Honours Dissertation

Tragic Games, Not Serious Games

(Exegesis)

Ellen Marie Jurik

Student No. 12626744

Supervisor: Dr Helen Merrick

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is a true account of my own research and contains no work that has previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution, other than work which may have been produced by me in preparatory Honours coursework.

Ellen Jurik

I declare this work is now ready for submission

Dr Helen Merrick

Abstract

The interest in games that are socially responsible while still being interesting and enjoyable has led to an investigation into adapting one of the oldest documented and still enjoyed forms of cautionary tales: Aristotelian tragedy. By reviewing current academic writing on tragedy as games as well as recently developed games, I was able to identify the limitations of current design trends. This focused my research into theatrical tragedy itself, from which I developed a set of design constraints or guidelines to be used to avoid common pitfalls when designing a game intended to act as a cautionary interactive game.

Acknowledgements

To my parents, who have supported me through this process; to my long-distance programmer boyfriend, who endured a number of fearful questions about the worth of both my research and myself; to my supervisor, who supported me beautifully by letting me explore just enough to not get lost, followed by being a great critic; to those who taught me about game design and development, who taught me how much work goes into it and how ruthless a designer must be with their own work.

Thank you.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Electronic games are like any media form in that they have the capacity to implicitly reinforce or subvert the dominant ideology of the culture from which they emerge. Games academics have become interested in the potential for games to be used for education, both formal and incidentally. This has manifested as a particular interest in Serious Games games[1], as well as the emergence of Games Development programs at universities, complemented by Ludology as an academic discipline focused on the critical study of games. Reflecting back into games development is interest in expanding gameplay and genre to reflect the moral and ethical obligation of developers to their players. Two opposing schools of thought have formed—the developers drawing inspiration from the success of film and television, and academics reacting against this and pushing for a focus on the unique capacity for simulation as exhibited in electronic games.

As a games developer with a background in theatre, I was acutely aware of the various incarnations of morality plays—plays intended to educate morally—and their strengths and weaknesses, as well as the downfalls of current thinking informing game design. Tragedy has remained fairly true to the form originally observed by Aristotle in ancient Greece, despite its various incarnations. It thus became clear that adapting Aristotle's *Poetics* from theatre to electronic games would provide a strong alternative. This brings me to the focus of my research: how is it possible to recreate the experience of theatrical tragedy in electronic games?

Renowned designer Will Wright comments on the long-standing desire for cautionary tales on a panel on games for social and personal change during the 2009 Game Developers Conference in San Francisco.

> *By and large people enjoy failure in games more than success. They want interesting failure. We might want to focus on representing states on what we want society to avoid: if players can play with that in a positive fashion, they can avoid it in real life* (Taylor).

Possibly one of the earliest forms of cautionary tale is tragedy as observed and defined by Aristotle. Will Wright lists a number of narratives which he deems cautionary tales, and yet many of them could easily be regarded as Tragedy. They all warn of the emerging temptations of the culture in which they were written, with one scapegoat: the tragic hero. Yet all the texts he lists are novels and films; there are no renowned games which have been, in Wright's words, "powerful in changing the course of history."

[1] Serious Games are games designed for more than pure player enjoyment. They can be used for training purposes, or for personal and social change.

According to Aristotle, “imitation comes naturally to human beings from childhood ... so does the universal pleasure in imitations,” and that it is through imitation that we begin to learn (Aristotle Poetics 6). However, we are unable to imitate something we have not first seen. For this reason, encouraging a person to play through a simulation of a situation for which they have no basis for imitation can cause alienation. Sometimes, seeing an imitation is just as effective as performing mimicry or otherwise creating an imitation. Aristotle explains that, “people take delight in seeing images; what happens is that as they view them, they come to understand and work out what each thing is” (7). Therefore, the desire to not only perform, but also observe mimicry of all things, both attractive and repulsive, is not only important but also enjoyable, as “understanding is extremely pleasant” (7). This understanding of the enjoyableness of imitation sets up the understanding for Aristotle’s explanation of tragedy:

> *Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the catharsis of such emotions* (10).

In this particular translation, *catharsis* is translated into “purification,” although the etymology of the term and its prior and subsequent uses call into question the exact definition and thus result. Nevertheless, it is important to note that there is often an incorrect assumption that *catharsis*, that is, the purgation or purification of some form of pollutant from the human being, is either the primary function of, or synonymous with, tragedy. Aristotle refers to *catharsis* again in *The Politics* when referring to the capacity of music to elicit or rouse the emotions of the listener (Aristotle The Politics). Meanwhile, Aristotelian tragedy focuses on human suffering, and as mentioned before, brings about the *catharsis* of pity and fear. When attempting to identify a tragedy, there are two important factors to consider: the structure (or what I prefer to term the components), as well as its purpose. Aristotle’s *Poetics* highlights the key structural aspects or key events, required to cause the “pity and fear” that are considered the emotions of tragic catharsis. The first event is *hamartia*, the poor choice made in good conscience. This is often attributed to *hubris*, which is colloquially translated as “excessive pride,” but I prefer to use “audacity,” as it is a more action-oriented term. When the audience sees the Tragic Hero commit *hamartia*, they recognise it due to the knowledge they possess which the hero does not—a situation best described as tragic irony. They then begin to feel fear for the moment when the hero will learn of the magnitude of his or her error. This occurs with *anagnorisis*—recognition or revelation—which is followed by *miasma*—self-pollution or disgust—and evidenced through *peripeteia*—a reversal of thought, action or fortune. This emotional journey from fondness or empathy with a character transitioning through fear and concluding in pity

marks the emotional purification regarded in this instance as the *catharsis* of tragedy. The purpose of tragic catharsis is twofold: firstly, on a superficial note, it is pleasurable to experience emotions that have no real-world ties; secondly, it is pleasurable to gain understanding of a person whose actions inadvertently cause their own downfall, their story acting as an emotionally-driven caution against some aspect of the culture in which it was written and/or performed.

Adapting the enjoyable emotion-inducing structure or components of tragedy to games allows the potential to employ catharsis as a cautionary narrative to a normalised but dysfunctional part of the player's culture. My aim in this project is to explore the possibility of the creation of a tragic narrative experience in an electronic game. I have chosen to develop a set of design constraints to inform the development of such a game. Brenda Laurel offers a reflection on Rollo May's writing on the desire and need for constraints:

> *When a person is asked to "be creative" with no direction or constraints whatsoever, the result is, according to May, often a sense of powerlessness or even complete paralysis of the imagination. Limitations—constraints that focus creative efforts—paradoxically increase our imaginative power by reducing the number of possibilities to us* (Laurel 101).

My interpretation of my own constraints—the creative piece accompanying this exegesis, is therefore in no way the only illustration or even the best illustration of how tragedy can be portrayed in games. Additionally, as it remains suspended at the metaphoric end of its first trimester, its effectiveness remains speculative rather than certain. The relationship between the creative piece and exegesis has been symbiotic. For my creative piece, I have chosen not to create a game demo, as the time and technical constraints I face would not allow me to produce a full-length game, which is the only way I would be able to adequately depict the full form of a tragedy. Instead, a written design document—paramount to the development of a larger-scale project—has been developed, both inspired by and informing my research direction. The exegesis reflects my process of reaching the constraints I used in developing my creative piece. The first half focuses on the academic material already written on adapting tragedy to games, while the second section reviews two recently developed games which deal with the concept of *hamartia*, followed by writing on theatrical tragedy itself. I conclude by drawing from my research a number of guidelines or constraints for a developer to follow.

Background: Academic Writing on Tragedy in Games

The desire to develop the emotional and critical depth of electronic games has been explored within academic writing to some extent for the last nineteen years. Brenda Laurel's discussion of catharsis is the first attempt at applying Aristotle to game design. This exploration of

the capacity for games to create emotion in the player has become the Holy Grail of game developers, with increasing amounts of literature being written on adapting conventions of prose and film that have proven successful in eliciting a variety of emotional responses in their respective media. This writing has been readily absorbed by game designers, with seemingly equal amounts of success and failure. Henry Jenkins argues in his paper published in the anthology *First Person* that it is this desire to rely on adapting proven formulae from cinema to games that has triggered the debate of ludology versus narratology, of games as play versus games as more traditional storytelling:

> *Much of the writing in the ludologist tradition is unduly polemical: they are so busy trying to pull game designers out of their "cinema envy" or define a field where no hypertext theorist dare to venture that they are prematurely dismissing the use value of narrative for understanding their desired object of study* (Jenkins 120).

Gonzalo Frasca states in his essay, "Simulation versus Narrative: An Introduction to Ludology," that game development should include narrative as one aspect of its approach, focusing on games as simulation, not representation. Frasca argues that the flaw of relying on traditional storytelling to inform game design is that it "is based on semiotic representation, while videogames also rely on simulation," and that in narrative, there are "actions and descriptions," while in games there is "how [an agent or object] conducts itself in relationship with the player and the environment (behaviour). In temporal terms, narrative is about what already happened while simulation is about what could happen" (Frasca "In First Person").

As part of his explanation of games as simulation, Frasca compares Roger Caillois's definitions of the Latin word *ludus*, game, with the Greek *paidia*, play (Frasca "Simulation Versus Narrative" 8-9). Frasca describes *paidia* as a form of play wherein there is no set rules, no endgame, no winning or losing. *Ludus* is a game, it structurally has a beginning, wherein the rules are formed; a middle, where the game is played; and an endgame, where the winner is decided upon, based on their capacity to fulfil the conditions of winning. This follows Aristotle's concept of a three-act structure, which is essentially a feature of successful narrative. Frasca notes that it is the simple binary logic of *ludus* that makes it both easy and successful to design with. He criticises this as therefore only being applicable to Aristotelian narratives or what he calls, "Hollywood Endings," and seems to view the win/lose end state of the narrative as being shared with the player character's personal role (8). I can understand, therefore, his inability to view a narrative-based game as being conducive to creating a game with a greater purpose than gratifying the player's capabilities.

Despite his connection with ludology, Frasca focuses on the potential of games that would be classed as *paidia*, in other words, what are known as god-games or sandbox games: simulations.

Frasca proposes that simulations make it possible "for players to analyze and question their ideological assumptions," in an essay featured at Siggraph 2001. He proposes a theoretical game design based on a variation of Will Wright's popular "Sims" line, combined with some of the features of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed: his argument is that gamers aren't actually concerned about the personal lives of their player-characters, but instead desire an unobtrusive puppet to play through (Frasca "Rethinking Agency" 2-3). He notes that Wright's Sims games separate gamers from their characters; thus, the perfect method of character exhibition is found. Using the game's potential for user generated content, Frasca proposes a game where players can create, edit, and upload their own Sims characters to create virtual situations they can observe and ideally learn about. He describes his design as being a "meta-simulation […] a simulation that allows simulations," and counts this as directly inspired by Forum Theatre, one part of the Theatre of the Oppressed (Frasca "Rethinking Agency" 6). However, Frasca recognises that an individual's intention comes into play here, and that shared user content does not always constitute shared learning experiences. With the advent of *The Sims 3* release this year, the potential for Frasca's "Sims of the Oppressed" has never been greater. Recently, Robin Burkinshaw created a blog to track his two homeless Sims, Alice and Kev. He says,

> *I have attempted to tell my experiences with the minimum of embellishment. Everything I describe in here is something that happened in the game. What's more, a surprising amount of the interesting things in this story were generated by just letting go and watching the Sims' free will and personality traits take over* (Burkinshaw).

While this honest journalism implies a real account of the emotional nature of observing Alice and Kev, it is impossible to ignore Burkinshaw's authorial position and selective framing. We are not watching an in-game replay, we are reading Burkinshaw's mediated account of the most significant or interesting events. Another player may download Alice and Kev, starve Alice to death, and encourage Kev get a job or a lover to have another child to, before having the lover leave. The player's individual intentions and fantasies are played out, rather than always being Frasca's intended, socially-challenging ones. It is Burkinshaw's retelling, his narrativisation of events, that leads to an emotional experience for readers[2]—please note I use readers instead of players—not the game experience itself.

The educational potential of any form of media can be compromised by focusing on making it edutainment. By failing to view electronic games as first and foremost entertainment media, they can become nothing more than a loosely veiled lecture, with identifiable set goals and values which

[2] At the conclusion of the blog on October 11, 2009, readers commented asking for a sequel, and thanking him for his story.

are transparently dogmatic. This can cause alienation, offence, or frustration in a player whose values contradict those promoted in such a game. Additionally, the assumption that a linear, narrative-driven game is more likely to reveal a designer's agenda is false. Narratives are enjoyable. The Aristotelian "Hollywood ending," criticised by Frasca is the point where further events are unnecessary; not, as he claims, forced into a necessarily binary win/lose ending, dissipating any potential for critical thought. The genres of drama and tragedy use a character placed within a morally discordant society—whether it is the society that we recognise or the character with whom we identify—leading to the reader's active critique of the culture in which the narrative is set. When mirroring this in a game, players can recognise that they are playing through a set story in a set world. The opacity of the clash between the values of the hero and society is accepted as secondary to the gameplay, which leads to an implicit critique of something that the viewer may have normalised. Yet an open-ended "sandbox" world often relies on a more complex understanding of the underlying structures, leading to a more obvious and immediate need to (temporarily) acquire morals or ethics that may clash with the player's own. If the game is designed to mimic or represent the player's world, or their assumed version of the world, then the game has more scope to subtly undermine various aspects which the player, as real-world player/actor, may take for granted, or else the satire may be lost, and the game merely reinforces the normalisation of the very issue which the designer attempts to critique. Alternately, a world which presents a situation intended to illuminate a cultural environment of which the player might be ignorant risks doing nothing but alienating the player. Giving the player the potential to step into the role of active audience member ala Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed does not remove the potential for a satisfying conclusion, unless, of course, the game is so inaccessible to the audience member that they simply switch off and walk away[3].

In game studies, the most common writing on tragedy and catharsis come, like Frasca—whose previously cited writing culminated in his 2003 M.Sc—from the academic research conducted at Georgia Institute of Technology, under the supervision of former MIT researcher and current GIT Professor, Janet Murray. Her book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, is one of the seminal works of interdisciplinary interactive media theory. Murray uses her background in English Literature to inform her research and teaching syllabus. She does not believe that games should merely be traditional narratives, transposed, and instead focuses on their interactive qualities in order to inspire new methods of communication. She asserts that games have the capacity to act as teacher

[3] Boal's theatre was intended to be used to find empowering solutions for the issues of the oppressed party in a situation; in other words, the purpose was to find the "Hollywood ending" which the oppressed party felt was lacking.

and counsellor through their ability for *transformation*: “The goal of mature fictional environments should not be to exclude antisocial material but to include it in a form in which it can be engaged, remodelled, and worked through” (173). Challenging the player’s perception of their social or cultural beliefs and situation can lead to a shift in their assumptions and thus allow for psychological, social, and cultural growth. Murray tackles ways of presenting the issue of suicide, which she deems, or wishes to present, as an example of a tragic event. I would argue that a suicide is not in itself a tragic plot. It could be a self-sacrificing conclusion to a hero’s journey. Murray recognises, as Aristotle himself states, "one cannot undo traditional stories ... but one has to discover for oneself how to use even the traditional stories well" (Aristotle Poetics 23). Therefore, while the concept of suicide itself isn’t *tragic*, the designer or storyteller’s craft is to portray it in such a way as to evoke the pity and fear which forms tragic *catharsis*. Murray puts forth three proposals of how to deal with this subject in an interactive electronic format. Her first proposal is to create a hypertext exploration of the suicide victim’s mind (176). She proposes that this electronic “stream-of-consciousness novel” or “soliloquy” would work to illustrate the obsessive, cyclic thought process that leads ultimately to the conclusion of suicide, a situation that could be portrayed in real-time (Murray) (176-7). “The reader would have both enacted and witnessed the decision and would feel the sense of understanding, inevitability, and sorrow that we call catharsis” (177). This does not strike me as structurally tragic, however, and is more akin to horror, as the aim appears to be to invoke the *anagnorisis*—that is, within the player themselves, without offering any opportunity for *peripetea*. This may leave the player disgusted and even sympathetic towards their player-character (in this case, they represent the conscious being navigating the cyclic suicidal thought bubbles that are sent to them), but I disagree that it would evoke *understanding*. The natural inclination of the player would be to escape this cycle, and the incapacity to do so would be ultimately frustrating. Additionally, if the character’s thought process spirals back towards depression and suicide at every turn, the player may easily dismiss this character as being overly pessimistic, thus alienating themselves from the player-character’s emotions.

Murray’s second suggestion is a voyeuristic investigation into the minds of those most affected by the suicide (177). The player could choose whose mind to investigate, following a number of them until the simulation ends. “Each separate viewing would provide its own experience of catharsis, but no single one would feel complete” (178). But in this situation, who becomes the tragic hero? Is it everyone apart from the suicide victim, as they all begin to blame themselves? If each character expresses grief and regret over a choice they feel that caused the suicide to occur, what purpose does this have? The third and final attempt at the suicide tragedy is a simulation of the victim’s final time on earth (178). This simulation places the player in the role of what could be

imagined as a demigod, capable of influence but not ultimate control over the situation or conclusion. The player could replay the situation, exploring different paths but ultimately finding that the conclusion is the same. She says, "The tragedy of the situation would arise from a demonstration of the ways in which people unwittingly play into destructive patterns, sometimes from the best on intentions" (179).

These "kaleidoscopic" simulations and interactive hypertext narratives, Murray claims, gives the player an opportunity to exhaust every option of intervention and gain greater insight into the process of a tragic hero's decision (180). But would this repetitive action repeatedly bring forth the pity and fear required for the enjoyable purgation of those emotions? Does this offer what Murray herself claims is the lure of games, that "they offer us the chance to erase memory, to start over, to replay an event and try for a different resolution" (175)? The very point of tragedy is that it stems from an error made in good intention, and to illuminate this future path and change the hero's action would destroy the tragedy itself. Dramatic irony is important for the viewer to experience the "fear" that is the foundation of catharsis. The focus on the process necessarily cheapens the tragic hero's *harmatia*, and places their choice and the tragedy's conclusion in the realm of fate. It ceases to be an incorrect choice, and begins to become an unavoidable end; the horror which the hero feels when they experience their *anagnorisis* can never occur, as there is no contrasting path which they could have taken.

In his 2004 Master's project, Danny Muller of Georgia Institute of Technology wrote on creating *catharsis* through tragedy and its potential application to games. He focuses on *catharsis* rather than tragedy. He cites Brenda Laurel's definition, drawn from her application of Aristotle's *Poetics* to human-computer interaction in her book, *Computers as Theatre*¸ in which she emphasises *catharsis* as being the pleasurable experience of emotions, which may or may not in themselves be pleasurable (Laurel 30-31, 121). As a result, Muller falls prey to what I believe is one of the greatest setbacks to incorporating tragedy into games: the use of martyrdom to evoke grief, awe, and sorrow (Muller 1, 43, 56). He also focuses heavily on film as his influence, both screenwriting techniques as well as production values used for visual communication (1, 5-23). This includes *mise-en-scene* and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey* (13-15). While he concedes the differences between the linearity of film and interactivity of games, he returns to, "the principles of screenwriting and mise-en-scene [...] to create catharsis in a game" (42). This mindset, especially the use of Campbell's work, is commonly found within game writing guides in design books[4]. This leads to confusion between an

[4] To give a few examples: *Chris Crawford, Chris Crawford on Game Design (Boston ; Indianapolis, Ind.: New Riders, 2003). Chris Crawford, Chris Crawford on Interactive Storytelling (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2005). Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams, Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams on Game Design, Nrg (Indianapolis,*

epic or romantic hero and a tragic hero. It is not surprising, then, that Muller falls back to the "buddy movie model," and martyrdom to evoke catharsis: "when the leopard sacrifices herself to save the man from certain death, it is my hope that a cathartic response will be evoked in the player" (43). While this is an effective technique for encouraging empathy with a character and evoking grief when the player's buddy martyrs themselves, it has the capacity to really only perform one moral lesson: sacrifice is a noble but often necessary act when used to aid the hero on their path to success.

Theorising a concept is quite different to developing it enough to be put into production by a multidisciplinary team. The issues that academic papers reveal will be different to those seen in developed and released games. With this in mind, I now survey two independent games released this year which have both attempted to deal with tragic events: *The Path* by Tale of Tales; and *Braid* by Number None.

Current Stance: Incarnations of Tragedy in Games

Recent independent game, *The Path,* is inspired by the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood.* The game allows you to consecutively play as each of six sisters, aged nine to nineteen, who, through encountering the wolf—transformed into a symbol for each individual sister's *hamartia*—experience *miasma*, or "pollution." The player is shown clearly where the wolf is, and the situation is set up to feel eerie and foreboding. This is setting up the dramatic/tragic irony and then encouraging the player to exhibit forced ignorance so that they may perform *hamartia* and choose to encounter and be ravaged by the wolf. There is only one "wolf" that creates a more real *hamartia*, as the wolf does not look dangerous at all—she is a playful girl around the same age as the sister who encounters her. She also resembles another girl who, in herself, is not dangerous and can be helpful to the player.

If the player chooses to interact with the Wolf, the player then sees a shift in the visual style and tone of the game, and they are delivered to their Grandmother's house, wherein they are presented with a passive ghost-train style experience, littered with images relating to their particular vice. They may look around to some extent, and must repeatedly press a key to advance along the set path through the house to Grandmother's room. This is a clear visual representation of *miasma*, and calls to mind Macbeth's line, the epitome of defeat against their own destiny, "I am in blood, stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er" (Shakespeare 3.4.135–37). Described by the developers as "a short horror game," *The Path* forces the player into a Tragic experience, by telling them that arriving to Grandmother's house without encountering the

Ind.: New Riders, 2003). Lee Sheldon, Character Development and Storytelling for Games (Boston, MA: Thomson Course Technology, 2004).

wolf means that they fail that stage, and they must repeat (Tale of Tales). They are advised with such phrases as, “You know what you must do.” Because the player cannot advance without making the “wrong” choice—which, in this circumstance, makes it the right choice—the sense of *peripetea* and *anagnorisis* is lost after playing through the first girl’s journey correctly. All of the actions which the girls choose are also positioned to be against the player’s better judgement. There is no reward for foresight, no reward for correct choice. The reward is the punishment of the horrific and disturbing visit to Grandmother’s house. While the game certainly evokes fear, it offers merely terror and horror –the catharsis of a horror film, lacking the pity which is the hallmark of a good tragedy.

Braid is a game that is about *hamartia*, *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*: error, recognition, and reversal of action, respectively. It features a very clever game mechanic which allows players to rewind their actions. This mechanic becomes a tool the player must use in order to solve puzzles and collect puzzle pieces. It sets up the final level, which, according to the game’s logic, is World One: the first event in the story. When the player successfully navigates their character, Tim, to the end of this level, time suddenly stops and the player must rewind the footage. Suddenly, Tim’s role changes from rescuer to tyrant, in a clever moment of *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia.* During the following epilogue, Tim’s story is communicated to the player as literary parts of a puzzle, mimicking the theme of collecting puzzle pieces to complete each World, revealing the game’s theme of regret. While the game fosters the pity for the player-character that *The Path* failed to create, there is no fear of an outcome or horrific repercussions. The ending has a poignant feel, but no *catharsis*; the player is more likely to find themself admiring the clever game design than expressing a release of emotion over the narrative’s events.

However, there is one design flaw that can cause the player to unwittingly become a tragic hero: to collect a star which reveals more of the story, the player must put one of the puzzles together incorrectly. If, however, the player does not realise this and puts the puzzle together, they cannot later incorrectly put it together, as the correctly placed puzzle pieces snap together permanently. Here is real *hamartia*- a poor choice made with limited knowledge and good intentions. The player is the tragic hero who reads about collecting stars and realises their error in attempting to finish the game as quickly as possible. The reaction to this of both myself and another player was, “If only I’d known, I would have done it differently. But I can’t be bothered going back and playing it again!” Unfortunately, this seemed to clash with the theme of revesting mistakes. This made the reaction even worse. While I think of *Braid* fondly for its interesting rewind mechanic, I did not enjoy the feeling that I had caused myself to fail, and the only way to fix it would be to start over completely.

The various methods of infusing tragedy and *catharsis* into games have thus far led to a limited yet contradictory approach: keep the player in focus, and overtly illustrate the situation to educate them. Obviously the player wants to be the central character, as players have generally become accustomed to playing the protagonist, the hero. Yet, a game that encourages the player to lose through living out a tragedy themselves, surely risks creating a tragedy where the tragic hero is the development team, rather than a fictional character. To survive this requires an understanding of what constitutes an enjoyable tragedy, as well as its purpose and how it functions. Blindly designing a game based on my own assumptions would surely cause me to make unnecessary mistakes. It is therefore important to survey current assumptions of tragedy in electronic games, as well as referring to Aristotle's *Poetics*, which is the first study of the most successful tragedies.

Early Observations: Aristotle on Tragedy

Despite the various plots, structures, techniques, characters and settings of tragedy, the theme is more often than not that of weighing up the ethics of the society, the ethics of the gods, and an individual's *auto-nomie*, their self-invented laws (Vernant 281). Jennifer Wallace discusses the social and political environment surrounding Ancient Greek and Shakespearean tragedy as being one of rapid change and contradictory beliefs (Wallace 22, 44). She theorises that it is perhaps because of this that tragedy emerged, in an attempt to explore, destabilise and restructure the interpersonal society. The tragic hero was the one who questioned the society in which their story is set, and there always comes a time when they make a choice. This choice, inevitably, is *hamartia*—it is always the wrong choice.

The breaking of *nomos*, the laws of the Gods, results in *miasma*, or human pollution (Wallace 15). This miasma can be portrayed physically as sickness or decay, or can manifest emotionally as shame or guilt in a hero. Wallace cites a passage in Sophocles' *Oedipus* where he and the chorus attempt to imagine a world wherein the Gods do not react to hamartia—an act of poor judgement—or punish it; "In that hypothetical situation, members of the chorus suggest, they could not continue as a chorus, they would lose their very identity and become nothing, nobody" (16) This suggests that should the *diké*—justice—of the gods fail, the chorus would have no place to enter into society and live according to its laws. This miasma is implicit punishment, fear of the repercussions that may occur as a result of being seen by the gods. However, these characters were completely incapable of knowing whether the gods were even there, as shown by the appeals made by Hecuba to the gods who have, unbeknownst to her, abandoned her and Troy, in Euripedes' *The Trojan Women* (17). This relationship between the visible human subject and the invisible gods of legend call to mind what Foucault writes of the prisoner in the Panopticon: "He is seen, but he does

not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault 200). How could this portrayal of a superhuman justice work in any way other than that of the Panopticon, rendering its gods omniscient? The tragic hero and the chorus both admit the fear and guilt of being seen. This is the true *miasma*.

The hero's self-questioning and questioning of his Gods and City are played out in a hypothetical situation, under the gaze of a chorus whom Nietzsche, in his The Birth of Tragedy, concluded was "a symbol of the crowd in a Dionysiac state" (44). The Dionysiac state to which Nietzsche refers is simply the state of being at the most heightened, emotional, animalistic form of man—being satyrs in worship of Dionysus, free of the cold rationality of Apollo. This troupe of actors performed the role of both creating the backdrop for the tragedy by drawing the audience in, as well as being the equivalent of a prompt for the emotional and a rational reaction which the real audience should have. The chorus is not the ideal audience, but rather an audience who focuses on the laws of the City, somewhere between the watchfulness of the real audience, and an informed actor. The chorus both chides the hero for his wrongdoing, and sympathises with their plight. If they did not, there would be no social reaction to the hero's actions. In this way, it proves impossible for the Greek Tragic Hero to exist without the external observation and impressions of the Gods and the Chorus. In addition to the chorus, there may be portrayals of various Gods, whose personal agendas and judgements are passed on the characters and events of the tragedy.

Instead of divine justice, Shakespeare's tragic heroes understand their own error—*anagnorisis*—and while they react in response to this—*peripetea*—representatives from the government body take action to resolve the disruption that, by now, has reached its eventual end. The *anagnorisis* in Macbeth, for example, is accompanied by a fear of this restabilisation, a sense that they are now accountable to society, which will not look upon them kindly. Wallace argues that this eventual conclusion is less about preventing the depicted society from changing, and instead, "supposedly brought the audience back to a comforting sense of normality, which had been disturbed during the course of the play" (Wallace 61). Regardless, it is a fear of being visible, being accountable, that drives the *peripetea* of the play and appeals to the audience's fear for the consequences. We, as audience, watch their fearful flailing, pitying their desperation. Although the tragic hero appears early in the piece to be able to escape an omnipotent gaze of a lawful force, his self-knowledge places him in a situation whereby his eventual visibility is recognised.

It is important to understand that what the tragic hero is punished for is not their specific actions, but the *hubris* that drove them to make that incorrect choice, isolated from the influence of the laws of their gods or society. Use of the word *hubris* today is often aimed towards a proud, self-righteous and arrogant individual, and yet its true meaning is probably closer to extreme audacity,

especially in regards to following their society laws, or the laws of the Gods—their culture's moral code. Hellenistic society valued moderation of all virtues, encouraging neither a deficiency nor an excess of any one part of a subject's temperament (Nietzsche 26). This sensible system of ethics was said to please the rational god, Apollo, while the theatre was said to express emotions and thus be pleasing to Dionysus. When the hero of a Hellenistic tragedy suddenly ceases following the laws imposed on him, he begins questioning his own choices.

So suspicious were the Hellenist Greeks of any form of deviation or excess, that they were likely to *ostracise*—cast out from society—a *pharmakos*, a subject they believed had a suspicious amount of good luck, or had become too successful; they did so because they believed that this individual would then bring bad luck, and that expelling them would prove *cathartic* to their society (Vernant 275-276). While it may seem that Greek tragedy focused on individuals whose character was flawed and whose behaviour was undesirable, it is important to highlight that Aristotle believed, "Tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and life" (Aristotle Poetics 11). Hellenist Greece's suspicious attitude lends itself very well to the kind of situation which would be presented in a tragic plot: a *pharmakos*, for example, may well be an individual expressing *hubris*, the significance of the results of their actions being the symptom of their disregard for the rest of their society.

Tragedy is appreciated for its capacity to warn, educate and discipline the audience about its society's moral code. It presents characters that make what they consider a good decision, but due to their judgement being clouded by hubris—this is most often manifest through following emotion rather than rational intellect— they take the wrong path with ultimately disastrous results. The audience is invited to indulge in a story fuelled by emotion, which they are encouraged to respond to via their own emotional *catharsis*. Part of the self-inflicted agony of the audience member is being in possession of the kind of omniscience regarded as Tragic Irony. The audience experiences fear of the moment when the tragic hero experiences *anagnorisis*: the point where the true situation and its repercussions are revealed, and thus the tragic irony is lifted. It is at this moment when the audience not only begins to feel pity for the hero as he or she responds to their horrific truth, but also, as Alain de Botton reveals, "fear for oneself based on identification" (159). To remove the audience member's identification with the hero, as is featured in Brecht's epic theatre in an attempt to encourage a critical, rational reaction to the narrative, removes the potential for that final stage of selfish fear, which works as a form of discipline. It is important to highlight the use of *identification*; David Konstan, researcher of emotions in ancient Greece, states that Aristotle believed that pity was reserved for, "those kind of evils that may afflict us *or ours*," while misfortune happening to those whom we love or are close to evokes horror, "And horror, Aristotle observes,

tends to drive out pity" (14). We must be capable of imagining ourselves in a similar situation, even if we do not believe we would act the same way. Likewise, giving an audience member the potential to actually destroy the tragic irony by pre-empting *hamartia* would undermine the narrative's potential to quash the audience member's *hubris*.

Taking into consideration the delicate composition and requirements of tragedy, the constraints I developed for my concept of a game on tragedy differs significantly from those theorised by academics or developed independently in 2009. I intend to take the focus of the narrative away from the player, going so far as removing their control over it—not through enforced linearity for the player, but rather through a deterministic narrative for the Tragic Hero. Additionally, the purpose is not to educate with cold rationality, but rather through becoming emotionally involved with the story. Non-existent, emergent, fragmented and ironic narrative structures only serve to break the fearful anticipation of *anagnorisis*.

Design Constraints: The How-To Guide

Constraints form a very important part of the game design process. The design team is always fed with a variety of constraints from the product owner (publisher, executive producer, or client) as well as other developers such as programmers and artists, and even from player feedback, before they even get to their own game design theories and methods. While this may appear stifling and uninspiring, the process becomes more game-like itself, with the constraints as the rules the designer must follow in order to win. It is also far more productive for a designer to be spending their time writing about something they are confident will be incorporated into the game, which makes it a far less demoralising process.

It is not uncommon to see similar "guidelines" for story-writing and character development in books and articles discussing game development. Of these resources, a great many reference the structuralist narratology made useful for films,[5] developed from Joseph Campbell's Monomyth, Gustav Freytag's Pyramid, and even an oddly interpreted snippet from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Rather than revise these methods of storytelling and their suitability for interactive media, I wish to form my own system or list of constraints which a developer must work within in order to develop a tragedy in the form of an electronic game. The function and mechanics of tragedy will be used to develop a picture of the necessary components for adaptation, and form the basis of my constraints.

[5] Many games writers have been programmers or screenwriters, most likely due to lack of funding and lack of tradition, respectively.

Conclusion: The Constraints

As previously indicated, my conclusions manifest in the form of constraints for the game product. In this way, the designer has freedom to create a game with any number of possibilities, and still theoretically evoke a tragic state. The tragic game has the freedom to follow whatever form it desires, free to remain game-like without creating the need to mimic film, theatre, novels, or in some cases even other games.

The first and possibly the most likely to challenge developers' perceptions is the constraint that **the player must not be the Tragic Hero**. The player must be free to observe the Hero—and this means that they cannot be the focus of the narrative. However, this risks creating an overly passive experience for the player. Therefore, **the player must have a secondary, parallel "quest" or set of in-game objectives independent of the Tragic Hero**. But the player's journey must not be too separate or disconnected from the Tragic Hero. This **Tragic Hero must be someone with whom a player can identify**. This means that he or she must give the player no reason to want to condemn their actions, so as to inspire pity and fear that a similar situation might happen to them, as **true *hamartia* can only occur when the choice appears harmless**. It is important that **the player must not become too close to the Tragic Hero**, lest they experience horror instead of pity. If necessary, **the player must be able to interact with the Tragic Hero, without being able to break the tragic irony**. Similarly, **the player's success must have no relation to the Tragedy's plotline**.

As for the content and story of the game, it must deal with a conflict of the morals or ethics occurring in the society of its intended audience. This means that the game must have a target market, with an appropriate lesson and suitability of content. It is important to remember that, traditionally, a tragedy encourages societal stability, discouraging radicals. This does not mean that it is impossible to create a critique of society and not the individual, but instead to act as a warning that going against society will lead to ostracism. In order for the *hamartia* to occur, the Tragic Hero must, for a time, feel free of the constraints and expected behaviour of their society. And in order to inspire fear and pity, the Tragic Hero must feel that he and his indiscretion have become visible and he may be punished. Finally, the game must conclude in a manner which suggests that the status quo of society is reinstated, usually through the intervention of a higher or external force.

The implementation of these constraints is necessarily an iterative process. How I chose to develop these into my own design is not necessarily the best or only method of depicting tragedy by following these guidelines. I considered a wide variety of options, but many would have required an in-depth investigation into the underlying political or social statement which it would make. If the constraints dictate the player's character must be incapable of interfering with the tragic hero, then, how can the player be constrained, and from a narrative perspective, how is this explained? The

removal of the option to communicate must be justified for the player. I chose to make the character mute- but how would this happen? Have they always been mute, or is their in-game motivation in response to a quest to recover their voice? I settled on the latter option as I it was able to satisfy two objectives at once. I then was drawn back to cautionary tales, in particular, a plot device featured in a number of fairy tales: a curse, with conditions to break it. Game mechanics were designed, only to be discarded when they felt superfluous. I focused on the narrative, but it would be just as possible to focus on the gameplay. The constraints are the key: their incarnation is the designer's skill.

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