, disappointing releases. This culminated with a "State of the Game"-blog¹² that players felt mis-represented the current state of the game, and misunderstood the community and their desires. After this, then Game Director Joe Blackburn made a 15-minute video on Twitter (Blackburn, 2023), addressing the complaints on the blog-post and, outside of outlining several concrete game changes players had asked for, promised to communicate better in the future. While Bungie's communication tends to be either text or well-produced videos, this was 15 minutes of a man talking into a camera. This was well-received by the community, as he showed a transparency many had felt was lacking. Individual developers might still talk about the game on their personal accounts or ask players directly for feedback, but it is up to their own discretion, and at constant risk of harassment for all manner of reasons. Especially after a more maligned release, such as the *Lightfall* expansion, this harassment becomes more vitriolic, and developers are forced to take better care of themselves, often shutting down avenues to direct communication to players, and it is no wonder they are more hesitant to do just what Joe did, despite it being celebrated.

¹²https://www.bungie.net/7/en/News/Article/state_of_the_game_aug_2023

This harassment has changed how Bungie interacts with players. In Summer 2023, a Bungie developer clarified on Reddit that they have decreased their amount of direct interaction with players and cited harassment as the cause (Patel, 2023). Previously, Bungie’s social and community managers would often act from their own personal Twitter accounts, publicly showing their own personas. However, in January 2023 a “Destiny Team” Twitter account was created to be the primary social media account, creating a step between the individual social and community managers and the players.

Strong negative community sentiment also has a negative spiraling effect within the community, as other players dislike when the community is negative. Some players might outright leave the game because the community is seen as too negative or toxic, something also seen in other games (Turpeinen, 2023; Aguerri et al., 2023). This behavior thus hurts both the community and the developer.

14.2.3.4 Lance Reddick

To contrast with the above, and to showcase a powerful moment of camaraderie for the Destiny community, the final story shared here is a poignant moment that intercrosses storytelling, community and development. Lance Reddick was a prominent voice actor for Zavala, a central character in Destiny. And so, when he passed away in Spring 2023, this was grave news for the Destiny community. He was not only a voice actor but also an avid Destiny player himself (Tassi, 2023d), often sharing his experiences on his personal Twitter account. Thus, his passing is impactful in multiple ways for the Destiny community, who lost a unique voice for a popular character, a prominent, well-

liked community member, and a strong voice actor and colleague. The players were quick to organize vigils, standing around the in-game character with honoring emotes, breaking what rituals they would have otherwise done in the game. Streamers held hours of silence or helped bring people together to honor him in whatever way they could. Players were quick to organize wearing the same emblem, as a signifier of him. The developers joined in too, sharing their memories of Lance. As voice acting is done well in advance of the story being released, Lance's voice acting was still present in the season after this happened, and it was uncertain for a while what the future of this character would be¹³. This moment, while truly sad, showed the Destiny community coming together to celebrate and honor a well-liked figure, despite players' current feelings on the game (this happened shortly after Lightfall, likely the game's most contentious expansion), and showing their best side.

14.3 Discussion

14.3.1 Rituals of play

It is clear from the findings that there is a large amount of rituals that surround the playing of a game like Destiny, from the weekly routines to the larger, annual events. These kinds of rituals have also been seen in other similar games (Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008a; Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021; Geraci, 2014; Larsen et al., 2023). Many rituals are created through the design of the game, as this sets the foundation through weekly

¹³As of August 2023, Bungie announced that Keith David would take over as the role of Zavala (Gach, 2023). This was no doubt be a change in the character, as Lance's voice was considered iconic by many.

resets, seasonal events, and recurring delivery mechanisms. Yet, the players themselves are just as responsible for upholding these rituals, and create expected, familiar schedules that utilize the rules for their own gain. Slightly paraphrasing Carey and Adam (2008), rituals in *Destiny* are actively being communicated about and through to maintain social community over time. When these get socially reinforced by your friends or favorite content creators being there every week with you, it becomes more than habit and routine (Silverstone, 2003), and turns into something you do because of the social aspect (if not moreso) than the specifics of the gameplay, echoing the social function of ritual in across society (Couldry, 2005; Carey and Adam, 2008; Corneliusen and Rettberg, 2008a; Rusch, 2018). As with historical and modern rituals, the rituals of *Destiny* are maintained to express shared values (Trillò et al., 2022; Larsen et al., 2023) and organise the social space (Couldry, 2005) of the game (see chapter 3).

The sense of belonging players get within an online virtual world and community can be exhilarating (Wan and Nordmann, 2023; Nitsche, 2019; Golub, 2010; Laato and Rauti, 2021). Together with the familiar rituals, a strong mixture is made, wherein players are kept together socially, habitually, and ritually. This is the case in the *Destiny* community, as players who have played for up to 11 years are so familiar with the game, its environments, quirks, mechanics, and characters, that they feel a sense of homeliness when entering it. The belonging is shown at its most powerful form in situations where people come together to rally around a common events like new expansions, Day 1 raid races, or honoring Lance Reddick.

The rituals created for *Destiny* are set up for this purpose: They allow people to

come together. The rituals make people tune in every Reset to see the new content, check every weekend what Xur is selling, or read the new TWAB for surprises. The rituals make people prepare and schedule time for new events, so when something new does happen, people are there to witness it together. The rituals thus create situations where players can be there together, to react and participate, making moments that you do not just experience by yourself but together, in the world, on a live stream, or in online chat servers, experiencing "collective effervescence"¹⁴ in Durkheim's terms (Couldry, 2005). The rituals in Destiny are also a clear example of rituals stretching across multiple sites, as Couldry described (Couldry, 2005), as they appear on livestreams, Discord servers, in-game, and forums, all at once. The player-made rituals are also intentionally upholding and maintaining social structures (Carey and Adam, 2008), such as maintaining spoiler-periods etc., similar to how the Let's Play community maintained communal grace periods (McKittrick et al., 2023).

If the game did not operate on ritual schedules or predictable patterns, players would not be able to organize as effectively, not know when to tune in and when to stay away, or when their friends might be playing. The rituals are thus a crucial element in the social development of Destiny.

14.3.2 A Relationship of Contradictions

The relationship between players and developers is one of contradictions. At first glance, it is a relationship of mutual benefit: Developers create the game for players

¹⁴The feeling of togetherness produced by simultaneously doing something together, such as a ritual chant.

to play, giving them new content to experience, while players give developers a reason to make things, enact their visions into real life, to the surprise and delight of the creators. They rely on each other: Without the developers, there is nothing to play, and without the players, there is no one to develop for. Yet, they are also at odds. Echoing Glas (2013, p. 99)'s notion of *hyperproductive demystification*, the players want to do everything, play with the most optimal strategies, learn all the secrets of the story, and have fun. The developers, on the other hand, want to pace their storytelling and create curated, pleasant experiences that cater to all players, including those that are not able to achieve the most optimal of play. When players discover a new glitch or potential exploit, it is shared widely across the community, making sure as many players know about it "before they fix it"¹⁵. This puts players, in some ways, in *opposition* to the developers, as they want to take advantage of all possible tools they have, while they can. Players enjoy "getting one up" on the developer, finding a strategy that they had not intended. Activities such as grinding or farming have traditionally been seen as unwanted in game design, as something to avoid, as "unfun" gameplay. Yet, players in *Destiny* continue to find new ways to do just that.

This kind of optimization goes beyond gameplay strategies and also impacts the narrative experience. Echoing the "Survivor" leakers investigated by Jenkins (Jenkins, 2008), some players want to learn all they can about the story before they are supposed to, digging through the game's files and breaking the intended experience.

¹⁵In some more extreme cases, attempts are taken to "hide" the exploit so the developers cannot learn of it. This dynamic is widely controversial and not liked by many members of the community. Regardless, it rarely works for long because the developers will always learn about it eventually.

For some players, this is rewarding and exciting, as they are at the extreme end of testing the boundaries of accepted play. Yet, it can negatively impact the "normal" play of others, both because they might get spoiled when they don't want to and because the development might be affected by the presence of this advance information. And while the developers might not cater intentionally to dataminers and leakers, they still rely on developers, and many players still utilize the information gathered by datamining and leaks for their own benefit.

It is this tricky balance between mutual dependence, opposition, and play, that community-developer relations—and especially the community manager—must traverse. When this is fun and delightful, they are able to actively play with the community, tease upcoming content, reinforce community, and enrich the experience outside of the game. When it breaks down, it is potentially toxic and harmful. Players become isolated from the developers, losing the sense that they know what the game is and will be. Developers, in turn, lose the confidence to make things *for* the players, because they no longer know what the players want. As will be discussed in section 17.2 community managers are often neglected and undervalued in development (deWinter, 2014; deWinter et al., 2017; Kerr and Kelleher, 2015; Zimmerman, 2019), which is in contrast to the players' perspective, where there is less distinction between community managers and developers¹⁶. When players "talk to developers" they talk *to* community managers or social media managers, and thus the roles are often collapsed for players.

¹⁶I cannot say definitely how community managers were and are treated internally in Bungie. Yet we do know several community managers were laid off on October 30th 2023 (Schreier, 2023) and some reports from previous community managers about their experience (Ruppert, 2024).

The unification of "Bungie" as a single entity (section 14.2.3.2) also shows this. This is another reason for the precarious position of community managers: They are seen as the "face" of the company for the players, and represent all developers, while they only rarely are considered on equal level as other developers by those companies.

One might ask why players continue to play a game they complain about viscerally. These findings strongly echo the suggestions by Laato and Rauti (2021), and further showcases that power of rituals might be one of the reasons why harassment happens. The strong cocktail of belonging (Wan and Nordmann, 2023; Golub, 2010), ritual, and social interdependence that a game like *Destiny* creates gives people strong reasons to stay despite immediate dissatisfaction. Because of the familiarity, rituals, and social connections the game has established, it is difficult to break out of the routine and there might not be another immediate place, online or not, that offers the same sense of community and belonging. When players feel their sense of home and social belonging is in danger, they might lash out at what they perceive as the cause of that change. This can become personal and harmful, and it is thus important that each party is protected from the potential harm this can cause.

14.3.3 Too Much Ritual?

The findings also showed a danger to having too predictable ritual patterns in a game: The game gets boring. Surprises are more memorable than repetition, and players often hope and want things to change. At the same time, players also want to know what is coming, to be able to prepare, schedule for, and look forward to upcoming

events. In general, the community tended to appreciate surprises more than expectation in hindsight and in nostalgia, but expectation and anticipation is very important in the moment: If they are not excited about the future, they will lose interest, as much of the promise of a perennial game is that there is more coming. The tricky balance is being able to achieve both: Giving players something to look forward to *and* surprising them with something new. Destiny has shown situations where this succeeded, and where it has failed, as Bungie continuously walk the tightrope between too much and too little.

And it is often when exploring that boundary that players begin to break things and create new fun for themselves. "Kidnapping" Xur or the 12-man raids were enjoyable for the community exactly because it was a way for players to entirely "break" the game in a way that was fun and inclusive. These events create memorable moments for players, that changed the monotony for a time, giving players a new reason to log in and play with their friends. They can be seen as a kind of "media event" (Couldry, 2005; Dayan and Katz, 1992), but one where the audience (especially content creators) themselves are propagating and mediating the event. Contrary to traditional mass media events, these kinds of events often deliberately shake the foundation of the authors, as players wrestle control of the conversation back for themselves. Using Turner (1974)'s terminology, they have a "liminoid" quality: The rituals of players are de-centralized and transformative, and characterized by playful experimentation, rather than being centrally instigated, and often intended to expose existing systems (Couldry, 2005; Larsen and Tufte, 2004). These kinds of breaks are often welcomed by players and tolerated by developers (for a time). Rather than immediately clamp down on bugs or exploits as mistakes, the

developers had success and most leeway from the community when they leaned into the players' deviance, and let them play within the rules of the game, fixing the bug once the community has had its fun.

Players are also aware that the developers need to fix bugs, and that leaks are undesirable. Players also report bugs, knowing the developers will fix them (and still take advantage of them in the mean-time). They are thus willing to both play the game and subvert it, and it is often in this balance they find the most fun, testing the boundaries of acceptable behavior, and it has often been when Bungie has accepted, leaned into, or supported these breakages that Destiny has created some of its most memorable moments.

14.3.4 The Importance of Storytelling

Outside of trailers and teasers, when developers talk directly to players, they tend to discuss gameplay changes, and new features, and rarely what happens to characters or new plot details. The reasons for this are not surprising: They want the players to discover the story for themselves. Many players are happy with this, wanting to avoid spoilers or leaks, including official ones. When Bungie thus talk about the story openly, it is often accepted as *part* of the experience, despite its narrative incongruencies. The players have gotten to know Bungie well enough over time that they know how and why they tease events, and what it means, and what Bungie are comfortable telling and not.

As players get to know what to expect, and know how Bungie tell stories, players can predict patterns and infer relationships. When something as small as the

name of a new weapon can be used to tease story-events, players know that anything might be relevant. This is especially showcased when Bungie plays with the forms, such as playing as a character on their Twitter account, or reinforcing community memes like Telesto. Players enjoy these moments greatly and what they show is precisely the power of storytelling for developer-player relationships. Telesto becomes more than a buggy weapon: It becomes a story, it becomes a myth. By incorporating storytelling into the conversation, a simple weapon gains a meaning that players can relate to and resonate with, especially because they were present when the bugs happened and participated in discovering and using them. This is the same with many of the other most successful examples of player-developer communications: It is playing with storytelling, and it is through storytelling that we see play in community relations. It is in reacting to the emergent stories of players, as seen in the Loot Cave, or reflecting on the stories you inadvertently have created, as seen in Telesto and infamous PvP weapons, or forefronting the story directly in communication, as seen Twitter character impersonations. These kinds of communications go beyond the functional of informing players or moderating a community, and involve the fictional experience directly, blurring the lines between the game and the community. This aspect of community management is something not often openly discussed as a part of the community managers' role (see section 17.2 for more discussion of community management), but these findings suggest that this blending of community and storytelling might be a powerful way to both empower community managers by having them be more directly involved in the development, and improve the experience of players.

Taylor (2006) asked what designers do after accepting that players will always subvert the intended experience. This kind of storytelling might be part of the solution: By deftly utilizing the players' stories and weaving them into the rituals of the game, players both get to subvert the storytelling *and* be a part of it. It is not fully surrendering control to the players—the developers of *Destiny* maintain much control over how the narrative develops—yet players do not feel their actions are ignored.

This chapter served as the other major contribution on how the *Destiny* community create mythology about their game. We discussed how the rituals of *Destiny* cultivate its community, both through their design, allowing players to come together, and how the community reinforces them in their own play. These rituals are a key part of building up the sense of belonging in players, as they experience a ritual activity week over week with their friends, growing it into their own. Over time, these rituals become predictable and players might grow tired of them, and seek ways of reinterpreting them into something new, often through breaking the rituals themselves. This is all mediated within the communication between players and developers, who react to and play with the expectations of the other, as they over time begin to recognize how they each function. Yet, this relationship is fraught, and prone to conflict as their inherent motivations are sometimes at odds, yet this can also provide opportunities for play. Next, we will discuss the *why* of this communal activity in greater detail.

Chapter 15

Living in a World

"...my friend was like, 'hey there's this game that is made by Bungie and Activision, and it's supposed to be like a world changing type of game' and I hadn't even heard about it up until then."

Participant 14, Player Interviews, 2022

THIS CHAPTER FOLLOWS UP ON ADDITIONAL FINDINGS from the interviews (first seen in chapter 13) I have not yet published on, yet will nevertheless be important to the overall argument of the dissertation. As the previous chapters (13 and 14) answered *how* communities play with narrative in Destiny, these interviews responses will dig deeper into *why* players play. What about Destiny keeps them coming back and being interested, and why engage with its narrative, and why perform narrative play?

15.1 Methods

The core protocol of the interview was described in section 13.2, as the recruitment, format, and processing was the exact same. Yet I will here list a few addendums regarding the questions asked for this topic and how they were analyzed. On top of the questions about canon described in that chapter, further questions were asked about the participants' experience with Destiny. Primarily, the questions were open-ended, asking participants about how they got into playing Destiny, why they keep playing it, how they play it, and what they enjoy about it. Questions were asked about their feelings on the narrative, the social aspects, fanwork, repetition, and how much these elements mattered to them. During the interview, a series of curated photographs were shown to participants, in the style of visual elicitation in social sciences (Pauwels, 2019) to prompt discussion. These photographs were collected from my own experiences with Destiny, either personal screenshots taken by myself or popular and well-known events in the community. They were all images of Destiny's history, showing various moments of narrative importance, community importance, or merely activities in the game, including some screenshots of out-of-game elements like community ARG puzzles, social media, or the Destiny Item Manager¹ Both the regular questions and the image prompting responses were coded for this part of the interview, as both showed instances of participants recalling interesting moments or discussing their experience with Destiny which were relevant to the research question.

¹The Destiny Item Manager is a popular website players use to maintain their inventories across characters and to interact with their vault.

15.1.1 Analysis

Each interview was coded through an open coding method (Charmaz, 2006), capturing relevant data to the experience of playing Destiny, focusing on the questions of "why do players perform narrative play in Destiny" and "why do people continue to play Destiny over long periods of time". Through an iterative process of condensation, these codes were then turned into 13 focused codes, such as "here for my friends", "understanding the obtuse", and "being in the world". These focused codes were then arranged in a visual display (see figure 15.1) and connected through their meaning, seeing how each element would lead to another or transition from one kind of play to another. This display is the core of the findings for this chapter, yet I will augment this with individual quotes from the interviews and the overall analysis.

15.2 Findings

Figure 15.1 shows the display of the focused codes for this chapter, highlighting how participants getting into playing the game, and how they stayed engaged through loops of social engagement and feeling a sense of magic and mystery about what was coming next, and ultimately beginning to feel a sense of belonging and understanding of the game and its narrative, and social bonds that makes it feel like a home.

The first stage of the display, and a starting point for many participants is getting into the game with a promise. This promise is the fantasy, or the magic of the game. When asked why they started to play Destiny, many provided answers that

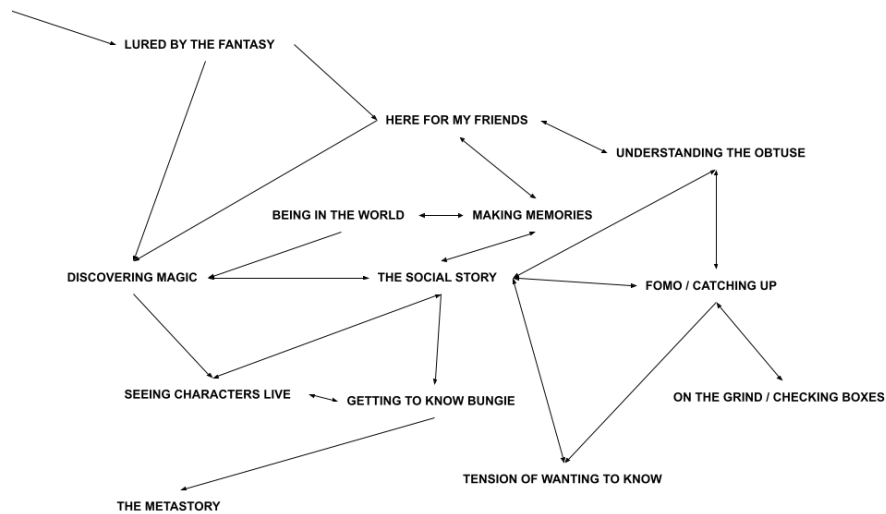


Figure 15.1: A display of the focused codes from the interview analysis, showcasing how Destiny players talk about the game and connect different aspects to each other, from the narrative and the social elements.

spoke to the fantasy of the game: *"The hunter! [laughs] [...] I did really like the Hunter and the fact that you could be an Exo [A robot]"* (P6). *"This has got some fun science fiction and some robots in it. [...] cool, I'll give it a shot"* (P10) etc. Some participants also mention being dragged into the game by their friends in the first place, and playing initially was done entirely for social reasons, the fantasy meaning less yet wanting to play with their friends. Yet as they played, many participants discussed a moment when they realized the game was "more" than just a game for them, finding a little detail or feeling awe or a feeling of wonder. This was often something unexpected, such as finding a surprisingly poignant and emotional lore tab, which they had not expected from a *"a looter-shooter"* (P4). Similar to this, players talk about the feeling they had back then of the world being bigger and more uncertain, with more unanswered questions and mysteries, and wanting to seek out the answers. One participant also mentioned the

quality of the production of Destiny helps with this as well, as each weapon and area is unique, bespoke and richly detailed, meaning that each time you find something new, it is often more rewarding. Several participants talked about enjoying the visuals and environments of Destiny, and purely liking just being in the environment for its mood and atmosphere, and appreciating the game's aesthetic aspects.

15.2.1 Social Connections

Eventually, for most participants, however, much appreciation for the game inevitably leads to the social interaction. For many participants, the primary reason they are still playing the game after many years is because of the social connections they have through it, even long after the initial excitement of the game itself has worn off. As P15 said, *"playing moment to moment, the game is still fun to play. But like, you know, what keeps me as a long-term player is more being part of various different Discord servers for the games where I've made friends."* This is at first due to the naturally empowering aspects of social connections, being able to feel the excitement with others, and having others to share the experiences with, further heightening already exciting moments through being there together with others. As P9 said: *"I started probably becoming more engaged with aspects of the story because people wanted to have lore discussions. People wanted to talk about it."* Over time, it thus becomes a social space, a place to hang out and be with people you are comfortable with. The social connections were also directly relevant to the experience of the narrative, as it was precisely about experiencing the narrative *with others*, talking about it with friends was part of what

made the narrative engaging to continue to keep up with. Several participants brought up heightened social moments, for example community puzzles or important narrative live events, where the community came together and how much fun that was to be part of in the moment. On describing the Corridors of Time event, P14 said: *"It just felt like genuine fun because you were working towards this cool, secret goal. And everybody was locked in at the edge of their seats. It felt like you were witnessing history and you were a part of it."* Several other participants also mentioned this event, and others, with similar fond sentiments, such as Day 1 raids, or narrative live events, or new announcements, and the joy of experiencing those with others in the moment.

Several participants mentioned how this, over time, was like being in a world. This feeling is difficult to pin down exactly, but many participants spoke to the world feeling "like a place", they could be in *"as if it was real"* (P4) (and echoing Hong (2015)). As they had played the game for so many years, returning "feels like returning home". They know it intimately and so well it is a part of them and being there is as comfortable as being in their home—which, as some participants mentioned, is further emphasized by the game letting them "be" in it as much as they are, allowing players to be "in the action" and enjoy the atmosphere. This feeling is very reminiscent of Klastrup and Pearce's idea of "worldness". It is important to mention that this also is inextricably bound up in the social connections, as it the social bonds in the world help strengthen this feeling. Talking with others is part of what makes it "real", as these social connections indeed are very real. Players connect the changing game with these social connections, going through life alongside their friends, seeing them change alongside the game. As P5

said: *"I think saying it's one of the most important things would not be doing it justice. Because it's more than that. It's uh... right now and, for the rest of my life Destiny is part of who I am."*

Players thus, both socially and narratively, create memories within this world, and connect its spaces with memories of each other and of the fictional characters and its narrative events, and these memories a part of shaping how they understand and see the world. As P9 put it *"I still get a sense of enormous... nostalgia just jumping into the Cosmodrome" [one of the earliest areas from Destiny 1]*, and remembering all the fond memories they had in those places over and over and they repeat activities. Seeing these spaces change over time is also a large part of it. P5 noted how *"the books for the Iron Lords in Destiny 1 were so much different than the ones we're getting in Destiny 2"*, and how it was part of the enjoyment to see this change over time. This also comes through the ongoing storytelling, as participants mentioned how the evolving narrative helped seeing characters live (note, here I am intentionally using the ambiguity of the word "live", meaning it in both the senses of in the moment and alive). P12 mentioned the joy of seeing the grow over these many years, and how the story thus has developed.

The social connections are also important for another reason as players are learning the game. As many participants noted, Destiny is often quite obtuse and difficult to parse. Many elements are not easy to understand as a new player and they would have gotten lost if they were on their own—and this relates to both storytelling information and gameplay information. This is either done by looking up answers in the larger community, searching through social media or finding guides on YouTube,

etc. (which many participants noted as being very common for them), or by asking people they play with. Relying on others to understand the game is part of learning to play it, at all, as there is almost no part of the game that cannot or is not being looked up or asked about by players (echoing the point from Hayward (1997) that people are introduced to these experiences by other people, not by themselves). This goes doubly the for storytelling, which, if you are not paying active attention and reading all the lore entries, can be daunting to keep up with, often requiring work to parse and understand. Thus, many players rely on content creators and friends who do want to do that work. As P13 put it: *"there's people who are just way more into the lore than I am, who know it much better. So I kind of am just relying on them to to have interesting comments. That way I can sort of kind of keep up with the interesting parts but without actually having to do any work [chuckles].."*. This also highlights another point mentioned by some participants which is how keeping up with the narrative, reading the story or watching videos on it, can be quite separate from the playing of the game. For most participants, it was not something they're actively doing while playing with friends or doing repetitive activities, but something that happens separately and at other times (or occasionally, in the background while doing other tasks).

15.2.2 FOMO and Spoilers and Repetition

The obtuseness combined with the constant change, however, also leads to anxiety over feeling like you need to catch up, or experiencing FOMO (fear of missing out), as the story is constantly moving, and wanting to be able to follow the ongoing

conversation in the community (either at large or just in local discords with friends), could cause a need to make sure you are up to date. This also applies in terms of mechanics, as making sure you have the gear and builds required to do the newer content when it released can be a burden. Another way this manifested was through the (few) live events that Destiny has had, which some participants expressed regret to have never experienced (like P11 missing the Almighty and P4 missing the curse of the dreaming city), yet still appreciated that the moment had happened in history. Though, even when the events are not live, the fact that content is regularly removed from Destiny is also a cause of this anxiety, as players want to make sure they did not miss out on it when it was there. Some participants also mentioned missing certain parts of the game, old environments and planets they couldn't return to, further indicating a sense of belonging and emotional connection with the spaces themselves.

The flip-side of this is spoilers, which participants had disagreeing views on, some actively seeking out spoilers, not being able to keep themselves from seeing what was happening, yet others avoiding them, or avoiding certain kinds (such as P7 being fine with datamined weapons, yet avoiding story spoilers), being fine with spoilers on the mechanical nature of weapons, but avoiding narrative spoilers until shown in the game. As mentioned by some participants, it also depends on their individual tolerance for spoilers. P1 and P5, for example, were in general fine with being spoiled and it didn't necessarily ruin their experience of a show, yet other participants mentioned being much more worried about seeing spoilers and actively avoiding them. P12 mentioned enjoying the moment of surprise upon seeing something unexpected for the first time

in the game, and not letting that be influenced by anything outside, and P3 mentioned not thinking they would enjoy a mission as much as they did if they had been spoiled on it first.

The repetition was also not always seen positively. Several participants mentioned how the game sometimes felt more like a checklist, which was satisfying to tick off and make sure you collected it all, but it could lead to burnout and exhaustion, or feeling like you were doing "homework" too much. Participants handled this differently. Sometimes, they recognized that the best option was to take a break, if a particular season was not interesting to them either because of the activities or theming or storytelling in the moment, and so they stopped playing themselves and kept up through friends, to return when the game piqued their interest again. The game in these moments almost becomes an entirely passive experience, paid attention to through social osmosis and not as a video game.

15.2.3 Getting to Know the Developer

The continuing engagement led to another phenomenon some participants mentioned, which was a joy or appreciation for getting to know the game better, and more specifically, the people making it. As P3 mentioned, over time they get to know Bungie and how they tell stories, and thus you can begin to tease apart what the next part of the story is going to be based on previous clues, what kind of foreshadowing they tend to do, as well as what kind of stories they seem to enjoy telling (and not). This is of course not meant in the way that they get to know the individual people (al-

though, in the case of the community-facing people, such as the community managers, that might be a little different), but more in the sense they understand the developers style or work over time, as they see repeating patterns in the work which they can then predict going forward. This can lead to both joy and frustration, as this, as it did for some participants lead to increased focus on the story they are not the most interested in, yet Bungie seems to want to tell more, or wanting Bungie to change in one way or another to better accomodate what they want, or otherwise disagreeing with the direction of the narrative or game. However, there is also a joy in this, and in seeing the developer improving over time, and appreciating their storytelling style. Several participants expressed being impressed by Bungie and what they have accomplished, praising the game for various details and moments, such as P10 being impressed they managed to take a hated character and turn them into someone the players (including the participant) loved. As people were saying this, it is important to mention, also in relation to the findings from the canon findings (section 13) , that participants here were consistently discussing the role of Bungie as an author in this, describing their work and attributing developments in the game to them. The inferred author function (4.1) is clearly present in the responses, as participants discuss Bungie often as a holistic entity with preferences, proclivities, and tendencies in their authorship.

This was also reflected in the moments participants mentioned of Bungie talking back to the community, for example related to the Loot Cave or other community events. *"it feels special. It's um... It is like you're being seen by the company that actually develops the game and they try to, you know, [...] acknowledge that this has*

happened." (P6) Participants recognized this as special and enjoyed it greatly when it happened, as it made the players feel more part of the world and like their activities as players matter. As P9 said, *"it adds to the the illusion the suspension of disbelief that we're all under, that the Guardians and the game are part of this connected world, that does actually live and breathe outside of just being a video game."* When Bungie reacts to the players, it further enhances this feeling that this is a real place with real people in it, to whom real things happen.

This chapter discussed how Destiny players get invested in the game in a moment of mystery, when the game opens up and becomes more than they expected, and then how over time they have continued to stay in this world due to the social connections they have made, feeling like they are part of something greater than themselves, which they truly come to know like their own, and the continued engagement and interaction from the developer is also a great joy and feels very powerful in the moment. Yet, the continuing updates can also lead to a pressure to feel like you need to stay engaged to keep up, which can be stressful, and yet they often stay due to those very same powers of social connection, belonging, and enchantment.

Now, with all the findings covered, we are ready to proceed into the final chapter of this direction, which will bring all the findings together and begin answering the research question of how and why players play with narrative in perennial games.

Chapter 16

Connecting the Findings

"It—this is going to sound stupid—it feels like home, returning to it. [...] It feels like this is where I'm supposed to be. It feels good to be here."

Participant 6, Player Interviews, 2022

THIS FINAL CHAPTER OF THIS PART will bring together the findings from the three studies from previous chapters (chapters 13, 14, and 15), to approach an answer to the research question. I will also discuss these findings in relation to the prior work, especially the understanding of mythology (chapter 3), space 8, and the related work mentioned in chapter 12 on community and the magic circle. This will all come together to understand how and why people play Destiny together, and how the mythology of the game can be read to understand the community as it exists and plays with those myths.

16.1 Mystery and Homes

The first and most crucial element I want to discuss in this section is the idea of losing mystery. Across the interviews and ethnography, we see different ways this manifests. The first of these is the simplest: The game answers questions over time, and becomes more concrete as players play it. Much of early Destiny was obfuscated and vague, allusions to grander elements that were coming in the future. Echoing what we saw in chapter 9, the game has become more closed and fixed and predictable over time, and players feel this closely. Regardless how many changes happens the game, it can only ever build upon what is already there, and needs to take into account that past history. In fact, players will feel betrayed if it does *not* build on the past, precisely because of those years of history that have been established, and put effort into caring about, built up relations around, and shaped entire communities and myths. If the game does not honor what the game *was*, players might feel their years of investment were wasted. Yet, by only building upon what was before, the resulting future can only be slimmer than the past, the possibility space inherently has to be *lesser* because each choice made before cuts off possible paths. I am reminded of one interviewee who mentioned the story being built like a "ziggurat", one piece atop another. Yet, a ziggurat gets slimmer at the top, until it cannot be any taller. And before we get into the development challenges of this (and we will), I will here discuss how players consider this. Because players are aware of this challenge, and to some extent are sympathetic to it.

It is easy to feel a sense of longing, of nostalgia to back when the game was mysterious and vast and awe-inspiring at every turn (while remembering that these "turns" are often collapsed in memory, often taking months to execute, yet in hindsight feel more frequent). It is easy to be nostalgic for when the garden was wild and every step felt like being on an adventure into the unknown, for when the Ziggurat was brand new and you could not see the edges of it. But after 10 years, a perennial game simply *cannot* be that wild anymore. It's paths have been too downtrodden, its edges too well-trimmed, its many corners too marked by what lives inside it.

However, there something very important happens upon this loss of mystery. What the game loses in questions, it gains in familiarity, comfort, and relationships. The fact that players know the game so well is, in a way, its own reward. I feel a familiarity and resonance with so many of the places in Destiny because of all the time I have spent there. All the times I have gone to the Tower and spoken to Hawthorne to pick up my clan bounty. Re-heard her familiar words and then loaded into a raid I have been in many, many times with friends I care for to enjoy a familiar trek through well-crafted, well-known spaces. As both shown in the ethnography and the interviews, Destiny becomes a *home*, a third place (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2017), where players go to co-exist and *exist*. It is a place accepted and beloved, not just because of its strengths but because of its flaws, because of its idiosyncrasies and specificities that have remained over the years (let me tell you about the weird jump you can do to get to Hawthorne from Ikora, it is not the most obvious way to navigate, yet it is faster and more fun). Many of the participants echoed this feeling of "coming home" to Destiny, accepting its

idiosyncrasies and behaviors as a part of what it was, and enjoying that familiar space. This is the ordinary play of Destiny, what you experience when you log in to the game every week for ten years.

I want to especially highlight that this is in *contrast* to the idea of the game as mysterious and wild. A wild forest cannot be a home because it is not known. These two feelings, both desirable, exist in opposition to each other, and any perennial game straddles these desires, because, as shown in the interviews, players rarely arrive here because it is a home. They come for the fantasy and a hope to explore and discover new things. Yet it becomes a home over time, as they continue to play. The fact that the *reason* for playing changes over time is valuable to consider going forward, because it is two rather different things that are required from the game to support one and the other.

16.1.1 The Ordinary and the Real

And yet, this is more complicated. Within the familiar, weekly rituals of play, players get tired and desire novelty. While a new raid is a new activity that provides a new mystery there is still so many well-established expectations in what a raid *is* that there is plenty of familiarity within this ritual. The Day 1 raid—the epitome of the "new raid experience"—is a heavily ritualized endeavor, with many players following clear rituals around it, with weeks of preparation beforehand and a strong expectation of what is going to happen. We know roughly how many encounters will be in a raid, the broad types of encounters we might face. It would arguably be more "wild" for

Destiny to not release a raid but an entirely different activity for a different number of players with a different kind of encounter-design and a different set of outcomes. Yet I do not think this, instead of a raid, would be beloved by the current community¹. Because the ritual is just as important as the mystery. A Destiny without raids, its arguably marquee feature (despite how few people actually engage in raids²), would be considered a lesser experience by many players. And thus, with each new expansion a raid must follow, not just because players want it, but because they expect it. This is *constraining* inherently, because through this expectation of getting a raid we are closing other possibilities. Destiny's future possibility space is inherently smaller because of constraints like these, yet this should not be considered inherently problematic, as raids are for many players *why* they are there.

The fact that these spaces are increasingly turning familiar, turning into homes, is what causes them to be more and more difficult to change. This is also true for the narrative. The players care deeply about the canon and want it to be upheld. For example, the *Eliksni*, one of the major factions in Destiny, has a very defined history and any new character or group within that faction needs an explanation for how they fit into that previous history. The introduction of something entirely new must be accompanied with an explanation of *how it was not known before*, because the world is so familiar to players they should have known had it been common knowledge. New

¹We do see examples of this being beloved *on top* of a raid or when no new activities were expected, for example the "Onslaught" activity before The Final Shape, sparking life into the community before the new expansion.

²The actual statistics on this are difficult to get, but rough estimates based on API statistics and player calculations is that only around 5-18% of all players have ever completed a raid.

elements can be introduced—as they did with the new city of "Neomuna" on Neptune, a previously hidden city that had been unknown to mankind for thousands of years—yet this kind of introduction requires buy-in and suspension of disbelief for players to accept.

In this ritual, in this recurring expectation of what the experience is, is where the truth of the game lies to the community: In the increasing knowledge of what the game is and can be, in the increasing relationships that builds, in the everyday interaction of weekly events is how the game *becomes real*. More succinctly, it becomes real because it becomes *ordinary*. Playing Destiny is an every-day event, the same as eating dinner or chatting with a friend. It's comforting everpresence is what makes it feel like a home to players. Real through social interaction. Real through historical change. Real through making memories in it. Real through seeing real people's lives being impacted by it. Real through the game's insistence that players exist. Real through a commitment to the game's fiction as relevant to the experience of play. Destiny is a part of life. When people were asked to recall memorable events (chapter 13), they mentioned events like the Day 1 raids, Corridors of Time, the Craftening, the big expansions, and so on. Yet, those kinds of moments do not make a home, they make a spectacle. The mundaneity of the everyday activities is what creates the space to exist in, in the weekly rituals, reading the TWAB/TWID every thursday, logging in every tuesday for the new content or for the weekend raid with the clan, or just jumping in alone to grind out some weapons. Because it is everyday it is safe and familiar and you can always go there.

However, as Crenshaw et al. (2017) highlighted, repetition can turn sour for some parts of the community too, as play gets hyper-optimized. This can also be seen as a reflection of this turn to ordinariness. As Crenshaw noted in her paper about a guild's raid experiences as they improved their skills: *"...progress eventually turned to stagnation. In December 2015, [the guild] defeated the last boss [...] completing all the content that was available. Now the guild leadership began to focus on efficiency."* (Crenshaw et al., 2017). As players got more familiar, their play shifted towards hyper-optimizing all mystery out of the experience, which some players disliked (or did not have the time, ability, or interest to keep up with). The ordinary becomes routine, becomes work. In other words it becomes *too* familiar, and without the sense of mystery that drew players there in the first place, the sense of community—or what they got out of the community—is lost. The ordinary is just as important as the extraordinary. The extraordinary is why people show up in the first place, yet the ordinary is why they stay. If the the ordinary goes away, too, they will leave.

It does not matter what form this ordinary takes. The world of Destiny is not real despite or because of it being "virtual" but instead real because of the social dimension—the virtuality of the world does in fact not matter at all. The Destiny played in the Destiny Item Manager, or in damage testing spreadsheets or on Reddit or on Ishtar Collective, is just as *real* as shooting guns to kill aliens on Mars. The lines are not even blurry, as discussed by the previous work (section 12.1.3): They do not exist.

16.2 The Masquerade of Magic

However, saying that the lines do not exist is not entirely true either, because that is only true as long as we disregard the fiction and as long as we disregard the audience. The narrative is where the line between "real" and "fictional" lies, and while this line is up for discussion at all times. The line, as the discussion on the magic circle reminds us (section 12.2), is only there as object of discussion, and part of that object is the fiction. We want the line to be real, and discuss it as such. The fictional characters and events of *Destiny* are "not" real, yet this fact is precisely what makes them alluring and worth interacting with. *Destiny* matters to players *because* it is *Destiny*, because it is a video game that is separate from their daily life and yet nevertheless is part of it. It matters because we want it to matter, because the allure of a mythic science fiction story about robots fighting ancient gods about the shape of the universe *is* beyond our own experience. *Destiny's* ideal shape, as an object of play we can negotiate about, a place where we as players can *make our own fate* (chapter 9), is attractive precisely because of its boundaries *and* its permeability. This is why we engage with the ordinary over and over again, why players accept the grind and run through the same strikes over and over. On top of the social connections, the ordinary becomes *meaningful* precisely through the continued engagement with the game through the ironic distancing of the masquerade of play (section 12.2).

Furthermore, the audience enjoys when this line is played with. It is great fun when the fiction of the game enters reality, it is great fun when we as real world humans

enter the fictional world. This expanding of fictional scope is fun because it reminds us of our power to affect it; that our power as audience is to decide where the boundary lies. This fuels the discussion and brings us closer to the world. We enjoy discussing what is canon both because the game invites it through its canon-blurring incidents, but also because in doing so we are helping shape the world for ourselves.

And it is also because there is more to the world of Destiny than any one person can experience on their own. The magic found in Destiny is rarely experienced or seen by everyone, yet collectively, over time, it *can* be—if not in person then through the shared stories we tell each other. As discussed in chapter 9, only one player got to level 999 and killed Dul-incaru and only one player had to for the story. Yet, this story lives on in the memories of everyone else and is part of the magic of the game now. It was real enough that a real person *could* "become legend" (as Destiny's tagline promised us), yet not so real this is a promise we all *actually* expect to fulfill. "Becoming Legend" for most, is referred to the fictional storyline, in which players have killed gods and saved the universe from extinction, yet it is only occasionally this truly means something more—yet the fact that it *can* matters. Destiny is its own magic circle, a fictional universe with its own rules that we can achieve mastery over as players. We do this both through feats of skill, yet we also do it in more subtle ways, as we grow accustomed to the universe and its rules, learn how the story unfolds (and how Bungie tells stories), learn the nooks and crannies of its environments.

This fun, however, is not always "fun" for all sides. I here return to Trammell (2023)'s notion of play, who expands it intentionally to include elements like torture and

bullying, which have typically been discarded in the (White, Western) canon of play studies. We saw in the Destiny community how the sense of belonging and ownership over the game could turn sour once the game changed in a way they did not enjoy (or not change enough), leading to complaints and harassment. Discarding this as "not play" or not part of the communal experience is disingenuous and misses the point. It *is* a kind of fun to discuss how a developer is incapable of fixing their game, or break the game against the wishes of the developer, and intentionally disregarding their vision. The myths created through this play can be hurtful, just as they can be joyful for all parties, and it is important to remember that even the painful play is productive for the community: It creates the boundary of who is allowed to have fun and who is not³. Yet, within the masquerade, the assumption of "fun" is present, which is dangerous precisely because it seems like it "should" be fun for everyone.

16.3 Identifying the Myths of Destiny

On top of all of this, are the layers of myth. As the game fluctuates between surprise and repetition, players tell stories about those repetitions. As mentioned in the ethnography (chapter 14), a buggy weapon becomes more than a buggy weapon, a ritual activity becomes more than an activity, because people tell stories about them.

We do not just create stories; we create myths. These myths explain and reinforce the

³There is more work to be done here. Using the framework of Repairing Play from Trammell (2023) to investigate perennial games in more detail would be highly relevant, due to the obvious tension points and moments of painful play that undoubtedly happens over the course of the experience. Unfortunately, a deeper analysis is out of scope for this work.

community's idea of what the game of Destiny is: "Telesto always breaks." "The Witch Queen was a great expansion." "Raids are the epitome of Destiny." "This next expansion is make or break for Destiny." These surrounding myths are how the community orient themselves to think about the game, how they make sense of its idiosyncrasies and shapes the current sentiment. Note, that I am not saying these myths are "true"—I am not evaluating The Witch Queen, but saying that the fact that The Witch Queen *is considered* a great expansion makes it a point around which future and past expansions are measured against. As naturalized myth, this statement *becomes* true. If an expansion does not have what Witch Queen had, especially if it has *less*, it is in danger of being compared unfavorably. It does not matter whether these myths are actually true; Telesto does not actually break "always". Many "make or break" expansions have released for Destiny, and it remains, even after some of them "failed". Many players never interact with raids at all. Yet, through the naturalizing power of myth, these stories and signs and symbols, and others like them (these four are not the only myths of Destiny), these myths become what Destiny frames itself against. They become *true* to the experience of the community.

As Ford notes, early myths are malleable before they ossify into proper, reliable myths, which people use to build their identities upon. And people do build their identities around the myths of Destiny. A strong example of such a myth is what the audience relies upon: "Destiny will continue to exist." The audience needs the game to give them something new to talk about and play, and this is especially true for all the content creators who make up the "parasite industry" (section 4.1). Thus, they have a

vested (financial and personal) interest in the game continuing to exist and give them new experiences. And the *more* Destiny continues to do this, the more the audience relies on it to continue, the more the myth ossifies. And of course, we can further detail this kind of myth into a thousand small pieces, as each content creator and audience member has their own unique focus, and want a specific part of the game to "continue" for their sake. For example, a long stretch of little to no changes to the PvP scene in Destiny was causing strain on the many players who focused on that aspect of the game—the myth was breaking, and shifting: "Destiny's PvP is suffering"⁴. When the audience buys into Destiny, they are buying into the promise that Destiny will continue, and committing their time, identity and relationships to this idea. They become "people who play Destiny".

In fact, we might be able to say that this myth ("It will be continue to exist") is the primary myth of not just Destiny, but all perennial games. It is the fundamental expectation that makes it worth it to invest time into. A player knows that this story will continue, and expect there to be continuing story threads in the future, and more stories like the ones they already love. It is this myth which causes the tension of familiarity and mystery, between difference and repetition, as the continuing drive to exist pushes against the possible boundaries of the established patterns, until they might break. It is this myth which causes perennial games to be *perpetual*, which causes a need for new content at all times, and a player base that always expects more. We will return to this in section 21.6.

⁴Some would argue this is the constant state of Destiny's PvP.

As the audience settles into the play of the game, they build their community around these myths. And unpacking these myths helps us understand that community and what they value and what they see the game as. For example, the Destiny community values what The Witch Queen did. They value raids. They value engaging stories about weapons acting in interesting ways. Thus, let us now dig deeper into one specific myth to understand what that says about the community, as a final example of the usefulness of the lens of myth to understand perennial games.

16.4 The Loot Cave as Exemplary Myth

The Loot Cave is the story of an unexpected interaction creating a community moment (refer to beginning of chapter 2 for a full description). As a myth, it represents the chaotic early moments of Destiny's launch and how the community rallied together around a found fun. It represents the guarantee, from the developer, that they will not be punished for taking advantage of the game's systems. Bungie set a precedent with the Loot Cave that is still the core expectation today: If a player finds an exploit, it is fair game to utilize until it is fixed. This guarantee is vital to players feeling empowered in seeking out the edges of the game, and feeling like they can break its rituals. If not for the Loot Cave, we likely would not have gotten the Craftening, or Laser Tag weekend (see chapter 9)⁵.

The loot cave also shows something even more fundamental about what Des-

⁵And this stands in contrast with an often referenced moment in *Anthem* (Bioware, 2019), where the popular streamer "Gladd" got banned for using an exploit (something he was very used to doing in Destiny), which simply caused him to stop streaming the game, which led to a loss in player interest.

tiny players value, so obvious it is in the name: Loot. The community often jokes that it is *obsessed* with it, so much so it has several times been incorporated into the fictional text of the game⁶. This focus on loot as primary motivator was established before the loot cave (and Destiny certainly was not the first game with loot) yet the loot cave serves as a fixture point for how valuable loot is in Destiny: Players will do the most boring activity in the game to get it. It taught Bungie a valuable lesson, and it shaped the community's expectations on what the future of Destiny could hold. Not exactly in the sense that "more loot caves are coming", but in the sense that the magic of the game could be found in the mundane. The loot cave was not a big planned spectacle, it was not a grand, authored event. In how it is described and memorized in the history of Destiny, you might be fooled into thinking so, yet the story is precisely that it was a major event inside the most minor of places.

It was also the first major example of Bungie telling the players they were paying attention and considering their actions part of the fiction of the game. With a little pile of corpses in the cave, the community reinterprets the myth of the loot cave, and their own role in the fiction of Destiny. The loot cave told the community that their actions might matter, regardless how innocuous or "game-breaking" they seemed. This enforced the current, powerful myth of the Destiny community that their actions matter, that our actions at least will be *remembered*.

And of course, in 2021 *celebrated* the loot cave in the grandest, most authored

⁶A collection of lore tabs about this and similar player-related references can be seen here: <https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinyTheGame/comments/swe8ix/comment/hxlrqoj/>, or for a single example you can see <https://www.ishtar-collective.net/entries/vance-canary>.

spectacle, when they added an entire dungeon underneath it. If players thought the loot cave were going to be forgotten or that Bungie were ashamed of their past, they were proven wrong in the most spectacular way possible, an honoring of a very mundane and irreverent thing players did. It is a recognition from the developers how important this moment was to the history of Destiny.

Players were not "angry" they fixed the loot cave. Sure, maybe in the moment, players were disappointed, but they also understand why it was fixed. The story of the loot cave is one of nostalgia for a time when the game was *dysfunctional*, an odd type of nostalgia we see throughout Destiny's history (12-man raids, the Craftening, etc.). It is the kind of event that cannot be planned for, and cannot be shown on a roadmap or in a trailer, yet it is, for many players, the kind of event that makes Destiny what it is, and makes them keep coming back, in hope of finding something new and exciting, hidden in the rubble of an innocuous cave.

This is so much so that I would argue that, if there is an *origin myth* of Destiny it is the Loot Cave. The Loot Cave made Destiny what it is today. Just as the fall of Dalamud is technically not the beginning of Final Fantasy XIV yet is considered when the game truly began, the Loot Cave is when Destiny *became Destiny*. When the game ceased to be a piece of software and became something played with by a community, and audience, and a developer. It is remarkable that the origin myth of Destiny was a time when *it did not work as intended*, and this fact has chased Destiny throughout its entire life since then. As discussed in chapter 9, Destiny's logic is one of complication and diversity, not of following a fixed, planned path. The loot cave is thus the perfect

origin myth for a game like Destiny, and the community as well. It is a myth told and retold because it highlights that Destiny is not just a series of missions and weapons and activities, but a site of narrative play. It is a myth that exploded outside the game itself, so well known it is regularly cited and referenced in broader game culture, often as one of the few things any one person will know about Destiny. For good and ill, the loot cave is the exemplary myth of Destiny and its community: It is what most nakedly shows the community for what it is and why they enjoy the game and play with its narrative. It is what shows Destiny's turning of mystery into familiarity, of how its community and developer performs narrative play.

16.5 Summary of the Second Direction

This direction investigated the communities of perennial games in order to understand how and why they create mythology through their play. We saw how the community is actively discussing what is part of the game while they play, and how the rituals of the game allow them to come together and are reinforced by the community's own actions. Within these rituals, they create and deliberate the ongoing myths of the game, which they use to understand how they see the game and their own relationship to it.

The ritual activities create sociality, because they bind people together at the same time, doing the same activity, and over time these repetitions turn the activity of playing the game into ordinary, everyday life. In this ordinariness, the game becomes

both special and familiar and safe, and rote, predictable, and boring. However, there is an element of fiction too, and this element of fiction is important in alluring and causing a sense of mystery which the ritual activity is wrapped inside. The audience seeks this fiction out, and desires it in their play, and when it is lost the rote repetition is felt most profoundly. Yet, the audience also enjoys playing with the fiction, and testing the boundaries of what is and is not part of that fiction.

This chapter ended with identifying and discussing several myths of Destiny, which the community actively uses to discuss and understand the game, which can then in turn be analyzed to understand the community's values, desires, and customs. Identifying these myths can thus be very valuable in understanding how and why the audience of a perennial game play it in the first place, as these myths will enlighten on how that community thinks. Furthermore, the mere fact that such myths *exist*, as strongly and powerfully as they do, is a strong sign that community is being cultivated and is actively working, as any myth of this kind requires maintenance and support in order to persist.

This concludes the second direction. Now, we will move on to the third and final direction, investigating the final piece of the trifecta: The developers themselves.

Part IV

Direction Three: Development

Chapter 17

Developing Live Service Games

“If you don’t know what Warframe is, if this is your first time hearing it, we don’t know anymore either. But we’re still having a lot of fun making it.”

Rebecca Ford, Creative Director, *Warframe*. The Game Awards 2024

THIS DIRECTION WILL DISCUSS THE THIRD research question: *How does the live development of a perennial game utilize narrative play?* How you create a game that affords and encourages players to perform narrative play, and tell an ongoing, perennial story with that audience. As we have discussed the community and the game in the previous two directions, it is time to set our focus on the people making these games happen. Before, we can dive into the results, this first chapter will go through how "live-service development" is different from traditional development, and what that means for the developers. Then I will share the research I have done interviewing live-service developers (chapter 18), discussing how they tell stories in perennial games, sustain development, and interact with the community. Then, I will discuss the

development I have done myself of perennial games (chapter 19), focusing primarily on the perennial game *Telegrams from the Choir Train*. These various empirical findings and reflective experiences will ultimately lead to my primary finding on development of perennial experiences, which I discuss as the "Lifecycle of Perennial Games" (chapter 20) which will help answer the research question.

17.1 Game Development Research

Before we focus on live-service development, it is worth understanding the larger research of game developers and game development culture, or "game production studies" (Sotamaa and Svelch, 2021; Keogh, 2018), as an emerging area that has received increasing attention (Sotamaa and Svelch, 2021; Ruggill, 2016; O'Donnell, 2014; Keogh, 2023). Weststar (2015) investigated the game developer community as an "occupational community", who form a social identity and community around their work, through specialized jargon, similar work ethics, and social boundaries, across individual studios. Game development is a unique industry blending technology and creativity, and as Keogh (2018) argues, it might be better described not as a single industry but as as fields with large studios surrounded by independent artists making art for arts sake. Other work in game production studies includes Hewner and Guzdial (2010), who investigated hiring processes, Giri and Stolterman (2022) who investigated organization building and improving competence, to Styhre and Remneland-Wikhamn (2021), who studied indie game development, and how they try to develop novel games and genres. All

show different aspects to why video game development is a complicated business, where developers are often in precarious positions despite the reported wealth of the industry at large (Keogh, 2018). Work has been done investigating specific scenes and communities of game developers, such as the game developers in the Nordics (Jørgensen et al., 2017; Lundedal Hammar et al., 2023), Finland (Sotamaa, 2021), Canada (Parker and Jenson, 2017), Australia (Keogh, 2018; Banks and Cunningham, 2016), the UK (Ruffino and Woodcock, 2021), or queer creators (Ruberg, 2019b).

Software development shares some similarities with game development (Kasurinen and Smolander, 2014), and much work has been done in this area (Lin et al., 2016; Bjorn et al., 2014; Boden et al., 2009, 2007; Poller et al., 2017; Mahoney, 2017)). Game development is similar in its use of agile development practices (Agile Alliance, 2024; Tendedez et al., 2018; Hoda et al., 2010), and use of technology. Some research has been done on how agile teams must balance between flexibility and standardization (Tendedez et al., 2018), or freedom and responsibility (Hoda et al., 2010), which also applies to game development teams. Yet, game development differs through greater focus on creative practices, art, and predominantly being focused on entertainment (Keogh, 2018). As Keogh (2018) highlighted, game workers *"often have working lives and subjectivities that are structured less like tech workers and more like cultural workers—that is, artists, musicians, actors, writers, and so on,"* (Keogh, 2018). Thus, our learnings on game development as a creative field, is limited, by investigating software developers. Kasurinen and Smolander (2014) studied how game developers focus on the game content and user experience over more "traditional" software objectives such as reli-

ability or efficiency, and also studied the tools of game developers (Kasurinen et al., 2013). Whitson (2018) investigated the role of development software as not a simple, obedient tool, but part of a co-creative practice, sometimes imbued "magical", unknown properties developers need to work within.

17.1.1 Development of Live-Service Games

Next, let us focus on the rising trend of live-service development or "games-as-a-service" in the last 15 years (Cai et al., 2014; Dubois and Weststar, 2022; Clark, 2014; Sotamaa et al., 2010; Bernevega and Gekker, 2022). As a rising phenomenon in the early 2010s (Cai et al., 2014; Sotamaa et al., 2010; Lowthorpe et al., 2013), the shift was a change from games as individual products to being ongoing services that could continue to be developed for, with players returning to the same games over and over, paying for smaller features, cosmetics or content. Bernevega and Gekker (2022), in their analysis of monetization strategies, describe this as an "*assetization*" of game development, turning games from commodities into assets that continuously generate revenue. Supporting a game after release has become increasingly the norm and expectation for players, with increased extensive player tracking and analytics (Kerr, 2016; Bernevega and Gekker, 2022), which has led to a growth in the revenue across the game industry alongside a decrease in the number of released games by the largest publishers (Bernevega and Gekker, 2022). Also see the report by Ball (2025), as discussed in section 1.2, for more information on this. This has also led to a increased de-emphasis on physical sales and thus retail stores (Kerr, 2016) because of the increased focus on digital distribution

(Young, 2018), alongside the expansion of the mobile games industry (Tamer, 2023). Lowthorpe et al. (2013) described the results of this shift in the UK game development scene, showing how it caused a lot of unease and vulnerability for game developers as their livelihood was shifting. Yet they also discuss, through Hill (2013), that this vulnerability might be turned into a strength with increased opportunity to work with customers. Dubois and Weststar (2022) discussed how this model of development is sufficiently different from "traditional" development to lead to a distinct identity and relationship between developers.

Live-service games are related to the similar trend of software-as-a-service, which changes development from "discontinuous production" (Choudhary, 2007) to ongoing development of new features on the same product. Similarly, open-source projects (Filippova and Cho, 2015; Alspaugh and Scacchi, 2013) manage success with ongoing, flexible development (Alspaugh and Scacchi, 2013) despite being more distributed than traditional software development. As Filippova and Cho (2015) note, open source teams, because of the ongoing nature of open source software, has *"a greater long-term orientation of working together in the future"* (Filippova and Cho, 2015), and thus evolve unique intragroup processes. Another area of comparison are citizen science projects, which, similarly to live-service games, attempt to build an ongoing community and share similar challenges, such as onboarding new users (Harandi et al., 2018), differences in users (Bowser et al., 2014), and motivating users to pursue intended goals (Reeves et al., 2017). Citizen science projects have also become increasingly collaborative, as highlighted in this survey (Reeves et al., 2017), with developers both encouraging users to work to-

gether and with developers. Yet, citizen science differs from games as entertainment in its requirement for accurate, scientific results from its users. There is a substantial body of work on developing for online communities (Beenen et al., 2004; Farzan et al., 2011; Ehrlich et al., 2014). This includes investigating why people contribute to online communities (Beenen et al., 2004; Ehrlich et al., 2014), showing that factors like clear, concrete goals and wanting to help others, and highlighting the contributions of members, all helped community members contribute more. In a large study on how to design for online communities, Kraut and Resnick (2012) found design claims relating to 5 areas, such as "encouraging commitment", "regulating behavior", and "dealing with newcomers". This work tends to focus on productive contributions from community members, which makes comparisons to games, where the act of "playing" is often the expected contribution, a bit challenging. However, playful communities can and are also productive (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009), which is important to keep in mind, yet that activity often goes beyond the mere play of the game and is not necessarily the "base" expectation of a developer.

As may be no surprise, as developers have worked on live-service games, they have shared their learnings in game developer talks at venues such as GDC (Game Developer's Conference) and others (Yoshida, 2014; Truman, 2023; Hazzikostas, 2025; Koster et al., 2018). Here I want to especially focus on two talks by prominent contemporary designers, which showcase a number of key learnings about developing live-service games. The first is the talk about Justin Truman, General Manager for *Destiny 2*, at Bungie (Truman, 2023), presented at GDC in 2023. This talk discusses the transition of

the team at Bungie from a "box-product mindset" to a "live-service mindset", and what that required to develop Destiny 2 successfully. He describes the story of how Destiny 2's launch saw high player numbers that then quickly dwindled week over week. In order to address this, they had to redefine what "success" was to them, away from the idea of crafting an impeccable product once every few years to critical acclaim, and only letting failure happen in the design process, they needed to come to terms with success and failure being part of the public process, and which metrics they used to determine if their game was doing well or not. The learnings from this will be presented in the following list:

- Velocity is more important than position: Regardless of the current quality of the game, it is more important to be able to change what you have than what you have. A live-service game can be good or bad in the moment, but it is how fast you can change it that marks how successful you will be in the future.
- First Trust, Then Retention, Then Revenue: As Destiny 2 was approaching its abyss in player numbers, Bungie developed this mantra to rebuild their player-base and thus sustainability as a company. First, they needed to establish and maintain player trust, which they did by serving what existing players needed and wanted from the game. Then they focused on retention and providing interesting reasons for people to keep playing week over week, and only then, after they had successfully done so, began focusing on monetization.
- We're Building a Train Station, Not a Train: The neverending pipeline of a live-

service game means that the moment a piece of content has been released, a new one needs to enter production, and thus the ebb and flow of a box-product lifecycle is unsustainable to maintain the speed required. What is more reliable is a rigor in scheduling and keeping multiple teams occupied and "on track" for their release timings. A delayed train (to keep in the metaphor) is more disastrous than a less successful release because the delay causes a cascading effect, delaying other releases. Thus, Truman mentions the advice of "no heroics", of not letting developers "overdevelop" a single piece of content and burn themselves out so they struggle working on the next train.

- **You're Building a Community, Not Just a Game:** Finally, Truman mentions the focus of these design decisions all working towards developing trust and communication with your players, and how this ongoing dialogue is the true point of the releases, and any one release is thus not the end-goal but a part of the building of the relationship.

The second talk is by Ion Hazzikostas, Game Director of World of Warcraft (WoW) at Blizzard (since 2016), and who has worked on WoW since 2008, presented at Nordic Game in 2025 (Hazzikostas, 2025). This talk is a reflection on the changing design philosophies of the WoW team over the past 20 years, and especially a major shift that occurred in the 2020s. The core of this talk is how he reflects that the team has been too rigid in holding true to a design vision of what World of Warcraft was and "should be". And while keeping true to a design vision is typically a good design

philosophy, the WoW team noticed how they were increasingly making their players unhappy. Over time kept expanding and maturing and this led to "design problems" the design team sought to solve. For example, the continued weakening of character identity through giving players mix and match playstyles. This was perceived as a "problem" in the 2010s and so they attempted solutions, yet no matter how they tried, players seemed increasingly unhappy. The change came, ironically, through the release of *WoW Classic*, the edition of the game that launched in an almost-identical state to how it had been in 2004. In this, they saw something surprising: While the game was the same, the players of 2020 played it very differently than they had done in 2004. Thus they came to the important realization that the players they were developing for were no longer the same and thus the same design visions that held true in 2004 were not going to be useful today. Instead, they should update and adapt their design goals based on their current players¹. From this he has several key suggestions for design which I will summarize in the list, as they will be very useful going forward:

- Do Not Chase the Perfect Design: Designers, as he says, love "tidy solutions" yet players are not satisfied with a single, eternal solution. As the designers of WoW made a successful new system for quests in *Legion*², the designers thought "great, players loved that. Let's keep doing it", yet when the same system appeared in the next expansion the reaction from players was decidedly more muted and uninterested. As Ion says, "novelty has inherent value" and any single, static

¹Ion relates this to the classical design concept of "desire paths", of people walking a different part intended by the urban design planner. As he says, the designer inevitably has to give in and allow people to do what they want and avoid "adversarial design".

²The sixth expansion for WoW, released in 2016.

solution will not serve a recurring, ongoing playerbase for eternity. He mentions how the raids of WoW has gone through 8 separate iterations, yet these iterations were not in pursuit of the "perfect" version of raids, but rather the most ideal for the current situation. A designer of a live-service game should thus expect to need to continually update and refresh their systems, regardless of how successful any iteration was.

- **Maintaining Player Trust.** As also highlighted by Justin Truman, the most important "currency" in a live-service game is the trust of the players that this game will keep continuing and their experience and investment in it will be rewarded. In order to maintain this, outside of developing for the players, Ion insists that transparency is key, despite how scary it can be, as it is the only way to maintain trust in the long run.
- **Worry Less About the Future, Worry About Now:** Ion shares an anecdote of the design team refocusing their talent system to allow it to be more extensible for many more expansions to come and more "streamlined". Yet, players universally hated this version of the talent system because it was less fun in the moment. As Ion said, if players do not like now, there may not be a tomorrow. Thus, he advises to focus on designing for the current moment and not too much on potential future elegance, because players only care about what experience they have in front of them. In the Dragonflight expansion, they thus "reverted" to a less extensible version that was more fun in the moment, which they knew was

going to cause problems in the future, yet Ion deliberately stated that this was intentional and something they will deal with "when the time comes". And players were much more pleased with this iteration of the system.

You may notice a lack of narrative development in much of the above work. Most work on "live-service games" has focused on the model as a model for monetization and distribution and ongoing content delivery. However, work on the experience of developing narrative in online games has been done, and we can extrapolate this to what we are discussing here.

17.1.2 Narrative in Online Video Games

The fields of interactive storytelling and the long list of scholarship on narrative in video games (Jenkins, 2004; Ryan, 2006; Murray, 1997; Aarseth, 1997) have long discussed how storytelling functions in games (also see section 4.3). In development, narrative has also increasingly come into its own as a discipline in video game development, through increased focus on storytelling and "narrative design"³. Few of the books on narrative design or writing in games, however, engage in great detail with how narrative in multiplayer games work, or perennial, live-service games. Work has been written on designing virtual worlds, such as the work by Bartle (2004, 2022) and Koster (2018), and developer talks and blogs about the topic (e.g., (Truman, 2023;

³"Narrative design" is a complicated term to succinctly describe, as it is a discipline which combines game design with writing, and often takes on different roles and tasks based on the game and the studio. In general, narrative design helps convey the narrative of the game *through* its design, often interacting with multiple disciplines, as can be seen in the many books on the topic (Heussner et al., 2015; Nicklin, 2022; Skolnick, 2014).

Church, 2014)), yet only a few talk about how to do storytelling, with a few exceptions (Rimington and Blount, 2016; Scott, 2012; Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, 2009; Church, 2014), and these examples are often cursory or surface-level. Gursoy (2020) discussed the storytelling strategies present in patch notes for "League of Legends", a competitive multiplayer live-service game, showcasing how developers, through their continuous updates, are conveying narrative to the community, even in texts that are not designed for narrative purpose. Also looking at League of Legends was Rimington and Blount (2016), who investigated its digital representation of characters with their presentation in the background narrative (lore), finding discordance with between their in-game and out-of-game versions.

The book by Tamer (2023) is a recent work and a notable exception, as it covers narrative design in live-service games in much greater detail than most other sources. She defines a series of challenges of live-service narrative development as the following:

- Telling a Story that goes on indefinitely.
- Long-term development, changing teams, and story coherency.
- Players Join at Different Times.
- Live Content Access.
- Player Memory.
- Managing and Curating an Ever-growing Library of Content.

These challenges are all unique to narrative live-service development and thus perennial development, and we will see these challenges appear throughout this chapter, along with some others. However, Tamer also crucially highlights why a developer would want to do this from a creative perspective, and not just a monetary one. These motivations include the ability to tell a long-term epic story in an extensive game world that you can expand over time, as well as keeping players invested for a long time and respond to their actions and feedback in future content.

Tamer also highlights a bunch of other similar media forms for inspiration, many of which we have already discussed previously, such as serial media (section 4.1), mythology (chapter 3), sports (section 4.2), cinematic universes, and so on. A notable point here is how she deliberately uses the terminology of "seasons" (similar to television seasons, as we also saw in *Destiny* in chapter 14) in the structuring of live-service games, which are groups of thematically cohesive content released over a series of weeks or months, sometimes with time-limited, ephemeral events scattered throughout. She also discusses the scheduling and production of different types of content within that season and how permanent it is, and how fast it releases. She notes here the challenge of managing the pacing in a way that avoids the two extremes of 1) players running out of content too fast, and 2) slow players not getting the chance to play through everything. As Bartle also noted many years earlier *"players consume content quicker than it can be produced"* (Bartle, 2004, ch. 4), yet players consume at different rates, especially as you have diverse sets of player types with different amounts of time, and it is necessary to strike a balance between giving the "powergamers" enough to dig through while also

Permanence	Advantages	Risks	Ways to Mitigate Risks
Time-limited	– Drives moment-to-moment motivation and user engagement – Can pull churned players back in – Marketing potential (especially if accessible for all players) – Greater potential for a social spectacle – Can shift the thematic focus from season to season, and explore the story from various perspectives (Seasons) – Can narratively highlight a specific aspect of the game world, such as characters or events (Time-limited Events)	– New players jump into the middle of a story and are lost/unengaged – Ongoing production costs for content that is scrapped after a specific time	– Create permanent onboarding campaigns to introduce new players into the live content – Allow regular easy entry points into the story, such as the beginning of a new season – Make information on the past seasons accessible – Make main story progression permanent, while time-limited content is composed of self-contained side stories – Make time-limited content self-contained arcs that can be joined at regular entry points (such as season beginnings) – Strike a balance between permanent and time-limited game additions
Permanent	– Enables a standardized story progression, experience no matter when players join the game – Growing library of content as a selling point for players	– Ballooning file size – Lots of content might be hard to navigate and overwhelming – New content may only be available for end-of-content players – New content may be less interesting for potential new players (due to the inaccessibility)	– Tech solutions (e.g., only download the parts the player is about to access) – Add new starting points/progressions so that new players can also access new content, such as new parallel stories (such as new roles, new parallel paths, or new stories), short stories, etc – Guide player experience, so they're aware of options but not overwhelmed

Figure 17.1: Table from Tamer (2023). Shows the risks and advantages of time-limited versus permanent content.

allowing those with less time to feel like they are not missing out. She discusses the pros and cons of permanent versus time-limited content or live events, which I will share here in figure 17.1.

As seen here, there are many advantages of doing time-limited content for the existing user-base, and can be a key factor in keeping the game going over time, yet it can be expensive and can repel newer users. Reversely, permanent content makes it easier for newer players to experience a standardized progression, yet might be overwhelming or inaccessible to them. Not mentioned here is the fact that permanent content also grows stale for existing players and is often left untouched after it has been experienced, leading to the increasing file size without as much gain for existing players (although most players will stay they prefer the content being there despite not engaging with it). As visible in the table, Tamer also lists ways to mitigate these risks (notably, not avoid them).

As a final note on this book, Tamer discusses how to keep a story interesting over the long period of time needed for a perennial game, which includes sensible advice such as "having lovable characters" and "don't resolve all conflicts" (as known from serial fiction as well, see section 4.1), and keeping consistency while allowing fresh ideas. As she says, and as we have seen in previous sections therein lies an inherent contradiction: *"There's often a seeming contradiction between what audiences want in an established brand. On the one hand, they want something new and surprising, on the other hand, they don't want it to be too different. After all, they're consuming new content because they do want more of the same thing. So finding a balance is key."* This strongly echoes Kelleter (2017) and other findings from serial fiction, discussing how ongoing stories have an increasing problem catering to the expectations of players wanting what they know and love, while also giving them something new and exciting (this is also discussed in chapter 16).

Before we leave the realm of narrative, I want to mention one more insightful source. In a Polaris report⁴ from 2022 (Compton et al., 2023), designers listed a series of ways to encourage player stories in ongoing games and how to utilize player activity in the narrative. The designers highlight several tools that help players create and tell emergent stories with games, and the examples they use range from expected emergent storytelling examples like Caves of Qud and Dwarf Fortress to perennial games like Sea of Thieves and Fallen London. This report is written with the intention of wanting to better tools to respond and feed back to player community actions, and reference some key

⁴A yearly design report by skilled game designers.

"perennial moments", which they want to see more of in future games, like the *Corrupted Blood* incident from World of Warcraft⁵, and the Loot Cave (see chapter 2). The report asks whether we these can be better designed for, rather than just happenstance. They see two primary approaches to "harvest" these player stories: Observing players actions and preferences and basing new development content upon that, or building content up front that can dynamically respond to player actions in predetermined ways. There are pros and cons to both, but a primary challenge they identify is that these events seem to be at their strongest *because* they are unplanned, and so it is an open question whether they can be fully designed and prepared for. I will go into more detail about this report and other design insights on how to design for emergent narrative in perennial games in section 17.1.1. The report also defines a set of tools for seeding and encouraging player stories. These tools are as follows:

1. Defining an Expressive Range: Creating a consistent voice and providing a strong vocabulary of events, letting players easily imagine which kinds of stories could be told here.
2. Lacunae: Intentionally omitted details about the storyworld. Leaving open gaps and questions for players can be very fruitful to invite player stories and discussion.
3. Acknowledgements: Responding to player actions in the game, for example in dialogue or extradiegetic elements like *Achievements* systems. Also see Scott (2012).
4. Support for Player Framing. Asking players open-ended, subjective questions that

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corrupted_Blood_incident.

do not affect the narrative (plot) outcome, e.g. letting them express themselves through fashion or detailing the motivation to enter a quest.

5. Curation. Providing curated summaries of a players' experience, which can more easily be assembled into a narrative experience post-play. Also see (Kreminski et al., 2020; Ryan, 2018).
6. Procedural Generation. While rich for story-generation and generating lacunae, procedural generation has been sparsely used in live-service narratives, with the only prominent successful example being Blaseball (The Game Band, 2020).
7. Community Management. In an ongoing community of players discussing a game, stories will percolate. Through intentional and successful management of said community, these stories can be proliferated and collected. This, as the report discusses, and as I will discuss in a moment, requires ongoing engagement and maintenance of the community, regulating behavior and enforcing policies, as well as encouraging the fruitful interactions you want to see.

This final point on community management is so crucial to perennial games we will spend more time discussing it.

17.2 Community Management

Almost all games today form communities around them, even single player games (Ruggles et al., 2005). Developers have thus found a need for communicating

with, managing, and facilitating that community. From the earliest online games such as *Ultima Online* or *Habitat* (Koster et al., 2018; Morningstar and Farmer, 2008) (see section 7.1), the developers noticed the need for a role to “manage” the ongoing concerns of players, to tell people about changes and respond to requests. Since then “community management”⁶ has evolved into a complicated and multifaceted role where a person will need to listen to and empathize with a diverse and sometimes conflicting community of players, moderate discussions, funnel generalized insights and feedback from the community back to the developers, be an agent for the community within the development team, and provide insight into ongoing development back to the community (deWinter, 2014; deWinter et al., 2017; Kerr and Kelleher, 2015; Ruppert, 2023). They are often the first line of defense for player feedback and are thus often the most vulnerable to harassment, toxicity and negative community behavior (Adinolf and Turkay, 2018; Aguerri et al., 2023; Busch et al., 2015; Chesney et al., 2009; Turpeinen, 2023; Dibbell, 1993).

Yet, community managers are often hired with little formal training relevant to the job, brought in from the community itself (Zimmerman, 2019), forced to learn by doing, and unprepared for the emotional toll it demands (Zimmerman, 2019; Kerr and Kelleher, 2015; deWinter et al., 2017). As deWinter highlights, much of this labor is affecting emotional, social labor, and has been predominantly feminized, neglected, and undervalued. As both the interviews from Sparrow et al. (2021) and deWinter et al. (2017) show, community managers have been shown apathy and neglect by development

⁶The game industry has shown efforts to move away from the term “community management”, because of its inaccurate description of the actual work. See (Tran, 2021, 2020).

studios, who devalue the work emotional labor they undertake, while also receiving the brunt of the outrage from players. Yet, community managers have long been known to be vital for game development (Ruggles et al., 2005; deWinter et al., 2017; Wera, 2008; Humphries, 2013). Sparrow et al. (Sparrow et al., 2021) suggested a greater need support to community management, promoting agency over interactivity for players, and a deeper unpacking of ethical values within game studios, among other things.

As discussed by some researchers (Laato and Rauti, 2021; Wan and Nordmann, 2023; Golub, 2010), players of a community can be deeper than (dis)satisfaction with a product because of the social ties that are created through such a community, and the sense of belonging players feel towards that community and game (something also discussed in chapter 16). When changes by developers endanger this sense of belonging, people lash out (and do so most directly at social and community managers). However, this belonging is also the reasoning for why community and community management can be so powerful: Players will stick around in games much longer if they have a sense of belonging with its community, and a community manager can be a strong part in establishing this sense of belonging, working with the community to improve their experience, and collaboratively helping players make the game better (Tran, 2021).

In this chapter, we saw how perennial (live-service) development differs from "traditional" development due to the constant need to produce new content, turning the game into a "service" or an "asset" rather than a singular product. We discussed how developers have discussed this shift in their own practice, and learned to prioritize differently as a result, focusing on speed and agility over quality and ideal design solutions.

We also saw how developers have learned the importance of establishing and maintaining trust and the community management that goes into that. Finally, we investigated narrative development, and discussed the many challenges of telling stories that last forever and adapting to the players. This is the foundation for how developers utilize narrative play in perennial games, and we will refer back to these points throughout this direction. Going forward from here, the rest of this direction will utilize the concepts discussed in this chapter and involve the empirical findings from interviews with game developers (chapter 18), and my own development practice (19).

Chapter 18

Hitting the Balance

"For other games it was sort of like, yep, we finished it. [...] With this, it was more like we're going to release it. We don't know what's going to happen."

Participant 5, Developer Interviews, 2024

THIS CHAPTER AIMS TO EXPLORE HOW DEVELOPMENT of perennial games are perceived by developers empirically through in-depth interviews, exploring the joys and challenges of perennial game development, and how they as creatives engage with this form of storytelling. In order to understand the research question of how developers play during development, it is important to investigate how to develop these games sustainably, as these are continuous, potentially decade-long projects. This is meant both in the sense of financial sustainability, but also (of more focus here) how developers in teams can stay creatively engaged, continuously deliver exciting new narratives and experiences, while avoiding crunch or burnout. The compounding effects of needing to tell stories on top of an ongoing development cycle in response to a com-

munity creates a unique set of circumstances to this form of development, as compared to the "traditional"¹ boxed-product method. The primary question is as follows: *What are the challenges and joys of perennial game development for developers, and how can developers make long-running games so they are financially, creatively, and mentally sustainable to develop?*

I focus on two specific aspects of this. The first is how narrative is affected by an ongoing development process. What new storytelling forms are produced and how must narrative be developed when the story never ends? I investigate this by relating it to other similar forms of media like serial television (section 4.1) and mythology (chapter 3). The second aspect is community management, as communities and community interaction becomes exponentially more important when the development is happening in ongoing reaction to that community (Sparrow et al., 2021; deWinter, 2014). How do internal teams handle the community discussions and structure development to best engage with the community while also keeping the team safe from harassment and toxicity? I investigate this through relating to existing scholarship on community management in game development (Sparrow et al., 2021; deWinter, 2014; Kerr and Kelleher, 2015; Ruggles et al., 2005), as well as other work on ongoing software development in HCI and related fields (Choudhary, 2007; Tendedez et al., 2018; Hoda et al., 2010; Bjorn et al., 2014).

To explore this, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 game developers of narrative perennial games, a method also explored in similar research by

¹Throughout this chapter, I refer to "traditional" video game production as non-live-service production, that is releasing a single boxed-product through a pre-production-production-release cycle.

other researchers (Sparrow et al., 2021; deWinter, 2014; deWinter et al., 2017; Giri and Stolterman, 2022). Through this, I found how developers play with the community and react to their players, deal with shifting team dynamics over time, manage the fast pace of development without crunching or burning out (or failing to do so), and how the ephemerality and permanence of perennial games lead to narrative possibilities and challenges.

18.1 Methods

This study interviewed 12 video game industry professionals, asking about their experience working on live perennial games. The main goal of the interviews was to discuss the processes, joys, and challenges of perennial game development, and hear from regular developers how this form of development has impacted their lives as professionals, compared to traditional video game production. I was especially interested in not just focusing on the production challenges and opportunities, but also get a better understanding of how it changes the relationship with their work as creatives, and how the ongoing community interactions affect them. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of UC Santa Cruz. Participants were not compensated, yet the findings were shared to them prior to publication.

18.1.1 Participants

A total of 12 participants were interviewed in 11 interviews² The inclusion criteria were developers who were working on or who had previously worked on a live-service game with a narrative focus. Potential participants were identified as either being experienced developers with more than 1 game or 5+ years of experience, or through having a unique development experience on relevant games not otherwise covered by other participants (e.g. being a solo developer on a live-service game, or being in charge of a unique narrative system, etc). Potential candidates were reached out to via email or private messaging, and asked if they were willing to participate in an interview about their experience as a developer. The developers were only reached out to if they were identified as having the appropriate experience, based on prior accolades or private conversations. I predominantly reached out to narrative designers, writers, and people in charge of or involved with narrative, yet other developers were also considered, especially if they had strong design experience and community involvement. Snowball sampling was used to recruit additional participants, as participants often knew colleagues with relevant yet alternative experience. Of the 12 participants, 5 had at some time worked for the same company on two different projects: One person worked on a project with two different people, at different times, and three people worked together on a different project, in different roles.

²One interview had two participants, who had worked on the same game, yet with different experiences and views on it.

18.1.2 Collection

The interviews were conducted in the period of Spring and Summer 2024. Interviews were all conducted in English, on online communication platforms such as Discord and Google Meet, accommodating for the schedules and platforms of the developers choosing. Average interviews lasted 60-90 minutes, yet some lasted longer, depending on the participants' available time and interest.

The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured. Some standard questions were prepared about perennial development, their processes, joys, and challenges, through asking on a variety of topics seen as related to perennial game development from previous work, such as community relations (Sparrow et al., 2021; deWinter, 2014; deWinter et al., 2017; Kerr and Kelleher, 2015), narrative (Larsen and Carstendottir, 2021; Tamer, 2023), canon (Larsen and Carstendottir, 2023), crunch, sustainability and burnout (Edholm et al., 2017; Cote and Harris, 2023), improvisation and performance (Larsen et al., 2023), and comparisons to other media (Tamer, 2023). Yet, the interviews were tailored to each developer, and thus questions for each interview was individually prepared based on research and/or familiarity with the studio and games each developer worked on. As each game was different, this was deemed to be a better choice to engage developers with their actual experience. Thus, questions often revolved around specific features, storylines, or elements they had worked on and then used those stories and insights to extrapolate to larger themes about perennial development. Following typical semi-structured interview processes, the questions might also arise during the interview

as responses gave rise to new topics and questions. This interview structure was flexible to let participants share their unique experiences, and were allowed to talk openly about what topics they chose.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed first with Adobe's automatic transcription. One researcher quality-checked the transcription of all interviews by listening through them, corrected errors and anonymized them.

18.1.3 Analysis

The interview transcriptions served as the primary form of data in this study. These transcriptions were analyzed through an iterative, reflexive thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019; Sparrow et al., 2021). Primary analysis was done by me and codes discussed with another researcher throughout the process. See section 1.4 on my general positionality in undertaking this work.

Initial codes were generated through in-depth reading of the transcripts and translating sentences, coding for any relevance to the major research questions, while writing initial broader themes and memos for further analysis. Resonant codes were highlighted and gathered for further analysis. These were arranged into themes iteratively, first generating themes through a process of axial coding (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2021), finding the similarities between the codes and categorizing them accordingly, leading to 27 themes, such as "confidence" and "losing mystery". Secondly, themes were divided into "joys" and "challenges", and clustered into broader categories, through a method method inspired by the labelling and grouping step of the "KJ" method (Scupin,

1997). During this process, categories across both challenges and joys began to emerge, as many aspects of development were found to be causes of both joys and challenges. This eventually led to a table of joys and challenges on one axis and 4 major themes on the other, those being "Playing with Players", "Working in Teams", "Moving Fast", and "Permanence", showcasing how different aspects of perennial development each adds both their own joys and challenges. This table can be seen in four parts in section 18.2. This process was done following qualitative, abductive and reflexive practices, letting patterns seen in the data naturally emerge, and abductively discover possible connections, as highlighted by the KJ method (Scupin, 1997), and the core tenets of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019).

As a final part of the iterative analysis, the interviewees were provided with early drafts of the chapter to ensure they felt their opinions were being expressed fairly and accurately, as well as ensuring they felt their identities were not compromised by its publication. This follows member-checking policies seen in other qualitative work (Carlson, 2010; Birt et al., 2016).

18.1.4 Ethics, Privacy, and Anonymity

The video game industry is notoriously secretive and individual developers have many good reasons to want to avoid their opinions being revealed to the public (Sparrow et al., 2021), from toxic gaming communities, Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs), to maintaining their personal privacy. Thus, for this research, I have done my best to keep the identities of the interviewed developers private and anonymous.

During the findings and discussion, all interviewees will be discussed with the names "P1-12" for identification. These numbers have been scrambled from the original order of interviews. This is similar to other academic research (Sparrow et al., 2021; Giri and Stolterman, 2022), yet due to the nature of the variety of games and developers interviewed, a few more steps had to be taken to ensure anonymity in this writing.

First, all names of games and entities, characters, worlds, etc. have been obfuscated, and quotes have been adjusted or changed to not reveal the game or company in question. Second, it is difficult to compare releases, schedules, and even the type of work 1:1 across all the games. Some games release weekly updates, some release monthly, some release constant small drops, others work on live events or yearly expansions. For some of these games, the distribution structure is so unique one might be able to tell the game apart based on this alone. Thus, to respect the privacy of the developers, when discussing the games, all releases, patches, seasons, etc, will be discussed as "installments" with the size, if relevant, explained for any individual example. Finally, many of the participants worked in different capacities, or describe colleagues in different roles in game development, and these might also be so specialized as to be revealing. Thus, when discussing the developers, I use the word "developer" regardless of this was in the role of a community manager, writer, programmer, actor, social media manager, designer etc. These are all part of making the game and are thus treated as together.

18.2 Findings

The findings will first cover the 4 major themes that emerged from the interviews, discussing their upsides and downsides, and then discuss the processes of perennial game development more broadly.

18.2.1 Theme 1: Playing with Players

To start, I focus on what many participants mentioned as the primary reason to do live-service narrative development in the first place: The live community. Developing a game live with a community means you get to see those players react to the things you have made, and are able to respond to them and change what they play with in close to real time. See table 18.1 for an overview.

Participants had many good things to say about this, starting with the simple fact that *"feedback is good for making games"* (P9) and thus getting this constant, ongoing, iterative response helps improve the games over time. Others likened it to improvisation and improvisational acting (P6, P4, P7, P3), being a performer in front of a live audience (P7), constantly listening to the audience to know what they wanted next, and either giving it to them or playing with their expectations (P9). For some, who was newer to this cycle of constant feedback, it was almost intoxicating: *"Suddenly they're all glued to the discord because it's like immediate feedback [they were not used to]"* (P3). P1 recollected watching a player experience something they had developed on a stream, and the joy they felt *"seeing people experience the stories I've made in the*

Table 18.1: Table showing a summarization of findings relating to the joys and challenges of interacting with the community.

COMMUNITY	JOY	CHALLENGE
PLAYER STORY-TELLING	letting players tell their own stories. having players participate in the storytelling	needing to maintain some amount of control of the creative vision
	being able to respond to the audience	cannot respond to everything and maintain coherence
A LIVE COMMUNITY	being able to riff with the community	need to keep evolving with the community
	creating a lived world with a community. making it feel alive	cannot stay the same for too long
	having an audience who care deeply and with strong engagement to the thing you are making	becoming too insular, only responding to the most engaged players
	seeing the audience reaction in real time. being able to play with the audience	
COMMUNITY RELATIONS	getting to interact with players directly	need to be prepared to interact with the community without harming yourself
	getting constant feedback to improve the game	getting too close with the community
	having player trust	getting player trust
		maintaining professional distance, avoiding personal danger and threats
		being afraid of community reactions
		dealing with toxicity and unreasonable demands
		players not understanding the individuals working on the game

way I wanted them to. [...] ...that's why I do it" (P1). This is fun to the point where it can be a distraction, as P9 said: *"if I was reading all of what the community was saying, the content would never get done"*. A primary joy of this is seeing players do unexpected things with the tools you have given them. As P4 said *"players are the most interesting agents in the world"*, and will inevitably surprise developers with their creativity and playfulness. Being able to "yes, and"³ players and support them in their play (P4, P11),

³"Yes, and" is a term from improvisational acting, where actors will never reject a previous input but only build on top of it (Moshavi, 2001).

giving them more tools to do what they enjoy. Participants generally enjoyed when players surprised them. P6 likened it to a "cat-and-mouse" game, constantly trying to outsmart players and staying a move ahead, yet sometimes they got the upper hand. This ability to "riff" (P4) with the community, and to create something together that could only be created through that constant conversation, was for many a primary reason to make live-service games, and something that could only be done through this constant, online engagement with a community.

However, this constant interaction has challenges too. Managing a live community is an entire job onto itself, and not all developers realize that in time. Several participants spoke about needing to hire community managers or dedicate more resources than they expected. As P9 said *"we just weren't prepared to have a community."* Community management was mentioned as invaluable by several participants in maintaining the player-developer interaction, once it was present. Alternatively, as players are granted more control, it can become difficult for the developer to maintain authorial control while letting players not feel betrayed. This was especially difficult in games that relied heavily on giving players agency over the world-building. As experienced by P3 and P9, when fans began disagreeing about the world, it became more difficult for the developer to maintain a sense of coherent canon—a common truth about the world (section 13)—from what players had made. Thus, to maintain the role of the author, they had to establish rules about what was considered part of the world and not, leading to less audience control. P1, P9, and others discussed how they found it worked better when the community help shape what stories they want to see, but the *"details are up*

to design decisions" (P1). As P7 said, *"interpretation is a privilege of the audience"*, but it does not necessarily go further than that.

This extends beyond canon and storytelling to general decisions about the game, as players can feel they can control the direction of the game through their feedback. As players see developers respond to them, they might feel empowered to pressure developers further. P4, P8, P9, and P11 talked about needing to maintain an authorial distance while maintaining communication with the community, establishing open channels to discuss but maintaining the hierarchy of who had the final say on what happened in the game, and being transparent about this. Yet this relationship can be fraught. Any change that makes players angry can have a direct impact on the financial situation of the development company. Therefore, developers can get scared of doing anything that might *"piss off our player base"* (P1). This can turn into abject fear, as noted by P4, who described seeing other developers afraid of their own community, afraid to make risky choices that might enrage them. P11 noted how they had seen developers give in to player demands, giving answers to questions that were never intended be answered. P3 also noted how some developers on their team, who at first were excited about the quick feedback and interaction, realized the dangers when a community member began stalking a developer. P10 mentioned how they had received bombing threats because of unhappy players. P9 noted that while they did not experience anything too toxic, it was part of the challenge to manage fans with unrealistic or unmanageable expectations, as they had to make decisions they *"knew the community wasn't gonna vibe with"* (P9). P1 described how community interaction

requires a “thick skin” because players can be harsh and direct in their feedback, and you need to have clear lines about what kind of communication is acceptable.

Interacting with the community directly, however, can also be great fun. P12, P1, P6, P9, and P10 all mentioned how direct conversations with community members on social media were rewarding and joyous for both the players and the developers. P10 discussed how some players were interested in the development process and enjoyed learning more about it. Some saw benefits letting players know what developers were struggling with or helping players understand why something could not be done, which helped gaining *“more understanding for why choices were made”* (P9) from players. Yet, it also makes the developers more visible to the community, and makes them more easier to target if there are complaints and toxic elements in the community. P8 noted this was not true of all players, saying *“not everyone wants to see how the sausage is made”*. P9 hypothesized that players knowing the developers made it more easy for them to think they could influence their choices, rather than the choices of an unknown company, and yet it is easier to be angry at a faceless corporation. As P4 said, live community interaction can be a double edged sword: A source of great joy, and yet also a source of anxiety, worry, and doubt. On a personal level, P8 talked about struggling with their community relationship as they had been a part of the player community before being a developer, yet now they could not talk freely in community spaces when their words were read as written by a developer with authorial intent, causing them to drift away from the community. P3 discussed how players did not understand the differences between individual developer roles on the team. P1 mentioned an example

of a player complaining to a writing staff developer about a combat bug—something they have no influence on. As P10 highlighted, players might play the game for very different reasons and different content caters to specific parts of the community. As P1 mentioned: *"Sometimes you do just have to say this quest isn't for these players, and that's okay. They'll complain for a while, and then they'll move on"*. Developers thus need to make sure to maintain enough interest across all the different player segments.

One danger with community interaction that P3, P9, and P10 mentioned, was how the most interactive part of the community were likely the most engaged part of the fanbase, who cared and knew the most about every detail of the game, but were therefore not representative of the larger population of players. If participants listened to those players exclusively, the development interaction could become insular, making a game only for a small percentage of super dedicated fans, who end up being the only people who understand what the game is.

18.2.2 Theme 2: Working In Teams

Live-service development changes the actual development process. See table 18.2 for an overview. Rather than working on different projects through a traditional structure of a pre-production-production-release cycle, you are going through smaller, constant cycles for every installment, iteratively working on the same project over and over again. This has advantages, as any creative team working on something naturally gets better at making it. P12, P7, and P2 all mentioned how they over time developing they grew more confident: *"...our team figured out this is what we as a group of creatives*

are good at" (P7). Developers begin to understand what works for their game, what their audience responds to and what they should avoid. Thus, over time, long-running perennial games often run more smoothly and with greater confidence, as developers understand the thing they are making.

Table 18.2: Table showing a summarization of findings relating to the joys and challenges of working in teams in perennial games.

WORKING IN TEAMS	JOY	CHALLENGE
PATTERNS	patterns are cost effective to produce	need to keep things fresh, not getting too predictable, disrupt players ability to see patterns
TEAMWORK	growing confident in working together	difficult to keep everyone pointed on the same set of goals
	learning to work on this game as a team, utilizing our individual strengths	competing goals between the teams
	different ideas getting time to shine	knowledge transfer across developers
	excelling at making this specific thing	not getting creatively challenged from the same project over time
	new, fresh ideas, changing how it is made with new team members	developer turnover
FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY	steady job	reliant on short-term success, every installment matters
	stable, reliable income when successful	uncertain whether you succeed, unrepeatable formula
		working within strict technical, funding, and scope limitations
		difficult to sell to investors and get funding for unpredictable projects
		never being able to move on and make something else

Yet, there are many challenges. Teams, especially larger ones, rarely stay the same during the long timeframes of perennial games, as developers will move on, hire new team-members, change roles, or, unfortunately commonly, be laid off. This turnover creates a challenge of cohesion, as the visions and philosophies of the original team might not be shared or sufficiently transferred to new team members, and thus the

overall design goals might shift over time. *"If you lose key people along the way who were really the champions of [a feature], people forget and it becomes more dicey"* (P4). As P7 said, it often comes down to good creative direction to make sure that the coherence of the vision is maintained and everyone is kept on track. Yet, leadership decisions can also cause problems, as sometimes the vision changing can cause friction between developers. P4 discusses how a change in leadership strategy and vision disappointed some developers, as they had aligned with the previous vision more. As everyone is still working on, ostensibly, the same game, there is no opportunity to split off and make a different product with a different vision, but instead the team needs to morph what is already there, which can prove challenging technically and creatively.

Furthermore, teams may have established guidelines for how content should be developed for their game, and over time, some developers might want to break those rules. *"Everyone always wants to break rules, especially narrative folks always want to tell the story of the exception to the rule."* (P11). P8 notes too how differences in vision, expectation, and desires, as well as competing goals between teams (P11), can cause issues within the team that can cause problems over time. P5 noted knowing a different game falling apart because of creative differences leading to interpersonal conflicts, many years into its production. This is the case in traditional development too, yet the difference here is that the creative differences affect a game people are already playing and are paying for. As some participants mentioned, working for many years on the same project can be creatively draining, as developers get bored being given the same challenges over and over. The constant need to supply new content can

become a burden, not allowing developers to refresh and rethink what they want to do. As P9 said, *"It's nice to be done."* Live-service development can thus feel less creatively fulfilling (P7), since there will never be a point where you are "fully done", and always feel like you are in the production phase of a project.

Effective game production often follows patterns. P4, P11 and P7 talked about how they as teams had gotten good at producing content at a steady pace through effective pipelines and patterns. *"The more you're able to lean into patterns, the more cost effective it is to actually produce"* (P4). However, this can cause problems. By following the same pattern, similar content gets made, and over time, participants noted how this led to the game becoming more stale for players, causing developers to need to *"shake things up"* (P7). P10 talked about how providing the team with new tools to allow new types of narrative structures, and recalled a junior developer coming up to them afterwards to say how excited they were now to work again now they could make new types of stories. This kind of revitalization is important to make sure that the team doesn't lose creative interest in the project. Thus, participants discussed how they ideally *"try to find ways to surprise while keeping our production schedules relatively healthy"* (P7). This is a core challenge of live-service, because however high the quality of the content you are producing is, it will eventually work less well to keep producing the same kind of content, and thus you have to change your methods, structures, and systems; not necessarily because they do not work but simply because they have been what they are for too long. An important key to this is the need to *"maximize on flexibility"* (P7), and create processes and pipelines that allowed for quick turnarounds

on new ideas, and being able to adjust those processes as easily as possible. Since it is never possible to know what the game needs in the future, the most important skill was to be ready to change.

Narrative work, too, has further limitations and challenges in a perennial game. Sometimes developers must accept that *"narrative is not the most important thing"* (P4) at all times. If players are focusing on mechanical challenges, they might not care about the narrative. P8 noted how narrative content that was grouped with mechanically important information was much more popular than a piece of narrative by itself. As large parts of perennial games focus on the stories of the players, too, the authored narrative sometimes takes a backseat. An amazing player moment *"is not like a great story, precisely [...] But it's their own little heroic epic that they have, that they can share with people."* (P10). P7 and P8 discussed how the job of narrative design was also to make sure the player fantasy was aligned with the thematics and mechanics of the game, making everything coherent and enjoyable. Furthermore, narrative is often under very tight technical or design constraints (P4, P7, P8). P8 talks about being given very little literal space for text (a few sentences at best), and that space is determined by game design, not by narrative, so *"you work with what you got"* (P8). This sometimes affects the narrative outcome, as there might not be enough narrative material to cover the story beats a plot needs.

This steady deployment schedule, however, has a potential strong benefit from an employment perspective. As P1 says, *"it's a steady job"*, something rare in the game development industry. If you manage to create a successful live service game

that operates for many years, you are financially much more stable than many game development companies. Ye, as P10 says *“I still think that’s it’s kind of a crapshoot and you’re not guaranteed anything”*. Many live-service games failed due a range of unrelated factors such as timing, community sentiment, or virality. P3 mentions how a lot of these games struggle with monetization when they rely on selling live, ephemeral events in digital spaces. Compared to immersive theater like "Sleep No More" (Flaherty, 2014), which can sell tickets for 150USD for a one-time event, video games cannot sell a single evening’s entertainment for anything close to that price. As also mentioned by P12, P4 and P11, the unpredictability and player-driven moments inherent in these experiences is tricky to get funding for, and publishers and investors might be hesitant in supporting it, because it is not guaranteed to work. *“[Publishers] were like, well, we can’t really sell this”* (P12). Furthermore, it is *“the short term success that determines if you are around for another chapter”* (P7) meaning if you manage to not hit what the audience wants for even a few installments, you might lose enough players that you cannot sustain your development costs, making it difficult to gain them back.

18.2.3 Theme 3: Moving Fast

The third theme was regarding the constant need to change, adjust and improvise during live development. As P5 said, *“there’s an expectation you can change things and you can grow with players”*. This fact means that development teams have to move fast to keep up. See table 18.3 for an overview.

Many participants talked about the chaos (P12, P3, P9) of live development,

Table 18.3: Table showing a summarization of findings relating to the joys and challenges of the speed of development in live service games.

MOVING FAST	JOY	CHALLENGE
IMPROVISING	not knowing what will happen	differing levels of comfort with not knowing what is going to happen
	tossing someone else the ball, knowing they will pick it up	letting players be
ADRENALINE	feeling the rush of being live	needing to keep the production healthy and avoid crunch
	being there in the moment	risk of emotional breakdowns and crashing because of the emotional stress of being on all the time
	so much fun	so much work
	being fully immersed in it	crunching
UNPREDICTABILITY	always something new and unknown	can never plan too far ahead. can never know what i will be working on in the future
ADAPTABILITY	being able to adapt and course correct and improve	not knowing how players will respond
	being able to iterate after launch	not able to test features and systems before going live
	creating new and surprising content for players	needing to live up to an expectation of quality
EPHEMERALITY	giving players "watercooler moments"	players getting FOMO
	drawing players in with the future possibility of live events	losing access to what you made

the rush and crunch (P7, P8), and "whirlwind" (P5) that could appear during especially intense periods. These periods, often signified by the early launch, the releases of big installments, or live events, can be terrifying yet tremendously fun (P12, P9, P10). The experience is heightened in almost all ways, and the stakes are raised from the normal run-of-the-mill content. P3 and P9 described their early launches as "The Wild West", a time marked by a constant sense of the unknown, where players were constantly doing new and surprising activities. P9 recalled fondly sitting in a group call with the other developers, together watching the community experience the game for the first time. *"The pace of it was so fun. I cannot stress how fun it was"* (P9). These moments often

called for a rapid need to iterate and react to momentary issues, and improvise solutions on the fly, and were tremendously rewarding when this happened successfully. These times were remembered by many developers as a blur (P12), a time of riveting adrenaline and were for this reason not always viewed positively. Some developers had experienced emotional breakdowns (P9) and stressful periods they regretted (P12), and failed to uphold other responsibilities (P6). P3 succinctly likened it to how theatre performers describe a theatre production as *"that was so much work, but so much fun, but so much work"* (P3). All participants also recognized that this chaos was not sustainable for the length required to work on a perennial game, and needed to balance it out with more sustainable processes. The danger was that these moments could appear as surprises if players suddenly did something unexpected, and so it might not be possible to settle into an equilibrium. P8 explained how they had been *"catching up ever since"* they got hired because they had been forced to move so fast and build the team as they went along so processes never got time to settle.

Some participants also mentioned a constant need to be *"on hand"* (P5). P9 and P5 mentioned how developers rarely get the ability to "turn off" a live-service game, meaning someone always needs to be ready in case something goes wrong or needs changing. This doesn't have to be new features or installments, as players suddenly discovering a bug can cause a need to stop what developers were working on to address that. Since the pace needs to be fast, there is rarely enough time to properly quality test and go through iteration loops as one would before release on a traditional video game. As P2 mentions, even if you had the time, many features for live service games

couldn't be tested effectively, because they rely on the live engagement of the audience, and therefore it is only in the live environment you get to see how they perform. This can feel terrifying for a developer, because you are often putting out content without knowing if it will work. *"For other games it was sort of like, yep, we finished it. [...] With this, it was more like we're going to release it. We don't know what's going to happen."* (P5). P8 discussed the difficulty of releasing intentionally incomplete narratives you were going to conclude later, knowing players might be unsatisfied or upset in the moment, yet hoping it would pay off with the later conclusion. Yet, as P5 mentioned, this expectation of speed also is in tension with an expectation of polish from players, who could play other games that are more complete in their current state than your game might be in the moment. It is not enough to maintain players on a promise that the game will "get good" but it has to also be compelling with every installment (as Ion Hazzikostas (2025) mentioned).

The flip-side of this, however, is that, rather than iterating before the game releases, developers have the potential to iterate the game after. Many participants, such as P12, P2, P9, and others spoke to the value of being able to update the game as they saw how players responded. P2 described working on a feature that required several installments-worth of iteration as players found ways to exploit it, yet over time, they slowly patched its issues and improved it. This also affects storytelling, as developers might "test out" a narrative beat and see how players respond (as we saw in serial fiction, section 4.1). P12, P6, P3, and P8 all mentioned an example of the community responding positively to what was intended as a throw-away character, leading to more

storylines with that character in the future. P6 discussed how early on, they were making what they considered "carnival attractions", yet players assumed there were deeper stories behind them and thus the developers felt compelled to create the plotlines the players already assumed were there. The developers will see what aspects of the story excite players, and use this to focus the rest of the story. This is only possible because the story is released in a live, ongoing process, rather than all at once. Yet, this can also mean abandoning previous plans for where the story was meant to go. P9 acknowledged that it could feel very frustrating in the moment because you had to walk away from already developed content because it no longer fit.

18.2.3.1 Ephemerality

A topic of discussion for many participants was the use of ephemerality. Some games use ephemeral moments, that if players miss, could never be experienced again. The participants had mixed feelings about this. Some, like P9, used to lament this, thinking it a fundamental problem with their design, yet over time, came to see it less as a problem and more a fact of the matter. P7 mentioned how they wished that everything in the game was still accessible, yet this wasn't possible for a number of reasons, both technical and design-wise. Other participants (P3, P6, P10) enjoyed the ephemerality, and while understanding its problems, saw it as one of the primary joys of this kind of development, and wanted to lean into the unpredictability and sense of liveness it gives. As P12 mentioned, ephemeral moments were often what created the "watercooler moments" that were fun to talk about in live-service games. And these

moments often spread outside the game's immediate community and became something people talked about, making the possibility of future events a draw for new players. However, P6, P9, and P3 mentioned a danger with too many ephemeral moments was it encouraged players to pay attention to the game 24/7 which led to unhealthy engagement patterns from players (and developers). Some solutions were discussed to circumvent players feeling like they missed out. P6 talked about how a developer in the team tried to extensively document the live events, and made sure that other players could at least see the screenshots and write-ups to understand the narrative. Some participants (P10, P12, P9) also noted how the community tended to extensively document these events, and how this often became a way for the community to explain to new players what had happened. P10 described developing an in-game feature which gave a fictional justification for being able to re-experience previous events, allowing players to experience them, yet without the *zeitgeist* of the moment. P4 and P11 discussed seeing their ideal uses of ephemeral content being additive to a core experience, and something not required but beneficial if you happened to be there.

18.2.4 Theme 4: Permanence

Many participants discussed the consequences for how stories are told in these games compared to traditional games, because of their perennial nature. The primary difference here is that, as P6 said, "*With live storytelling, it's really never finished.*" See table 18.4 for an overview. One advantage with this, as P1 mentioned, is that nothing is lost. It is always possible for a developer to pick up a hanging story thread many years

later. Because of the scope of perennial games, a cut storyline is a possible thread for the future. P5 also mentions this scope giving the possibility of unprecedented depth, since you spend many years with the characters in these worlds, so a developer has a lot of room to explore and develop them over time. Furthermore, you are also writing for a community who have also spent years in these places and care deeply about those same characters, and thus you have a built-in, known audience for anything you write, who want to pay attention, read and document everything you write.

Table 18.4: Table showing a summarization of findings relating to the joys and challenges of the permanence of perennial games.

PERMANENCE	JOY	CHALLENGE
NEVER DONE	always being able to continue telling the story	feeling less creatively fulfilling, never ending or wrapping up the story
	being able to set up promises for the future	needing to pay off the promises you set up early on
TELLING FOR- EVER STORIES	telling deeper, bigger stories, large cast of characters	can never steer too far away from the original concept and promise
		format and tools restricting the types of stories you can tell
	having players live with and grow with the story and know it intimately	catering to different player tastes and wants
	telling a living story	never being able to polish the story to its best possible shape
		accepting releasing unfinished stories, not being able to iterate the whole arc as a whole
	an ever-increasing amount of history for players to engage with	history becoming a deterrent for new players
ALWAYS ON	always being able to build and expand the game	never having stable ground, always needing to move fast
	(building on top of what players already know)	can never remove or delete progress, always have to build on top
		servers always need to be on, the game always needs to work, always needing to be "on hand"

However, this also means that everything is a permanent part of the narrative, which can have downsides. The fact that you can never delete anything can be detri-

mental, and the fact that players expect truths of the world to stay the same means that if you realize later that the story would have worked better another way, you cannot change it. P2 talked about how players would get very angry if you ever wiped their progress or reset the server or storyline they had worked to get, so perennial games are, with some exceptions, unable to redo or reset a faulty or dysfunctional storyline, feature, or system once it has been released. You are *"unable to wipe the server"* (P5), and instead have to build upon it, extend it, and change it. Releasing a new installment can thus sometimes feel like opening Pandora's Box because the consequences can never be undone (P2). P10 mentions how many traditional stories are written so the beginning is changed after you have written the ending, yet in live-service games, the beginning was often written several years before the ending, and thus the beginning is and must be what it was at the time. *"In a live game, you have nailed your feet to this, there's nothing to do about that, so you just have to live with it."* (P10)

This goes beyond plot, as the promises are also thematic and aesthetic. You need to "honor" what came before and what players did (P1, P11, P10), and provide players with a world and narrative that still feels recognizable to them. P1 talked about upholding a certain quality of the game that players expected, an essence of the game that was not possible to put into words, yet made the game what it was. If something didn't feel like it fit in with the world, it was noticed by players. P10 described a time where the team updated the visuals of some characters to be more proficient as the team had gotten more skillful, yet players complained it didn't feel like "them" anymore, having gotten used to the older visuals. The narrative changes quality over

the time of development, too. Both P4, P6, and P10 mentioned how often early on the writing was more free and about evoking concepts and mysteries without needing to resolve them, at least not in the near future. Yet after years of development, the developers felt pressure to provide answers. P11 mentioned an example of working on a story element in response to history written years before by a different developer who never intended it to have a resolution. Players had an expectation that this could be resolved based on the promises of the game, and thus the developers had to find a way to resolve it. The challenge here is that if you conclude too many storylines, the world can feel smaller and closed-off, losing the sense of mystery and exploration that drew players in, as unanswered mysteries are great to make players engaged. P10 and P4 both talked about needing to, as they were doing this, making sure they "*close one door, open two more.*" (P4).

Some participants, like P6 and P12, questioned whether a perennial game needed to exist forever, and were happy to see them end at a certain time. Yet others (like P7, P10) saw their games as being able to go on forever as long as there were interested fans, comparing it to long-running series like Star Trek, soap operas, or sports, which can continue to tell new stories with the same basic rules and concepts. P9 and P10 discussed how perennial games are bound by their initial promises and design goals, and cannot stray too far away from that without betraying why people were drawn to the game in the first place. Therefore, the initial promise needs to be strong enough it can last forever, and not run out of material after a few years. P3 discussed how perennial games almost have to turn into a platform for stories rather

than a single game, and not all teams have the resources to do this. Existing long enough will almost inevitably turn the game into something else than what it was when it began. P5, in a paraphrase of a famous quote, discussed how perennial games either die or *"live long enough to become weirder"*, turning into more specialized versions of what they started out as, as they cater to their specific audience and experiment to survive.

Despite these challenges, the storytelling possibilities of live-service games were a core source of the joy for many of these participants. P9 said that now they had done a live-service game with a narrative, they would never work on a non-narrative live service game again: *"It's the same cycle, but it's just with so much more purpose and so much more fun..."* (P9).

18.3 Discussion

18.3.1 The Joys and Challenges of Perennial Development

It is evident from the findings that the joys and challenges of perennial game development are caused by the same underlying phenomenae. A key example is the live interaction with the community. This was what many developers saw as the primary draw for this kind of development: Being able to respond to and riff with players and being surprised by what they get up to. All of this is not possible without the community, yet that same community causes the need to constantly be on hand for any surprises, and are the same community who always require more content and attention.

The unpredictability of the community causes as much joy and happiness as it can cause friction and tension in a development schedule. This therefore makes one thing clear about perennial and live-service development: The challenges are not to be overcome by eliminating their source. Removing unpredictability or the community interaction would deter much of the creative value of making perennial games in the first place. As Lowthorpe et al. (2013) hypothesized, working with the audience is a great source of the joy of live-service development, yet the vulnerability is not gone. In the years of live-service development, developers have not found a fixed, solid position, and the vulnerability persists as live-service development consistently is uneven and uncertain, with each installment being a new possibility for success or failure.

Regarding community management, the findings indicate developers have a great amount of respect and appreciation of community management, contrasting somewhat with the findings from deWinter (2014); deWinter et al. (2017) who showed that community management was often undervalued. Note that this may be a difference in how individual developers feel and how studios structurally handle community management, as deWinter et al.'s findings were targeted at the studio in general. Yet, several participants were still surprised by their need for community management, so there is still a point that developers are perhaps not prepared for how early and how frequently community management is necessary. As found in citizen science projects (Reeves et al., 2017), the community aspects are vital and connected to the experience itself. The dangers with community interaction also showed, as developers mentioned them or colleagues being afraid of the reactions of players and this steering decision

making. As discussed by previous work (Busch et al., 2015; Turpeinen, 2023; deWinter et al., 2017; Laato and Rauti, 2021; Siu, 2017) the feelings of unhappy players could directly impact the mental state and safety of developers, which also showed in these findings, causing some developers to disengage from direct player interaction for their own health. A final danger mentioned in these findings not seen in previous work was the overreliance on the engaged players leading to an insularity of opinions, as it is only a fraction of players who are the most engaged and talking to developers at all times.

18.3.2 Working Sustainably

One key challenge for perennial game development is the speed at which it operates causing stress, burnout, and unhealthy work practices. As highlighted by many developers, the pace they were working at at some points during development, maybe even for years, was not feasible to maintain for 10+ years. However, the challenge is deeper than advocating for more healthy work hours, because live-service games are "on" all the time, and therefore it is not always possible to take breaks as a developer, especially in small teams with limited resources. Furthermore, the same intensity and adrenaline that causes burnout and stress is also part of the joy of the experience, as that intensity can be immensely creatively fulfilling in the moment, and thus it can be difficult to choose to tune out even if it would be a healthier choice. The findings also showed similar tensions as those mentioned by Tendedez et al. (2018) in agile development, of trying to manage the flexibility needed to work in an agile manner, while also creating the standardized processes needed for larger team productions.

Furthermore, the reality of working on the same games for 10+ years are also showing today in a way it did not when games as a service was being defined in the 2010s (Sotamaa et al., 2010; Clark, 2014; Cai et al., 2014). The developers behind a game might shift and change, get laid off, promoted, or lose interest, something also mentioned by Tamer (2023). Keeping a large creative team on track on the same experience for that amount of time is thus a significant challenge. New ideas are also necessary, as a team can become too comfortable in the same patterns and production cycles, and lose the drive to make new things, which is necessary for a creative endeavor like game development. Something as "simple" as an update of the tools can refresh the joy of developers working on the same game.

As mentioned by Bernevega and Gekker (Bernevega and Gekker, 2022), the shift into live-service games caused fewer games to be released by large studios, meaning each game has a higher expectation to succeed. Yet, as seen in the findings here, whether a live-service game actually succeeds is not something developers can predict. As games get increasingly expensive to develop, having one live-service game flop can be catastrophic for a company, and thus its developers. The findings here also show how developers were aware of this financial uncertainty, and how live-service did not feel like a safer financial direction than traditional development, contrasting to assumptions of early live-service writing (including software as a service writing (Choudhary, 2007)).

These findings highlighted some of the difficulties with iterating live with the community, which can cause friction and unhappiness as players are experiencing something that is "unfinished". As a creative, it is necessary to accept releasing unfinished

products and working on it with players, which can be a difficult shift in mentality. Another insight from these findings was how the participants saw themselves and their teams grow more confident about the game they were making over time. This makes sense as skills develop, yet in live-service games, this growth doesn't happen before the game is out but during, meaning that early installments inevitably will be made by a team with less confidence than later installments. The problem here is maintaining financial sustainability while iterations are happening, as fluctuations in game quality or early negative experiences might lead players to lose interest. There is a direct financial incentive to not create designs that would lose players, potentially leading to safer, more popular content, and less creative risk-taking, which might turn players away over time, instead.

This kind of development is not for everyone, as there is a creative satisfaction in being "done" with a project that is never fully realized in a perennial game. Conversely, some participants found joy in always being able to find new stories to tell in the same world and expanding on what players already knew.

18.3.3 Telling Forever Stories

As the majority of previous work on live-service games does not cover narrative design, this section helps to provide some insight into how this is currently done in the industry. The first and foremost finding thus is the joy developers got out of telling stories in this manner. Seeing and reacting to players as they were telling their stories and responding narratively to their actions was a core reason to tell stories like this,

and not possible in traditional development.

The first and primary challenge when telling stories in live-service games is their length and perpetuity. Stories rely on beginnings and endings, where questions are asked and answered, so when a game needs to keep running it needs to ask new questions. This was a challenge for developers, as perennial games run for so long that answers to "unanswerable" questions might need to be given. It is a natural evolution of the narrative to become more intricate over time, as each new installment provides further specifics, detail, and concretization of previous elements that may have been kept vague. This can, if not treated carefully by developers, lead to the narrative world losing its sense of mystery. As found in serial fiction studies, there is a need to continuously supply new story arcs before old ones end, to make sure there are always new, lingering questions for the audience (Hayward, 1997; Mittell, 2015).

There is a potential discussion for each perennial game, from a creative perspective, about whether the story should inevitably end. Any game will need to preserve some of its core experience, which, while still potentially profitable, may run its course creatively. As Church said in a developer blog, live-service stories *"are never going to end on a high note"* (Church, 2014). Some participants in the findings indicated a desire to want their narratives to end at a satisfactory time, and let the story be what it was, yet other developers saw their games as potentially going on forever, so this may be a more difficult question and depend on the project.

One finding that does resonate with the old work on virtual world design (section 7.1) is the importance of responding to player action, and the success developers

saw when they did so. Drawing the players into the narrative was often a goal of many developers and they saw great rewards both in reception and their own enjoyment of their work when doing so. This thus indicates that even as authored narrative is more prevalent in modern perennial games, utilizing the old teachings of emergent and serial narrative is still immensely useful. This also echoes examples in serial fiction, of authors even in traditional fiction responding to the audience (Hayward, 1997). The challenge, as found in these findings, is how modern video game content takes so long to produce on higher scales that responding in time and in kind to the audience can prove more challenging than in traditional fiction.

One of the more contentious topics for participants were the topic of ephemerality. While some considered it an inevitable part of the experience, others wanted to alleviate the worst parts of it, giving players a chance to experience ephemeral content later, or having it be additive to the experience but not necessary.

18.3.4 Hitting the Balance

Some of the findings discussed the adrenaline and excitement of some parts of perennial development, yet also how this excitement could be dangerous and lead to breakdowns and crunch if developers stayed in this mode for too long. Reversely, we also saw developers describe the opposite situation, of being so efficient and confident about the content you were producing that it became stale and predictable, and needing to freshen things up with new production methods, tools, or ideas.

The interplay between these two extremes were best exemplified by a concept

brought up by P9, of "*hitting the balance*". Other participants used similar terminology to discuss this idea of trying to work without crunching and burning out, yet being able to produce rich, varied and surprising content fast enough to engage players. The struggle with this, however, is that maintaining this balance is likely impossible. The nature of hitting the balance is dependent on producing the game at a healthy pace for the team, yet developing in the same, healthy way likely leads to producing similar content over time, and thus developers need to change their production method, cadence, tools, or style in order to make something different, which will naturally disrupt this balance. Furthermore, if a production schedule is too planned and too set in stone, it will not be able to react to unexpected player actions, new bugs, or player sentiment in time. There is a built-in need to be flexible in a perennial game development that requires teams to never be able to settle on a plan too far ahead in the future—or at least always be ready to change that plan.

This is similar to the concept of "balancing acts" by Hoda et al. (2010), on how working teams must maintain balance between conflicting concepts, such as freedom and responsibility. Yet, this balancing is primarily concerned *within* teams, and not in relation to the needs of a community of players or users, and responding to outside needs, which are likely also concerns in ongoing software development. This, internal balancing act is a more foundational layer, which gets disrupted and pushed by community expectations and needs.

Perennial game development fluctuates in and out of states of hitting this balance, sometimes needing to rush and crunch in an intense moment to establish a more

confident schedule, and sometimes needing to shake things up after content has become too stale. This is an important learning for perennial and live-service development. While aiming for this balance is a worthy goal, it is perhaps necessary to build in an expectation—in developers, in publishers, and possibly in players—that this balance ebbs and flows and does not maintain a constant level of quality or engagement at all times, and thus that any momentary downturn or unsuccessful launch or less-than-hoped-for reaction in players does not spell the actual end of a project. Yet, this is challenged by the practical realities of game development, as there might not be enough of a financial foundation to be able to last any fluctuation out. As P9 said *"It is absolutely possible to hit the balance. But it is not possible forever."*

18.3.5 A Group of Authors

Finally, I wish to use these findings to complicate two elements from the previous work. First, the notion of the inferred author function from Mittell (2015), discussed in section 4.1.4, and second, the notions of the players' relationship to the developers discussed in the ethnographic findings in section 14.3.2.

In the ethnography chapter (chapter 14), we saw the effect of the inferred author function, from a community's perspective, with the players often talking about "Bungie", anthropomorphizing their actions as a complete entity. And while we do see that here, it is complicated by the realities of game development teams over time. Because, while a community might discuss a singular entity, developers very much do not. Developers are always aware that development is more complicated than a single

author, and they feel this acutely in their own practice. Thus, in the relationship with the audience, they can't not differentiate themselves. This complicates their relationship with the audience, as their impetus will often be to differentiate between the work of individual developers.

This is further complicated by the fact that developers and audiences are not static. The people employed at Bungie today are so vastly different than when Destiny began (to the point that there are likely few left who was part of that original Destiny launch), that we could in theory describe it as a different team or company, yet we do not. They are still called "Bungie" and players still anthropomorphize this Bungie as the same regardless. This is especially evident in the most extreme cases where players become developers or vice versa, or shift in and out of these roles. I will intentionally not divulge too many identities but I know of several instances during the ethnography where a member of the Destiny community became employed by Bungie (and there are stories of this across live-service games, and really, game development). For a more public and stark example, we can see how a person like Lance Reddick was *both* a member of the community, an active player talking about his experience, and a person participating in the development of the game as a voice actor for a prominent character. While I cannot know specifics, it is almost unthinkable that his experience as a player over the years would not affect his voice acting performance. He would recurrently play this character as an actor, over time, expansion after expansion, while he was playing the game and seeing how the community discussed it. Furthermore, it also impacts the experience of the players, as when they hear his voice lines in the game, their knowledge

of him as a player affects that hearing. This kind of crossover between audience and developer is very unique to perennial experiences, as it only happens as a consequence of the long time-spans they exist at, and only in the context where a community member can conceivably *become* an author of that experience—which is not the case for many narrative experiences. Yet, it is possible for a player to, within 10 years, become a game developer, or vice versa.

We are not done complicating this, however, as voice acting is one of the easier elements to attribute to a specific person. In an area as complex as game design, it is often difficult to pinpoint who did what and who was in charge of what feature⁴. The audience, can sometimes struggle with this. A participant in the interview (a writer) commented how they sometimes are asked why a mechanic is not working, something they have no control over. Yet sometimes, players are highly aware of changes in teams and use it to describe their experience. Bungie has had several different people in the role of Game Director, one of the most audience-facing roles outside of community managers. As Game Directors, they are attributed a lot of authorship over the state of the experience at the time of their tenure. For example, Luke Smith became Director of the lauded *Taken King* expansion, which caused him to then be applauded. He continued as Game Director into *Destiny 2* until 2020, yet as opinions of the game soured, this was then also attributed to him, and the community's opinions of him also

⁴I should also clarify that even voice acting can be complicated, as the final performance is influenced by a number of factors, such as the script, the voice direction, the voice actor, the recording booth, etc. *Destiny*, too, has a famous example of this in the early voice acting of the "Ghost" done by Peter Dinklage, which was very disputed and disliked by many at first, yet over time it has gotten more appreciation due to its more unique direction for the character (Evangelho, 2015).

greatly soured until he stepped into a different, less front-facing role at Bungie. We also saw a similar attribution of importance in Yoshi P. for Final Fantasy XIV (see section 10.5).

These are examples where the "inferred author function" is no longer about an amorphous entity making the entire game but instead the audience identifies an author of a specific aspect, era, or feature of the game. "I dislike *this* system in Destiny which *this person* was in charge of", regardless of whether that is true or not. These kinds of narratives (myths) about the game, and who is telling it, are highly bound in with the current attitude towards the game by the community, as they will use these myths as explanations for why the game is in one state or the other. It is thus not "really" a reflection of the actual development, but a reflection of their understanding of it. The developers can try to correct these myths (and sometimes have success doing so as discussed about Joe Blackburn in section 14.2.3.3), yet this is often exceedingly difficult. This is because these attributions are not about often about truth, but about supporting and building upon the existing perennial experience, supporting their myths and pre-existing understandings of how the game works and should be perceived. Is there a flaw in what an otherwise lauded author made? Must be someone else's fault. Is there a flaw in a disliked author's work? Ah, of course, as expected. Identifying a person as an author causes more personality to be attributed to that decision, which can both be negative and positive. There can thus be an advantage in maintaining the inferred author function of the company as a single entity, as blame is harder to assign (and individuals more difficult to harass). The audience does get individual attribution

both very right and very wrong, and they often do not see the difference, and it is often their prerogative when they choose to assign authorship to an individual or the company.

This chapter presented and discussed the results of a interviews with perennial game developers, to understand the joys and challenges of this form of development, and to ultimately understand how they utilize narrative play in their practice. We saw how the joys and challenges are often bound in the same underlying phenomena and thus the friction of the communal interaction is as unavoidable as the fun of it. We saw how it was very much in this communal interaction that primary joy was, and in the ability to respond to an ongoing, engaged audience. We can thus see how developers play with the audience through the development by responding to their play in future installments, all while trying to "hit the balance" of their own, maintaining momentum in their narrative delivery while staying sustainable.

Chapter 19

Developing Telegrams from the Choir Train

“People say they hear choral singing when the trains arrive. People say this, because recordings do not pick up anything resembling a choir.”

The Connective Rail Company Encyclopedia, common folklore about Choir Trains.

(Larsen, 2025)

THIS CHAPTER WILL DESCRIBE THE DEVELOPMENT and live operation of the game *Telegrams from the Choir Train*¹. This was developed as an experiment in developing a low-budget perennial game to experience the development aspect of the work first-hand, to corroborate and reflect on the empirical findings throughout this direction.

Telegrams from the Choir Train is designed as a perennial experience that

¹The game will be referred to as either "Telegrams from the Choir Train" or simply "Choir Train" interchangeably throughout this chapter.

is played through a Discord bot. It is a cooperative management game, designed as a long-running communal experience where players collectively manage freight on a fictional train and receive cryptic telegraph messages. The game allows communities to experience a narrative over time on Discord, a platform they already interact on, while utilizing design elements from perennial games and serial narratives, designed to bring people together.

This chapter will describe the design of this game, how it was developed and implemented, how its live run went (and, to some extent, is going), before I will reflect on this experience as a designer and developer, and for this work at large. This is intended to function like a post-mortem, covering the difficulties and challenges and joys of this development from my own personal perspective. These descriptions will augment the findings from the previous chapter with personal recollection, as I experienced many of the same dynamics of perennial development first-hand. Due to this, this narrative is intended to showcase an aspect of development only touched on in description before this: How it *feels* to develop a perennial game. However, before we get there, I will describe the design of another game I was a part of during my PhD process, which helped inform this design greatly.

19.1 Prelude - Designing the ARG "The LUX"

During the period of 2021-2023², I was part of a project designing an ARG called "The LUX", as part of a larger research project, investigating the use of ARGs to measure complex sociological phenomenae such as team resilience. This project can be read more about in the papers written about it (Habibi et al., 2022, 2023). The LUX is an ARG, or "Alternate Reality Game" (Aardse, 2013), a type of game that has received a fair share of research buzz in the past 10 years as well (Aardse, 2013; Javanshir et al., 2018; Hansen et al., 2013) (see section 4.4). Therefore, while the research output from this study is less applicable to my work (Habibi et al., 2022, 2023), the experience on the media-making and development of this project is valuable in a perennial purview. ARGs share primary features with perennial games (temporal continuity, universal chronicle) and while they may not be perpetual (although some are), many valuable lessons can be learned from how they are made in terms of how they interact with and respond to their audience, and tell an ongoing, live story.

I was acting as the primary narrative designer and writer on the project, creating the storylines and experience flow for the players, and integrating the puzzles and mechanics into the storyline, as well as developed some of the technical features required such as parts of the Discord Bot. The first version of The LUX ran in spring 2021 with two two-week sessions where approximately 6-7 players played in each. This was inten-

²I should also mention before this, I have a bit of previous relevant development experience. During 2017-2019, I worked on a series of casual, branded mobile games as a programmer. While these games were not narrative, they were nevertheless live-service, as we continually updated them with new levels and updates, and had to respond to user-requests and problems in real-time. This gave me a first early taste of the experience that will be discussed here.

tionally smaller-scale than most ARGs, experimenting with the possibilities of ongoing ARG-storytelling through Discord with students. The players had to navigate around UC Santa Cruz campus to scan AR markers to get clues for puzzles, while talking with each other and us over Discord. The developers, in a trope common to ARGs and early virtual worlds (section 7.1), acted out as characters over Discord, role-playing with the players as they progressed through the story, either helping or misleading them as the story went.

I will not here go into detail on this project, yet the perennial experiences we saw during the live operation of this project directly led into my future work on perennial games. We experienced first-hand needing to deal with live problems such as our physical AR tags getting removed or players finding ways to cheat our systems. This taught me some valuable lessons we can see echoed in the literature review prior, such as how players will always be faster than you expect, and they will surprise you, yet also how they were able to break in and out of character and accept the flow of the story despite it's logic breaking or them seeing behind the curtain at its technical construction. It also showed me the joy of interacting live with players in the moment, and how terrifying it was to do regardless, and how all-consuming it could be if you were not careful about spending your time appropriately. This project was also a big reason why the project I am about to talk about was done through a Discord bot, showing me the power and possibilities of developing a game entirely inside a Discord server.

19.2 The Design of Telegrams from the Choir Train

Telegrams from the Choir Train is entirely played through Discord commands, and all output appears through text channels, with guidance through a manual present on a website: <https://bjeck.github.io/CRC-RITU/manual.html>³. The game has three main components:

- 1) Inspired by traditional mail ordering companies such as Sears & Roebuck, the players accept orders from customers (say for a set of cutlery or a piano), and then must purchase this and then let the train carry it across the world until it reaches the correct station, where they must offload it to the recipient.
- 2) Before offloading, players must find their recipient's name and/or address, since this information is missing due to a corruption of data (see section 19.2.4). This is done by querying several incomplete databases, in a manner similar to a logic deduction puzzle.
- 3) As players complete orders (and due to the passage of real time) a narrative will be presented through Discord messages. These messages might provide special orders which unlocks further story, or be seemingly unrelated. This is implemented as a bespoke storylet system (Kreminski and Wardrip-Fruin, 2018), with multiple parallel storylines progressing at once. Upon every successful offload and at every

³The game can be accessed at <https://bjeck.github.io/CRC-RITU/index.html>. A video showcasing gameplay can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TofBvFx0GY&feature=youtu.be>. Note that, as a perennial experience, seeing a short video is not representative of the full, communal experience.

fixed time interval (every hour), the game will perform a series of checks on the players' save file to see if any new storylets should be unlocked.

Each of these individual tasks (receiving an order, finding an address, reading a storylet), may take no more than 5-10 minutes individually, and players are free to accept and fulfill as many as they like (as their resources permit). However, they must wait for the train to travel across the world in real time (which might take several days). In the meantime, they can read the narrative, fulfill other orders, or disengage from the game. As discussed in the research on perennial and serial narratives (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021, 2024b; Hayward, 1997; Mittell, 2015) (see section 4.1), this waiting or "gap" (Mittell, 2015) is an important aspect what helps grow the communal interactions. Gaps were thus designed into the experience to encourage players to chat, as well as give space to investigate the game's narrative in greater detail.

19.2.1 The Wares and Orders

The orders of the game consist of a ware requested, a destination, and a reward (as well as other information needed to find the address/name of the recipient). All the possible wares are designated in a spreadsheet, which has a host of properties primarily concerning their price, type (such as Organic, Metal, etc), size, and rarity, with each station selling a different assortment of wares based on their type. This information was loaded on startup and could be loaded dynamically, and the idea of a dynamic economy was experimented with, yet was not implemented due to scope.

When receiving an order, players are given 3 options to pick from, generated

dynamically based on current position, place in the story, and other considerations, using a dynamic "difficulty" system that ensures the players do not get three exclusively difficult or easy options every time. On top of these regular orders, over the course of the game players are given a series of “scripted” orders, which serve the narrative and require specific wares to be offloaded at specific places, as well as “modular” orders, which require specific wares to be offloaded at dynamic destinations (based on where they are currently). Furthermore, it is possible for players to get contraband and illegal wares through the game, which they can transport at the risk of being spotted in inspections when the train stops, and requires a special treatment upon offloading to make sure customs agents do not know you are shipping something illegal.

19.2.2 The Investigation

While an order provides some information on the recipient, it does not always provide all necessary information. In order to successfully offload a ware, players need a name and an address. The order supplies an “ID” (similar to a social security number) which can be looked up to see what information is in the primary database. Sometimes this will have all the needed information, but often it will not. Thus, players will need to solve a logic puzzle to find the appropriate information. A host of different databases exist in the game (see figure 19.1) which supply different kinds of information about people in the world, such as the voting registry supplying addresses a person has lived at, the commuting database, supplying work addresses for a person, or the “postage” database, supplying all addresses within a given postage district. These databases,

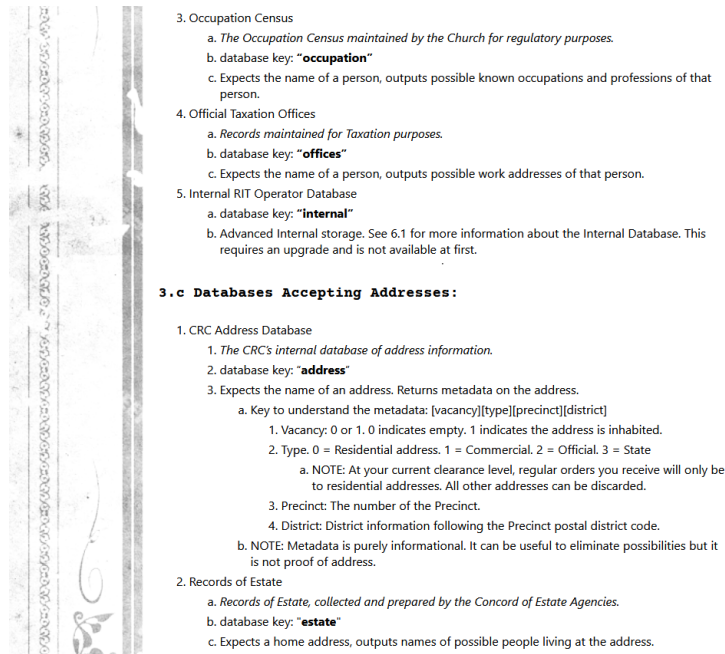


Figure 19.1: Excerpt of the part of the Choir Train Manual explaining the Databases. Shows an example of how the databases are structured.

however, are not entirely accurate. Due to the natural corrosion of data (part of the fiction of the world), these databases are flawed and have incorrect, outdated, or wrong information (the voting registry, for example, might have addresses a person has never lived at, or not have where they currently live). Thus players will often need to cross-reference multiple databases to find the right answer.

It should be noted that these databases were procedurally generated and some addresses are impossible to find. Due to the random nature of the system, a person might have all their relevant information removed and you cannot find the correct information. This was intentional to provide the aesthetic of the corruption accurately and give sense of uncertainty in the solving. Being aware of the frustration this could

cause, players are informed upon picking an order how difficult an address might be to find through a loose evaluation of the known information⁴. Furthermore, players are also given an option to “opt-out” of finding an address, causing a monetary penalty to offload the ware to a “Decorrosion Provider”, an in-world service which “decorrodes” corroded data in the databases.

19.2.3 The Manual

A key part of the game is the manual itself. This has been crafted as an intentional “look-up” reference for players to refer to over and over again. While the game has a very light tutorial, the primary mode for learning the game is by reading the manual and, over time, internalizing its lessons. This was done to simulate the experience of doing complicated administrative work, evoking the feeling of being a phone operator, etc. The manual furthermore, serves as a vehicle for narrative, as it is written “in voice” of the fictional employers of the players, giving a sense of the tone of the game right from the start. As it exists on an external website, there is also room for visual design not possible through the Discord bot, and this was taken advantage of. See the manual at the following URL: <https://bjeck.github.io/CRC-RITU/manual.html> and figure 19.1 for a visual excerpt.

The manual is split into “roles”, covering the different utilities of the bot.

While these roles are never enforced by the game itself, it gives players a soft guidance

⁴Note, this evaluation, however, is not entirely accurate either, due to the difficulty of proceduralising this kind of deduction, and this evaluation is thus only an approximation. Players thus might be able to find an “impossible” address, yet it is exceedingly difficult.

on how to delegate tasks in groups. This was implemented due to a playtest seeing difficulty for players in how to distribute tasks among groups, as they had a hard time understanding what other players had done or not. Thus developing roles like “the Trader” or “the Manager” allowed players to slot themselves into possible archetypes. While some players ignored these, it did help some players distribute their tasks and was used for collaboration.

19.2.4 Narrative

The world of "Telegrams from the Choir Train" is a post-post-apocalypse, where a strange "Logic Bomb" destroyed the world and corrupted all data, yet people managed to rebuild civilization in small enclaves where they are safe from the dangerous wilderness known as the "Scan". The only way to travel The Scan is with "Choir Trains", sacred trains people claim have been given to them by the gods, and they are thus worshipped religiously and controlled tightly by the governing religion. The story starts with the death of the "Channeller" (the religious leader), and the players, as newly hired telegraph operators for the leading freight company, navigate this world entirely through telegraph responses, presented as Discord messages. It is a story about labor, deep-rooted systemic oppression and how regular people survive and resist in unfair conditions, drawing conscious parallels between religious oppression and that of capitalism. The players are tasked to become laborers within the game's system, working very directly on laborious, repetitive tasks. They have little control over the narrative and large-scale outcomes, yet their contributions affect the lives of others

indirectly, and the story mirrors this experience.

The narrative is explored and presented in snippets of in-world textual entries, such as newspaper articles, diary entries, board meeting minutes, audio recordings etc. the meanings of which may not be immediately obvious. The narrative is intended as a puzzle for players to piece together, to encourage "forensic fandom"-work (Mittell, 2015), inspired by several "story artifact"-like (Krainert, 2014) stories, such as Dark Souls (From Software, 2011), and Destiny (Bungie and Activision, 2014). This kind of work is further incentivized by the interface of the game. The bot presents itself as a telegraph known as the "Irregular Telegraph", a strange piece of equipment that can send communication messages across the Scan, yet it narratively is known to have disturbances and is not trusted by many people. Due to being sent through the Scan, messages can appear corrupted or glitched, and this is an important part of the aesthetic of the game.

The narrative system is structured as a "Quality-based narrative" (QBN), (Short, 2016) or a storylet system (Kreminski and Wardrip-Fruin, 2018). The one difference is how the storylets are structured in "storybooks", a set of linear storylet chunks that unlock one by one in sequence, inspired by Destiny's lorebooks⁵. Multiple storybooks are active at the same time and thus there is a degree of non-linearity and modularity, as storybooks are activated over time as others progress and qualities change. To unlock an entry, both the requirements for the storybook and the entry

⁵Work had begun to make it possible for storybooks to have a "flat" structure, where any entry could be unlocked in any order, yet this was not finished, as it caused complications for the UX (for players to see which entries they had unlocked) which could not be finished in time

must be fulfilled. On top of checking qualities as part of their requirements, storybooks can also advance or change qualities, and unlocking entries can affect qualities and do a number of other effects, such as adding orders to players.

19.3 Development Process

19.3.1 Preproduction and inspiration

While this idea of a “narrative through a discord bot” has been mulling in my head for a long time throughout this PhD, pre-production for this project began in earnest in Summer 2023 and lasted through Fall 2023, making early mechanical prototypes and researching the aesthetic and tone of the game. Some of the core pillars of the game were locked down early, partly due to the nature of the perennial game I wanted to make and due to the technical limitations of Discord I was aware of. These pillars included a known constraint that the entire game would take place in Discord commands and text, and needing to take place over a long period of time, with intermittent ritual tasks for players, and also a need for communal interaction.

Basing the game around the journey of a train came about due to a brainstorming session with other narrative folks at UCSC landing on the idea of a train travelling as a natural fit for this ritual, scheduled journey, as a train naturally stops and travels and one must wait for it. From this, a range of other inspirations clicked into place. The gameplay was inspired by the focus on labor I wanted to invoke narratively, calling from inspirations of games like *Papers, Please* and *Hardspace Shipbreaker* etc., which put the

player in the shoes of a “laborer” performing menial, repetitive tasks inside a corporate structure, which they would slowly improve at over time, learning mastery and planning as the game went on. Naturally, this also draws inspiration from perennial games like *Destiny* and *Fallen London*, where repetitive actions are also commonplace. Secondly, I wanted to draw inspiration from detective games like *Return of the Obra Dinn*, *Her Story*, and *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective*, etc., by giving the players small, repeating deductive puzzles. And finally, I knew that the narrative had to draw inspiration from sources of perennial games and “Hidden structure” (Carstensdottir et al., 2019) narratives like *Destiny* lorebooks, *From Software* lore design, *Fallen London* storylets, as well as invoke the feeling of reading newspapers and wikipedia entries from *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective*, *Mass Effect*, and *Neurocracy*. The notion of a “Collective Tamagotchi”, or a collective gardening game (Kreminski et al., 2018) was also an early inspiration for what I wanted the game to feel like, creating an experience that would “idle” in the background as players did other tasks, and return to once in a while, sometimes together, sometimes asynchronously.

As I researched, the natural aesthetic inspiration for this quickly became early 20th century train travel, and Gilded Age aesthetics, and luxury train travel as seen in *The Last Express* and *Snowpiercer*. *Sears and Roebuck* catalogues especially were a huge inspiration for the mechanics of the game, letting the players be the “operators” of a fictional ware catalogue. The post-apocalyptic setting came in to marry the affordances of *Discord* with this pre-digital aesthetic, allowing textual glitches and digital corruption. This shaped into the idea of the “post-post-apocalyptic” setting, allowing me both the

language of the digital while creating a setting mostly relying on analog technology—the digital existed in the past, and was the realm of the players and the otherworldly elements, not the realm of the human characters. This finally, was combined with the final aesthetic inspiration: Religion. The idea of the trains being “sacred” brought about the missing connection between the inspirations, creating a “need” for the trains beyond their material affordances. This was inspired in part by “impossible” beings or “alien” gods like The Nine in *Destiny*, yet also manifesting in practical religion in ways similar to the Catholic Church, inspired (very literally) by religious choir music⁶. These three aesthetic pillars (20th century train travel, digital corruption, and grand religion) were the primary ingredients that served the development narratively and fictionally. With these three, I could then also echo parallels across these three, showing how hegemonic structures appear across religion, gilded age capitalism, and modern day technocracy, and how these ultimately marginalize and affect laborers.

With this, I fleshed out the world, created factions and ideologies, creating a history, characters, and possible story threads. This then was shaped into storylines for the first season iteratively, figuring out which story arcs excited me and would work well for introducing the setting and conflicts. I intentionally created A and B plots, giving some story elements more weight than others, giving players a core narrative and more to chew on if they wanted to dig into the margins. I also developed plans for future “seasons” if further development would allow it.

⁶This is in fact where the name “Choir Train” came from.

19.3.2 Production

As the game entered production, I received help from 5 other people, helping me with system design, programming, and writing. Jason Xu was instrumental in setting up the SQL database required for storing and saving the data of players as they played, and Andrew Li did much work on the systems of the game, setting up the wares, orders, and stations, as well as doing much help on the databases for address finding. Finally, Nic Junius, Ryan Cai (who also contributed some programming), and Kyle Gonzalez helped with writing storylet entries, which led to a total of 114 storylet entries in the game⁷. Nic and Ryan each spear-headed two primary storylines in the game, and Kyle helped provide worldbuilding details and wrote newspaper entries. The primary production of the game lasted throughout winter and spring 2024. Without their help, this game could not have been finished in time. However, even with this, the game was delayed from initial launch targeting Fall 2024 to Winter 2025, due to additional development, playtesting, and polish needed. While these people helped with a bulk of the development, I was the primary developer of the game throughout, and also the primary developer when the game went live. I wrote large chunks of the narrative, and programmed the bulk of the game, as well as managed the live operation once it was live.

The scope of the game in its current state is one complete “season” of narrative, which takes place over about 8-9 weeks in its current form. This matches two complete journeys for the train, as each trip back and forth takes 4 weeks (1 month) (see figure

⁷Each of these storylets were fit within the 2000-character limit Discord has for messages.



Figure 19.2: An overview of the full seasonal structure of Choir Train. A full season takes 8 weeks, split into two full trips through the world.

19.2).

19.3.3 Implementation

The game is written in Python, using the discord.py library to interact with Discord’s API. All mechanics in the game are activated through Discord commands, which interacts with data stored in an SQLite database that is updated concurrently as the game is running, and static data (wares, storylets, databases of recipients etc) stored as .json files or .csv files. The program only stores necessary data for play sent through commands, and no messages from Discord are stored by the bot. While tracking would have been useful for the monitoring of the bot, privacy was acutely important since I was asking players to invite this into their own private discord servers, and thus I wanted to make sure I was tracking as little as required for operation of the game. Thus no messages are stored except those explicitly sent by the players to the bot, and no data about their play is stored except that which is stored in the SQL database.

Its design as a Discord bot guided several of its affordances and limitations.

As a bot, it needs to be invited into a server⁸ in order to be used. Each server is its own instance of the game. Any person buying or selling a ware in that server does so for the entire server, and they are only managing a single train together. This was done primarily to allow collaboration and teamwork, yet also allowing flexibility: You can play this in a large Discord server or a small one (even as small as a single person) and the game's logic will behave no different. This said, some parts of the game are shared across all Discord servers, connecting servers and allowing cross-server communication. The train itself runs on a fixed, global schedule, meaning that all players know where in the world the train is at any given time, and the database of all recipients and addresses etc. are fixed for all players. To help facilitate this, a "global" player-managed database was created. When players find the correct addresses for recipients, they can fill out this global database, which other players on other servers can freely query. This allows a small degree of "cross-server" collaboration. More cross-server collaboration was planned in the early stages of design but was cut for scope.

19.3.3.1 Discord

Discord bots are common in Discord servers as utilities, with most published work on discussing their use for community management and moderation (Mock, 2019; Koehler, 2017; Axelsson and Fathallah, 2018; Seering et al., 2019), yet Choir Train provides an authored, narrative experience that still utilizes the communal aspects of Discord as part of its design. One key advantage of using discord was the inherent

⁸Discord now allows bots to be for individual users, yet this happened after the game was designed.

community it gives: A perennial game needs a community, a way to communicate with other players, and collaborate (or compete). It needs an online infrastructure and a way to store information. It needs a way for the community to receive narrative information and disseminate it. Discord has all these things built in. The second major advantage was the idea of this being a bot you invite to your server. This solves a major challenge of community building, because players (ideally) invite into their pre-existing communities, letting them play with their friends where they are already talking with them. This, however, marks a difference between this and most other perennial games, since they generally require players to "come to them", to log in to *World of Warcraft* or *Fallen London*. With Telegrams from the Choir Train, players are able (and encouraged) to play it inside their existing communities. Thus, this game is not intended to "create" an entirely new community around it, but rather help foster and cultivate existing communities. In this sense, it is more like an ongoing table-top role playing game (TTRPG) (Tychsen, 2008) that slots into an existing group. It is intended as a light experience that does what perennial and serial narratives have done for decades: Give communities something to talk about (Hayward, 1997; Larsen et al., 2023). I will discuss how this marks it as different from the other perennial experiences in this dissertation, and thus how we can discuss this game in relation to it, in the end of this chapter (section 19.6).

19.3.3.2 SQL Database

To ensure the progress of players was saved and stored in case of bot downtime or errors, all progress is stored in an SQL Database. The majority of this functionality was programmed by Jason Xu. The SQL database serves as a mirror of the internal storage (in memory), with everything that gets stored in memory also gets stored in SQL at the same time. It is thus always synced 1:1 across all players. When the bot shuts down and restarts, it then “loads” the SQL database into memory, and then uses that for play. The SQL database is thus entirely a “save”, only used for storage and on reload, and not actually queried in live play.

19.4 Playtesting

The game was playtested on a number of occasions. The first primary playtests were testing simple iterations of the order and ware system, skipping the waiting time between stations. These initial playtests were to test the efficacy of the system, to get a sense of whether they might be fun to expand on. These playtests took the player through 2 full loops of getting an order, offloading it, and receiving a narrative payoff. The response from these were mostly positive and encouraging, yet of course, were heavily biased by being instantaneous and without the proper scheduling system in place.

During production, a few internal playtests were done at increased speeds, letting the train move faster than intended in order to test more loops in a quicker

fashion. These playtests helped a lot to understand how the game was to be played in closer to real situations, and how the weaving of narrative story entries mixed with the order management, often causing confusion and one drowning in the other. Also through these, we learned the importance of helping the players keep up to date with each others' progress, and giving them options to catch up if they had missed a day or two of play.

One final playtest was conducted before the game launched, which was close to the actual play experience: Using actual length of operation, yet with new players invited into a separate testing server. The reason for this was so I could monitor their play in case something went wrong and to observe their play. This was the major difference between this playtest and how the game was "intended" to be played, and turned out to be quite a major difference, as many of the players did not know each other well and did not have an established community with each other or the server. Thus, this playtest, in honesty, failed. Players only played for a few days and saw no major story progress in that time, and then drifted away from the game. However, a lot was learned from this playtest, such as the need for a "role" system described in section 19.2.3 and the importance of regular scheduling. In the playtest, the train operated on a 16 hour schedule, entering or leaving a station every 16th hour. This was not intuitive to players, as the train seemed to leave and enter stations at different times each day and thus was difficult to plan around. Thus, it was changed to a regular 24 hour schedule. I also improved the onboarding experience after this and gave more guidance on how to play in the bot itself, by implementing a short "tutorial" on top of the manual, guiding

players through offloading their first order and leading them more naturally into the narrative. Yet, the most important thing I learned was just how important it was for the players to communicate as they played, which would naturally become easier if they knew each other already. For this game to work on pick-up groups, a lot more work would need to be done to foster collaboration than currently exists.

19.4.1 Live Play Prep

In this next section, I will describe some of my mentality and mental state as I was preparing to launch and then launched the game. I do this because it is the kind of experience that you can only get by doing it yourself, and it helps color in some of the perspectives on live-service development that this chapter discusses from a more personal angle. It should be mentioned, that while the particulars here are unique to this game, the general expressions and affects are reflective of much of what I have seen in perennial game development, and as discussed in chapter 18). Thus, this discussion should be read in the light of broader perennial development, to understand the mindset and experience of any developer.

In one word, as I was getting ready to deploy the game, I was *worried*. I was worried for the obvious reasons: The game might break. I might get no players. It might not resonate with players. I was worried that Discord's API, which is not under my control, could do a number of things to thwart my game, could go down, or throttle my bot's activity, or any number of technical problems on other servers I could not predict. I had tested multiple servers, sure, but I could not test every possible Discord

server and permutation of settings. But I was also worried for another reason, which was deeply influential to my ability to understand this as a perennial game. I was worried whether this even *was* a perennial game. The strange nature of the Discord server instancing meant that each server would operate individually. And while there was some overlap, I was not expecting to a greater community gathering together to talk about the game, because everyone was siloed off by design. I was worried about not being able to react to players, not being able to respond to their individual actions because they were happening in servers I could not monitor. I was worried that if something were to happen, I would not be able to respond to it, or rectify it, or affect it, or, more urgently: I would not even know about it. I stressed in those final days about giving myself ways to respond to players within Discord, and to have them report to me what was happening, while still not betraying the privacy I needed to maintain (and this led to a few features, which will be discussed below). I know I definitely could have done more in this department, and I could have planned it more in the production, and that was definitely a failure of this project. In hindsight, this fortunately did not matter as much as I feared⁹.

It did not take long for the players to turn this into a perennial game, and seeing this was immensely rewarding by itself, even if the number of players I had was not many. Before I discuss what the players did, I should clarify that point because it

⁹I did put some thought into what would happen if this game "failed" to succeed as a perennial game. If inviting it to servers did not work, I had intentions of making a complete "single-server" run, and inviting a set of players to try a full-playthrough, as I had done in the previous play-test, and creating something closer to an ARG-experience with direct involvement from me. If that did not work, I will admit in hindsight I did not have a clear plan of action, yet that may have been an interesting post-mortem in itself, even though it would have changed the intent of this chapter quite drastically.

will color the below experiences: I did not and have not had a great number of players playing Choir Train. I had in total around 6 servers start the game at launch, and only a few of those kept playing until the end (3 played for a while, only 2 finished). I should also note here that the few servers who got to the end were predominantly my friends or people who know me. This also meant, for these servers, I was in them, and could thus monitor progress directly. I generally would not interfere and in no way play the game with them, yet this naturally colors their perspective on the game.

That said, let us discuss what happened as players played the game.

19.5 Live Play

Unsurprisingly, one of the first things that happened was something broke. Shortly after the game had started, a player offloaded a ware and the story entry that was supposed to show up did not fire properly. This was not player-facing: They saw no error popup, but I knew the lack of activity was a problem. And when the hourly tick, which should send all unlocked story entries, happened without any message, I knew something was wrong. Yet, this was once again not player-facing, and the information they received they did not need for at least one more day so I did not fix it immediately.

Despite waking up at 3AM in worry about this, it turned out it was just a visual bug, and all progression had been unlocked properly in the database. The reason this matters, though, is not the bug but the experience of afterwards: I then needed to rectify the experience of players, since they had no idea that anything had gone wrong,

and were missing crucial story information they were supposed to have. This became my first use of a critical last-minute feature I added to the bot: A messaging function. With this, I could send messages through the bot to all (or any) server, and the bot would then relay this command. This way I could speak “in character” to the players, speaking as their manager or their boss (or any other character). This became a crucial feature for the rest of this live run of the game. I could here directly address the players in character, addressing current events and explain elements in character voice. For this bug, I sent a message as their manager explaining they should check their archive for narrative important information after I had restored the functionality of the story unlock system.

Why did such an important feature get added so late? Primarily, the reason was it is not the kind of thing you can “test” outside of live, actual-time play experience, because it only is tested in response to real interaction. I knew it would work from my time on LUX, so I did not consider it important to test it. Sending a message is, technically, easy (I implemented this feature in about 10 minutes). But it is not a technical question what happens when that message is sent, but a narrative and experiential one. And that part of the game can only happen live, and in situation. In hindsight, I think spending more time on integrating this at a bit more detail might have been helpful. Yet I also think this feature worked well because of its “scrappy” nature, allowing me to improvise on the fly. This does showcase a first important aspect of perennial development: There is no distinction between playtesting and live—you cannot “playtest” community interaction except by doing it, and at that point you are

already playing the game. While you can and need to do technical tests, the moment a community is involved and reacting, perennality is already happening.

I also used the live play session to “test” other features, by implementing a feature I was not sure if the players were going to use or how they would use it. The first of these was the ability to “send” messages to their manager (to me). This would not do anything systemically other than ping me, yet could be used to inform me of issues, bugs, or literally anything. As I implemented this, I did not know how players would use it but since it had little impact on the rest of the system, it was easy to implement and gave players another possible interaction and method of responding to the game¹⁰. In a similar vein I also implemented a “hidden” command in the bot, which served a similar purpose: It would do little more than notify me if a player found it, but the intention was to see how players would react and use the feature, if they did. Unfortunately, no player has found it so far.

The most fun example of this kind of player-developer communication came a bit later as a server experienced a fairly severe bug: They lost an item in their inventory. Due to a discrepancy between the SQL and memory implementations (thankfully, the only one of these bugs found to this day), if a player had 2 of an item and sold 1, they would lose both in the SQL database. This was a pretty severe bug, yet thankfully could be easily rectified: I could use my administration powers to give them back the money to repurchase the ware, yet I had a discrepancy to explain. This turned

¹⁰This is another reason why it is important to note that the players knew me: They knew that “I” was speaking to them and they were speaking to me, yet this did not matter. They still bought into the roleplay, keeping up the masquerade of play because that was what they were invited to do and it was enjoyable to do so.

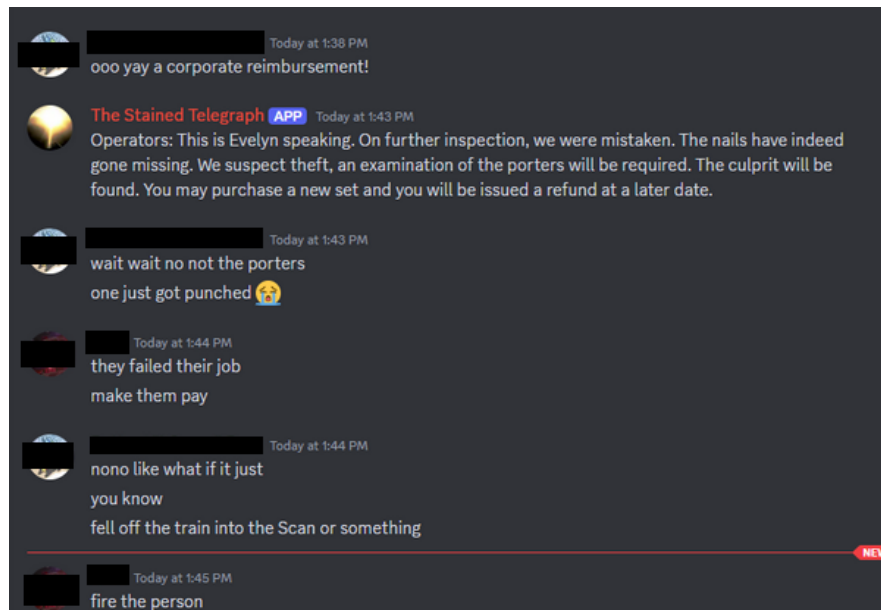


Figure 19.3: An excerpt of a conversation from players, after the incident where an item (nails) had gone missing, and the response from me. I am writing as "Evelyn" (their boss) through the Stained Telegraph (the bot), and you can see their responses below.

into an opportunity for roleplay for both sides, as I could first send a message saying management was “investigating the issue” and then later, in a fictional escalation, send a message from upper management that the source had been identified: A thief. To fit it into the narrative, I wrote that the upper management suspected the porters on the train (workers in charge of the physical freight management on the train) to be behind this, and the culprit would be found. The players, in turn roleplayed with me, one player wishing them to not hurt the porters and another (jokingly) wanting them to get fired for their mistakes (see figure 19.3). This detail ultimately does not matter to the narrative, yet fills in the world and reinforces the setting while providing the players with a fun opportunity for narrative play.

Another “perennial moment” (as I began to name these fondly) happened early

on as well, yet had longer lasting impacts. The game includes an upgrade system and within that I had an upgrade for a “Smuggling Compartment”. This upgrade did not do anything. In production, I had planned for it to be functional, yet scrapped the idea because I wanted smuggling to be always possible and "discovered" by players through play, not something you unlocked. Yet, I forgot about the smuggling compartment upgrade in the last minute.

Yet, the players saw the words “Smuggling Compartment” and got excited, because of course they did. Those are exciting words. Knowing it was now too late to remove this upgrade I had to find out what it now did. Thankfully, I had some weeks to implement this, since the Smuggling Compartment was by far the most expensive upgrade. The solution was to create a new problem: Players had a chance to be faced with “inspections” at every station, and if you had an illegal ware they would confiscate it, unless you owned the smuggling compartment upgrade. I introduced this inspection system before any player had the chance to buy the smuggling compartment, and thus no player ever learned that this upgrade “did nothing” beforehand. Yet this change was entirely done due to me (accidentally) building an expectation in players. This is a great example of a “lacunae” of something players find in a perennial game that is not finished, yet later becomes patched in because the players express strong interest in it (section 17.1.2).

Through moments like these I learned something important, which may be self-evident: A perennial game is not a perennial game until it is launched. I don’t mean it in the theoretical sense, as I already knew that. I mean, effectively, a developer does

not know if they have made a perennial game until it launches. The trifecta (section 2.2) does not operate until the game, the developer, and the players interact, and before that, no perennality exists. Because it is only by seeing players respond to it, only by having your own Loot Cave moment, that you know. That knowledge, that in order to know you have to no longer be in charge of what the thing is, is *terrifying*. Yet, it was only once I saw players act like this that I grew confident that what I had made was a perennial experience: I could see what I had been studying reflected in my own experience.

Perennial experiences, as an author, are marked by this very stark feeling of loss of control. This is felt most acutely in moments when players does something unexpected, or break the game, because, you realize that *you cannot take back that this has happened*. You have to keep moving forward in development as if this thing is now part of the world, as canon as everything else, because players will treat is as part of the game. There is no way to rewind or undo the experience: It is what it is.

However, seeing players play also motivated me immensely. At the end of development I was tired of working on the game and I almost did not care how it went in live because I just wanted to be done. Yet seeing players respond like this was so exciting, I wanted to work on the game more, keep responding to them and seeing their reactions as I changed things based on their behavior. This is similar to the adrenaline other developers discussed upon launching their game (section 18.3.2).

The other thing this did for my development was it gave an immense clarity of focus: What I should work on was what was going to matter to the players right now.

Whatever they were likely to face next was what I needed to improve, whatever bugs they experienced were what I needed to fix. I had a backlog of possible features to add but the players made that list obsolete: They created a to-do list for me, week by week.

I did however, also begin to see how this could be dangerous. In weekly improvements I could only do so much, and bigger features (such as the smuggling compartment) required more weeks to implement and test properly. Thus, I had to balance my time between what the game needed in the moment and what it needed in the future, and this was a tricky balance to hit. Knowing the lessons from previous developers, I also knew I needed to pace myself. It was easy to tell myself I needed to fix a bug “immediately” or work overtime to create new features because I knew the players would want them. Yet, I had limited time to work on the game. Instead I paced myself by working on the game only a fixed set of hours each week and what I managed to do in that time was what got added to the game. I am immensely happy with this decision. While the game could have likely been more improved had I worked on it more, my mental state remained much more calm and sane throughout this process, and the players still saw regular, weekly improvements for the first 2 months. This was a direct result of me internalizing this lesson from previous perennial experience and my findings from previous work (chapter 18).

As a final example, a player found an exploit in the order system, allowing them to cancel orders over and over again until they got the best possible options. I then added increasing penalties to canceling, yet this caused a new behavior from this player. Knowing I had fixed the previous, when they found a new exploit they did

not want to tell me about it, knowing was going to fix it¹¹. This kind of “antagonistic player” is another common phenomena in perennial games (see section 14.3.2). I also knew, however, from these examples, that aggressively punishing this player for this behavior was going to be counterproductive. Instead, I merely fixed the bug and let the player keep the advantage they had gained from using the exploits. This kept the player engaged and entertained, and did not feel punished for testing out the system, and while it did provide them with a slight advantage, it was not so severe an increase it caused much problem.

19.6 Reflections on Perenniality

I need to mention a crucial point about the experience that has certainly colored my perspective. As I mentioned, I was worried about the perennial nature of Choir Train because of its siloing in Discord server, making each instance of the game decoupled from the other, despite the synchronization of the train and bot. However, what happened on launch was not quite that: Instead, the people who started playing on launch, naturally, all started playing at the same time. And therefore they were in sync. And thus, the first and primary experience I have of "live-opsing"¹² Choir Train, is of multiple groups of players experiencing it all at the same time. While there were slight deviations in the groups, they did roughly experience the narrative at equal pace, as they had started on the same day. This experience effectively turned the

¹¹I should note here again, that this player is my friend and I know that they were not being “vindictive” in this behavior, but moreso testing the boundaries of the interaction.

¹²Live-ops, short for live operations. Live-opsing is probably not a real word.

experience into a “regular” perennial experience, with all players responding to the same events at the same time, and me as a developer able to respond to all active players knowing they had roughly the same amount of knowledge¹³. This effectively negated the worries I had, and allowed the perennial experience of the zeitgeist, of being in the moment, to fully occur. This was by accident. And yet, upon further reflection, this is not that dissimilar from the experience of other perennial games: I have already discussed the importance of zeitgeist in the perennial experience (section 4.4). What happened here was not unique but simply an effect of players hitting a launch window. It is what *Neurocracy* (Playthroughline, 2021) does when it starts a run, making sure every player starts at the same time and follows the same progression: It is what a launch does, what a weekly reset does, what the ritual of telling players when to tune in does: Synchronizes experience. Makes people come together. I had always considered it valuable that players could start the game at any time, but perhaps there is more value—or at least as much—in making it more ephemeral and to be able to create that experience. There is a different version of *Choir Train* that operates like *Neurocracy*, where the train runs through its narrative as a spectacle and then stops; that is almost the experience I got, despite it being not how it technically works.

In terms of the narrative, seeing players play also allowed me to reflect on the narrative experience of the game, and what worked and what did not. Since I had not been able to test the “proper” timing of the game running more than two weeks, many open questions still existed about the narrative experience after week 3, and going all

¹³Still, I had the opportunity to respond to individual servers, and I did use this occasionally, for example when only one server lost the wares, the theft story improvisation was only on that server.

the way to week 8 (and beyond). This is mostly down to a question of timing, of what story entries appear when, and what story moments lead into what. While I am not able to control when players offload orders and how many and what kinds, much of it is also controlled by the storybook parameters. I noticed 2 primary problems with this throughout play. The first was that week 5 and 6 had a significant lull in the narrative compared to the first and last weeks¹⁴. This indicates that, for a sharper narrative, it could have been reduced to fewer weeks, or additional storylines were needed. However, the biggest issue, which was partly able to be rectified live, was the lack of a denouement.

As week 8 and the “finale” of season 1 was approaching I noticed that players were not really “prepared” for the fact that the narrative was ending. Nothing in the game was really priming them for this fact, and the tension was still rising, with more questions than answers¹⁵. Thus I began worrying that the finale would hit and they would still expect more to come, which then would not happen, leading to an unsatisfying feeling. While I was not intending the story to end (as a true perennial experience), I still wanted players to understand that next week would not keep telling the story, and to set expectations appropriately. Thus came the idea of introducing a final newspaper in “week 9”, after the events of week 8 (a grand inauguration of the new Channeller, with a bold speech and two key characters making major decisions

¹⁴This is in fact a very similar issue as many of the 10-week seasons in *Destiny 2* have had, which often included “filler” quests in the middle weeks.

¹⁵Furthermore, as a sign of players caring about the narrative, I was delighted to see one player give some of the characters names. The enigmatic *Audience* which are the representations of the gods and serve like a “Greek Chorus”, commenting on the events of the story yet with a very clearly skewed perspective, are not given visible names in the text, yet are distinctly defined characters with their own voice. One player, reading these entries, decided to spend the time giving them each nicknames, which was very endearing, and an excellent example of productive fan-interaction.

surrounding this). This newspaper would include 3 articles describing the aftermath of the inauguration and letting players know the state of the world as they were about to leave it, setting elements up for the future while also letting them know the immediate consequences of their actions. Within this, I also “broke character” and wrote a note at the end of the final article: *“Reading this, you have reached the end of Season 1 of the story of Telegrams from the Choir Train. There is currently no more major story on the main path, yet there are still more secrets to find.”* This out-of-character note was directed at players directly, and was done very deliberately to help them understand the situation.

This largely worked. Players read this and understood that the story was now over and seemed to feel more appreciative of what they had experienced. Through the finale of week 8 and 9, I saw players express the emotions I was expecting, worrying for the fate of the characters I expected them to worry about, and wanting to know more yet also accepting this as a denouement.

19.6.1 Larger Reflections

I went into the experience of Choir Train with a number of assumptions and guidelines from my readings on live-service development. I knew that players were going to do things I had not predicted, or play in a way I had not prepared for. This, however, caused a potential worry which the game perhaps suffered for: I was terrified of getting more players than I could handle. Not terrified of getting *players* per se, but getting too many to the point where I would not be able to keep up as a single developer. In

hindsight, it feels ridiculous to hope that your game is *not* successful, but nevertheless that is what I did.

This caused me to be incredibly timid in the launch of the game, which definitely did affect the amount of players I got for the launch window. I made a bluesky post and posted it to a few friends and then when I saw games had started on servers I stopped trying to post it more. I knew that if I only had a handful of servers running, and I knew who those servers were, if something were to go horribly wrong, I would be able to manage that. If I had many servers playing and the save files got corrupted I would have a major issue. In short: I did not have enough confidence in my system to run it at a large scale. I told myself that I thus treated this a bit like a "soft-launch" a common term in mobile game development, launching the game without marketing or for a smaller group of players. The problem with this was that there never came a hard launch afterwards. I launched it softly and then never again¹⁶.

That, fortunately, does not mean that it is not useful as a perennial game, as I hope it has been abundantly clear by now that perennial games are not defined by their launches, but by their ongoing development. I had players play through the entire "first season" of Choir Train, and they had a good time. I have not had more players (outside of an occasional group trying it and then losing interest quickly) play it. I will also say I immensely enjoyed having the smaller group of players that I had because it meant I could pay more attention to them and thus make the experience a bit more special for them than I otherwise would have been able to. I can also say here that I

¹⁶That is not to say this cannot happen in the future, and it might, yet that is prospective and thus not relevant to this point.

am very lucky that I, unlike most other perennial games, am not bound financially to the success of this game, as I never intended it to be a financial endeavor.

In a sense, the lack of monetary ties is the biggest difference between Choir Train and the games otherwise discussed, because the incentive structure for me to continue working on and improving the game is simply not the same as those whose jobs and livelihoods depend on being able to do so, and being able to continually satisfy a group of players. Had I needed to do that, this experience would have been a major failure by now, as all my players, even the most dedicated ones, at this point have stopped playing once they ran out of content. I would have needed to produce more content continuously, rather than stopped as I did. In that sense, this was a failure as a perennial game. The massive benefit of not being financially tied to it is that I can wait until later and not feel bound to continuously produce, which in some senses "end" its perennality. The train is still running, as it has been since I started the bot on January 20th¹⁷, yet with no continuous updates since March 2025.

This all said, to understand the perennial experience as an author, this was not a failure. All of the lessons and stories listed above were indeed the reason I did this, and because the creation of a new artifact is in itself a worthwhile contribution (Mason, 2021). This game is a unique, small-scale perennial experience you can play with your friends in a Discord server. I have thus showcased a possible way to develop small-scale perennial experiences (albeit not monetize them), and implemented a novel perennial game which facilitated a communal experience for a group of friends, in a way

¹⁷Another minor note here, which may have also impacted the launch of this game. Don't launch a game on January 20th after an election year in the US. Just don't.

not otherwise done before. This post-mortem in itself is also the intended contribution: By showcasing the emotional and personal experiences of development, I hope to inform and clarify how perennial development *is*, as an experience and as an occupation.

After this experience, and as a summation of the learnings from this chapter and the chapters before (especially chapter 18), we are now ready to proceed to the final chapter of this direction, which will propose a new framework to understand the ongoing development of perennial games.

Chapter 20

The Lifecycle of Perennial Games

"It seems like PvP is going to be a little bit Wild West at the beginning of Edge of Fate?"

Fallout Plays, July 3rd, 2025

THE BOOK *COMPLEX TV* (Mittell, 2015), referred in section 4.1, opens with an anecdote on three television series that launched in 2001, out of which *Alias* and *24*, the two shows with the least successful launches, were the ones which continued the longest¹. I cannot help but notice a similar tendency in perennial games. Many live-service games that are tremendously successful had very small or unsuccessful beginnings. *Destiny*, *Final Fantasy XIV*, *Warframe*, *Rainbow Six: Siege*, *League of Legends*, *No Man's Sky* etc. all were games that either had tremendous problems at launch, failed to live up to their potential, or did not launch to the fanfare they have

¹The quote in the epigraph is from the YouTube video named *Destiny 2 Expansions are Now Free (briefly) Exotics Gettin Reworked, and PvP is the Wild West*, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yy4WCpSsZT8>. The quote is said at 20:13. This is in relation to weapon changes for the (at the time) upcoming expansion for *Destiny 2 Edge of Fate*, releasing July 15th. This wording is a pure coincidence and is not intended as related to this dissertation.

today. Yet over time, they grew into success stories, examples of how modern live-service games could turn around in the public eye given enough dedication, effort and work by the developers.

I do not want to state here that a life-service game “needs” to fail to be successful, as there are examples of the opposite (Rocket League, Blaseball, Helldivers 2). However, this trend is part of a larger trend of how live-service games fluctuate over time. This chapter will be about this trend, and how it can be patterned as a development cycle, which will serve as the fundamental contribution of this direction on how developers play within perennial development. This "lifecycle" is something I have gathered from the work I have done on the past several chapters, connecting the literature review (chapter 17), the interview findings (chapter 18), and my personal experience (chapter 19). The lifecycle of perennial games can be seen in figure 20.1. It covers the general movement of a live-service game, as it begins in a state of uncertainty and mystery (called "The Wild"), which eventually transitions into a recurring loop of a period of stability (called "cruising") followed by a period of instability (called "crushing"), which most successful perennial games navigate, until they potentially end. The lifecycle has 4 stages, which will each be covered in turn.

20.1 The Wild

While not all perennial games start unsuccessfully, most of them start in the Wild. When a perennial game launches is when its possibility space is the most wide

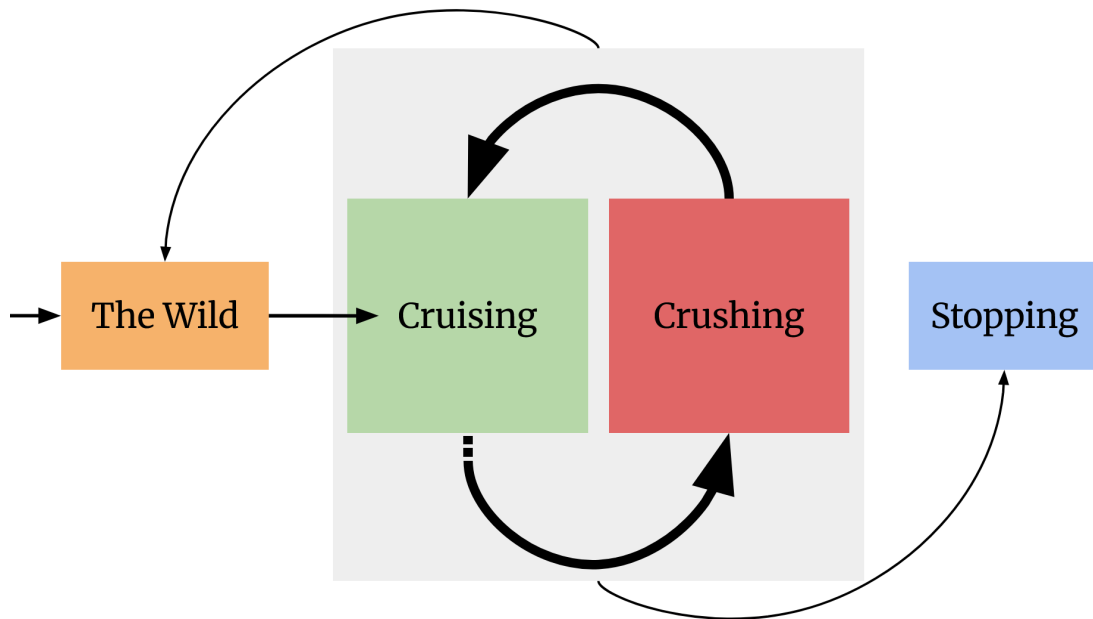


Figure 20.1: The Lifecycle of Perennial Games.

and when what could happen inside it is the most unknown. This is a period with a tremendous amount of excitement, as the rush of experiencing The New is at the forefront. This is true for all participants: For the players, it is unknown because it is a new game they have not yet mastered and optimized, and each moment they are discovering new things. Players might approach challenges differently than they had designed for, and organise their play differently. Some players might do actions detrimental to that of other players (such as player killing, or using exploits). This is why events like the Loot Cave occur in this stage most frequently, as players are actively finding ways to break the game most visibly and loudly, and developers have to react quickly. This is the early stages of the community forming, as players organize around their play experiences and uncover the game's mysteries together. The developers,

meanwhile, are also learning what their game actually is. As potentially thousands of players are all playing the game for the first time, the developers will learn a tremendous amount about their game they could only theorize on or suspect (or not think about at all) during development. As discussed in the Choir Train chapter (chapter 19), it is not until this stage developers even know whether they have made a perennial game, as the interactions of players are truly what makes it into one.

A game can stay in the Wild stage for a while, and different games stay there for different amounts of time. Baseball stayed in this stage throughout the entire "Discipline Era" (, YouTube), until it took its first major break (and arguably, never left). Arguably, Final Fantasy XIV did not leave this stage until its first major expansion, 4 years after the 1.0 release. It can be exciting to stay in this stage, as this is where the game truly unfolds for developers and where the fruits of their labors in development stage is paying off. It is tremendously rewarding to see players “go loose” in their game and find everything you left for them to find. This is why many developers described this stage as a “whirlwind” or a “rush”. The adrenaline you get from this is very possibly what keeps you able to keep going throughout the (probably long) hours you are pulling to keep up with the players here.

Yet, for this reason, the Wild stage is dangerous to stay in for too long. While it is exciting it is also exhausting, and developers are prone to crunching and overworking, as they must work incredibly fast to keep up and it can feel like players are always finding new ways to break the game and you get so many ideas from how they play that you want to implement immediately. And this is not just a developer-problem, as

the constant excitement about new findings can be exhausting for players too, as they need to always “keep up” to avoid missing out on the newest event. The community is so fast and wide and inventive that it can be difficult for any one player to follow what is happening in all areas of the game. Staying in this stage for too long can thus also lead to only the most dedicated players being able to follow what is going on, leaving others eternally behind. This can thus cause both developers and players to burn out.

A game leaves the Wild stage when it stops being surprising and when players begin to know what to expect, and they do not find as many ways to break the game. This happens naturally, assuming no new installments are added into the game, as the community settles on how to play the game and how to read its narrative. For the developers, the longer the Wild continues, the stronger the impetus comes to get out of it, and thus developers will either pause releases or stabilize their schedules to help avoid future complications. Thus, a game slowly becomes more stable and enters the Cruising stage. It either does this or it stops immediately: A perennial game cannot sustain being in the Wild forever. Several live-service games ended before they ever left this stage, and it is in many ways the hardest one to escape, because of its volatility.

20.2 Cruising

If a perennial game makes it to the cruising stage, it means it has passed the first major hurdle and is now in a state where the game can look forward and make more long-term plans. The cruising stage is defined by a certain amount of stability:

The players and developers both know that the game will continue to exist and function for the foreseeable future and it is thus about maintaining this groove while it lasts and continue to produce new content at a steady-yet-workable rate to satisfy players. One of the primary ways developers begin to work sustainably is by finding patterns and processes they can replicate over time. This is what a seasonal structure does in a perennial game, and why so many live-service games utilize one (Tamer, 2023). A season of Destiny content has a set amount of content in it, and developers can plan around what they need to make for it to function (chapter 14). As the developer produces a season, they get accustomed and familiarised with what they can manage to produce in the necessary span of time and thus scope more and more effectively. In the cruising stage you will thus often see new installments release at a reliable rate.

Players appreciate this because they can plan around it. Contrary to the Wild stage, they can take breaks and know that they are not missing out on major events. They know when to tune in and gather into groups to experience it, and thus this stage is where the social rituals get solidified over time, as the schedule of the game governs when and how they play. The game becomes reliable and familiar.

However, there is a danger to this reliability and this familiarity. As the game settles, it is slowly losing its sense of mystery and surprise. As the ritual patterns of play solidify and become routine, they become a little more stale each time, and what was different and surprising last month might not be so enticing this time around. While each season might bring new story elements and new developments, it is often doing that within the same structure, following a predictable pattern. The activities afforded

by that season is still within the same structure of what a seasonal event can be, and over time the possible volume of those events shrink and become stale.

While this is the stage of development where developers are the most sustainable and at their most effective in terms of the amount of content they can produce, following these effective patterns has, over time, a detrimental effect, no matter how great they are. No matter the quality of the content, as it is inevitably released within this same binding structure, players see through it more and more each time, and grow a little less interested with each update. Over time, players answer every mystery and become satiated with what the game has to offer, and stop being hungry for more. If you stay in this stage too long, players will stop playing out of boredom. The cruising stage is an important part of why perennial games lose their mystery and why this is such an inherent part of their development: Developers seek the stability of the cruising stage. The longer the game goes on, the more likely these patterns are to set in, as developers grow accustomed to working in their teams, knowing what they are proficient in and how to develop their content. Yet, stay too long and those same developers will crave new challenges and require new inspiration.

Thus, as discussed heavily in the developer interviews (chapter 18), developers need to find ways to give players surprises and the unexpected, while keeping their production pipelines healthy (to avoid ending back in the Wild). While going back to the Wild is one potential way of doing this), what developers instead try to do to keep themselves sane, is to successfully transition into the Crushing stage.

20.3 Crushing

The crushing stage is about breaking what works. While that sounds unintuitive or unwise, it is in fact what is often necessary in order to keep the perennial game going. It is necessary, as mentioned in chapters 18 and 14, and by Hazzikostas (2025), to “change things for the sake of change” as novelty has inherent value. This stage can take several forms. One way can be to change the release structure entirely, such as what Destiny has been doing in the recent year (2024-5) as they realized their seasonal structure was growing stale².

Another major option to "crush" a game is through releasing major new expansions or updates, which often take significantly more development time, yet have a chance to completely alter the game. All expansions in the perennial games discussed here do this to a greater or smaller extent. Every expansion in Final Fantasy XIV resets the maximum level, bringing everyone to an even playing field again, every expansion in Destiny introduces a new location and often several new ways to play the game, via subclasses or abilities etc. These expansions are the chance to do a major swing and players often expect bigger changes from these as a result.

While the cruising stage happens inevitably over time, entering the crushing stage requires active effort. It often requires developers to very deliberately change their processes, update their tools, or rethink their paradigms, in order to happen, as if development continues to occur “as is” the game will continue cruising. It can be

²Destiny converted their 4-seasons-a-year structure into 3 “Episodes” in a year, and are once again changing this in 2025 to now be a bi-yearly installment cycle, further experimenting with how to release content for their players

difficult to do this, as it does involve changing or breaking up useful and practical and clean solutions, which can feel antithetical to any "good" design.

This name of this stage is inspired by a very literal “number crunch” or “stat squish” that inevitably happens in most MMOs and live games. As players grow more powerful and increase in levels and get more powerful gear, their ability to deal damage increases to ever-larger numbers. This eventually leads to a point where increases in numbers become meaningless or so outlandishly huge incremental upgrades cease to matter. Thus most of these games, as part of a major expansion, has at one point or another “squished” their numbers down³. This is a good metaphor for the idea of the crush as it is about "resetting" the experience of the game back to an earlier time, when it was not as mastered and "figured out".

The crushing stage usually does not last as long as the cruising stage in live play—however it is often under development for considerably longer. This is a juxtaposition that can be difficult to reconcile as a developer, as players will burn through the content in the crushing stage exponentially faster than it took you to make it and so the cost-benefit analysis of doing the larger swings might not seem worth it. And yet, it is crucial for any perennial game to, at some point, enter this stage to not succumb to the ever-slowing drip of a stagnant cruise. The crushing stage is what reinstates the mystery they long for, what keeps them coming back to new releases, in the hope to find something new and surprising. If they only find what they expect they will be less

³Examples of this are decreasing the maximum level from 120 to 60 in World of Warcraft, resetting the minimum item level from 1900 (in the Final Shape) to 10 (in Edge of Fate), or damage numbers getting downscaled in FFXIV: Endwalker.

excited about the potential future.

This stage is not sustainable on its own, and while it might be vital as a “reset” to help establish a foundation to cruise upon for the next years to come, it is not a stage one can linger in. There is a chance, depending on the amount and gravity of changes, of the game slipping back into a Wild stage as a result of this crush, as players get so many new possibilities that combine dynamically in unpredictable ways. This Wild stage will usually not last as long and, generally, revert back to a cruising stage, yet nevertheless it is important to note this transition as a possibility. This, in general, should be embraced, and might be the very reason to do the crush in the first place, as bringing back the mystery and surprise of the Wild stage is often the reason to crush the game at all.

There is, however, the danger of this stage changing too much, and causing players to go angry that the game is no longer what it was. The cruising stage establishes a reliability that players do enjoy, and if you crush the game so much it loses that effect, those players will likely not appreciate it.

20.4 Oscillations

The loop between the cruising and crushing stage is the “primary” loop of a perennial game, and the one it will oscillate between the most, assuming it is sustainable. A game not oscillating between these is when trouble can appear, either because the game stays too long in one stage or another (either stagnating, changing too drastically,

or staying so wild the developers stop being able to manage it), and thus it is in danger of stopping. Getting this oscillation right during the development of a perennial game is crucial to its ongoing success. This oscillation is indeed the “balance” you are trying to hit as a developer (section 18.3.4), it is what this balance is about. It is not about hitting a static, perfect version of the game but successfully transitioning in and out of these stages in a way that leaves your game in a better position to serve your current players. The goal is not to make this oscillation static, or to make it a flat line or to stay in one stage forever. This is a see-sawing motion and it will forever be, and the important job as a developer is to make sure this oscillation happens under your control, enough that you can manage it and drive it forward and continue to develop the game sustainably within that oscillation. Each installment and patch and even social media post affect this oscillation, either pushing you further towards your current trajectory or beginning the turn the other way. It is thus helpful to know which of these stages you are in and which one you are pushing towards, and evaluating whether that is the right choice for the moment. This is why, as Justin Truman (2023) said, velocity is more important than position, because being able to adjust the oscillation is more important than where in the oscillation you are—the oscillation will happen, it is just whether it is going where you want it to.

It is also important to remember that while this is presented as a loop, it is not returning to the “same” stage as before, but each time we enter a cruising cycle it is a new cruising rhythm with a different set of assumptions about what the game is, a different tempo, and the playerbase once again has changed a bit and expect different

things from the game. It is important to continue evolving alongside this changing rhythm, and respond to players within it.

Of course, within this cycle, there is always the chance of the unexpected. While I here talk as if developers can be in control of this oscillation this is of course only partly true. The shifts in stages can occur outside their will. I already mentioned how a crushing stage can lead to the Wild, yet the cruising stage can also lead to a Wild stage. In fact, the more the game is cruising, the more it is prone to players finding ways to break it⁴. Events like 12-man raids or The Craftening (see chapter 9) primarily happen when there was little else happening in the game, and thus players are bored and prodding at its edges. Thus, making sure everyone has *something* to do can help keep the game running smoothly. That said, sometimes letting players *be* bored might be the intended effect, as some of these player-made activities can also be a tremendous boon to a game.

Finally, the oscillation itself, too, can become predictable. A regular cadence of expansions—intended as the grand crush of the game—will too, over long enough time, become another cruise, and cease to have the intended crushing effect it once did. Over long enough time—and considering these games are successful they will *always* run over long enough time—the same oscillation becomes predictable, too. Thus, developers need to not only consider the how (the amplitude, if you will) of their oscillation but the frequency of it, and this can and should change over time. Unpredictable player-driven moments can be tremendously useful in sparking new life into the same oscillation and

⁴Anecdotally, I can say this reminds me of advice I heard for Escape Room design, which is you don't want the players to be bored, because it is when they are bored they start breaking things.

causing the players to reinvigorate, without the developer needing to develop for it. Some of this player-owned storytelling can be invited, or at least encouraged through design, as discussed in the Polaris report (section 17.1.2).

20.5 Stopping

Finally, there is the stopping stage. There is not too much to say about this one, as it is relatively simple, compared to the rest. Live-service games do not end; they stop. At some point, the money runs out, the players leave, or the developers lose interest in maintaining it, or any number of other reasons, and so it stops in whatever stage it was in. This breaks our expected mythology that perennial games are meant to continue existing, and thus when they stop it feels *unnatural*, wrong. Live-service games are not meant to stop, they just do. Thus, the narrative of perennial games does not end at the conclusion of the story but stops at some point in its telling. If the developers have enough run-way they can sometimes conclude their current narratives in a satisfying way, know that this last installment will be their last swing and thus present the players with an ending of sorts—yet this is by far not guaranteed, and not likely.

We have seen many live-service games stop over the past 20 years, be that after long-running mild success, or immediately after launch, and it is never a joyous experience, nor one that feels satisfying. Many MMOs have shut down and each time it is a haunting, bittersweet moment, as you see the players for whom this world meant

so much come together one final time. Perversely, however, the end of an MMO is often exciting, as it is a big social event, often with more people than have been logged into the game at the same time in years, yet it is of course sad due what brought them together. It is the last spectacle every perennial experience is able to offer, and one of the few (other than the Wild) that is guaranteed.

This is the lifecycle of perennial games, and how they develop over time. While specifics will differ from game to game, the general oscillations described in this model between stages of cruising and crushing, apply to most if not all the games studied and mentioned within this dissertation. The Wild and the Stopping stage, are likewise crucial to understand the unique experiential nature of a perennial game, which help explain why they are different than traditional development. This lifecycle is not a blueprint, and it should not be treated as “guide” on how to develop live-service or perennial games, and should be treated as descriptive rather than prescriptive. Some perennial games might break this trend all together, yet most of these stages apply to most games I have studied.

There are many challenges a developer of a perennial game faces, and if not handled properly, it is likely they will end up in the stopping stage. Thus, finally, we will briefly cover the many possible challenges before we are ready to proceed to the conclusion of the dissertation.

20.6 The Challenges of Perennial Development

As can be gathered from this entire work, there are many outstanding design challenges in modern perennial games. These will be briefly discussed in this section, as a starting point for future designers trying to understand the problem-space. For each, we will discuss possible "solutions" and alleviations developers have done or can do to help mitigate the negative aspects of these challenges. However, as is clear from chapter 18, most of these challenges cannot be overcome while still creating a perennial game because many of them stem from the very core premises of what a perennial game is, and which cause much of the joy of creating such a game. Thus, many of these can be seen as "Cursed Design Problems", defined by Alex Jaffe (2019), as design problems that cannot be solved by definition. It is impossible to have a game that both feels unique to the individual and is accessible by everyone. It is impossible to have a game that allows live moments and also allows people to experience those moments anytime they want. It is impossible to respond to players and have an exact plan for what you are making years in the future. Therefore, most of these suggested solutions are not *really* solutions but merely attempts at mitigation or workarounds which allow the game to run more smoothly.

Challenge 0: Keeping the Game Mysterious and Familiar. I name this challenge 0 because, as has been the throughline of much of this work, this is in many ways the core challenge underlying many of the below ones. As discussed in chapter 5 and the previous sections, the problem of maintaining both mystery and familiarity is

the consistent struggle of perennial games, and requires constant, ongoing maintenance. Therefore, this challenge is the so broad no single mitigation can attempt solve it, yet it is important to remember the lifecycle of perennial games described in chapter 20, as by maintaining the cycle of cruising and crushing successfully, you can keep new mysteries while also keeping the game in familiar cycles.

Challenge 1: Accessible Ephemerality Unique, memorable, ephemeral moments can be important for the lifeblood of the game and for keeping the feeling of mystery intact in the community, as these memorable moments are what fuel excitement about the future. Live, one-time events, like the Opening of Ahn'Qiraj in WoW (Ziebart, 2011) or Fighting the Peanut in Blaseball (Manning, 2021) are, however less accessible, by nature, because you must be there at a specific time. You missed being part of the zeitgeist. But it is also precisely that it is missable and live that makes it special, memorable, and unique.

Thus, the best way to treat these events is as supplemental to other events that are accessible by everyone. Some games experiment with reintroducing one-time events as a "re-imagining" or "retelling" of that same event which players can experience on their own time. Fallen London has had some success in doing this, and this is also similar to the revisiting of older content we see in Final Fantasy XIV, Destiny and many other games.

Challenge 2: The Hell of the Content Treadmill, or, Working Sustainably. Perennial games need new content. It is built into the perennial definition and expecta-

tion that elements of the game, story, etc. need to expand over time. The game always needs more content faster than it can be made and thus developers, if not careful, are prone to burnout and stress. It is thus important to develop new content on a healthy timeline. However, maintaining a sustainable and too rigid schedule can lead to cruising too heavily causing the game to become stale.

As heavily discussed in the Lifecycle section (section 20), much of the way to alleviate this problem is through a healthy oscillation between cruising and crushing, making sure you maintain surprise and mystery for yourself and the players in a way that still allows you to cruise sustainably when needed.

Challenge 3: Team Cohesion, Vision, and Stability. As live development of a game lasts years, the team working on those games inevitably changes, either due to promotions, new hires, loss of interest, or layoffs. As this happens, the processes of development will inevitably change, which can mean that the institutional knowledge about what works for the game can get lost. This can mean the game changes in ways that break initial promises players expect. However, change is also potentially useful as perennial games do need to change, and, as discussed in section 18.3.2, refreshing teams, tools, processes, and design visions, can lead to new and exciting ideas and revitalize a team to develop the game further.

The solutions to this likely lie not in the realm of game design, however, but in team management, as this is more so a interpersonal and teamwork-related issue than most other challenges discussed here. Maintaining inter- and intra-team communication

and communication with the players here is likely paramount to keeping the cohesion fluent, or at least possible.

Challenge 4: Responding to Players Successfully. As explained in Polaris report (section 17.1.2), many memorable and powerful moments in perennial games come from when the game or the developers respond to the community. Especially in AAA games the length of development time adds significant complications to do this successfully.

Many of the tools they offered offered in that report are useful starting points, such as defining an expressive range, lacunae, acknowledgments, support for player framing, and curation. It is also important to create flexible tools which allow fast iterations in the live game in some areas, such as being able to write text announcements that all players can see (as done in *Blaseball*), or updating values on a monument (Scott, 2012) or similar.

Challenge 5: Onboarding, or “Welcome, Here’s the 10 Hour Lore Video”

Ongoing games need new players, as old players will leave. However, the longer a perennial game has “run” the more history a new player will have to catch up on to understand the current plot. A new player in *Destiny* in 20205 will need to grasp 11 years of character development, plots, wars, and other events. This leads to situations where, to understand even the basics of the current backstory, players are being told to watch a 10-hour long recap video on the lore of *Destiny* (My Name is Byf, 2019; Evaze, 2023), not even considering all the gameplay changes that have also happened in that time. A lot of this work is often left up to the community itself (creating orienting

paratexts (Mittell, 2015)) which, has the potential benefit of enforcing the community through shared knowledge-building (Taylor, 2006; , Evanf1997).

This is still a very unsolved challenge of perennial games at the moment, as every perennial game I have studied and played struggle with this. Some, like FFXIV, "solve" it by requiring players to play through all content, thus providing the same onboarding for everyone, yet this leads to challenges of players needing to go through that to get to current content (Tamer, 2023). Barring that, the crushing stage can be used to provide a "reset" to the game, making it easier to jump into the game without needing to understand previous events. Another possible solution is providing a strong foundation of some evergreen content that will be relevant "forever" (or at least for the foreseeable future), which can be used for onboarding players. This helps the gameplay aspect of onboarding, but does not help with the narrative aspects, as inevitably, this evergreen content will be outdated narratively, and a player going from that to the latest events will likely cause a strong disconnect (which is very much the current case in Destiny).

Challenge 6: Telling a Story That Goes on Indefinitely. Stories do not inherently go on forever. Stories need to have endings to feel satisfying, yet ending the story in a perennial game leads you to trouble. In navigating this challenge it is important to avoid two pitfalls: Never wrapping up any story-threads, leaving the audience in suspense so long they give up hope of continuation, or wrapping up all story-threads too well, leaving them entirely satisfied and putting down the experience forever.

Here, we can look to serial media (section 4.1), and it has successfully been telling forever stories for decades, through techniques such as making sure a plot has begun before wrapping previous ones up. As Tamer mentions, it is crucial that the foundation of your storyworld is rich and expansive enough to give you more and more potential stories, conflicts and characters. Limiting yourself too much to a single storyline early on can be detrimental when that storyline inevitably needs to wrap up.

Challenge 7: Story Coherence As the story keeps going on, and especially with changing teams and new visions, there is increasing risk in introducing elements which contradict, entirely repeat, or feels discontinuous with previous elements. Players deeply care about the internal consistency of the world, as seen in chapter 13, and while some degree of inconsistency is potentially even beneficial (see previous arguments on lacunae (section 17.1.2), overly doing so (and especially accidentally doing so) may be dangerous.

In order to solve this, teams rely on strong documentation and maintenance of narrative documents. This can be done in-house (for example Bungie has a hired "Destiny Historian" whose primary job is to know the history of Destiny), yet developers have also been known to use fan-made documentation, as fans are often very rigorous and accurate in their documentation, and cross-reference and check themselves for mistakes. As Tamer also mentions, proper onboarding and documentation for new developers also helps alleviate this Tamer (2023, p. 87).

Challenge 8: Dealing with Those More Interested in Breaking Your Game Than Playing It. Even in the earliest virtual worlds like Habitat (Morningstar and

Farmer, 2008), cheating was a problem. Any exploit, cheat, or bug could cause havoc to the entire ecosystem, and impact even those who don't engage with it, e.g. the economic inflation caused by an item duplication issue (Koster, 2018). Because of the temporal nature of perennial games, a bug can never be retracted, an exploit can never be undone. Another method of breaking is through leaks or "data mining", where players learn information before it was intended to be experienced. This can turn the relationship between players and developers "antagonistic", and hurt the experience of other players (Jenkins, 2008).

While this challenge can seem great, from my personal experience and data gathered in the community, players consider datamining much less of a problem than developers do, so therefore a potential solution is to simply not worry about it as much. This gets more complicated in competitive situations like Day 1 raids etc. yet it is thus worth it as a developer to consider which elements are important and necessary to hide and which can be found through leaks and datamining without ruining the experience for others. Sometimes, bugs and breakages can also be used for good, as in the examples with Telesto from Destiny (Evanf1997, 2021b), or the Peanut Fraud in Blaseball⁵, or, of course, the loot cave (chapter 2).

Challenge 9: Player Memory. As perennial games run for years, relying on an individual player to remember an a minor story event that happened 4 years earlier (or that they might not even have seen) is prone to lead to confusion. While the memory of

⁵https://www.blaseball.wiki/w/Peanut_Fraud

the community is often even greater than that of the developer (see Story Coherence), an individual player cannot be expected to maintain this in their head.

To help mitigate this, providing contextual information for current story events (similarly to "Previously on" for TV shows), or providing archives or timelines for players to peruse on their own can be very helpful. This can also be done programmatically. *Runescape 3*, for example, provides contextual dialogue, based on whether a player has seen a certain questline or not, and if not, can thus provide more context for the ignorant player, while being more referential to the player to remind them.

Challenge 10: Managing and Curating an Ever-growing Library of Content.

Continually adding content introduces a number of problems, as every new feature needs to work with what came before. This can become such a major technical hurdle that a game might need to remove content in order to develop new content, as was the case for *Destiny*. This also becomes a UX problem, as the ever-increasing possibilities can lead to a situation where a player does not know what to do or where to go in the game. This has increasingly both been a problem in *Destiny* and *FFXIV*.

The primary ways to mitigate this is to either create systems modular and flexible enough they can increase in scope without feeling overwhelming, or by inevitably crushing the game down and simplifying those systems later. As Ion Hazzikostas (2025), mentioned, planning too far ahead here, however, can have its own problems, as it is important to focus on making the game fun in the moment and not in 3 years. This challenge is also one reason why ephemeral or seasonal or time-limited content can be

attractive as a developer, as it has a built-in time where it needs to be relevant and afterwards it does not need to be compatible with the rest.

Challenge 11: Community Management and Live Ops The final challenge I want to mention here is much greater than I give it room for, and I will thus leave it as the open and perhaps most crucial challenge to consider, as community management in itself is and should be the topic of much further research.

Community management has become a larger part of game development in the last decade, as developers has adapted to social media marketing (Tran, 2023, 2021) and online community building as a key source of acquiring players. As detailed in section 17.2 community is such a core part of perennial games, and community management is integral to the experience how this community is developed and how the community-developer relationship is managed. This is both true in the senses of handling and responding to community feedback and addressing concerns, but it is also a vital venue of narrative play. Community relations can be a great source for the narrative play a developer can do with their community. Successful examples of this have been mentioned in chapters 13 and 14, where *Destiny* had fictional characters “overtake” their official twitter account (Murray, 2022; Valle, 2021). Great community interaction can make the audience feel seen, feel like they are part of something greater and actively participating in the overall course of the game and be a source of the enjoyment of the game itself (Tran, 2021). It is thus crucial to not consider this aspect as removed from the design and development but rather keep it integrated as part of the live development of a perennial

game, and consider the community aspect throughout. The Blaseball development team (R.I.V.) had created a fusion role of “Community Designers” to handle this specific bridge in between the design teams and the community management teams⁶. However, how to do that well is a challenge. You have to both manage the varied and conflicting changes players want, responding to concerns earnestly despite players wanting things that are impossible within the scoped development budgets, explain properly to the developers what the community wants and needs, while also attempting to perform narrative play the players will enjoy and remember. Community management should thus be seen as a vital part of development, on par with the game itself, as this is truly where the developer has the most say in how the trifecta (section 2.2) of perennial games is shaped over time, as they manage player expectations, confirm or deny assumptions about how the game functions, and help enforce or mitigate encroaching community myths.

This chapter covered the lifecycle of perennial games, showcasing the general trends of perennial development over time, oscillating between moments of surprise and comfort. This serves as the final answer to the third research question on how developers do narrative play, as it is within this oscillation and how it moves they play, altering its amplitude and frequency to subvert the expectations of players as best they can. Developers know they must deliver both mystery and ritual, and it is thus only in the intentional *play* between the two, oscillating back and forth, they find success. This chapter concluded with highlighting the many open challenges still present in perennial

⁶Personal correspondence.

game development, offering potential ways to alleviate them while maintaining the core joys of perennial game development.

With this, we are ready to move into the final part of this dissertation, which will attempt to do what I at some points during this work wondered if was impossible:

Part V

Bringing It All Together

Chapter 21

Conclusions

"Pray to spinny."

Internal joke in my raid team.

THIS FINAL PART WILL CONCLUDE the dissertation by bringing together the findings of the three directions, and consider what all the individual findings gathered here tell us about perennial games and how the communities tell stories¹. First, we will summarize the research questions for each direction and how we can answer them based on previous chapters. Then, after a brief discussion of the limitations of this work, I will discuss my major thesis of narrative play in perennial games and how that relates to these findings. Then I will discuss what I consider to be the "ur-myth" of perennial games. This leads into the final chapter where I discuss the broader impacts of this work, both with games and beyond. I will remind of the core metaphor introduced in chapter 5 of seeing perennial games as a planned garden, which grows and shifts

¹Context for the chapter epigraph: In the Last Wish Raid, before opening the final chest, in order to pray for good loot, we would "pray to spinny" by making a floating statue spin around really fast.

according to the weather, the gardeners, and the visitors. This metaphor will be used throughout these conclusions.

First, we will dive into answering each research question through summarizing the major points of the three directions, corresponding to each point in the trifacta: The game, the audience, and the authors.

21.1 Direction 1: How have perennial games facilitated narrative play?

The first direction investigated the games themselves, specifically focusing on the two perennial games *Destiny* and *Final Fantasy XIV*, as exemplary case studies of the modern perennial game. In this we saw a number of ways they facilitate narrative play in their design, from communal ritual design patterns to repetition to relating the community directly in the narrative:

Communal Ritual Design Patterns A number of design decisions for these games are explicitly drawing people in together or facilitating ritual activities (section 11.1). These can be through repetitive activities which provide information incompletely, requiring either teamwork or multiple runs to experience the totality, or otherwise hiding information and not helping an individual player and thus enforcing teamwork and collaboration. By requiring teamwork in certain activities in order to complete them, or provide a complex enough narrative that relies on people to discuss it, you facilitate the audience to come together and build community. In other words, by providing a

mystery that can be solved through collaboration you build community, and thus familiarity. Ritual, repetitive activities are especially effective at this because they, when infused with sufficient mystery, provide both the familiar ritual experience and potential mystery within the repetition, as a ritual activity can be recontextualized over and over by new information.

Non/Diegetic Repetition Repetition is an inherent necessity for a perennial game, which relies on loops of gameplay for players to do over and over again for increasing rewards, or merely for the ritual experience (see above). Within this repetition there arises questions of diegesis and canonical experience, and the experience of the world can be brought into question. This can be contextualized as a retelling, a mythological re-enactment of the past events, and we can see attempts of games using this exact language in their activities (section 11.2.1) or explaining the repetition as canonical (chapter 13). In explaining the repetition, yet not fully succeeding, the games invite players to think curiously about the repetition itself, and how their experience reflects across the game, facilitating their experience of narrative play in the very loop of the game itself. Perennial experiences are diegetically muddy, as their two layers of myth bleed into and affect each other, causing the real world to slip in and out of relevance as needed for the narrative, yet the audience and authors are very adept at handling these muddy relationships, and it is a joy to play with them.

Ephemerality and Change Creates History, History Is Not a Spoiler Destiny and Final Fantasy XIV handle their histories very differently and this is expressed in

how the community handles that history. Final Fantasy XIV's narrative is present and core to the experience, treated as a "sacred" rite of passage for any new player to venture through, whereas in Destiny, the narrative is history, unexperiencable and treated as a curatable series of events for retelling (section 4.3). This leads to different ways to facilitate narrative play: In FFXIV's case it is a joy to help new players re-experience what they themselves have already done, and rediscover the nostalgia of those experiences. In Destiny, learning the history of the game is forced to be a communal activity, as you need to consult friends and community resources to learn about the past. This difference is caused by the differing ephemerality of those games. This causes a shift in how spoilers are handled because history is not treated as a spoiler, whereas narrative events *in the game* are and can be spoiled, which affects how the community talks about the game with other players. As history, the past events are collective memory. As story, the past events are personal experience. Ephemerality inherently exists in all perennial games to some extent as the community will always do things that only occur once, yet this can be used for narrative effect if done deliberately.

Narrative for Community The narrative of perennial games is not disconnected from the definitions of the space and the rules of the game, but a part of facilitating how players should play. The narratives of both Destiny and Final Fantasy XIV are intentionally echoing the “community metastory”, in both ways big and small, and reflecting upon their existence as persistent, online, communal experiences, with narratives about large collectives of people coming together despite differences to overcome

foes through challenge, diversity, and struggle. This narrative can thus be read as a form of “social engineering” (Wong, 2025), intentionally guiding players on how to play through storytelling. This facilitates further narrative play through this echoing, allowing players to more easily see themselves in the narrative, and build upon it for their future experiences.

History is Myth, Myth is Nature The histories of perennial games inform their future, and is a key site of narrative play for the audience as the history is malleable and curatable. The parts of the history that a community wishes to remember, which they feel matches their experience and feel True about the world, are highlighted, brought forward and retold. This “historization” turns it into myth, and this in turn turns the history into something that does not feel malleable but natural. As the stories of historical events like the Fall of Dalamud or the Loot Cave are retold, they are *naturalized* (section 3.1.5), and become such an inherent part of the game it could not exist without it. Yet it is important to remember that the specific mythologization is not inherent or fated, but a result of continual, communal processes of retelling. How these myths are created is inherently *playful*, as the audience wants to tell their own stories. The fact that the game exists for long enough that these myths can grow is part of why this works inherently, yet the design of the game and the way the community discussion is facilitated is a key part of how successful this is long-term.

Perennial games facilitate play through their design, acknowledging and encouraging the community to play within its repetition and gaps that repetition in-

evitably creates. The game encourages players to come together by requiring teamwork and collective organizing, both in its gameplay and in its narrative, which then reflects back on their experience by being about that very same organizing. A perennial game can thus tell them how to play through its design and its narrative, forming the myth of the game in how it allows and supports the community.

21.2 Direction 2: Why and how do communities create mythology with a perennial game through their narrative play?

The second direction investigated the community, specifically focusing on the Destiny community and how they play with the game, its narrative, canon, and each other. In this we saw how they create myths about the game and how these reinforce the communally understood truths about what the game is and what it can be. This is done through collective rituals, reinforced and maintained, turning the game into an ordinary, regular experience, which over time lets players be part of the history of the game.

Canon as a Subject of Myth If “*mythology is about the construction of truth*” (Ford, 2022, p. 31) (section 3.1.5), then canon is one of prime subjects of that construction. What is canon, and what is not, about a storyworld is “what is true about this world”, and the way this is assembled and maintained follows the naturalization processes of

collective myth. Through this process, the community deliberates what is valuable about this world and what should be part of it. This even applies to themselves and their role in the world, as we saw how players consider their fictional role as part of the world (chapter 13). In case of doubt, canon is proven rather than disproven, yet the audience is willing to maintain a much more complicated sense of canonicity than a binary. Thus an author can keep elements that are complicated in the canon for the benefit of the audience. The play of the canon, furthermore, is invited by the game, and the audience helps feel encouraged to play on with the canon when they are drawn into it by the authors.

The Collective Ritual The rituals of *Destiny* and *FFXIV* are crucial to their mythological development. The weekly and monthly and yearly recurring rhythms of play is how players know when to gather and pay attention. These rituals are upheld and maintained by the combination of the game facilitating them, the authors highlighting them, and the audience caring about them, and thus are a key part of how the collective myth is reinforced and ossified over time. This is how the mystery turns familiar as they week after week repeat and re-enact the narrative events of the games, or get together to learn about the upcoming changes in a weekly blog post. These rituals are paramount to the social organization of these games and strengthens the sense of community. People know when to come together and rally around the collective experiences, which is where perennial games are at their strongest. As mentioned in section 14.3.3, players rely on the expected comfort of the ritual in the moment, yet surprises are also important in

hindsight and nostalgia, as it is often breaking the ritual that is the most memorable, yet keeping the ritual is vital for the everyday interaction to function.

Being a Part of History Within the binding of the social and the narrative, as social events gain narrative meaning and ephemeral events happen in the zeitgeist, and as these events become historized and mythologised, the joy of being there in the moment to “witness” this history is not to be understated. A large part of the communal joy of continually being a part of these games is this sense of belonging both socially and within the world, and being a part of events which turn historical, providing the future expectation of being part of more. These events can be as large as the Fall of Dalamud or as “small” as Lasertag weekend (section 9.1.3), yet all matter to the players who were there and who felt the game turn a bit more magical than it had been. This ongoing participation in history is a large part of how these places become “homes” and “real” environments people return to again and again, to relive these moments and exist in them with their friends. This returning to nostalgia, remembering the communal moments of the past, is also an important strengthener of that community, tying them together in shared memory.

The Ordinary and the New In the weekly repetition, the extraordinary of the game becomes ordinary, expected, and predictable. While this is beneficial for social connectedness and familiarity, it is trading this for the mystery of the new. Players crave regular, expected, reliable experiences, yet they also want to be surprised. Doing one or the other is not enough; players want familiarity and mystery, and the game

falters for them if it fails to deliver on either front. What comes next is always weighted against what came before, and it always needs to be better and more, even if we know this is not possible. If it changes too much, the audience loses their home. If it changes too little, it wilts and they leave for another one.

The Masquerade of the Real Perennial games matter because players imbue them with meaning. They matter because players find value in their social connections, in being part of their history, in participating in their rituals. They do this all within the ironic distance of being aware that this is a “video game” that “does not matter”, yet we play it “as if it did”. This masquerade is key to how we participate in the perennial narratives, because it is what allows them to both be meaningful and meaningless, letting the audience care when they want, and disengage when they want. The allure of being able to matter, play “as if it was real” is so strong that we continuously maintain this masquerade in order to continue to participate in and act within the collective mythology. It is a great joy to play with the boundary of real and not-real and games can encourage this play by intentionally making their fiction and reality more complicated, more prone to breaking, and more open for questions.

The communities of perennial games create mythology because that is part of how they understand the game and organize around it, and because they want to give in to the fictional reality of the game, and play with what is part of it and what is not. Making mythology thus helps the audience make the game *theirs*, as they are involved in the making of the truths of what the game is. They do this through the recurring

rituals of the game, creating their own history through the experiencing and retelling of communal events, turning the game into part of their lives.

21.3 Direction 3: How does the live development of a perennial game itself utilize narrative play?

The third direction investigated the development of live service games, by reviewing previous literature, interviewing current developers about their experience, and through my own development practice. In this, we saw how development struggled to hit an oscillating balance between sustainability and novelty, and responding to players while telling a story that ideally would never end.

Hitting the Balance in the Oscillations The state of a perennial game needs to oscillate between the stages of the life cycle (chapter 20) in order to maintain interest, sustainability, and adapt to new circumstances. The balance this requires is also not constant but shifts as the days and years go by and the game needs new things, sometimes stability, sometimes surprise. Therefore, in order to be able to work on the game sustainably for a long time, it is not possible to maintain the same cadence, pace and pipelines which may have worked for a time. In the garden, the natural oscillations of wilting and blooming are present in a perennial game, and should be encouraged and fostered for the health of the plant. It is only over a long enough time-span that we can see the consistent growth and change of the plant as it persists.

The Joys of Perennial Narrative Perennial narratives may often be instigated by a continuous need for more content and financial gain, yet there are several key joys a creative can get out of telling narratives perennially. The ability to tell ever-deeper stories in rich worlds and respond to a passionate audience in “real” time, “improvising” alongside the play of the audience, letting players tell their own stories in the world and riffing on them, and being able to iterate with the players are all examples of reasons this narrative form is enjoyable to creatives (see section 18.3.1). I want to highlight this specifically on top of the many challenges highlighted in section 20.6 because it is not something as often discussed and is a key counterpoint to the idea that this is a media form only driven by capitalist incentives. This said, the many challenges are nevertheless real and worth considering, despite how many of them cannot be “solved” without also taking away the joys of the live interaction with the audience.

A Perennial Game Is Only That When It Is Played While it is common knowledge that a game, or any piece of art, changes the moment it is released (see *Death of the Author* (Barthes, 1994), the nature of this change is so distinct in a perennial game that it is worth highlighting. This is not a mere question of change, but one of existence: A developer can plan and prepare, but it is only when players interact, push, and break their systems they know they have made a perennial game. It is not until the triangle forms, until the three elements interact in real time with each other, that perennality begins, and it is thus entirely unknown before whether and how any experience is perennial. I also want to highlight the *breakage* here, because if players do nothing

unexpected, if they only play as the developers want and do not push the boundaries or perform their own narrative play, the perennality of the experience diminishes to the point of non-existence. It is only when players do the unexpected that a developer can begin to play in return.

Telling Forever Stories Telling a story that might go on forever provides a number of different considerations than a traditional narrative. The crux of what “good story-telling” is does not necessarily change, yet the bounds of that narrative does. A story can no longer have one ending but needs multiples, and in order to ensure continued mystery and questions as one thread closes another (or two, or three) needs to have opened. A perennial narrative will inevitably reference itself and trade its mystery for familiarity, recurring the same characters and the same plots, and doing so has advantages as players grow attached and respond well to what they like. Yet this also, as with all other elements, has the danger of players losing interest if the self-referentiality grows so inert it cannot accept new developments. It is also important to note that you cannot plan a forever story, as even a 10-year plan will end, and you thus need to continually build on the previous and find some way to either rebuild the ziggurat (section 16.1) or build a new one inside the old.

Involving Community Management in the Ongoing Narrative The narrative experience of a perennial game is inextricably tied to the interaction between the developer and the player and should not be considered different aspects of development. As seen in games with successful narrative community interactions (some of which are

discussed in chapters 9 and 10, yet others include *Helldivers 2*, and *Blaseball*), and in section 19.6, players love when the developer interactions directly involve the narrative, and players love playing along with this form of live narrative play. This is difficult and requires planning and coordination between disparate teams, yet is often worth it because the audience always responds in kind. This can take many forms, from out-of-game marketing involving players and “speaking diegetically” with them to responding to player actions with future content, and it can be difficult to achieve within developer budgets and timelines. Yet there is always value in trying to accomplish it regardless.

Developers facilitate narrative play through the oscillations of development, maintaining interest for players by shifting between regular patterns and surprising with new developments, intentionally playing with their expectations. They play through the long-term improvisation this dynamic creates, seeing what players want and do and furthering the game in response. In their direct interaction with players, they need to make sure that players feel responded to and seen, which can be done by directly reinforcing and supporting them in *breaking* the game, and building on top that.

Before we move on to the major thesis of perennial games, I will briefly discuss the core limitations that affected the entire work.

21.4 Limitations

The first and most obvious limitation of all of this work is all the experiences, communities, and games I did not investigate. *Destiny* and *FFXIV* are just two examples

of modern perennial games, and there are many others that showcase different aspects of the form, with different approaches to narrative, community, and myth. These games have been briefly mentioned, but to provide a more comprehensive list of games I am aware of as relevant yet were not studied enough includes: Warframe, League of Legends, Rainbow Six: Siege, Fortnite, World of Warcraft, Blaseball, Overwatch (2), Helldivers 2, Guild Wars 2, Neurocracy, Call of Duty: Warzone, PUBG: Battlegrounds (previously PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds), Apex Legends, the Hoyoverse games (Genshin Impact, Honkai Star Rail, Zenless Zone Zero), Wuthering Waves, Tower of Fantasy, on top of a host of other Asian MMOs, gacha games, and mobile games, which were a major blind spot for me (Arknights, Fate Grand/Order, Project Sekai: Colorful Stage, BanG Dream, Love and Deepspace, Girls Frontline, and many more). This limitation is partly due to my positionality and cultural bias skewing more towards Western games, and partly due to restrictions on scope. I am especially aware of how missing the Hoyoverse games (of which Genshin Impact is the most prominent) and its many influencees is a major omission, as they are arguably a new evolution in the perennial form after the Western development in the 2010s.

This limitation also extends to the people I talked to in the interviews and who replied to my survey, who were limited to those I had access to, and were predominantly from communities I already followed or were a part of. The Destiny community, as mentioned, has a very particular relationship with their game, which does not necessarily translate to other communities in all particularities. The developers I interviewed, likewise, do not represent the full range of developers working across all live-service games

today, and different developers will no doubt have different processes and perspectives on the games they work on.

This said, the major limitation of all of this work is the lens I have taken to view it with. Focusing on these games as myth is not the only way to investigate perennial games. As mentioned in section 1.4.2, the three directions were undertaken with the knowledge that I would not be able to go as deep with each of them as they could have. There are several areas of research I could have dedicated more time to studying, which would have enriched this work. I only cursorily touch on fandom studies (Hellekson and Busse, 2014; Jenkins, 1992). I only loosely touched on play studies (section 12.2) (Sicart, 2014; Huizinga, 1956). I focused on space (chapter 8), yet there is a lot of work on time in games which undoubtedly is relevant (Zagal and Mateas, 2010; Nitsche, 2007). Likewise, there are many other lenses which would have been useful, such as cultural analysis (Murray, 2021; Hall, 1980), phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Keogh, 2018), history (section 4.3), transmedia (Jenkins, 2007; Ryan, 2015), queer theory (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017; Ruberg, 2017) or further exploring the socio-economic perspective (Kelleter, 2017) through avenues like Marxist analysis, and there are doubtless more I am omitting at the moment.

Furthermore, within the lens I chose, more work could be done. The analyses of *Destiny* and *FFXIV* could have covered how their systems and space facilitate narrative play more systematically, and more comprehensively tied them together. The ethnography could have been more sophisticated, spent more time getting involved in parts of the community I was not a part of, and participating more in ways to play *Destiny* I

was not already doing (LFG, speedrunning, datamining, PvP, etc). The ethnography was inherently scoped so it was possible for me to maintain in the sporadic schedule I needed and I participated, primarily, as I would have otherwise, playing the game with my friends, yet did tried to do so with care, rigor, and reflection. The interviews could have covered more aspects, and there are still parts of the interview and survey data that have not been properly analyzed for study. Finally, my own development efforts could have been richer, and created an experience even closer to those I studied, with a managed community of active players and more ongoing support. I am proud of what I made in *Telegrams from the Choir Train*, yet it is a small experience, and as discussed (section 19.6.1), its perennality is compromised in a few ways. As discussed in section 1.4.2, these are intentional failings of the approach I took, yet doing all three is what allows to draw the following conclusions more comprehensively, drawing across experiences of the game, the audience, and the players.

21.4.1 Beyond Games

The focus on games, furthermore, limits my ability to understand modern perennality in a broader context and does impact what I can and cannot say about it on a broader scale regarding sports, music, internet narratives (section 4.4) etc., yet how warrants further elaboration. Most other forms of media do not share the same unique blend of art, craft, and technology as game development. Televisions shows do not issue minor patches to fix the dialogue in a single scene two days after an episode has been released. Sports do not have the audience both exist on the pitch and in the

stands. Neither of them have "bugs" since they are not software. Internet narratives do not share the same expectations of consumption as media dedicated to narrative. While individual lessons thus might extend to one medium or another, based on its specific perennality, it is important to remember the differences in perennial affordances. For example, a lack of (or different) temporal continuity will cause that any effect of temporal continuity (like muddy diegesis (section 4.2)) to be lessened. It is thus difficult to provide a comprehensive list of what is and is not applicable across the variety of media (that would be its own chapter), and it is unlikely that any aspect will be applicable to all perennial media (for example, what will be useful for sports narrative might not be applicable to serial television, and so on). Yet I will try to offer some guidance here on how this applies outside of games. Starting with Direction 1, the narrative design patterns of games discussed in section 8.6 are often caused by their specific implementation of repetition, ephemerality, and simulation, allowing individual audience members to experience a different version of events, which is general unique to how games treat simulation and repetition. Yet, we see examples outside games where the audience treat a perennial experience both like history (as *Destiny* does), in sports and internet narratives, which can be spoiled and explained by the community, and as narrative experience (like *Final Fantasy XIV*), in serial media, which should be experienced by the individual. The lessons pertaining to those kinds of narratives and how they cultivate community would then be applicable to those experiences. The focus on the magic circle in Direction 2 makes it seem unique to games, yet the broader lessons here about belonging and ritual and people wanting to be part of history and something greater

does apply in general. All perennial media do create communal ritual experiences and communities where people experience mythology together. Furthermore, many of the lessons about the complicated relationship between the audience and authors also apply outside of games, especially where those authors are not unanimous or singular (yet are sometimes treated as such) such as serial television, internet narratives, and professional wrestling. Most of the lessons and specific challenges of Direction 3 (chapters 18–20) do not extend much beyond games (although an adapted version of the life-cycle could likely extend across other forms), as the development challenges of games are often unique to game development as a form. This has some exceptions, such as the challenge of telling forever stories, which has been tackled in a variety of ways across serial media over time (see section 4.1). Finally, the lens of myth I also view as being useful across perennial narrative, due to the recurring communal activity that inevitably happens.

Furthermore, many of these lessons can apply by appropriating the language of authors and audience and game onto other groups. For example, in Ringland et al. (2016a)’s work on AutCraft, one could view the moderators of the Minecraft server as the authors, and the players as the audience, and then we can see perennality apply once again. Section 22.3 will also discuss another example of using this perennial lens onto a different non-game experience: Streaming.

Before that however, we will move on to the primary conclusion of the dissertation, which will connect all the directions into a primary thesis.

21.5 Trading Familiarity: A Thesis on Perennial Games

In order to bring all the findings from this dissertation together, let us return to the initial research question, defined all the way back in section 1.1:

How does narrative play in perennial games cultivate community?

And remember my core thesis, from chapter 5, which can now be framed as an answer:

Perennial games cultivate community by trading mystery for familiarity.

This consistent trade from mystery to familiarity permeates across the findings from this dissertation: It exists in the facilitation of play through the ritual design, governing play and social interaction through repetitive, social events; it exists in the never-ending work of the community breaking down a game's mysteries in collaborative history-making; and it exists in the development, as the possibilities and restrictions of the world and its systems are learned with each spiral around the lifecycle. All these cyclical, ritual activities further cement the experience as known and familiar, taking away mystery and mapping out the spaces of the garden.

This trade is how community is cultivated: The community forms through the formation and enforcement and maintenance (and breakage) of rituals turning the unknown into familiar space, which is how the mystery is lost; it ossifies in the development of mythology, which is how the mystery is naturalized; and it persists due

to the ever-increasing complexity and self-referentiality, which is how the familiarity is strengthened and grows interdependent. This happens in relation to and in conversation with a developer whose work is ensuring the continued creation of new experiences, and is thus simultaneously creating an ever-narrowing possibility space of what the world is and can be. This developer creates the mystery yet also inevitably nourishes the familiar through structural design decisions, ritual patterns, and an increased understanding of their own game.

In this process, the bonds between the three aspects of a perennial experience (the author, the audience, and the game) is strengthened and growing ever more reliant on the continued existence of the other. The longer it exists, the more relationships between them naturalize into expectations and norms, the more each "interactor" in the trifecta (section 2.2) has a developed myth about the other. In some ways this also means these connections grow more brittle, because the increased expectations means that any break in those expectations causes a greater fracture than would have been the case otherwise. As the myth grows, so does the dependence on its continued truth.

These myths exist in two layers (section 3.5), affecting each other, and the mystery can arise in both, yet does so differently. The first layer of fiction is initially developed by authors, yet affected and influenced by how the audience responds to it. This is where *narrative mystery* flourishes. This bleeds into the second layer of the community myth, where the paratexts and meta-communication about the game takes in the many mysteries of the game and familiarizes them. Mystery arises here *in community*, as new forms of play can arise due to the audience or authors discovering

new ways to affect each other and build their relations. This in turn affects the first layer once again, causing a feedback loop of narrative (meta-)communication, providing new material with which to do narrative play in the second layer.

However, perennial experiences require mystery for prolonged existence, and thus require active effort to translate this familiarity back into mystery. As Kelleter (2017) said, the core problem of serial storytelling is translating repetition into difference. This language can be translated: Repetition is familiar, difference is mysterious, and thus in those words the problem of perennial storytelling is to translate familiarity into mystery; in other words, to counteract the motion by doing it in reverse. This effort can come from the developers (and often, when they need to sell continuous product, that is the impetus for future content) who need to wrestle the community out of their comfort zone, surprise them with unique and different forms of play and provide new mysteries, narrative and otherwise, for them to ponder. Yet it can also arrive from the game itself, as discovered interactions surprise both the players and developers, leading to new forms of possible narrative play. And finally, it can come from the players themselves, ever creative, who desire novelty and are willing to break what is there to find it.

If this effort does not occur, the garden is at risk of becoming familiar and safe and toxic. The familiar turns predictable, the paths and corners expected and mundane, the plants wilted and rotten. The audience begins to despise that which they loved, trotting around the same garden every day, hoping to find a fresh seed underneath the muck, and so they either leave, or begin to uproot the earth. If the garden is not

maintained and refreshed and watered, if new plants are not introduced or new insects allured, the familiar turns sour and foul. Yet it also should not be over-managed, with each leaf unable to grow beyond their boundaries, as the developer needs to let the garden breathe and become its own, and let the audience play with it as they wish.

However, the garden is not innocent, and the audience is not independent. The myth of the garden is not decided entirely by the audience, or the developer, or the garden itself, but in conversation, as the collective myth informs which kinds of play it invites and which kind of play it shuns. The audience can accept or subvert that, yet subversion is also acknowledgment. These designs may have been intended or not, yet they nevertheless exist, and inform who and what wants to play in the garden, and what kind of play they collectively prefer. Over time, this myth gets strengthened and ossified (Ford, 2022), shaped by the continued interaction of everyone involved, and can become so intertwined in the mythology of the game (and of culture writ large) that they are the myths you build new myths around. The earlier you are in this process, the more those myths are malleable. Early in its life, a perennial game feels more volatile and prone to surprises, as the Wild is in full effect. Over time, however, the boundaries of play get settled and become expected, as each new discovery relates to a previous one, each event and myth correlate and compare to the ongoing mythos. The longer this goes on the harder it becomes to change the underlying myths, and the more you have to rely on building new ones if you wish anything to drastically change.

Let me briefly break down what this contribution means for each intended audience (see section 1.1.1) of this book.

First, for people who wish to understand narrative in ongoing narratives, it serves as a touchstone, and is intended as guidance on how to read perennality. As should be clear, ongoing, communal experiences *can* be read as narrative experiences and analyzed as such. In order to do so, we can take inspiration from how it was done in Direction 1: Investigate their repetition, their ritual design patterns, and how their narrative is reflective of the community. In order to understand narrative in perennial experiences, it is important to ask how is mystery offered, and how is familiarity traded, and ultimately, how is this trade counteracted in the ongoing experience. The contribution here is thus providing a framing for understanding these experiences as narratives, by asking questions about its perennality: What is repeated and what is not? How is the narrative conveyed within this repetition? What is ephemeral and why? How do the themes of the narrative reflect the play of the experience in the community (or not)? How is the space changed over time, inside and outside the experience?

Second, for people who wish to build communities, be they in games or otherwise, the primary contribution is also one of framing, yet in a different angle. The concepts of the lifecycle, oscillations, and masquerade of play frames the discussion around what a perennial story looks like and when it is effective: Not in moments of brilliance but in ongoing, oscillating success. Furthermore, the trade of mystery to familiarity is a very important concept to keep in mind for creating perennial experiences, as this is the inherent force you always have to fight when building them. The plans around future content, the expectations of what should happen next, always needs to be in the service of *new mystery*. As an author, planning out and considering what mys-

teries the audience have, and which you are giving them, is thus constantly important to consider. You can think of mystery almost as a kind of resource, nuggets of treasure you intentionally leave in the garden, which must be seeded again once the previous ones have been discovered.

Finally, a core contribution of this work is this: Perennial experiences are joyful because they are ordinary, communal, and unexceptional. Cultivating community should not be seen as a great secret or ingenious solution only the very best pieces of media manage to accomplish. Cultivating community is, in some ways, rather straightforward: Give a group of people a mystery and the means to collaborate on solving it. The difficulty comes in maintaining this community, in *continuously* cultivating it, feeding and nourishing it without it growing sour. Cultivating community in this sense should *not* be seen as being about growing that community, in scale or size or shape, but rather *nourishing what is there*; the present connections between the audience, the author, and the game, and continuing to make sure they are communicating fruitfully. As the trade of mystery for familiarity is an inherent process of human curiosity, collaboration, and desire for community, it is in many ways the easy part. The difficulty comes in the fact that this process is so inherent: It is unstoppable, innate, natural, and unavoidable.

21.6 The Ur-Myth of Perpetuity

I will here return to a point made in section 16.3, which is the ur-myth underlying all perennial games, bound in its perpetuity: *"The game will continue to exist."* This myth is what causes the game to receive continued support, it is what makes players feel good about investing in its future, and it is what makes developers believe there is value in creating that future. It is what gives hope in a period of disappointment that things will become better, and it is certainty that the questions will be answered and the familiar rituals persist. The moment this myth falls away a number of critical things change: It is abandoned by its players, it becomes fragile and will often end if trust is not rebuilt (because this myth relies, fundamentally, on trust). Yet, it also causes the game to be more precious: If it is going to end, it means what is there is more valuable. Because while this myth is vital to the continued existence of a perennial game, it also has a sinister nature to it: *This myth causes the community to be unhappy with the current state of it.* If there is always the potential for more in the future, if the game can and should improve (as is promised) then we want this and that and those to change. If it really will continue, it can't continue like *this*. Once the trust is established, it is simultaneously taken for granted. Final Fantasy XIV's community became how it is, in part, because of how this myth broke, and because they did not take their game for granted (section 10); as the classic adage says, you do not know how valuable something is to you until you lose it. In contrast, many other other perennial games (including Destiny) have a contingent of the community who are (perennially, hah) unhappy with

the state of it, despite continuing to play it. As described in section 14.3.2 there are many strong forces keeping them in a spiral of unhappiness, partly due to this myth as well (“*this is where my community is and will be as long as this game exists*”). The more any player stays within the game, the more they see the lifecycle of it rise and wane and see the patterns of its development, the more those patterns grow familiar, predictable, and assured. What was once surprising and exciting is now mundane, and despite upholding the same quality and giving the same list of features, it is not the same experience for that player. The knowledge that this game will exist and continue to add to this in some amount, will not work, despite how enjoyable that very same list of features was when we started. Yet, because it has grown familiar, that player also does not want to lose it: They want it to be *better*, without knowing what that better is. The players are inevitably nostalgic for the mystery they once had, and yearn for it to come back, yet do not want to lose the familiarity they now have in order to (re-)experience it.

This myth is also why shut-downs of perennial games feel so heartbreaking. When this happens it violates the primary myth upon which all the others stand. Games that end prematurely or without fulfilling their true promises like *Star Wars: Galaxies*, *The Matrix: Online*, or *City of Heroes* are often revered and missed by those who played them. As mentioned in section 20.5, when games like these end it fuels a profound sense of loss and camaraderie among the people there, no longer taking for granted what they had. This myth of perpetuity is of course, like any other myth, not actually true as perennial games stop existing all the time. It is in the *belief* that it will that

the myth exists, not in the practical (or financial or societal) actuality. The end comes unexpectedly and is always unwelcome. When this myth breaks, it is thus disappointing because it is a reminder that this was just a myth: We realize we are building our foundational relationships upon something we are not in control of, upon something governed by a need to perpetuate new content for profit. It breaks the masquerade entirely, as the fiction we build it around becomes dysfunctional, the author we relied upon no longer trustworthy. Of course, it should be mentioned that these worlds can continue in a different form, as we have seen fan projects trying to resurrect both Matrix: Online and City of Heroes, among others. Yet this becomes a decidedly different thing, with a new set of authors and a new scope, which then has to rebuild its perennial myth all over again.

Chapter 22

The Future of Perenniality

“What once was old shall be new again, and history will have its revenge.”

Weapon Description for *Sins of the Past*, Destiny 2, 2017

AS I HAVE BEEN WRITING THIS DISSERTATION, I have been thinking a lot about *Concord*. *Concord* was a breaking point for the public consciousness around live-service games (McWhertor, 2024b,a), a wake-up call for many publishers that these experiences might also be too risky to attempt¹. Yet, *Concord* did not fail in the way we have seen most perennial games fail up until this point, either cruising so long it grows stale or ending due to lack of funding. No, *Concord* failed before it even reached the Wild. In some ways, *Concord* never even became a perennial game. It presented

¹I would be remiss not to mention the other contextual elements that likely caused *Concord*'s failure. While it is easy to bring up the anti-DEI propaganda against this game, I do not think that group has as much power as they like to believe, so I do not think this is the reason *Concord* failed. More likely is the general fatigue with live-service games, which has been halting the success of a number of titles like it before. It was a competitive character-based shooter launching into a saturated market without properly selling its unique features. I should also add here I tried *Concord* in the open beta and quite enjoyed it but also found no reason why I should play it over other games I was already playing. Thus is the dilemma of new live-service games.

itself like one, it had promises of ongoing storytelling in small cutscene vignettes which promised to continue week over week. It had the trappings of an online shooter with “lore”, it presented a new world and the potential for stories within it. Yet, despite all this presentation, it never seemed to actually live up to that promise. It had no Loot Cave moment, players did not take it into their own hands and try to break it. It just existed. The cutscenes were just there and no one seemed to care. It had no room for players to play within it, to push its boundaries and turn it into something the developers were not ready for.

If a perennial game begins the moment players break it, it ends when players stop breaking it. The moment it is “solved”, the moment the cruise takes over and there is nothing more to crush or misunderstand or ask questions about, then the perennial game freezes. The triangle stops moving and it falters. Concord was solved the moment it launched.

As mentioned in section 1.2, newer perennial games struggle against all the previous successful perennial games within which players are entrenched. It is demonstrably difficult to find a good reason to switch from your familiar, safe, rewarding perennial game, where your community exists and you are invested in the narrative, to switch to a new, untested experience, where you do not have the established trust that it will continue. This trust is tremendously difficult to build as a new game and is not something that is truly built until years of dedicated development. This is part of why so many perennial games had “failed” launches: Why should players get invested when they do not know that investment will be rewarded? It is only through showing

dedication that players begin to believe, and showing dedication *through* failure is a strong way to do this.

This is also a function of the Wild stage: Being wild and letting players break your game is one of the fastest ways to get them invested and build that trust. Players are a lot more likely to believe in you as a developer if they see you honoring their narrative play and building on top of it. In having no Wild stage, in providing no room for players to break it, Concord remained non-perennial, and it was never shown to the players that the garden could grow. By working through the Wild and coming out the other side, you are in a much stronger position to build and maintain that trust going forward. Therefore, while I will not offer much direct advice to future developers in this dissertation, I will offer this: Let players break your game and build upon what they do. You *want* the players to do the unexpected. Find your lacunae and invite players to answer your mysteries, and then respond back in kind when they inevitably arrive at unpredictable answers. Make it easy for players to feel like they are making your game theirs. The landscape of perennial games will only get more difficult to break into than it has been, and if you fail to give players a reason to care, they will not abandon their existing experiences to come to yours.

22.1 The Failure of Sustainable Perenniality

I want to here return to the question of the perennial relationship to capitalism first brought up in section 4.1. While serial media and perennial storytelling rose

through capitalist production, we have recently started to see a breakage in that relationship. As mentioned in section 1.2, and in the section before, perennial games are no longer (nor have they ever been) a guaranteed financial success. Yet, under purely capitalist logic, would we not expect their success to be guaranteed?

This is naturally more complicated to answer than I have the scope for here, and I am no economist, yet we can see the dynamics of perennality as part of the answer. While perennial media is very good at maintaining an audience, it is, over time, less adept at *growing* that audience. Thus, under the logic of modern, late-stage capitalism perennality fails at a key tenet: They stop growing. We have seen this in countless examples, such as World of Warcraft, Destiny 2, League of Legends, which all grew to a point and then stopped, maintaining fluctuating yet stable communities. In their self-referentiality (Kelleter, 2017), in their insularity (section 18.2.1), in their failure to onboard new players into an ever-expanding history (section 20.6), perennial games often fail to grow at the exponential rates late-stage capitalism desires. It has traded so much of its mystery for familiarity that that same familiarity—a great boon for those inside—becomes a repellent to those outside. In other words, the garden stops growing, its space conforming to the people inside it, and in doing so makes entering it much harder. This is ironic, as it is the exact same process (trading mystery for familiarity) that allows the *promise* of infinite growth, yet it naturally defeats its own purpose. Perennial games are not intended to have infinite audiences, and those that try often fail.

We instead have seen a different trend arise, which is not quite perennality

although it in many ways looks like it. It is a trend which in some ways counters the idea of "self-referentiality" (Kelleter, 2017) and universal chronicle of perennial games: "Fortnitification"². Fortnitification is the trend of creating universes where characters from many different properties intermingle, as seen in Fortnite, Call of Duty: Warzone, Magic: The Gathering, and so on. This is another way live-service games have trended to avoid insularity, growing their potential players by grabbing the interest of different communities into their own, creating a hodge-podge of an experience where the lack of internal consistency *is* the point. This, so far, though, has broken perennial storytelling, as most experiences trying to create this "metaverse" are not then also actively telling engaging stories *with* it. Even Magic: The Gathering, which does deep, perennial storytelling within their own universe, generally keeps their "Universes Beyond" sets outside that narrative—so far. I have mentioned the Black Hole in Fortnite as a key perennial event, and Fortnite was early on toying with fiction, yet as it has increasingly incorporated more and more of the outside world, including real world people, and in its attempts to turn itself into Roblox³, it has ceased developing its own fiction. Fortnitification will no doubt continue as it is aggressively successful when it works (as can be seen in the success of Fortnite and Magic: The Gathering's recent "Final

²See <https://www.thegamer.com/call-of-duty-fortnite-shark-skin-live-service/>, <https://www.tcgplayer.com/content/article/From-Innistrad-to-Outlaws-The-Fortnite-ification-of-MTG/88210a45-411b-4e69-9330-5b0bb943d616/>, or <https://www.endlessmode.com/tabletop/magic-the-gathering/the-magic-and-final-fantasy-crossover-is-a-massive-success-what-does-this-mean-for-magics-future>. This is, of course, older than Fortnite, as we can already see trends like this in "Ready Player One" (Cline, 2011) and crossover movies like the Marvel movies of the 2010s, yet the way Fortnite is doing it is both bigger and more aggressive than most we have seen before, leading it to become the poster-child of the trend.

³Roblox can be seen as another potential avenue for live-service games to go in to avoid insularity, by giving players the ability to create their own experiences, entirely forgoing the developer's role as an author.

Fantasy", becoming the fastest selling Magic: The Gathering set to date (Valentine, 2025)), and it is an open question what this means for perennality. Telling stories with this wide range of characters seems undeniably difficult—disregarding the many practical complications of IP control, authorship, and comprehension there would be—as players would need to grasp not just the narrative they follow, but countless others. Thus, in some ways, this almost seems like an evolution of the capitalist form that eschews perennality or seriality for something altogether new: Translating repetition into difference not from within itself, but from outside.

Before discussing perennality in even broader terms, let us finally return to a few of the open questions regarding perennial games which are prime areas for future work.

22.2 Open Questions

As stated in section 1.4.2, much of this work was not intended to definitely answer how to tell stories in perennial games, but explore a possible lens through which that question can be understood. These should be read in addition to the many challenges highlighted in section 20.6, as many challenges there are also open question, yet focus more on how to design future perennial games, whether these open questions are broader.

- Should Perennial Games End?

A question hovering around perennial storytelling, and brought up by some de-

velopers (section 18.3.3), whether perennial games “should” have planned ends. Considering that all perennial games potentially stop out of necessity, from a narrative perspective there are obvious places where stopping would be preferable compared to others. It is easy to consider whether, narratively, it is not better to end while the game is at its best, and let something new take its place. This is in many ways an artistic, creative decision, and not one we can definitely make one way or another across all experiences. Some experiences probably should end, whereas others might be able to continue so long they are effectively perpetual. There are distinct artistic advantages to concluding a work and letting it sit with an audience. Yet, we have also seen examples of the joys of a perennial work existing throughout decades of human history (Sherlock Holmes, Doctor Who, etc), and continue to bring new experiences.

However, in practice this question is moot, because it is rarely a narrative or creative decision whether the game will continue to exist; it is a capitalist one. Perennial (serial) media arose alongside capitalist modes of production (section 4.1.5) and is still governed by this. As long as this need exists, perpetuity is a given, not a question.

- Can Perenniality Escape Capitalism?

As a follow-up it seems prudent to ask whether the capitalism of ongoing media is bound to chase perenniality. I do not aim to solve capitalism (although that would be nice), rather, we can ask whether it is possible to tell stories in perennial

form, taking advantage of the joys of this mode of telling, without relying on the capitalist assumption of continued growth. Perennial games do not need to *grow*, in the sense of expand and make more money than they did before (rather, this is proving to not be the case, see section 22.1). Rather, it seems possible that perenniality work could be more narratively, experientially successful, if the financial goal was not expansion but maintenance. We have seen this in a few cases of successful, smaller perennial experiences: *Fallen London* (Failbetter Games, 2009), still going since 2009 for a small, dedicated fanbase, or MUDs, like *Achaea* (Reed, 2021), running for over 30 years. Escaping capitalism is, obviously, tremendously difficult, especially as you create experiences that demand more financial support, such as AAA video games. Therefore, if it is possible to create sustainable experiences in the current socio-cultural landscape that can rival current perennial experiences yet do not falter to the continued assumptions of exponential growth in modern capitalism, is an open question. Theoretically, it seems possible, yet in practice it may prove another matter.

- How Do We Sustain Digital Ephemerality?

A major draw to perennial experiences is their ability to create once-in-a-lifetime communal moments of *zeitgeist*. These moments, however, have been proving substantially difficult to sustain. This is both meant creatively, as the excitement of anything wanes, yet also financially: Selling an ephemeral moment in a digital experience is mostly, unproven. Moments like live-actor performances in *The*

Under Presents or the *Peanut Fraud* in Blaseball are tremendously cool experiences: Yet none of them were paid for, and thus eventually, went away. While physical ephemeral experiences like concerts, theater performances, escape rooms, etc. sustain themselves with ticket sales, a virtual world has not yet been able to sustain itself on the admission to a one-time event. Even AAA games like *Destiny* have struggled with how to properly monetize themselves in a way that allows continued, sustainable production while not upsetting players. Only MMOs were able to normalize subscriptions, and that only lasts for as long as the myth of that game's continued existence is blooming; we have seen countless examples where the "fate" of a failing MMO is to become free to play, to monetize off the few rather than the many. People are buying access to the *world*, to the continual ability to re-enter it at will. Ephemerality can happen *within* that world, yet it is not the reason people are buying into it in the first place. Thus, if you are creating an experience that leans more heavily on ephemerality—a true joy and power of perennial experiences—how to sustain yourself is yet an open question. A potential model here might be something closer to what *Neurocracy* is doing—recurring the same ephemeral 10-week experience, over and over (with additions and changes each time). This way, it is closer to a theater performance, where many people can buy access at various points, when it suits them, yet always experiencing the narrative from an easy entry point. This, naturally is thus less of a "true" perennial experience yet nevertheless succeeds at the powerful aspects of ephemerality.

22.3 Broader Impacts

As was already evident in chapters 3 and 4, perennial experiences are bigger than games. While I have here exclusively focused on perennial, live-service games, the experience of communal narrative play, of trading mystery for familiarity, is much wider, both historically and currently.

As media has increasingly been relying on the internet for dissemination and community building, we have seen the benefits of this, allowing people to come together around niche experiences, rallying around the zeitgeist of defeating a Peanut God (*Blaseball*), cheering in the theater as 10 years of movies come to fruition in a single man picking up a hammer (*Marvel: Endgame*), in the lifelong friends gathering around discussing the merits of Roman Reigns (*WWE*). Yet, we have also seen the exploitation, the prolonging of infinite storylines that forever tease conclusions, the introduction of new characters to sell merchandise, and the peer pressure of needing to keep up, and needing to pay money to do so. The popularity—and thus the influence—of these experiences is not to be understated. We have also seen the many copied attempts to replicate the success of perennial media, and the many times it has failed.

Perennial experiences *are* insidious. In the same way that religion and culture and media are insidious: Trading mystery for familiarity is a very powerful process, and the community it creates is binding, enthralling, and intoxicating. It is difficult to stop playing a perennial game when you are excited about the next chapter on your favorite character, when your friends are asking you if you want to raid (and *depend* on you to to

show up), when your regular rituals are tied into the fluctuations of the medium, when your online timelines are populated with news and conversations about it. It is difficult to escape when you *want* to stay. And these dynamics play out not just in games, but in any ongoing media experience with a sense of community. The community becomes the reason you stay, and thus the nature of what you need to do to continue staying there is critical. When your identity and enjoyment is stapled upon the ability to visit the same garden over and over again, the nature of that garden becomes vital. Does it require regular payments? Does it require investing more time than you have? Does it require a fixation that is unhealthy to other aspects of your life? Or does it allow you to take breaks and oscillate your commitment as needed? This is easy to exploit, even accidentally, as an author.

But this is an insidiousness we welcome and cherish. That is precisely why it is dangerous, of course, but it is also why it is worth caring about. I believe history has shown us that we, as humans, cannot live happily without community, ritual, enchantment, magic, and the desire to belong. Thus, it is not a question of denying those pleasures, but indulging in such a way that it does not exploit or extract from those same people. The broader impacts of this extend far beyond games, into the very fabric of our cultural production, into the very reason we consider life worth living. As noted by Barthes (1957a) (see section 3.1.5), mythology naturalizes arbitrary signs into truth, making the ideas professed in cultural production seem inevitable, unavoidable, and natural. "The experience will continue to exist" is precisely that, in effect, the naturalization of cultural production into inevitability. Perenniality feels inevitable yet

this, too, is a myth.

One broader takeaway from this work, then, is this knowledge by itself: That perennial experiences are not as inevitable as they seem. They are not a given. Yet they feed into a very core desire we have as humans to *belong* and participate and be a part of something greater, and that desire will not go away. Yet, the ability to belong is not as connected to the material production of new experiences as it seems. As mentioned, the reason authors need to continue to produce new content is *capitalist*, not creative. What capitalism has done successfully is warp the system to *sell* that experience, and require continued financial investment. Yet, the value of the experience is not related to this fact.

I am writing all this because the people selling media have already realized that tying ongoing stories to repetitious content is an effective way to ensure that people keep coming back—this has been known since Charles Dickens (Hayward, 1997). It is valuable to understand how this has changed today, as no longer is "mere" seriality being sold, but perennality, using continuous time and the internet to forever sell you a forever experience. Terminally online, terminally present not merely in recurring installments but in perpetuity. They are not always successful in doing so, far from it, but i am saying this because the people trying to sell things do not always have the best interest of their audience in mind. Therefore, understanding this dynamic, understanding what we get out of it as an audience, and which parts of that are inherently bound into the experience of being a consumer, is important. Fan communities respond to authors (bands, writers, video-makers, influencers, designers etc.) through social platforms, creating rituals,

mythologies, and narratives responding to their common media of interest, and we can view these dynamics through a perennial lens. I am also saying this to the creators themselves, understanding that they have this power over an audience, to guide and govern their experience through your continued creation and presence is a responsibility to think carefully about. Even if you are not trying to exploit your audience, the continued production of ephemeral experiences may be doing that regardless.

I have already mentioned many of the examples beyond games in section 4.4. However, one trend I want to highlight here, which represents this dynamic in new, online media, is the rise of streaming, internet celebrity, content creator, or influencer culture⁴ and how this works perennially. Grayson (2025), in a recent book about the video game streaming platform *Twitch*, discusses how it became a phenomenon not by focusing on the spectacular possibilities of streaming, but the mundane: Letting streamers set schedules and get monthly revenue through subscriptions, fueling their ability to form habits and giving the audience the joy of a regularly scheduled comfort. In doing so, Twitch let communities form around *personalities* rather than the games or events themselves. These personalities are why people follow, and who they create a community around, yet this happens in a specific way which we can read perennially. I recall a point made by a streamer once⁵ about the fact that the audiences of streamers tend to treat them like characters in a story, rather than people. This means that anything new that happens to them is explained by the audience with the logic of

⁴I'm using streamer, influencer, content creator and internet celebrity interchangeably here.

⁵I am 99% sure this was *Day[9]*, a streamer I respect greatly, although I do not remember the specific stream this happened in and thus I cannot reference it. A great example of "vanishing" media, in Hayward (1997)'s terms.

narrative, not the logic of "life". The streamer is sick? There must be some meaning behind it. Not streaming a specific game? They must hate the developer. This combined effect of a pseudo-narrative experience (getting to learn about someone's life in recurring, regular intervals) and parasociality, creates, in effect, a perennial experience where the author and the actor are the same person (similar to the Reality TV mentioned in section 4.4), just on a much more personal and long-term scale. There is no direct *authorship* happening—no planned intentionality of a narrative outside "what happens in my life"—yet nevertheless, the audience treats it as such.

The sense of community, belonging, ritual, and mythology of streaming is all the same as the perennial experiences we have discussed. I mention this, especially, because content creator culture is *everywhere* and *in everything* today. Twitch is, relatively, a minor platform in this space, when you consider the totality of other platforms like YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook, which combined had a total consumption of over 400 million hours watched in the U.S. alone in 2024 (Ball, 2025). Understanding that these are platforms that enable (and encourage) creators to function on a narrative, perennial logic, despite not being designed for that, is insightful to understand how it evolves. This is even more true when we begin to see "streamer communities" form, see various streamers interact, as they inevitably work together, form friendships and collaborate on each others "content". The "drama"⁶ this creates, as streamers both accentuate and proliferate their own myths and the myths of others (as it is indeed "good

⁶Here meant in the internet sense. For the uninitiated, this is a complicated term that can mean an actual dramatic incident (e.g. someone is in trouble due to something they have done) yet can also be meant ironically, as disagreements between influencers is often ballooned out of proportion, due to these same narrative effects.

content") is directly narrative in nature. Influencers also create and rely on a myth they participate in building around themselves. Following a streamer is often aspirational, or at least the person espouses virtues or values that resonate with their audience, and the audience participates in helping flourish what they want to see. Maintaining this myth is vital to an influencer's continued existence, and, as it is their job, their financial stability. The trade of mystery to familiarity works different here: The familiarity is more a goal in an influencer community than mystery (as often the desired experience in following an influencer is the feeling of a known, valued person to look up to or hang out with). Streaming and influencer culture is also *parasitic*—it relies on other media, properties, or experiences to function—be they game streamers, travel bloggers, fashion influencers, etc. Yet surprise and mystery is just as important in maintaining interest. We often see the push towards mystery from the streamers themselves, who get tired or burnt out performing the same way over and over. It is they who desire mystery, and the audience whose incessant need for familiarity they fight against. Grayson (2025) also highlights how dependent streamers are on the platform(s) they operate on, and yet simultaneously how they constantly push the boundaries of what that platform allows and is capable of. Twitch has countless times been pressured to adjusting its rules based on a new trend on their platform, as streamers find ways to circumvent, subvert, or break their rules.

This is all to show the power of the perennial lens, and how versatile it is in understanding modern culture. Understanding the production of perennial myth helps us understand why communities form around experiences, why those experiences

flourish and why they falter. It helps us see why we stay in places that seem toxic. It helps inform us why people gather around "meaningless" experiences and why they mean so much to us. It helps inform us how we have not escaped the pull of magic and how deeply we seek it. It helps us understand the challenges we are actually facing when building a community around an experience, the mythologization we are fighting. And ultimately, it helps us understand why we humans like telling stories over and over and over again, why we like playing with those stories, and why we cannot but help ourselves to do so.

This is important for building communities. Understanding that what you are making is an inherently insidious product allows you to push back against those tendencies where they are most toxic. Understanding the trade of mystery to familiarity allows you as a creator to understand why and how the community is always asking for more—and what they are really asking for. This will help creators appreciate the oscillations of the lifecycle (chapter 20), the allure of fiction (section 12.2), the importance of ritual (chapter 14), the design patterns of repetition and narrative (chapter 11), and at the same time understand all the challenges of working within these restrictions (section 20.6). Ultimately, understanding that you are creating an experience that is about communally trading mystery for familiarity allows you to build better communities, regardless of your field, medium, area, or platform.

One of the great powers of the perennial form is that it can arise anywhere. I do sincerely believe that there is not a single person who has not engaged with some form of perennial experience in their life. It is not relegated to one medium or another,

it is not limited by format, genre, or conventional storytelling practice. As long as a series of events (a story) occur within or for a community over time (temporally continuous) without obvious end (perpetual), with some degree of authorship and audience interaction of a simultaneous object (universal chronicle), you have a perennial experience. It can form abruptly, spontaneously, without a plan or expectation, like a plant bursting through concrete. People will start taking care of the plant, and the people who own the concrete and thus the plant notice this and encourage its growth, telling more stories which resonate with the audience. Before you know it, you have a garden, and before you know it, people depend on its continued existence for their own sense of self, identity, and belonging. And so you continue, the garden flourishes, and you need to charge an entry fee to pay landscapers to maintain it. The garden changes and stays the same and the people who stay in it grow dissatisfied. You change it too much and people grow dissatisfied. You change it too little, and people grow dissatisfied. And the more times you do this, the less it works, and the more you have to counteract the fact that everyone knows what the garden is and how safe they feel in it. Eventually, those inside grow to be a part of the garden, fixtures in the same way the plants are, and others, including the gardeners, rely on their existence. As they develop more and more history together, the garden grows insular, turning inside itself and begins to seem less inviting for outsiders, who become more and more troublesome to accommodate for those inside. The garden perhaps thrives still, on its community, yet to grow further it needs to change. Perpetually, it needs to change and stay the same.

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