

**The Allure of Choice:
Agency and Worldbuilding in Branching-Path, Transmedia Universes**

by

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SUBMITTED TO THE PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES/WRITING IN
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES
AT THE
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

June 2017

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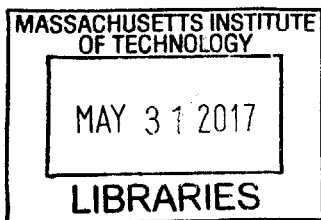
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Submitted to the Department of Comparative Media Studies/Writing
on May 11, 2017 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Comparative Media Studies.

Abstract

Agency is often taken as a given in branching-path stories because they, almost by definition, allow for enhanced user involvement. But this truism hasn't changed as the structure of the worlds that these branching texts exist within have. Transmedia, branching-path texts represent an intersection of both linear media and forking ones and thus, an interesting case study of how player agency can be expanded and re-categorized in these larger universe. By looking at where and how agency is located in three different case studies, we can get a better sense of how agency is changing—and staying the same—in these multi-platform, player-driven worlds.

The first chapter in this thesis looks at the intersection of worldbuilding and transmedia and where player agency can hope to fit between these traditions. The second focuses on the *Game of Thrones* universe, looking to understand the effects that adding the branching-path Telltale game had on this universe. The third chapter looks to *Mass Effect* and all its related media in an effort to understand how an undefined hero ties the whole universe together. The fourth chapter focuses on *Quantum Break*, and its groundbreaking, wholly integrated, transmedia structure. The final chapter discusses steps creators in the future can take to expand player agency. By looking at these worlds through an increased understanding of where the player fits in, it becomes clearer how these universes can be expanded in the future while still giving the player the most autonomy over their story.

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Acknowledgments:

So many people to acknowledge; so little time.

I'll start where I did, with my family. Thanks to my dad whose love of science fiction and fantasy inspired my own. To my sister Chloe whose Sonic play sessions were my introduction to video games. To my brothers Brandon and Ariel who taught me how recognize a story in its most compacted form: a joke. And to my mom, the thread that ties my family together, and the person who I wouldn't be a reader or writer without.

Thanks to my friends from home—you know who you are—who are as much nerds as I am even if they won't admit it. Who are always down to talk about The MCU, *The Wire* or any story for hours at a time. They will probably never see this, but it doesn't matter.

Thanks to my former PBS colleagues who helped me move gradually towards MIT—a special shout out to Kelly who told me about this program and helped me during the application process. And thanks to the wonderful BioWare Austin writing staff who took me in for a summer and taught me how to write for someone other than myself.

Thanks to the CMS grad kids '16, '17 and '18. I literally wouldn't have made it through this without you. A special shout out to Josh and Katie who I wouldn't have made it through Tang without and to Sue and my other Strangest Things' worldbuilders.

Thanks to Junot who truly, truly taught me what worldbuilding is. And thanks to Mikael who provided me with feedback constantly and often at random intervals.

And finally thanks to Kate. For getting me through the ups and downs and for putting up with the constant flux of my life.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Agency at the Intersection of Branching Paths and Transmedia	6
<i>Case Studies</i>	9
Chapter 1: Histories and Theories of Branching Narrative, Transmedia and Worldbuilding	17
<i>Worldbuilding: Completeness and Consistency</i>	17
<i>Transmedia Storytelling: Close Reading Across Media</i>	24
<i>Branching-Path Narratives: Agency and Authority</i>	28
Chapter 2: <i>Game of Thrones</i> and the Impact of Branching Narratives	33
<i>Agency and its Affects on Representation</i>	34
<i>Order of Publication and Player Autonomy</i>	41
<i>From Watcher (on the Wall) to Player</i>	44
Chapter 3: <i>Mass Effect</i>'s Transmedial Choices	46
<i>Morality as Choice</i>	49
<i>The (Mis)Uses of Linear Media</i>	57
<i>The Strength of Shepard's Absence</i>	63
Chapter 4: <i>Quantum Break</i> and its Uncommon, Common Use of Transmedia	66
<i>Jack Joyce's Lack of Agency</i>	70
<i>The Familiar Transmedia Structure of Quantum Break's Branching Paths</i>	74
<i>Consistency and Completeness at the Unnecessary Cost of Agency</i>	76
Conclusion: A Step Closer to Authorship	79
<i>Allowing Players to Impact Multiple Types of Media</i>	80
<i>Publication Order and Time with Medium</i>	81
<i>The Importance of Thematic Cohesion</i>	84
<i>The Underlying Structure of the Universe</i>	85
<i>Final Thoughts</i>	86
Works Cited	88
Images Cited	91

Introduction: Agency at the Intersection of Branching Paths and Transmedia

About two years ago, many players booted up the first episode of the Telltale *Game of Thrones* video game in an effort to advance the story of House Forrester—a lesser, northern house once devoted to the Starks, the central lordly family of the HBO television show of the same name. Assuming control of the family's eldest daughter, Mira Forrester, the player was tasked with making alliances in the royal capital, King's Landing. The capital of Westeros is a miserable city known for backstabbing and political infighting, and Mira resides there alone in the royal court, cut off from nearly all support. In this court, Mira has been able to make fleeting alliances and friends but has learned quickly that she has no true allies to call upon. That is until an offer from the noble Tyrion arises. Like a knight from on high, one of the show's most sympathetic characters offers her a pact that could save her from his sister, the villainous Queen Cersei. In acceptance for the Forrester's supply of a valuable northern commodity, Tyrion promises to shield Mira from Cersei. And just like that the player is offered a potential out from her dire situation and the ability to help her family at the same time.

Or so it should be. Of course, the only problem with this potential *savoir* is that he has already been bested by Cersei—at least to those who are caught up on the television show. Let me explain. The video game is meant to run concurrent with the events of the fourth season of the television show, but by the time the video game was released an informed audience will have already seen Tyrion's imprisonment at the hands of his sister in the television show. Thus, the player is now left with a choice between siding with Tyrion or his sister that is muddled by the effects of linear texts in the same universe. In this way, a game that is thought to provide player autonomy simply by giving them choices, is actually much more constrained thanks to the larger universe surrounding it.

As branching-path, transmedia fictional universes become increasingly prevalent, moments where player agency is either conscripted or completely taken away in order to conform to the larger universe will only become more prevalent. Despite the growing occurrence of transmedia storytelling, this type of interaction has yet to be discussed in any academic forum. There are plenty of works that discuss transmedia universes and some that even examine the incorporation of video games in these universes, but even the latter only focus on “interactivation,” the way in which the experience of controlling a character is different from watching, reading or otherwise viewing them (Wolf 260). And while interactivation is fascinating, it is still concerned with two linear forms of storytelling rather than the intersection of branching-path and linear texts. This crucially leaves out the way player agency functions in large, multi-media branching-path worlds.

In order to better understand how player agency can be increased in branching-path, transmedia universes, this thesis will consist of three close readings of these types of worlds. Universes with branching-path and linear texts were chosen because they perfectly represent the crucial contest between player autonomy and canonical conscription. These universes are the *Game of Thrones* universe, the *Mass Effect* universe, and the *Quantum Break* universe. These specific worlds have been selected because they all exist as different variants of universes that contain both branching-path and linear narratives: the *Game of Thrones* universe, a linear world to which branching-path narratives were added later; the *Mass Effect* universe, a universe built around branching-path narratives with linear works surrounding them; and the *Quantum Break* universe, a world where branching-path and linear texts are both foundational. Looking at these universes in this order will demonstrate how transmedia, branching-path universes have evolved

to become ever more agential, from isolated off-shoots of major media products to branching-path worlds with linear texts to, finally, integrally mixed-media universes.

For each of the specific universes I will play, watch, and read each piece of media that make up the larger universes looking at both the portion of the story that is being told in the text, as well as the way it fits into the larger universe. Close reading is a method of textual analysis that allows for an audience member to look at specific moments within texts in an effort to better understand the type of arguments that the text is putting forward. By understanding specific moments within the text, the practitioner gains a better understanding of not only the message at the heart of the text but also the way in which it formally functions. In an effort to understand the large, fictional universes here, I will be employing close reading to not only specific moments within each individual text, but across the fictional universes as a whole in order to gain an understanding of the function, shape and themes of large fictional universes. Accordingly, many of the most telling moments I will be focusing on will highlight not only how interactions occur across mediums but specific cases where branching-path texts intersect with linear texts—such as Tyrion’s untimely jailing mentioned earlier. By looking at these moments of tension, interaction and division, the audience can gain an understanding of the singular ways in which agency is given to—and taken away from—the player in these universes. Each of these universes are very specific and highlighting these variances will be useful for understanding the way in which branching and linear narratives exist simultaneously within them. Apart from having read, played and watched the media in these universes, I also gathered insight about how these texts function over the past summer during an internship as a writer at BioWare (the studio behind *Mass Effect*). During this time, I was able to gain firsthand awareness into how these worlds function which will be invaluable during my close readings.

Case Studies

The case studies I am focusing on all have unique relationships with how they handle agency in transmedia worlds. Each one is made up of various media elements arranged in their own specific order and fashion. I'll revisit these in more depth in later chapters, but looking at their structure now will help to make sense of not only how they function formally, but why they specifically have been chosen as simultaneously representative and unique case studies.

The *Game of Thrones* universe is my first case study as it is an exemplar of works that incorporate branching-path, transmedia storytelling but were not planned to function as such. Rather the foundational text at the heart of the *Game of Thrones* universe is a linear work—the HBO scripted drama television show of the same name which premiered on April 17th 2011. Based on the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series of fantasy novels, the show has grown into a juggernaut over its six season run becoming the most watched HBO television show of all time (Fienberg), winning more Primetime Emmys than any other scripted drama (Dockterman), and even purportedly increasing the popularity of the fantasy genre (Flood). The show focuses on the power struggles between several dynastic, ruling families in a faux-medieval European setting across two fictional continents, Westeros and Essos. Incorporating classic fantasy elements such as dragons, blood-magic and diminutive woodland creatures, the show features an astounding amount of worldbuilding with thousands of characters, hundreds of fictional locations and myriad plotlines.

While it was created originally to be a single show, the *Game of Thrones* universe does have deeply transmedia roots as it is an adaptation of an earlier work of literature. The original sequence of novels is an epic fantasy series by author George R. R. Martin, created in 1991 with

the publishing of the first novel, *A Game of Thrones*. The series now includes five books with at least two more planned for publication. These novels have been extraordinarily successful in their own right selling over 60 million copies and being published in over 45 languages and now include several prequel novels along with the main series (Alter). But as works of adaptive transmedia, the stories have had a remarkable second-life, inspiring a card game, tabletop role-playing game, several board and video games, a comic books series, and, of course, the immeasurably popular television series, *Game of Thrones* (“Works Based on *A Song of Ice and Fire*”). This constant level of transformation makes the lines between canon and adaption somewhat messy and thus, it is important that we distinguish which fictional universe the show occurs within. The original books, and prequel novels exist as a set of canonical works within the *A Song of Ice and Fire* mythos that are solely the province of George R. R. Martin. To this date he has stated that these books exist as “supreme canon” apart from any of the additional content or the show (Elio).

In much the same way, the television series’ two creators and showrunners, David Benioff and D. B. Weiss have acknowledged that the show has its own canon separate from the books (Ackerman), and this *Game of Thrones* universe will be the world that I will be focusing on here. The canonical works included in this universe are the flagship television show, the “Histories and Lore” animated segments—a series of one-hour animated videos included with each season of the show’s DVD release, which cover a broad range of in-world historical topics from the *Game of Thrones*’ mythos—and the branching-path Telltale video game. This Telltale *Game of Thrones* game consists of six, two-hour episodes, which were released throughout the fourth and fifth season of the show. While the video game was not originally planned until the show was fully formed, its inclusion has the potential to change the universe because of the two

additional forms of interaction that it grants the audience: the ability to both control a character and determine specific outcomes of the universe. This universe was selected above other similar universes because it represents an attempt at inserting an agential player into one of the most prominent, developing fictional worlds of all time. And many of its greatest strengths and weaknesses come from the way in which it respects and rejects the canon and themes of the show.

The *Mass Effect* universe, on the other hand, has always been planned as a branching-path work of transmedia. Launched in 2007 with the release of a prequel novel, *Mass Effect: Revelation* months ahead of the initial action-RPG *Mass Effect*, available originally only on the Xbox 360, this game has always had at its core the idea of cross-platform storytelling. This game, developed by critically acclaimed studio BioWare, takes place in the future with humanity as a relative newcomer to an established universe of other sentient species. Throughout the series' main trilogy, you play as Commander Shepherd, a rising space marshal of sorts who is tasked with investigating a threat to peace that (of course) turns out to be much more serious than originally thought. This franchise went on to spawn two more core games, *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, as well as two iOS games, four novels, nine comic story arcs, and one anime film over the next five years after the original game's release. Additionally, there is a soft reboot/relaunch of the series which was released March 21st, 2017 entitled *Mass Effect: Andromeda* that does not focus on Commander Shepard (this game will not be a part of my case study as it constitutes a new, unconnected story, rather than existing amongst the original universe). The initial trilogy has garnered dozens of awards and is recognized across the board as one of the defining experiences of the Xbox 360 generation (IGN).

With *Mass Effect*'s origin encompassing both linear and branching-path media, it is no surprise that virtually all of the linear media go to great lengths to avoid interfering with players' choices in the video games (though there are certain extreme actions possible in the games that are outright ignored). By placing an undefined hero at the center of the world, the *Mass Effect* universe has an interesting relationship with not only the branching-path texts which it is centered around, but also the canonical linear media that encompasses those core works. Having an undefined protagonist in the central role of a story is not unique to storytelling and in specific is a very common trope in many video game narratives. However, by having a singular, indeterminate avatar tie together an entire world of transmedia storytelling, the *Mass Effect* universe presents a truly unique attempt at combining linear and branching-path texts that has garnered both anger at attempts to recognize player choice (Clarkson) and organize a background canon (Makuch). Despite these complaints, the *Mass Effect* universe represents a paradigm of this type of world because it places an indeterminate hero at its core in the way that no other branching-path, transmedia world has—including other BioWare properties—and refuses to avoid that absence.

Finally, by far the most experimental universe I will be studying is the world of *Quantum Break*. This universe centers around time travel paradoxes that place the player in the role of Jack Joyce. First established in 2016 with the simultaneous release of the series' video game and television show, the *Quantum Break* universe is mostly comprised of these two elements which intertwine into one experience for the viewer/player. During each level, the player assumes the role Jack Joyce during his battle against the series' main antagonist, Paul Serene. At the end of each of these levels, the player switches to controlling Paul Serene and then makes a choice that will determine how the next live-action episode of television will play out. The series is

composed of four episodes of television as well as the five video game levels that effectively surround these live-action sections. Finally, the series also features a non-canonical tie-in novel released in conjunction with the game and television show known as *Quantum Break: Zero State*.

While nowhere near as impactful as the first two universes mentioned, *Quantum Break* represents a radical attempt to expand player agency in transmedia worlds. As an example of worldbuilding, *Quantum Break* is wholly unique in that its entire universe is branching in ways that transmedia worlds usually never accomplish. Of course, the complicated structure of this universe inherently asks the audience to assume the role of both player and viewer nearly simultaneously. This collapse between media is a unique experiment in both branching-path and transmedia worldbuilding and offers many clues as to the future of this medium and how these worlds can be built to respect player autonomy.

Ultimately, this thesis is an effort to better understand how agency actually functions in transmedia, branching-path worlds. Too often player autonomy is thought of as a given in branching-path video games because, by their very nature, they allow for player choice. This sort of narrow definition, while technically accurate, fails to take into account the multifaceted aspect of these worlds, limiting the storytelling potential of these types of fictional universes. Real agency in branching-path, transmedia worlds is the ability to make choices that have both a lasting effect and impact on the storyworld beyond just the player character's personal story arc that is being told in a single piece of media. Many examples of this sort of increased agency are visible throughout the *Mass Effect* series. One example is the player's ability in *Mass Effect 2* to determine if two of her squad mates from warring races, Tali and Legion, become friends. This choice doesn't just impact Shepard and her journey in *Mass Effect 2*—though it does do that—

but whether or not the two races these characters represent can coexist peacefully in *Mass Effect*

3. This example demonstrates real agency because it both impacts the wider universe and has lasting consequences beyond just Shepard's own personal story. In this instance, choice has ramifications beyond the narrow scope of the story and on the greater universe itself.

By looking at these types of universes through the lens of real agency, we will see that player influence functions in many ways, but when widened in scope it has the potential to not only increase engagement and create richer worlds, but expand representation in the process. Alternatively, when agency is narrowly confined, the byproduct is often cramped, isolated, and, occasionally, plain offensive storytelling. By focusing on the case studies within, we'll be able to see this demonstrated firsthand.

Chapter One of this thesis will look at the long history of worldbuilding, branching-path narratives and transmedia and the intersections of these three traditions. I will also focus on the approach needed to understand not only these traditions individually, but specifically how to comprehend them together. Looking at these histories in concert will give a sense of how these works I am investigating can best be analyzed.

In Chapter Two, I will look at the way in which the *Game of Thrones* universe incorporates a branching-path narrative. I will focus here on how a branching-path narrative can be added into a rigid system of a linear universe and how this incorporation can change the world. Additionally, I will investigate how canon subtly limits the ability to tell stories and the way in which the branching-path narrative works within these worlds to grant a modicum of player agency. Finally, I will look at the implications of bringing branching narratives into a fictional universe and whether this allows for an increased ability to intervene in overly narrow representation.

Chapter Three will focus on BioWare's *Mass Effect* universe. In this section, I will look at how a universe built for multiple narrative paths, varied protagonist representation, and deeply personalizable lore can hope to incorporate linear canonical works, and the affordances and losses that those works provide upon introduction. I'll also look at how this world goes to great lengths to respect player agency, while still not fully integrating its various elements.

In Chapter Four, I will look at the *Quantum Break* universe and the unique way in which the game/television show marries transmedia and branching-path and linear narratives at its core. Additionally, I will explore how this choice, while seemingly leading to more expansive agency, actually creates something more complicated. Finally, I'll pay special attention to the formal structure of the universe and the valuable lessons that this experiment in player autonomy can teach prospective worldbuilders.

My Conclusions Chapter will tie together the various lessons learned from studying these universes in an attempt to understand what about these case studies are successful, what should be replicated, and what should be jettisoned in forthcoming attempts. In short, I will look towards the future in how new universes can be created to allow for real player agency.

The idea of real agency comes from the simple fact that as a storytelling form, what makes branching-path narratives so distinct from their linear counterparts is that they give greater autonomy to the player in shaping the narrative they are temporarily inhabiting, allowing the player to see themselves as a (more) active participant in the storytelling. Thus when worldbuilding within universes that contain both linear and branching-path texts, it's important for creators to give active thought to how much space and power they are leaving users within fictional universes or else risk promising player agency only to take it away later.

If creators establish a world in which the player is given the ability to shape their own narrative, setting and hero, then they should think carefully about how linear works might remove these abilities in a search for either expansiveness or consistency. Much of what can be transgressive about branching-path narratives is that they give players the opportunity to create characters that align (more closely) with their own values, personality and identity. Take this away from a player through an established canon, and this loss of agency can be dislocating and demoralizing. This thesis is an effort to reexamine how agency is seen in branching-path video games and update it for transmedia worlds. And, of course, to look for new ways in which to expand it.

Chapter 1: Histories and Theories of Branching Narrative, Transmedia and Worldbuilding

Before diving into close readings, it is best to explore the history of the three major traditions of storytelling that my case studies exist between. There are many different tools that storytellers can use in the construction of fictional works and worlds but branching narratives, worldbuilding, and transmedia are all key to understanding how agency works in multi-platform, player-driven storyworlds. Worldbuilding and transmedia are intricately linked: both focus on the creation of worlds for interactors to experience. This construction must be understood before one can begin to grasp the player's place within them. Branching narrative creation on the other hand is more obviously tied to agency in that it places a very specific type of discretion in the hands of the interactor: the ability to choose multiple pathways of experiencing a story. When combined, these traditions highlight the creation of large worlds wherein players can not only have an active hand in deciding how specific storylines develop, but should be able to shape the very world itself.

This is by no means meant to be a full history of the traditions of branching-path narratives, transmedia and worldbuilding, but instead highlights examples of the works that precede the fictional universes I will be investigating. By learning the history of these traditions we will begin to understand not only how player agency has developed over time but also gain insight into where it is located in the case studies I focus on.

Worldbuilding: Completeness and Consistency

Worldbuilding as a theoretical framework is key to how these fictional universes must be understood, but while there has been much discussion of worldbuilding in contemporary times, the formal study of it dates back to J. R. R. Tolkien's essay, "On Fairy Stories." In this treatise,

Tolkien lays out many of the building blocks for understanding the act of worldbuilding such as the concepts of “sub-creation,” “secondary worlds” and “secondary belief.” The term secondary world comes from its relation to our “real” or Primary World. Thus a storyteller becomes a subcreator or builder of worlds when they

[make] a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (12)

In this section, Tolkien is making clear that a seemingly real world can only arise from skilled creators who inspire secondary belief, which is not a willful suspension of belief but is instead a state that the reader enters when the secondary world adheres to an “inner consistency of reality” (15).

This thread of inner consistency is picked up on by Mark J. P. Wolf in his 2012 primer on worldbuilding, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. In this work, Wolf expands upon what it takes to create an “inner consistency of reality,” delineating the three components of worldbuilding that outline whether a fictional universe is successfully built. The first of these components is Invention or “the degree to which default assumptions based on the Primary World have been changed, regarding such things as geography, history, language...” (34). Invention is perhaps the most vital component of creating a fictional world because without invention the world would simply be our everyday existence, or as Tolkien refers to it, the Primary World. The three works that I will be investigating are firmly set in the speculative fiction meta-genre and have a substantial degree of invention. And while their transmedia and

branching-path variations do allow greater room for exploration of invention, the combination of these two narrative formats does not inherently present any additional affordances or challenges.

The second of these three components of worldbuilding is completeness or “the degree to which the world contains explanations and details... which together suggest a feasible, practical world” (38). Completeness is the level of detail that is presented to the user of a fictional world, which when done successfully induce within the user of the world a feeling that the world is as fleshed out as our own existence. Completeness can help induce secondary belief in the reader through the level of detail in the world. The transmedia, branching-path universes which I will be exploring have a unique relationship with completeness. Transmedia storytelling, by its very nature allows for deeper exploration of a universe, giving the user additional outlets through which the narrative can manifest. Similarly, a branching-path narrative allows for an increased amount of exploration with its multiple pathways that let the user see how the universe responds to specific choices. However, completeness in linear narratives, by sticking to a rigid canon, can conflict with the type of completeness offered by branching paths, limiting real player autonomy to shape a world.

Finally, the last term which will be incredibly important to my work is Wolf’s idea of consistency or “the degree to which world details are plausible, feasible and without contradiction” (43). Consistency then is a subcreator’s attempt at making sure that details in the world are not only properly explained but also that they do not conflict with one another. The difficulty with maintaining consistency is directly related to the size of the world—the more moving parts a fictional universe contains, the more difficult it is to keep conflicts among these facets from arising. The difficulty with maintaining consistency in branching-path, transmedia universes is directly related to the way in which these two formats allow for enhanced

completeness. While these two narrative techniques provide new levels of exploration, this can explicitly come at the cost consistency within the universe. Linear texts in these worlds often present one canonical, or accepted, version of events, while branching-path texts offer the opportunity for diverging, player-created canons. These two types of storytelling thus have three options in terms of matching up with the player's choices: conflicting, aligning or eliding. In this way the affordances offered by both transmedia and branching-path literature can come into direct odds. This duality of completeness vs consistency is one of the cornerstones of my thesis. And while the complications that branching-path transmedia introduce are something new, the history of the struggle between completeness and consistency is very old.

Worldbuilding has a long and varied history, as old as storytelling itself. Its history is far too broad to be captured in a single chapter, let alone a part of a chapter. But rather than try to outline the entire history of worldbuilding, I will focus on the knowing creation of fictional universes that strive to attain both a high degree of completeness and consistency through multiple works authored by a single author or collective body. These types of works are the most explicit precursors to branching-path, transmedia universes and often include moments of tension between consistency and completeness. How these conflicts were solved will serve as important grounding to how player agency can exist in my case studies.

While many religious and mythological traditions were in their own way obsessive about the continuity of their stories—that is after all where the word canon derives from—one of the most overlooked early examples of expansive worldbuilding by a single figure or body is L. Frank Baum's *Oz* series, which during the span of time he worked on the series from 1900-1919, included 14 books, comics, stage adaptations and a film (118). Part of what is interesting about this world is that while Baum may have created it as an author, he eventually became a

subcreator as the series continued, increasingly interested in making sure that the universe had a coherent storyline. As Michael Riley points out in his history of the series, *Oz and Beyond: The Fantasy World of L. Frank Baum*,

One Important way in which Baum modified Oz to accommodate more stories is evident in *The Patchwork Girl*: he restored to Oz the sense of cast size that exists in *The Wizard*...

The sense of space was necessary for the modification that Baum made to enable a seeming paradise to include the necessary obstacles and struggle that would generate plots. (176-177)

Here we see Baum actively at work in an effort to modify the world he has created in order to allow for the creation of additional works and expansion of the universe. It is an early example of a subcreator working to change the world he has already created in order to allow for it to grow; consistency is explicitly being diminished in order to allow for greater completeness.

Another example of early worldbuilding where the interplay of completeness at the cost of consistency occurs is in J. R. R. Tolkien's celebrated series, *The Lord of the Rings*. Much has been written about *The Lord of the Rings* and how it forever changed not only literature but the art of worldbuilding. The size and scope of Tolkien's world is astonishing and the vastness that we get a glimpse of through the series is truly breathtaking. But while this work is unquestionably one of the greatest works of worldbuilding artfully and methodically planned out, even Tolkien was forced to alter his original work in order for it to line up with his later efforts. Tolkien famously retconned, or "[altered] established facts in earlier works in order to make them consistent with later ones" (Wolf 380) when he changed the history of the One Ring in *The Hobbit*. In this revision, Tolkien made the character who originally possessed the One Ring,

Gollum, much more reluctant to give it up, thus, making the corrupting ability of the Ring consistent with *The Lord of the Rings*. The effect of this alteration is that the expansion of Middle-Earth now more clearly aligned with the version of it that was presented in *The Hobbit*. If Tolkien had not made this change, those reading *The Lord of the Rings* would be left with two different versions of the character Gollum—and possibly the corruptive power of the One Ring. It's important to note that Tolkien could have solved this problem in a number of ways—such as having past ring-bearers become more obsessed with the One Ring only after being separated from it for a significant time. But rather than do this, he chose to actively go back and alter a pre-existing work. This example demonstrates that Tolkien's efforts to expand the world via *The Lord of the Rings* came directly into conflict with a pre-existing version of his world. In this way, the competition between expansion and consistency are considerations that even the most gifted of worldbuilders must reckon with.

Finally, while the first two examples of worldbuilding are clearly predecessors to the storyworlds focused on in this thesis, they are both predominantly the work of lone authors. However, with the growth of new Mass Media outlets throughout the 20th century, a new era of franchised media rose to the forefront of worldbuilding. These new worlds, were similar to their predecessors in that they contained vast, constructed imaginary spaces, but one of the key differences is that the worlds were not owned by the creators but rather the companies that the brand was developed under. There are many examples of this enfranchised production of media that occurred during this era, from *Astro Boy* to *Star Trek*: the dawn of the franchise fundamentally changed the ability for large properties to grow without the active involvement of a single creator. One particular example of this can be found in Marvel comics. As Derek

Johnson puts it in *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*,

Marvel Comics differentiated itself from competitor DC in the 1960's and 70's by embracing continuity across its entire catalogue and enabling heroes like The Avengers, The Fantastic Four, or The X-Men to guest star in each others' stories. (75)

Marvel was not only a brand but a shared universe of comics with multiple writers and creators who focused their efforts to create one single canon. While seemingly mundane in the age of the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe, the Marvel Cinematic Universe and other tightly organized fictional worlds, the focus on a single canon put together by multiple creators is revelatory in the amount of completeness that a universe is capable of. The idea is also vital to the formation of transmedia, branching-path storytelling where the multiplicity of subcreators is much more necessary given not only the increased amount of content but also the need to work across medium lines. And of course with this increased amount of creators and worldbuilding also came more frequent retconning of events which Marvel and its older sibling DC are infamous for—and where the popular use of the term retcon first arose from.

The difficulty of having both a complete and consistent world cannot be overstated. Many authors or groups of authors have tried over the years, finding different methods to maintain a continuity despite rapid growth. Transmedia universes with both linear and branching-path narratives are merely the newest frontline of this effort with the added complication of player agency. But while it is important to understand the role that worldbuilding plays in these works, the importance and affordances of transmedia must also be understood.

Transmedia Storytelling: Close Reading Across Media

Transmedia storytelling is a term first developed by Henry Jenkins in his 2006 book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. In his chapter, “Searching for the Origami Unicorn,” Jenkins lays out his definition of transmedia storytelling that he has since refined several times, most recently in the form below on his blog *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*:

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.

This definition is extremely helpful in understanding what differentiates transmedia storytelling from transmedia entertainment. Whereas transmedia entertainment is primarily located in the use of similar characters, world spaces and narrative arcs, transmedia storytelling is the coordinated telling of a unified narrative.

The importance of unification as well as coordination cannot be overstated and is key to the way in which large, transmedia universes not only function, but the way in which they allow for increased agency in a world by having player’s choices unfold over multiple works. The attempt to tell a unified story denotes a single narrative that is being relayed across various mediums and this unification means the arrangement of media pieces does not come about randomly, but that each disparate element contributes to the development of a singular vision. In this way, “reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption... Offering new levels of insight and experience” (Jenkins 96). The best way, therefore, to understand how transmedia storytelling affords creators with an increased

opportunity for player autonomy, is to closely read the entire subcreated world looking for moments of interaction between the different pieces of media.

In “Searching for the Origami Unicorn,” Jenkins conducts a close reading to demonstrate how viewing *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions* is fundamentally different if one is familiar with other canonical *Matrix* universe texts such as *The Animatrix* and *Enter the Matrix*. Through this approach, he lays out the way in which a deeper reading of a universe can change how singular texts are viewed. This paper will similarly conduct a close reading of fictional universes, but while Jenkins was mostly concerned with the way in which a deeper interaction with a universe enhanced the way linear texts are experienced, this thesis will look at how deeper engagement with a universe can inform interaction with branching-path texts. And since this thesis is, in part, an attempt to understand how the release of each new text affects player agency in these universes, my close readings will be done in order of their publication as an ideal interactor with the universe would. But before those close readings can begin, it is important to first understand that though unified storytelling across mediums it is a relatively recent tradition, there are many precursors. Those I’ve highlighted below demonstrate important shifts towards the type of unified storytelling which I focus on.

Many sacred texts are clear predecessors to transmedia storytelling with their multiple characters and events often shown in various media formats. One of these precursors is perhaps the most significant transmedia work of all time, the Bible. As Derek Johnson puts in his essay “A History of Transmedia Entertainment,”

the Bible might be considered one of the most successful transmedia narratives in history: its stories have been passed down over centuries not only through written word but also through religious paintings and icons that framed those stories in new ways. As processes

of adaptation became industrialized, films such as the multiple screen versions of *The Ten Commandments* made that transmedia narrative mass producible, and products such as the *Left Behind* novel series and video series transformed stories such as the Book of Revelation...

The Bible models the way in which transmedia entertainment can unfold through different mediums offering access points to users through nearly unlimited forms of media. Each potential user of the story is allowed to interact with media in their own various ways, permitting a different, if not deeper, understanding of the texts' characters when viewed across mediums. But while successful, the lack of continuous coordination in the telling of the story is clearly different than the way in which modern transmedia storytelling unfolds under the careful gaze of either a singular author or overseeing body.

Another important and far less discussed precursor to transmedia storytelling is the novel *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* by Samuel Richardson. As Karen Swallow puts it writing for *The Atlantic*, Richardson

[had] a circle of female friends among whom he circulated his book manuscript to solicit feedback. And that feedback helped shape the story (along with criticisms that followed the first edition and resulted in significant changes in the second). Richardson's responsiveness to his readers, even *sans* social media, worked. The *Pamela* phenomenon included communal readings of the work in at least one village; the ringing of the church bells at one public reading of Pamela's marriage; the proclamation of the novel's merits by preachers from the pulpit; the sales of *Pamela* paraphernalia such as paintings, fans, prints, playing cards, and waxworks; and the publication of various knockoffs, parodies, and sequels...

While not necessarily transmedia storytelling in that one story is being told across mediums by one author, what is interesting about this case is that there is a purposeful effort by one single creator to engage his audience via multiple different outlets. This unified action resulted in a truly transmedia form of entertainment that changed and grew according to the needs of its audience.

The lineage of transmedia texts such as the Bible and *Pamela* are quite clearly works which led to the current day version of transmedia storytelling that first blossomed into being in the 20th century. Transmedia narratives dispersed across mediums are rooted in franchised media such as the *Star Trek* universe which licensed their world to be shared across multiple media avenues. What's particularly useful about this example is that Gene Rodenberry, the creator, originally kept an active hand in much of the media that was licensed from the *Star Trek* brand, safeguarding what he felt was the message at the heart of *Star Trek* through deputies such as staff writer D. C. Fontana (Johnson 142-143). Much like Marvel comics, *Star Trek* was able to grow with involvement from a team dedicated to maintaining a single continuity, here across multiple mediums such as books, television and movies, rather than just numerous comic series. The incorporation of multiple mediums in this way demands access to authors who can either work across these mediums or additional creators, promising the need for increased coordination in order to maintain consistency and allowing for diversity of thought in the creation of these universes. And while the level of coordination in the *Star Trek* universe lessened over time, it still serves as an obvious precursor to the more closely aligned efforts of transmedia storytelling in years to come.

While these three works highlight some of the many, many predecessors to tightly organized transmedia storytelling, the term's popularity arose during the 20th century in a period

where truly coordinated examples of this form were first arising, many coming to the fore with the development of the Internet. These works, such as *The Matrix*, *The Blair Witch Project*, and *Dawson's Creek*, are similar to the three fictional worlds that are focused on in this thesis in that they too took advantage of digital mediums and their affordances. Transmedia storytelling is not only a unique way of worldbuilding but it also pinpoints the way in which texts interrelate and thus is a useful method for viewing how new mediums can allow for greater completeness. And while this new completeness gives fans an enhanced understanding of the way the characters and world function, it also has a very real chance of lessening the amount of agency that fans have when interacting with a universe due to diminished space for imagining diverse possibilities—a concern that becomes direr when combined with branching-path storytelling.

Branching-Path Narratives: Agency and Authority

Like both worldbuilding and transmedia storytelling, branching-path narratives have a long history. But before diving into the history of this narrative format, it is important to understand what exactly I am referring to by branching-path narratives, and how they function differently than linear narratives. As many have pointed out, all texts can be read from multiple viewpoints and are thus capable of being nonlinear texts. However as Espen J Aarseth states in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*,

when you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed. This is very different from the ambiguities of a linear text. (3)

This idea of a non-straightforward path is something that Marie-Laure Ryan succinctly crystalizes as a text which has “a built in reading protocol involving a feedback loop that enables the text to modify itself, so that the reader will encounter different sequences of signs during different reading sessions” (207). What’s so useful about Ryan’s definition is that it delineates that branching-path texts allow for new experiences depending on the particular reader’s playthrough. This new ability to encounter different versions of the text upon reading fundamentally changes the audience’s relationship with the text.

The branching nature of interaction with this sort of text allows for greater participation by the audience, which in turn increases the agency they have in the fictional space they are inhabiting. This increased agency does not make them authors who are actively writing a text but instead readers who have increased agency within a text. As Janet H. Murray explains in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, “procedural authorship means writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves” (125). This means that the author of a branching-path narrative must construct both the narrative chunks as well as the mechanism that will allow for different readings each playthrough. However, while this notion is helpful for locating the author’s work in the creation of these texts, it does not negate the increased agency that a user of branching-path text gains in the narrative. Branching-path works by their very nature allow for the discovery of multiple paths granting the user an increased ownership of their specific playthrough of a text and thus the world created during it. As Murray continues, “The interactor is not the author of the digital narrative, although the interactor can experience one of the most exciting aspects of artistic creation—the thrill of exerting power over enticing and plastic materials. This is not authorship but agency” (153). Agency is often thought of as the ability to determine the way in which a story unfolds, and this is true in many cases. But in multi-story

works, real agency is the ability for the player's actions to have lasting impact across multiple works. This freedom can often come in direct conflict with those trying to maintain a consistent universe. The way in which diminished agency can come at the cost of increased consistency is a particular thread that I will be focusing on in this thesis—though the idea of expanded autonomy in texts is nothing new. In fact, increased agency is one of the reasons that this form of narrative has such a long and varied history, all of which serves as the basis for the rise of these mainstream, branching-path worlds.

Branching-path storytelling's history far predates the invention of the computer. The *I Ching* is often cited as the first branching-path literary machine. Pre-dating the Common Era, The *I Ching* is a formal system for generating different literary texts, for instance. It incorporates chance and provides explicit procedures for how to assemble fragments into a final text... (Montfort 66)

Like the branching-path texts which I will be highlighting, the *I Ching* allows for the text to modify itself before each new reading thanks to the procedural way in which it was constructed, giving each new interaction a level of variance. This work shows that the desire for increased agency within a text was far from dependent on a digital medium.

Over the centuries, countless other procedurally written literary machines sprung into existence, from Raymon Llul's *Ars Generalis Ultima* to Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes*. However, one noteworthy predecessor to mainstream, branching-path video games were the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books that began with Edward Packard's 1979 *The Cave of Time*. This brand line produced over 200 works in the main two series, Bantam's *Choose Your Own Adventure* and *Choose Your Own Adventure for Young Readers* (71). Though sometimes overlooked, this series was incredibly influential in familiarizing

western audiences with the branching-path form of storytelling via literary machines and allowing users to more fully inhabit the stories they were reading. The pop-culture ascendance and success of this series marks it as a clear predecessor to the video games and branching-path universes that I will be looking into as they too firmly sit in the mainstream.

Finally, while the rise of video games provides me with many, many important predecessors to the works that I will study, MUDs are an important early digital form of branching-path storytelling that allowed players to live in nonlinear universes. MUDs or Multi-User Dungeons, allow users to create their own in-world identity in the confines of a fictional universe situated in an online space (Bartle 197-198). Like the worlds I will be investigating, they too had a ruling figure or figures known as wizards who were in charge of maintaining the larger world structure (Bartle 569). Here again we see an interesting parallel in the way in which agency can easily be taken away if the need for consistency arises.

Since the creation of MUD's, many other works have appeared that allow for deep interaction within a branching-path universe. The rise of hypertexts and interactive fiction both present interesting case studies of how computers have allowed for branching fiction to become more popularized. At the same time, MMO's have evolved from MUDs to include animated, fully fleshed out worlds in which players have agency to shape their own story, if not the story of the world (Jakobsson). And of course, there are many other games that allow for transmedia storytelling, whether that be from licensed games like *Enter the Matrix* or online content generated from a video game property such as *Halo's* viral *I Love Bees* alternate reality game. But while all of these works incorporate a version of one or two of these traditions, the culmination of branching-path narratives, transmedia storytelling and capacious worldbuilding is most visible in the tradition of video games made by Telltale Games, BioWare, and Remedy

Entertainment. These three companies have a history of both transmedia and branching-path storytelling, all of which come to the fore in the video games *Game of Thrones*, *Mass Effect*, and *Quantum Break*. Over the next three chapters, a close reading of each of these universes will demonstrate the way in which worldbuilding through transmedia can both increase and limit player autonomy in branching-path worlds.

Chapter 2: *Game of Thrones* and the Impact of Branching Narratives

As mentioned earlier, the *Game of Thrones* universe has deep transmedia roots. Likewise, Telltale Games has a history of working with established worlds to create branching-path iterations or connected versions of these universes. Two prominent examples are the *Walking Dead* series of games, which connect directly with the Robert Kirkman comic, and the *Guardians of the Galaxy* game, which serves as a *mélange* of the comic book and movie series of the same name. *Game of Thrones*, similarly, represents a marriage between Telltale's branching-path storytelling prowess and the HBO television show's complex world.

Both the original television show, *Game of Thrones*, and the Telltale game spinoff are organized around a ruling family from a backwater region of the world being broken apart when they are at their most vulnerable. But rather than focusing on the Starks who rule the Northern half of the primary continent, Westeros, the Telltale game concentrates on one of the lesser houses sworn to the Starks, the Forresteres. This minor family's interactions often intertwine with main characters from the show including, Cersei Lannister, Tyrion Lannister, Jon Snow, Margaery Tyrell, Ramsay Snow, and Daenerys Targaryen. Thus, the Telltale game is one of three canonical works within the *Game of Thrones* universe that also includes the "Histories and Lore" animated series, which is meant to serve as a primer for those looking to begin watching mid-series, and the flagship television show, *Game of Thrones*. The Telltale video game consists of six approximately two-hour episodes, the first of which was released on December 2nd, 2014 and the last of which was released on November 17th 2015. Over this period, the fourth "Histories and Lore" episode was released along with the fifth season of the television show, though the Telltale game's in-world timeline remained concurrent with the fourth season of the live-action show.

Much like the Starks, the Forrester's' adventure consists of struggles caused by their geographical division and their attempt to unite and use what little resources their divisions grant them. These efforts are done—similarly to the Starks of Winterfell—in order to maintain the family line while facing betrayals, hostile competitors, and the changing tides of rule. While the adventures of the Forrester's mirror the Stark family's in many ways, the dual facts that this lesser family is controlled by a player and must conform to the television show's preexisting canon makes the experience of interacting with these characters different than that of watching the television show. The introduction of this plotline into the *Game of Thrones* universe, which prior to this consisted solely of linear texts, demonstrates how having a player in control of the story alters the audience relationship with a universe and, in turn, the way in which the universe tries to maintain consistency by limiting the crossover between the two media items. By giving more agency to the viewer, the Telltale video game exhibits how the change from audience to interactor necessitates a rethinking of a fictional universe by not only allowing for possible intervention into problematic representation but also showing the increased importance of every canonical detail, such as release dates. Unfortunately, while Telltale does make a crucial intervention into the world, the wider universe's failure to acknowledge the player's actions in the television show, or even the Forrester's themselves, ultimately demonstrates how consistency and completeness are attained through the limiting of player agency.

Agency and its Affects on Representation

Game of Thrones has received considerable criticism for the amount of rape that the show features (Itzkoff). This high level of rape is not only more than exists in the books, but often occurs to main characters in the show, such as Cersei and Sansa, and not their book counterparts.

And while the rape that occurs in the show is horribly problematic, it is only the most obvious of all of the misogynistic elements contained within the show. Another issue is the dearth of positive female to female relationships that exist within the series. No one can deny that *Game of Thrones* is a show which features a plethora of both positive and negative male to male relationships: positive father and son relationships like Ned and his children and negative ones such as Tyrion and Tywin; affectionate friendships such as Tormund and Jon and some that fall apart such as Theon and Robb; brothers who love each other like Robb and Bran and those with a gruesome history such as the Hound and the Mountain. But while there is a glut of types of male relationships shown throughout, there are very few positive female relationships that we actually see on camera. The vast majority of these affiliations lead to betrayal, misery or death: Sansa and Arya, Dany and Mirri Maz Duur, and Cersei and Margaery. There are, of course, notable exceptions such as the relationships between Margaery Tyrell and Olenna Tyrell, Dany and Missandei, and Brienne and Sansa—though of course Olenna is not able to save her granddaughter in the end, Missandei's role is one of servitude, and Brienne's friendship comes from a sworn oath.

At first Telltale's *Game of Thrones* mirrors the trend of not giving much room to positive female relationships within the world of cinematic Westeros. Of the five characters that you control throughout the game, only one of them is female, and she is placed in King's Landing, an area where female relationships within Westeros effectively go to die. As Mira Forrester, the player controls a handmaiden to the Lady betrothed to the King, Margaery Tyrell. Mira's, plot in the Telltale game runs concurrent with the events that occur in the fourth season of the show—even though the likely player will have already watched the fourth season as it was released prior to the video game. Thus, the player knows much of the larger events that will occur throughout

the world, affecting Mira's story. However, it is in the smaller moment's between the big events of the show that Mira's story takes place, and that the player is able to make their own way through the political intrigues of King's Landing.

The very first time the player controls Mira in the game, the character is immediately given a choice between stating their loyalty to Queen Dowager Cersei Lannister or Margaery Tyrell. At the time of meeting Margaery, the viewer of the show is aware that she is currently locked in a proxy battle for the throne with Cersei, over who will control the horrific King Joffrey—a battle that Margaery seems to be winning despite Cersei's best efforts. The first choice that occurs for Mira in the game happens when the player is asked point blank by Cersei, "And if your loyalties were to become conflicted—between your King and [Margaery]—what would you do then...?" As the first major choice of your female character in the game, deciding whether her loyalty is to the King, and in turn to Cersei, or to Margaery perfectly represents the way female relationships function within King's Landing (and to a lesser extent, all of Westeros). Cersei is someone who has railed against the unfair misogynistic system her entire life, while at the same time using the power that it affords her as the partner to the sovereign and daughter to a powerful patriarchal Lord—becoming an emissary of this system which has so brutalized her. Margaery on the other hand is a character who fully plays into her femininity, and is seen earlier in the season using her body to manipulate the ascendant King Tommen after Joffrey, his brother, has died. She is also, often shown surrounded by her handmaidens all of which are female (see Fig. 1) and as mentioned earlier has one of the lone strong female relationships with one of the few powerful female rulers, Olenna Tyrell.

This all works to make Mira's first choice emblematic of the way in which female struggles function within the *Game of Thrones* universe. The player is asked to either choose the more powerful figure who has gained her clout from the male dominated patriarchy or choose Margery who is a member of a more traditionally feminine power structure. Either way, however, the player is asked to choose directly between two women who despise each other rather than trying to work between them or solve their discord. Whatever you choose, this decision is mentioned several times throughout the rest of the game though it does not ultimately change the fate of Mira. But while this choice does immediately model the way in which female relationships usually manifest in the *Game of Thrones* universe, it does also establish an important precedent by allowing Mira to immediately begin building a relationship with another female character, Margaery. When Margaery later tells Mira that, her "words to Cersei were brave," it represents a way in which the branching nature of the story is already allowing for minor interventions in this narrative—even if isolated.



Fig. 1 A scene from the television show depicting Margaery (center) surrounded by her handmaidens while Cersei (far right) is typically alone (“Natalie Dormer as Margaery Tyrell and Lena Headey as Cersei Lannister”).

While this first major choice made between Mira and Margaery establishes their relationship, the true heart of the Telltale game's all female relationship is between Mira Forrester and her fellow handmaiden, Sera. This relationship develops between two seeming equals throughout the game into one that (potentially) places the most valuable and rare commodity in all of King's Landing at its core: trust. This relationship starts as a tale that is ripe with the hallmarks of the rest of the show, possible betrayal and a lack of faith in one another. But as with the earlier choice, the control given to the player allows for a truly positive relationship between two female characters to develop. The very first time the character meets Sera, they are both in the process of drawing up plans for the royal wedding between Margaery and Joffrey. Sera asks a number of probing questions, none of which come back to bite Mira if she answers truthfully. You can then ask Margaery to help your family and can even allow Sera to stay and listen in on your conversation. If you send her away, Sera will be hurt by your lack of trust, however, if you keep her around, she will suggest that Margaery should not risk her marriage to King Joffrey to help you. It seems at first that this relationship would play into the typical tropes offered in the *Game of Thrones* universe, but as the series goes on a number of different moments arise wherein the player and Sera have the possibility to establish a truly positive relationship—if the player desires it.

At the beginning of "The Lost Lords," the second episode in the game, Sera shows up and tells the player the secret that puts her most at risk in this world of court intrigue, that she is a bastard. She states, "My mother was a handmaiden to Lady Olenna for many years. She... became pregnant. It was a disgrace to her family. My true name is Sera... Flowers." The telling of this secret represents an amazing amount of faith in Mira, because she is in effect admitting that she has no actual claim to her name or her family. In a world where power comes largely

from familial relationships and title, this is an incredibly potent secret. Not only this, but Sera has done an amazing job at keeping this hidden in King's Landing, an area where knowledge is almost never secret. Almost nowhere else in the universe is this kind of unflinching honesty shown—let alone between two female characters—and the scene knows this allowing for the full power to play out as Sera is forced to drink wine for strength before relaying the truth. Several times throughout the rest of the story, Mira is presented with an option of betraying Sera with this information, but because this is ultimately a choice that the player gets to make, they can hold onto the secret and decide the trust their friend put in them is something they won't give up so lightly.

All of these acts of friendship between these two characters can play out and compound in a number of ways, but if the player chooses to keep Sera's secret safe, they are in turn rewarded with Sera helping them into an important garden party that could mean life or death for Mira's family. Doing this, however, means that Sera is very much putting herself at risk because she has been expressly forbidden from letting Mira in and could even get her removed from the service of Margaery for doing so. Despite all of this, Sera still chooses to help Mira because they have grown to trust one another. This moment in the story of Sera and Mira's relationship shows us what is usually very rare among two women in Westeros, and unheard of among two women of the same rank: intimacy and trust. What allows these moments to develop is in part the fact that the player is in control of Mira and making choices that will determine her relationship with Sera.

The last event that occurs for Mira Forrester is devastatingly familiar to *Game of Thrones* viewers because it boxes Mira in like most of the women who exist in this universe. Mira is forced to choose between betrothal to a man she hates or death at the chopping block. As with

the potential death of Mira, so is her friendship with Sera also at risk. Due to Mira's own actions at the garden party, Margaery is now aware that Sera helped the player character slip into this event. Sera then truthfully tells Margaery that Mira stole into the party, and the player has the choice between telling the truth to the ascendant queen and being removed from her service or lying and saying it was Sera's idea and having Sera removed from Margaery's service. However, even as the contours of the world close in on this potentially strong female friendship, the player's last act with Sera can be to protect her from Margaery and keep her in the lady's service. If the player chooses to do this, then Sera and Mira reconcile, with Mira even having the option of stating, "You're my friend, Sera. I look after the people I care about." Sera will then later come to offer comfort to Mira during her execution—if the player chooses death over marriage. In the end, this friendship may seem to be like many other female relationships that exist in King's Landing, but because of the way in which the player now has the option of staying loyal to her friend, it has the potential to be one of mutual trust and reliance—torn apart only in the most extreme of circumstances. In this way, the very incorporation of some player agency in the story offers up new pathways into problematic representation.

This is just one example of how the incorporation of branching plotlines into a strictly linear world naturally wrest a small amount of control from the author. Unfortunately, the issue with this plotline is that it has almost no impact on the wider media world of *Game of Thrones*. While the story within the Telltale game is quite transgressive for this world, there has never been any confirmation that Mira, Sera or any of the new characters introduced in the game have or will appear in the television show or "Histories and Lore." The relationship between the game and the established world is one-dimensional at best—characters from the television show insert themselves into the video game but not vice versa. This effectively limits the player's agency in

this world, constraining it to only the subworld of the game and in turn making the wider universe feel almost separate from that of the game, even if it does potentially make the universe of the show more easily consistent by not having to deal with player choices. This is a shame because the incorporation of the player's choices via Mira has a potentially curative effect to some of the issues in the larger world. Instead, the universe expands while limiting the crossover of the two series, or in other words, it increases completeness and maintains consistency while diminishing player agency. In the end, this limited agency results in the larger world continuing as it is.

Order of Publication and Player Autonomy

While the agency given to a player in a branching-path narrative can feel freeing within the context of a single story being told, it is also important to consider the ways in which a linear story limits a player's options in the larger universe. In the world of *Game of Thrones*, the camera lens stands in as an objective narrator—we are supposed to believe that the events that we see in the live-action show actually happen within this fictional world. This is different from the animated companion series to the show, “Histories and Lore,” wherein the narrators, who are always in-world characters, present events from their own viewpoints. Both of these linear examples of completeness widen the scope of the world by filling in its history, setting and characters while at the same time creating a consistent explanation for in-world continuity.

This differs from canon presented in branching-path works, which by their very nature, do not present a singular pathway. Thus, when branching-path works coincide with linear texts, they often exist in spaces between the linear canon, allowing for the consistency of the linear works to not interfere with the player agency of the branching works and vice versa. The Telltale

video game, for instance, chooses to work around the major set pieces of the *Game of Thrones* television series such as the Red Wedding or Dany's march through Slaver Bay, two of the most important events that happen in the show. But while this sort of interaction is obvious, there are subtler ways in which the consistent canon of a show shapes the video game. One of the most interesting is how the release order of works limit the player's ability to act freely in the world. As stated earlier, I chose to experience these works in the way that an ideal player would, interacting with each piece in the order it was published. By following this strict order, I found that the timing of the show often directly affected the choices that I made in the game.

The example I presented in the introduction of this thesis is just one such instance. The audience will already be familiar with Tyrion who is constantly portrayed throughout the show as not only intelligent and marginalized, but also as someone caring for underdogs, or as he calls them in the episode of the same name "cripples, bastards and broken things." Thus when you are given a choice early in the game, while playing as Mira, of siding with him or the vicious Queen Dowager Cersei, the choice seems obvious—whom better to ally with than the man who looks out for the dark horse—or at least it would seem so out of context. However, if the player is experiencing the show in the order of its release, the choice becomes much more difficult as they know that not long from now Tyrion will be tried for the murder of his nephew, the King. Likewise, this same issue exists for those coming to the game long after the show. Thus what may be a straightforward choice gains added depth through a transmedia reading of the universe.

As the series continues, it moves farther and farther away from both the original release dates and the fictional events of the season that it was originally tied to, seeking greater freedom from the imposed completeness of the show's events. By the time the last episode of the Telltale video game, which diagetically coincided with the end of the fourth season, was released, the

entirety of the fifth season had already aired. This all works to make the interactions between the show seem less and less relevant to the actual events of the main world and to those most interested in the larger events of the universe. The game, however, combats this by focusing in more and more on the goings on of the characters of the Telltale game and less and less on the flagship characters of the television show, finding an unused corner of the universe to exist in. By the time the last episode arrives, the only character who remains tied to the events of the show is Mira, though this is only tangential as well. This drift from the main events of the show works both to give the player more agency in the specific game, allowing them to make truly large choices in their characters' lives, and less agency in the larger world, as they are now barely interacting with the events or characters of the television show.

The odd timing of the release acts to compound the seeming isolation from the show. This feeling that the video game is drifting farther from the television series is captured in the very last moment of the game: the summary of player choices. During this wrap-up, characters from the television show, such as Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen recount the actions of the characters that they have interacted with during the events of the video game. For several characters, this feels odd as it has been a few video game episodes since the player characters interacted with them at all, such as Jon and Gared who share relatively little time together. But this lack of connection, while peculiar, is relatively innocuous compared to the summary of Mira Forrester, whom may be eulogized by Margery and Cersei, the former of which was killed by the latter in the finale of season five of the television series. This gives the entire summary a bizarre feeling that is purely the result of specific publication and player interaction order. This will only be compounded as the HBO show continues while the video game's ending likely remains the same, making later playthroughs of the game even more off-putting.

Publication timing and reader knowledge of materials must be carefully considered by creators when deciding how they want users to interact with the world and what events they want readers to know in what order. And while this is undoubtedly true for most transmedia worlds like the *Game of Thrones* universe, it must be considered in even greater detail when branching-path and linear materials coexist because these materials include both choices to be made by the players and decisions to be determined by authors. In branching-path works it is important, then, that subcreators think carefully about not only if a universe is complete but in what order they are constructing the expanded universe or else risk diminishing player autonomy. What is so often exciting about the choices granted to players is that they allow for at least some sense of agency—agency that something such as publication timing and player interaction order can easily take away or interfere with. The way in which branching-path materials are influenced by linear materials is not a simple causality, and thus, must be considered by creators thoughtfully when thinking about the way that the content will be published and experienced. The alternative is both muddled storytelling and lessened player engagement, even if the completeness of the universe is marginally increased.

From Watcher (on the Wall) to Player

Anytime a story is told across various media, additional considerations must be made concerning what elements of the story are best dispersed across new mediums, and how the overall universe changes. Completeness is no longer a simple process of expansion but something much more complex and much harder to coordinate. This is even truer when the shift crosses the line between branching and linear methods of storytelling. Having a player active in the world fundamentally requires a rethinking of how the universe is experienced by an audience

member. The very inclusion of branching narratives into a linear world means that a measure of agency will be given to the player. But while this undoubtedly can be somewhat empowering, determining the actions of a specific character does not equate to real autonomy within a storyworld. This can only occur when the player's choices have the ability to permeate beyond a single work—and only then, can concrete assumptions of a world, such as rigid gender politics, be upended through player choices. When player agency is instead isolated to a fraction of the world in order to maintain consistency, or confined by release schedule, its transformative effects—even when skillfully carried out—are likewise limited. To create fully agential, multifaceted, branching-path worlds, thought must be paid to every aspect of the world expansion and attempts to create consistency. In the next chapter, we'll see how *Mass Effect* manages to take another step forward in increasing player agency by constructing texts that (mostly) respect—even when not fully engaging with—player decisions.

Chapter 3: *Mass Effect's* Transmedial Choices

Of all the universes I will be focusing on, *Mass Effect* is not only the most media-rich and expansive but also the longest running. And in comparison to *Game of Thrones* it is also much more tightly aligned by respecting player choices. Launched in 2007 with the publishing of the prequel novel *Mass Effect: Revelation*, the *Mass Effect* universe is a highly organized transmedia world based around a set of three primary games, each with a number designation. It's important to note here that I'll be focusing on the original trilogy and the media that surrounds it and not the expansion of the universe that occurred with *Mass Effect: Andromeda* as it is effectively a new story, world and plotline, with only the brand name connecting the two.

The games in the original series collectively tell the story of Commander Shepard, whose status as the first human Spectre (a position somewhere between a space-marshal and a non-mystical Jedi) demarcates the rise of humanity on the galactic scene. In the *Mass Effect* universe, humans are one of over a dozen sentient species in the Milky Way galaxy that, with the use of ancient artefacts, have attained faster-than-light travel, colonized various planets, and constitute a greater galactic community. The first game begins with the election of Shepard to Spectre, a highly sought after and incredibly agential position, working for the force that governs the galaxy, the "Council" made up of representatives from the three or four most powerful galactic species. Shepard's work immediately has her pursuing a rouge Spectre who, as it coincidentally turns out, is the agent of a group of massive, ancient sentient spaceships known as "Reapers," who every 50,000 years purge the universe of intelligent life. With this threat as the core unifying conflict, each game offers various ways to combat the Reaper menace granting the player a large amount of latitude in how they topple this threat.

The first game focuses around the initial discovery of this Reaper menace, the second on stopping their servants, known as “Collectors,” and the third on combating the Reapers themselves. Each game provides the player with enormous amounts of freedom in how they choose to gather allies, discover news menaces, and most centrally, what type of Spectre Commander Shepard will be. These three games are comprised of in-world missions, which involve a combination of inquiry with non-player characters, third-person shooting combat, and bi or trilateral decision making that usually contribute to attaining the central goal of each game. The player assumes the role of Shepard during these missions, accompanied by two of her companions—though one mission has the player controlling another character, and a handful are missions where only Shepard alone can act. These three games also have a number of other, smaller side-missions, activities, and character interactions that usually reward the player with a lesser amount of money, experience or morality points. The choices that the player makes during their missions are usually structured so that the largest choice of the mission, such as whether characters live or die, which alliances flourish or stymy, and generally whether Shepard becomes a “Renegade” or “Paragon,” occur towards the end of the mission.

As the core of not only the series, but the wider universe where the expanded content resides—every single piece of media is based around a character (or organization) who interacted with Shepard—Commander Shepard is a very flexible centerpiece. The gender, race, power set and origin story of Shepard are all extremely malleable (though it should be noted that this flexibility is somewhat diminished by the way in which the game’s packaging shows a male, vaguely Caucasian protagonist). This plasticity means that at the center of the universe is a character whose identity is radically indeterminate and the materials that surround the universe’s main character demonstrate this. Shepard appears at best obliquely in the linear works, whether

mentioned or seen at a distance, and these works almost always focus on either her companions, close allies or foes. This focus on characters who surround Shepard, means that the adjacent works achieve greater completeness by dealing with spaces in the characters lives that occur before, after or in between moments of their contact with Shepard and the core games of the series themselves. These works include four books focusing on two main characters at the periphery of Shepard; several different series of comics devoted to various allies, and enemies; one anime that deals with the backstory of a squad mate from the third game; and two mobile games, one which concerns a squad mate and the other, a member of an enemy organization.

The *Mass Effect* universe is expansive and multifaceted, as is the core tension at the heart of the universe: race and xenophobia. Like most noteworthy science fiction, the *Mass Effect* universe is at its core concerned with a question as relevant to us as it was to our ancestors a hundred years ago: Can we all get along? And while the series is not the first to couch racial divides amongst alien species, its use of branching pathways, a flexible protagonist, and remarkable scope make it something worthy of in-depth study. To understand how *Mass Effect*'s complex views on race and xenophobia work, both the linear and branching-path elements that are offered in such a universe must be understood individually.

Choice in the *Mass Effect* universe is not a monolith, but by analyzing the content of the choices and the way in which the morality system functions, one can see how the universe's views towards race and racism effectively develop over the course of the series without constricting player autonomy. Similarly, by considering the way in which the linear works manifest, the need for coordinated, transmedia handling also becomes apparent. Finally, looking at these elements in concert demonstrates how the *Mass Effect* universe's absence of a unifying character makes a thematic case for a transmedia, branching universe while at the same time

granting the player increased agency. The *Mass Effect* universe is nothing if not large, but by understanding both its individual components and the way in which they function, we can start to understand how the game works to respect player choices via its thematic call for unification and absence of a defined central protagonist. In short, *Mass Effect* uses player agency to keep the universe consistent, but this does not inoculate it from the dangers of a mishandled canon that occurs from increased completeness.

Morality as Choice

At the core of *Mass Effect*'s choice system is a morality binary that often has the player picking between two options: the angelic Paragon or the martial Renegade. This system of binary choices has become a core feature of BioWare games almost since their very beginning. One of BioWare's earliest forays made use of an alignment system adapted from the *Dungeons and Dragons* series. These games, *Baldur's Gate*, *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, and *Neverwinter Nights* all have alignment systems in which players are allowed to choose one of nine options of different moralities that affect various play stats of their characters. However, with the launch of the 2003 *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, BioWare adopted a morality binary that more closely hewed to the pre-existing canon in the *Star Wars* universe. In *Knights of the Old Republic*, the player character is allowed to choose dialogue and actions that represent their character's moral adherence to the "light side" or "dark side" of the force. These choices come to shape not only the character's appearance and combat stats but also the way in which their companions regard them and ultimately how the story unfolds. This binary morality system was adopted into the next game published by BioWare *Jade Empire*—though it was known as the "Way of the Open Palm" vs "Way of the Closed Fist." This morality system eventually made

its way into the *Mass Effect*, though with several differences from the light side/dark side duality from the earlier incarnations (see Fig. 2 & 3).

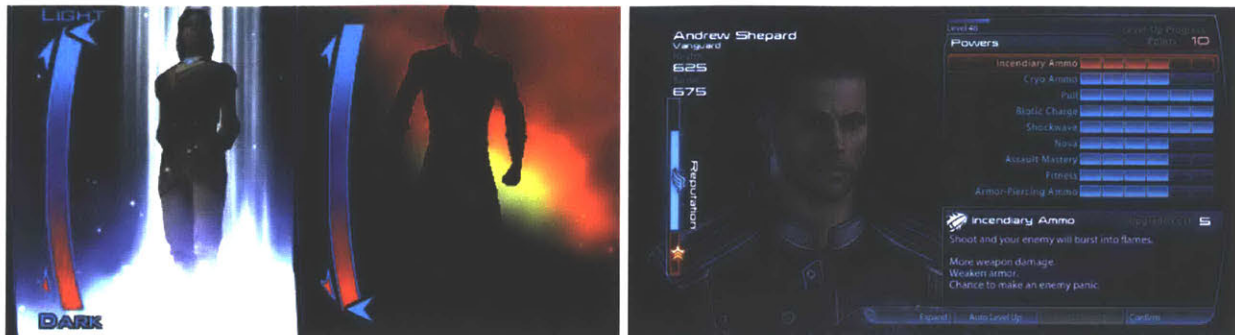


Fig. 2 & 3 The morality meters in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Aplin)—left—and *Mass Effect 3* (“What does 100% Paragon or 100% Renegade actually mean?”)—right, respectively.

The *Mass Effect* morality system in the original trilogy functions similarly to the light side/dark side system seen in the *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* with some key differences. One of these is simply nomenclature—the duality for *Mass Effect* exists on a Renegade to Paragon spectrum rather than one that extends from the use of “the Force.” Renegade is essentially an aggressive, ends-justify-the-means philosophy that often leads the player into conflicts that can be otherwise avoided. The Paragon stance, on the other hand, means that the player spends much more time talking and trying to resolve situations diplomatically. While *Star Wars* fans may see this morality system as embodying Yoda’s famous line in *The Empire Strikes Back* that the dark side is “Quicker, easier, more seductive,” it is important to understand that regardless of the player’s choices, Shepard remains a soldier with a high degree of military rigor. This means both that she is unlikely to enjoy suffering of others just for pleasure, and also that she often defaults to martial solutions.

Additionally, the morality system borrows many conventions of how western pop-culture divides good and evil. The representative symbol of the Paragon pathway is a set of angelic wings drawn in blue, while the icon of the Renegade is instead a star (possibly referring to a wild west

Marshal) styled in red. Given these differences from its predecessor, it's appropriate that the in-game gauge of the series is not a zero-sum meter as it is in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* but instead a gauge that charts the player's direction toward embodying a Paragon, Renegade or both. This means that the player's morality in one situation does not necessarily keep them from attaining their goals differently in other situations. Additionally, rather than devoting entire powers to the light side or dark side options, Renegade and Paragon choices exist almost solely through the realm of story and dialogue—though in the second game, Shepard's face becomes more machinelike if the player follows the path of the Renegade. Regardless, the Renegade and Paragon duality do have at least as large of a presence in this game as light side and dark side binary does in the original *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. And the evolution of this system manifests throughout these games in interesting ways that have specific ramifications for how they work.

The first game in the series focuses much of its attention on how humans interact with alien species. At the beginning of *Mass Effect*, the player is part of the human military government apparatus known simply as the Systems Alliance. As a whole, humankind and the Alliance are known to the larger galactic population for their aggression and involvement in a war with the militaristic turian species that occurred when humans first made contact with outside species. The "First Contact War," as it is known amongst humans, has given the galaxy the impression that our species is overly hostile and entitled. Throughout this game, the player's actions usually rest between disproving or proving true this stereotype.

Of all the games in the series, the morality system in this first game often boils down to action vs diplomacy. Nowhere is this better highlighted than in one of the final options presented to the player. As a proxy for human and turian's lingering distrust of one another, Commander

Shepard is tasked with hunting down a prominent turian Spectre, Saren Arterius. Saren has committed many crimes against humanity—including disqualifying the first human Spectre candidate several decades ago. But it is his involvement with the Reapers that finally convinces the Council that he must be brought in. This touches off Shepard’s quest across several planets and solar systems to hunt down Saren, eventually resulting in the discovery that he now serves the Reapers. In the final climatic battle with Saren as he is leading an assault on the hub of the Council, the Citadel, the player has a brief interaction with Saren asking why someone who signed up to be a Spectre is now waging war on the populous he is meant to protect. In short, Saren can either be convinced to back down, at which point he chooses to kill himself, or can simply be fought by the player. In this example, the Reapers have so wholly possessed Saren that he knows the only way to escape their control is to end his life. The ability to reason with Saren, even when the only options available are incredibly extreme, shows the way in which this game hinges on the idea that no matter how desperate a solution, it is still possible to strive for diplomacy.

The role of diplomacy vs aggression is of course just a proxy for how the game tackles the appearance of humans on the wider galactic scene, and how they view themselves within the puzzling world of established species. Is the final frontier of space akin to the US’s manifest destiny? Or should humanity learn to live with those whom already exist outside their solar system? Many of the human crewmates on Shepard’s *Enterprise*-like ship, the *Normandy*, exhibit this confusion about alien species, often showing outright xenophobia, though the player can often have an active role in shaping their thoughts. One such squad mate is the “space racist” Ashley Williams, who during the first game states that she is concerned about having aliens aboard the ship, that she is not sure we should call the “Council races” “allies,” and at one point

even comments “it’s not racism. Not really.” Eventually it comes out that she has never actually served with any aliens and finally that she feels entitled to want humanity to be strong. This is all due to her grandfather’s history of being the only human to ever surrender to an alien species. This idea that being at war can either create alliances or lead to greater strife is something that comes up again and again throughout the series. It’s significant, however, that in the first game it is much more difficult to actually alter Ashley’s thoughts towards alien species though this changes as the series continues, especially with Shepard’s influence.

During the second game, they make the racial subtext of the first game the actual text. The beginning of *Mass Effect 2* starts off with the traumatic and harrowing death of the Commander, as a ship from the main enemy of the game, the Collectors, attacks the *Normandy*. As Shepard is seen hurtling towards the surface of a planet, surrounded only by her fragile environmental armor, the embossed title for *Mass Effect 2* rises to the screen indicating that this game will be drastically different from the first. And this promise is immediately made good by the actual game itself as the player sees Shepard and her ship painstakingly rebuilt by an off-screen organization. As the Commander awakes, the player becomes aware that she has been put together by a pro-human, terrorist organization known as Cerberus, who are set on using Shepard to combat the Collectors currently attacking human colonists. Throughout this game, Shepard will come into conflict with the imperious leader of this group, the Illusive Man, a Cigarette Smoking Man type, whose ends-justify-the-means actions have earned his organization their infamous reputation. This conflict becomes the driving force of the game as Shepard can either side with the pro-human organization or choose to instead embrace diversity.

One of the most interesting elements of this game, however, is that, like the others in the series, it too centers around the need to gain a diverse group of allies for the final mission, in this

game referred to as the Suicide Mission. While these alien squad mates may seem at first to merely be more canon fodder for the Illusive Man to throw at the Collectors, the survival of the whole squad is built in as a mechanical necessity to the larger game. In order for each squad mate to survive, the player must engage in “Loyalty Missions” which help dictate who will and who will not live. Additionally, if the player chooses to not engage in these loyalty missions, Shepard’s own chance of surviving the mission decreases drastically. This is an important mechanical backing to the embodiment of how the game chooses to tackle diversity. The Suicide Mission becomes an important rallying point for the entire game which is predicated on the need for all species to not only participant but to do so willingly for a Commander who has shown them respect. The success of this mission, while not wholly based on player completion of Loyalty Missions, dramatically increases once the player chooses to engage with her squad mates—human or otherwise. This call for experiencing multiple viewpoints, of course, works in tandem with the way in which these universes hope to deeply engage players, having them experience the fullness that their world has to offer.

Much like the second game, *Mass Effect 3*, has at its core the need to gather a diverse group of varying aliens in order to combat a hostile force, the big bad of the series: the Reapers. Much like the Suicide Mission of the second game, this finale is centered around putting together a team—in this case it’s in order to deliver a weapon of mass destruction against the Reapers. Similar to first game, the player’s options center around the choice to be more aggressive or diplomatic to alien forces, though the stakes in this third game are much more personal than they ever were in the first. Many of the choices in this game boil down to the player being open and team spirited vs more emotionally cold and aggressive in their leadership. Over and over again the player is rewarded more and more for trying to be diplomatic rather than just forcing their

leadership upon the alien species. For instance, one of the key moments occurs during a rescue mission to save a character from the second game, Grunt, as he is investigating the Reapers' bastardization of an alien hive-mind species known as the Rachni, similar to the Formics from *Ender's Game*. The player is eventually presented with the option of either saving the Rachni Queen or Grunt, but they may actually save both if Grunt's loyalty mission has been completed in the earlier game. In this way, the game actually makes the loyalty missions not only important in the second game but also in the third game, demonstrating its deference to player choices throughout the series.

The third game is filled with missions like these where the player has the option of either trying to secure the alliance of one species or the other. But if they fulfilled the loyalty mission in the second game and acted as a Paragon throughout the series, they often have the additional option of choosing a third pathway towards resolving the conflict in these games. In this way, the game shows its clear preference towards the importance of trying to ally different species, while simultaneously using the player's real agency as the glue that keeps the universe consistent across multiple entries. Each entry in this main series effectively revolves around the need to recruit various species and in *Mass Effect 3*, the survival of the entire galaxy hinges on this ability to gather these various species, taking into account Shepard's—and thus the player's—choices across the entirety of the series. And while Shepard is engaged in this work of uniting the different alien races, her backers from the second game, Cerberus, have become a secondary antagonist working against her. The overall arc of the game is measurably one towards displaying the importance of diversity as is shown in the way the game also chooses to actively combat alien stereotypes.

One of the most profound relationships that can occur in the second and third game is with a member of the AI geth species, Legion. This relationship occurs towards the end of *Mass Effect 2*, but not before the player has already killed hundreds of geth during the first game while they were under the sway of the Reapers. If the player chooses to recruit Legion, they absorb much about the history of geth, learning that they were created only to serve another alien species, the quarians, until they became self aware at which point their makers turned on them. The harsh treatment of the robotic species, however, is not surprising when one considers that they, in many ways, represent the ultimate marginalized group—more so than any of the other non-human alien species. They are reviled by the entire galactic community and their very existence is outlawed, and even Shepard spends much of the first and second game actively hunting down and killing their members. But by allowing one aboard their ship, the player learns that those who served Sovereign in the first game were actually just a splinter faction, immediately diminishing the standard thinking that all geth are the same. What's more, Legion's individuality is repeatedly drilled into the player, as is the strategic value of his friendship. As mentioned briefly in my intro, the biggest coup in the third game revolves around the ability of the player to solve the long war between the geth and their creators, the quarian. The opportunity to recruit both of these species occurs only if the player has chosen the most diplomatic options when completing both the quarian crew member and Legion's loyalty missions and intervened to stop the historic foes from fighting one another. Here we see not only the underlying theme of the universe consistently outlined across the series but the way in which it uses player autonomy to demonstrate it.

The treatment of Legion as an individual also models one of the most important ways in which the main series of *Mass Effect* operates, through the abolishment of stereotypes with

personal contact. Throughout the game, the player is repeatedly given many, many chances to interact with species from other planets, often from races that are grossly characterized: the militaristic turians, the sensual asari, the thieving quarians. The game makes sure that the aliens who become squad mates each actively combat these stereotypes. Across the board, the members of those races that we most commonly interact with actively go against these stereotypes. In *Mass Effect*, we are provided with a turian who refuses to follow orders, an asari who is bubbling over with innocence and lack of confidence, a quarian with a heart of gold, etc. Each character is meant to show the way in which stereotypes are prejudicial systems that only work rhetorically, not in actuality. Even the most problematic character in the series, a remnant of an ancient slaver species with an African accent, still exists to combat the stereotyping of this species as a benevolent ancestor.

The series goes to great lengths in order to show the thematic necessity for diversity while still allowing players' choices to feel impactful—no easy task. It does this by mechanically rewarding players for both interacting with stereotype breaking aliens directly and engaging with the series beyond a single game. This, in turn, causes player choice to not only impact the world but to serve as the glue that holds much of the story together, creating deeper engagement with the game at the same time. This respect for the established canon, player or otherwise, is not always carried throughout the rest of the universe, with certain linear media choosing to alter the version of the world the interactor is experiencing, rather than aligning with it.

The (Mis)Uses of Linear Media

With the *Mass Effect* universe under a clear mandate to extol the virtues of diversity while respecting the individuality of each player's unique experience, the clearest answer to how

to create surrounding media is to focus on the stories of those companions that are closest to Commander Shepard: her squad mates, allies and enemies. This focus is similar to the way in which many other expanded universes emphasize times before or after the main series of their universe in their tie-in products—expanding the universe while maintaining the consistency of the main series. This is true for the *Mass Effect* tie-in content as well, though the absence of the core character from the series necessitates that the linear media focus almost entirely on building up the secondary characters, rather than relying on their relationship with the main character of the series as a proxy for who they are or how an informed audience should understand them. This makes the focus of the stories much more intent on fleshing out who the supporting cast are and what their goals/aims are—making them usually more digestible as standalone projects while less connected to the arc of the story that is being undertaken by the main series. Unsurprisingly, the content that does the best job of continuing the racial work that the main series begins are those projects that are most closely tied to the original creators of the main trilogy—when the work gets farmed out to other avenues, some of the series’ most egregious examples of both mishandling the thematic importance of diversity and disrespecting the version of the world the players know occur.

A key component of transmedia storytelling is that the works function as a piece of a larger narrative that is unfolding. This matters not only when it comes to obvious elements of a story such as plot, setting and characterization, but also for the themes that are being told within the larger universe. Of all the components that may be the hardest to extend to various media formats, this is undoubtedly one of the most difficult because transmedia storytelling usually requires the involvement of various outside authors due to its cross-medium nature. In this sense, one of the obvious reasons that the *Mass Effect* universe as a transmedia brand has been so

successful is due to its ability to use writers who can work across mediums such as Drew Karpysyn, head writer on *Mass Effect 1* and *2*, as well as the author of three of the four *Mass Effect* tie-in novels, and Mac Walters, head writer of *Mass Effect 3*, co-lead writer of *Mass Effect 2*, and author of every comic published in the *Mass Effect* trilogy mythos. The success rate of involving other creative teams, however, has often resulted in the most contentious and disrespectful instalments in the *Mass Effect* universe.

By far the most controversial of all the *Mass Effect* tie-in works has been the novel, *Mass Effect: Deception* by William C. Dietz. This book, published in 2012, has so many canonical and in-world errors that it engendered not only umbrage from its fans upon its release but also a detailed 12 page google doc meant to capture all its various diversions from the original canon (Plunkett). The outrage was even so great that it caused BioWare to release a declaration stating it would republish another version of the book that corrects the errors held within—a bold step indeed (Makuch). And while there are many discrepancies within the book, one of the core issues is that it fails to live up to the promise of stereotype breaking and inter-species cohabitation proposed by the original series. Instead the book seems to revel in hackneyed treatment of different species, breaking the established canon that players have come to know and demonstrating an example of completion coming at the cost of consistency in the wider universe.

Throughout the series, the player is made increasingly aware that asari, a mono-gender species which strongly presents as feminine, is often fetishized and sexualized by other species throughout the galaxy. What is empowering about the original series, however, is that the two asari squad mates you befriend skew far from stereotypical feminine presentation. The initial asari companion gained, Liara, is first met as a damsel-in-distress—literally shackled and

needing to be saved. But over the series she grows into her own, building on her role as a scientist, then information dealer, and in the third game, the single most politically powerful person in your crew. Likewise, the other asari squad mate, Samara, that the player acquires early in the second game seems at first a figure of fem-fatale badassery. However, her warrior-monk exterior quickly shows that she is not interested in being just a romantic object, and she is the only original squad mate in the second game (other than the newly born Grunt, and the AI Legion) who the player cannot have a romantic relationship with. These two examples provide us with paradigms of asari characters that the player interacts with who break out of the roles that the universe tries to pin on them.

Another such character presented in the main series of the game that breaks traditional feminine stereotypes is Aria T'Loak, the asari, Pirate Queen of Omega. This holds true until she is presented in *Mass Effect: Deception*. Since her introduction in *Mass Effect 2*, Aria has been positioned as the unflinching mob boss of Omega, a lawless wild west of a planet with no central government or police force. In this bastion for gangs, slavers, drug traffickers and other assorted denizens, Aria has managed to assume and maintain control of the planet for several centuries through pure strength of will and power. In this time, she has defeated would-be challenger gangs, single-handedly beat down monstrous rivals, and become feared by an entire planet—and she has done this not as a peaceful enforcer but as someone who will kill or harm without batting an eye. Despite this tough-as-nails characterization the audience has become familiar with throughout the series, we are instead presented in Dietz's novel with someone who breaks down and is on the verge of crying several times. For instance, during her daughter's funeral her internal monologue states, "Then as the casket was closed and pushed into the wall, the woman who wasn't going to cry began to do so. Deep sobs racked her body as she stood head down in

front of the name that had been chiseled into the marble” (125). And if the reader thinks this is simply due to her daughter’s death hitting her hard at the funeral, a similar scene is repeated later after someone just mentions her daughter’s passing, “T’Loak was determined not to cry. Not until later. When she was alone. She cleared her throat” (175).

Of course being upset at the loss of a child is more than understandable, it’s how the vast majority of people would react. But the way in which *Mass Effect: Deception* portrays Aria is in conflict with the way she acts throughout the preceding books and games in the series. During the third novel in the series, *Mass Effect: Retribution*, she barely responds visibly at all when initially seeing her dead daughter:

“Over the centuries, Omega’s Pirate Queen had seen thousands, if not millions, of bodies: both those of her enemies and her allies... But it was rare she had to face the death of one of her offspring.... Despite the seething rage she felt over the death of her daughter, Aria wasn’t about to jump to any conclusions. There were too many possibilities in play” (75).

In this scene Aria’s reaction is not only one of calculated calm but of purposeful stoicism as if emotional response beyond fury is antithetical to her very being, and the rest of the book plays out with her hunting down her daughter’s murderers with cruel efficiency. The rapid and confusing increase in emotionality for Aria is one of many features that seemingly change from her last appearance in *Mass Effect: Retribution* to her appearance in *Mass Effect: Deception* to make her seem more stereotypically feminine. On top of this gross mischaracterization, Aria is also physically weakened by Dietz—she never at any point during the book uses her fierce biotic (read telekinetic) powers that she is known throughout the galaxy to possess. This downplay of martial ability and increase in sentimental emotionality are just two small ways in which *Mass Effect: Deception* characterizes the Pirate Queen of Omega to fit within a more traditional

bounds of her feminine race that the other works in this series usually portray her firmly outside of.

The playing into stereotypes of alien species in *Mass Effect: Deception* is just one of the examples of *Mass Effect* tie-in works that do this. Another example occurs in the mobile game, *Mass Effect: Infiltrator*, which takes place concurrently with the events of the *Mass Effect 3*. Throughout this game, the player controls a Cerberus soldier who must fight back against his employers when they experiment on his female co-worker. Tired stereotypes of rescuing the princess aside, this game features two prominent alien characters: one a volus known as Volus and another, a turian known as Turian (see Fig. 4 & 5). If you are looking for a clear way to exemplify that all aliens in a species are the same, giving them the name of their species is a very good idea.

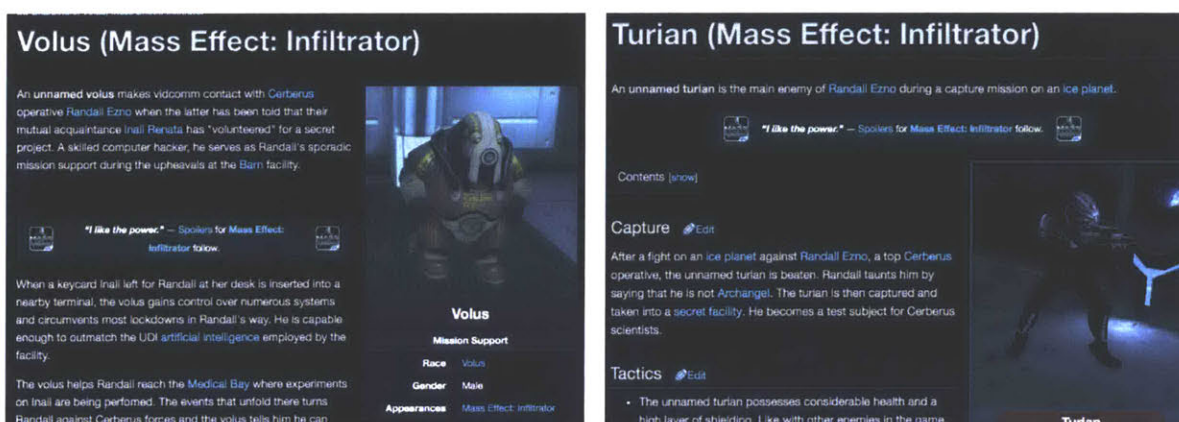


Fig. 4 & 5 The top of the wiki pages for the volus (left) and turian (right) from *Mass Effect: Infiltrator*.

What these two works demonstrate isn't just a failure to fully engage with the *Mass Effect* mythos but also an underlying inability to grasp the central theme at work in *Mass Effect*—that we must be able to work together with and understand those who are different. This theme comes up again and again while interacting with the *Mass Effect* universe and the majority of the linear media in this world go to great efforts to engage with the idea of breaking

stereotypes, unlike these two which reinforce them. Many of the linear works written by either Karpysyn or Walters by their very nature of focusing on squad mates help to flesh out alien species or those enemies and allies who may have specific prejudices against these species. But when the work is passed on to others the efforts are usually less successful. This idea that an outside contributor isn't able to quite engage with the locus of the universe is by means a new phenomenon, but in a transmedia universe, it becomes all the more acute as we watch characters go from one medium to another in an attempt for completeness. Additionally, when branching paths are integrated and players feel more ownership over the larger world, then it makes sense that the players may take more seriously the linear media, as it can challenge the legacy of the version of the universe they built. And in a branching-path, transmedia universe this makes the linear works all the more important as their canonicity may take away some of the agency of the readers while they expand the universe. In this way, it is possible to see how linear works can both elevate or diminish the choices of a player and the world they create. Those who contribute formally then must have a keen understanding of its driving principles and established canon in order to make sure that the striving for completeness of a universe does not diminish player autonomy.

The Strength of Shepard's Absence

When branching-path and linear media work together in an effective way they can make the narrative impact of each other even stronger. Throughout the series we are told repeatedly of the main character Shepard's salvific potential—that she alone has the ability to save the world from the horrible fate that awaits. But at the same time, the player is told that what is truly great about Shepard is her ability to unite diverse groups. In this way, the universe sets up the potential

for there to exist stories beyond just the main series of games—a perfect situation for expanded completeness. The *Mass Effect* trilogy is nearly unique in its use of an undefined central character around which to build an entire universe. What is interesting is that it works not only despite this absence but because of it. By having an undefined protagonist at the heart of the trilogy, the universe that surrounds it does not have the easy task of creating tie-in works that focus on the central character. Instead they can only ever obliquely hint at the main character, showing her off-screen, in a stasis tube or from afar. In this way, the universe has been forced to evolve beyond the main protagonist—focusing on the supporting cast and creating new characters to tie in to the main story. Luckily at the very core of *Mass Effect* is a thematic call to hear diverse voices and understand what is happening to those around us: in short it is a call for empathy—towards the end of the series even the evil protagonists begin to get their shot at redemption and understanding.

This core foundation of the series has found its home in this branching-path, transmedia universe that demands that more than a single story be told. The *Mass Effect* universe only works because it is explicitly about a call for the stories of many, the stories of others beyond the main protagonist. It is important then to think about the underlying themes when building a universe or else risk not having enough content to base the works around. Similarly, if a universe functions only because of the worldbuilding, it will be dry and dull. What the *Mass Effect* universe clearly demonstrates is that one must think about the underlying structure of the universe before deciding how to create it and make sure it is one that cannot only support multiple stories but one that is built to do this. The *Mass Effect* universe presents an interesting litmus test for any nascent worldbuilder: Is your universe still engaging even after the main character is removed?

This absence of a central protagonist is just one of the many ways in which *Mass Effect* is able to establish a world that respects player choices while still having linear media inside of it. This ability is also due in part to the (mostly) tight cohesion of the authors working on the source material, as well as the way in which the world is built around the idea of diversity. By incorporating these elements, the *Mass Effect* mythos is able to allow for players to influence the world on a grand scale (even in the linear works, Shepard is always discussed even if the player's choices are not), effectively using player choice as the cohesive glue that allows the universe to maintain consistency while striving for completeness. This makes this universe quite different from how *Game of Thrones* effectively cordons off the Telltale game into its own subworld—though the result in both of these cases is still effectively elision. In the next chapter, we'll see how *Quantum Break* tries to increase player agency by even more tightly aligning the disparate media elements it is composed of.

Chapter 4: *Quantum Break* and its Uncommon, Common Use of Transmedia

The *Quantum Break* universe is by far the least media rich and well known of my case studies. It's also the most singular—adapting its transmedial universe in an attempt to grant players more agency than in either the *Game of Thrones* or *Mass Effect* universes. And while those other universes had clear contemporaries (such as other BioWare games for *Mass Effect* or similar Telltale games for *Game of Thrones*), *Quantum Break* represents a truly bold step forward in integrating various formats of media. Its television and game elements are packaged as one branching work and so incorporated that to remove one would be to make the other nearly unintelligible. This sort of experiment is wholly new to the world of transmedia, branching-path works, but its predecessors can be seen in other works by Remedy.

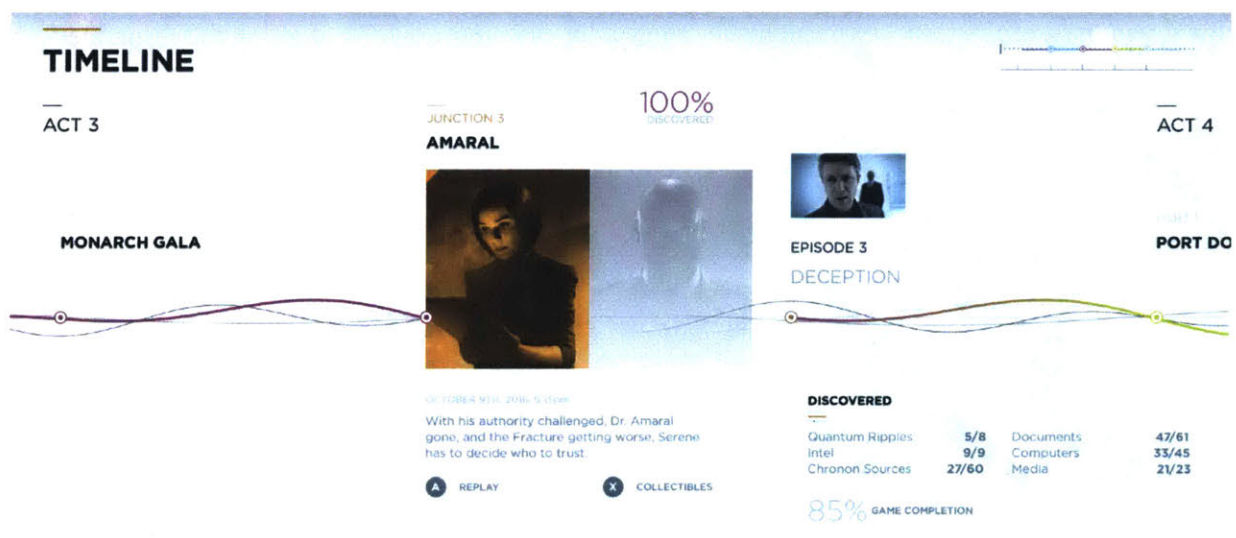


Fig. 6 The “Timeline” where players can access the different levels or “Acts,” as well as the episodes and “Junctions” (“Screenshot from ‘Quantum Break walkthrough #021 The Story Timeline’”).

Quantum Break was released on April 5th 2016 by Remedy Entertainment and published by Microsoft Studios. Remedy Entertainment’s history of transmedia is bound up in perhaps its two best known series, *Max Payne* and *Alan Wake*. The first two *Max Payne* video games produced by Remedy were successful enough that they inspired a major motion picture

adaptation. Likewise, *Alan Wake* was similarly a work of transmedia—somewhere between the planned storytelling of *Quantum Break* and the adaptation of *Max Payne*. Much like Telltale's *Game of Thrones*, *Alan Wake* is centered around “Episodes” in which the main plot plays out. And though the game does not have the same branching structure as *Game of Thrones*, its universe also features a live-action tie in show, here the web series *Bright Falls*, which serves as a prequel to the main game. These examples of connected storytelling are also supplemented by more disparate elements such as a non-canon novelization and a loosely connected Xbox Live Arcade game known as *Alan Wake's American Nightmare*. The roots of Remedy's fascination with transmedia storytelling are clearly visible in this series—a preoccupation that led ultimately to *Quantum Break's* groundbreaking structure.

As mentioned earlier, the canonical universe is made up of only two media elements that have been packaged together, the *Quantum Break* television show and the *Quantum Break* video game. For the majority of the video game portion, which consists of levels or “Acts,” the player controls Jack Joyce who is invited back to his hometown by his best friend Paul Serene to activate and use a time machine that was developed by his brother Will Joyce. Sending Paul into the time machine creates a version of Paul that will go back to the year 1999 and create an evil corporation known as Monarch. It also gives Jack time manipulation powers, creates a rift in the universe that will eventually stop all time, and sends him on a mission to hunt down the one object that can stop this future crisis. If it sounds complicated, it's because it is—as most time travel tales are. These sort of narratives almost inherently incorporate branching paths, alternate timelines, and bifurcating decision points for characters, though the actual structure of the game compounds the complexity inherent in these stories through its mixed format and divided focus on multiple characters.

Formally, *Quantum Break* functions as both a television show and game embedded in one another. In keeping with the time travel motif, each segment of the media experience is accessible via a “Timeline” that allows the player to choose which portion of the series they wish to experience (see Fig. 6). Each video game level or “Act” consists of missions built around specific goals that lead Jack closer to getting the “Countermeasure,” a McGuffin that will stop the world from devolving into itself. In order to do this, the player controls Jack as he travels forward and backward in time encountering, allying with and combating past, present and future versions of Paul Serene, his brother Will, his chief love interest/ally Beth, and the secondary villain and day-to-day head of Monarch, Martin Hatch. The first four of these five levels all end with a “Junction” during which the player control shifts from Jack to his nemesis Paul who must make a choice based on blurry precognitions about how the events will turn out (see Fig. 7). Depending on which of the two pathways is selected, the player is then presented with two (or in later portions, three or four) versions of a 20-30-minute live-action episode of television focusing on the workers at Monarch. Each episode will have several scenes that are different depending on the choices made in the Junction point, while other scenes will remain the same regardless of choices made. In short, “While the game focuses on the hero, the episodes focus on the villains” (Campbell). This sort of bifurcation makes *Quantum Break* a universe with many characters, POVs and plotlines even though the total running experience of the combined media is approximately six hours.

The only additional official product connected to this universe is the tie-in novel *Quantum Break: Zero State* that, like the *Alan Wake* novelization, tells a similar, although significantly different, non-canon version of the events from the main game and television show. As the forward to the book by Sam Lake, the Creative Director at Remedy, states,

This is not the *Quantum Break* you have played. Is this canon? Strictly speaking, no. But, in an experience where the player gets to make choices and shape the story, in a multiverse, what isn't canon? This story contains mysteries and histories of its own. Do the revelations within these pages provide answers to the questions raised in the game? We leave that to you. (9)

Thus, while the book does hint at an interesting relationship between how continuity works in a universe that is at its core branching and multitudinous, it is anything but canon.

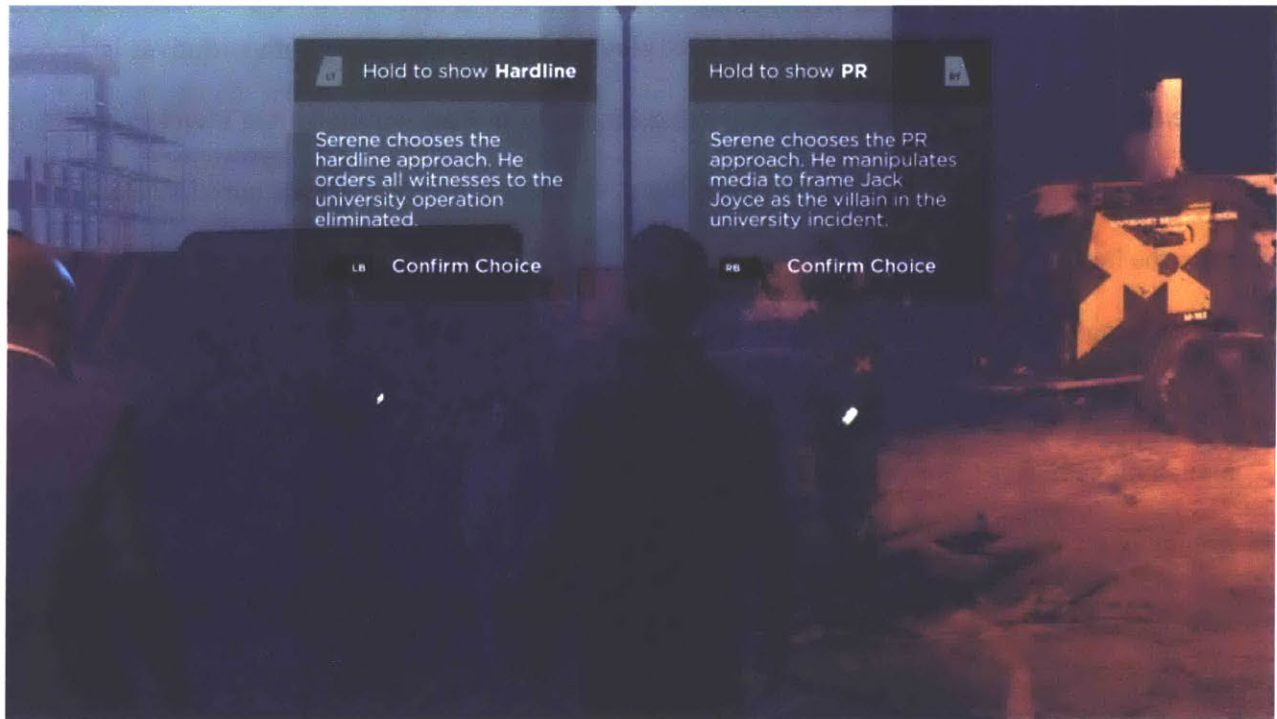


Fig. 7 A Junction point early on *Quantum Break* in which the player controls Paul Serene (“The Choices of Junction 1: Hardline/PR.”).

More than any other of the works I've focused on, *Quantum Break* is explicitly about the branching nature of storytelling and where players can fit into it. What is truly interesting about this work is that while the plot is obsessed with branching-path options, they do not change the ultimate outcome of the story, which both conflicts and aligns with common time travel tropes. By focusing on time travel, this universe highlights some of the core tensions seen in both *Mass*

Effect and *Game of Thrones*: the difficulty in respecting player choice via branching paths while trying to create a single, complete canon. At the very core of *Quantum Break*'s plotline is a protagonist, Jack Joyce, who believes he can change the way in which events of the past occur. The push and pull of this belief plays out throughout the entirety of the game and television show. But rather than actually being able to alter the timeline, this power is in the hands of the player-controlled villain rather than Jack. By locating all of the player agency in shaping the story away from the hero, the *Quantum Break* universe demonstrates the importance of not just giving additional choice but specifically where player agency in branching-path narratives is placed. Giving this agency to a controlled antagonist helps to flesh out the villain's backstory, expanding the completeness of the universe, but at the same time it focuses the narrative away from the hero, ultimately limiting the impact that the primary player character has on the world and creating a tropic narrative. In short, this unique location of agency perfectly highlights how fleshing out a consistent, complete universe can come at the cost of providing divergent, branching pathways that permeate throughout an entire world. In this way, even though the agency of the player is expanded across media, they are still unable to make any choices that change the universe at large.

Jack Joyce's Lack of Agency

Quantum Break is a unique game for many reasons, and much of the coverage of the game is concerned with its combined transmedia and branching-path nature—that is, of course, what drew me to the studying this universe in the first place. But one of the most interesting aspects of the game is where the agency in creating these multiple pathways is placed—within the antagonist. *Quantum Break* revolves around the two primary characters of Jack Joyce and

Paul Serene whose feud drives the plot and structures the wider universe. The player spends the majority of the time in the world inhabiting Jack Joyce, the evident protagonist, and using his power set to take down the evil corporation Monarch whose time manipulation antics are the fantastical heart of the universe. These powers grow rapidly throughout the game and eventually include the ability to stop time in specific areas, create a barrier to cover himself and even speedup his own temporal existence. Despite this focus on Jack, the decisions that effectively change the plotline of the game and incorporated television show are made while the player is in control of the head of Monarch, Paul Serene. This relocation of authority makes many of the choices that the player faces as Paul more difficult, helping us sympathize with the villain. It also relocates agency in the world away from the hero and instead places it in the antagonist, effectively disjoining the agency of the in-world hero from the agency of the player interacting with this world.

One of the most common aspects of building a fictional world includes giving its protagonists huge amounts of agency in shaping the space. Both the *Mass Effect* series and the *Game of Thrones* universe are centered around characters who have enough political and militaristic power to change the external world that surrounds them. *Quantum Break* on the other hand is much more concerned with the fundamental immutability of time and the surrounding universe—an interesting conceit for a game that is based on branching paths. Throughout the story, Jack Joyce is told repeatedly that no one has the ability to change the future events, but this never stops him from believing he can. For instance, a large section of the game is based on Jack's desire to go back in time and right a wrong that occurs at the very beginning: the death of his brother Will. Jack witnesses his brother being crushed by a collapsing building during the very first Act of the game, and this moment motivates much of Jack's original angst against

Monarch and Paul. Jack's pursuit of his brother's salvation continues throughout the game despite being told repeatedly that he cannot alter the timeline. Eventually after working through many obstacles and using time travel to return to the exact moment when Will supposedly died, Jack is able to save his brother, seemingly proving wrong the idea of a fixed timeline. That is until Jack discovers that his brother never actually died or as Jack and Will discuss immediately after the moment:

Jack: If what you said is true then how did I save you? I saw you die, Will.

Will: Think, Jack. You never physically saw me die, did you?

Jack: No, I watched a roof collapse on top of you—

Will: Creating the illusion of my death, yes, which brought you here to make sure it remained only an illusion.

These sort of moments where the player and protagonist are both supposed to know that they lack the ability to fully change the universe pervade throughout the time the player spends as Jack Joyce.

We are repeatedly told that this protagonist, unlike the normal heroic figure, cannot actually change any of the fundamentals of the universe, here shown through the past. Again Will explains this succinctly to Jack right after being rescued:

Will: What you have done has set in motion a chain of events that cannot be broken—and if it could be broken, it could jeopardize the entire world. We get one shot at this. There's too much at stake, Jack—

Jack: Look I know the stakes! Okay?

Will: Then you gotta let go Jack. Everything you have done to get to this place is necessary. Trust me. The past... is set.

Jack: But the future isn't...

Will: Right.

Not only in this moment is Will telling Jack that he can't change the course of the past, but he is saying that if he even tries to then there will be terrible ramifications. And though Jack is never truly able to fully imbibe this message—even at the end of the game he still believes that he has the ability to change the past—this is a message that is repeatedly relayed to player while they control Jack. Jack, like the player, has little ability to change the actual plotline of what is evolving throughout the video game portion of the narrative. This message is literalized in the decision to make Paul Serene the locus of branching paths within this universe. A decision that enhances completeness through a clever use of transmedia while diminishing the power of the player to create alternative pathways that ripple throughout the universe as a whole.

This relocation of player choice, in turn, makes sure that *Quantum Break* fails to capitalize on other potential benefits that increased interactor agency allows for. This lack of real agency for the player highlights the rigidity of the narrative that Remedy has built in the video game portions, and the story in these sections suffers because of it. The video game narrative is replete with stereotypical story elements: Both the main love interest/ally becomes the rescue object at the end of the game; the only prominent minority in the game, Hatch, is the only truly irredeemable character; and the player's only option is almost always to act violently. The relocation of agency away from the protagonist hurts not only his agency but the ability of the story to evolve in an interesting way. By contrast the anti-hero's story has much more room to incorporate fresh conceits: giving Paul a love-interest who can potentially save him; allowing his relationship with Hatch to develop in surprising ways; and even having him struggle over whether or not to use violence against Jack. These interventions, however, are minor in

comparison to the possibilities that could occur if the protagonist was given more agency in the wider universe. In the end, the decision to locate power away from the protagonist cripples the main conceit of *Quantum Break*: to allow for a more wholly integrated media experience, while also hurting its ability to tell a more interesting story.

The Familiar Transmedia Structure of Quantum Break's Branching Paths

Like many of its predecessors, the *Quantum Break* universe employs transmedia storytelling by using each piece and type of media to focus on one element of a larger story. In more typical transmedia universes such as *Mass Effect* and *Game of Thrones*, this is more visible both because these types of medias are less embedded in one another and because the choices in one type of media do not visibly change the other piece of media. However, looking past the obvious packaging of the live-action television show as one unit and the video game as another, one can see that the Junction points and television show function much more like one single package removed from the interactive gameplay. Both the Junction points and television show feature the villains of the series, appear adjacently, and are concerned much more with branching pathways than the remainder of *Quantum Break*. The system at play in the *Quantum Break* universe essentially flips on its head what we are used to seeing in branching-path, transmedia universes. In this model the typically linear media, the live-action television series, becomes branching while the typically branching media, the video game portions, become more linear. To be sure, the decisions made in the Junctions do influence moments while the player is in control of Jack, but they never change the actual outcome of any of the levels or force Jack to have to re-evaluate his goals or tactics and demonstrate the constraining of player choice in order to make a more consistent universe.

These Junctions occur at the end of most in-game levels or Acts, when the player controls Paul Serene's ability to select between two alternate versions of a timeline. In the moments where the player is in control, they must make decisions that affect both the goals of Monarch and the persecution of Jack. These can be difficult moments because they ask players to choose between making a choice that would benefit the villain they are currently inhabiting or the hero that they generally control. For instance, during the second Junction, "Personal/Business" the player must decide whether they as Paul want to interrogate Jack or leave it to their menacing second-in-command Martin Hatch. Choosing to allow Hatch to interrogate Jack means that Paul can give a speech to Monarch re-establishing his control but also puts Jack in potential danger by leaving him with Hatch. Choosing the reverse means that Hatch will gain a measure of control by filling in as speaker, though Paul is now able to ensure Jack's safety. In this Junction, the player is asked to decide if they value Jack's safety or Paul's power more. And after the choice is made, the player then receives an episode of television wherein these choices play out more or less along the lines that their precognition gave them.

But even for all of the nominal decisions that are being granted throughout this series, the player rarely has the ability to change the video game portion of the narrative in any substantive way—and thus no real agency in this universe. This is demonstrated by the final Junction choice that is made before the last Act of the video game. The last choice that the player makes as Paul Serene is again another moment where the player's loyalty to Paul or Jack is tested by choosing whether or not Paul should let himself succumb to his time-based illness. Throughout the game and the television show, the player is made aware that Paul has Chronon Syndrome, a disease that will cause him to turn into a Shifter, essentially a violent, time-displaced fiend. This last choice then is one in which the player can either sacrifice Paul to weaken Monarch or keep Paul

healthy and strengthen Monarch. But whatever choice is made here, we only truly see the ramifications of this decision through the varied scenes in the television series—such as whether one prominent Monarch employee lives on to the end of the episode or not. The player's boss battle as Jack, on the other hand, still remains the same regardless of their final Junction decision: they fight and defeat Paul who bears no outward appearance of having turned into a Shifter. In short, the Junction decisions are only seen minimally in the video game and never in a way that truly changes Jack's journey beyond which tertiary characters he interacts with. In this way, the game shows that its commitment to a branching narrative only really ever touches the villain's portion of the story and thus, the impact of these choices limits the potential for the player to have real agency in shaping the world while also demonstrating another example of completeness that limits player autonomy.

Consistency and Completeness at the Unnecessary Cost of Agency

Quantum Break is an incredible achievement in transmedia worldbuilding for what amounts to merely a six-hour experience. The universe contains not only the video game and television show, but also dozens of narrative based collectibles that expound on the story in the game. All of these elements combine to make a story that features dozens of characters, events and locations. What is more, the storyworld shown in these different media formats is highly consistent and transmutable across mediums. It is always clear which portion of the story is being told in which medium and the potentially confusing time travel elements are always efficiently summed up by in-world explanations. However, the way in which the universe remains a complete, tightly-laced, transmedia experience means that the player has little ability as a whole to truly shape the narrative, which is clearly shown in the series' ambivalent

relationship to branching pathways. As a formal storytelling tool, they are at the heart of the villains' story, but the fact that there can only be one timeline motivates the entirety of the heroes' plotline and makes sure that all truly significant moments within Jack's journey play out in the same way. The branching plotlines both give the player more control over the live-action television show and less agency in the "branching" video game than many players will be used to having in those respective mediums. In this case, we see the universe expanding while limiting player autonomy.

What's disappointing is that this choice between a consistent, complete universe and player agency is an unnecessary one. By bifurcating the player's choices, *Quantum Break* makes sure that its universe expands to cover the villains' stories while also making sure that the heroes' focuses on the immutability of time. This makes sense in theory, but is limiting to the player. Instead Remedy could have employed real agency to serve as the glue that allowed for a both complete and consistent universe. *Quantum Break* uses Junctions as the connective tissue between the Episodes and Acts when in actuality that connection acts more like a barrier. The game could have instead used the Junctions to more fully allow for player choices to flow between the two mediums. Likewise, Remedy could have instead removed the Junctions and allowed the choices to occur in the video game and then influence the television show—or vice versa. For an example of how this could work we only need to look at how the *Mass Effect* universe employs decisions between games in the main series, allowing impactful and lasting choices to permeate throughout the entire universe. In this way, player choice could have more freely traveled between the various media elements.

Quantum Break uses a truly unique form of branching-path, transmedia to flesh out its universe, but the forking nature of the series is never allowed to manifest fully into one where the

player can own the world that they have created. Of all the case studies so far, *Quantum Break* offers the greatest amount of recognition of player choices across different media formats, but ultimately fails to achieve real agency due to an unnecessary division of its story. In the Conclusion, we'll see how this interesting experiment in branching narrative could be restructured to provide the player with a greater feeling of ownership, whether by incorporating different pieces of media or rethinking its thematic underpinnings.

Conclusion: A Step Closer to Authorship

The art of worldbuilding, just like the creation it breeds, is always evolving. Since the birth of storytelling, worldbuilding has always found new ways to expand, contain and invent fictional universes for stories to take place in. As shown earlier, transmedia and branching-path narratives demarcate huge innovations in how to construct a secondary world with enough texture to feel as if it has been lived in. Both of these tools represent new ways in which to gain increased completeness in a universe, exploring multiple aspects of the world. But while powerful, they are both storied traditions whose placement of interactor have already been theorized and studied. Their combination, however, in works like *Game of Thrones*, *Mass Effect*, and *Quantum Break* demonstrate a relatively new type of worldbuilding that is still trying to understand how it can use the best aspects of each tool to bring new expansiveness to these stories. Over the hundreds of hours I spent inside these worlds, key facets and features emerged as strengths of the universes that could be taken and applied to others. At the same time, specific ways in which these universes were limited also became obvious.

In the remaining chapter, I will highlight the ways in which branching-path, transmedia universes can be constructed in the future in order to maximize the size and consistency of the world while employing real player agency as the glue that holds the universe together. These suggestions are not meant to be solutions that will instantly make any fictional universe engaging and, of course, many of them would not be able to be employed by creators working under the guise of corporations. These recommendations should instead be thought of as important concerns for those looking to construct worlds that place the player at the center of the story. When carefully considered, this type of real agency has the potential to not only create more

engaging worlds but push the interactor ever closer to the position of an author by allowing them more and more control within a fictional world.

Allowing Players to Impact Multiple Types of Media

One of the key empowerments of branching-path works are that they allow the interactor a greater measure of agency in how the stories evolve. This is as true for hypertexts as it is for *Choose Your Own Adventure Books*—the ability to experience the story in different ways is one of the core pleasures of branching-paths works. This strength of indeterminate pathways when applied to large fictional worlds though must be reexamined. In video games that allow players to make divergent choices that influence the larger world, the players gain even more agency, permitting them to not only determine their own route through the story but also how the larger universe will evolve. However, in these worlds that feature both transmedia and branching-path works, this ability to shape the larger world and story often ends at the boundaries of the piece of media, limiting the impact of the choices that the interactor makes and thus, their feeling of control over the larger world. In order to give the player even greater autonomy over these transmedia universes, their choices should influence not only the branching media that they take place in, but also the texts that surrounds these works.

This may at first seem like an extreme measure that would take an exorbitant amount of coordination, but as we see with *Quantum Break*, it is not entirely impossible. One of the core conceits of *Quantum Break* is that it managed to flip the traditional model of what is branching-path media and what is linear. This meant the creation of extra scenes for the television show that slotted in for others depending on the users' choices. This sort of model could easily be employed for works such as e-books where choices the player made could be slotted in. For

instance, imagine the hybridization of how the *Mass Effect* universe and the *Quantum Break* universe handle their linear media. *Mass Effect* avoids any mention of the player's choices in their linear media, but what if instead every time Commander Shepard appeared, the player's version of them was mentioned. This would still respect the player's choices while at the same time not creating an excessive amount of work for the creators of the once linear texts. While still not having the player's choices be the main topic, they could be referenced in a way that made the player's impact felt throughout the wider universe that is being constructed—granting them even more ownership over this world. This sort of increased complexity though would only increase the importance of greater coordination in the structural planning of the world.

Publication Order and Time with Medium

Branching-path, transmedia universes are complex worlds that rely on careful construction in order to function in an engaging and satisfying way. One way in which to help ensure the success of these worlds is to make sure that minor elements are planned carefully. Throughout my investigation of these types of fictional worlds, I noticed two small but important details that should always be understood by their creators in order to make sure that they create a sustainable universe that allows most fully for player agency.

The first of these two is the simplest and became apparent while exploring the *Quantum Break* universe. *Quantum Break* does an excellent job of using multiple types of media to construct a single universe where the pieces fit together tightly. This high level of fidelity across different mediums is something that cannot be praised highly enough with characters often wearing the same exact clothes across mediums and locations being visited in each space. But while it is a thrill to watch characters move across different mediums, one of the most difficult

aspects of interacting with the *Quantum Break* game/television show is the short duration of time granted in the new medium when shifting from one format to the other. When interacting, the user plays a 45-60-minute level before shifting to watching a 20-30-minute episode of television and then back to playing a 45-60-minute level of the video game. This pattern makes sure that the different mediums are as tightly integrated as possible. However, at the same time, it never gives the interactor enough time to truly settle into the medium that they are experiencing.

Media consumers are becoming evermore used to the idea that we can experience works over whatever duration we wish—just look at the hype around “binge-watching” television shows. The problem then with the *Quantum Break* paradigm of consumption is not that it asks the player to take in media in short amounts, it is that it demands that the player do this before moving on to the next medium. This then acts as another form of choice constriction in a type of universe identified for granting players more options. In order to guarantee the player real agency in their world, it is important that the user be allowed to experience the different mediums at their will and not restrict them even if this may slightly complicate the storytelling.

Another type of high-level planning that can allow for greater player agency in consumption is order of publication. During my *Game of Thrones* section, I talked largely about how order of publication can have unintended negative side-effects, limiting player choice and causing them to act out of knowledge of the larger universe instead of their character’s emotional state or view of the grander situation at hand. In that situation, the player’s knowledge of future events colored their choice about what their own character should have done. However, this same sort of knowledge can be used to positive effect as well, increasing the player’s engagement with the world. Telltale’s *Game of Thrones* begins with just such a moment set during the Red Wedding, which occurs towards the end of the third season of the HBO television

show. During this infamous event, heroic main characters are slaughtered along with their comrades and lovers in a brutal fashion. This violent scene is meant to be visceral and disturbing and demonstrate how diplomatic relationships can often sit on a razor's edge. By setting the first scene of the game in this same moment, Telltale skillfully recreates the terror of this act and uses it to imbue an unforgettably chilling introduction into what it means to actually have to live in this world.

During the opening level of the Telltale video game, players control a character who is soon to be swept up in the horror of this event. At first, all signs that the player is actually at The Twins for the Red Wedding are carefully downplayed, until slowly hints are doled out, and it becomes obvious where the player character is. The dramatic tension is effectively ratcheted up until it becomes dramatic irony. This is all done in order to increase the feeling that the player is entering this brutal world that they have only ever experienced before passively. In this way, the video game makes use of order of publication, knowing that the player would almost certainly have seen the Red Wedding before experiencing the game, and harnesses this knowledge to create an opening that immediately establishes their ties with the overall universe while at the same time engrossing the player in the new characters.

Careful planning of operational aspects such as time spent with each medium and order of publication, while seemingly small, can have both positive and negative effects. However, in order to guarantee the most effective type of storytelling, a worldbuilder should consider these aspects of planning as two more possible tools rather than as limiting factors. The complicated publishing schedules of multiple creative teams and types of media can be dizzying to coordinate and maintain. But if these sorts of decisions are at least kept in mind by those in charge, they can help increase the overall reception of the world and lead to greater agency of the player while at

the same time making sure that the projects are more coherently aligned. This sort of coordination is one of the core necessities of creating worlds authored by multiple voices—just one of many ways in which synchronization is important in these works.

The Importance of Thematic Cohesion

Consistency is one of the core tenants of worldbuilding that may seem more and more elusive as these worlds grow. As universes sprawl and branch, twist and turn, it's hard to predict where they'll go or what will be their next facet. But if they generate enough public interest, there will often be more. As more talent is added to them, this can bring in additional ideas, perspectives and outlooks that can infuse the world with a revitalized feeling and benefit some of the static or negative aspects of the world. For example, look at what the introduction of new writers, some of which were female, was able to accomplish in Telltale's *Game of Thrones*—even if it was limited to just the game. At the same time, while it is important to allow artists the ability and the freedom to create stories, freedom without creator understanding of how the world functions can produce not just incorrect plot and characterization but also confused attempts to capture the heart of the series.

One of the greatest issues with the *Mass Effect* universe is that some of the projects clearly suffered from a lack of oversight in their creation. These works weren't just flawed in terms of lore—though that of course didn't help—but they also failed to take into account the driving force that underlies the universe and this in turn was one of their main disappointments. It isn't surprising that the themes that underlie a universe can sometimes be forgotten—it after all requires attention and engagement with the actual universe in order to understand. This is why when creating these universes, it is important to attract talent that has some respect for the world

and have a ruling body that will allow for a minimal amount of oversight. This is nothing new. With the proliferation of shared universes, nearly every large one has some sort of governing board, but in branching-path, transmedia worlds these sort of reviewers can have the added job of making sure that these new collaborators won't damage players' investment in the world through the restructuring of the universe, thematically or otherwise.

The Underlying Structure of the Universe

Finally, of all the takeaways that I have learned while investigating, the most surprising and also the most seemingly obvious is that creators of these universes should think about the underlying structure and themes of these worlds when building them. I simply mean that a large part of what will engender the success of these branching-path, transmedia universes depends on if they actually work well with this model of worldbuilding, because when done correctly the structure should harmonize with the themes of what is being developed.

For instance, the *Mass Effect* universe, and to some extent most BioWare games, function thematically as a need to unite a diverse team in order to topple a threat or series of threats. This sort of structure works well for a branching-path, transmedia universe because it inherently calls for a diversity of stories to be told through multiple characters. These worlds are often overflowing with minor, major and side characters that have their own rich lives and background stories. At the same time, the way in which they are often centered around a big bad bolstered by minor antagonists give the narrative a drive that effectively establishes a timeline around which all the works can revolve. This mixture of a diverse cast uniting around a singular threat is nothing new to worldbuilding, but it is something that BioWare has effectively harnessed for the transmedia, interactive age.

At the same time, the way in which *Quantum Break* seemingly wants to be a time travel story in which time travel cannot change the past works against the very structure that it is seemingly embracing. This hamstring the universe in a number of ways but the most obvious is in how it effectually ties the hands of the main protagonist and in turn the player, making for a character whose agency feels brittle and confined. This could be made for an interesting turn in a linear work, but not in a branching-path one where the player has been promised a tremendous amount of latitude in constructing the universe. Considering whether or not to build a universe in a transmedia format is not unlike considering what medium to tell a story in. One must take into account what type of story best fits the medium. In much the same way it is important to think if your universe is one in which you wish to create not only a multitude of works but a multitude of pathways, characters and stories for a user to interact with. And above all, if it is one where players can become a partner in shaping the world.

Final Thoughts

As a lifelong fan, I've always been interested in the space that worldbuilders leave us, the readers, watchers and players. Some of my earliest memories revolve around recapping *Power Rangers* episodes with my own action figures standing in for the on-screen characters. But as I reconstructed them, things would inevitably change, shift and slide away from the canon that had been established on TV. This, in a way, was my introduction to branching-path, transmedia universes. As I quoted in my earlier chapter, Murray says much of the delight of agency in branching works come from “the thrill of exerting power over enticing and plastic materials” (153). These “plastic materials” are so appealing because they allow the user a measure of creation, a measure of control, and a measure of involvement in making these worlds. It was

inevitable that I be drawn to these sorts of worlds as I grew up and left my action figures behind because they too allowed for a similar measure of agency in the construction of fictional spaces.

In branching-path works, choices are the backbone of the interactor's experience, and thus must be respected if the creator is going to make sure the audience feels empowered. Authors only need to treat the player as they would any other collaborator, leaving them room to weave a story that appeals to them. This truism is only magnified in the instance of transmedia, branching-path universes where entire worlds are promised to be built around player choices. These fictional spaces, unlike our own, are constructed on an implicit agreement to grant the user something greater than agency, something closer to authorship. This slide along the scale of player agency towards authorship is only possible if builders of these branching-path, transmedia worlds undertake steps to respect player autonomy and, most importantly, never take it away once it is established. In a world that so often doesn't respect an individual's right to tell their own story, this becomes an imperative: to allow players to retain their agency as the world they are playing in expands. In short, agency, once given, should never be taken away.

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