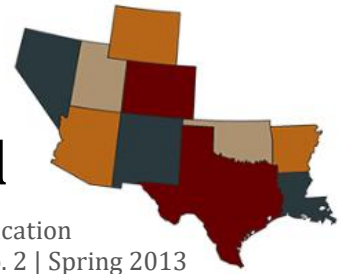


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Virtual Vision: Applying Cultural and Critical Theory to Video Game Aesthetics in Lollipop Chainsaw

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This essay contends that video games are multifaceted in nature and can be understood and analyzed from various critical and cultural approaches. Most video game studies are focused on effects and do not take into account the aesthetic and interactive appeals of games. The increased multimedia capabilities of contemporary games provide new opportunities for interactivity, audiovisual fidelity and creativity, and auteurs that can establish distinctive creative signatures. Through analysis of critical and cultural literature, three main areas of critical and cultural inquiry are identified - perspective and the degree to which players can control the visual aspects of a game, the nature of player characters and how players can identify with and interact with them, and the ways in which the game appropriates and reflects creative culture and social issues. The common thread of player interactivity and control is identified in all three perspectives and noted as a vital component of game analysis. This approach is illustrated through critical and cultural analysis of the game Lollipop Chainsaw, a recent action game from a noted video game creator that utilizes repurposed cultural content and has been the center of debate and discussion due to the sexualized portrayal of its lead character. The paper offers implications for applying critical and cultural studies and theory to interactive media and gaming. The study of games must take into account the degree of control and interactivity the player has and how that control manifests within the game, as this is a unique element of games that is intertwined with the aforementioned critical approaches. In doing so, the paper attempts to reconcile the ongoing discussion between pure ludologists and pure narratologists in the study of games.

Keywords: video games, critical studies, cultural studies

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Virtual Vision: Applying Cultural and Critical Theory to Video Game Aesthetics in *Lollipop Chainsaw*

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Abstract

This essay contends that video games are multifaceted in nature and can be understood and analyzed from various critical and cultural approaches. Most video game studies are focused on effects and do not take into account the aesthetic and interactive appeals of games. The increased multimedia capabilities of contemporary games provide new opportunities for interactivity, audiovisual fidelity and creativity, and auteurs that can establish distinctive creative signatures. Through analysis of critical and cultural literature, three main areas of critical and cultural inquiry are identified - perspective and the degree to which players can control the visual aspects of a game, the nature of player characters and how players can identify with and interact with them, and the ways in which the game appropriates and reflects creative culture and social issues.

The common thread of player interactivity and control is identified in all three perspectives and noted as a vital component of game analysis. This approach is illustrated through critical and cultural analysis of the game *Lollipop Chainsaw*, a recent action game from a noted video game creator that utilizes repurposed cultural content and has been the center of debate and discussion due to the sexualized portrayal of its lead character. The paper offers implications for applying critical and cultural studies and theory to interactive media and gaming. The study of games must take into account the degree of control and interactivity the player has and how that control manifests within the game, as this is a unique element of games that is intertwined with the aforementioned critical approaches. In doing so, the paper attempts to reconcile the ongoing discussion between pure ludologists and pure narratologists in the study of games.

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Virtual Vision: Applying Cultural and Critical Theory to Video Game Aesthetics in *Lollipop Chainsaw*

Critical approaches to video games often focus on the effects games have on the individual on the psychological or behavioral level. While such studies can be useful for discussing the influences of the medium on society, comparatively little work has taken a critical eye at the aesthetic and interactive appeals of games. Jenkins (2007) suggests that video games have been consigned to a lower status among critical scholars despite their significant gains in narratives and aesthetics. Far from the primitive audiovisual presentations of older generations of games, contemporary games bring with them new levels of immersion and multimedia fidelity as well as interactive elements that set them apart from film, television, and other forms of entertainment. Moreover, games are uniquely catered to the current time-shifted, user-focused media landscape, as they rely directly on user control and autonomy. These elements demand a new approach couched in classical critical and cultural literature. Much of contemporary games research focuses on the effects of games on players or player motivations, yet comparatively little research examines the position of video games in the cultural landscape, leaving a significant gap in academic discourse. This paper suggests a holistic approach to the study of games to position future research into the interactions between players and games through a case study of one particular game and how it can be understood through a multimodal theoretical approach.

Based in the literature, there are a few primary conceptual areas that influence how a player connects with and interacts with a game. The first is the critical concept of vision, or the way that players look in on the game world. The second is the nature of the characters that the player controls to interact with the game world and the characteristics they represent. The third is the cultural perspective, both in terms of the way that games can potentially appropriate and reflect culture or act as a reflexive critique of culture. It is the contention of this paper that games not only can be but should be understood as multifaceted creative works via critical perspectives.

The Game

For the purposes of this essay, the game *Lollipop Chainsaw*, a 2012 release from Warner Bros. Interactive, was selected. The game puts players in the role of high school student Juliet Starling, a blonde cheerleader who is part of a family of monster hunters. The plot is moved forward when one of Juliet's classmates opens a portal between Earth and what the game refers to as "Rotten World", unleashing a plague of undead monsters upon Juliet's school and the surrounding area. In the ensuing chaos, Juliet's boyfriend Nick is bitten by a zombie; to save him, Juliet uses her magically-endowed chainsaw to sever his head and keep it alive on a clasp at her waist.

The player is tasked with guiding Juliet and Nick through a series of escalating challenges to defeat a quintet of undead demons themed after various forms of pop and rock music in order to seal the rift between the two dimensions. Juliet battles her enemies using the aforementioned chainsaw as well as her pom-poms and cheerleading moves, while Nick acts in a support role. Along the way, the player can also rescue Juliet's classmates from zombie attacks, upgrade her skills and combat abilities, and purchase new outfits in order to customize her appearance. The player succeeds after they have defeated every level in the game as well as the final boss, after which they receive one of two endings based on whether or not they rescued all of Juliet's classmates. For the purposes of this analysis, however, the mechanical characteristics of the game – the goals and rules of the game, etc. – are of secondary concern to the design and experiential aesthetics, though the two facets may affect each other. Perhaps the way in which aesthetics and design most closely align is the area of visuals.

The Question of Vision

Vision, for much of human history, has been held up as the "noblest sense", the source of empiricism and truth (Jay, 1993, p. 85). Similarly, vision has been a core component of the human experience and how we gather information about the outside world. Technologies such as cameras and

microscopes have been developed to augment and improve the visible field of humans as well as assign permanence and greater importance to fleeting moments (Haraway 1991; Jay, 1993; Sontag, 1977).

Vision has inextricably been linked to control and power throughout history, both in terms of its ability to define reality and also due to its significance as a source of authority over world around us (Starobinski, 1989). Vision, perhaps more than any other sense, endows the beholder with the ability to selectively exert authority and influence over the world around them.

Sontag (1977) famously wrote that photographers attempt both to transform "living beings into things" and "things into living beings" through photography (p. 98). Photography immortalizes a fleeting moment as a tangible, fixed object that can then be passed around and kept for posterity. This creates a situation in which these simulacrum become both desirable and realistic (Sontag, 1977). Turkle (1995) suggests a similar phenomenon occurs with computer mediated imagery, which serves to explain why virtual worlds can become more compelling than reality. Games and other forms of virtual environments essentially create worlds, people, and situations out of whole cloth with which the player can interact.

Perspective. Also influential in the way the player views the game world is the perspective from which the player-influenced action is viewed. The perspective in a game can tell analysts about not only what sort of game is being played but also the ways in which the player could interact with the environment (Taylor, 2002). Such perspectives can also influence narrative. A first-person perspective, in which the player's vantage point is through the eyes of their character, could potentially serve a more immersive role than that of a perspective outside the character.

Unlike many other visual forms, the off-screen space in games can often be just as important as what is happening on the screen. In a film, what happens out of frame does not in a tangible sense exist - it is visual information that has simply been left out, and does not have direct impact on the narrative or meaning of the visuals. In a video game, enemies, obstacles, and other events that require the player's attention may be congregating in the off-screen space (Nielsen et al., 2008). In *Lollipop*

Chainsaw, the player must not only be aware of where they are going but also what is going on behind Juliet or in a different part of the level, as adversaries could potentially sneak up on the player and attack. Video games complicate the critique of vision further - while Sontag, Jay, and other critics of vision insinuate a world beyond the image, the viewer is not obligated to compensate for that world. In a video game, the player is required to do so.

Lollipop Chainsaw, much like many other video games, places the player in a permanently fixed third-person perspective outside of the main character. In the game, the player is given a simulacrum of three-dimensional movement which rotates around the axis of the player character. The player is given free reign, using the right control stick on the gamepad, to rotate the camera around Juliet, and may settle the camera more or less where they deem it necessary. Unlike photography or film, the game does not limit the player to a flat, rectangular image similar to that described by Sontag (1977) and Jay (1993). However, the camera rotates around the character, making it impossible for the player to zoom the camera in on other areas of the game world or objects of interest.

To this end, the player's immersion in the game and their visual perspective is still limited to that which the game engine allows them to see. This, in turn, is projected on a screen with a finite dimensional shape and size. *Lollipop Chainsaw* is not unusual in this regard - technological requirements and design limitations inherently lead to such limitations. Effectively, the images presented by the game are more complex and higher-tech than photography. Yet, they are subject to greater layers of abstraction. When viewing a photograph, the eye gazes upon the image presented by the photograph, which was in turn influenced by the aesthetic eye of the original photographer. In the game, however, the player is subject not only to the aesthetic designs of the artist that created the game visuals, but also to the limitations of sight imposed by the graphics engine and the equipment through which they view the game. If, as Starobinski (1989) suggests, vision is linked to power and a superordinate positioning in the world, gamers may certainly have power but they must share it with the authors of the game.

The male gaze. Regardless of the position of the camera, Juliet as the character remains the focal point of the visible spectrum the character. The optimal playable view (so the player may see incoming enemies) is behind the character, giving the player ample view of the back side of her body. Such an angle would to the critical eye invoke Mulvey's (1975) notion of the male gaze, which suggests that in most cinema the camera takes on the perspective of a male viewer objectifying women in the scene as it is shot. The images created by the camera transform women into commoditized, exchangeable images that are compatible with a patriarchal system; this is problematic because such images can cause body image issues, stereotyping, and other negative mental issues among women (Calogero, 2004; Gervais, Vescio, & Allen, 2011; Sassatelli, 2011). Such a relationship is tied to an imbalance of power that is weighted toward males.

Mulvey suggests that the male takes a "role as the active one of forwarding the story", controlling the fantasy of the narrative through their goal as spectator (Mulvey, 1975, p. 12). In this analogy, the player takes on the role of the gazer, viewing the character of Juliet through the lens of the game and the camera positioning that frames her body in the shot. Doane (1982) explains through the example of early silent cinema that the nature of mediated visual images of women encouraged a sense of voyeurism and pleasure in the viewer by allowing them to feel as though they are getting away with seeing something otherwise unknown to their eyes; this instills a sense of power within the viewer. Oswald (2010) expands upon this by suggesting that the "object of desire in the image evokes an imaginary, psychic space - the space of the scene off-frame and the figure of the absent voyeur/camera" (p. 124). Through the camera, the male gaze organizes and controls the world it observes.

A similar relationship exists in the game world, but the camera is controlled more directly by the user and therefore changes the dynamics of the relationship between the viewer and the viewed. The player controls the camera, which acts itself as a formless figure that follows the heroine not unlike Oswald's conception of an absent voyeur. Unlike a film, where the viewer is limited by the visuals and

angles that the director chooses to show the audience at a given moment, the player is given some degree of freedom to influence what they see and toward what end. Doane (1982) would suggest that the game allows the player to engage in voyeurism, and possibly to a degree that is greater than silent film. It is no accident that the game offers players a reward in the form of an in-game achievement viewable on their online profile for positioning the camera to look up Juliet's skirt.

Moreover, because Juliet literally cannot function without involvement from the player, Mulvey's (1975) conceptualization of the male gaze moving the action forward is implemented to a stronger degree than it would be if the same player were passively viewing a film. In fact, because Juliet does not exist outside of the game world, she is expressly created to facilitate the gaze. The male gaze is not limited to sequences over which the player has direct control. It influences the game's cinematic sequences, which often emphasize Juliet's breasts, thighs, and buttocks, as well as the alternate costumes in the game which emphasize the same aspects of her body. The male gaze is facilitated at two levels - both by choices made by the game developers and by the actions of the players.

Therefore, critical analysis of games and the perception players have of what is going on within them cannot be limited to visual aesthetics alone. While visuals may often be influential and visceral in nature, they are only part of the equation. Even though the player may not necessarily have full authorial control over what they see, the visual element of the game is yet another dimension of the control the player has over the game. Critical analysis must focus also on the tangible activities the player engages in while playing and how the player negotiates with the game to create a sense of meaning. The choices afforded to the player must also be taken into account.

The Character On The Screen

Critical studies of video games and their relationships to players have long been interested in the question of how players interact with their onscreen personas. These personas fall into a number of different categories based on the degree to which the player has the ability to influence their

appearance and actions. Ultimately, this level of interactivity is what makes video games unique. Rather than simply watching the events of a story unfold, players have the opportunity to experience and in some cases influence the outcome of events in a game.

Defining characters. Game characters serve varying fundamental purposes at the design level. Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca (2008) conceptualize a semi-hierarchical system of four main dimensions of video game characters. *Stage* characters are part of the game world but the player generally cannot directly interact with them in a meaningful way; they tend to simply provide some manner of background decoration or to populate a world. When the character is given a function in the scope of the game design, they become *functional* characters. Functional characters may also be *cast* characters and play a role in the story of the game, though functionality is not a requirement. Finally, characters within the game directly controlled by the player are *player* characters. As the main character of *Lollipop Chainsaw*, Juliet fulfills the player character role, while Nick is best defined as a functional character.

Further distinctions can be made in terms of the authorial influence a player has over their character. Waggoner (2009) distinguishes between avatars, which can be more or less fully edited by the user in terms of their physical characteristics, back stories, and abilities, and agents, which can be controlled but not altered. To draw a starker contrast between the two, it is important to consider the origin of the term "avatar", which originates from a Hindu term referring to the incarnation of a god on the mortal plane (Hemp, 2006; Strayer, 2010). The implication is that the player acts as a deific figure that sculpts an intermediary to serve in their stead in the mortal plane of the virtual world.

Agents, on the other hand, may still be understood as the manifestation of the player in the virtual world but users have comparatively little agency in determining the character's appearance or how they operate. Rather than tailoring the character to their needs, the player may instead relate to the character by projecting certain emotions or perspectives onto them. Agent characters either tend to have firmly defined personalities or may have previously existed in other media. Other characters, like

Mario, are comparatively blank slates (Whitehead, 2011). The predetermined nature of the agent does not preclude identification or projection yet it does suggest a different relationship than a player would have with an avatar.

In the world of *Lollipop Chainsaw*, Juliet is best understood as an agent. While the player has a modicum of ability to personalize and change the character, the player's influence over the development of Juliet is limited to the purchase of special combat techniques and special costumes. The player is free to identify with Juliet and to connect with her, yet any actions taken by the character are predetermined in accordance with the narrative. Progression towards completion of the game mandates that the player must travel down a prescribed path; if the player does not wish to take a certain action, their only option is not to play. The player's agency in the game is primarily related to cosmetic enhancements, and the gameplay does not allow the player to change the outcome of predetermined story beats. The player can control Juliet, but the player cannot become Juliet.

Critical issues in gaming and virtual environments. As Turkle (1995) suggests, computers and the virtual spaces they provide often act as a means of reconciling an often-fragmented version of the self with relatively few consequences. Individual users will often craft separate identities within the context of the virtual world and use those identities to communicate with others, seek entertainment, and deal with real-world concerns (Turkle, 1995). There is reason to believe that games offer a uniquely powerful platform for realizing these goals, due to their focus on immediate, visible progression and feedback; games have often been used in educational and other non-entertainment contexts to more powerfully engage or persuade others for this reason (Bogost, 2007; McGonigal, 2011). Games are complex and can accomplish different goals through different processes.

The hedonic value of game play cannot be ignored, either. Vorderer, Klimmt, and Ritterfeld (2004) suggest that media users attempt to find experiences that are positive and stimulating. In this vein, Crawford (2012) suggests that if a player has an enjoyable and immersive experience, they are

more likely to engage with the game and interact with it on a higher level and in turn be influenced by the messages the game presents. Such a concept extends to characters and the way they are designed, as well – characters may even be redesigned for different markets to be more appealing (Roch, 2000). Therefore, a character that is aesthetically pleasing to the game's target audience is more likely to encourage enjoyment of the game. Juliet Starling's curvaceous appearance and limited amount of clothing were engineered to attract the attention of a certain demographic. While it is presumptuous to suggest that all *Lollipop Chainsaw* players would react the same way to the aesthetic design of Juliet, it is likely that her appearance and personality appeal to some segments of the audience. Even if the main character does not have agency to change her role in the storyline, the player at least has agency in deciding whether they wish to project onto this character and to what end.

Avatars. The distinction between avatars and agents has been previously discussed here but critical exploration of player interaction with game worlds merits additional exploration of the factors influencing how players represent themselves. These avatars become an important means through which individuals portray themselves and socialize online, causing attachment between the user and their avatar (McCreery, Krach, Schrader, & Boone, 2012). Trepte and Reincke (2010) suggest that players will attempt to create avatars that meet their needs for entertainment and representation. While avatars may be able to represent the malleable or "looking-glass self" described by Cooley (1968/1912, p. 90), the looking glass can be distorted in accordance with the aesthetic designs of the game developers (Robinson, 2007). In *Lollipop Chainsaw*, the player does not have the freedom to alter Juliet beyond her initial appearances, yet these same principles should apply.

The role of narrative and the auteur. Narrative plays a significant role in the critical analysis of any form of entertainment medium. Often, the way a medium tells a story is just as important if not more important than the elements of the story being told. Video games have historically strived to tell stories to varying degrees of success. Everything in the game, from the world in which the game takes

place to the rules and conflict introduced through gameplay, can be used in the service of creating an alternate world. Klastrup (2003) suggests that games are unique in that they have the potential of presenting not only fiction but acting as "performative" and "social spaces" built around the interaction between users and the world with which they are involved (p. 104). Carlquist (2002) identifies three main types of storytelling: out-of-game scenes in which the player does not have direct control of a character, in-game scenes where the player has some degree of interactivity with the scene, and external materials such as tie-in novels and merchandise. *Lollipop Chainsaw* has each of these forms of storytelling, with both cinematic sequences that further the plot where the player has no direct control, conversations between Juliet and Nick where the player is still in command, and collectable elements that provide back story and personality to the game's zombie enemies.

Dramatological critical approaches can likely be applied to the story at a root narrative level, though these characteristics may not also take into account the interactivity and player agency present in telling a story through a game. There is reason to suggest that an approach that takes into account player involvement (or the lack thereof) in shaping the storyline must be considered. Nardi (2010) suggests that virtual game worlds (in her case, *World of Warcraft*) act as a medium in which the player can tell their own story and showcase their own selves; at the same time, rules in the game world exist in order to guide players along the path and encourage particular experiences. Players follow these rules in order to interact with the world they see and the characters with which they come into contact, though these experiences may often be mediated by a process of production and authorship that is not unlike other forms of media (Kaneva, 2007). In effect, the narrative events of the story must work in concert with the framework of the game.

In such a paradigm, the game developers have authorial influence and some could in fact be considered auteurs with distinct stylistic characteristics. Auteur theory suggests that the director of a film or the chief force behind a creative work is responsible for the decisions made in its production and

the aesthetic characteristics it possesses; the film or creative work is essentially an outgrowth of the director or central figure (Menne, 2011). Several game creators have reached the level of respect and visibility in which their creative stamp can be seen on their projects, with some names even being used as part of branding and advertising efforts. *Lollipop Chainsaw* has been promoted as a project from Japanese developer Goichi Suda, better known by his pseudonym, Suda51. Shapiro (2012) identifies recurring themes in Suda51's games, such as masculinity and sexual imagery that may reflect underlying psychological issues, phallic references in the weaponry the characters wield, and meta-textual references to other games within the game itself. Such concepts echo throughout *Lollipop Chainsaw*.

Much like the protagonists in other Suda51 games such as *No More Heroes* and *Shadows of the Damned*, Juliet carries around a chainsaw that due to its prominence relative to the character and status as a primary means of interacting with the world could fit a psychoanalytic concept of phallic imagery. The character of Nick reflects socially-created equations of masculinity with strength and agency by lamenting that he should be the one to protect Juliet; he also grows increasingly frustrated with his lack of ability to influence the world around him – male characters generally are not denied this right – and asks that Juliet leave him in a mailbox to die. Writer Jim Sterling (2012) suggests that the "emasculatation" of Nick due to his lack of a body reflects how women are deprived of power and status in the media (Sterling, 2012). While it is unclear whether this was the designer's intention, the dialogue in the game suggests that the player is meant to empathize with Nick as he becomes increasingly despondent.

It is clear that *Lollipop Chainsaw* eschews traditional gender roles, granting most of the agency and power in the game to female leads. Juliet is far from a standard damsel in distress – rather, she is the driver of the plot and ultimately the savior of the day. This is a significant reversal from many game plots, which often feature women in need of rescue or who primarily serve support or background functions. Yet, the game still positions Juliet as an object of male desire that the player can dress and position in a manner they find appealing. The ludic elements of the game in many ways contradict the

narrative, and even within the narrative the idea of Juliet as a powerful agent is counterbalanced by jokes and images that emphasize her appeal as an object of sexual desire. This dissonance underscores the need for an analytical approach that considers game aesthetics on both the artistic and ludic levels.

Video games offer the player the ability to connect with a character in the narrative on a different level than they might if they were simply passively watching the character's activities unfold. Different kinds of characters may inspire different levels of connection, but most players attempt to seek out characters that provide enjoyment and opportunities for identification. However, the portrayal of these characters is still influenced by the aesthetic style of the game designers, and the rules and limitations of the game world influence how players navigate through the narrative and the environment. Moreover, these representations and how they are implemented in the game world can be influenced by auteurs. Yet this is only one part of the story - the cultural context of the game must also be taken into account.

Video Games As Cultural Mirror and Cultural Generator

Video games have the ability to convey meaning and signify information to the player, which Crawford (2012) contends qualifies them as a form of media. This meaning takes many different forms, from telling a story to critiquing sociopolitical issues - some games, such as *World Without Oil*, even allow players the opportunity to speculate about survival in a world without the resource and collaborate on plans to live independently (McGonigal, 2011). Even games focused on providing a hedonic form of entertainment, like *Lollipop Chainsaw*, still offer signs and associate meaning with those signs in order to evoke feelings and reactions in the player.

There is a long-standing tradition of homage, parody, and inspiration in various forms of media. Films, music, and novels draw upon influences and previous media creations to develop a *mélange* that is unique to the creator. Often, critical approaches to these works discuss how they have been influenced by what has come before - much has been written about the degree to which director

George Lucas was influenced by film serials and the works of Akira Kurosawa in the creation of the *Star Wars* films (Davies, 2008). Video games have both been influenced by what has come before and in turn influenced other forms of media. A cultural approach should examine these relationships.

Cultural studies have long examined media and communication in the contextual frame of where such things occur. Video games are no exception, as they often reflect real world sociocultural problems, racial issues, gender roles, and broader social ideologies and trends. Yet, because video games have long been considered a purely hedonic medium, their ability to reflect such issues has been largely ignored by the mainstream. The intellectual push toward postmodernism and its blurring or in some cases outright elimination of the barriers between high and low culture suggests that value can be found in all forms of media, further justifying the consideration of these issues in a critical framework.

Cultural appropriation. In his famous work *Remix*, Lawrence Lessig (2008) noted the rise of a new “remix culture” based around the appropriation and repurposing of creative content toward new ends. While Lessig used the term to refer to an online media culture built around the use of creative works to create memes, homages, and parodies of those works or altogether new works, forms of remix culture have been present in various kinds of media for many years. Hip-hop music samples other songs to create unique sounds, and television shows like *The Simpsons* use films like *Citizen Kane* as the foundation of jokes. Perhaps one of the most famous practitioners of remix culture in media is the director Quentin Tarantino, whose stylistic approach involves the appropriation of older and influential films into “mash-ups” and reinterpretations that bear his unique perspective (Rennett, 2012). Media often owes a debt to the culture that has come before it.

As Jenkins (2007) suggests, the increasing audiovisual fidelity and technical capabilities of video game hardware has allowed for more complex audiovisual landscapes and greater impetus for critical study. Modern games often utilize previously recorded songs, visual homage, and textual references to create pastiches that trigger certain emotional or psychological connections within the player. *Spec Ops:*

The Line, a recent military game, liberally references the film *Apocalypse Now* and its source novel *Heart of Darkness*, even naming a prominent character "John Konrad" in reference to the author of the novel (Suellentrop, 2012). Music is commonly used to establish settings and mood. The critically-acclaimed *Bioshock* used period music from Django Reinhardt and Bobby Darin to establish both mood and setting as players explored a ruined underwater city built in the 1950s; the calmness and optimism of the songs juxtaposed against the horrific situations the game provided (Hryb, 2007). The greater bandwidth afforded by new technology in turn allows games to utilize media content that they were unlikely to be able to utilize before.

Lollipop Chainsaw is rife with references to popular culture in its setting and aesthetics. Several of these cultural references pertain to the world of horror films. Juliet and Nick attend San Romero High School, so named in reference to acclaimed horror film director George Romero; later, a climactic battle takes place among the arcade machines and neon lights of the Fulci Fun Center, named for *Zombie* director Lucio Fulci (Gamefront Staff, 2012). The player can also access a special costume for Juliet that dresses her as the character Ash from the *Evil Dead* and *Army of Darkness* films, and in one scene Nick expresses his disdain for running zombies, echoing a contentious debate among horror aficionados (Gamefront Staff, 2012). Music is also tied heavily into the game. Each of the five main zombie villains is based on a different genre of music, from a heavy metal-influenced Viking zombie lord to a psychedelic counterculture-inspired enemy that uses psychotropic attacks against Juliet. When the player sends Juliet into a mode that increases her attack strength and speed, the Toni Basil song "Mickey" (which famously featured the lead singer and backup dancers in cheerleader uniforms in its video) begins to play (Ishaan, 2012). The music is often used to humorous or referential effect, drawing connections between events in the game and existing schematic circumstances possessed by the player.

The game wears its influences on its sleeve and in doing so illustrates the power of games to offer new life to certain forms of pop culture messages and in doing so assign them new meaning. As

Barkow, O'Gorman, and Rendell (2012) suggest, popular culture may affect or supplant other forms of cultural transmission. It seems reasonable to expect that a pop culture artifact such as a game can change or form the mental association a player has with a piece of culture – some players may first come to know a piece of music or the name of a film director first through this game. In this way, a game, just like any other media, can influence the user's understanding of the cultural landscape.

Sociocultural commentary and reflection. While games are still in their infancy in terms of representing sociocultural issues, researchers and social critics are beginning to pay attention. Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory (2009) significantly stated in their "virtual census" of the video game industry that games echoed other forms of media in terms of the way they represented race and gender; namely, white males made up a disproportionate amount of the characters represented in the games sold while female and minority characters took a backseat. Leonard (2004) noted the growth in popularity of military video games after 9/11 and suggested this popularity was symptomatic of a further-reaching militarization of society and served to marginalize the human costs of war. These are a fraction of the issues that are raised by games. Sanford and Madill (2006) problematize the issue of player interaction with video games by suggesting that players tend not to critically reflect on the content of games, rather focusing on the skills necessary to complete objectives. Players are provided with a particular worldview and approach when they play a game, and they may not consume it critically.

While *Lollipop Chainsaw* is presented in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, it has inspired some in-depth analysis of its themes. Sterling (2012), as described above, views the game as a reflective critique of the objectification of women in media. Other writers suggest that Juliet's heavily sexualized portrayal and the stereotypically feminine explosions of rainbows and hearts that accompany Juliet's slashing through enemies position *Lollipop Chainsaw* as a "commentary, almost to the level of pure parody, on women in video games" (Sims, 2012). Feminist blogger Alex Cranz drew many of the same conclusions and had a

positive overall reaction to the game, yet pointed out that Juliet "is not the kind of woman most women could or would ever empathize with or desire to emulate", calling her a "thirteen year old boy's idea of the perfect woman" (Cranz, 2012). While these approaches illustrate the critical approach that can be taken toward games, there is an issue that they do not address - the question of player control.

In *Lollipop Chainsaw* and most other games, regardless of the degree of freedom the player is offered to customize their character and their experience, there is still a set path that must be followed in order to achieve an end goal. The player is ultimately limited in what they can do; short of breaking the coding and structure of the game via hacking or modifications, there is a finite amount of interactivity and autonomy to be had. The player must ultimately accept the rules of the game in order to play it. This means that the player is subject to the whims of the designers and authorial forces behind the game, and in order to achieve their goals and advance the narrative the player must simply accept the situation in which they find themselves and follow the path.

In *Lollipop Chainsaw*, Juliet cannot respond to classmates who comment on her breasts or appearance after she rescues them; she must simply rescue the individuals and be rewarded by verbal harassment. Nor can the player attempt to challenge these statements or reframe them in context of what they have done for the character. They simply are there, and must be endured as any other obstacle. The player may choose not to rescue these characters, but not doing so leads to a negative ending and outcome. Even in games like *Mass Effect* where the player has the opportunity to make decisions, the decisions offered are still limited by the scope of the game design. Therefore, gamers are subject to the ideological perspective of the game creators and the societal context in which the game is developed just as in any other form of media.

The Case For Comprehensive Critical Study of Games

Having analyzed three main content areas in which critical and cultural approaches can be used to analyze video games and applying them to the particular example of *Lollipop Chainsaw*, the

importance of taking critical and cultural approaches to the study of games has been underscored. Much of the work done in the field of game studies focuses on games either in terms of their effects on players or their utility in achieving desired communication outcomes, yet not enough work has been done analyzing games on a critical level in terms of the situations they present and the way that players interact with them. In other words, too many game studies focus on the effects rather than the aesthetics of games.

This is problematic because it ignores a potentially viable area of critical inquiry. Video games offer unique potential for communication of ideas in a variety of fields and disciplines and can be useful for developing important skills for education and everyday life (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009). Likewise, the impact that assuming virtual identities and personas as described by Turkle (1995) has on Haraway's (1991) conception of the cyborg self - specifically, the ability to bridge the gap between socially defined expectations and internalized understandings of individuality by creating personas that are either more or less in line with social expectations - implies a potentially rich vein of critical cultural study. Games can be used in a variety of different contexts for a variety of different reasons, and their ability to meet these needs is tied at a root level to their aesthetic capabilities. If a game is not welcoming or engaging, it is difficult to use it for any other reason.

Therefore, this essay argues that games must be considered in terms of what they offer to the player as well as the effects they have on the player. Three main areas have been identified in this essay. The first is the concept of vision and how visual characteristics influence player engagement and involvement with the game and how having even some control over what is seen and when influences the degree of control a player has. User-controlled vision inherently affects the relationship the player has with the world behind the screen; how the world is simulated or evoked can potentially influence the relationship as well. McGonigal (2011) states that video games have been shown to influence feelings of agency and competency among players, and the degree of control they have over their

environment and the perspective they take in viewing it could do the same. Yet at the same time what that vision focuses on and for how long could be potentially deleterious or objectifying.

The degree to which the player can shape the character they use to interact with the game world, whether at a visual level or through the course of actions taken by the character, can also influence the systems of meaning negotiated between the player and the game. Players may feel more comfortable or engaged in games where they identify with the main character or in games where the character aligns more comfortably with their value system and worldview. Games are also shaped by the people and organizations that create them, which are in turn shaped and modified by the culture of which they are a part. Players have some degree of control and authority over a game, yet they are still influenced by the authority of the game designer and must ultimately on some level compromise with the creators in order to progress through the game. Video games are by nature multifaceted, video game studies must be multifaceted as well.

From a methodological standpoint, applying these theories to other mainstream games should be relatively simple. Considering that these theories are largely connected to the textual nature of the game, any attempt to apply them should come not at the player level (though using player experiences as a source of triangulation could be valuable for longer-form studies) but rather at the level of textual and rhetorical analysis of the games themselves. For example, one might take an auto-ethnographic approach to analyzing not only the elements presented to the player in terms of the characters, music, and story but also how the player reacts to them. Consalvo and Dutton (2006) suggest that there is value in studying the systems of the game, including how the menus, controls, and options available to the player facilitate their progress through the game – the actions the player undertakes and how these actions are reflected in the game world create the rhetorical discourse that Bogost (2007) and others refer to. It is perhaps most useful to consider critical and cultural theory as a starting point and source of analysis for genuine interaction with a game, as Harper (2011) suggests that this interaction is the

source of genuine rhetorical and textual analysis. By comparing the aesthetic and narrative elements of the game to its ludic elements, a more comprehensive picture of the game's place in the broader culture can be provided.

If there is a recurring theme through these three elements, it is that they are all related on some level to the question of control and interactivity. This is crucial, as this aspect of games sets them apart from other forms of media. Traditional forms of cultural, dramatic and aesthetic criticism can certainly still be applied to games, and to very powerful ends. Yet comprehensive game studies must inherently take into account the effect of player involvement and engagement. While the audience for a film or television program still interacts with and reads the media text to derive meaning and enjoyment, they do not enact direct influence over what they see. Jesper Juul (2005) points out that video games are unique in combining a set of rules and actions with a world that the player can investigate and use to tell stories, though he is careful to note that games and narratives are complementary, not interchangeable terms. Even in the most narrowly-focused, linear video game, the player still has a hand in reaching the outcome, and players can often create systems of meaning that make sense of the game world (Consalvo, 2003). In game studies, the conflict between ludologists (who focus primarily on the rules and interactive elements of the game) and narratologists (who look at the aesthetic and story components of the game) has ended in a more or less hybridization of the two perspectives where both elements are considered important to understanding (Nielsen et al., 2008). This essay contends that comprehensive analysis of games must adhere to this perspective and has offered a potential model that satisfies both perspectives.

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