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2019

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# Playing in Licensed Storyworlds: Games, Franchises, and Fans

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# Playing in Licensed Storyworlds: Games, Franchises, and Fans

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**Dissertation**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**August 2019**

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to thank to my parents, Vickey and Ted Bestor, for their love and support. I would also like to thank the members of my committee, Alisa Perren, Tom Schatz, Paul Booth, and especially my advisor Suzanne Scott, who provided such wonderful guidance and feedback to help me finish this. I also am immensely grateful to all the players who were so eager to participate in my research—without your insights, none of this would have been possible. And finally, I would like to thank all my friends for their support over the years, including the amazing members of my graduate cohort: Morgan, Jackie, Lucia, Julian, Jinsook, Sara, and Alexis.

# Abstract

## Playing in Licensed Storyworlds: Games, Franchises, and Fans

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2019

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Licensed games—analog or digital games that are made under contract using pre-existing intellectual properties—bring together the narrative trajectories of their storyworld, the production histories of their creation, the affective traces of their fandoms, and the interpersonal dynamics of their play. This dissertation examines the intersection of the industrial practices of licensing, the textual properties of transmediality, and the creative process of worldbuilding through the lens of licensed games. Licensed games have frequently been dismissed as derivative and overly commercial; my aim is to embrace the redundancies and contradictions of licensed games. Licensing, in which owners of intellectual property sell the rights for use of an IP for a limited period, provides the framework but not the boundaries of these ludic paratexts that stage a complex negotiation of popular storyworlds and fannish affect.

In this dissertation, I explore how three different popular storyworlds are built and shared, explored and negotiated, experienced and felt. The first chapter examines how games have contributed to the growth and continuation of the *Star Wars* universe. In the second chapter, I survey how the design of rules in games based on the *A Song of Ice and Fire* / *Game of Thrones* franchise inflects and influences engagement with Westeros. And in my final chapter, I explore

what I call a *post*-licensed game, *Warhammer 40,000: Conquest*, and the frequently fraught communal process of supporting a card game once its licensing and production have ended.

These licensed games provide richly textured case studies of the negotiation between industrial stakeholders, texts, and fans. Utilizing a combination of textual analysis, participant observation and interviews with players, I argue that licensed games are a fertile medium through which popular brands, franchises, and storyworlds are productively transmediated. How these games draw upon the subjective and affective dimensions of our investment in popular storyworlds reveals much about game design, media franchising, and the creative processes of worldbuilding inherent to both. Licensed games allow us to play in a storyworld, and their modes of engagements foreground the playful ways we experience and understand the transmedially expansive franchises that dominate popular culture.

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# Introduction
# Playing in Licensed Storyworlds

In May 2013, my friend David and I met for breakfast at a diner in northeast Atlanta, and drove an hour to Raven's Nest Games in Marietta, Georgia. We were there to play *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game*, produced by Fantasy Flight Games (FFG) and based on the license for George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels. Although the HBO series, *Game of Thrones*, had premiered two years previously, the game goes back much further; FFG had launched an earlier version, *A Game of Thrones: Collectible Card Game*, in 2002. In *The Card Game*, players play as one of the Great Houses, noble dynasties that wield broad regional power across the continent of Westeros. Players use cards representing characters, locations, and events from the franchise to engage in multiple forms of combat, representing different ways of consolidating power in the medieval European fantasy pastiche of Martin's storyworld.

Raven's Nest was hosting a regional tournament, one of dozens of official tournaments around the country sanctioned by FFG. David and I arrived early, the first players there. We practiced with our decks, chatting casually about our expectations for the day and debating what last minute changes to make to our decks before the tournament began. David and I frequently played with other Atlanta-area players, and we had all spent weeks preparing for the tournament, experimenting with what decks to play. The tournament registration would reach 20 players, a medium-sized tournament for the game. Some players were from our local group, and others from out-of-state. The tournament would progress through five rounds of play before a final set of elimination bouts. The champion would win an acrylic trophy, prizes supplied by FFG, and, of course, bragging rights.

Going into the tournament, I was reasonably confident. I had been playing *The Card Game* for about two years, and had tested my deck extensively (perhaps obsessively) against other Atlanta players. I knew what my deck could do, and I hoped I had a good understanding of what my opponents' decks would be able to do. I had modest goals for the day: if I made it the elimination round, I would win a playmat,[1] featuring beautiful artwork of the character The Hound, available only through "placing" at these regional tournaments. As the tournament began, I was paired off against a player with a similar deck to my own. We chatted about how long we had been playing, our favorite characters and moments from the books and the show, and where we thought the narrative was going. I won this first game. As the tournament continued, these patterns of conversation and play repeated. At the end of the opening rounds, I had a record of three wins and two losses, the fifth ranked player in the final eight.

Nervous and excited, I went into my first game of the finals. And won. And in the second game, I won again. In the final game, I played against my friend David. I had won our morning practice game, but I knew not to underestimate his deck. We had played each other often enough to know each other's playstyles well, and which traps to avoid. It was a long and grueling game at the end of a long and grueling day of play. In earlier rounds, games were limited to an hour, but the final game was untimed. Eventually, through careful play and a not-insignificant amount of luck, I won.

When I got home, exhausted and elated, I immediately began writing a tournament report, which I posted to the official FFG forums. I wrote about my experiences before and during the tournament, and my thought process behind the deck I had built. I included a breakdown of the 20 players and their decks. And I wrote two or three paragraphs on each game of the day, highlighting the key plays that led to my wins and the devastating moments that led to

[1] Similar to a large mousepad, on which card games are played

my losses, with even more detail given over to the final game against David. The report I wrote was over 4000 words long, almost six times longer than my description here.

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This extended autobiographical anecdote[2] demonstrates not only that licensed games *matter* but also the many different *ways* they can matter. I started playing *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game* shortly after the HBO series premiered. I had already eagerly consumed the books, and I felt I *needed* another outlet for this newfound fandom, and that outlet quickly became *The Card Game*. My experiences playing the game and engaging with its community is of central importance to my personal relationship with everything else *Game of Thrones* related—even now, years later, experiences like this tournament color how I watch the show, read the books, or play other games set in the storyworld of Westeros.

This account highlights many of the important themes of licensed gaming that I will explore in the following chapters. The card game allows players to interact with Martin's storyworld, but also to interact with other fans (of both the franchise and the game itself). In the course of that day, I was engaging with members of my local community of play, with players who had driven hundreds of miles to be there, and finally with the transnational online community. But what *I* love about *The Card Game*—seeing major and minor characters abstracted as cards, engrossing myself in both the history of Westeros and the history of the card game, memorizing the byzantine rules, seeking out like-minded players both locally and online, and ultimately spending hundreds of dollars to build my collection—would not appeal to every *Game of Thrones* fan.

The idiosyncrasies of transmedia—the deeply personal ways that media texts come to be meaningful and important—is what makes licensed media generally and licensed games in

[2] Written using a mix of my personal recollections and information from my tournament report

particular such fertile areas to examine the economic, creative, and cultural processes by which media comes to matter to us. "Transmedia" literally means "across media," and refers to the ways that stories, storyworlds, characters, and other manifestations of intellectual properties get dispersed across different media platforms. Although a multitude of scholars have tackled the question of how to define transmediality (most famously Henry Jenkins, discussed below; see also Dena 2009; Scolari 2009; Ryan 2013; Thon 2015; Harvey 2015; Mittell 2015; Fast and Örnebring 2017), I favor Mark J. P. Wolf's definition: transmediality, according to Wolf, is simply "the state of being represented in multiple media." He emphasizes how this definition "suggests the potential for the continuance of a world, in multiple instances and registers" (Wolf 2012, 247). Wolf's definition is suitably broad to account for the diverse ways that media texts proliferate across media.

My research takes as its central focus the intersection of transmedia, game design, worldbuilding, fan communities, and licensing—"an industrial practice by which intellectual property owners (licensors) assign rights of use to paying third parties (licensees) granted limited markets or territories by the agreement" (Johnson 2014, 310). In this legal arrangement, the licensor sells the rights to use the IP for a limited period and with sometimes-strict terms dictating what can and cannot be done with the property.

Owing to the priorities and foci of media studies scholars, more narratively-oriented visual media tend to dominate transmedia discourse: film, television, video games, comics, etc. Such texts are obviously important cites of transmediality, but we miss much by not using a broader and more inclusive definition—licensed toys, t-shirts, and breakfast cereals have just as much a claim to transmedia as any other media. Too often, discussions of transmediality, in both scholarly and industrially contexts, place too much emphasis on coherence, coordination, and

consistency—this is the baggage of orienting our theoretical perspectives around "storytelling." A broader definition of transmediality, one which can account for the myriad ways that texts move across media boundaries, is better able to account for the ways that contemporary media are frequently expansive and affecting without necessarily conforming to traditional understandings of narrativity.

Henry Jenkins is one of the central theorists of transmedia studies, owing to his work on "transmedia storytelling" that has been hugely influential and widely cited, both by the academy and the media industries. According to his definition: "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 it own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" (Jenkins 2007). Jenkins' definition establishes several key features: transmedia storytelling is systematic, it is unified, and it is coordinated.

Central here is the relational and dialogical dimensions of transmediality, the ways that media texts work in tandem to build a storyworld. "Transmedia storytelling" is an enticing label precisely because it seems to account for so much of how contemporary media production functions. As Johnson notes, "control of intellectual property resources became increasingly central to corporate strategy, both in their potential to be protected as proprietary and their potential to be widely shared and flexibly multiplied on a production level" (Johnson 2013, 4). In the current media moment, Conglomerate Hollywood's (see Schatz 2008) sprawling media franchises like Harry Potter, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Transformers, and Jurassic Park continually demonstrate the long-term cultural and economic value of transmedially expansive storyworlds.

Widely utilized by both academics and media practitioners, “transmedia storytelling” is a useful framework for introducing the fundamental transmediality of popular media, but the adoption of Jenkins’ definition has created certain blind spots, devaluing approaches to transmediality that can be just as expansive and meaningful as the limited range of practices that fit the “transmedia storytelling” model. A priority of my project is to expand our understanding of transmediality beyond the limitations of this definition. One area that Jenkins is especially dismissive of is licensing. He bemoans the sorts of legal arrangement that underpin a vast amount of media production:

> The current licensing system typically generates works that are redundant (allowing no new character background or plot development), watered down (asking the new media to slavishly duplicate experiences better achieved through the old), or riddled with sloppy contradictions (failing to respect the core consistency audiences expect within a franchise). These failures account for why sequels and franchises have a bad reputation. Franchise products are governed too much by economic logic and not enough by artistic vision. (Jenkins 2008a, 107)

Licensing is antithetical to Jenkins’ conception of transmedia storytelling, and there undeniably *are* creative limitations associated with licensing—as Derek Johnson notes, “licensing contracts [formalize] the dominance of the intellectual property owner over the creative process. Licensed creativity must negotiate a position of contractual subordinance to another party” (Johnson 2013, 141). But I argue it is also inextricable to how transmediality is created and experienced in the contemporary media landscape. We must more fully attend to what sorts of transmediality licensing produces, rather than dwelling on alternative paths-not-taken.

Other scholars have worked to recuperate licensing’s bad reputation. In his book *Selling the Silver Bullet*, which charts the history of licensing and the central role that it played in the transmedial success of *The Lone Ranger*, Avi Santo notes: “When media scholars talk about licensing, the usual refrain is less than flattering. It is viewed as lucrative but essentially noncreative, leeching off the popularity of established and successful characters and texts—and

largely concerned with contract oversight" (Santo 2015, 8). My work is especially indebted to Paul Booth's *Game Play: Paratextuality in Contemporary Board Games*, which is similarly invested in examining the complex ways that transmedial games (board games, in Booth's case) expand upon popular IPs. Early in his book Booth makes an important rhetorical move in defining the object of his study: "Rather than the more commercial moniker 'licensed board games,' which brings to mind generic instances of already extant board games overlaid with television and film themes, I use the term 'paratextual board game' throughout the book to highlight the multiple ways that these games can be seen to interact with media franchises" (Booth 2015, 4). Booth's framing is significant—by utilizing Jonathan Gray's work on media paratexts (2010), Booth is making board games legible to media studies, highlighting both the interplay between these games and their associated paratexts and the performativity of playing these paratextually evocative games. But it comes at the cost of reifying a cultural hierarchy that unfairly dismisses licensed media. Booth's description of licensing as evocative of the "commercial" and the "generic" echoes Santo's "lucrative but essentially noncreative" and Jenkins' "economic logic" versus "artistic vision."

Not all scholarship on transmediality necessarily fall within the scope of "transmedia storytelling," but can still contribute greatly to our understanding of the complex interplay between different media sites. Jonathan Gray's *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* presents an extended examination of media extensions, with a particular focus on the promotional role of paratexts like trailers, official websites, and, in later chapters, licensed toys and games. Gray argues for the importance of understanding the full context of media texts that surround, inform, and extend the "primary" text:

> To limit our understanding of film and television to films and television shows themselves risks drafting an insufficient picture not only of any given text, but also of the

> processes of production and reception attached to that text. Paratextual study, by contrast, promises a more richly contextualized and nuanced image of how texts work, how and why they are made, and how and why they are watched, interpreted, and enjoyed. (Gray 2010, 22)

Some of the texts that Gray examines in his book would fall outside the scope of a narrow definition of transmedia storytelling, but his examination of the full ecosystem of paratexts surrounding major media properties is a major influence on my own understanding of transmediality.

Licensed games serve as excellent sites to interrogate the limitations of "storytelling" as a framework for understanding transmediation—by foregrounding game design's privileging of evocative and spatial narrative strategies that do not fit neatly into classical definitions of storytelling, this dissertation surveys an alternative framework for transmediality that privileges the spatial practices of worldbuilding and the affective dimensions of media consumption over the linearity of storytelling. No media text exists in a vacuum, but licensed games are especially imbricated in complex networks of intellectual property rights, transmediality, and affect. In the current media environment, dominated by horizontally integrated conglomerates, the media industries are increasingly dedicated to producing and promoting sprawling franchises that extend across as many media platforms as possible. By focusing on licensed games, I am analyzing not only the specific ways that storyworlds are ludically transmediated, but also foregrounding the centrality of transmedia playfulness. Licensed games stage engagement with popular storyworlds as playful, but this playfulness is *not* unique to games—all transmedial engagement is fundamentally playful. Understanding how these texts are produced, consumed, interpreted, played, and played with is critically important. By focusing on licensed games, I contribute to the growing body of literature on both transmediality and worldbuilding, offering as broad a perspective as possible on both the myriad ways that popular texts proliferate across

media boundaries, and the complex consumption practices that emerge around such textually and affectively rich media sites, surveying how these extensions allow players to (re)enact, (re)work, and (re)experience the storyworld.

Licensed games have a long history. In terms of digital games, there have been games based on popular media licenses since nearly the beginning of the mass market video games industry. Early examples include *Superman* by Atari[3] for the Atari 2600, and *Star Trek: Phaser Strike* by Milton Bradley for the Microvision, both released in 1979. Licensed games became more prevalent during the early 1980s, with 1982 seeing the release of a significant number of licensed games: the arcade releases of *Tron* by Bally Midway and *Popeye* by Nintendo; *The Hobbit*, developed by Beam Software and published by Melbourne House on the ZX Spectrum; and on the Atari 2600, the release of *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes* by Parker Brothers, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* by Atari, and *Alien* by Fox Video Games. As the licenses being used in these early years demonstrate, video games played a role in the developing practices of the Hollywood Blockbuster and its vast transmedial reach. 1982 also saw the release of one of the most infamous games in video game history, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* by Atari. Based on Spielberg's hit film, released early the same year, Atari rushed the game to market and vastly over-estimated its sales potential, resulting in a poorly-designed game that no one wanted. *E.T.* is often cited as one of the causes of the video game industry's crash in 1983, and Atari famously disposed of its excess stock by burying cartridges in a landfill in Alamogordo, New Mexico (see Guins 2014).

Although *E.T.*'s famous failings have contributed to the stigma against licensed games, they have always remained central to the video game industry. Examples of licensed games that were both critically acclaimed and among the best-selling titles on their systems are numerous, and include *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1989, Konami, Nintendo Entertainment System),

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[3] Unless otherwise noted, these games were both developed and published by the listed company.

*GoldenEye 007* (1997, developed by Rare and published by Nintendo, Nintendo 64), *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003, developed by Bioware and published by LucasArts, Xbox), *Batman: Arkham City* (2011, developed by Rocksteady Studios and published by Warner Bros. Interactive, PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360), and *Marvel's Spider-Man* (2018, developed by Insomniac Games and published by Sony Interactive Entertainment, PlayStation 4). Licensed video games are produced at all tiers of production, including first-party titles from console manufacturers Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft; large third-party companies like Electronic Arts (EA), Activision-Blizzard, and Sega; and smaller companies that may specialize in niche genres or the mobile gaming markets.

In terms of analog games, licensed games have an even longer history, one that reinforces the oft-neglected fact that transmediality is far from a recent development (see deCordova 1994; Santo 2015; Fast and Örnebring 2017). Matthew Freeman (2014), for instance, analyzes *The Wonderful Game of Oz*, a 1921 board game based on Frank L. Baum's *Wizard of Oz* novels (and released eighteen years before the 1939 film). Other early examples of transmedial board games include *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1933, Parker Brothers), *The Charlie Chan Mystery Game* (1937, Milton Bradley), and a wide variety of games based on Disney properties, including *Mickey Mouse Coming Home Game* (1930, Marks Brothers Co.), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1938, American Toy Works), and the card game *Shuffled Symphonies* (1939, Pepys). Licensed tabletop games are produced both by large mass market board game companies like Hasbro (which acquired Milton Bradley, Parker Brothers, and Wizards of the Coast), as well as smaller hobby market companies like Fantasy Flight Games, the company behind several of the games I examine in the chapters ahead, and a subsidiary of Asmodee Games since 2014.

Licensed games *are* frequently simply ancillary texts, minor paratexts in a larger transmedial network; they are produced by contracted labor with minimal input from those overseeing the entire property; and many of these games are as redundant and contradictory as Jenkins bemoans. But to study contemporary transmediality, we cannot only study the well-controlled and well-curated examples. Where licensed games excel is in providing an affective playground for fans to immerse themselves in a pre-existing storyworld. Because licensed games are vibrant sites of worldbuilding creativity and fan negotiation with popular texts, this project does not rhetorically sidestep the cultural and commercial baggage of "licensing," but rather engages it.

My research is inherently interdisciplinary, bringing together material from game studies, media studies, narrative theory, and fan studies, and connecting existing bodies of literature on licensing, storyworlds, and game design. A flexible methodological toolbox also has important ethical dimensions, as my research process must be "open enough to accommodate different scenarios while protecting fannish spaces and individual fans—as well as a researchers' code of ethics and academic rigour" (Busse and Hellekson 2012, 41-42). A mixed methodology is necessary to account for the multifaceted assemblage of interlocking activities that comprise these games, their communities, and their transmedial, cultural, and industrial contexts. Much of my research, especially in the later chapters of my dissertation, has utilized a combination of participant observation, autoethnography, and interviews, drawing on traditions from both games studies (see Fine 1983; Aarseth 2003; Lammes 2007; Pearce 2009) and fan studies (see Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002; Freund and Fielding 2013; Booth 2013). Importantly, I must acknowledge my own positionality as an academic doing research on areas of my own fandom.

The communities of play I have chosen for my case studies arose from my own experiences and exposure to these communities. Spence describes how "my own background knowledge and history of fan participation allowed me to approach these topics as an 'insider' who was perhaps better equipped to treat these issues more seriously, respectfully, and generously than would a researcher without prior fan interest or involvement" (Spence 2012, 30-31). Researching these communities frequently required "intense involvement and engagement, often to the point of mastery" (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 2). This dissertation would have been much more difficult without these stores of insider knowledge. Although this has inherent advantages, the fact I have chosen franchises and communities I am familiar with has also biased my case studies toward texts that fit my personal tastes and sensibilities—most significantly, there is a major masculine bias in the examples in the following chapters. A broader range of media licenses would further aid me in improving the current representational limitations of my research, and potentially reveal facets to the transmediality of licensed games that I have neglected or overlooked.

With my focus on examining the broader cultural networks that surround licensed gaming, it is necessary for me to engage directly with the communities that emerge around these texts; an ethnographic methodology is a requirement for this dissertation. As Matt Hills warns in *Fan Cultures*, the traditional approach to ethnographic research in media studies "constitutes a potentially reductive approach. It assumes that cultural activities can be adequately accounted for in terms of language and 'discourse,'" (Hills 2002, 66). Hills champions an autoethnographic approach, arguing that "autoethnography asks the person undertaking it to question their self-account constantly, opening the 'subjective' and the intimately personal up to the cultural contexts in which it is formed and experienced" (Hills 2002, 72). Evans and Stasi posit that "the

practice of autoethnography might allow for more than simply the textually created audience, but instead would develop narrative accounts of what it means to take up these subject positions and use them to create a sense of self as a lived experience" (Evans and Stasi 2014, 15). Autoethnography "seeks to lift the self-reflective notes and biography of the embedded ethnographer to the level of a primary source in order to get a firsthand account of a culture or experience. Combined with the stories and perspective of other actors as well as with theories and analysis, autoethnography becomes a layered account of that culture or experience" (Bjørkelo 2018, 174). Booth argues that autoethnography is not only well-attuned to the analysis of tabletop games, but "is a relevant methodology for integrating studies of fans within game and media studies" (Booth 2017, 433), an integration that both his work and my own aim for.

Although there are numerous benefits to autoethnographic methodologies, there are risks as well. Evans and Stasi caution that "autoethnography may end up focusing too much on the individual feelings, and risk oversight of the larger cultural structures that are interacting with those feelings: in short, it can be hard to criticise your own tribe—or indeed yourself" (Evans and Stasi 2014, 16). Garner also notes the potential to "question the reliability of autoethnographic data (e.g., 'isn't this just your own personal perspective?'" (Garner 2018, 28). To account for some of these shortcomings of autoethnography, I have endeavored to position the games I analyze within the context of their "larger cultural structures," continually reinforcing these games not as isolated research sites but as nodes within complex and shifting transmedial networks. In addition, my own personal subjective experiences are but one of the sources for my analysis. Throughout my chapters, I utilize a mix of textual analysis and ethnographic methods including participant observation and interviews with players. These interviews were the most engaging part of this research process, producing a huge amount of

interesting and insightful material that helped inform and complicate my own understanding of how these licensed games were consumed, interpreted, and used as the launching pad for a broad range of complimentary fannish activities.

For my second and third chapters, I conducted interviews with players of both *A Song of Ice and Fire* games and *Warhammer 40,000: Conquest*, recruiting 22 and 20 interview subjects for each property. These interviews began in June 2018 and progressed through the fall. Recruitment included drawing upon my own personal network of connections in the communities, online recruitment posts on active centers of fan discussions like popular Facebook pages, and posters I put up in local (Austin, TX) tabletop game stores. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms, with the exception of a handful who chose to pick their own pseudonyms, and care has been taken that absolutely no identifying material will be included in my research results. More detailed discussions of the cohorts of interview subjects can be found in the appropriate chapters.

My analysis of these interviews has been mindful to treat "Fan responses […] as texts that are both performative and discursive rather than expressions of the 'truth' about fandoms or individuals" (R. Williams 2015, 12). As much as possible, in transcribing the audio recordings or quoting from the text of interviews, the interviewees have been quoted verbatim and unedited, "to avoid the presumption that fan commentary needs to be modified or 'improved' by the researcher" (R. Williams 2015, 13), though care has also been taken to provide as much context as necessary to make this commentary legible to a general audience. In this research, I want to ensure that the player communities I study are "represented more on [their] own terms" (Hills 2002, 9). As Hills warns, "the question 'why are you a fan of…?' itself causes the fan to cut into the flow of their experience and produce some kind of discursive 'justification'" (Hills 2002, 66).

My research interest in the communities of play that develop around licensed games is not an attempt to place these fans into academically orderly boxes—I welcome the heterogeneity of fan practices that so often resist too-tidy categorization.

In this dissertation, I utilize interdisciplinary methodologies to examine licensed games as sites of worldbuilding labor and of complex negotiations between fans, storyworlds, and the multiple industrial stakeholders of the intellectual property. The three body chapters of this dissertation each explore a different popular storyworld and a different analytical framework for understanding the ways these transmedial worlds are built and shared, expanded and sustained, explored and negotiated, experienced and felt. The first chapter's focus is worldbuilding, as I utilize Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca's work on transmedial worlds to explore how games have contributed to the growth and continuation of the *Star Wars* universe. The second chapter's focus is games and rules, as I survey the design of mechanics in games based on the *A Song of Ice and Fire* / *Game of Thrones* franchise through the lens of Ian Bogost's procedural rhetoric. And the final chapter's focus is the players themselves, as I use Rebecca Williams' post-object fandom to examine a *post*-licensed game, the defunct card game *Warhammer 40,000: Conquest* and the frequently fraught communal process of supporting a game once the legal licensing framework that allowed its production has ceased. The first chapter is the most historical in scope, considering licensed games produced in the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, while the examples from the second and third games are limited to the 2000s and especially the 2010s, examining contemporary licensing practices and the communities that grow around these transmedial games.

## TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

A cornerstone of my dissertation is to integrate and synthesize a broad range of transmedia scholars—even and especially those whose work may not triangulate themselves within existing discourses of transmedia—to develop and refine a more inclusive and expansive framework for transmediality. Crucially, though, Jenkins is not the origin point. Marsha Kinder coined the word "transmedia" for her 1991 book *Playing with Power*. Kinder, in describing the intertextual networks surrounding both fictional characters like the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *The Muppets* and celebrities and entertainers who attain cultish devotion like Marilyn Monroe or Michael Jackson, employs the term "supersystem:"

> In order to be a supersystem, the network must cut across several modes of image production; must appeal to diverse generations, classes, and ethnic subcultures, who in turn are targeted with diverse strategies; must foster 'collectibility' through the proliferation of related products; and must undergo a sudden increase in commodification, the success of which reflexively becomes a 'media event' that dramatically accelerates the growth curve of the system's commercial success. (Kinder 1991, 123)

As Kinder's definition makes clear, her focus is on the economic exigencies and sociocultural contexts of these "supersystems," charting the ways these properties are produced, marketed, and consumed—this is a broader, and thus more broadly applicable, definition of transmediality than transmedia storytelling.

Jenkins uses *The Matrix* franchise to demonstrate how his idealized "transmedia storytelling" functions in practice. Lana and Lilly Wachowski, in developing the media franchise that came to follow the success of the original *The Matrix* film in 1999, sought to spread the narrative across a wide array of media platforms, utilizing both conglomerated subsidiaries of Warner Bros. and contracted licensees. The first film sequel, *The Matrix Reloaded*, released in May 2003, was accompanied by several other media texts—concurrently, the video game *Enter*

*the Matrix*, developed by Shiny Entertainment and published by Infogames; later, in June, *The Animatrix*, an anthology of nine animated shorts, distributed by Warner Home Video; and finally, in November 2003, the last film in the series, *The Matrix Revolutions*. In the narrative through-line crisscrossing between *The Matrix Reloaded*, *The Animatrix*, and *Enter the Matrix*, we see a robust example of narrative material "dispersed systematically." As Jenkins explains, "The consumer who has played the game or watched the shorts will get a different experience of the movies than one who has simply had the theatrical film experience. The whole is worth more than the sum of the parts" (Jenkins 2008a, 104). Each of these media texts offers a distinct perspective on the storyworld, thus fulfilling Jenkins' ideal that the disparate components of a transmedia system make "unique contributions." Jenkins' model for transmedia storytelling stands as an idealized vision of what a more convergent model of media production could look like, though in practice few media properties fully conform. Even *The Matrix* arguably is less decentralized than is ideal under Jenkins' model—though The Wachowskis and their collaborators produced a robust transmedial flow between the various *Matrix* texts, the films enjoy a privileged status as the "main texts" of the franchise.

"Transmedia storytelling" is so popular, both among scholars and media practitioners, because it speaks to how fundamental transmediality is to contemporary media (see Dena 2009; Scolari 2009; Harvey 2015; Hassler-Forest 2016). That accommodations or exceptions are frequently needed for less rigorously designed and managed examples of transmedia, however, also demonstrates its limitations. What Jenkins advocated for has not come to pass, but in reevaluating transmedia storytelling, let us not throw the transmedial baby out with the bathwater. Though examples of transmedia storytelling may be scant, transmediality more broadly conceived does remain central to the promotion and expansion of intellectual properties

across media platforms. Transmedia scholarship has much to gain from moving beyond Jenkins' definitions, and one of the most fruitful areas to examine and explore is one that Jenkins explicitly precludes from his definition: licensed media production.

Jenkins' idealized vision for the transmedia storytelling and the utopian potential for new production paradigms like co-creation—where "the companies collaborate from the beginning to create content they know plays well in each of their sectors, allowing each medium to generate new experiences for the consumer and expand points of entry into the franchise" (Jenkins 2008a, 107)—is overly prescriptivist. This unnecessarily circumscribes the boundaries of transmediation, because Jenkins takes a worst-case scenario view of the legal and industrial practice of licensing. As quoted above, according to Jenkins, "The current licensing system typically generates works that are redundant […], watered down […]. or riddled with sloppy contradictions" (Jenkins 2008a, 107). Jenkins' model also overstates the ability or even the desire of the industrial stakeholders to work in such tightly coordinated ways, ignoring some of the advantages of the production processes that structure contemporary media franchises.

Licensed media tie-ins, according to Jenkins, often offer nothing novel or substantive for fans of the franchise. Jenkins' critique of licensed media hinges on the idea that such texts are redundant and contradictory, implicitly assuming that non-redundancy and consistency are universally desirable traits in transmedial extensions. Here, Jenkins makes major assumptions about fan attitudes toward licensed texts—some fans in fact may actively desire stories offering alternative perspectives on the primary text. Jenkins' utopian vision of transmedia storytelling as a creative and economic boon for both fan audiences and media producers requires a more nuanced consideration of both the diversity of fan subject positions and the economic exigencies of transmedia.

Transmediality is a fundamental component of contemporary media culture, and attempting to cordon off some transmedial works as "not good enough" is unnecessary gatekeeping. Rather than trying, like Jenkins, to champion particular approaches to transmediation, my aim is to be attuned to how transmedial works are *actually* being produced and consumed, embracing the redundancies and contradictions of licensed media. These are not the artistic deficits of licensing; instead, they represent a broad range of creative approaches to transmediation, approaches that have frequently been excluded from scholarly consideration. As Trevor Elkington notes, licensed games in particular are rarely held in high esteem: "video games based on films receive a generally hostile reception from game reviewers and players. Rather than successfully drawing on the synergistic advantages of cross-media development and promotion, licensed film-to-game adaptations in particular must overcome a long history of critical and commercial failure" (Elkington 2009, 214).[4] As Elkington argues, much of the problem comes from trying to replicate the aesthetic and narrative qualities of the originary texts—similar to Jenkins' observation of "asking the new media to slavishly duplicate experiences better achieved through the old" (Jenkins 2008a, 107). As media that is not always well-suited to the aesthetic qualities of storytelling that are culturally valued in fiction and film (not due to any inherent shortcomings of games, but due to their specific media affordances), games, both digital and analog, are uniquely well-situated to help decouple scholarly understanding of transmediality from the limited and limiting norms of "storytelling."

Colin B. Harvey advocates "a broad definition of transmedia storytelling, one which is capable of accounting for the multiple kinds of interrelated narrativisation that can occur across

[4] There have always been well-made and well-received licensed games. Elkington's article was written at a point in the history of franchise transmediation where direct tie-in video games were a central plank of promoting new film releases. One of Elkington's primary examples is *Van Helsing*, a 2004 game developed by Saffire Corporation that transmediates the events of the film of the same name and year. This sort of lock-step production cycle, with games serving direct marketing purposes for upcoming films, has waned significantly.

media […] I argue for a nuanced and flexible approach which can account for the many different kinds of transmedia storytelling" (Harvey 2015, 1). Engaging directly with Jenkins' critique of licensing, Harvey writes that "conceiving tie-in media in terms of Jenkins' 'reproduction and redundancy' suggests an author-centered approach which might well be at variance with what a storyworld's audience understands of the diegetic universe they're engaging with" (Harvey 2015, 27). For some fans, a given licensed media text might represent all the worst tendencies Jenkins ascribes: shoddily made, with a shallow connection with its originary text and offering no new perspectives on the storyworld. But this can only ever be a personal assessment. What may be redundant and pointless to one fan may be central to another fan's appreciation of the franchise.

Just as it is impossible to definitively state that transmedia storytelling practices serve the interests of a monolithic conception of the audience, no one can properly judge whether a given media text makes a meaningful contribution to the broader property. Some fans may have no interest in the "official" transmedia extensions; other fans may form personal attachments to media that does not aspire to Jenkins' lofty vision of "a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (Jenkins 2007). Harvey sees little value in demarcating licensing as the bad object to transmedia storytelling, emphasizing the importance of engaging with a fuller range of transmedia production practices:

> Attempts at excluding licensing or marketing-based crossmedia extensions on the basis that they do not contribute to the advancement of the primary narrative strand from which they are derived, speak to a structuralist conception of 'transmedia storytelling' at odds with the intertextual basis of the term transmedia, and the constant dialogical flow underpinning it. (Harvey 2015, 38)

For my own research, I am heavily indebted to Harvey's open-ended and open-minded conception of transmediality—the flow of storyworlds across gaming media is the central concern of this dissertation, regardless of precisely how coordinated the production processes behind these texts were.

Transmediality is vital as an analytical and economic framework that can account for the multiplicity of production and consumption practices surrounding media texts. A more nuanced conception of transmedia can also help highlight the playfulness at the center of these processes. “Play” is defined by Johan Huizinga as “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly’ (Huizinga 1955, 13)—and it is easy to see how this definition extends to our participation in popular storyworlds, often trivial settings that are nonetheless utterly absorbing. Julie Sanders describes a “sense of play” in the processes of adaptation and appropriation, citing the “pleasurable aspects of reading into such texts their intertextual and allusive relationship with other texts, tracing and activating […] networks of association” (Sanders 2006, 25). And Jonathan Gray observes that, “To play with or in a storyworld is to gain more ownership of it, to personalize it, and to move it out of the space of the spectacle and render it a malleable entity” (Gray 2010, 187).

Expanding on those notions of “ownership,” “personalization” and “malleability,” I focus on “transmedia worldbuilding,” a concept developed by several scholars (including Ryan 2013; Thon 2015; Hassler-Forest 2016; Boni 2017). Transmedia worldbuilding is, I argue, more inclusive and offers a greater framework for transmediality’s expansive capacity for creativity and play. This dissertation is not about theoretical perspectives on how storyworlds could best be transmedially evoked and developed—it is about the existing approaches used to ludically adapt and expand a popular storyworld. The shortcomings of “transmedia storytelling” are not with “transmedia,” but “storytelling,” as a creative and constructive process that privileges linearity, continuity, and coherence. While this may apply to some transmedial work, it will never be adequate to account for all transmedia. In this dissertation, I argue that shifting the

focus away from "storytelling" allows transmedia scholarship to describe, even embrace, a far broader range of ways that media texts interact and interface with each other. "Transmedia worldbuilding" is, as I argue in the follow section, a more comprehensive and robust framework.

### STORYWORLDS AND GAMEWORLDS

The fundamental appeal of a licensed game is that it allows consumers an opportunity to engage with a known or knowable[5] media property. In a licensed game, the player is invited to interact with a storyworld that co-exists transmedially in other texts. Understanding how storyworlds and gameworlds, the fictional constructs of imagined worlds that serve as the settings of stories and games, function is an important first step in charting how ludic paratexts are produced and consumed, and how these games then contribute back to their transmedial franchise. Much game studies scholarship has explicitly limited itself to digital gaming contexts, and scholars of analog games tend to focus solely on roleplaying games, board games, and other tabletop forms as a corrective to this privileging of digital games. By putting both digital and analog games in conversation, I can better attend to the ways that popular storyworlds are transmediated into a variety of interactive media.

Some scholars, including Jenkins, would not make such a strong distinction between storytelling and worldbuilding: "storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium" (Jenkins 2008a, 116). Worldbuilding is explicitly stated to be a core component of transmedia storytelling, and the best examples of the transmedia storytelling process exploit detailed and well-built storyworlds that entice fans to want to know more. Other scholars, however, have more thoroughly explored distinctions between these terminologies.

[5] We should not assume that all players of licensed games come to it with an existing relationship with the brand.

Roberta Pearson states that world building "is a necessary condition for but not coterminous with" transmedia storytelling (Pearson 2017, 111). In other words, "transmedia storytelling" is a subset of a broader range of transmedial worldbuilding practices. Mark J. P. Wolf notes, "storytelling and world-building are different processes that can sometimes come into conflict" (Wolf 2012, 29). The following section explores some of the ways both storyworlds and gameworlds have been theorized, and how these frameworks are ultimately better suited to discuss transmedial games.

In his book *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, Wolf offers a thorough examination of the history and practice of worldbuilding. Worldbuilding is a process that is "often transnarrative and transmedial in form," with the material components of the storyworld dispersed across a broad range of media platforms; storyworlds can also be "transauthorial" as well, with multiple creators contributing to the development and definition of the world (Wolf 2012, 3). Wolf conceives of storyworlds as something beyond the media texts through which we consume them. We view the world through "media windows," but as he explains, these glimpses suggest something greater: "Transmediality implies a kind of independence for its object; the more media windows we experience a world through, the less reliant that world is on the peculiarities of any one medium for its existence" (Wolf 2012, 247). Wolf's description here echoes much of the rhetoric surrounding "transmedia storytelling"—in both cases, the multiplicity of media extensions produce something that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Wolf analyzes common advice for writers about "narrative economy," that they should "remove anything that does not actively advance the story." Worldbuilding can easily work at counter-purposes to "narrative economy:"

> [worldbuilding] often results in data, exposition, and digression that provide information about a world, slowing down narrative or even bringing it to a halt temporarily, yet much of the excess detail and descriptive richness can be an important part of the audience's experience. World information that does not actively advance the story may still provide mood and atmosphere, or further form our image of characters, places, or events. (Wolf 2012, 29)

Harvey similarly notes that many transmedial extensions rely on "resources which we might recognize from the semiology of the originating storyworld but which are not narratives in their own right" (Harvey 2015, 77). Instead of trying to square the circle by conflating these disparate creative processes, transmedia scholarship should embrace "worldbuilding" as a more broadly productive lens to analyze contemporary transmediality.

In the following chapters, I analyze a number of games based in licensed storyworlds; some of these games—such as *Star Wars: Shadow of the Empire* (1996) or *Game of Thrones: A Telltale Games Series* (2014)—strive to tell compelling stories. But many of the games that I analyze may offer little in terms of traditional conceptions of narrativity. What these games instead excel at is exploiting, expanding, and remixing what Wolf calls "the excess detail and descriptive richness" of their storyworlds in satisfying gaming systems that may lack many hallmarks we associate with storytelling. Wolf writes, "A compelling story and a compelling world are very different things, and one need not require the other" (Wolf 2012, 29), and throughout this dissertation, my focus remains on the worlds more than the stories.

Worldbuilding is not only a better framework for understanding transmediality; it is also fundamental to appreciating how games function and make meanings. One of the foundational texts in game studies is Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, which focuses on the societal and cultural function of games and play. The most famous of Huizinga's contributions to game studies discourse has been the concept of the "magic circle." As Huizinga explains,

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. […] The arena, the card-table,

> the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (Huizinga 10)

It is within the magic circle that Huizinga sees play circumscribed, the line around play that lets it stand outside "ordinary" life. The magic circle is, fundamentally, a spatial designation—at times a quite literal division of space, as in the field of play for sports or the board for chess, but also frequently this conception of play-space takes a more metaphorical meaning. The inherent circumscriptive connotation of the "magic circle" is particularly evident in game studies' tendency to privilege the analysis of video games and virtual worlds, which are fertile contexts in which to consider the relevance of Huizinga's spatial metaphor.

In his discussion of paratextual board games, Booth evokes the "magic circle" as a framework for the licensed board games he analyzes: "There are thus two sets of rules at work at once within the paratextual board game: the rules of the game, that set it apart from the 'real world' and place it into a 'magic circle' (Huizinga's term for the play-space of the game world), and the rules of the cult franchise that govern the player's understanding of the larger world of the game" (Booth 2015, 22-23). Booth evokes the "magic circle" in the case of this first set of game rules, but Huizinga's metaphor can apply to the storyworld itself as well. Virtual worlds are quite literally "temporary worlds within the ordinary world"—and so are storyworlds, similarly circumscribed, divorced from the mundane; consider the ritualized spaces we engage with these worlds—books, movie theaters, theme parks, games, or within our personal, mental reimaginings of the storyworld.

Jesper Juul's *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* highlights this complex interplay between rules and worlds in game design. As Juul writes:

> rules are designed to be objective, obligatory, unambiguous, and generally above discussion. With fiction in games, we find the opposite to be true: a strong part of the

> attraction of fiction in games is that it is highly subjective, optional, ambiguous, and generally evocative and subject to discussion. (Juul 2005, 121)

Juul highlights several ways "A game cues a player into imagining a fictional world," including "graphics, sound, text, cut-scenes, the game title, box, or manual, haptics, and rules" (Juul 2005, 133). A licensed property is another way to prime players, and the pre-existence of this storyworld can simplify this process: the player may be able to draw on prior comprehension of the diegesis, re-evoking a known world rather than evoking an unknown one. Licensed storyworlds offer some major advantages for game designers, as portions of the worldbuilding come pre-designed in other transmedia sites. M. J. Clarke, writing about the designers of the MMO *Star Wars Galaxies* (*SWG*), writes that "It was the task of *SWG*'s makers similarly not to create a world ex nihilo, but to make a world through the application of ligature, a system of ordering and reordering of a brand through both the lenses of old and new media" (Clarke 2014, 211). Although games are well-suited to depicting storyworlds, and licensed games have built-in advantages from prior worldbuilding, one should not assume that successfully adapting a popular storyworld to a game is automatically an easy task.

Juul's scholarship is squarely focused on digital games, but one of my primary objectives in this dissertation is to challenge the over-privileging of the digital in games studies—analog games are able, through their own specific affordances, to evoke storyworld just as meaningfully as digital games. Whereas the underlying programming of a digital game enacts the storyworld for the player, analog gaming requires a more complex interplay between player and game, with the player tasked as a key feature of the game engine, enacting the rules while physically and mentally manipulating both the material and imaginative components of the game. According to Booth, board gaming is fundamentally performative: "[board games] ask players to perform a version of a media text, one that differs from the original. In turn, the game itself is a type of

performance, relying on players to make sense of the multiple sites of interaction between these 'paratextual' board games and their primary media text" (Booth 2015, 3). Interpreting and understanding these sites of interaction from text to text is a feature of all transmediality, but analog games necessitate a more active and engaged role in this meaning-making process. And it is the interpretative dimensions of storyworlds that frequently has the most personal value, as I explore in the following section.

### AFFECT, MEMORY, AND EVOCATION

In *Fan Cultures*, Matt Hills argues that cult texts are built around a "hyperdiegesis," "a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension" (Hills 2002, 137). Other scholars have noted the role of incompleteness in worldbuilding. Thomas Pavel writes, "incompleteness constitutes a major distinctive feature of fictional worlds" (Pavel 1986, 107). Lubomír Doležel observes that, "It would take a text of infinite length to construct a complete fictional world. Finite texts, the only texts that humans are capable of producing, are bound to create incomplete worlds" (Doležel 1998, 169). True completeness is an impossibility—akin to the absurd map-making task of Jorge Luis Borges' "On Exactitude in Science," where a society disastrously decides to construct a 1:1 scale map of its territory. The incompleteness of the hyperdiegesis is in fact one of its most appealing traits—it is in the narrative gaps that fans find spaces to embellish and expand the storyworld; the value of it lies in "a certain 'undecidability,' a space for interpretation, speculation and fan affect which cannot be closed down by final 'proof' or 'fact'" (Hills 2002, 143). As Hills' definition foregrounds, exploring and experiencing a storyworld is fundamentally an affective experience; popular storyworlds "provid[e] a trusted environment for affective play" (Hills 2002, 138).

Understanding the affective, mental, and emotional processes that make transmediality meaningful is central to my research, but "affect" is notoriously difficult to define or quantify. Lawrence Grossberg's work on "affective investments" in popular culture has been a central text in affect theory; Grossberg argues, "for fans, popular culture becomes a crucial ground on which he or she can construct mattering maps. They may construct relatively stable moments of identity [...] Fans let them organize their emotional and narrative lives and identities" (Grossberg 1992, 59). Sara Ahmed goes so far as to state, "I do not assume there is something called affect that stands apart or has autonomy, [...] or even that there is something called affect that can be shared as an object of study. Instead, I would begin with the messiness of the experiential [...] how we are touched by what we are near" (Ahmed 2010, 30). The potential impossibility of defining "affect" also means that scholars writing on it may find themselves working at cross-purposes. Melanie E. S. Kohnen explains that she "use[s] 'affect' in the sense of 'strong emotional attachment' rather than the way affect theory uses the term (i.e. as an involuntary, pre-cognitive, bodily reaction)" (Kohnen 2018, 337). I position myself similarly to Kohnen; my use of "affect" will center on examining the emotional, subjective, and associative investments that players make with storyworlds. My interest lies in the playful processes by which these games shape the identities of their players and the ways that certain objects (the storyworlds or the games, or the communities that develop around either) come to matter so deeply.

In one chapter of *Game Play*, Booth compares two board games utilizing *The Walking Dead* license, one based on the original comic series by Robert Kirkman and produced by Z-Man Games, and the other based on the television adaptation (2010-present, AMC) and produced by Cryptozoic Games. According to Booth, the comic-based board game is less concerned with adapting the narrative of *The Walking Dead* (something the TV-based game is), but instead

evokes the affective experience of *The Walking Dead* itself. Game mechanics do not correspond with the narrative events of the series, but they do *feel* like *The Walking Dead*. Booth terms this "transmedia pathos," explaining: "Pathos is generated by affective actions happening to a character in a media text, the feeling of connection between character and player. In its attempts to transmediate pathos, the graphic novel board game […] develops gameplay affect. I am defining 'affect' as the way that emotions are generated through the game" (Booth 2015, 68). By looking beyond the limited perspective of transmedia extensions as simple narrative adaptations, Booth demonstrates that there is a more complex range of experiences players can have when engaging with a paratext. The comics-based board game may be a poor conduit for narrative information, providing an incomplete and incoherent rendering of the events of *The Walking Dead*. But players of the game likely come to the game with at least some knowledge of the franchise, and can apply these prior competencies to the game—and even if they are unfamiliar with the property, the successful adaptation of the comics' affective dimensions can then be utilized in future points of contact with the property.

Other scholars have explored these affective dimensions, using a variety of terminology. Harvey explains that, "In all examples of crossmedia storytelling, elements from elsewhere in the transmedia network are necessarily invoked" (Harvey 2015, 33). Harvey posits that memory is the connective tissue that unifies all examples of transmediality:

> My contention is that ideas from the field of collective memory can help us understand the network of relations at play in the phenomenon of transmedia storytelling, from the interrelationships between the various elements of the franchise in question, through to the roles of creators, fan-bases and cultural commentators, and the legal frameworks which circumscribe creative production and distribution. (Harvey 2015, 34)

This memory is not solely that of the creators or the fans; the media texts themselves must remember each other—transmediality is fundamentally dialogical and relational. Matt Hills further develops this idea when he observes that in certain cases, both fandoms and producers

may “non-remember” (Hills 2017, 355) certain portions of the storyworld. Transmedia utilizes memory to form a sort of gestalt understanding of the storyworld, putting the multiple textual sites of a transmedial system into a constant state of recollection and renegotiation.

In “Design Decisions and Concepts in Licensed Collectible Card Games,” game designer Eric M. Lang provides his own insights into how games function as media extensions, using examples from his work on numerous licensed card games. Lang argues against immersion as the point of adaptation: “Many believe that the player’s motivation to immerse herself in the world informs every aspect of her play pattern,” he writes, but “‘Evocation’ is what I have self-defined as the goal of a successful design based on a strong property. I believe that what players want is not so much to transpose themselves into the heart of the narrative through game play, but to enjoy a lateral experience that enhances their overall appreciation for the property” (Lang and Harrington 2007, 85). Lang’s description of “evocation” has clear parallels with Booth’s “transmedia pathos,” and his “lateral experiences” speak to the ways fans often enjoy remixing storyworlds in unexpected ways.

It is also important to consider the affective dimensions of the network of activities that surround the ritual of play itself. Analyzing the time-consuming miniature wargaming hobby, Carter, Harrop, and Gibbs argue that something *more than* the game is involved: “we suggest the new concept of pastime, defined as a collection of interlinked and associated activities that serve to occupy one’s time and thoughts pleasantly” (Carter, Harrop, and Gibbs 2014a, 123). Consuming transmedially expansive media and playing a game often go far beyond the simple acts of consumption and play: both encourage careful consideration of rules and structures, imaginatively appropriating the texts for personal fantasy, and engaging with various levels of fan community. The primary text—the storyworld or the gameworld—may be the center point of

the communities that develops around it, but it always remains one part of a large network of interrelated activities. Both storyworlds and gameworlds demonstrate an expansive capacity to be greater than the sum of their parts, and this springs from the pleasures of their affective and immersive potential.

These different writers each deploy their own terminology, but I argue that they are all fundamentally discussing the same topic: the affective dimensions of transmedia. Be it pathos, memory, or evocation, engaging with transmedia involves a deeply personal drawing upon of our media histories. In the chapters that follow, I will be especially attuned to these personal dimensions, to the inherent idiosyncrasies of individual experiences of transmedia: the differences in what we have consumed, in what we have found important, in how we have felt. Games, as a medium of procedurally authored texts that every player explores and experiences in their own individualized ways, are uniquely attuned to foreground the personal dimensions at the heart of transmediality.

## Chapter Breakdowns

The principal chapters of my dissertation explore how licensing is utilized across a range of ludic media extensions and how players use these extensions to explore and expand a property's storyworld. Each chapter of this dissertation focuses on a different intellectual property. The case studies I have chosen—*Star Wars*, *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Warhammer 40,000*—each originate in different media (the case studies represent a film series, a literary and television series, and a tabletop game franchise respectively), and have very different relationships between the core text of the franchise (the "mothership") and their transmedial extensions. *Star Wars* is the most centralized, with a clearly delineated textual hierarchy with the films superseding all other texts; *A Song of Ice and Fire* has a more bifurcated structure, with the

original novels and the HBO television adaptation each functioning as central nodes in two not-quite-overlapping transmedial networks; and *Warhammer 40,000* has the originary miniature wargame as *a* mothership, with the other licensed transmedia extensions often lacking the sort of centripetal pull toward this central text—as my interviews reveal, many *Warhammer 40,000* fans have little to no experience with what would seem to be the central node of the franchise's transmedia network.[6] These three franchises allow me to explore the complex relationships that ludic paratexts have with their licensed storyworlds, with the prior history of other transmedial extensions, and with the franchise's own fandom(s).

The opening chapter explores *Star Wars* and the process of worldbuilding, examined through the lens of Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca's model of transmedial worlds. *Star Wars* games offer a huge range of examples to draw upon, which highlight the diverse ways that games aid in the development, expansion, and even continuation of transmedia storyworlds. *Star Wars*—a comprehensively licensed property, with hundreds of ludic paratexts, produced by dozens of different stakeholders over the course of more than three decades—reveals the strategies that structure these games. The case studies I have chosen—West End Games' *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*, first published in 1987; LucasArts' *Shadows of the Empire*, released for the Nintendo 64 in 1996; Traveller's Tales' *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game*, released cross-platform in 2005; and Fantasy Flight Games' *Star Wars: The Card Game*, released in 2012—demonstrate both important moments in the history of the *Star Wars* franchise and different ways that storyworlds are expanded, refined, and evoked through games.

The second chapter uses Ian Bogost's procedural rhetoric, how the design and implementation of rules present rhetorical arguments, as a launching pad to examine the

[6] I would count myself among such fans, having only played the miniature wargame once, but becoming a fan through playing the card game *Conquest*.

intersection of the rules-based systems of worldbuilding, genre formation, and game design in Westeros, the storyworld of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* novel series and its HBO adaptation *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). Though Bogost's framework has been mostly used in digital contexts, it is important to contrast the modes of engagement between players and both analog and digital games' structure of processes. My case studies include one analog game, *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game* (2002-present) by Fantasy Flight Games, and two digital games, Cyanide's *Game of Thrones* (2012) and Telltale Games' *Game of Thrones: A Telltale Games Series* (2014-2015). Through interviews with players and participant observation, I examine the ways these games provide outlets to engage with the storyworld and the ways these rules of these games inflect and influence engagement with Westeros.

The third and final chapter moves into the afterlife of licensed games, building upon Rebecca William's post-object fandom to examine a *post*-licensed game: *Warhammer 40,000: Conquest*, a card game that was cancelled in September 2016, when Games Workshop (owner of the *Warhammer* I.P.) and Fantasy Flight Games (producer of *Conquest* and other analog *Warhammer* games) announced that the license between the two companies would not be renewed. Through extensive interviews with players, including members of competing fan collectives producing new cards for the game, I examine the appeal of *Conquest* and the ups and downs of the emerging production and play practices of *Conquest*'s post-licensed after-life. This chapter examines how game communities survive once the licensing that made its production possible comes to an end, when all that is left are players working together (or, as it turns out, against each other).

# Chapter One: *Star Wars*
# Transmedia Worldbuilding in a Galaxy Far, Far Away[7]

*Star Wars* is perhaps the most widely-utilized media property in the history of licensed game production. Since the original film's release in 1977, the property has generated billions in revenue. But *Star Wars* is far more than simply the films. The storyworld exists and persists across novels, comics, toys, fan fiction, art, cosplay, theme park attractions, and, of course games. *Star Wars* is an instructive franchise to start with, owing to how popular a license it has been for a diverse range of games across several decades and numerous genres and styles, highlighting the varied ways that games aid in sustaining a storyworld. The four *Star Wars* games I analyze in this chapter demonstrate alternative strategies for transmedia worldbuilding. Each game also intersects with the overall franchise at important moments in its history, reflecting changing degrees of control Lucasfilm and later Disney exert as owners of one of the world's most valuable IPs.

This chapter builds upon Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca's essay "Transmedial Worlds: Rethinking Cyberworld Design," which offers a robust framework for examining how popular storyworlds transmedially proliferate across different media sites:

> A transmedial world is an abstract idea of a world generated on the grounds of the first actualization of the world and the core elements this world contained, but not in anyway restricted by this. We must thus approach transmedial worlds exactly as worlds, not as a "texts" or any given sign system, but as imaginary constructs shared by the cult audience with an interest in the universe. (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 5)

Klastrup and Tosca frame their work in digital contexts, which can easily be applied to other transmedial contexts, as they demonstrate: "by encountering one of the world's actualizations

[7] Portions of the section "*The Card Game* (2012 to 2018): Contingency, Precarity, and Canonicity" were previously published—see Nick Bestor, 2018, "Distribution, Deckbuilding, and Design in Star Wars: The Card Game," *Well Played Journal* 7(1).

(for example an amusement park ride in which participants have to shoot arrows at cardboard orcs), the imaginary construct of the world is evoked in the participant's imagination, and each simple act gains a much wider meaning" (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 1). One would not expect a coherent narrative expansion of a storyworld from a licensed roller coaster, but that does not mean the ride has not contributed to the complex network of associations and experiences that compose a given property's transmedial gestalt. We do not need a full narrative rendering of the storyworld—certain diegetic traces are necessary to conjure the storyworld and its meanings.

They define several core characteristics of storyworlds, traits that carry over as the world is represented (and re-presented) across different media platforms. First, the "mythos" of the world, "the central knowledge one needs to have in order to interact with or interpret events in the world successfully." Second, the "topos," "knowing what is to be expected from the physics of and navigation in the world." And third, the "ethos," "the form of knowledge required in order to know how to behave in the world" (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 4). In the case of *Star Wars*, the mythos would include the central conflicts between the Light and Dark Sides of the Force, the specific science-fiction technologies of *Star Wars* (lightsabers, droids, Death Stars), and even pre-established characters (or character types). The topos would include the familiar spaces of the storyworlds and the ways characters move through them (for example, the relative ease of interplanetary travel through hyperspace differentiates *Star Wars* from many other sci-fi storyworlds). The ethos would include the spiritual belief in the Force and the dominant ideologies that motivate the characters. As Nicolle Lamerichs discusses, "The subdivisions of mythos, topos, and ethos are helpful tools to construct an analysis of this universe and the ways in which fan expressions and official texts connect" (Lamerichs 2018, 160). None of these are

"the text" of *Star Wars* itself—instead they are the worldbuilding blocks that make *Star Wars* its own distinctive storyworld.

They are also the blocks that allow *Star Wars* to be transmediated across a range of different media platforms; how these blocks are employed across different media sites differs depending on the specific affordances of those media. In this chapter, I examine four very different games that transmediate *Star Wars*: *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* (1987-1999), *Shadows of the Empire* (1996), *Lego Star Wars* (2005), and *Star Wars: The Card Game* (2012-2018). In the introduction to the collection *World Building: Transmedia, Fans, Industries*, Marta Boni writes: "media truly are complex systems […] Within the current, interconnected panorama, they do not only transmit worlds, they become worlds themselves" (Boni 2017, 24). Each game comes at different moments in the broader transmedial history of the overall franchise, and utilizes the mythos, topos, and ethos of *Star Wars* in ways suited to their medium, demonstrating the varied approaches to evolving and growing popular storyworlds as they move across media (see Table 2.1 for a selected timeline of the franchise, featuring the films and games discussed in this chapter)

As a media franchise, *Star Wars* has had a long and complex production history. The first film, *Star Wars* (later subtitled *A New Hope*) was released in 1977, and its box office success spawned a media craze and merchandising boom. This was central to George Lucas' own success, owing to the deal he made with 20th Century Fox that allowed him to retain ownership of the licensing and merchandising rights to the original film. Sequels soon followed: *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, released in 1980 and 1983. Over the next several years, the franchise would lie somewhat fallow, before a major resurgence in merchandizing production in the early 1990s. In 1997, *Special Edition* re-releases of the original films, which

**Table 2.1**: Timeline of select Star Wars productions. Games discussed in this chapter in **bold**.

**Figure 2.1:** Timeline of *Star Wars* productions. Games in **bold.**

| | |
|---|---|
| 1977 | *A New Hope* |
| 1980 | *Empire Strikes Back* |
| 1983 | *Return of the Jedi* |
| 1987 | ***The Roleplaying Game*** |
| 1991 | *Heir to the Empire* novel |
| 1996 | ***Shadows of the Empire*** |
| 1997 | The *Special Editions* |
| 1999 | *The Phantom Menace* |
| 2002 | *Attack of the Clones* |
| 2005 | *Revenge of the Sith* |
| 2005 | ***Lego Star Wars*** |
| 2012 | Disney buys Lucasfilm |
| 2012 | ***The Card Game*** |
| 2015 | *The Force Awakens* |
| 2016 | *Rogue One* |
| 2017 | *The Last Jedi* |
| 2018 | *Solo* |
| 2019 | *The Rise of Skywalker* |

added new special effects sequences, were released theatrically. These were followed by a new trilogy of prequels, set decades before the original films: *The Phantom Menace* in 1999, *Attack of the Clones* in 2002, and *Revenge of the Sith* in 2005. Following the prequels, film production paused, though the franchise continued to grow via a vast array of transmedial extensions. In 2012, Disney announced they had purchased Lucasfilm for over $4 billion, and the franchise entered its current stage of rapid and continual production, with yearly film releases: *The Force Awakens* in 2015, *Rogue One* in 2016, *The Last Jedi* in 2017, *Solo* in 2018, and *The Rise of Skywalker* in 2019. Though the franchise's main texts are its films, it is in its transmedial reach that *Star Wars* becomes such a massive and self-sustaining property—over the last forty years, hundreds of novels, comics, TV shows, and games have offered fans additional ways to explore and play within the *Star Wars* universe.

In the case studies that follow, I examine how *Star Wars* games exploit and expand the storyworld materials of the Galaxy Far, Far Away. Instead of trying to chart the full history of *Star Wars* games—a book-sized undertaking in itself—I have instead chosen four

key examples from the past thirty years. In addition to ordering my case studies chronologically—each game comes at important moments in the history of the *Star Wars* franchise—each case study will demonstrate distinctive approaches to transmedia worldbuilding, starting with a directed and substantial expansion of the storyworld's mythos, topos, and ethos and progressing toward examples that are more evocative and abstract in their use of the storyworld. Although these four games are my primary focus, they cannot be taken in isolation—to understand how they function as transmedial games, we must be aware of what transmedia comes before and after. Thus, between each of my case studies I have included short sections that encapsulate different periods in the franchise's history, briefly covering the film releases and the subsequent games, novels, comics, TV shows, and other transmedial extensions that precede or follow.

In my first case study, I examine West End Games' *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*, first published in 1987. At the time of its release, a decade past the release of *A New Hope* and four years after *Return of the Jedi*, *The Roleplaying Game* comes at a unique time in the history of *Star Wars*: at or near the nadir of its pop culture relevance. In producing the game, WEG contributed significantly to defining and organizing the storyworld, refining and expanding the mythos, topos, and ethos of *Star Wars* by integrating some earlier transmedial extensions while excluding others. Beyond transmediating the storyworld as a setting for imaginative tabletop roleplaying gameplay, *The Roleplaying Game* also served as a foundational document for the Expanded Universe, the interconnected network of *Star Wars* paratexts codified by the licensing department of Lucasfilm during the 1990s. Coming at an early point in the franchise's history, before Lucasfilm exerted as much control over its licensees, *The Roleplaying Game* offers an opportunity to examine the role that licensed game designers can play as architects and

gatekeepers of transmedia worldbuilding, codifying what is and is not remembered within the storyworld.

From *The Roleplaying Game*'s release at a point when the franchise's initial success had run its course, I jump forward in my second case study to the beginning of a sustained period of *Star Wars* production: LucasArts' *Shadows of the Empire*, for the Nintendo 64 in 1996. Players take the role of Dash Rendar, a new character created as a proxy for Han Solo, as he explores familiar corners of the *Star Wars* universe in the time period between *Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. The game itself, however, is a piece of a larger whole—*Shadows of the Empire* is also a coordinated transmedia project including a novel, a comics series written, trading cards, a soundtrack, and several lines of toys and merchandise. *Shadows of the Empire*, produced by a corporate subsidiary of Lucasfilm, is *not* a licensed game, offering an opportunity to contrast the coordination of this project with the worldbuilding efforts of the chapter's other licensees. As the ludic component of this overarching project, the game *Shadows of the Empire* demonstrates the ways games can work within a coordinated transmedia project while revealing some of the fundamental limitations of this approach to transmediality.

My third case study turns to *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game*, released by Traveller's Tales in 2005. Released shortly before *Revenge of the Sith*, the game utilizes a light, parodic, and self-aware tone that has come to characterize Lego's media brand in recent years. Restaging the events of the prequel films as a Lego-based pantomime, the game may initially seem to do little to expand and broaden the storyworld. What *Lego Star Wars* demonstrates instead are alternative strategies that licensed games use in evoking and remediating their original texts, playfully deconstructing and reconstructing the property in ways that provide new perspectives on the storyworld.

The final section of this chapter examines Fantasy Flight Games' *Star Wars: The Card Game*, first released months after the Disney deal was announced in 2012, and cancelled in 2018. As an analog card game, the mythos, topos, and ethos of *Star Wars* are transmediated into images and text on cardboard, and the highly abstracted gameplay offers the least amount of traditional narrativity of any of the transmedial games discussed in this chapter. Set against the backdrop of Disney's purchase and its upheaval of not only the previous licensing status quo but also the definitions of *Star Wars* canon, *The Card Game* highlights the precarity and volatility of licensed media production. Fantasy Flight Games must serve multiple masters, working to produce a successful game, released serially over the course of years, that can cater to the franchise's long-time fans amid the uncertainty of Disney's new licensing regime.

Before examining the first case study, WEG's *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*, I briefly discuss the early years of *Star Wars* transmedia. Although the franchise was groundbreaking in its extensive use of licensing and merchandising deals—a model that has become the norm for every Hollywood blockbuster to follow—the often chaotic and disparate ways that the property was being deployed in this first decade of *Star Wars* history is a far cry from the finely-tuned corporate machinery we have come to expect from one of the most valuable brands in the world.

## THE FIRST DECADE OF *STAR WARS* TRANSMEDIA: 1976 TO 1987

Although the *Star Wars* franchise has since developed into a transmedia storyworld spanning hundreds of novels, comics, games, and toys, it is important to first consider the scale of the franchise in its early years. The original three films—*Star Wars* in 1977, *The Empire Strikes Back* in 1980, and *Return of the Jedi* in 1983—generated a huge range of merchandising and ancillary media, but as Sean Guynes argues, there was little top-down structure governing

these extensions: "*Star Wars* developed not as a set of predetermined, interrelated convergent narratives, but as a hodgepodge storyworld built up through a series of punctuated media extensions licensed by the newly created Lucasfilm company" (Guynes 2018, 145). This approach to *Star Wars*' merchandising was groundbreaking for the time, setting the stage for the more ambitious and synergistic promotional efforts that have come to characterize franchise entertainment in the last forty years. There was a significant amount of transmedial *Star Wars* early in the franchise's life, but it lacked the coordination and structure the property would gain in later years as Lucasfilm began to more successfully leverage or exploit the value of the IP through carefully managed licensing arrangements.

One of the most important sites of early *Star Wars* transmediation was Kenner's line of toys, which featured hundreds of action figures, vehicles, playsets, and board games between 1976 and 1985. As one of the first massive licensing pushes for a film, the Kenner toys were extraordinarily successful, selling "42 million in the first year alone, producing profits of $100 million for the toy company Kenner in 1977" (Gray 2010, 177)—and with Lucas having retained the licensing and merchandising rights in his negotiation with Fox, the success of the *Star Wars* license made him extremely wealthy.

The Kenner toys provide some of the first examples of *Star Wars* worldbuilding outside the original film, helping to fill in the blanks and flesh out the world on screen. The action figures not only produced miniaturized versions of Luke and Leia and Obi-Wan; they drew attention to the background details of *Star Wars*. For example, the exotic but nameless patrons of the Mos Eisley Cantina, the bar where Luke and Obi-Wan first meet Han Solo and Chewbacca in *A New Hope*, were given definition and nomenclature, with names like "Hammerhead," "Snaggletooth," and "Walrus Man." For the first generation of *Star Wars* fans, Kenner's design

and marketing decisions played an unparalleled role in defining the storyworld. The toys offer a broad range of flexible play possibilities, putting a specific spin on *Star Wars*, "refining and accentuating certain meanings" (Gray 2010, 181), providing a framework for how to understand the film itself and how to play in its world. Kenner's toys frequently foregrounded violent conflict, even where it may not exist in the films—for instance, the aliens mentioned above all came packaged with toy guns. Such framing reinforces a highly gendered perspective on the storyworld: the toys provide numerous avenues to enact violent man-of-action scenarios for the likes of Han Solo, but little material to restage the diplomatic and political work of characters like Princess Leia. As the franchise developed, toys remained a robust area of profits for Lucasfilm and their licensees: in 2016, *Star Wars* was the top toy brand and generated $760 million in US sales (The NPD Group 2017)—and these toys continue to inflect transmedial understandings of the films, as Suzanne Scott discusses in her analysis of the #WheresRey hashtag and the lack of toys featuring current *Star Wars* protagonist Rey (Scott 2017). Kenner's toys provide an enduring example of the worldbuilding-by-licensee process that has played a significant role in the history of the *Star Wars* franchise, and is a central motif of this chapter.

Not all early *Star Wars* media was necessarily successful, such as the franchise's widely lampooned first foray into television, *The Star Wars Holiday Special*, which aired on CBS on November 17, 1978. Lucas had little to do with the *Holiday Special*'s production, stating in an interview, "We let them use the characters and stuff and that probably wasn't the smartest thing to do, but you learn from those experiences" (Burke 2005). The early period of *Star Wars* transmedia was frequently defined by this sort of hands-off approach. Later television production included the made-for-TV films *Caravan of Courage: An Ewok Adventure* and *Ewoks: The*

*Battle for Endor*, which aired on ABC in 1984 and 1985,[8] and *Star Wars: Droids: The Adventures of R2-D2 and C-3PO* (1985) and *Star Wars: Ewoks* (1985-86), produced by Canadian animation firm Nelvana for ABC.

Another significant extension was a long-running comics series published by Marvel. The first issue of the *Star Wars* series pre-dated the film, coming out in April 1977. The series, which ran until 1986 for 107 issues, began by transmediating the events of *A New Hope*, then detailing new adventures for Luke, Leia, and Han. In book publishing, Alan Dean Foster, who ghost-wrote the first film's novelization, *Star Wars: From The Adventures of Luke Skywalker*, was commissioned to write the first original *Star Wars* novel, *Splinter of the Mind's Eye*, published in 1978. Chris Taylor describes *Splinter* as an "insurance policy[:] If *Star Wars* only broke even, or made just a tiny bit of profit, [Lucas] could use Foster's book as the basis for a screenplay and make a quick sequel" (Taylor 2014, 286-287). *Splinter of the Mind's Eye* is in many respects representative of the inchoate transmedia strategies of early *Star Wars*—a disparate and uncoordinated product line of cash-ins and back-up plans, far-removed from the carefully curated approaches that would emerge in the 1990s and continue to be refined and market-tested through to the present day.[9]

The first digital game to utilize the license was *The Empire Strikes Back*, published and developed by Parker Brothers for the Atari 2600 in 1982, which recreated the film's opening Battle of Hoth; Parker Brothers released two more Atari 2600 titles in 1983, *Return of the Jedi: Death Star Battle*, based on the final battle of the original trilogy, and *Jedi Arena*, based on Luke's lightsaber training in the first film. The first arcade game, titled simply *Star Wars*, was

[8] The films received limited theatrical distribution abroad.

[9] Foster's novels were followed by two more film novelizations—by Donald F. Glut and James Kahn, respectively—and two trilogies of novels: *The Han Solo Adventures* (1979-1980), by Brian Daley; and *The Adventures of Lando Calrissian* (1983), by L. Neil Smith.

released in 1983 by Atari. In the game, players are put in the first-person perspective of Luke Skywalker in his X-Wing during the climactic attack on the Death Star. Atari would follow up with *Return of the Jedi* in 1984 and *The Empire Strikes Back* in 1985. The *Star Wars* license was also used for a large range of tabletop games, including five board games based on the first film published by Kenner in 1977: *Escape from the Death Star*, *Adventures of R2-D2*, *Destroy Death Star Game*, *Electronic Laser Battle Game* and *Electronic Battle Command Game*.

These early ludic extensions for *Star Wars* were sometimes limited in terms of worldbuilding, though still offering evocative experiences of the *Star Wars* world. Atari's *Star Wars* arcade game was perhaps the most ambitious in its transmedial evocation, utilizing sounds from the films and an "elaborately decorated cockpit cabinet for the interface features stickers and faux computer screens to give the player the impression that they are piloting an X-Wing"[10]—as Drew Morton describes, "the physical interface itself—not just the game—aids substantially in the creation of an evocative space" (Morton 2018, 110). Juul, on the other hand, has argued, "The primary thing that encourages the player to connect game and movie is the title *Star Wars* on the machine and on the screen" (Juul 2001). Stripped of its branding, it *might* be difficult to identify the storyworld from this abstraction—but the game utilizes identifiable iconography (the X-Wing, TIE Fighter, and Death Star designs, for instance), in addition to John Williams' score and sound clips from the film itself, so the association goes beyond the title. The game is not meant as an alternative narrative outlet, but as a complimentary one, offering players evocative and imaginative experiences that may not necessarily be narrative in nature—and this is true for many *Star Wars* games. Each of the case studies in the following sections highlight different ludic approaches by various stakeholders in the *Star Wars* franchise, starting with the ambitious transmedia worldbuilding process of *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*.

[10] Two cabinets were produced, a conventional stand-up cabinet and this more elaborate set-up.

## *The Roleplaying Game* (1987): Gatekeeping in Transmedia Worldbuilding

I have discussed a number of the ludic extensions produced in the early years of the *Star Wars* franchise, and I now turn my attention now to one produced during a transitional period in the property: *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*, first published in 1987 by West End Games and designed by Greg Costikyan.[11] Although it may be hard to imagine given *Star Wars*' current ubiquity—especially under Disney's ownership of the franchise, marked by production schedules exploiting the IP's value to its fullest—but when WEG secured the license, *Star Wars* was seen by many to have run its course. Bill Slavicsek, one of the game's editors, was told, after WEG secured the rights, "Why would you make that?! That's a dead license!" (Baker 2016). At the time, this might have been the case, but within a few years of WEG's development of a roleplaying game set in the *Star Wars* universe, the franchise re-emerged as a major site of production for both licensed media extensions and merchandising like toys and apparel. *The Roleplaying Game* has had a significant and lasting influence on the entire *Star Wars* setting. According to Schrier, Torner, and Hammer, "In the creation of transmedia, a so-called story Bible is imperative in documenting—and thus establishing—the world" (Schrier et al. 2018, 359); as Lucasfilm moved toward more fully exploiting the value of its IP across a broad range of media, it used WEG's worldbuilding labor for this foundational document. *The Roleplaying Game* thus played an important and central role in organizing the storyworld and defining key aspects of the mythos, topos, and ethos that would be used in later games, novels, comics, and other extensions.

West End Games (WEG) was founded by Daniel Scott Palter in 1974, and initially specialized in board games and historical wargames, a mode of tabletop gaming that simulates

[11] West End Games would have the license until 1999.

and abstracts military combat through the use of maps and pieces representing troops and materiel; early WEG releases included Palter's own *Marlborough at Blenheim* (1979), *Campaigns of Napoleon* (1980), and *Killer Angels* (1984). The company also published a trio of licensed *Star Trek* board games in 1985: *Star Trek III*, *Star Trek: The Enterprise[4] Encounter*, and *Star Trek: The Adventure Game*. In 1984, WEG branched out into tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs). TRPGs were a relatively new tabletop gaming format that had grown out of miniature wargaming, so WEG was well-situated to capitalize on the new market. The first commercially available TRPG, *Dungeons & Dragons*, was published in 1974; designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, the game was based on miniature wargame *Chainmail* (1971), designed by Gygax and Jeff Perren. The success of *Dungeons & Dragons* spawned many imitators in the hobby gaming market, and WEG entered the market with an original setting, *Paranoia*, in 1984, followed by their first licensed RPG, *Ghostbusters: A Frightfully Cheerful Roleplaying Game*, published in 1986. The following year, WEG acquired the *Star Wars* license from Lucasfilm.

In TRPGs, players "roleplay" as their characters, imaginatively narrating their actions within the game's storyworld. Daniel Mackay defines the form as "an *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation system that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *characters'* spontaneous interactions are resolved" (Mackay 2001, 5). Games are usually overseen by one player who serves as a sort of referee or moderator—this role is known as a Dungeon Master (or DM) in *Dungeons & Dragons* and a Game Master (or GM) in other game systems, including WEG's. The GM is "the person who organizes the game, plays the role of all NPCs [non-player characters], and is responsible for everything except the actions taken by the player characters. This includes describing everything the player characters experience (see, hear, etc.)" (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 27-28).

*Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* offered players a transformative sense of control and ownership over this familiar storyworld. Jennifer Grouling Cover writes that, "TRPGs based on popular media are gamers' way of interacting with these worlds, understanding them, and appropriating them as their own" (Cover 2010, 150). Importantly, before players can enjoy this sort of experience, WEG had to undertake a process of defining and refining the *Star Wars* storyworld, adapting the Galaxy Far, Far Away to a TRPG system. This worldbuilding ultimately had a huge impact on the franchise as a whole —before either players of *The Roleplaying Game* or later transmedia producers could explore and develop the storyworld, WEG themselves had to "completely transform and control" the *Star Wars* universe, reshaping the often inchoate and contradictory early transmedial storyworld into a more ordered setting, one that was cohesive and expansive enough to generate individualized roleplaying sessions in the storyworld.

Although the initial transmedia produced for *Star Wars* were crucial components of the franchise's success in the late 70s and early 80s, this earliest period of transmedia produced its share of oddities, including the song-and-dance numbers of the *Holiday Special*; Jaxxon, a green Bugs Bunny-like rabbit smuggler introduced in the Marvel comics; and the names chosen by Kenner for their alien action figures. The most important facets of the *Star Wars* universe—the spiritual duality of the Force, the military conflict between Rebel and Empire, major alien races like the Wookiees and the Ewoks—remained in place, but many other facets of early *Star Wars* transmedia were minimized or outright ignored by WEG. As a property develops transmedially, it becomes important for the disparate media components to "remember" each other to generate the necessary dialogical transmedial flow (Harvey 2015); conversely, there are circumstances where both fans and producers choose to "non-remember" prior extensions (Hills 2017). *The Roleplaying Game* acts as a foundational text for the *Star Wars* franchise, serving a gatekeeping

function in codifying both what is and is not "remembered" in the storyworld, shaping both popular conceptions of and official policies toward what "counts" as canon in *Star Wars*.

*The Roleplaying Game*, like other early *Star Wars* games, taps into the evocative or immersive potential of the series by remediating existing *Star Wars* experiences, but WEG's worldbuilding labor goes further. Earlier games could evoke the transmedial memory of scenes of lightsaber training or X-Wing piloting from the film; they would not need to account for the rest of the mythos, topos, and ethos of the storyworld. A TRPG provides players with more agency to improvisationally construct their own identities within the storyworld, which must be more completely modeled in order to accommodate as broad a range of player experiences as possible.

Like many TRPGs, *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* utilizes multiple volumes of written material that teach the rules of both the game itself and the storyworld setting—and it is this material that is my focus here. Jessica Hammer argues that TRPGs are triply authored experiences with separate levels of texts: "The primary text is that which outlines the rules and setting of the game in general. The secondary text uses this material to create a specific situation. Finally, the tertiary text is created as the characters encounter the situation in play" (Hammer 2007, 70-71). Hammer's secondary text is the GM's design of the scenarios for their players to experience, while the tertiary text is the player's improvisational process of playing the game itself. Each offer a profound breadth of potential experiences, marked by individualized worldbuilding processes. As a licensed game, *The Roleplaying Game* also has a preceding level of text, what might be considered the "zero-ary" text: the originary storyworld itself. My focus here will be on *The Roleplaying Game*'s primary texts, the tangible and concrete worldbuilding texts that WEG produced to support these secondary and tertiary texts. The secondary and

tertiary texts are extremely important, but direct access to these highly performative and ephemeral enactments of *The Roleplaying Game* is methodologically outside the scope of this current research. As I show later, the primary texts have a long-lasting impact on the overall franchise.

The primary text of *The Roleplaying Game*, the manual for the game, simply titled *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* (to avoid confusion, I refer to this text as *The Rulebook*) provides a broad overview of the setting while teaching fundamentals of roleplaying and the intricate rules and statistics that govern player actions within the game. The opening chapters, "Introduction" and "Player Section," as well as the "Character Templates" appendix, are intended to be read by all players of *The Roleplaying Game*. The bulk of *The Rulebook*, entailing the lengthier "Gamemaster" and "Adventure" Sections, teaches GM how to design and run a game. Here the primary text functions as TRPG pedagogy, instructing players on how they will be constructing their own secondary and tertiary texts.

A central feature of the TRPG industry is the iterative and serialized production of new materials, including both new "campaigns" (pre-designed packages of characters, settings, and narrative hooks that GMs may utilize in designing play sessions) and additional supplemental volumes that expand on the encyclopedic perspective on the storyworld. One such example is *The Star Wars Sourcebook* (which I will refer to as *The Sourcebook*) by Bill Slavicsek and Curtis Smith, published concurrently with *The Rulebook*. Almost 150 pages long, *The Sourcebook* provides a wealth of information about the *Star Wars* storyworld. Across its fifteen chapters, *The Sourcebook* includes the minutia of space travel (Chapters One through Four all discuss different facets of *Star Wars* spacecraft design and propulsion), the mechanics of droids (Chapter Five), the alien life of *Star Wars* (Chapter Eight and Nine), the inner workings of lightsabers (Chapter

Eleven), and the biographies of the major characters of the films (Chapter Fifteen). Sprinkled throughout the volume are schematics, diagrams, and blueprints, as well as numerous pieces of concept art for the films.

*The Sourcebook* is not primarily a narrative text in and of itself; Hammer notes, "this material is almost never enough to actually tell a story with. It is general rather than concrete, world-building rather than story-building" (Hammer 2007, 71). Though there are certainly portions of *The Sourcebook* that are storytelling-based—in particular, the biographies of the films' main casts are dedicated to telling (or re-telling) stories about these characters—the primary pleasure of *The Sourcebook* is in its ample amounts of "excess detail and descriptive richness" (Wolf 2012, 29). There is likely little direct storytelling value in understanding the architecture of Rebel and Imperial military sites (as covered over the 14 pages of *The Sourcebook*'s Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen)—but there *is* worldbuilding value here, providing insight into how to construct the spaces where much of the gameplay will be staged. *The Sourcebook* is ultimately a tool, a reference guide to aid GMs and players in designing and guiding their own personal explorations of the *Star Wars* storyworld.

*The Sourcebook* is a rich and comprehensive database of information. One especially detailed section is "Chapter Eight: Aliens," which covers many of the sentient non-human species featured in the original trilogy (non-sentient aliens can be found in the following chapter, "Creatures"). The chapter details ten alien species, each receiving about a page and a half of material, including the species' name, several paragraphs that describe their physical appearance, homeworld, and culture; suggested character statistics;[12] and a short piece of fiction that further develops that species' attitudes and worldview. These overviews are directly focused on situating each species within a more developed mythos, topos, and ethos for the storyworld. The aliens

[12] The numerical values that reflect a character's strengths and weaknesses.

include some that are heavily featured in the *Star Wars* films, such as the Wookiees or the Ewoks, but others are peripheral or background figures in the films, including Ithorians (seen as a patron in the Mos Eisley Cantina in *A New Hope*), Gamorreans (the green, pig-like guards in Jabba the Hutt's palace in *Return of the Jedi*), and Sullustans (the jowly species of Lando Calrissian's co-pilot Nien Nunb at the climax of *Return of the Jedi*).

At 14 pages, "Aliens" is also one of the longest chapters in *The Sourcebook*—only "Chapter Two: Starfighters," at 17 pages, and "Chapter Fifteen: Heroes and Villains," at 21 pages, are longer. This level of detail speaks to the importance of this chapter to WEG's worldbuilding process—by zooming in on the fine details of the lives of *Star Wars*' aliens, who are visually distinctive but rarely narratively central, *The Roleplaying Game* more fully peoples the Galaxy Far, Far Away with more robustly defined individuals and cultures that roleplayers can utilize in their games. *The Sourcebook*'s chapter on aliens is impressively detailed, but it is not simply a repository for existing information on the storyworld—*The Roleplaying Game* provides a wealth of new information about *Star Wars*.

Additionally, what is *left out* can be just as significant. Matt Hills describes a sort of reverse worldbuilding process he calls "worldblocking, as previous creative reinventions are dropped, edited out, and non-remembered" (Hills 2017, 356). Omissions of material from the earlier *Star Wars* transmedia operates as a form of worldblocking, but *The Roleplaying Game* offers numerous opportunities to make other, smaller adjustments to the *Star Wars* universe. *The Roleplaying Game* does not merely block certain facets of the early transmedial world—it tweaks and refines the storyworld in subtler ways too. These refinements were done in the interest of transmediating *Star Wars* into a compelling TRPG setting, but the lasting influence of

*The Roleplaying Game*'s primary texts as the later story bibles of the Expanded Universe means that the *Star Wars* universe still bears the fingerprints of WEG's worldbuilding labor.

For example, Kenner's *Star Wars* toys played a central role in the franchise's early development, but some of the choices the company made in terms of naming were revised in *The Roleplaying Game*. Chris Baker's history of *The Roleplaying Game* discusses one such change:

> there's a bizarre alien that's glimpsed briefly in the famous cantina scene from *Star Wars* that has a long curving neck and eyes on either side of its wide, flat skull. The Kenner toy line simply referred to the creature as Hammerhead. 'I convinced Lucasfilm that 'The Hammerheads' wasn't a good name for a species,' [Bill Slavicsek] says. 'If anything, they'd take that name as an insult.' Slavicsek renamed them Ithorians, and the sourcebook described the herd-like society they had developed on their lushly forested homeworld. (Baker 2016)

The affordances of different licensed media require different approaches to how the storyworld is exploited and expanded. For Kenner, the process involved selecting a novel alien design seen briefly in *A New Hope*, modeling it into a 6-inch action figure, coming up with a catchy name for the alien, and designing the packaging to ensure maximum identifiability. Within that context, "Hammerhead" is snappy, marketable, and memorable—it's a good name for a toy.

WEG's approach to the *Star Wars* universe had to be different. In using the *Star Wars* license as the basis for a TRPG—a process that involves not only designing the mechanics and rules of the game systems but also producing encyclopedia-like guides to the storyworld that will be used to inspire hours of imaginative roleplaying—WEG's worldbuilding must be more thorough, as their primary text will be the basis upon which the secondary and tertiary texts of the GM and the players rely. The appeal of TRPGs is the freedom and agency they provide players in deciding how they will enact their fantasies and build their in-game personas; a company like WEG must thread a worldbuilding needle, providing players with a vast diegesis in which to stage their play, but one that is open and flexible enough for players to feel ownership of their characters and their place within *Star Wars*. The freedom with which WEG was able to

do this is directly tied to the degree of control that Lucasfilm exerts on their licensees—none of the other games I discuss had this degree of control in shaping the storyworld.

Throughout the material of *The Rulebook* and *The Sourcebook*, WEG engages in a sort of worldbuilding fine-tuning, with details or vocabulary from the films, the scripts, or other transmedial extensions selected and iteratively refined. Kenner had already singled out "Hammerhead" as an attention-grabbing design fit for a toy, and players of the RPG may have brought that knowledge with them into the game—the writers at WEG constructed a world and a culture for that species. And in the interest of making background information on this species feasible and plausible, Slavicsek rightfully points out that "Hammerhead" is no longer a fitting proper name for what is now the Ithorians.

**Ithorians**

Ithorians hail from the Ottega star system, in the Lesser Plooriod Cluster. They are called "Hammerheads" by other races because of their most prominent and unusual feature. Ithorians have a long neck which curls forward and ends in a t-shaped dome.

Ithorians speak the common language of the galaxy, albeit with a peculiar twist. Ithorians have two mouths, one on each side of the long, curling neck. This produces a "stereo" effect when they speak that can be disconcerting to beings not familiar with them. Their native language fully employs this stereo effect, making it one of the most interesting sounding but difficult languages to speak.

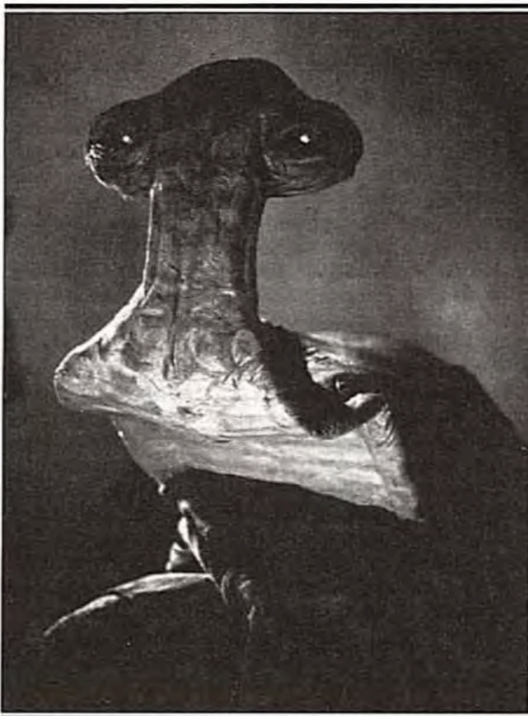

**Figure 2.1:** Portions of *The Star Wars Sourcebook*'s entry on "Ithorians." Copyright West End Games. Image cropped by author from two columns in original text.

In breaking from Kenner's prior work at developing and defining the storyworld, *The Sourcebook* does not entirely abandon the pre-existing nomenclature. As seen in Figure 2.2, the opening lines of *The Sourcebook*'s entry on the species notes that Ithorians "are called 'Hammerheads' by other races because of their unusual and prominent

features" (*Sourcebook* 1987, 73).[13] *The Sourcebook* goes far beyond simply codifying the names of these alien species—"Chapter Eight: Aliens" contains extensive material on the cultures and attitudes of *Star Wars* aliens, representing a profound amount of new worldbuilding detail, which can then be called upon for roleplaying and, as will later be the case, serve as foundational material for the *Star Wars* transmedia to be produced in the years following.

Players of *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* "seek their own narrative control over the text" (Cover, 150-151), and WEG's primary texts like *The Rulebook* and *The Sourcebook* provide players with the means to attain this sense of control. Though prior transmedia had done its own worldbuilding, WEG's contributions endeavor to more fully organize and structure the storyworld. This systemized approach to worldbuilding is well suited to a TRPG, but an argument could be made that earlier *Star Wars* transmedia offered more creative freedom for fans to engage with the universe on their own terms. Kenner gave fans cyphers like "Hammerhead," and these toys remained open to a wide range of interpretations and uses. In his book *Using the Force*, Will Brooker recounts casting Hammerhead as the leader of the mercenary Hammerhead Gang, an interpretation that the relatively open text of the original film allows room for—and Kenner's decision to package Hammerhead with a gun may have encouraged (Brooker 2002, xii). The more developed, fleshed-out universe presented by WEG gives *Star Wars* more definition, for better or for worse—the universe of *The Roleplaying Game* is more closed than earlier *Star Wars*, with their worldbuilding labor having given the *Star Wars* universe a coherence and stability that may ultimately cut off options for how some players may want to experience and own the storyworld. A scenario like Brooker's may be harder to support

[13] The "Quarren" entry similarly acknowledges the species' nickname of "Squid Face," another less-than-dignified name used by Kenner on its action figure. Both of these details in *The Sourcebook* canonize the idea that *Star Wars* aliens face significant discrimination, an evocative hook for potential secondary and tertiary texts—whether players at the time used that hook would be an excellent direction for future research.

with WEG's Ithorians, but *The Roleplaying Game* provides players and GM a more concrete setting for their imaginative play sessions. Licensed media, as evocative paratexts, always feed into each other—the Kenner action figures inflect *The Roleplaying Game*, which in turns can transform future interactions with that toy, and both are transmedially feeding off of and back into every other node on the transmedial network that a *Star Wars* fan may encounter.

Material like *The Sourcebook*'s sections on alien cultures is sometimes referred to by the TRPG fan-term "fluff," which game designer Robin D. Laws defines as "encompass[ing] the invented histories, character portrayals, setting descriptions, visual imagery and other imaginative elements that together make up the form's narrative side" (Laws 2012). Fluff is an often-dismissive term (i.e., insubstantial and unimportant) for material that aims to expand and nuance the storyworld but is not strictly "necessary" to understanding the rules of the game. It serves a major role in how a TRPG deploys and distributes its worldbuilding. *The Rulebook* features several in-universe advertisements, including a print ad for R2 astromech droids (*Rulebook* 1987, 112), a two-page spread for a "Four-Week Grand Galactic Tour" vacation package (*Rulebook* 1987, 110-111), and recruitment materials for The Imperial Navy (*Rulebook* 1987, 38-39). These faux advertisements are among the few pages of *The Rulebook* that are published in color, on a glossier stock—these pages increase the production costs for *The Rulebook*, but are invaluable in how effectively they can encourage the reader / player to imagine the universe that produced these ads. Situating the Imperial Navy within the familiar context of a military recruitment advertisement could encourage a player to more fully consider the lives of a Stormtrooper; reading promotional copy for an R2 unit makes it easier to understand how droids are treated more as commodities than as individuals. Fluff frequently encourages a more robust examination of the storyworld.

Similarly, Han Solo's profile in *The Sourcebook* begins with an "Author's Note," with an in-universe "historian" providing a short anecdote about how his family was rescued from slavers by "Han Solo, notorious pirate, miscreant, and villain" (*Sourcebook* 1987, 126). This bit of in-universe detail can subtly signal to players that the information provided in *The Rulebook* and *The Sourcebook* may not be immutable nor infallible, that players can move beyond what is strictly written on the page in their secondary and tertiary texts. Players familiar with the films know that Han Solo is *not* a "pirate, miscreant, and villain," and thus *The Sourcebook* implicitly encourages players to read between the lines. If the "author" is wrong about Han Solo, what else might they be misrepresenting? (An assessment that would be up to individual players in their own secondary and tertiary texts.) Alternatively, this passage could encourage a player to consider the ways that the charm of Harrison Ford's performance allows audiences to overlook the more unsavory facets of Han Solo—perhaps he *is* a villain?

This moment of in-universe fluff can produce a moment of reflection, leaving it to individual players to decide how they will read Han's character, which can inflect their understanding of the broader storyworld. The time and space that WEG gives over to "fluff" demonstrates the value of maintaining the diegetic "reality" of the *Star Wars* universe, portraying it as both a living, breathing world and as an engaging setting for immersive and evocative play. The design and writing of *The Roleplaying Game* primary texts are rife with these sorts of opportunities for critical reflection on the *Star Wars* universe—certainly not every player will engage in this sort of interpretative reevaluation of their understanding of the storyworld, but "fluff" frequently aids players in conceptualizing their place within the storyworld while roleplaying. It will also feed back into perceptions of the previous texts or influence the production of subsequent texts. *The Roleplaying Game* is not simply a single ludic extension of

*Star Wars*—the dialogical and relational flow of transmediality means that it can and will influence both the past and future of the franchise.

*The Roleplaying Game* engages in a worldbuilding-by-licensee process that fleshes out and solidifies the mythos, topos, and ethos of *Star Wars* in ways that allow players to exert a new level of control over their evocation of the storyworld—and importantly, makes these individual renderings of the storyworld more consistent from player-to-player. Everyone who adopts WEG's rendering of the storyworld is playing and experiencing a more codified and concrete diegesis. And critically, this extends far beyond just those playing *The Roleplaying Game*. *The Roleplaying Game* has often been reduced to a footnote in the history of *Star Wars* transmedia, sometimes quite literally,[14] but *The Roleplaying Game* has had a significant and lasting influence on the entire *Star Wars* setting: the hundreds of *Star Wars* novels, comics, games, and other transmedia that came with the franchise's dramatic rebirth in the 1990s were born out of the worldbuilding labor of West End Games, meaning that the secondary and tertiary texts of *The Roleplaying Game* are not only the imaginative TRPG play-sessions the game enabled, but the whole scope of *Star Wars* transmedia that was built within the storyworld that WEG had reordered.

### *STAR WARS* TRANSMEDIA STRIKES BACK: 1991 TO 1996

Though the mid-1980s were the nadir of the property's popularity, the 1990s saw the franchise make a major comeback. Although no new films would be released until the later years of the decade, the early 90s saw a significant proliferation of transmedia extensions, with much of this growth stemming from book publishing. In 1991 and 1992, Dark Horse Comics published

[14] Sean Guynes and Dan Hassler-Forest's *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling* mentions WEG's game in only two of the collection's 21 essays, once only in a footnote.

*Star Wars: Dark Empire*, a six-issue series written by Tom Veitch, the first *Star Wars* comics since the end of Marvel's original run in 1986; also in 1991, Bantam Spectra released *Heir to the Empire*, a novel written by Timothy Zahn, the first *Star Wars* novel since 1983. *Heir to the Empire* marks an epochal moment in the history of *Star Wars* transmedia, as one of the most significant non-film releases in the history of the franchise, topping the *New York Times* Best-seller list (Taylor 2014, 289) and spurring a dramatic boom in *Star Wars* transmedia, marketed by Lucasfilm and its licensing division as the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe. Prior to 1991, only ten *Star Wars* novels had ever been published; within a few years, at least as many were published *every* year—22 novels were published in 1997 alone (Taylor 2014, 290).

Zahn has been widely recognized for his contributions to the franchise—StarWars.com once credited *Heir to the Empire* for "jumpstart[ing] a publishing program that endures to this day and formalized the Expanded Universe" (Newbold 2014). His novel (and its sequels) owes much to the prior work at WEG. As Sean Guynes describes, "Lucasfilm hoped to establish a relatively consistent storyworld through the new novels and, as such, directed Zahn to draw on *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*'s encyclopedic rundown of the storyworld's elements" (Guynes 2018, 146-147). Zahn's novels are set in a *Star Wars* universe that bears the stamp of West End Games' worldbuilding, a storyworld of Ithorians not Hammerheads. The influence of *The Roleplaying Game* can still be felt in the Disney era: much of WEG's worldbuilding remains canonical, and Pablo Hidalgo, a member of the Lucasfilm Story Group (a division founded by Disney in 2013 to maintain and coordinate continuity), co-wrote several *Roleplaying Game* supplements between 1995 and 1997.

Just as *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* rode the wave of tabletop RPGs that followed the initial success of *Dungeons & Dragons*, another *Star Wars* game would be one of the market

leaders for the major tabletop gaming boom of the 1990s: collectible card games (CCGs). Kicked off by the 1993 release of *Magic: The Gathering*, published by Wizards of the Coast and designed by Richard Garfield, in a CCG, players amass personal collections of cards and assemble their own decks. The success of *Magic* spawned an entire industry—"By the end of 1995, forty CCGs were on the market" (Owens and Helmer 1996, 38)—including the *Star Wars Customizable Card Game*, published by Decipher, which was "At times second only to *Magic* in popularity" (Lee 2018, 133). Decipher lost the license in 2001 to Wizard of the Coast, but Decipher's game lives on through the "Star Wars CCG Players Committee," a fan-run organization supporting a card game that has been *officially* defunct for almost two decades. I return to another *Star Wars* card game, Fantasy Flight's *Star Wars: The Card Game*, in the final case study of this chapter, and I examine a similarly fan-run effort to maintain another defunct card game, *Warhammer 40,000: Conquest*, in my final chapter.

Although my focus throughout this chapter and throughout this dissertation is on *licensed* transmedial games—that is, games produced through a licensing agreement between the owners of the intellectual property and the makers of the game—the following section explores a transmedial game made by a subsidiary of the IP owners themselves: LucasArts, Lucasfilm's internal digital game development and publishing wing. This corporate hierarchy allows for increased levels of collaboration, but it carries with it its own creative limitations. LucasArts was founded in 1982, as Lucasfilm Games. As Lucasfilm began seeking more opportunities to promote and monetize the property in the early 1990s, LucasArts became involved in *Star Wars* games, handling the European publication of the Nintendo Entertainment System game *Star Wars* in 1991 (developed by Beam Software); co-developed (with Sculptured Software) the three *Super Star Wars* games (1992, 1993, and 1994, Super Nintendo); and published *Star Wars: X-*

*Wing* for (1993, DOS), developed by Totally Games, which spawned several sequels. LucasArts soon also began developing *Star Wars* games, including *Rebel Assault* (1993, DOS); *Star Wars: Dark Forces* (1995, various systems), a first-person shooter that introduced the Jedi character of Kyle Katarn; and *Shadows of the Empire* (1996, N64), which I examine in the following section.

### ***SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE*** **(1996): THE LIMITATIONS OF COORDINATED TRANSMEDIA**

The success of transmedial extensions like Bantam's novels and LucasArts' video games demonstrated the renewed commercial value of the *Star Wars* IP in 1990s. This success spurned greater and greater levels of coordination between the various stakeholders in the franchise, culminating in the release of *Shadows of the Empire* in 1996. In this section, I turn away from a licensed game to directly contrast such production processes with the sort of coordinated transmedia that Jenkins' "transmedia storytelling" lauds. *Shadows of the Empire* is a product of the coordination that Lucasfilm fostered in the 1990s, exploiting the value of their IP through the labor of their stable of licensees producing transmedia extensions and the in-house workforce of subsidiaries like LucasArts. Though such coordinated efforts have their advantages, they also have severe creative limitations, as *Shadows of the Empire* will demonstrate.

The transmedial *Shadows* project was spearheaded by Lucasfilm's Vice President of Licensing Howard Roffman and Director of Publishing Lucy Wilson, with Lucasfilm and their licensees collaboratively developing the various transmedial components. Roffman explained how the different media worked in tandem: "The novel looks at things from the overall Rebel-Imperial situation, the comics have more of a bent for Boba Fett and the bounty hunter side of the story, and the game focuses on the action sequences. Basically, it was a case of looking at which aspect of the story best suited each medium" (Wallace 2012, 175). Steve Perry, author of the *Shadows* novel, wrote the outline for the project based on the desires of the project's various

stakeholders (Pellegrom 2010). Each media component aimed to provide distinct experiences that would transmedially come together under the umbrella of *Shadows of the Empire*.

*Shadows of the Empire* was conceived as “the movie-without-a-movie project” (Vaz 1996, 31); Lucasfilm, its subsidiaries, and various licensee companies released a broad range of complementary media over the course of 1996. Bantam published the novel written by Steve Perry in May, with a subsequent release of a young adult novelization by Christopher Golden in October. Dark Horse Comics published a six-issue miniseries, released between May and October. LucasArts published the video game for the Nintendo 64 in December. West End Games published an RPG sourcebook, allowing players to incorporate *Shadows* into their secondary and tertiary roleplaying texts. A variety of toys and collectibles were produced: Kenner released a line of action figures and vehicles, Galoob released a line of Micro Machines, and Topps released a 100-card set of trading cards. Vasèse Sarabande released an official soundtrack composed by Joel McNeely and performed by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. Del Rey published *The Secrets of Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire*, a making-of reference book written by Mark Cotta Vaz. This is a sprawling range of merchandising, exactly what you might expect for this sort of “movie-without-a-movie project”—although the *Shadows* project ostensibly stands as an idealized form of Jenkins’ transmedia storytelling in its coordination and co-creation, only a handful of what was produced and sold under the *Shadows* brand actively contributes to this dispersed storytelling.

In the game, players control Dash Rendar, a new character closely modeled on Han Solo. Over the course of the game, the player-as-Rendar explores levels set in several different *Star Wars* locales, some directly borrowed from the films, some newly introduced in the game but similar to pre-existing *Star Wars* aesthetics, widening the scope of the franchise’s topos. The

game opens with "Part I: The Battle of Hoth," set during the opening of *The Empire Strikes Back*. First in a snowspeeder, fighting AT-AT walkers like in the film, then on foot in the Rebel base, Rendar navigates familiar spaces from the film. In this first section of the game, the opening scenes of *The Empire Strikes Back* are directly evoked, though the film's set pieces have been reorganized in various ways. Some facets of the originary text are present in *Shadows*, but in new contexts. The battle between Rebel snowspeeders and Imperial walkers is more drawn out. The game transforms the relatively sparse Echo Base seen in the film into a massive catacomb of manmade tunnels and natural glacial formations. Most of the game is structured as a third-person shooter—a 3D video game focused on firearms-based combat, with the game's camera positioned so that the player can view their on-screen avatar (Rendar) as he navigates the gameworld, fighting Stormtroopers and other *Star Wars* enemies.[15] This gameplay formula is expanded upon when Rendar acquires a jetpack, dramatically increasing the player's options in exploring the game's environments. Sections like the opening levels on Hoth replicate the experience of engaging in flight combat, and later portions of the game introduce new gameplay styles, including a racing game-like level, which mixes the "speeder bike" vehicles seen in *Return of the Jedi* with the desert environments of Tatooine.

Over the course of the game, Rendar battles a number of filmic *Star Wars* villains, including the bounty hunters Boba Fett and IG-88,[16] saves Luke from an assassination attempt, steals the plans for the Second Death Star, and even rescues Princess Leia from *Shadows of the Empire*'s newly-introduced villain, Prince Xizor, an alien crime lord and rival to Darth Vader. In the final space battle, Xizor's space station is destroyed in a process that involves assaulting its reactor core, clearly evoking the Death Star sequences from the films, and Dash fakes his death,

[15] Cf. the closely related "first-person shooter," where the camera is embodied within the avatar, so that the players sees the world from the perspective of the avatar.
[16] A robot bounty hunter seen briefly in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

a narrative contrivance that helps the game better conform to the continuity of *Return of the Jedi* while leaving the possibility open for the character to return in later *Star Wars* productions.

Narratively, *Shadows of the Empire* is messy and confusing. The game's storytelling is frequently vague, jumping from plot point to plot point and planet to planet with minimal explanation, and leaves many unanswered questions—just who is Prince Xizor, what is he up to, and why does he hold Princess Leia hostage? In-game specifics are sparse. It also does little to explain the events of the films themselves. One cutscene mentions "the frozen Han Solo" without explanation, as for most (but by no means all) players, no explanation is needed: prior knowledge of the narratives of the *Star Wars* film is taken for granted by the game. A transmedial game cannot be expected to be entirely coherent on its own, as it will undoubtedly rely at least somewhat on other paratexts to provide context. Jenkins uses the example of *Enter The Matrix*, describing how, "The consumer who has played the game or watched the shorts will get a different experience of the movies than one who has simply had the theatrical film experience. The whole is worth more than the sum of the parts" (Jenkins 2008a, 104). This is especially true of *Shadows of the Empire*, which is far more than just a game for the N64, but part of a transmedial network nested inside an even larger transmedial network. To fully understand the events of the game, the player needs not only prior knowledge of the films, they must also engage with an array of interconnected texts that encompass the *Shadows of the Empire* transmedia project.[17]

*Shadows of the Empire* is an ambitious experiment in transmedia storytelling, one which fits many of the key characteristics of Jenkins' definition: it is "dispersed systematically," it is "unified and coordinated," and "each medium makes it own unique contribution" (Jenkins 2007).

[17] Unlike *Shadows*, which fills in gaps between two films, *Enter The Matrix* fills in narrative gaps *within* one film, *The Matrix Reloaded*, fleshing out off-screen events that can inform a better understanding of the events of the film.

No one transmedial component of *Shadows of the Empire*, be it the novels, the games, or the comics, tells the full story. The process by which the narrative was developed—involving input and deliberation from various stakeholders in the project—represents something close to the "co-creation" that Jenkins advocates for. But owing to protective corporate owners of IP like *Star Wars*, Jenkins' ideal of "co-creation" is difficult to accomplish within the confines of the norms of franchise media production. Under either George Lucas or Disney, Lucasfilm is protective and controlling of its IP.

The game, the comics, and the novel all serve as sites of direct storytelling and worldbuilding. The game focuses on Dash Rendar's experiences during the events of the transmedial project; the comic series focuses on Boba Fett and the other bounty hunters introduced in *The Empire Strikes Back*; the novel provides the most number of perspectives, alternating points of view between members of the film cast (Luke, Leia, Lando, and Vader) and characters original to *Shadows* (Dash and Prince Xizor). To experience the full scope of the project, consumers must move between many different media sites working in tandem.

Although there is significant parity between the various transmedial components of *Shadows of the Empire* internally, within the broader context of the storyworld, the project still maintains the hierarchy that privileges the films above other transmedia. Will Brooker argues that a text like *Shadows of the Empire*, even as a transmedial extension commissioned by Lucasfilm, has "the same formal relationship" with the canonical films as fanfiction—both sanctioned and unsanctioned extensions involve "a balance between respecting the established rules of the mythos and providing creative variations, based on personal interpretation, within this accepted framework" (Brooker 2002, 134). Even as the work of an in-house subsidiary, the narrative potentials for *Shadows* are strictly constrained. The starting point for the project is

exploring the narrative lacuna between the second and third films, and the producers of *Shadows of the Empire* must affirm the pre-existing narrative beats of the films. Creative limitations are thus placed upon the whole transmedia *Shadows* project from the start: nothing that happens can contradict or change *The Empire Strikes Back* or *Return of the Jedi*.

The coordination necessary to produce *Shadows of the Empire* is possible thanks to the role of a more active and engaged (and economically motivated) Lucasfilm, cultivating a network of stakeholders producing transmedia extensions and relying on the in-house workforce of corporate subsidiary LucasArts. M. J. Clarke describes *Shadows*' production process as "the blueprint for the Expanded Universe, in which additions to the corpus of the *Star Wars* narratives were tolerated, but only through sacrificing ownership and subjecting oneself to possibly intense scrutiny and constant surveillance" (Clarke 2014, 209-2010). *Shadows of the Empire* represents a classic dilemma for a transmedial extension functioning within such a hierarchical franchise: it *must* respect and maintain the continuity of its two immutable narrative points, the end of *Empire* and beginning of *Return*. Forced to work within the pre-defined constraints of the films' plots, the whole *Shadows* project can only color within the lines. *Shadows of the Empire* pioneers a model that Lucasfilm has followed closely in its *Star Wars* projects in the decades since, using carefully planned and highly structured transmedia projects as a means of promotion. In the remaining two case studies, I return to examples of licensed games, examining the ways they exhibit their own forms of worldbuilding creativity while working within the boundaries of the franchise's increasingly protective owners.

### THE RETURN OF CINEMATIC *STAR WARS*: 1997 TO 2005

The *Shadows of the Empire* project was released on the brink of a new era in *Star Wars*, and thus the entire transmedia project can be seen to serve a secondary promotional purpose.

This new era began in 1997 with theatrical releases of *The Star Wars Trilogy Special Edition*, marking the 20th anniversary of *Star Wars*. The *Special Editions* updated many of the film's special effects, adding CGI into existing scenes or redoing entire sequences with CG effects,[18] as well as restoring some deleted scenes and remastering the audio track. The *Special Editions* mark the beginning of an eight-year period of *Star Wars* returning to theaters; the first prequel film, *The Phantom Menace*, came out two years later in 1999, followed by *Attack of the Clones* in 2002, and *Revenge of the Sith* in 2005.

In many regards, *Shadows of the Empire* prefigures the strategies that Lucasfilm and later Disney would employ in the promotion and extension of the *Star Wars* universe. As Seve Chambers note, "such a blitz is standard for new installments in the outer space tale" (Chambers 2015). A coordinated production, dispersed across a huge range of different media platforms, has become the standard promotional strategy for new *Star Wars* releases (and many other media franchises, as well). Examples include publisher Del Rey's *The New Jedi Order*, a 19-novels series written by twelve different authors between 1999 and 2003, and a broad range of transmedia that explored the Clone Wars, a galactic conflict first mentioned in the original film and set between *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith*.[19] These sorts of coordinated transmedia projects aim to fill in narrative gaps between and after the films, though as the following section explores, telling new stories is not the only measure of a successful licensed game.

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[18] One sequence includes an Easter egg for viewers familiar with *Shadows of the Empire*—in the remastered *A New Hope*, Rendar's ship can be seen taking off in the background of Mos Eisley.

[19] The animated *Star Wars: Clone Wars* aired on Cartoon Network from 2003 to 2005; seven novels were published by Del Rey between 2003 and 2004; Dark Horse Comics' ongoing series switched focus to the Clone Wars in 2003; and seven *Clone Wars* video games were published by LucasArts between 2002 and 2005

## *LEGO STAR WARS* (2005): PLAYFULNESS AND PARODY

As the second sustained period of cinematic releases came to an end in 2005 with the release of *Revenge of the Sith*, the franchise entered a period dominated by transmedia—without new films to promote, these extensions could explore new corners of the *Star Wars* universe, fill in narrative gaps, and sometimes experiment with new formal styles. One such game was *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game*, developed by Traveller's Tales and released in April 2005,[20] shortly before the release of *Revenge of the Sith*. In the game, players take control of characters from the prequel films, including Anakin Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Padme Amidala, rendered as digital Lego minifigures. These Lego characters move through a world that is also modeled as though it were partially built of Lego bricks, progressing through a series of levels that transmediate major scenes and action set-pieces from each of the three prequel films, complete with an opening scroll for each chapter of the game. Other than this scrolling yellow text, the game eschews dialogue—in cutscenes, the *Star Wars* characters-as-Lego-minifigs act out the prequels through gesture and gibberish utterances, with various components of the storyworld taking advantage of the constructible and destructible nature of Lego. For instance, when the characters are stranded on Tatooine in *The Phantom Menace*, the malfunctioning ship component is represented as breaking down into its constituent Lego bricks.

If one were to judge the game as an adaptation of the prequel trilogy, *Lego Star Wars* could be seen as severely lacking. The narratives of *The Phantom Menace*, *Attack of the Clones*, and *Revenge of the Sith* are reduced to their simplest form, using highly abstracted characters and settings to evoke the broad strokes of these films. Jenkins derides licensed media as being

[20] The PS2 and Xbox releases were on April 2 and April 5. Ports were later released for OS X on August 23 and the GameCube on October 25. A separate version, developed by Griptonite Games, was released on the Game Boy Advance earlier on March 29.

“redundant,” “watered down,” and “riddled with sloppy contradictions” (Jenkins 2008, 107). All of these could be said of *Lego Star Wars*. It is redundant, effectively rehashing the major story beats of the Prequel Trilogy. It is watered down, reducing each film down to a few core scenes that are enacted through the pantomime of its Lego characters. And it is contradictory: due to its irreverent and parodic tone and the embrace of the materiality of its (albeit digitized) Lego storyworld, there is no way for the events of *Lego Star Wars* to be fully compatible and coherent with the events of filmic *Star Wars*.

Yet it is the game’s fundamental redundancies and contradictions, its abstraction of the source material, that makes *Lego Star Wars* a compelling transmedial extension. The game balances the brand identities of both of its licenses, remediating the storyworld and narrative beats of the prequel films through the lens of an aesthetic of intertextuality and self-awareness that has become a central feature of the *Lego*’s brand as it has expanded in recent years into an increasingly profitable and transmedial franchise. The player embodies digital avatars of toys—and toys, especially licensed toys, are avatars themselves, totemistic representations of characters and events imbued with fannish affect. The game’s Lego characters model a specific mode of engagement with the source text: *Lego Star Wars* is first and foremost playful, but it is also importantly irreverent, parodic, and even self-deprecating. This modeling addresses itself well to two potential audiences for the game. For children, the game demonstrates the sort of imaginative remediation possible through *Star Wars* toys. Older *Star Wars* fans may recognize this approach from their own experiences growing up with the franchise. And for these older fans, the game’s abstraction of the source material can rehabilitate the poorly received Prequel Trilogy, using it as material for parody and farce.

*Lego Star Wars: The Video Game* was developed by Traveller's Tales (TT), an English company founded by Jon Burton in 1989. In 2007, the company became a subsidiary of Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment. TT has specialized in licensed game development throughout its history, both before and after the release of *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game*. Following the success of the *Lego Star Wars* games,[21] numerous other franchises received the *Lego* video game treatment, including multiple games based on *Indiana Jones*, *DC Comics*, *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Marvel Comics*. Importantly, several of these—*DC Comics*, *Harry Potter*, and *Lord of the Rings*—are also Warner Bros. properties, demonstrating again how the horizontally integrated subsidiaries of a media conglomerate are utilized for transmedial expansion. Since 2008, TT Games and its subsidiaries (including TT Fusion, formerly Embryonic Studios, acquired in 2007) have developed over 30 *Lego* video games.

The release of the video game was not the first synergizing of the *Lego* and *Star Wars* brands. For decades, The Lego Group had eschewed branding their construction kits with media licenses. In 1999, however, the company forged a number of licensing agreements, which saw the release of the first branded Lego kits: seven *Winnie the Pooh* kits in the pre-school-aged Duplo line, and 13 *Star Wars* kits, recreating scenes and tableaux of *The Phantom Menace* and the original trilogy. As Derek Johnson notes, these licensed products—including not only *Star Wars* but other major media franchises, including *Harry Potter*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Lord of the Rings*, and both Marvel and DC superheroes—have become central to Lego's bottom line (Johnson 2014, 308). The intermingling of these disparate media properties under the Lego banner have become an integral component of Lego's own brand as it has expanded in recent years into an increasingly transmedial franchise. The plot of 2014's *The Lego Movie* explores the

[21] Sequels included: *Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy* in 2006, *The Complete Saga* in 2007, *The Clone Wars* in 2011, and *The Force Awakens* in 2016

interconnectedness of a multiverse of Lego worlds—the protagonist Emmet (Chris Pratt) interacts with most of the major DC Comics superheroes (principally Batman, who would enjoy his own sequel in 2017's *The Lego Batman Movie*), as well as *Harry Potter*'s Dumbledore and *The Lord of the Rings*' Gandalf—importantly, the rights to these characters are all owned by Warner Bros., which produced *The Lego Movie*.

*Lego Star Wars: The Video Game* serves an important role in the history of two separate franchises: *Star Wars* and *Lego*. Harvey frames the game around this intersection of properties, writing: "The nature of the license arrangement between Lucasfilm and Lego is clearly key in determining the approach undertaken: this isn't an expansion of the *Star Wars* storyworld but rather a comically themed adaptation in which the original material is transformed in terms of another existing, well-known brand" (Harvey 2015, 158). Lego comes first in *Lego Star Wars*, setting the tone of the game. However, I would complicate Harvey's declaration that the game does not expand the storyworld. He may be correct in terms of many of the most conventional ways we understand this sort of transmedial expansion: *Lego Star Wars* does not necessarily provide us with new narrative details. But it does provide a new perspective. *Lego Star Wars* may not *add* to the *Star Wars* storyworld itself, but the very act of staging its "comically themed adaptation" does expand the storyworld in terms of tone and style.

Though not the first Lego video game, or even the first licensed Lego game,[22] *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game* is an important touchstone for both the then-emerging Lego media property and *Star Wars* transmedia. With the prequel trilogy coming to an end, Lucasfilm needed new ways to develop the storyworld and find new customers. *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game*'s family friendly trappings helped make it sellable to the next generation of *Star Wars*

[22] *Lego Fun to Build* was released in 1995 for Sega's obscure educational console the Sega Pico; two *Harry Potter* games, *Lego Creator: Harry Potter* and *Creator: Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, were released for Windows in 2001 and 2002.

fans—a vitally important audience, particularly as the franchise entered its post-prequels era. Transmedia extensions like *Lego Star Wars* and Cartoon Network's *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008-2012) series were central to keeping younger fans engaged. At the same time, the game's light and parodic take on the prequel trilogy provided some potential to recontextualize and repackage the films—which had alienated many older fans—in a more palatable form.

Jenkins has argued, "We already know the story before we even buy the game and would be frustrated if all it offered us was a regurgitation of the original film experience" (Jenkins 2005 677). This is certainly often the case—licensed games frequently build upon the audience's pre-existing familiarity with the storyworld, existing always in dialog with their originary texts. But we should not assume this is always true: we each navigate a transmedia franchise's network in our own, often deeply personal ways, and the idiosyncrasies of how we come to learn and understand and own a storyworld does not follow a roadmap. It cannot be assumed that everyone playing *Lego Star Wars* comes to the game with the same pre-knowledge of the storyworld.

And in fact, there is good reason to believe that *Lego Star Wars* would be the first point of contact many fans would have with at least some portions of the *Star Wars* franchise. For one, the game was framed a children's media product,[23] so for many players in the game's target audience this could have been their introduction to the *Star Wars* franchise. But even for older fans of the property, *Lego Star Wars* would still have function as what Jonathan Gray calls an "entryway paratext" (Gray 2010, 18)—those materials, usually promotional in nature, that introduce audiences to a primary text and prime certain expectations and reading strategies. Trailers and other advertising are classic examples, but it is important to note that at the time of its release, *Lego Star Wars* would have been an entryway paratext as well. Although *Lego Star*

[23] Reviews are quite consistent on this point: it is variously described as a "kids' game" (Davis 2005), "children's title" (Dunham 2004), and " aimed primarily at children" (Herold 2005).

*Wars* reworks familiar materials from *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones*, a major selling point for the game, seen in its trailer, is experiencing "the highly anticipated final chapter," *Revenge of the Sith*. *Lego Star Wars* was released over a month before the film, meaning that for players at the time, they experienced this Lego-ized version of the film's narrative *first*, demonstrating the ways that transmedia is rarely as linear and orderly as some theorists make it out to be.

One of the primary pleasures of *Lego Star Wars* is how the Lego aesthetic provides a playful twist on the storyworld, evoking and remediating the prequel films. The Lego aesthetic is, in many ways, a brilliant conceit for a tie-in video game, which have an often-earned reputation for being shallow experiences. Trevor Elkington explains: "what video game consumers seek from adaptations is not a simple, interactive-rehearsal of film events but in fact, further expansion of a narrative world via an engaged relationship with an interactive medium" (Elkington 2009, 219). Game designer Eric M. Lang offers a similar perspective, arguing "what players want is not so much to transpose themselves into the heart of the narrative through game play, but to enjoy a lateral experience that enhances their overall appreciation for the property" (Lang and Harrington 2007, 85). *Lego Star Wars*, in its parodic and playful tone, side-steps the trap of rote adaptation that Elkington sees so many licensed games fall into to, with the game instead providing the sort of lateral experience that Lang describes. The broad outlines of the prequels are evident throughout *Lego Star Wars*, and the effect is similar to how a child might reenact the films with Lego. This is a greatest hits version of the prequel narratives, privileging the actions of the heroes—players do not experience Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan calmly discussing their options aboard the Trade Federation ship at the start of *The Phantom Menace*, instead moving straight to sneaking through corridors and battling droids.

*Lego Star Wars* reduces the seven hours or so of the prequel films into seventeen action set-pieces. But through abstraction—remediating the films as something akin to a child playacting the films with their branded Lego—*Lego Star Wars* becomes more than simply a repetition of key scenes. The prequel films may even benefit from this sort of abstraction and condensation. The story beats that the game uses as the basis for its levels—moments like Darth Maul's duel with Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon in *The Phantom Menace* (in-game as Episode I Chapter 6), the Jedi Council's clash with the Droid Army in *Attack of the Clones* (Episode II Chapter 3), or the opening space battle over Coruscant in *Revenge of the Sith* (Episode III Chapter 1)—are exactly the type of scenario that lends itself well to game design: there's a clear sense of conflict and urgency, with obvious stakes and in recognizable and delineated arenas of action. The segments of the prequel films not represented in *Lego Star Wars*—such as scenes detailing the byzantine internal politics of the Trade Federation or the stilted love affair between Anakin and Padme—would be difficult to adapt into compelling gameplay. They are also aspects of the prequels that are most negatively affected by "the specifics of narrative, exposition, and performance," which Robert Buerkle identifies as the primary shortcomings of those films (Buerkle 124). What *Lego Star Wars* instead chooses to focus on are the segments of the prequel films that give themselves over to the spectacle and the sci-fi wonder of the *Star Wars* universe.

In the previous sections, I explored *The Roleplaying Game* and worldbuilding-by-licensee, and *Shadows of the Empire* and transmedia coordination. *Lego Star Wars* demonstrates another approach, the capacity of licensed transmedia to adopt an approach that privileges recontextualizing or even rewriting the source material. *Lego Star Wars* enacts a soft form of "worldblocking" (Hills 2017, 356), apropos given its chosen medium of digital Lego blocks: though by no means disavowing the prequels, the game purposefully strips away many of the

least popular particulars of the films. Anakin Skywalker is arguably a more compelling character once divorced from Hayden Christensen's performance, even if in this case the character is rendered as a largely mute toy. The player is given a plastic avatar (or an avatar of an avatar) and tasked with exploring a playhouse version of *Star Wars*—an engaging prospect for the child players that are the game's target audience, but also appealing to older fans who may need a radical transformation and reworking of the source material to rehabilitate the prequels.

The cross-franchise mix of Lego and *Star Wars* works so well because both are exemplary examples of what Umberto Eco calls "cult objects." According to Eco, "in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to unhinge it, to break it up or take it apart so that one then may remember only parts of it, regardless of their original relationship to the whole" (Eco 1985, 4). The cult object is so appealing because of its flaws. A perfect work—if such a thing even exists—is theoretically complete; an audience could only appreciate and marvel at such a work. The language Eco uses is markedly deconstructive (or destructive): the cult object is unhinged, broken up, and taken apart. Though Eco's description is quite fitting to discuss many different fandoms, it seems especially appropriate for Lego. Although Lego is marketed as a "construction toy," perhaps it would be more accurate to say it is a *deconstruction and reconstruction* toy. The lasting appeal of Lego is intimately tied to its imperfection. As Dan Hassler-Forest argues, "By its very design, LEGO is a toy that involves a highly participatory sensibility, with a productive tension […] between straightforward assembly […] and creative production" (Hassler-Forest 2016, 2-3). If one were to build a Lego model and then never take it apart, that would be a failure on Lego's part. The point of Lego is to take their products apart, to build creatively and to always want to build something bigger and better (encouraging the purchase of *more* Lego!)

Similarly, *Lego Star Wars* demonstrates the value in taking *Star Wars* apart. Throughout the game, portions of the world of *Star Wars* are rendered as a pre-assembled Lego playground, and players are encouraged to disassemble the world as they go. In combat, characters like Padme, Obi-Wan, and Anakin reduce droid opponents to their constituent Lego parts, collect Lego pips scattered throughout the levels for points, and use Force powers to build Lego structures to solve puzzles and navigate the game's spaces. Treating *Star Wars* as a cult object, *Lego Star Wars* is an appropriately deconstructive take on the franchise. The game works as a transmedia extension not because of its coherence with or faithfulness to the original diegesis. It adds little directly to the mythos, topos, or ethos of the storyworld; the game's design and aesthetic is focused on abridging the storyworld, stripping away much of the characterization and exposition that (for better or for worse) defines the tone of the prequels, leaving players with a highly abstracted, playful pantomime of the films. It instead succeeds because it takes the prequels apart, reusing some (but, importantly, not all) of the component parts to construct something not entirely new, a gentle parody of Lucas' films.

By adopting such a stylistically distinctive tone, *Lego Star Wars* effectively demands the player consider how the formal presentation of the "same" narrative can radically alter one's perception of the story and the storyworld. In a franchise that is so dominated by that privileges narrative continuity, with Lucasfilm and its licensees working in close coordination to maintain coherence across a range of complementary media texts, *Lego Star Wars* takes a different approach, offering a light and fun reconstruction of the prequel films that can appeal both to the franchise's younger fans, some of whom may be introduced to *Star Wars* through this paratext, and its older fans, many of whom were disappointed and disillusioned with the latter films. *Lego*

*Star Wars* is not about telling new stories in the *Star Wars* universe; it is about retelling the same stories, in new and playful ways.

**POST-PREQUELS, PRE-DISNEY: 2005 TO 2012**

After eight years of sustained film production and promotion, with the release of *Revenge of the Sith*, the franchise was no longer as directly tied to promoting a slate of upcoming film releases. *Star Wars* transmedia went in a number of directions, including the animated series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*[24] (2008-2013, Cartoon Network).[25] The success of the series inspired its own share of novels, comics, and transmedial games—including *Lego Star Wars III: The Clone Wars* (2011). With no active film production for almost a decade, this marks a rare moment where the transmedial center of gravity of the franchise shifted—the popularity of *The Clone Wars* meant that the leading edge of the *Star Wars* franchise was televisual.

In publishing, Del Rey continued its multi-author, years-long banners like *NJO*, including the *Legacy of the Force* (2006-2008) and *Fate of the Jedi* (2009-2012).[26] In gaming, 2008's *The Force Unleashed* was set before *A New Hope* and introduced an apprentice of Darth Vader, played via performance capture by actor Sam Witwer.[27] The project echoed the approach of *Shadows of the Empire*, with the release of a video game, a novel, comics, a roleplaying campaign, a soundtrack, and various toys and merchandise; in 2010, a sequel was developed, with a similar transmedial array of texts. Although examples of such highly coordinated

[24] Not to be confused with the earlier *Star Wars: Clones Wars*, with no *The*.
[25] In 2008, the first four episodes of the series were released theatrically under the same title.
[26] Both were nine-book series written by a rotation of three long-time *Star Wars* authors (Aaron Allston, Troy Denning, and Karen Traviss for *Legacy*; Allston, Denning, and Christie Golden for *Fate*
[27] Witwer also voices Darth Maul and Emperor Palpatine in several productions, including *The Clone Wars*, *Star Wars Rebels*, and *Solo: A Star Wars Story*.

transmedia continued throughout the *Star Wars* franchise, in my final case study, I turn to *Star Wars: The Card Game* to examine what is ultimately a more typical licensed production.

#### *THE CARD GAME* (2012 TO 2018): CONTINGENCY, PRECARITY, AND CANONICITY

In this final section, I turn my focus back to an analog *Star Wars* game, *Star Wars: The Card Game*, designed by Eric M. Lang[28] and published by Fantasy Flight Games (FFG) from 2012 to 2018, at a time of uncertainty for the franchise's licensees as a whole. Describing the earliest days of *Star Wars* transmediation, Sean Guynes states "*Star Wars* developed not as a set of predetermined, interrelated convergent narratives, but as a hodgepodge storyworld built up through a series of punctuated media extensions licensed by the newly created Lucasfilm company" (Guynes 2018, 145). Although much has changed for the franchise, it is important to recognize the *continued* role that more peripheral ancillary media plays in the development and promotion of *Star Wars*. For this reason, this final case study is perhaps the most typical licensed game in this chapter. Licensed game production is volatile and precarious, especially for a serially-released game like *The Card Game*. The game's long-term viability was highly contingent on the ebb and flow of player interest and profitability, and vulnerable to disruptions in the relationship between licensee and licensor. *The Card Game* was released in 2012 against the backdrop of a monumental disruption: Disney's purchase of Lucasfilm.

Founded in 1995 by Christian T. Petersen, FFG specializes in producing licensed games for the hobby game market, including board games, card games, roleplaying games, and miniature wargames.[29] Since 2012, FFG has produced a broad range of *Star Wars*-themed

[28] Whose framework of "evocation" and "lateral experiences" was covered in Chapter One.
[29] Current licenses held by FFG include *Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, the *Call of Cthulhu*, and they have previously produced games based on *Battlestar Galactica* and *World of Warcraft*.

games.[30] *The Card Game* has a very different relationship to the storyworld and narrative of *Star Wars* than the other games I have discussed so far. *The Card Game* renders the characters and events of the franchise as image and text printed on small pieces of cardboard. Jonathan Rey Lee explores the peculiar narrativity of a game like this in his description of the earlier *Star Wars Customizable Card Game*:

> While this is not storytelling exactly, the narratives that emerge from these assemblages can be considered a kind of emergent fan fiction—a strangely collaborative form of story-making driven by a contested interplay of cards and game actions. To play a transmedia [collectible card game] is therefore paradoxically akin both to authoring a fan response to the source text and performing a goal-directed simulation of the source text's world. (Lee 2018, 132)

There is an optionality to all game fiction (see Juul 2005)—a player could enjoy *Shadows of the Empire* without prior knowledge of the storyworld, or even willfully ignore the transmedial connections to other texts—but this optionality is especially apparent in an analog game like *The Card Game*. The rules of the game and the interactions between cards become higher order concerns, because the players must act as the game engine.[31] Playing *The Card Game* is more allusive than narrative, with familiar characters and events randomized and remixed into sequences of events that would be difficult to actively assemble into a coherent plot.

*The Card Game* is a two-player competitive game, with one side playing as the Light Side of the Force and the other playing as the Dark Side. It is also an asymmetrical game, with each side having slightly different mechanics and win conditions. In all official tournaments, and frequently in casual games, players will compete in a best-of-two format, alternating between playing Light and Dark Side decks. The competitive design of *The Card Game* is quite standard

[30] Other products include *Star Wars: X-Wing Miniatures Game*, first released in 2012; *Star Wars: Imperial Assault*, first released in 2014; and a suite of interconnected *Star Wars* roleplaying systems. The company also published a 30th anniversary reprinting of WEG's *The Roleplaying Games*' rulebook and sourcebook.
[31] See the chapter "Ludifying Lovecraft in *Arkham Horror*" in Booth 2015.

for a card game,[32] and it affirms *Star Wars* as a clash of good versus evil. *Star Wars* transmedia, from it earliest days, offered fans the opportunity to play out both sides of this conflict; Stefan Hall argues the ability to experience *Star Wars* from the antagonists' perspective is central to "fan-player engagement with the storyworld" (Hall 2018, 98). Lee notes how even the simplistic morality of the franchise gets stripped away in card design: "As moral allegiance is built into the card itself, goodness becomes less a behavioral notion than a reflection of inherent character—what makes Luke 'good' and Vader 'bad' in the game is nothing more than that they are Light and Dark side cards respectively" (Lee 2018, 138). Instead, the game reenacts and restages the central and seemingly eternal conflict at the core of virtually all *Star Wars* media texts as a function of the rules and design of the game—who is playing as the Light Side or the Dark Side ultimately matters very little, as players will be changing sides next game.

Though the production of any licensed game requires a years-long process of cooperation between the licensee/production company and the licensor/IP owner, by the time the production is complete and the game is released to consumers, that licensee/licensor relationship becomes, in some ways, moot. Once a consumer can play *Lego Star Wars*, for example, whether Traveller's Tales will continue to have access to the *Star Wars* or *Lego* licenses often has little bearing on the finished game. This is not the case for an ongoing, serially-released game—for *The Card Game* to succeed both initially and continually, there must be a long-term relationship between licensee and licensor, as well as a more dynamic relationship between the players and both the licensee and licensor. This sort of long-term, ongoing game system is vulnerable to disturbances in any of these relationships—maintaining a card game is labor intensive, and the history of CCGs is peppered with games that have ended precisely because a licensing agreement

[32] Both previous *Star Wars* collectible card games, Decipher's *Star Wars Customizable Card Game* and Wizards of the Coast's *Star Wars Trading Card Game*, had players alternate playing as both the Light Side and the Dark Side.

lapsed. *The Card Game* (as well as the rest of FFG's *Star Wars* product lines) had to contend the Disney buyout of Lucasfilm in 2012, which was announced two months before *The Card Game*'s release.

There were legitimate reasons to be concerned about the long-term viability of FFG's card game. The Disney buyout brought with it significant changes to the corporate structures governing the franchise, and the end of several licensing arrangements. In April 2013, Disney laid off most of the staff of LucasArts, halting all active game production at the company—a much smaller LucasArts team now merely handles licensing with external developers. Production on Cartoon Network's *The Clone Wars* was halted in 2013, [33] in favor of a new series, *Star Wars Rebels*, which premiered on Disney XD the following year. In 2014, Disney announced the end of its partnership with Dark Horse Comics, which had published *Star Wars* comics since 1991's *Dark Empire*; the rights moved back to Marvel Comics, which had itself become a Disney subsidiary in 2009. As transmedial approaches to media franchise production becomes more central to the operations of the entertainment industries, transmedia production frequently become more and more tightly controlled—in an era of such heightened media conglomeration, this move toward increased reliance on in-house production will only become more common. Why license out a valuable property to an outside company when it can be kept "in the family," with production handled by other branches of the media empire?

Although Disney would not scuttle FFG's plans for *The Card Game* and its other *Star Wars* products—which speaks to the niche role of tabletop games in the media industries—decisions made by the property's new owners impacted the game in other ways, such as the overhaul of *Star Wars* continuity. Through hundreds of licensed media texts—including games, novels, and comics—the Expanded Universe had told hundreds of stories in the *Star Wars*

[33] Unaired but completed episodes were packaged as a sixth season, distributed via Netflix.

universe, including 40 years of in-universe history that followed *Return of the Jedi*. The EU, however, was incompatible with Disney's plans for new films that would follow the original trilogy. As explained in the official announcement on StarWars.com: "In order to give maximum creative freedom to the filmmakers and also preserve an element of surprise and discovery for the audience, *Star Wars Episodes VII-IX* will not tell the same story told in the post-*Return of the Jedi* Expanded Universe" ("Legendary" 2014). The previously released material would still be available for sale—Disney would not abandon this revenue stream—with the newly decanonized EU rebranded as *Star Wars Legends*. The new canon would include all of the films, everything Disney would produce or license from then on, as well as the TV series *The Clone Wars*, which was still airing on Cartoon Network at the time of Disney's purchase of the property.

Disney's canon policy presents an instructive example of transmedial memory. It is up to individual fans how important the EU will remain to their appreciation of the storyworld, but Disney and its licensees are also frequently looking back to the EU, recanonizing characters or motifs of *Star Wars*' now-alternate past and future. The official web site, in order to assuage concerns over the EU's decanonization, notes that this material is not truly gone forever: "While the universe that readers knew is changing, it is not being discarded. Creators of new *Star Wars* entertainment have full access to the rich content of the Expanded Universe" ("Legendary" 2014). Transmedia utilizes memory to form a sort of gestalt understanding of the storyworld—but Disney's revised canon positions the EU in a liminal site of memory *and* non-memory, decanonized but always potentially reentering the current continuity if and when the EU can be mined for inspiration.

One of the most prominent examples has been the inclusion of Grand Admiral Thrawn, originally introduced in Timothy Zahn's novel *Heir to the Empire* in 1991, as an antagonist in

*Star Wars Rebels*. The television show, produced in-house through Lucasfilm Animation, has the clout to elevate Thrawn into being an "official" part of the new continuity, though it is in many ways a piecemeal canonization. The bulk of existing material on Thrawn comes from his prominent role in the post-*Return of the Jedi* storylines of the EU, which have been superseded by the events of Disney's films—in effect, *Rebels* establishes that a character *named* Thrawn exists, and though he may play a similar role to the earlier Thrawn, his character and his actions are different. However, even if this *new* Thrawn cannot be precisely the same, the character's existence carries with it transmedial traces of the EU.

In *The Card Game* and their other *Star Wars* licensed games, FFG's approach has also been to utilize a mix of both older EU materials and the new Disney continuity, although the effect is very different. *The Card Game* features many popular characters from the pre-Disney continuity, drawing upon the richness of *Star Wars*' transmedial history, including Grand Admiral Thrawn and Mara Jade, introduced by Timothy Zahn in *Heir to the Empire*; Tycho Celchu and Baron Fel, introduced in the *X-Wing: Rogue Squadron* comics series in 1995; and Dash Rendar and Prince Xizor of *Shadows of the Empire*. Additionally, figures from the new continuity are represented in the cardpool, with cards featuring characters from *Star Wars Rebels* and *Rogue One* (see Figure 2.3). Significantly, the biggest segment of the franchise that *The Card Game* does not utilize is the prequels era—ostensibly, this is motivated by the game being "set" during the era of the original trilogy, though trying to understand the randomized and abstracted actions of these cards as adhering to a coherent time frame requires extensive suspension of disbelief. A more likely and economically motivated explanation is simply that FFG recognizes that the prequels represent a divisive period in the franchise's history, and their products—an extensive range of board, card, miniatures, and roleplaying games—are better

**Figure 2.2:** The "Grand Admiral Thrawn" and "Jyn Erso" cards from *Star Wars: The Card Game*, intermingling both old and new continuities. Copyright Fantasy Flight Games.

served by catering to original trilogy content, EU nostalgia, and the current wave of *Star Wars* hype.

These cards *could* be seen as materials for resistant counter-readings of the new canon—players can build decks that restage and remediate their favorite moments of the EU, thumbing their nose at corporate policy that has redefined these valued narratives as mere "*Star Wars Legends*." And certainly, over the course of five years, *The Card Game* and its expansive cardpool of almost 2,000 cards gave fans the freedom to evoke their desired version of *Star Wars*. But it is important to remember the limitations placed upon FFG in terms of the agency and control over the licensed IPs they use. Lucasfilm Story Group allows licensees, with approval, to incorporate material from the EU, and Fantasy Flight's *Star Wars* games borrow heavily from that continuity—but printing a card with Mara Jade or Dash Rendar will not render these characters canonical, in the ways that *Rebels* can re-canonize Thrawn. FFG does not have

that sort of power in this licensee-licensor relationship. Instead, the mix of canons stems from the particular affordances of card gaming. The highly abstracted gameplay of *The Card Game* allows for the interaction of disparate and discontinuous components of multiple *Star Wars* storyworlds, in ways that elude and sometimes even preclude immersion and narrativization.

The years immediately following the Disney buyout were an especially uncertain time to be a *Star Wars* licensee. Although Disney's licensing policies did not jeopardize the game's production, it has come to an end: in January 2018, FFG announced, with little fan-fare, the cancellation of *Star Wars: The Card Game*. This was due to the waning popularity of the game, yet another dimension of precarity for this sort of serially-release game system. In the grand scheme of *Star Wars* licensed media history, *The Card Game* will likely be remembered as a modest success, eking out a niche following. This, ultimately, makes it highly typical of the challenges facing the contemporary production of licensed media. In a massive transmedial ecosystem like *Star Wars*, there will be dozens of competing *Star Wars* games, produced by multiple different licensee companies, all expanding and exploring the storyworld in their own ways while trying to distinguish themselves in a crowded market place. *The Card Game* is important for its ordinariness, as a representative example of a transmedia production navigating the contingency and precarity surrounding media licensing in the 21st century. And, as the following chapters explore, what is most important in any given transmedial game is the affective value players place in it—from a big picture perspective of the entire franchise, the game may be a minor footnote, but for players deeply engrossed in the experience of playing the game and participating in its community, *The Card Game* could have been the most important node in their personal transmedial network.

## Conclusion – The Disney Years: 2012 and Beyond

The purchase of Lucasfilm by Disney brought with it a number of jarring discontinuities to the production of *Star Wars* transmedia. Major corporate restructurings and changes to long-standing licensing arrangements followed the buyout. LucasArts went from an active development studio to a licensing wing; the comics rights returned to Marvel; *The Clone Wars*, the most active and popular *Star Wars* site at the time, was abruptly cancelled and replaced with a show that would air on a Disney-owned cable channel. Decades of transmedial canon was scrapped. But amid all this tumultuous change, there has also been a marked continuity between the pre- and post-Disney approach to transmediating the *Star Wars* IP. The particulars of *who* is making transmedia and on *which platforms* has changed, but Disney-era *Star Wars* is still a franchise where the films constitute the core mothership, and various games, novels, comics, and TV shows drive consumer interest both inward and outward in this transmedial network.

Despite these changes, the *Star Wars* storyworld continues to be developed and refined. One of the most ambitious extensions, dove-tailing with Disney's corporate priorities, is *Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge*, a *Star Wars*-themed attraction that opened in 2019 at both Disneyland and Disney World. Though not a game itself, the attraction does offer fans a playful venue for sustained engagement with the storyworld, and is even narratively grounded in the period between *The Last Jedi* and *The Rise of Skywalker*. How *Galaxy's Edge* further develops Klastrup and Tosca's framework for the growth of transmedial worlds would be one interesting direction to explore in future research.

This chapter has examined transmedial games and their expansion of popular storyworlds primarily through the lens of narrative theory and worldbuilding. In the following chapter, I turn my attention to another franchise, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, foregrounding games studies literature

to analyze how three games each privilege different facets of Westeros through the procedural design of their rules and mechanics.

# Chapter Two: *Game of Thrones*
# Procedural Rhetoric, Canons, and The Rules of Westeros

In the previous chapter, I explored ludic extensions of *Star Wars*, one of the most extensively licensed properties of all time. Across that chapter, my case studies examined licensed games as worldbuilding foundation (*Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*), as coordinated transmedia (*Shadows of the Empire*), as parodic restaging (*Lego Star Wars*), and as precarious media production (*Star Wars: The Card Game*). Each of these came at key moments in the long history of the *Star Wars* franchise, all building upon, supporting, and promoting the primary texts of the franchise, the films. In this chapter, I turn my attention to Westeros, the storyworld of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* (*ASoIaF*) novels by George R. R. Martin, its HBO television adaptation *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), and three games based on the franchise: Fantasy Flight Game's *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game* (2002 to present); Cyanide Studio's *Game of Thrones* (2012), and Telltale Games' *Game of Thrones: A Telltale Game Series* (2014).

Making a licensed game necessitates choosing what of the originary storyworld to focus on, which can affect how the world is consumed and perceived. As Mark J. P. Wolf argues, "The growth and adaptation of a world […] may even have very little to do with narrative. Some degree of a world's aesthetics (the sensory experience of a world) and a world's logic (how a world operates and the reasons behind the way it is structured) must be carried over" (Wolf 2012, 246). What of the aesthetics and logic of the originary storyworld a transmedial game chooses to implement can have a significant impact on the experience of that game. *Star Wars* games, for example have tended to privilege the conflict between Light Side and Dark Side, while downplaying other potential perspectives: numerous games allow you to take up a lightsaber or jump into the cockpit of a starship, while few have tried to explore the diplomatic

side of the narratives. The negative reputation of licensed games, seen as rushed and superficial cash-grabs, is fundamentally similar to Jenkins' denunciation of licensing overall (Jenkins 2008a, 107), and scholars like Elkington (2009) and Booth (2015) have dug into the specific ways that licensed games are often framed as derivative and uninspired. But even when this is true (and it is true for *some* games), these games are still based on an often-complex negotiation between the originary narrative text and the rules-bound design of the gameworld. The modes of appreciation around transmedial games, as interactive restagings of storyworlds that encourage various forms of immersion, are so personal and idiosyncratic. Even in licensed games that confirm all the worst tendencies of the form, there is always the capacity for a deep engagement with the transmedial memory of the property. Martin's novels and the HBO television series are both deeply invested in the worldbuilding process, providing fans with "excess detail and descriptive richness" (Wolf 2012, 29) to construct detailed mental imaginings of the continent of Westeros, little of which is directly represented in either media. The games discussed in this chapter all provide players with various means of accessing and recontextualizing their transmedial memory of Westeros, although the modes of engagement for each game are affected by the specific design decisions made in how to represent the storyworld and its rules.

One of the most famous discourses running through game studies, especially in its formative years in the late 1990s and early 2000s, was the so-called "ludology vs. narratology" debate, which was "formalized" (or mischaracterized, depending on who you ask) by Henry Jenkins in his essay "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" (Jenkins 2004; see also Frasca 1999 and Juul 2000). As Espen Aarseth (often counted among the ludologists) notes, "The once vigorous but theoretically weak discussion of 1) whether games are narratives and 2) whether narrative theory should be applied to this kind of entertainment software has long run out of

steam, and should be put to rest" (Aarseth 2012, 133). Fundamental to this chapter is the argument that games—especially licensed games which transmediate popular storyworlds—are best understood through a combined approach that foregrounds the ways games both build storyworlds *and* build the rules that make these worlds interactive. Each of the case studies in this chapter demonstrates different approaches to the rules and procedures that structure how players interact with Westeros, offering distinct perspectives on the storyworld, "combin[ing] elements from narratives and games into a number of quite different ludo-narratological constructs" (Aarseth 2012, 130)—each of the games discussed here, one analog and two digital, demonstrate how the implementation of these rules can structure and inflect our understanding and appreciation of the storyworld, providing competing interpretations of the source texts.

In this chapter, I utilize participant observation and interviews with players of *ASoIaF* games to explore different spheres of player activity and engagement with both the game and Westeros. Focusing on the rules of the storyworld itself and the rules of the games that transmediate that storyworld can only tell us so much—we must also attend to the ways players use these games to stage their personalized vision of the world. Recruitment for my research was carried out through a number of means. As a long-time member of the local community of Austin-area players for *The Card Game*, I was able to sit down with four players I already knew for in-person interviews, each of which lasted at least an hour. These were conducted in the summer of 2018, all at local coffee shops or restaurants. In addition to these interviews with players I already knew, I also recruited from a number of other sites. I designed a small poster recruiting fans of *ASoIaF* that I posted at several local Austin game stores, which generated three more interviews, two conducted in-person under similar conditions as described above, and one conducted via email. My most successful recruitment site was *The Card Game*'s very active

Facebook group, where I posted a message on July 9, 2018 saying I was looking for those interested in answering "questions about how you first got into the franchise, what you like or dislike about the storyworld of Westeros, and what [*The Card Game*] (and other games) have added to your understanding or appreciation of the series." This post received about two-dozen responses, including a few individuals who contacted me but did not respond to follow-ups. All together, my Facebook message generated 15 additional interviews, with one conducted via Skype and the rest conducted via Facebook Messenger or email. These interviews were conducted throughout Summer and Fall 2018.

Of my 22 interview subjects, twenty identified as male, with subject ages ranging from 20s to 40s. As I was recruiting in English-language sites, most of my players came from American or English backgrounds, though I was able to also speak with two players based in Malaysia and Bulgaria, who offered insights into the transnational flow of Westeros. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms, with the exception of two who took me up on the offer to pick their own pseudonyms.

In examining how players come to licensed games, and how they come to identify with communities surrounding these games, we gain a better understanding of how these games function as games systems and as living communities. As Woo argues, "identities and meanings do not reside in the mind alone. Although they are obviously in some sense 'subjective,' they are also an objective existence. They circulate and can be observed in interactions between people, have real effects on how social life unfolds, and leave traces in material spaces, organizations, and biographies" (Woo 2018, 65). T.L. Taylor, in "Becoming a Player: Networks, Structure, and Imagined Futures," writes, "For far too long we have had our eyes on the wrong target. We have looked to play *mechanics* as the explanation for who inhabits this space. But how people come to

know about a game, get reviews of it (formal or informal), get their hands on it, are taught how to play it, and indeed have people to play with is deeply informed by their social networks" (Taylor 2008, 54). In the case of licensed gaming, the entry point may seem obvious—fans of the license gravitating toward a transmedia extension—but it is important to remember that this script may not be set in stone: not everyone playing a licensed game is necessarily a fan of the licensed storyworld, and the storyworld may not be what keeps a player engaged with the game even if it is what brought them to it initially. By interviewing these players, I gained a much better understanding some of the pathways that fans can take through a transmedial network like *ASoIaF*'s, with respondents frequently describing radically different attitudes toward the long-term affective value they placed in transmedial sites like the novels, the television series, the merchandising, and the various licensed games discussed in this chapter.

If the previous chapter was about storyworld expansion, this chapter focuses on the rules and structures of licensed gaming. In discussing Westeros, we must consider the particular worldbuilding strategies that Martin and others have used to construct the diegesis (and how these strategies are frequently in competition, with the TV series exceeding the narrative bounds of the existing novels), the dialectical nature of generic formulations that situate the franchise in the "fantasy" genre, and the specific game design decisions made in transmediating and interactivizing the storyworld into a game. Game design, worldbuilding, and genre are all intrinsically tied to rules and mechanics, the processes through which Westeros is experienced. Throughout this chapter, I will be utilizing Ian Bogost's concept of "procedural rhetoric" (Bogost 2007), the ways that the design and implementation of rules present rhetorical arguments about the world, to explore the ways that rules and mechanics structure and define this storyworld and how players can experience it. Licensed games foreground the important overlap in the rules-

bound nature of both game design and worldbuilding, as the games are governed by both its own rules and mechanics but by its implementation of the pre-existing rules of the storyworld itself. Each game discussed in this chapter transmediates Westeros in its own particular ways, which privilege certain readings of the world and its values, creating radically different play experiences all derived from the same originary texts.

## PROCEDURAL RHETORIC AND THE RULES OF WORLDBUILDING

Ian Bogost, in his book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*, develops and defines his concept of "procedural rhetoric," the "practice of using processes persuasively" (Bogost 2007, 3). Building upon Janet Murray's definition of "procedural" as "[a computer's] defining ability to execute a series of rules" (Murray 1997, 71), Bogost explains:

> Procedurality refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes. And processes define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems, from mechanical systems like engines to organizational systems like high schools to conceptual systems like religious faith. (Bogost 2007, 2-3)

Process, the design and application of a series of rules, is central to how players make games meaningful. But it is also central to how storyworlds and genres are made meaningful. Klastrup and Tosca's "mythos, ethos, and topos" (2004) are fundamental building blocks for the rules of storyworlds, and generic formulas and tropes are a genre's rules—the success of Martin's storyworld frequently stems from his use of the rules of the fantasy genre in unexpected but not necessarily unfamiliar ways. We can use procedural rhetoric as an analytical framework to understand and appreciate the ways that Westeros is built and rebuilt in its primary texts and in licensed games.

Just as words like "procedure" may carry negative connotations, "rules" may not sound like the most appealing part of a game, but they are an absolute necessity. One may be able to

imagine forms of *play* that are rules-less (such as the improvisational make-believe sessions of a young child), but on a fundamental level, it is the rules that make a game a game.[34] Juul notes this inherent paradox in *Half Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*: "Rules and enjoyment may sound like quite different things, but rules are the most consistent source of player enjoyment in games. We may associate rules with being barred from doing something we really want, but in games, we voluntarily submit to rules" (Juul 2005, 55). In various contexts, both popular and scholarly sources frequently use terminology like "rules" and "mechanics" interchangeably. I will be following the lead of Elson et al.'s definition of mechanics as "compris[ing] all game 'rules' and defin[ing] the options for interaction in and with a game. […] Mechanics also include some technical characteristics of digital games, such as how feedback is delivered through visual, auditory, and haptic cues in response to user input. […] they are the sine qua non for a genuine gaming experience. Some digital games feature almost no narrative, focusing only on enjoyable mechanics" (Elson et al. 2014, 526-527). "Mechanics" are thus a sub-set of rules, particularly those rules that structure how players will interact with a game and its world. Notably, it is an analog game, *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game*, that most fits this last example of a game with limited narrativity but compelling mechanics.

Although Bogost's framework is perhaps *most* applicable to digital games, which privilege a mode of engagement that foregrounds the intersection between the game's procedurality and the player's actions, it is important to emphasize that procedural rhetoric-based analysis need not be limited to digital contexts, as Bogost himself notes: "I should stress that I intend the reader to see procedural rhetoric as a domain much broader than that of videogames, encompassing any medium— computational or not— that accomplishes its inscription via

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[34] See Roger Caillois's *Man, Play, and Games* (1958), which famously argues for a spectrum of games and game-like activities from rules-based *ludus* to free-form *paidia*.

processes" (Bogost 2007, 46). In fact, analog games provide a vital counterpoint to Bogost's digital examples, with players tasked with enacting the processes of the game itself, potentially making them more attuned to the design of the game engine that they are actively actualizing.

Procedural rhetoric is well-attuned to examine the particular algorithmic functions of gameplay, but it is more widely applicable. Worldbuilding is very much a rules-bound process as well: "To think of storyworlds as dynamic models from which different stories can be derived reveals an important structural analogy between games and storyworlds: both are abstract, rule-based models that map relationships between their constituents" (Schröter 2015, 70). Importantly, just as worldbuilding relies heavily on creating the *illusion* of completeness (see Introduction), no game can model a complete world—and what is included (or often, more pointedly, what is *not*) says much about the design process: "meaning in videogames is constructed not through a re-creation of the world, but through selectively modeling appropriate elements of that world" (Bogost 2007, 46). It is here, in the active creative process of choosing *what* to model in the world, that the rhetorical dimensions of *both* game design and worldbuilding come to the fore. The diegetic components necessary to achieve an intended affect can tell you much about what the designers value in the world—in comparing my three case studies, *how* Westeros is rendered in these three games matters most.

Bogost's procedural rhetoric, with its emphasis on *rhetoric*, focuses first and foremost on the ways that games can and do make persuasive arguments about the *real* world, but games can just as equally portray their own perspectives on storyworlds as well. According to King: "By embodying certain processes and not others, by structuring a playing experience around particular rules and logics, videogames make claims about the world and how it works—or how it does *not* work, or how it *should* work" (King 2010). The designers and programmers of

Fantasy Flight, Cyanide, and Telltale decided how *their* Westeros would be represented, both visually and through the rules and mechanics of gameplay, and these three games all reflect different perspectives on the storyworld, each privileging certain traits and tropes the other games do not, and each positioning their texts in relation to the primary texts of the franchise (the novels and the TV series) in different ways.

Licensed games provide a robust venue to examine the important overlap in the procedural rhetorics of game design and worldbuilding, as the games must be structured not only around its own rules and mechanics but its implementation of the pre-existing rules and mechanics of the storyworld. Studying the designers of the MMORPG *Star Wars Galaxies*, M. J. Clarke notes "the more powerful examples of worldmaking exist on the level of game mechanics and rules, where MMO makers literally detail what can be done, how players can interact, and the relationship of everything in a given world" (Clarke 2014, 211)—ultimately, all licensed media production necessitates this sort of mindful consideration of the rules of the property and the affordances of the target medium, but it is compounded in licensed game design: the particulars of the licensed storyworld are set, but games will privilege certain facets of the storyworld that are most relevant to the game they are making. Licensed game designers enjoy the most creative leeway in designing the game's own rules, which govern how players will interact with the frequently immutable constants of the storyworld's characters and plot. The common thread between storyworlds and gameworlds is the creation and implementation of *rules*. The two, storyworld rules and gameworld rules, must work hand in hand.

## A Brief History of Westeros

Before exploring the ludic and generic structures of these licensed games, this chapter first requires a careful accounting of the franchise's mothership texts and the licensed games I

will be discussing, because so many texts in this franchise have almost exactly the same title: (*A*) *Game of Thrones*. The originary texts are the novels, written by George R. R. Martin. As of 2019, Martin has published five of the planned seven novels, with the first novel, *A Game of Thrones*, released in 1996 (see Table 3.1 below for the other titles).[35] Although the book series is collectively titled *A Song of Ice and Fire* (*ASoIaF*), it is the first novel's title that has become synonymous with the franchise. The most significant extension—so major as to be a secondary mothership for the franchise—has been the HBO television series, *Game of Thrones*, which aired from April 2011 to May 2019 under showrunners David Benioff and D.B. Weiss. In this chapter, I will distinguish between these two primary texts as "the novels" and "the TV series," and I will be using "*A Song of Ice and Fire*" or its acronym "*ASoIaF*" to discuss the franchise collectively.

**Table 3.1: The *ASoIaF* Novels and TV Series**

| **Title** | **Media** | **Years** | **Terminology** |
|---|---|---|---|
| *A Song of Ice and Fire* | Novels | | "the novels" |
| *A Game of Thrones* | | 1996 | |
| *A Clash of Kings* | | 1998 | |
| *A Storm of Swords* | | 2000 | |
| *A Feast for Crows* | | 2005 | |
| *A Dance with Dragons* | | 2011 | |
| *The Winds of Winter* | | forthcoming | |
| *A Dream of Spring* | | forthcoming | |
| *Game of Thrones* | Television | 2011 to 2019 | "the TV series" |

The relationship between these two primary texts became quite complicated over the course of the TV series' eight seasons. The early seasons were relatively faithful adaptations of the novels; however, as the show progressed, televisual Westeros began to diverge. Throughout the show, storylines from the novel were simplified or even omitted, and starting in the show's

[35] In addition to the novels, Martin has also published a number of side stories, set in other eras of Westerosi history, as well as the 2014 reference book *The World of Ice & Fire*, co-written with Elio M. García Jr. and Linda Antonsson, founders of Westeros.org, a fansite launched in 1999.

fifth season, the TV series moved past the events of the novels, integrating plot points Martin will reportedly use in his future books as well as events that were entirely original to the TV series. What began as a fairly straightforward adaptation became a much more independent storyworld—much to the chagrin of many fans. I return to this fan outcry, particularly over the final season, in the conclusion of this chapter.

A franchise with multiple motherships is not unheard of—one prominent example is *The Lord of the Rings*, which, due to a complicated series of rights ownership deals dating back to the 1970s, has two major licensors: the Tolkien Estate (which manages the literary rights to Tolkien's full corpus of work) and The Saul Zaentz Company (which owns limited rights to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*—Peter Jackson's films were made using this license). This bifurcated licensing amplifies these competing motherships by reinforcing different approaches to Tolkien's storyworld of Middle-earth—games licensed through the former can delve deeper into the esoteric history and cosmology Tolkien developed throughout his work, while games licensed through the latter have access only to the more familiar characters and events of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Competing interests have their own claims on portions of the IP, and licensees must be careful to stay within the boundaries of what they have the rights to. Ancillary producers must remain mindful of how their games transmediate Westeros, considering *which* Westeros and *which* audiences their game will cater to. With multiple works being produced and released concurrently or in quick succession, the importance of how each media site uses the different iterations of Westeros becomes even more important.

Outside these two primary texts for the franchise, there have been a number of licensed games based on Martin's novels or the HBO series—and the ways that these games navigate the sometimes contradictory pulls of these two canons is one of the major themes of this chapter (see

Table 3.2). I start with *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game*, a series of three related card games published by Fantasy Flight Games beginning in 2002. These games are set within the canon of the novels, and the first iteration of the card game predates the TV series by nearly a decade. The bulk of the interviews I conducted in my research for this chapter were with players of the card games, and these interviews frequently explored the mechanical and social appeal of the hobby and tensions between the game and the competing novel and television canons.

**Table 3.2: Select *ASoIaF* Licensed Games**

| Title | Genre | Company | Years | Terminology |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game* | Card Game | Fantasy Flight Games | | "*The Card Game*" |
| *A Game of Thrones: The Collectible Card Game* | | | 2002 to 2008 | |
| *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game* | | | 2008 to 2015 | |
| *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game Second Edition* | | | 2015 to present | |
| *Game of Thrones* | Roleplaying video game | Cyanide Studio | 2012 | "*The RPG*" |
| *Game of Thrones: A Telltale Game Series* | Adventure video game | Telltale Games | 2014 to 2015 | "*The Telltale Game*" |

In the later sections, I turn my attention to two digital games. First, I examine Cyanide Studio's 2012 video game, simply titled *Game of Thrones*, an action roleplaying game (which I will refer to as "*The RPG*"). The game's development predates the television premiere, and includes only sporadic references to the televisual version of Westeros—in Cyanide's game, the competing interests of the franchise's two canons are seen through *The RPG*'s somewhat incoherent mix of these not-entirely-complementary storyworlds. My final case study in *Game of Thrones*: *A Telltale Game Series* (which I will refer to as "*The Telltale Game*"), a serially-released adventure video game released by Telltale Games in 2014 and 2015. Unlike the

previous examples, *The Telltale Game* is situated solely in the television canon, offering players the opportunity to feel directly involved in familiar events from the TV series but offering little agency in terms of what players can do in and with Westeros. Before delving into these, I analyze reasons given in my interviews for why this storyworld is a compelling setting—in other words, how fans understand and interpret the *rules* of Westeros, negotiating the process-bound tropes of the fantasy genre and the specific worldbuilding decisions made in defining and differentiating Westeros.

## THE APPEAL OF WESTEROS: "THE ANTI-FANTASY"

Storyworlds—especially those situated in genre contexts like fantasy or sci-fi—rely heavily on rules, both for the genre broadly and the storyworld generally, the things that set it apart from the real world and from other storyworlds. Film theorist Stephen Neale has defined film genre in highly procedural language, as "systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject" (Neale 1980, 19), and these definitions are broadly applicable in other media contexts. Genres are based on a series of rules, and *ASoIaF* owes its success to both how well it conforms to the rules of the fantasy genre and the ways that it frequently confounds audience expectations.

As one would expect, my interviewees were fans of the fantasy genre, although what precisely that means requires some unpacking. In their introduction to *A Short History of Fantasy*, Mendlesohn and James track a broad range of ways to define "fantasy," discussing psychoanalytic, rhetorical, and historical approaches from both academics and fantasy writers themselves. Defining the precise boundaries of "fantasy" is difficult, and different theorists frequently develop mutually incompatible definitions:

> The major theorists in the field—Tzvetan Todorov, Rosemary Jackson, Kathryn Hume, W.R. Irwin and Colin Manlove—all agree that fantasy is about the construction of the impossible whereas science fiction may be about the unlikely, but is grounded in the scientifically possible. But from there these critics quickly depart, each to generate definitions of fantasy which include the texts that they value and exclude most of what general readers think of fantasy. (Mendlesohn and James 2012, 1)

On the most basic level, "fantasy is the construction of the impossible" is suitably broad to cover the wide range of approaches that different authors, directors, or designers take in building their fantastical storyworlds. But they also acknowledge a perhaps more superficial way of defining the genre: "there is what publishers and booksellers package and sell as fantasy. For many people fantasy can be identified by its cover art. A dragon or a wizard is usually a clue; but so is a half-naked barbarian (male or female) wielding a sword" (Mendlesohn and James 2009, 5). For many of my interview subjects, this sort of surface-level evaluation of the fantasy trappings of Martin's novels or the HBO series were central to how they became devoted to the franchise. Some discussed the visceral appeal of dragons and other fantasy fauna, with Ben quite succinctly stating "dire wolves and dragons just kick ass." Echoing Mendlesohn and James' own example, Tyler described being at Barnes & Noble and seeing "the cover art for *Game of Thrones*, the paperback has Winterfell in the background and Jon Snow [on a horse …] I remember seeing that was like 'that's cool art! I better go check this out.'" Although many of my subjects went to great lengths to explain and theorize their love of *Game of Thrones* and Westeros, it is also important to remember that the deeply personal and idiosyncratic reasons one becomes a fan of something often do not lend themselves to tidy explanations. Sometimes you love Westeros because Jon Snow looked cool on a horse.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the fluency with which my subjects discussed the fantasy genre, one of the most common explanations for the appeal of *ASoIaF* was how it distinguished itself *from* fantasy. These fans had internalized that fantasy was a less culturally legitimated

genre, and expressed their admiration for one of the genre's most popular texts by going to great lengths to explain how *ASoIaF* transcended "mere" fantasy. In the words of Collin: "once you break through the surface level stuff, you realize [*ASoIaF*] is the *anti-fantasy*." This legitimation of Westeros as a more elevated fantasy setting required distinguishing it from the genre overall, which my subjects frequently described in terms of clichéd Hero's Journey-type plots. Or as Sam succinctly put it: "standard fantasy novels are pretty damn boring when you boil it all out."

For many of my subjects, "realism" was one of the key strengths of Martin's storyworld. According to Henley: "I like how it reflects real life, this world feels like it works a lot like ours does." Grace identified "the political side to it all, and the clear historical influence it has" when I asked what she enjoyed about Westeros, a common note struck in many of my interviews. One interesting facet in my interviews was the frequency with which fans would call upon their own experiences and bona fides in support of the realism or historicity of the franchise. Several (Bloodaxe, Neil, Tyler, and David) discussed their degrees in history or literature, and David, who first read the books while doing Peace Corp work in Central Asia, discussed his appreciation for the Dothraki while living in the part of the world Martin based their culture on. Although many cited the show's "realism," few defined what this meant to them. As Ryan Vu argues, "The show's counterintuitive sense of 'realism' has nothing to do with verisimilitude or allegory, but rather with mastery of its adopted generic codes"—as Vu argues, the "realism" of Martin's world comes less from reflecting reality, but from Martin "alternately subverting and reinforcing the norms of […] fantasy" (Vu 2017, 274). Thus, while "realism" was frequently deployed by my interview subjects as a way to distance the texts from the fantasy genre, much of what resonated with them was less *anti*-fantasy and more the ways that Martin uses familiar genre tropes in unexpected ways.

Intimately tied to this sense of "realism" was the storyworld's morality, with my subjects repeatedly using the familiar imagery of black, white, and grey moral worldviews. Collin directly tied this to "realism," stating "Nothing is black and white, exactly like the human condition." Neil explained "the classic criticism of [Tolkien's] work is the characters aren't interesting, because they're either good guys or bad guys, and then even organized across racial lines, like the elves are good guys and the orcs are bad guys." Once again, Martin's work is positioned as a palliative to issues plaguing the fantasy genre—or how these fans conceived of the genre, which was frequently limited to a small corpus of canonical texts by white male authors. Connected with this "shades of grey" aesthetic was a recurring motif about mortality in *ASoIaF*. Ted described perhaps the most famous example: "How many people do you know were upset about Ned Stark dying? All of them. Literally. I love it […] nobody is safe." The "realism" of Westeros can be "defined by the characteristics of the probable and legible combined with a focus on gruesome subject matter and concomitant repudiation of fairy tale happy endings" (Kustritz 2016, 5). Although death is far from the only stakes in a narrative, it is frequently the most dramatic and final, and the high number of sudden, shocking deaths in *ASoIaF* have left their mark.

On the other hand, some fans also cited the fantastical as a detriment to the quality of the franchise. Grace, who listed the dragons as among her favorite parts of the storyworld, also explained how "The main thing I don't like about it is when the traditional fantasy elements take over and it feels generic," using the example of "'these are the good guys, the Night King, etc. are the bad guys.' It lacks dimension for me." Here, "fantasy elements" is used as shorthand for a simplistic binary conflict between forces of good and evil. One of the key ways that Martin's novels and the HBO series tries (sometimes unsuccessfully) to avoid this binary is through the

use of a huge range of character perspectives within Westeros—the point-of-view characters in the novels changes chapter-to-chapter, which the TV series mirrors through shifting between a large number of parallel plot threads scene-to-scene. In the games discussed in this chapter, a similar attempt to provide multiple perspectives is frequently employed, although the results sometimes simply reify the simplistic "good guys vs. bad guys" binary. In the next section, I turn my attention to *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game*, which transmediates much of *ASoIaF*'s massive narrative scale while eluding narrativization due to its heavily abstracted gameplay.

### ***The Card Game*: Evocative Mechanics and Enduring Communities**

Although digital games based on *ASoIaF* would not arrive until after the release of HBO's adaptation in 2011, the novels had enjoyed a number of tabletop transmediations long before the property entered into the pop culture mainstream. Guardians of Order published *A Game of Thrones: d20-based Open Gaming RPG* from 2005 to until the company's closure the following year. Subsequently, Green Ronin Publishing has had the license for TRPGs, with *A Song of Ice and Fire Roleplaying* first released in 2009, with sporadic new releases through 2017. In contrast, the licensing rights for board games and card games based on *ASoIaF* has been remarkably stable: Fantasy Flight Games' first release with the license came in 2002 with *A Game of the Thrones: The Collectible Card Game*, designed by Eric M. Lang and Christian T. Petersen, and the company has held onto the licenses, and consistently released products for it, throughout the 17 years that followed.[36]

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[36] FFG has released many other tabletop *ASoIaF* games, including: *A Game of Thrones: The Board Game* (2003), revised as *A Game of Thrones: The Board Game Second Edition* (2011); *Battles of Westeros* (2010), a miniatures wargame; *Game of Thrones: Westeros Intrigue* (2014), by German board game designer Reiner Knizia; and *A Game of Thrones: Catan – Brotherhood of the Watch* (2017), based on Klaus Teuber's *Settlers of Catan* (1995).

In contrast to the single-player digital games I discuss later in this chapter, *ASoIaF*'s tabletop games have demonstrated a vital capacity for sociality. As Booth notes "Paratextual board games allow players to enter a cult world, but use a more tangible and material presence than video games to harness player affect" (Booth 2015, 6). The need for physically-present other players to co-experience a tabletop game is important, especially for a competitive game like *The Card Game*, which features hundreds of tournaments a year, hosted all over the world. When I began my interviews with players of *ASoIaF* games, I recruited from within the community of *Card Game* players, and I had expected to hear about a broad range of licensed games based in Westeros—instead I found the players were extremely devoted and loyal to their game of choice, having used the long history of this card game to forge strong communal ties that have weathered the sometimes volatile production history of the game.

*The Collectible Card Game* ("*The CCG*"), FFG's first *ASoIaF* game, ended over a decade ago, but Fantasy Flight has twice now relaunched new versions of the game to carry on that game's initial legacy. *The Collectible Card Game* was a conventional CCG, utilizing the blind buy booster pack distribution model of games like *Magic: The Gathering* and *Pokémon Trading Card Game*. In 2008, FFG relaunched the game as *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game* under the company's new Living Card Game (LCG) distribution model. The initial releases were designed to be compatible with both the old and new card games, but soon the older CCG cards were phased out entirely. In 2015, *A Game of Thrones* was once again relaunched as *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game Second Edition* ("*Second Edition*" or "*2E*"). Owing to similarity in design and mechanics, I will discuss these three iterations collectively as "*The Card Game*."

Despite some rules changes, all three forms of FFG's *ASoIaF* card games have the same general gameplay. Players pick from different Houses of Westeros, eight in *2E*: Stark, Lannister,

Baratheon, Targaryen, Greyjoy, Martell, Tyrell, and Night's Watch. Across the different versions of the game, gameplay is structured around a sequence of phases: Plot, Draw, Marshaling, Challenges, Dominance, Standing, and Taxation—these are "played in a serialized fashion […] creating a narrative out of the turn order" (Booth 2015, 159).[37] These phases create a routinized process that players enact moment-to-moment across multiple games. Several of the phases are fairly straightforward—in the Draw phase, players draw cards from their decks; in Marshaling, players taking turns paying for characters and other cards (i.e. marshaling their forces) to be used in the phases and turns ahead; and the Standing and Taxation phases serve to reset the gamestate in preparation for the following round, returning cards to their ready (or "standing") state and discarding any unused gold, the game's monetary resource.

The remaining three phases—Plot, Challenges, and to a lesser extent Dominance—are where FFG's games set themselves apart from other card games. In addition to the sixty-card deck that each player is drawing from, composed of cards representing both major and minor characters from Martin's novels, locations in Westeros, and military or courtly strategies and tricks, each player also builds a seven-card plot deck. At the beginning of each round of play, the players secretly pick one of their plot cards and reveal their choice simultaneously. True to their name, these plot cards are frequently the most "narratively" significant, "shaping the overall structure of the round" (Booth 2015, 170). The plot card contains several important values: a player's income (the gold they use to play cards); initiative (determining turn order), and claim (which determines the strength of challenges in that phase).[38] Additionally, each plot features a powerful effect, many of which are triggered the moment the plot card is revealed (see Figure

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[37] Booth's analysis is actually of the HBO-based *Game of Thrones: The Card Game* (2012), a standalone two-player card game that simplifies *1E*'s rules and uses photographic imagery from the HBO series. Despite the difference, the basic phase structure and turn order is the same, so Booth's analysis applies.

[38] *2E* introduces a fourth value, Reserve, which determines a player's maximum hand size.

**Figure 3.2** - The plot "Wildfire Assault" from *First Edition*. The plot transmediates an iconic moment from the series—the napalm-like wildfire used in the Battle of Blackwater Bay. In the top left, the income, initiative, and claim values of this plot. *Second Edition* added a fourth value, the reserve, which determines the player's maximum hand size at the end of the round. Beneath the image, the effect of the plot: killing all but three characters for both players. Copyright Fantasy Flight Games.

3.3). After a plot is chosen, it enters the used plot pile, and frequently will not be available to play again that game.[39] Players will have dwindling options each turn, so must carefully weigh when is best to use each of their seven plots.

In the Challenges phase, players use their characters to engage in multiple forms of combat, representing different ways of consolidating power in Westeros. Challenges are represented by up to three icons printed on a character, representing where their strengths lie (see Figure 3.4). The Military (red icon) challenge represents battles and duels, resulting in the deaths of characters; the Intrigue (green) challenge represents the conniving and scheming of the court, resulting in cards from a player's hand being discard, lessening their options in future turns; and Power (blue) challenges represent the leveraging of clout and influence, resulting in power tokens changing ownership between players. These tokens are central to winning the game, and are generated from a number of additional actions in the game—the first player to 15 power wins. In Dominance, the player with the most remaining gold and unused characters earns one power token, thus rewarding players for being as efficient as possible.

[39] Plots are only reused when games take over seven rounds of play—uncommon but not unusual.

These mechanics offer a heavily abstracted version of a political power struggle in Westeros. Analyzing FFG's design through the lens of procedural rhetoric reveals a number of important choices made in the creation of *The Card Game*'s rules and mechanics. Most overtly, the separate challenges clearly reinforces that "the game of thrones" is not won only on the battlefield. This is not a game that is solely about the military strength of the numerous armies of Westeros—in both the novels and the TV series, the specifics maneuvers and tactics of the wars being fought are frequently kept off-the-page or off-screen. The power tokens are also another important abstraction, representing victory not as an all-or-nothing binary but as a gradual, incremental process—across all of their tabletop games, FFG frequently employs large numbers of tokens and other material components to represent complex and fluid game states. Critically, *The Card Game* also does not dictate what "victory" looks like. For a small number of (mostly) men in Westeros, victory might mean seizing the Iron Throne, but the central "game of thrones" metaphor remains purposefully vague—"winning" can mean any number of things within the context of the storyworld, and that is true in *The Card Game* as well.

**Figure 3.3** - "Tywin Lannister" card from *Second Edition*. Along the top left side of the card is Tywin's cost of 7, his challenges icons, and his strength of 6. Below is the character's text box, featuring any traits ("Lord"), keywords ("Renown"), or effects the character has: true to the economic strengths of House Lannister, Tywin grows stronger the more gold the player has. Copyright Fantasy Flight Games.

Although *The Card Game* may not offer a coherent picture of the overall narrative of the *ASoIaF* franchise, the game does lend itself well to developing its own back-and-forth narrativity: "the players end up 'telling' a 'story' by juxtaposing the different cards within play […] the rules themselves help determine the meaning of the cards' juxtaposition with each other" (Lancaster 2001, 98). In my years of playing different versions of *The Card Game* and teaching the game to numerous other players, one of the most common questions comes from players grappling with the ways that FFG's design paradigm frequently emphasizes the interaction between cards, rather than broadly applicable rules. A new player might look at "Tywin" above, see his trait, and ask, "What does 'Lord' mean?" They expect there to be a codified rule, stating "Lord characters can do XYZ." But the answer is "Nothing … on its own." This is true to both Westeros and the real world itself—a title like "Lord" intrinsically means nothing, requiring broader social contexts and cultural norms for the privilege of the position to be evident.

It is only through the juxtaposition of other cards that reference a trait that something like "Lord" becomes relevant—these other cards are generating their own rules that provide "Lord" with meaning. As one example, an attachment called "Bodyguard" provides a character with the Lord or Lady trait with the ability to avoid being killed one time—demonstrating that, even in the brutal, violent world of Westeros, those at the top are less likely to be harmed. As the players themselves are the game engine that manage *The Card Game*, they must be mindful of the complex interactions between both their own cards and their opponents', discovering in the process innumerable different ways that FFG's design privileges a vision of Westeros where a small number of powerful individuals are squabbling over the limited resource of political influence. The player is situated at the center of this causal web.

For players of the various iterations of *The Card Game*, the mechanics are central to the enduring appeal of the game. I interviewed Sam in a Starbucks near one of Austin's major tabletop gaming shops, hours before a tournament we would both be playing in. While we spoke, he was also occupied with organizing and preparing his deck, frequently gesturing to specific cards to punctuate his point. As Sam explained: "it has so many pathways to interaction and to victory. There is no one way to win, there is no one way to lose." FFG's design of the game allows players to feel like they can always make interesting decisions and strategic choices—Sam noted "even when you're losing, you can look at it and say 'Hey, I made good choices.'" The game's design further emphasizes an important feature of the broader *ASoIaF* narrative(s)—the recurrent emphasis in both the novels and the TV series on the decision making process of characters, allowing audiences to understand and appreciate the causality behind every tragedy and triumph in Westeros.

Both the Plot and Challenges phase provide players with a significant sense of agency through both deckbuilding and gameplay. As Ted explained: "Even choosing plots for the deck in creation is a great process for me. […] And when playing a game, the chess match that is the plot phase is something I don't think other games can match." The back-and-forth of bluffing and counter-bluffing of the Plot phase was frequently cited as among the most compelling and thematically appropriate portions of *The Card Game*. Tyler described it as "the game within the game, right? You win that, you win the game. Well, most of times." The idea of the Plot phase as a microcosm of larger conflicts was echoed by other interviewees. The Challenges phase was similarly cited as among the most popular aspects of *The Card Game*. Andrew explained: "Even if you don't necessarily have as good a board position as your opponent, you can frequently find a good order of challenges to maximize your returns and place your opponent in an awkward

position.” This flexibility is an important dimension to the game. Players will frequently launch weak attacks they know they will lose, because forcing the opponent to defend now, and thus limiting their options later, is more valuable. According to Simon, the back-and-forth of Challenges “creates an intriguing storyline over the course of a game that really feels like the real story.” Even when *The Card Game* may be a poor conduit for the plot of the franchise—it would be very difficult to learn the storyline solely from playing the cards—the game itself can generate its own emotionally affecting stories. The back-and-forth of Challenges provides a number of avenues for narrativization: both in terms of evoking the originary storyworld but also in terms of the interpersonal clash between players. Across my interviews, players frequently recounted in vivid detail the blow-by-blow of their favorite games.

The players I spoke with were broadly in agreement that FFG has done a good job of capturing the tone and feel of *ASoIaF*. According to Walter, “the game captures the different feel of the factions exceptionally well.” House Stark, the family most central to the storyline throughout the series, demonstrates this well. On a basic level, Stark cards are strongest in terms of the Military challenge—they are very good at fighting the wars, but bad at the scheming and politics. Stark men like Ned and Robb are especially weak against subterfuge; the women of House Stark, like Catelyn, Sansa, and Arya—characters who are better able to navigate and survive Westoros’ political culture—offer Stark more Intrigue challenge strength. One common complaint among *2E* players is that Lannister’s niche of having the most gold has been supplanted by Tyrell, but even this can be seen as thematically appropriate—in the series, House Tyrell’s economic and political fortunes rise as the Lannisters’ dwindle. These design decisions reflect the rhetorical position that FFG has taken in developing and defining their instantiation of

Westeros—a world of shifting political fortunes where those who are unable to adjust and adapt are left behind.

The lethality of Westeros was also frequently cited as something *The Card Game* excelled at capturing. Collin's description—"No one is ever truly safe and you have to be ready to watch your best characters die miserably, and try to continue on without them"—directly echoes the "nobody is safe" narrative trope frequently brought up in my interviews. One important feature of *The Card Game*'s design further enforces the finality of death. In most similar card games, there is a single discard pile—a space where cards go when they are removed from play, either because the character has been killed, the effect of the card has resolved, or the card was removed from a player's hand. *The Card Game* maintains two separate out-of-play states: the "discard pile" and the "dead pile." When characters are killed, their card goes to the dead pile; if it is a named (or "unique") character like Cersei Lannister or Daenerys Targaryen, the player cannot play another copy of that character that may be in their deck. Once again, the rules of the game reflect the designer's vision of what it means to live and die in Westeros—but other rules further reinforce that, despite the high-profile deaths of main protagonists like Ned Stark, it is rarely those at the top who will face the dead pile. When losing Military Challenges (the main way that characters die), the defending player decides who will be killed—and usually, it makes more sense to kill a nameless member of the peasantry instead. Further, unique characters have special rules that allows them to survive longer: if a player draws another copy of a character they already have in play, they may play the duplicate beneath or "attached" to the original copy in play. This "dupe" serves a similar function to the "Bodyguard" card described above, providing the unique character with a way to avoid death one time.

Where players differ, however, was how much this thematic aptness mattered to their appreciation of *The Card Game*. As Henley explained "To be honest I rarely think about the *Thrones* world when playing [*The Card Game*], I enjoy it as a game and the theme is really secondary to it." There was ambivalence among my subjects on theming. Immersion is a widely used but poorly defined term in both popular and scholarly literature on games—McMahan has noted that, "immersion means the player is caught up in the world of the game's story (the diegetic level), but it also refers to the player's love of the game and the strategy that goes into it (the nondiegetic level)" (McMahan 2003, 68). For many players, immersion is experienced on the non-diegetic level—they are immersed in the strategy, not the narrative conceit.

Some areas where my interview subjects felt *The Card Game* failed to reflect Westeros were also places where the exigencies of making a fun and balanced card game took precedence. Though some players may want to see Martin's storyworld transmediated as faithfully as possible into *The Card Game*, there is a clear hierarchy of priorities. There are some design decisions that might allow the gameplay to make more in-universe sense, but would ultimately be to the detriment of the game's mechanics and competitive spirit. As Neil noted "I'd rather play a balanced game than an absolute representation of the storyworld." Theming is thus part of *The Card Game*'s paragame, to utilize Carter, Gibbs, and Harrop's definition of the paragame as "being contingent on a player's desires and motivations rather than the context of play" (Carter, Gibbs, and Harrop 2012, 14). For some players, the theming is an inextricable dimension to how they consume and play the game; for others, it was important as the entryway into the game, but has diminished in importance the longer they play; and for still others, theming is entirely incidental to their ongoing relationship with *The Card Game*.

Within the community, there is even established terminology for this relationship between theming and mechanics: Ned, Jaime, and Shagga, named after characters from the franchise.[40] Walter laid out what he described as "the three psychographics of the game," explaining "Ned wanting to have the theme brought out, to the Jaime wanting to win, to the Shagga trying to make weird combos and making a generally bad card interesting." This categorization originate from FFG themselves. The archetypes are frequently discussed in the company's promotional materials, such as a post by Nate French, one of the designers of *Second Edition*, who discussed how the archetypes influence game design: "We understand that most players are a blended combination of the various archetypes, but thinking about archetypes in an extreme, idealized form still helps to ensure that we look at the game from different perspectives and serve the entire spectrum of our audience" (French 2015). The archetypes go back to the start of *The CCG*, when original designer Eric M. Lang introduced the categories in 2002, building upon an existing set of archetypes from *Magic: The Gathering*: Timmy, Johnny, and Spike.

The Ned archetype is the most deeply invested in the storyworld and its characters, and makes deckbuilding decisions based on fitting the theme. For example, Grace described how "I played Martell a lot to begin with, purely because The Red Viper was a favourite character of mine at the time." The Jaime archetype is generally seen as the most competitive, playing decks that are efficient and effective, but which may not be particular coherent in terms of the storyworld. Tyler, a self-professed Jaime player, discussed a Martell/Stark deck as an example: "there's no reason to have [Martell and Stark characters] ever, in any chapter in that book. It's

[40] Edmund "Ned" Stark is the nominal protagonist of the first novel / season, whose strict adherence to a code of honor leads to his dramatic death. Jaime Lannister is one of the most acclaimed knights in Westeros whose more flexible moral code is better suited to Westeros' political culture. Shagga, Son of Dolf is a mountain clansman who, in the first novel / season, demanded to fight with two giant battleaxes, because "Shagga likes axes."

never gonna happen. Works as a deck, though." The Shagga archetype frequently aims to try unusual and unexpected combinations of cards, excited to try the newest cards to find some novel and interesting. Of the three types, Jaime is the one most focused on the metagame, while Ned and Shagga illustrate different types of paragamic creativity: Ned is staging a sort of affirmational-fanfiction-through-deckbuilding, while Shagga is more interested in exploring the combinatorial possibilities of deckbuilding (see Figure 3.5). These distinctions are context dependent, and players may find they are a mix of the archetypes, or shift between them at different times—players preparing for a major tournament may play more like a Jaime, while enjoying a more experimental Shagga style in more casual settings.

In addition to these archetypes, another common fan term is "nedly"—an outgrowth of the Ned archetype, the "nedliness" of a card is the degree to which it captures the flavor and theme of a given character or event from the books. The Tywin Lannister card in Figure 3.4 would generally be seen as a "nedly" card—the card grows stronger the more gold the player

**Figure 3.4** – *First Edition* cards of the characters associated with the three player archetypes: Ned (Eddard), Jaime, and Shagga. Each card also fits the archetype: Ned is meant to be easily played in Baratheon decks, thematically consistent with the character's loyalty to Robert Baratheon; Jaime is a powerful and effective card, ready in every phase of the game; and Shagga introduces an unusual twist to the rules that challenges the player to consider unusual approaches to deckbuilding and play. Copyright Fantasy Flight Games.

has, appropriate given the economic strengths of the Lannisters, and can participate in all three challenges, which captures the character's skill in both the military and courtly sides of Westeros' power struggles. Debates about "nedliness" of new games can be a common sight in the community. Although Andrew felt that "this game has done an excellent job of meeting the requirements of players who want to see theme, and those that want the mechanics," it is significant that only one of the three archetypes is focused on the lore—for most players, this is a lower-order concern.

Although the storyworld may not be a central motivating factor while playing *The Card Game* to many players, there is an important back-and-forth between the source texts and the game. Ted, for instance, described how "sometimes I'll see a card with a characters name or a location of some sort, and not know much about said name. I'll hop on a wiki and read all about that character or location and discover something new"—the game motivates him to seek out more narrative context from other sources, like a fan wiki. Others described a sort of feedback loop, like Charles: "characters, groups and themes that I enjoy playing in the card game, I find myself more drawn to as I re-read the story or watch the show […] and houses that I liked while reading also happen to have game mechanics that resonate with me." Although players may not experience "conceptual immersion" (Wolf 2012, 48) where the player imaginatively transports themselves into the world, *The Card Game* demonstrates a complex negotiation between theming and mechanics. Walter described how "Playing with these characters as they challenge other known characters during game play can bring back memories of the stories we have"—this experience, common to many players, is more allusive and affective than immersive.

And this sort of negotiation between theming and mechanics can lead to some moral quandaries—appropriate given the shades of grey moralism of Westeros that so many of these

fans identified as fundamental to their love of the property. Tyler described his conflicted feelings between Ramsay the character and Ramsay the card: “I love the card and just hate the character. And has that made me reconsider his character? No! He fucking sucks in the book, he’s terrible. And so you kind of have to compartmentalize it. Like, this is cardboard that I play with, and that fictional character is something else.” Similarly, after listing a tremendous amount of Targaryen-themed merchandizing he has collected, Neil admitted “if you really held me down and said, ‘Is Daenerys a murderer?’ I would have to plead the fifth because I’m invested.” Importantly, Neil’s observation came months before the premiere of the TV series’ final season, where Daenerys’ descent into villainy was one of many creative decisions that drew fan ire. Playing *The Card Game* necessitates an often-complex negotiation between the originary texts and the material components of gameplay, with players like Tyler and Neil drawing personal boundaries around their long-term investment in the storyworld.

What sets *The Card Game* apart from the examples discussed in the following sections is the extent to which the game itself serves as the locus for a larger transnational network of players. Digital games are, by and large, a solitary experience—even games with significant online multiplayer components like MMOs and first person shooters are frequently consumed by oneself, using gaming hardware as the communication platform.[41] And though there are popular platforms to play *The Card Game* online—the biggest is an in-browser app hosted at TheIronThrone.net—a premium is placed on in-person face-to-face gameplay in tabletop gaming. Ben extolled how playing “is a fantastic way to have a few beers and enjoy interacting with a story I love and nice people,” a statement that succinctly captures the interconnectedness of the storyworld, the gameplay, and the community.

[41] Although the growth of eSports is increasingly the visibility of in-person competition.

For many players, competition and tournaments were important reasons they stay invested in *The Card Game*. As a social venue, tournaments offer a number of opportunities for player expression and community building. Players take a special pride in building and playing their decks, and these events often allow disparate local communities of players to meet face-to-face. In my time in the community, I have played in local tournaments in Georgia and Texas, but also travelled further, including to Tennessee and Oklahoma. According to Ted, "Meeting new people, seeing old friends, and just getting together is better for me than winning games or prizes. [...] at the end of the day if I didn't win a game but made a new friend, it was a success." But there are also major creative dimensions to organizing the tournaments themselves. Unlike a more major card game like *Magic: The Gathering*—which feature a rigorous schedule of officially-run tournaments with cash prizes available—much of *The Card Game*'s tournament scene is the work of fans. Most of the players I spoke with discussed this dimension of the game as a wholly positive thing, but there are also potentially troubling aspects to the amount of unpaid fan-labor that FFG relies on as a company.

Central to the experience of *The Card Game* is the game's incremental growth as FFG continually releases new cards. For many players like Dylan, the company's non-random Living Card Game (LCG) model is a huge draw: "[it] puts everyone on the most even footing starting out—everyone has access to a full playset of everything, so winning really comes down to two important skills—deck-building and piloting." Beyond the egalitarian ethos of the LCG (perhaps ironic, given the rigidly hierarchal storyworld), others like Henley see this expansion as thematically rich: "Just like in the story world, different houses have changing fortunes [...] Over the course of the game those fortunes reversed because of what cards got released and helped weaker factions get stronger." As Booth notes, the "card expansion packs [...] feed a

continuing commercial enterprise. These expansion packs also generate interest in individual players who might want to mirror the anticipation of the release of a new volume in the novel series or television show" (Booth 2015, 168). The serialized release of *The Card Game* allows players an outlet to experience the anticipation of new content in the long drought between book releases or between TV seasons—or even when the players have soured on the main texts, as many of the players I interviewed had, expressing skepticism Martin will ever finish writing or dissatisfaction with the creative direction of the HBO series. *The Card Game*, as a heavily abstracted representations of the massive narrative scale of Westeros and as a site of decades-long community formation, is an especially fertile example to explore the ways that licensed games structure affective engagement in an IP. In the following sections, I turn to digital examples of transmediated Westeros, which have had more mixed success.

### CYANIDE'S *GAME OF THRONES*: PERIPHERAL NARRATIVES AND FRUSTRATION

Turning away from the tabletop *The Card Game*, the remaining two case studies in this chapter will be digital games, starting with *Game of Thrones*, one of two *ASoIaF* games released by French game studio Cyanide in the early years of the TV series. The studio's first, a real-time strategy computer game for Windows called *A Game of Thrones: Genesis*, was released five months after the show's premiere in 2011, and was the first digital game based on the property. The following year saw the release of *Game of Thrones*, an action-RPG video game released for Windows, PS3, and Xbox 360—like many *ASoIaF* extensions, the game has no additional subtitle, so for clarity, I will refer to Cyanide's *Game of Thrones* as "*The RPG*." Both games started development before the TV series premiere, which creates a peculiar tension for a license that rapidly went from a well-selling novel series within the niche of fantasy genre fiction to mainstream popularity. According to Martin, the first novel hit a million paperback copies in

2010, fourteen years after its original publication (Martin 2010)—respectable sales but far from blockbuster numbers. In comparison, the novels' collective sales in 2018 exceeded 85 million (Yu 2018).

*Genesis* sidesteps the tension between the novels and the TV series by setting itself a millennium earlier in Westerosi history, detailing ancient events that have been only alluded to in the franchise's main texts. This is overall a common strategy in transmediations, allowing audiences to explore a familiar storyworld without having to conform to the immutable tent poles of established events or ongoing characterizations. This strategy has even been used by Martin, who has written a number of novellas set in the centuries before the events of the main series, and HBO, which has commissioned multiple spin-off prequel projects to continue to generate revenue off what has been their flagpole IP for most of the last decade.

*The RPG* finds itself in a more complicated position; the game is set immediately before and during the first book / first season, and although the plot is connected with one of the major storylines of the series, there is little direct overlap with characters and events. As Schröter explains: "Originally a game based solely on the *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels, French developer Cyanide Studios made a deal with HBO to use art assets, music, and voice actors from the TV series, and even involved George R. R. Martin as consultant on the game's script" (Schröter 2015, 73). The game's development during the early period of the TV series' production led to some oddities in how Westeros was rendered. *The RPG* uses little from the TV series, aside from a pair of roles played by actors from the show; for instance, the game does not utilize the TV series' set design and costuming, so its setting does not *look* much like televisual Westeros. This leaves *The RPG* in a peculiar, liminal state, occupying a diegetic space somewhere between the novels and the TV series.

Neither game was well-received—both *Genesis* and the PS3 version of *The RPG* have Metacritic scores of 53 out of 100, representing an average of review scores from across a range of sources (40 reviews for *Genesis*, 14 reviews for *The RPG*). In this section, I will examine *The RPG*, which in many ways falls into the conventional traps of licensed games that make them so often culturally devalued. Elkington describes the double-bind that many licensed games are put in: "Video games based on film and television licenses must attempt to appease two audiences: fans of the original license, who expect a certain adherence to its details, and fans of video games, who expect adherence to common notions of gameplay" (Elkington 2009, 215). *The RPG*, despite some promising narrative choices, captures some facets of the storyworld but fails to transmediate others, while being frequently a frustrating video game to play, making it difficult to say it appeases either audience.

In *The RPG*, players take control of two protagonists, Mors Westford and Alester Sarwyck, both disgraced former knights under House Lannister. The central plot of *The RPG* follows one of the primary plot-threads in the early seasons and novels: the succession crisis following King Robert Baratheon's death. In order to conceal the illegitimacy of her children and to eliminate other Baratheon claimants, Robert's widow Cersei Lannister orchestrates the assassination of Robert's numerous bastards. Alester finds himself reluctantly working for Cersei, and Mors is protecting a young woman whose pregnancy will further complicate the succession crisis. The storyline initially alternates between Mors and Alester, until later in the game when their plotlines converge. Mors and Alester are at the center of a power struggle between past and future political dynasties—until the very end where players are forced to pick sides and the two men fight to the death in the final level of the game.

In many respects, *The RPG* does a good job of replicating the tone and style of the series. Cyanide's Westeros is a brutal and violent place full of courtly intrigue and split loyalties. *The RPG* ultimately benefits from how peripheral it is to the main action of the series, while simultaneously fitting in reasonably well with the existing plotlines. Gray argues that many transmedial games "work at a text's perimeter, filling in details at its outskirts and giving meaning to its underexplored portions. Some will also push against the text's borders, expanding its scope, meaning, and uses" (Gray 2010, 205). *The RPG* does not rise to this second standard, but Cyanide chose a good narrative gap to fill in for their game, as the murders of Robert's bastards is important but largely in the background of the first novel / season of the TV series; it is believable that this conflict would play out with a cast of characters never seen or mentioned before or after. The final portion of the game takes place in King's Landing right after Ned Stark has been captured and is to be executed—the streets are filled with the corpses of Stark men killed in the conflict, but the game keeps its protagonists far away from the broader narrative's established and immutable events.

The game's protagonists function as an amalgamation of various tropes from *ASoIaF*. Mors is the more conventional of the two, fitting into the archetype of a grizzled world-weary veteran, very familiar in both the fantasy genre and video games. He is also a member of the Night's Watch, an organization that plays a prominent role in the series, thanks to the central focus both the books and the TV series gives to Jon Snow, and has the ability to "warg" (that is, control the mind and movements of animals)—a fantastical ability shared by many of the Starks.[42] And given his steadfast devotion to knightly ideals of honor, one could read Mors as a proxy for the series' early protagonist Ned Stark. Alester, on the other hand, is more

[42] Bran Stark demonstrates the warging ability most consistently and overtly, but there are numerous references in the novels that suggest that other family members have latent warging talents, especially in terms of the sometimes-supernatural connection between the Stark children and their direwolves.

compromising, willing to work for Cersei to achieve his ends, a better fit for the realities of Westeros and occupying the franchise's grey moral space. Whereas Mors' affiliation is with the narratively well-represented Night's Watch, Alester, as a member of the religious order of the Red Priests of R'hllor, has the more unfamiliar background, with the game providing significant information about a religion foreign to Westeros. And by using two Lannister knights—haunted by the horrible actions they were forced to do in the past by Tywin or in the present by Cersei—the game also allows players to experience a side of the series' Stark-vs.-Lannister conflict that both the books and the TV series leave unexplored.

The game's use of television assets is extremely limited. The only direct connections are Conleth Hill and James Cosmo, who provide voice acting and character models for their roles in the TV series, Lord Varys and Jeor Mormont respectively. Cersei Lannister is the only other established character who appears in the game, but she is neither voiced by nor modeled on Lena Headey's portrayal. One can imagine that Cosmo and Hill, playing relatively ancillary roles in the series, would be far easier to book than Headey. Of these, only Varys plays a significant role in the game, aiding Mors and Alester as they infiltrate King's Landing in the final parts of the game. As Booth notes, licensed games frequently "rely on the auteurs and authors of the cult world upon which they are based" (Booth 2015, 9)—and we see that very directly in *The RPG*: like Cosmo and Hill, author George R. R. Martin appears in the game, providing voice acting and the character model for the character Maester Martin (see Figure 3.6). Martin (the character) plays a small role in the game's plot, but the player may also optionally speak with Martin repeatedly—which is somewhat jarring, given the author's nasally American accent, dramatically different from every other voice performance—hearing his thoughts on the legends

**Figure 3.5** – *The RPG*'s eclectic mix of canons. Lord Varys and Jeor Mormont, modeled on and voice acted by TV series actors Conleth Hill and James Cosmo. Contrast with the game's Cersei Lannister, divorced from her televisual portrayal by Lena Headey. And Maester Martin, original to *The RPG*, modeled on and voiced by novel author George R. R. Martin. Copyright Cyanide Studio.

and histories of Westeros, privileging Martin's auteur status as the ultimate source, both in-universe and out, on the storyworld.

Beyond simply the potential incongruity of mixing the storyworld's canons, the game's design of these characters fails to capture their broader significance to the franchise. One of the biggest disconnects between the storyworld of Westeros in other media and Westeros in *The RPG* is the extremely limited role of women in the latter—as Schröter argues, throughout the game, "female characters are exploited for highly conventional tropes and plot devices, and are completely excluded from the player's interaction with the game *as* a game" (Schröter 2016, 88-89). Although there has rightfully been much discussion of the depiction of sexual violence in *ASoIaF*, especially in HBO's adaptation—for example, Anne Gjelsvik analyzes "the depiction of sex and violence, and how the adaptation transforms different forms of power into sexual victimization" (Gjelsvik 2016, 57)—Martin's novels and the TV series both frequently foreground the women of Westeros and how they exert and maintain power in a highly patriarchal society. This is most obvious in the case of Cersei, who is arguably one of the most politically powerful characters in the series—and based on my interviews, one of the most

popular. The game renders the often nuanced and complex portrayal of Cersei as something far simpler: "while the 'original' Cersei is both a powerful and deeply troubled character, the video game settles for the rather unimaginative stereotype of the 'evil queen'" (Schröter 2016, 86). Although the game makes clear that Cersei is in a position of authority, her characterization is limited to acting as a quest-giver, sending Alester on his missions to assassinate Baratheon bastards. This provides the player with a clear insertion point into the broader narrative of *ASoIaF*, but as this is all the player is ever shown of Cersei, it reduces this multi-faceted character to a fairy tale-like villainess, ordering the deaths of children.

Although there are reasons to praise the fairly compelling side-story that Cyanide tells here, *The RPG* is not necessarily a good *game*. As mentioned above, it is an action role-playing game, featuring many of the common traits of the sub-genre: "[Action RPGs] are generally defined by two characteristics: real-time combat and a simplified character development system. […] [Action RPGs] introduced a measure of player skill into the [computer RPG] form by integrating dexterity and reflexes into gameplay" (Schules, Peterson, and Picard 2018, 111). Much of the gameplay focuses on combat, with both Mors and Alester constantly fighting. The real-time flow of combat can be interrupted (or, rather, slowed dramatically) by pulling up a menu of skills either men can perform. In addition, each has a secondary set of skills attached to their particular magical abilities—Mors can command his dog to perform special skills, and Alester can use R'hllor's flame to immolate enemies or to heal himself.

Compared with *The Card Game* discussed above, or *The Telltale Game* which I discuss below, there is little room in *The RPG* for the sort of diplomatic maneuvering and political machinations that define many of the dramatic conflicts in *ASoIaF*. Critic Kirk Hamilton argues that *The RPG* "undercuts one of the series' most interesting and compelling themes. *A Song of*

*Ice and Fire* is in many ways an exploration of the idea of power" (Hamilton 2012). In cutscenes, Mors and Alester may occasionally be mindful of the political dimensions of their actions, but the gameplay forces the player to interact with the storyworld and its characters *only* through direct violence. Having implemented a combat-oriented game engine, Cyanide's Westeros inevitably becomes a world of combat—the procedural decisions made in designing and implementing the game provide no alternative ways to interact with the gameworld. This is not necessarily out-of-character for the storyworld, but it is a very limited perspective.

Beyond simply the inaptness of *The RPG*'s fixation on violence, the game's combat system is also more frequently frustrating than fun. The game is surprisingly difficult, as critic Joe Juba noted: "the difficulty can spike unexpectedly, overwhelming you […] it helps to adjust the difficulty […] to survive the poorly balanced fights" (Juba 2012). I played on the lowest difficulty and very often had to try major fights several times—which was made even worse by the two-minute long load times after each death. One can imagine a way that this frustration could be intentional, presenting an argument about the world of Westeros—by making it difficult to succeed through sheer physical might alone, the game *could* rhetorically reflect the need for other skills and strengths to play the "game of thrones." But in *The RPG*, there are no other skills and strengths. *The RPG* offers players decisions on the "classes" of Mors and Alester, reflecting different styles of combat—for example, the player can choose for Mors to fight with a sword and shield, with a two-handed weapon, or with two weapons in each hand—but these are all decisions that simply offer different flavors of violence. The game does occasionally offer players ways to solve problems non-violently, but these moments are few and far between. Even then, the game frequently reinforces the primacy of violent action: in one optional mission, I chose for Alester to smooth things over with a disgruntled knight, but was chastised by Cersei

who had wanted me to kill the man. Again and again, the game offers no decision point where combat is not the ultimate outcome of every encounter. This focus on combat runs counter to one of the major themes of the series, the relative unimportance of military prowess in a world where intrigue and backstabbing seem better tools for maintaining and sustaining power.

Although much of the property revolves around the ongoing wars raging across Westeros and beyond, relatively little attention is actually given to these military efforts. The primary protagonists of the series are, almost across the board, not the ones fighting the wars themselves. As *AV Club* writer William Hughes argues, "The characters we end up loving in this series are rarely the ones kicking the largest amount of ass (at least until recently), and that puts the game, and its steady build-up of combat prowess and kickass loot, at odds with the [the tone of the series]" (Hughes 2019). In the books, Mors and Alester would not be prominently featured. This could be argued as an added value Cyanide's game provides, portraying protagonists who have not been included in the range of characters featured centrally in either the novels or the TV series, but the game's frustrating gameplay and general lack of nuance means that Mors and Alester greatly limit the scope of Cyanide's Westeros.

Outside of combat, players are encouraged to explore the nooks and crannies of the game spaces. But these locations are quite limited: including Castle Black and surrounding environs around the Wall, King's Landing, Alester's castle town of Riverspring, antagonist Lord Harlton's castle of Castlewood, and Mors' family cottage. Cyanide's game offers only a small range of locations in Westeros, transmediating little of the expansive topos of Westeros. This is arguably thematically consistent with the tone and style of the early series: the first novel and season of the TV series were focused on a far smaller range of characters and locations than the expansive narrative world that developed later on. In addition to finding small amounts of money

or even new equipment, players will frequently encounter special treasures that contain items called "Westeros Archives," historical tomes which add new sections to the game's lore database, providing an optional short section of prose the player can read to learn more about Westeros. They usually relate to events or locations the player has recently encountered—the player can find numerous ones on facets of the Night's Watch scattered around Castle Black at the game's start—but they are also frequently non-sequiturs, fleshing out details of the storyworld that are not explored in the game, such as the archives for Houses Martell and Tyrell, which are both found on the streets of King's Landing. These historical documents are a form of "archaeological storytelling," where "the player is required to study the artefacts found within the world in order to develop an understanding of the world and its histories" (Livingstone, Louchart, and Jeffrey 2016, 1-2). In *The RPG*, these archives remain an optional objective, and unfortunately the content contained in these historical texts embedded within the diegesis offer little in the way of new information on the storyworld.

These in-world paratexts, explaining the broader contexts of the storyworld, may seem like a peculiar addition, providing little value to players who are presumed already fluent in the storyworld. But it is clear in playing *The RPG* that the game does *not* presume this fluency—likely due to the fact the game was made largely without the context of the TV series, which brought Westeros to a wider ubiquity. One of the first scenes of *The RPG* features Jeor Mormont explaining, in great detail, the whys and wherefores of the Night's Watch: why it was founded, why men in Westeros are sent (willingly or unwillingly) to join, and the rules and strictures that govern the lives of those who have "taken the black." Such information is also thoroughly provided in the novels and in the TV series, and, like many other moments throughout the game's narrative, may feel superfluous or overly expository in *The RPG*, echoing one of Jenkins'

central knocks against licensed media: “asking the new media to slavishly duplicate experiences better achieved through the old” (Jenkins 2008a, 107). Throughout the approximately 25 hours of the game, it is virtually never taken as given that its players know anything about the storyworld.

But the fundamental contradiction of *The RPG* is that it is a game only a fan could love. Critic Richard Cobbett ends his very negative review by noting that *The RPG* is a game “which fans still might enjoy more than they probably should. At the very least, it’s not a lazy cash-in, just one trying its best on far too small a budget” (Cobbett 2012). Echoing the classic criticism of licensed games, Cobbett argues that the game may still appeal to fans in spite of its shortcomings as a game. This ultimately is why I argue that licensed games need to be more fully theorized—the fact that as messy and frustrating a text as *The RPG* still holds affective appeal for fans is important. Not because fans are easy marks, accepting anything that bears their favorite branding, but because the modes of appreciation that develop around licensed games are so personal. From the incoherent mix of storyworlds and gameplay styles in *The RPG*, I turn now to a game very firmly situated in the televisual canon.

### ***The Telltale Game*: Transmediated Televisuality and Irrelevant Choices**

For my final case study, I turn my focus to a game that attempts to replicate the formal qualities of the TV series: *Game of Thrones: A Telltale Game Series*. Telltale Games was a company that specialized in games with an episodic release schedule, one manifestation of the “games as a service” model that has come to dominate the video game industry since the late 00s. As games journalist Jason Schreier explains: “Today’s big video games aren’t products—they’re services. […] Developers are looking at ways to make money off games for as long as possible, through downloadable content, cosmetic microtransactions, and good-old fashioned

loot boxes" (Schreier 2017). The "games as a service" model encourages and sometimes even necessitates a long-term economic relationship from the player/consumer, paying subscription fees or purchasing new content to expand the base game.

Telltale's titles are serialized, with each game usually comprised of five or six episodes that are released on a monthly or bimonthly schedule—each episode is purchased separately. The company's first game under this model was *Sam & Max Save the World* (2006-2007), based on Steve Purcell's comic series *Sam & Max* and LucasArts' earlier adventure game, *Sam & Max Hit the Road* (1993). Starting with *Back to the Future: The Game* (2010-2011), the company increasingly developed games using more high-profile media licenses, including *Jurassic Park: The Game* (2011-2012), *Batman: The Telltale Series* (2016), and *Guardians of the Galaxy: The Telltale Series* (2017). The company's most successful games were based on *The Walking Dead*, with the first "season"—the company frequently utilized televisual terminology to describe their titles, drawing an explicit connection between their distribution model and the seriality of many of the licenses they worked with—released in 2012, followed by *Season Two* in 2013 and 2014, *Michonne* (marketed as a "miniseries") in 2016, *A New Frontier* in 2016 and 2017, and *The Final Season* in 2018 and 2019.

Core to Telltale's brand was their reputation as one of the most prolific developers of licensed games in the mid 2000s and 2010s: between 2006 and 2019, Telltale released 22 episodic adventure games. However, their accelerated output of content relied on an unsustainable working environment heavily reliant on developer "crunch," the industry term for extreme overtime schedules to meet deadline (as in, "crunch time"). Telltale's CEO Pete Hawley announced on September 21, 2018 that the company was laying off the vast majority of its workforce effective immediately. *The Walking Dead: The Final Season* had released two of its

four episodes, and would be finished by Skybound Games, a division of Skybound Entertainment, a media company founded by *The Walking Dead* comics creator Robert Kirkman. All other Telltale projects were cancelled.

Released between December 2014 and November 2015, *Game of Thrones: A Telltale Games Series* follows a similar mold to Telltale's other episodic adventure games. The game relies heavily on its connections to the TV series, with screen-accurate (albeit in the semi-cartoony style of Telltale's game engine) representations of Jon Snow, Daenerys Targaryen, Tyrion and Cersei Lannister, and others (voiced by their television actors) interacting with the game's original characters (see Figure 3.7). These cameos from the television actors are a core part of the immersive illusion of *The Telltale Game*, which goes to great lengths to appropriate the style and experience of the TV series—but this ultimately is one of the game's greatest flaws: replicating the experience of the TV series frequently comes at the cost of creating an either engaging narrative or engaging gameplay.

In addition to the televisual cameos, the game rotates between a cast of five original characters, navigating a storyline that plays out on the periphery of events from the TV series. The game opens with the Red Wedding, one of the most iconic and shocking moments in both the novels and the TV series, wherein the Starks are betrayed by their allies and massacred at a

**Figure 3.6** – Actors from the television series lent their voice acting and image rights to their characters' in *The Telltale Game*. L-R: Jon Snow (Kit Harrington) and Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey). Copyright Telltale Games and HBO.

wedding feast. The Red Wedding violently ends Robb Stark's reign as King in the North and dramatically upheaves the political balance of power in Westeros. *The Telltale Game* charts the fallout from the Red Wedding, focusing on the flailing political fortunes of House Forrester, vassals of House Stark mentioned very briefly in the novels but otherwise never depicted. The game's five protagonists are Gared Tuttle, a survivor of the Red Wedding who is banished to The Wall for political reasons; Mira Forrester, a handmaiden to Margaery Tyrell using her position in King's Landing to support her family; Ethan, the young new Lord Forrester, who is unceremoniously murdered by Ramsay Bolton at the end of Episode One; Rodrik, the eldest Forrester son, who survived the Red Wedding but is disabled by his injuries, who takes his place as Lord Forrester in Episode Two; and Asher, the second son living in exile in Essos, who must secure a mercenary army to defend his home and family. The game frequently shift perspectives between these protagonists, mirroring the formal structure of the TV series somewhat, although at a much slower pace: each episode, which take about two hours to play through, is structured as seven major scenes.

The gameplay options available to the player are in many ways extremely limited. The vast majority of the game is spent listening to and responding to dialogue between characters. Occasionally, the player is offered the opportunity to control their character outside these conversations, which takes the form of two different styles of gameplay. In the first, characters are shown from a third person perspective and are able to move around, searching for places in the game environment that are interactive. These are point-and-click segments, with players occasionally given the opportunity to take items they encounter—for example, some medicinal herbs and bandages Gared can collect near the start of Episode One are put to use later in

Episode Four. In addition, the game also occasionally presents the player with a sequence of Quick Time Events (or QTEs), often in combat situations. As Daniel Auerbach explains:

> QTEs [are] moments in a game's cinematic cut scenes where a prompt would appear to press a particular controller button. If the player failed to press the button within a designated time frame (less than a second, usually), the result would be instant failure, perhaps illustrated by a generic failure scene, and the game would end or the sequence would restart. If the player succeeded, the scene would continue as planned (Auerbach 2014)

In the game's opening scene, Gared is forced to defend himself during the Red Wedding massacre, and the player is prompted with onscreen cues to move in particular directions to dodge attacks, aim at specific parts of enemies to land their own blows, and rapidly press a button to escape a chokehold. Failure to perform the required action in time results in a game over—which happened several times for me over the course of the game's QTEs.

*The Telltale Game* does a better job than *The RPG* of transmediating a broader range of the experience of the storyworld, with its cast featuring two younger teenagers (Ethan and Mira) and a man with a disability (Rodrik), all of whom frequently have to find non-violent solutions to the dilemmas presented to them (the other two characters, Gared and Asher, are given opportunities to act diplomatically, but their sections of the game features the most combat). Despite this, it does repeatedly rely on the player characters engaging in hand-to-hand combat. By allowing the player to embody a range of perspectives within the storyworld, *The Telltale Game* demonstrates one of the clearest values that licensed games have in adding to the transmedial scope of a franchise like *ASoIaF*, allowing players to both bring their existing knowledge of the storyworld in to the game and also have the game inflect their understanding of Westeros going forward.

Given the increased breadth of the cast of characters here, *The Telltale Game* is also putting forth a more nuanced argument about Westeros than we see in *The RPG*. Rodrik's

struggle with his disability offers more consideration of how violent masculinity is valued in Westerosi society (and, by extension, our society) than the often uncritical hypermasculinity of *The RPG*, which foregrounds a pair of battle-hardened soldiers taking on squads of nameless enemies—a very conventional video game milieu. Similarly, when Mira is attacked by a Lannister soldier and is forced to fight for her life, *The Telltale Game* rhetorically shows the ways that the violence of Westeros is so frequently directed at those least able to respond in kind.

In terms of genre, *The Telltale Game* is tricky to pin down. The most widely utilized genre designation for this and other Telltale titles has been the "adventure game" genre, a broad constellation of games that privilege puzzle-solving and exploration over combat and reflexes: "Progress is inhibited not by enemies to be fought but by puzzles to be solved, whether those puzzles involve sneaking past guards, finding a key, or finishing tasks for a character in order to learn a vital clue" (Salter 2014, 4-5). But *The Telltale Game* only offers these sorts of experiences sparingly. The short exploration portions described above are the closest to what Salter describes. As Ruberg argues, "The spatial and temporal dimensions of video games, and how a player moves through those dimensions, is an important yet often overlooked site of meaning" (Ruberg 2019, 3)—and the adventure genre offers players an opportunity to move through game spaces at their own pace, slowly exploring and piecing together the puzzles that will allow them to progress. But in *The Telltale Game*, these sequences are few and far between, and rarely offer anything that could truly be called a puzzle: players can choose to interact with various objects in the game-space, but progress can be quickly achieved by moving the player character to where the next sequence of cutscenes are scripted. And the QTE sections of *The Telltale Game* are far removed from what Salter describes—throughout the six episodes, progress very frequently *is* inhibited by enemies to be fought.

Salter's description is of a particular corpus of Western adventure games, but the dialogue-heavy gameplay of *The Telltale Game* also shares some commonalities with a Japanese take on the genre: the visual novel, which

> typically articulates its narrative by means of extensive text conversations complemented by […] generic backgrounds and dialogue boxes with character sprites determining the speaker superimposed upon them. […] A visual novel's ending alters according to the player's choices at key turning points, which provides a motivation to replay the game and opt for alternative decisions each time. (Cavallaro 2010, 8)

Although the formal characteristics of *The Telltale Game*'s presentation does not match with the norms of the visual novel—utilizing fully voice-acted, 3D-animated cutscenes which attempt to replicate the cinematographic style of the TV series—the centrality of "extensive conversations" to the ludic experience of the game is at the very least a close cousin to the experience of a visual novel.

Except that, unlike visual novels, *The Telltale Game* does not offer nearly as robust an opportunity to explore alternative narrative pathways through its dialogue trees. One of the reasons that visual novels frequently foreground multiple diverging narrative threads comes back to their formal presentation—it is far easier and cheaper to generate alternative pathways through a gameworld when that world is rendered more simply: "Restricting narrative branching to local and inconsequential effects is vastly cheaper. As games have required increasingly complex and expensive graphics and acting, the cost of multiplying branches has become commensurately greater" (Auerbach 2014). *The Telltale Game*, with its more sophisticated (that is, expensive) imagery and its use of voice talent from the television actors themselves, must instead opt for a far more narrow range of narrative options. And this is ultimately the style of Telltale's games more broadly—this mix of gameplay styles with a fairly narrow range of narrative outcomes was a standardized formula across their 22 serialized titles.

Analyzing the dialogue-heavy segments that form the bulk of *The Telltale Game* will help illustrate the narrative limitations of Telltale's formula. During the conversations that form the bulk of the game, players are prompted once or twice a minute to make a choice about how their character will react and respond. In most cases, players are presented four options, with one of them being to choose to say nothing—these four-way decision points are timed, giving players a few moments to decide what to do; if the timer expires, the "no response" option is defaulted too. Occasionally, a small prompt will appear in the top left corner of the screen, often worded as "Margaery will remember this" or "Tyrion noted your silence." These prompts rhetorically signal the value of the player's decisions, though the long-term impact is marginal, providing some alternative dialogue, but never allowing the player to divert their course along Telltale's extremely linear narrative.

In addition to these timed decisions, more significant choices will also be presented to the player, often as a simple binary choice. Players have unlimited time to make this choice—or alternatively, will *have* to make this choice, as the rest of the decisions a player can make are theoretically optional, with the game depicting the player's inaction as the character's silence. Here the game features "the requirement that the player *act* to advance the story. This is not really a choice *per se*, since the story simply won't continue if you don't do what the game wants you to do, but it is nonetheless a volitional act on the part of the player" (Auerbach 2014). These are the choices that frequently have life-and-death consequences, although given that the narrative has a designated outcome with a small range of permutations for endings, these consequences have generally limited consequences. For instance, in my playthrough, a character Ethan spared in Episode One saved Asher's life in Episode Six, but only because two other characters that the game can use in this scene had already died—and if all three had died in the

course of my playthrough, a nameless NPC fills in the role. In other cases, the choice is a false one altogether—during Episode Three, I made a choice that resulted in the deaths of nearly everyone present in a scene; the game simply presented its Game Over screen and quickly loaded back to right before that decision.

The game is designed to have players make hundreds of decisions over the course of the six episodes, but because these choices almost never *matter* in any narratively significant way, players may be left frustrated by their lack of agency if they desired a feeling of narrative control in Westeros. Although the ludology-vs.-narratology debate has been overplayed and overdone, *The Telltale Game* does directly demonstrate some of the limitations of narrativity in game design. The game is engaged in a particular mode of storytelling that privileges linearity and coherence—the game allows for players to experience some variance in how they move from Point A to Point B of this linear flow, but outside of the momentary interruptions of the Forresters meeting an untimely end (after which the player is required to pick different choices), there is no way to divert one's course away from the irresistible narrative current dragging the player toward that Point B. This is even amplified by the procedural decision to make almost every decision in the game timed—this intensifies the dramatic tension throughout the game, but it also means the player does not even have the option to take the game at their own pace.

The game has a total of sixteen different endings, which comes down to simply four binary choices that actually have a significant impact on the narrative, the first made at the very end of Episode Five and the rest in Episode Six.[43] We see the critical limitations of this sort of game design in Telltale's take on Westeros—the game promises in its early episodes that

[43] First, the player picks if Rodrik or Asher will survive into the final episode; later the player's choices lead to the deaths of Ludd or Gryff Whitehill, the father and son antagonists; in King's Landing, Mira is arrested, and either she or her confederate is executed; and far to the North, the player decides whether Gared will abandon or defend the mythical North Grove.

decisions will have a ripple effect, but no decision made can change the narrative's trajectory away from these four central decision points, and none of these decisions truly impact the others in meaningful ways. The game touts the interconnectedness of its storylines, but in practice they run almost entirely in isolation. This is exasperated by the decision to leave things open-ended, with Telltale laying groundwork for a Season Two that would never be made because of the corporate collapse of Telltale in 2018, foregrounding the fundamental precarity of both the games industry generally and companies focused on licensed game production. Unlike the rigorously structured co-productions Jenkins' advocates for, transmedia is more typically made by the highly contingent labor of licensees like Telltale.

The game tracks the player's decisions, and, if one has signed up for an account with Telltale, at the end of each episode, will show how the player's choices compare with the rest of the playerbase (or the subset of the playerbase who opt into this). This is a feature common to Telltale's games, and there are several ways to look at it. On the one hand, the information provided to players offers them an outlook on how other players experience the same narratives, even when Telltale's games are always single-player games. For instance, during my playthrough it was frequently revealing to see how my choices compared with other players—in the first episode, my choice as Gared to abandon his friend Bowen at the Red Wedding was shared by only 34.2% of players and my choice as Ethan to pick the militaristic Royland over the diplomatic Duncan as my right-hand-man was shared by only 30.9%. I did not know these characters, but I was familiar with the storyworld ands its events enough that these decisions felt "right" in the moment to me—but obviously this was not true for most players. Over the course of my playthrough, my decisions were shared by as few as 1.9% and as many as 95.5% of other players. Allowing players to reflect on their decisions has obviously value for Telltale: by ending

each episode with this overview, Telltale can reinforce where players are making hard choices, and that these decisions will have impact later. A more cynical take is that Telltale, by offering this feature, creates a situation where their playerbase opts into creating an account with the company, which could be used as a form of digital rights management, monitoring players to make sure pirated software is not used, or a means to gather user data that can be put to use either internally or sold as marketing data.

But this results screen, labeled "My Choices," restating the major decision points of the episode the player has just completed, also lays bare the limited agency the player has. During each two-hour episode, a player is presented with dozens and dozens of choices. The first scene of Episode One, Gared's escape from the Red Wedding massacre, takes approximately 15 minutes to play through and features both the game's dialogue-tree and QTE gameplay—in that time, the player has 38 points of interaction. Not all of these are choices per se: the very first prompt in the game is for Gared to clean a sword, and there is no option *not* to—it is more a tutorial, showing the player *how* to interact with the gameworld, but this opening section does include including 17 dialogue choices, a two-minute long action sequence feature 16 QTE prompts, and the decision of whether to abandon Bowen. When the episode ends, it is only that last decision that is recorded, and the next major choice made in the first episode comes over 45 minutes later in the episode. After potentially hundreds of choices, the "My Choices" reveals that the player has made only five meaningful decisions, and even then many of those choices have extremely limited impact. Bowen, for instance, would not have been a major character had I chosen differently—at most, he would have been the one to save Asher's life in the example described previously. As the "important" decisions are the ones that players are not timed on making—and thus *must* make, unlike the technical optionality of many other choices—it can be

easy to recognize these decisions in the moment, eliminating even the potential dramatic stakes of not knowing which of a player's decisions matter.

There are also significant narrative limitations placed upon the game owing to its close tie-in with the TV series. Of all the *ASoIaF* games discussed in this chapter, Telltale's game is the one most intimately connected to the televisual version of Westeros, with numerous moments in the game happening in and around events from the show. FFG's tabletop games are set entirely in the world of the books, and operate within a sort of "What If?" narrative logic. Cyanide's game straddles a peculiar line between books and TV, but benefits from how peripheral its events are to those of either. Most of that game's events are happening far off-screen from the show, and there are only minimal intersections with a handful of major characters—Mormont, Cersei, and Varys, with only the latter taking a significant role in the game's plot. Telltale's game, on the other hand, chooses to situate much of its narrative parallel to the action of the show. In addition to Gared's role during the Red Wedding, the game also features Asher working for Daenerys Targaryen, and Mira being within earshot of King Joffrey's death. None of these characters would be in the show, per se, but one can imagine they are just off-screen. This is a common approach for transmedial extensions, both official and unofficial—many a licensed paratext or a work of fanfiction has explored characters on the periphery of established canon, reacting to known events and interacting with main characters.

But this creates a bind for Telltale's game. By repeatedly weaving the known story beats of the TV series into this original story about the Forresters, the player can feel stuck. Just as the choices the game provides the player allow them extremely limited agency, the storyworld acts as a sort of immovable object, constraining what can and cannot be done by the player. One excellent example came from my interviews, with Grace complaining that: "you knew nothing

that happened was ultimately of importance. For example, it set Ramsay Snow[44] up as an antagonist, but you knew you'd never truly beat him because that's not how the story goes, which felt unrewarding." Even without the prior context of the series, Ramsay is set up as one of the game's main antagonists when he murders Ethan in the first episode. The game provides several opportunities to confront Ramsay, but all are circumscribed by the limitations of the game's script. In the scene, Rodrik has just directly witnessed Ramsay's violent brutality, and is taunted into trying to stab him. Even as one of the most hateful characters in the franchise, players who tried to kill Ramsay were in the minority: only 36.6% of players choose the "Stab Ramsay" option, myself included. These numbers suggest that most players decide to avoid a narrative choice that contradicts the established canon—players may want to actively avoid such divergences or may, this far into playing *The Telltale Game*, simply recognize the futility of the "Stab Ramsay" option, given other false choices the game has provided. And the results of this choice *are* disappointing: Ramsay quickly knocks down Rodrik, but is impressed he even tried. This is, it should be noted, one of the "major" decisions of the game, registered on the "My Choices" screen at the episode's end, but its impact is only to change some of Ramsay's dialogue later.

The game suffers from its relative unwillingness to explore "What If?" narrative threads, or to take players down narrative dead-ends. Outside of the QTEs, where the Forresters frequently meet untimely ends, there are few "wrong" choices in *The Telltale Game*. Almost every decision you make will progress the narrative, but because the game has such a limited range of narrative consequences for those decisions, it also feels like there are not truly any

[44] Ramsay is a bastard who is later legitimated, so he is known initially by the Northern bastard surname Snow and later by his father's name Bolton.

"right" choices either. The procedural rhetoric of the game works to reify the established canon—nothing the player can do disrupts the immutable established facts of the storyworld.

This might be less frustrating if *The Telltale Game* did not put the Forresters so close to so many canonical moments from the TV series. Mors and Alester of *The RPG* are also never given an opportunity to change canon, but their actions are kept far enough on the periphery that it never feels like they would meaningfully intersect with what we read on the page or see on the screen. In *The Telltale Game*, these moments of intersection are everywhere, as the playable characters repeatedly interact with the main characters of the franchise. This moment with Ramsay would be perfect for this sort of divergence from the established facts of the narrative. Rodrik chooses to kill Ramsay, Ramsay's men immediately kill him in retribution, game over, try again. Perhaps "What would happen if Ramsay was killed? His men would kill whoever did it" is perhaps not the most satisfying "What If?" scenario to play out, but I would argue it is more satisfying than the game's tease of being able to do something radically outside the limited confines of the game's narratives. I cannot speak for 36.6% of other players who also pick this option, but I chose "Stab Ramsay" because I was curious how the game would handle such a decision, and was immediately disappointed.

In previous chapters, I have discussed the design ethos of Eric M. Lang, who has explained that, "I believe that what players want is not much to transpose themselves into the heart of the narrative through game play, but to enjoy a lateral experience that enhances their overall appreciation for the property" (Lang and Harrington 2007, 85). *The Telltale Game* is a prime example of the "transposition" method, and the game's failings demonstrate the value of Lang's approach. Rather than presenting a ludic version of Westeros where the player is free to explore the storyworld, *The Telltale Game* keeps the player on a short leash, guiding them

through a series of pre-scripted and nearly invariant scenes. The game's attempt to mirror the formal qualities of the TV series is frequently successful, but the results demonstrate how unsatisfying this sort of passive media engagement can be once Westeros has been ludically transmediated.

## CONCLUSION

On May 19, 2019, the final episode of *Game of Thrones*, "The Iron Throne," aired. The eighth and final season of HBO's flagship TV series brought with it, as many major pop culture endings do, controversy. In the eyes of many fans, the pacing of the final episodes was rushed, the characterization was inconsistent, and the quality of earlier seasons was nowhere to be found. Fans decried that Jon Snow, long the male lead of the series, had no hand in bringing down the series' most mysterious antagonist, the Night King, and that Daenerys rapidly descended into her family's legacy of madness without the necessary set-up to make her transformation into villainess convincing. A Change.org petition titled "Remake Game of Thrones Season 8 with competent writers," whose creator wrote "David Benioff and D.B. Weiss have proven themselves to be woefully incompetent writers when they have no source material (i.e. the books) to fall back on" (Dylan D. 2019), has received over 1.6 million signatures as of June 2019. Even at its ugliest and most entitled, this sort of (anti-)fan activity clearly demonstrates the intense affective attachment that fans have to a text like *Game of Thrones*.

My interviews were conducted in the summer and fall of 2018, months before the final season aired, but even then, the question of the TV series' quality—and the quality of the novels themselves—was a topic my subjects returned to again and again. Adam, who self-identified as an "angry fan," took the harshest stance: when I asked him when the show had soured for him, he took a moment to think and laughed: "at my most bitter, I'd say as soon as they decide to

make it." In *Post-Object Fandom*, Rebecca Williams examines the often fraught process of fandoms coming to terms with the end of a television series and observes: "the end points of texts (and whether these endings are defined by scholars, the TV industry or fans themselves) are subject to negotiation and are not always, in the era of transmediality and media convergence, clear-cut" (Williams 2015, 8). This is especially true for *ASoIaF*. There are two more novels left—assuming George R. R. Martin ever finishes writing them. But even outside the novels, Westeros will continue to live on transmedially, across a range of platforms.

If you were a *Thrones* fan online during the final weeks of its airing, you were inundated with ads for *Game of Thrones: Conquest*, a mobile game developed by WB Games Boston (formerly Turbine Inc.), first launched in October 2017. These ads showcased impressive CGI cinematics of a Night's Watch brother in pitched combat with a White Walker, a Dothraki warrior sweeping his scythe-like sword dramatically from horseback, and Daenerys Targaryen's Unsullied armies laying siege to a castle. None of this reflects *Game of Thrones: Conquest*'s actual gameplay. It is a fairly typical mobile game, a free-to-play strategy game relying heavily on micro-transactions. Images of the stars of *Game of Thrones* pepper the interface—photorealistic art of Jon Snow, Daenerys Targaryen, and others pop up alongside the game's instructive text boxes, for instance—but the gameplay is about navigating a vast array of menus (made easier by purchasing the aforementioned micro-transactions) to build one's armies and conquer swaths of Westeros. Like other *ASoIaF* extensions, the procedural decisions made by WB Games Boston reflect a certain vision of Westeros, one entirely focused on the bureaucracy and resource management of war. The game was reportedly "Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment's most expensive mobile game in its history" (MCV Staff 2015), and the investment has paid off: weeks before the television finale, CNET reported that *Game of*

*Thrones: Conquest* had made over $200 million (Van Boom 2019). Even if many fans were hostile to the TV series' final season—or perhaps precisely *because* of this hostility—Westeros remains a storyworld fans want to spend time in (and to spend money on). Fans will continue to be affectively invested in Westeros, and licensed games will serve as important platforms through which the storyworld is structured and interpreted—perhaps even by providing alternative outlets for the frustrations many fans felt with the franchise's televisual denouement, transmedia acting less as a parallel to the main texts but as a corrective.

As Nicolle Lamerichs notes, "Stories do not end these days, but even when they do, fans keep them alive" (Lamerichs 2019). HBO's *Game of Thrones* may be over, but the *A Song of Ice and Fire* franchise will continue to live on, via the final two novels, via fanfiction that reworks and rehabilitates the story, via *Game of Thrones: Conquest* and other ludic extensions, via the spin-offs HBO has already commissioned, perhaps even via by an updated TV adaptation someday—although such a development would have nothing to do with Dylan D.'s petition. It is on this note that I turn to the final chapter, which explores what happens *after* licensing.

# Chapter Three: *Warhammer 40,000: Conquest*
# Post-Licensing and The After-Life of Licensed Games

Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, I have explored different dimensions of licensed games. In the first chapter, I examined the extensively licensed history of the *Star Wars* franchise and the ways that industrial expectations for licensed media texts shift over the course of different periodizations based on the development of a unified *Star Wars* canon and the popularity and value of the IP for its various stakeholders. In the second chapter, my focus shifted to ludic extensions fraught with some fundamental tensions, including the design and implementation of various levels of rules (of the storyworld, of the genre, and of the licensed game itself), and the at-times contradictory pulls of the two central canons (*A Song of Ice and Fire* the book series and *Game of Thrones* the television series). The first two chapters have explored the production and consumption of these extensions *during* licensing; in this third and final chapter, I turn my attention to *after* licensing. Licensing, as a contingent legal agreement between licensor and licensee, is necessarily limited by time. Licensing, by its very nature, comes to an end—and, in some cases, this can be when things get most interesting.

This chapter takes as its case study the experience of players of *Warhammer 40,000: Conquest*, a licensed card game produced by Fantasy Flight Games (hereafter FFG) from 2014 to 2016, based on Games Workshop's *Warhammer 40,000* miniature wargaming property. The *Warhammer 40,000* (or *40K*)[45] setting is a dystopian universe of violent, endless warfare, and FFG's short-lived *Conquest* developed a small but devoted community of players eager to play in and with the *40K* storyworld—a devotion that would extend beyond the temporal limitations of the game's licensing. Licensed games can only be officially supported while the necessary

[45] "*Warhammer 40,000*" and "*40K*" can refer to both the miniature wargame itself and the storyworld. Throughout this chapter, I will use phrases like "the *40K* wargame" and "the *40K* setting" to make this distinction clear. The card game will always be referred to as "*Warhammer 40,000*: *Conquest*" or "*Conquest*."

licensing agreements are maintained. In this chapter, I turn my focus toward this precarity and, more importantly, what comes after. Fans of the card game *Warhammer 40,000: Conquest* have been negotiating this fallout since September 2016, when Games Workshop (owner of the *Warhammer* IP) and FFG (producer of *Conquest* and other licensed *Warhammer* games) announced that the license between the two companies would not be renewed. After the announcement, players quickly began making plans to keep *Conquest* alive through various forms of fan labor. Although *Conquest* was based on the *Warhammer 40,000* IP, the game's community was ultimately transmedial in other ways, utilizing both analog and digital modes of play and social media as a platform for community formation. The player practices of both the licensed and post-licensed eras of *Conquest* reveal a deep sense of affective ownership for the game in the creative dimensions of deckbuilding and play and, later, the design and distribution of new cards; the serialized acquisition of new cards, both "official" and fan-made; and the formation of communities of players.

Drawing upon Rebecca Williams work on "post-object fandom," I examine the *Conquest* community's process of sustaining itself, the strategies employed in keeping the game alive outside its initial licensing framework, and the conflict between two competing fan collectives, both trying to claim ownership of a post-object *Conquest*. Williams' book focuses on the reactions of television fandoms to series finales, and though there are obviously many differences between television and card game fandoms, there are also significant areas of overlap—both, most importantly, are communities forming around a serially released media object. Building upon Anthony Giddens' sociological frameworks, Williams identifies in these moments of transition for fan objects, and the reactions to the fan communities dedicated to these objects, the potential for disrupting a fandom's "ontological security," the feeling of comfortable

continuity in one's day-to-day existence. According to Giddens "On the other side of what might appear to be quite trivial aspects of day-to-day action and discourse, chaos lurks. And this chaos is not just disorganisation, but the loss of a sense of the very reality of things and of other persons" (Giddens 1991, 36). Core to this security is a sense of familiar routine. One of the reasons series finales can be so fraught and affecting is that "Ontological security may develop from the constancy of a fan object" (R. Williams 2015, 25). A card game enjoys a similar sense of continuity and routine to the televisual fandoms Williams' draws from—players of *Conquest* had enjoyed two years of regularly released new content, seeing the game grow in ways that both expanded its transmediation of the *40K* storyworld and its strategic possibilities as a competitive card game. The cessation of the game—as an ongoing commercial enterprise, as a transmedially rich site for *40K* fandom, and as a nexus for communities of players—galvanized members of the *Conquest* community to work to preserve and maintain the familiar routine of the game.

Beyond these similarly serialized fan objects, there are important differences in the capacity for fan production in a post-object era. Though there are a number of creative and affectively meaningful ways to continue to engage with a post-object television text—through fanfiction, vidding, cosplay, and other artistic outlets; through ongoing engagement with fan communities; through fan campaigns to revive a cancelled show—a post-object card game provides another option: for fans to keep producing the game themselves. The financial hurdles and production requirements for this sort of fan labor are significantly more manageable than television production, requiring design ideas for new cards, image editing software to produce the images, and the means to distribute and perhaps even print the cards. Players of licensed games must always contend with the inevitable precarity of their fan objects—the legal framework for the game is always temporary. In this chapter, I use the post-object practices that

surround *Conquest* to analyze the varied responses players have to the end of a licensed game and the fraught conflict between competing collectives staking their claims to *Conquest*'s future.

Through a combination of participant observation and interviews with players, including members of two competing fan collectives producing new cards, I examine the impact of the split between licensor Games Workshop and licensee Fantasy Flight Games, and the ups and downs of the emerging production and play practices of *Conquest*'s post-licensed after-life. Following *Conquest*'s cancellation, I have been intensely interested in the community's efforts to keep the game going. I have been an active participant in the game's online community since before its release, and participated in a large number of local and state-wide tournaments in *Conquest*, including placing first at the 2016 Austin Store Championship and second at the 2016 Austin Regional Championship. As a longtime member of the playerbase, knowledgeable in the history and culture of the game, I am well-situated as a participant observer to study how the community navigates and negotiates its way through *Conquest*'s transition into its player-run post-life. In fact, I was quite aware of my competing subject positions as both a player and an academic as I observed the developments that followed FFG's announcement of *Conquest*'s cessation. As a player, I was disappointed to see my favorite game end, and excited to see how others would develop new cards. As an academic, I saw an opportunity to study and explore the evolving set of play and production practices of *Conquest* in its post-life.

Between the summer of 2018 and the spring of 2019, I interviewed members of the *Conquest* community, including major figures in the two fan collectives that emerged as potential stewards for post-object *Conquest*, the Black Crusade League and Team Apoka. My subjects are 20 players, all former or active players of *Conquest*. Demographically, my research pool is quite homogenous, with all subjects being men in their 20s and 30s, and majority white.

Both the wargaming and card gaming hobbies are quite male-dominated, and in my experience across most of FFG's card games, *Conquest* anecdotally has a disproportionate gender imbalance. The "*Warhammer 40K: Conquest* LCG" Facebook group, the main hub of activity for the card game, which has, as of May 2019, over 1500 members, bears this out, with only a miniscule percentage of the membership being women.[46] Most of my subjects were based in America, although my interviews also included players from England, Spain, Poland, Cypress, The Philippines, and China.

The primary site of my recruitment was the game's Facebook group. My recruitment message was posted to the Facebook page twice, once in June 2018 and again in January 2019. My first posting was the most successful, with 11 of my 20 interviewees having come from responses to that post. In January 2019, a similar post was also made to the game's far less active sub-Reddit, /r/WarhammerConquest, which yielded only one new subject. In addition, I also personally reached out to community members I knew were active in the fan collectives that designed and distributed new cards. I also utilized snowball sampling to find additional subjects, asking at the end of interviews if the players had other people to suggest I speak with, with mixed results: for my interview subjects recruited via Facebook or Reddit, I was frequently given the names of individuals I was already interviewing; the snowball approach was more successful for the fan-producers, with one of my first interviews opening the door to several more.

Of my 20 interviews, all but 5 were conducted via email or Facebook Messenger. Of the rest, two were conducted in-person and three were conducted via phone or Skype. The interview subjects were offered a choice in how best to conduct the interview, with most of them choosing

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[46] Using a list of 1520 members from May 2019, I conducted a basic sampling of the group. Using Random.org to pick the pages of the list (139 pages) and a name on each page (11 names a page), I sampled one name per page, or 9.1% of the group. Using names, profile pictures, and preferred pronouns, my sample included 129 members identifying male (92.8%), 9 identifying female (6.5%), and 1 individual using "they/them" as their pronouns (0.7%).

Facebook Messenger or e-mail to be the most convenient. Such text-based communication necessarily reduced the sort of extemporaneous tangents and asides of the in-person interviews, but the convenience of having a larger and more international group of subjects to talk with far out-weighed the loss of casual tone. A small handful of online subjects opted for phone interviews, which were conducted via telephone or online VoIP services—most of these interviews were conducted in a single sitting, though for one subject, the best time to talk was during their morning commute, which resulted in two interview sessions conducted on back-to-back days. These audio interviews were recorded and later transcribed by myself, with most conversations lasting about an hour to an hour and a half.

All of my interview subjects have been given pseudonyms, and care has been taken that no identifying material will be included in my research results. Both written and spoken interviews were intentionally kept open-ended and casual, allowing the subject to guide the conversation as much as possible. I used a set of starting questions (about their introduction to *Warhammer 40,000* franchise; what they did and did not like about the storyworld; their introduction to *Conquest*; and their level of involvement with the game's post-cancellation life), which I intended as a baseline to personalize any follow-up questions for each subject, exploring their affective relationship with *40K*, with *Conquest*, and with the community itself. Before exploring how these players navigate their post-licensed relationship with *Conquest*, some background on the companies involved, the *Warhammer 40,000* storyworld, and the game of *Conquest* itself is necessary, to help situate the game in its transmedial contexts.

### ***CONQUEST*'S STORYWORLD AND GAMEPLAY**

Games Workshop (hereafter GW), founded in 1975 and based in Nottingham, England, specializes in miniature wargames, where players assemble armies of dozens or even hundreds of

miniature figurines, made of metal or resin and painted by the players beforehand, to engage in a tabletop representation of real-world, fantasy, or science fiction warfare. GW's original wargame *Warhammer Fantasy Battle*, first published in 1983, used a fairly conventional, Tolkien-like fantasy setting,[47] featuring orcs, elves, and other-worldly demons.[48] The futuristic *Warhammer 40,000* (or *40K*) setting transposes these fantasy races into a dystopian future, with humanity of the 41st century battling alien races including the Orks, the elf-like Eldar, and now extra-dimensional daemons. One of the most iconic aspects of the storyworld are the space marines, genetically and technologically augmented super soldiers that represent one of the main fighting forces of humanity—GW even unsuccessfully attempted to trademark "space marine" in 2012. The nihilistic and militaristic brutality of the *40K* setting may be best summed up by its long-time tagline: "In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war."

FFG's *Warhammer 40,000: Conquest* takes the grim and dark future of the setting, and transmediates it into a competitive, two-player card game. Unlike the original *40K* wargame, which is generally played with two armies fighting on a single battlefield, *Conquest* takes the familiar storyworld of *40K* and situates it in the context of an interplanetary conflict, with combat fought across multiple planets. Players choose from nine factions from *40K*: the genetically-engineered human super-soldiers of the Space Marines; the human infantry shock troops of the Imperial Guard; the intellectually dim but technologically gifted Orks; the daemonic hordes and corrupted humans of Chaos; the proud and ancient Eldar; their decadent and exiled off-shoot the Dark Eldar; the multi-species and ostensibly egalitarian Tau; the all-

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47 GW has also produced the licensed *The Lord of the Rings Strategy Battle Game* since 2001.

48 *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* was discontinued after its 8th Edition, published in 2010 and 2011, then rebooted as *Warhammer Age of Sigmar*, launched in 2015.

consuming insectoid swarm of the Tyranids; and the Egyptian-themed cyborgs of the Necrons.[49] The original release of the game contained only the first seven, with the final two factions introduced in later expansions.

In addition to choosing a faction, players also select one of several warlords, powerful units that frequently represent major figures in the existing lore (see Figure 4.1). The player's warlord starts in play and gives players immediate access to its unique abilities; each warlord is also paired with a unique set of eight "signature" cards that forms the basis for the player's deck, influencing the decisions the player will make in the pre-game deckbuilding process. Players take turns playing cards from their hands—representing units ranging in scale from small squads of disposable shock troops to massive vehicles or monsters, as well as cards representing tactical movements, armaments, or military strongholds—to build up their forces, with players using these cards to both generate additional resources (in the form of drawing cards and collecting in-

**Figure 4.1 –** Examples of Warlord cards, from three of the nine factions (Orks, Eldar, and Chaos). At the top, the warlord's name and faction symbol. In the bottom left, their attack (top) and health (bottom); in the bottom middle, the number of cards and resources the player starts the game with. To the left or right of their artwork, the warlord's ability text. Copyright Fantasy Flight Games.

49 These represent the major warring races in *40K*, though FFG simplifies the wargame's more granular distinctions. GW currently sells miniatures for 29 factions under the 8th Edition ruleset, with more than half (15) representing different forces of the Imperium of Man (humans).

game currency) and to fight. Gameplay in *Conquest* is spread across multiple planets of the Traxis Sector, an original area of the *40K* galaxy that FFG created as *Conquest*'s setting. These planets are represented by ten cards which are randomized and dealt out each game—five planet cards begin in play, with two additional planet card added in later rounds of the game; the last three planet cards are not used in a given game (see Figure 4.2). The variability of *Conquest*'s planet set-up contributes to the game's replayability: there are over six hundred thousand different ways the planets can be randomized, making each game a virtually unique experience. Combat can take place across more than one planet a round, but the first planet each round is permanently seized by the victorious player and removed from play. Each planet has at least one of three different "type symbols" (red, green, and blue)—the first player to collect three of the same icon among the planets they have claimed wins the game; players also win by killing the opposing warlord.[50]

Unlike traditional collectible card games (CCGs), Conquest utilizes a non-random distribution model that FFG markets as Living Card Games (LCGs)—this business model has been discussed with other examples from FFG, namely *Star Wars: The Card Game* in Chapter

**Figure 4.2 –** Example of one of *Conquest*'s 10 Planet cards, Iridial. In the top left, each planet has one, two, or three type symbols, tied to the game's victory condition. In the bottom left and right corners, the card and resource bonus for each planet; in the middle, the planet's Battle effect. Copyright Fantasy Flight Games.

[50] Players may also win if their opponent's deck runs out of cards (known as "decking"), but in practice this virtually never happens. In my hundreds of games of *Conquest*, I have seen it happen exactly once—to myself.

One and *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game Second Edition* in Chapter Two. *Conquest*'s product line included an introductory "Core Set," featuring the baseline cardpool for most of the game's factions, released in October 2014; monthly releases of 60-card "War Packs," which each included one or two new Warlord cards;[51] and two "Deluxe Expansions," released in August 2015 and May 2016, larger products that introduced additional factions, the Tyranids and Necrons. Players participate in a continual acquisition of the serially-released components of the game (that is, the cards themselves) over timespans of years—and this economic routine becomes part of the long-term experience for *Conquest*'s players (R. Williams 2015, 25). Consumption habits are central to active participation in games like *Conquest*, but it is important to not ignore the full range of other factors relevant to understanding player practices: "The feelings players express about gaming, how they relate to and treat other players, the ways in which players use and share game products, and their emphasis on skills all offer counter arguments to claims that subcultural selves are reducible to consumer products" (J. Williams 2006, 96). One cannot discount the consumer relationship between FFG and its players, but it cannot fully account for the protectiveness and sense of ownership players felt towards *Conquest*.

In September 2016, a month shy of *Conquest*'s second anniversary, FFG and GW announced that the license between the two companies would not be renewed, and *Conquest*, among several other licensed games, would be discontinued. The publically available details behind the terms of the licensing arrangement or the reasons for the split are scant—leading to speculation, which I discuss in more detail below. The closest to a direct explanation in the press release put out by FFG was the statement "As much as we have enjoyed creating these games, our current licensing term is coming to an end" ("New Path Forward" 2016). Most of the press

[51] Due to product delays, only 18 War Packs were released during the two-year run of *Conquest*.

release instead focused on what the news meant for FFG's catalog: twenty different product lines produced under licensed from GW were being discontinued.

With players accustomed to an ongoing serialized release schedule, it is natural for players to want more. *Conquest*'s after-life follows in the footsteps of other card games that have experienced the transition to post-licensing. Some of the most successful examples of fan-run organizations sustaining post-object card games include the Players Committee for the *Star Wars Customizable Card Game* and the Vampire: Elder Kindred Network for *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle*. Writing on another example, the *Middle-Earth Collectible Card Game* (*MECCG*), Joe Bisz offers an instructive example of how communities undergo significant realignment in a game's post-life: "Fans reshape and perfect their games, not just out of fandom sentiment but because they are the producers too; and in their own way, regardless of the presence of the parent, they will always fight to keep their ideas alive" (Bisz 2009). The Council of Elrond, the player-run "world-coordinating body for the *MECCG*" demonstrates how, according to Bisz, "Loss of the company has resulted in greater control of the game by its fans" (Bisz 2009). We see a similar pattern with the loss of the license galvanizing player efforts to preserve and maintain *Conquest*, but significantly, the narrative of *Conquest*'s post-life has been marked by the highly contested nature of player ownership of the game's future development.

**COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY: *ANDROID: NETRUNNER***

*Conquest*'s post-life has numerous parallels with *Android: Netrunner*—*another* card game by FFG cancelled due to the end of *another* licensing agreement—which is also experiencing the early stages of this process of fannish ownership of a post-object card game. *Netrunner*, a cyberpunk card game, was produced through a license with Wizards of the Coast, owners of the *Netrunner* game system developed by Richard Garfield (creator of *Magic: The*

*Gathering*). The game was launched in 2012 and its cancellation was announced in June 2018. According to Garcia and Duncan, "as analog games inherently encourage interactions in non-virtual environments," reactions to *Netrunner*'s "end" "reveal varied understandings of creation, control, and ownership of a game" (Garcia and Duncan 2019). One of the key features of transmediality is the ways that stories and texts never end—they are revived and remediated in new forms, deferring closure indefinitely. Under other circumstances, there might have been ways for FFG to have keep *Netrunner* going in some other new form—for instance, when Decipher lost the *Star Wars* license, they repurposed their rules and mechanics for the generic *WARS Trading Card Game* (2004-2005). But *Netrunner* presents an unusual example, as it is the very rules and mechanics that FFG have lost the rights to—they could release a new card game set in their proprietary *Android* universe, but they are unable to repurpose *Netrunner*. It thus falls to the players to defer *Netrunner*'s closure.

Garcia and Duncan's article offers a compelling examination of what it means to say a game has "died"—that is most true only if we accept games first and foremost as corporate commodities. The game is also the experience of playing it and the communal ties that develop around games like *Conquest* and *Netrunner*, and these can outlive the commercial life of a game. *Netrunner* persists—the Nextrunner International Support & Expansion Initiative (or NISEI)[52] was formed shortly after the game's cancellation was announced. Striking an optimistic tone, Garcia and Duncan note that: "NISEI represents a provocative reframing of what games can be and how they might 'live on.'" In the *Conquest* community, we see a similar struggle for meaning, relevance, and longevity amongst its fans, though with arguably more mixed results. There are obvious parallels between *Conquest* and *Netrunner*—both are defunct LCGs, which

[52] Japanese for "second generation," fitting the orientalist tropes of *Android*'s cyberpunk setting.

were cancelled when FFG was no longer able to utilize licensed intellectual property; both have seen fan efforts to continue to support and build the game beyond its original run.

Early fan studies scholarship tended to privilege a highly utopian vision of fandom, what Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington have termed "the 'Fandom Is Beautiful' phase." As they note, "early fan studies (and much of the work it inspired) often turned to [fan] activities and practices […] and attempted to redeem them as creative, thoughtful, and productive" (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007, 3). Scholars like Garcia and Duncan or Bisz fall into some of the same patterns in their discussion of post-object card games: divorcing the game from its commodity origins, the community can transform it into something new and different. This perspectives reifies notions of "fandoms as a democratic and socially progressive response to increasingly homogenized and corporate media industries" (Fathallah 2017, 9). *Conquest* serves as an illustrative example of a more complex, messy, and sometimes ugly route a game takes toward this state of fan ownership—unlike the unified efforts seen in games like *MECCG* and *Netrunner*, *Conquest*'s post-life has been highly contested, featuring a heated conflict between competing fan collectives staking their claims to ownership of *Conquest*, the Black Crusade League and Team Apoka. Before exploring this conflict, I explore the ways my interview subjects framed their affective investment in *40K* broadly and *Conquest* specifically.

## A LIVING CARD GAME: THE APPEAL OF *CONQUEST*

The miniature wargame may seem self-evidently the "mothership" of the *40K* franchise, the core text from which the various transmedial paratexts radiate out. Despite this, though many of my interview subjects had played the wargame in at least some sort of introductory capacity, only a handful were invested in the wargame long-term. Although Games Workshop generates significant revenue from licensing their IP to ancillary producers like FFG, the company itself is

focused on its dominance of the wargaming hobby niche. As Sturrock and Wallis note, "Everything that Games Workshop does or sells is based around the concept of what it calls 'the Games Workshop Hobby.' This is a combination of four linked activities: collecting miniatures, painting miniatures, modeling (converting miniatures or building dioramas) and playing games using a miniatures collection" (Sturrock and Wallis 2016, 605). While GW focuses on supporting its core audience, there is not nearly as much overlap between wargamers and players of other licensed *Warhammer* games as one might expect. One of the most significant hurdles is that the wargame is hampered by issues of accessibility and affordability: "players will spend thousands of dollars on small figurines, paint, and player manuals and devote hundreds of hours in preparation to engage in tabletop battles" (Carter, Gibbs, and Harrop 2014a, 123). Combat in the wargame is also extremely complicated, necessitating rolling and rerolling dozens of dice at a time, an activity that may seem onerous and unnecessary but which is in fact a key part of how "the experience becomes more meaningful both socially and tactically" (Carter, Harrop, and Gibbs 2014b, 8). The entry costs and the complexity of the wargame, as well as the long-term investments (both in terms of money and time), make the game difficult for many to justify.

Given the excessiveness—both financially and materially—of the *40K* wargame, it is not surprising that several of my interviewees gravitated to other transmedial *Warhammer* games that required less of an investment. Instead of a transmedial network of complementary, unifying paratexts, licensed *40K* media is better understood as semi-independent alternatives—the audience for *40K* novels, video games, and other tabletop games includes the wargamers themselves, but also consumers interested in the storyworld but unable or unwilling to invest (or continue investing) in the wargaming pastime. Neal was "intrigued by the idea of getting to enter *W40K*'s multi-faction fracas without having to paint and collect miniatures. The idea of being

able to battle in this highly thematic tableau with nothing more than a deck of cards was very appealing." Neal also specifically identified *Conquest*'s Warlords as "a relatable entry point"—playing with these characters encouraged him to read "Wikia pages that inspired the cards and characters in Conquest—and using those as jumping-off points to learn more about major battles, factions, weapons and heroes (such as they are)." The experience described here echoes an important dimension of transmediality: "additive comprehension," which allows "allows some viewers to have a richer experience (depending on what they know or which other media they have consumed) without in any way diminishing the experience of someone who only encounters the story on a single media platform" (Jenkins 2006). *Conquest*, as a licensed game, serves to spread the storyworld to new ludic contexts, and the specific design of the Warlord units—as both the central figure around which a player's deck revolves and as central figures in the broader *40K* storyworld—can function as centripetal cues for experienced players to activate the transmedia memory of these characters and for inexperienced players to seek out new storyworld data not directly accessible in *Conquest*. Like many successful licensed games, *Conquest* is both independent—one does not *need* to prior knowledge of *40K* to play, as several of my interview subjects (and myself) experienced; and complementary—building upon the franchise's other transmedial nodes.

Like Neal's praise of the design of the Warlords, players frequently gushed about *Conquest*'s gameplay, especially in terms of its interactivity. In many card games, when it is not your turn, there are few opportunities to interact with what your opponent is doing—in *Conquest* play is not divided into player turns, but rather shared rounds where a back-and-forth of player action and reaction sets the tempo of the game. As Maxwell mused, "You have to manage so many things–where your [warlord] and cards go, which planets to fight for—I doubt any 2 games

ever go nearly the same whereas even a complex game like *Magic* can be fairly repetitive within a given format." The diversity of experiences that Maxwell describes here is also central to *Conquest*'s appeal—given the complexity and number of decisions that players made in each game, in addition to what Stansilav described as "the randomization inherent in the planet draw and card drawing from your deck," the experience of each game was highly individualized. Taken all together, these factors made *Conquest*, in the eyes of its fans, eminently replayable.

The specific affordances of the card game format also allowed players of *Conquest* to feel like they could engage with more of the storyworld. Many of my respondents highlighted the LCG model as a key motivator for their participation in *Conquest* as a hobby. For Noah, "*Conquest* […] was designed to be constantly expanded, meaning more and more cards with more and more art and text to deepen the user's experience of the setting." For James, "The card game allowed me to play a *40K* themed game in a short period of time. I could also easily play a different army, theme or style without having to put in all the effort of buying and painting new models." In *Conquest*, where players are buying cards for a fraction of the cost of the wargame's miniatures, and in packages that contain cards for every faction in the game, it is far easier to experience the breadth of *40K* lore. Playing as a new side in *Conquest* is as simple as building a new deck with cards one already owns—although as my respondents frequently emphasized, deckbuilding is one of the most affectively complex and personal aspects of card gaming.

The card game proper may be the focus of the community that develops around it, but it always remains one part of a large network of interrelated activities that make up the overall card gaming hobby. Deckbuilding is a central activity, perhaps even *the* central activity, in what Carter et al.'s have defined as the pastime, "a collection of interlinked and associated activities that serve to occupy one's time and thoughts pleasantly" (Carter, Harrop, and Gibbs 2014a, 123).

Rodrigo offered an observation that mirrors many experiences of other interviewees: "My brother and I found the first game to be a bit dry (Ork v. Space Marine) but not bad. When we got to add the cards we liked in the deck, it started to become more of a *40K* experience." Not only does the game become more interactive as players move away from the introductory decks, but players also become invested in the personal decisions they make in constructing the deck. Vaël, for example, explained that, "For me, playing isn't the pinnacle of the game, but some kind of testing phase. I love deckbuilding." Deckbuilding can frequently occupy more of a player's time than playing the game itself—and thanks to a number of online deckbuilding sites, like the FFG owned CardGameDB.com[53] or the fan-sites ConquestDB.com and later TraxisSector.com, it can be extremely easy to deckbuild without having to sort and organize through one's materially dense collection of cards.

There is also a tension between the personal value attached to building a unique and individualized deck and other considerations like competitiveness or efficiency. David describes this balancing act when he states: "I wanted my decks to be competitive to a certain extent, but […] I always wanted to feel like there was a good soul to the deck that I could bond with when I played it." It is no longer simply a deck of cards—it is *my* deck. Robinson, writing about the superhero-themed collectible miniature game *HeroClix*, observes: "Each player is thus a bricoleur, assembling a mosaic of pre-existing pieces into a personal statement of strategy and, more importantly, superhero fandom" (Robinson, 341). The same process is evident in *Conquest*; players are not only engaged in a process of negotiation and bricolage with the *40K* setting they are fans of, but also with the materials of the game itself, instilling a sense of pride and affective

[53] CardGameDB.com was originally a fan-site, which was purchased by FFG in 2013. In both this and the site ConquestDB, "DB" stands for "database."

ownership. And it is this sense of ownership that the players immediately responded with when *Conquest*'s future was cut short.

### Cancellation Reactions

On September 9th, 2016, the FFG website posted a news article titled "A New Path Forward: Fantasy Flight Games and Games Workshop Conclude Their Business Relationship." The announcement kept the particulars vague—the second paragraph, for example, reads "Games Workshop has been a fantastic partner for the past eight years, and we're thrilled that we had the opportunity to work together and bring so many new and exciting games into the world. As much as we have enjoyed creating these games, our current licensing term is coming to an end" ("New Path Forward"). The corporate relationship between the two companies had started in 2008, and over the course of that time, FFG had produced a large range of licensed products, including board games, RPG sourcebooks, and other card games. This was thus not only the end of *Conquest*; in the official announcement, FFG listed twenty different product lines that would be discontinued in early 2017. With the legal framework for FFG's license ending, GW exerted its legal ownership over its IPs, but the reaction of the *Conquest* community also demonstrated their strong sense of affective ownership over the game as well.

The news was a major blow to the *Conquest* community. But it was also not entirely a surprise—rumors had been circulating for months that something was amiss. Parviz, for instance, recounts "rumors from playtesters who were not receiving new cards," with the *Conquest* community relying on the speculation of the players FFG uses for its (unpaid) testing of future releases. Steve noted, "you can set your clock by how they [FFG] preview or announce upcoming things or expansions. […] then you realize, it's been like months with nothing." Others perceived evidence of the game's imminent demise in the cards themselves, with Ktoto

noting, “There were signs: the quality of the last cycles dropped dramatically, which is a clear sign that the company is focusing its design efforts somewhere else.”

The precarity of licensed media creates an interesting parallel to spoiler culture—just as there are sizable communities of fans online eager to learn about upcoming media releases through leaks, set photos, and casting rumors (see R. Williams 2004; Jenkins 2008b; Gray and Mittell 2007; Scott 2017a), in my interviews with both *Conquest* and *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game* players, my subjects often discussed speculation about the often-opaque licensing arrangements that made their favorite games possible. This was not about excitement for future releases (though those sorts of spoilers are/were also a significant facet of both communities); this was bracing for the inevitable. For *Conquest* players, they found some sense of security in affirming “We saw this coming;” for *Thrones* players, it was an acknowledgement that even after seventeen years of stability in the property, if FFG ever lost the *ASoIaF* license the card game would *have* to end.

Few of *Conquest*’s players were ready to write off the game, though. David highlights just how much more *Conquest* could’ve grown: “we just got all the factions and the new cycle came out, and they’ve just introduced a story component to it, so I felt like there was a whole opportunity for years of fun.” Alongside the potential design space for future cards, *Conquest* had also begun to explore its narrative dimensions. Starting with the second cycle of *Conquest*’s monthly War Packs, FFG included paper inserts with each pack. These sheets served a practical purpose, providing an overview for new rules introduced in each cycle, but also included a short story featuring the new Warlords introduced in each pack. These stories were printed as two tightly-spaced columns on a single page, so were quite short, but helped narrativize the release of new cards as part of a broader ongoing conflict in *Conquest*’s Traxis Sector. These stories were,

for most players, nice to have but incidental to their long-term enjoyment of *Conquest*—although my interviewees were often quite invested in the *40K* storyworld, their engagement with it through *Conquest* was frequently abstract and allusive, and players tended to foreground the strategy of the game in their responses; significantly, David was the only player to discuss these narrative inserts at any length in his interview.

Many players were even more mournful of the future directions the game could have taken, the potential for card designs they had hoped to see but now never would. The end of the game's production meant a rupture in the ontological security of not only the game's present but also its future. Such speculation was a common feature of the *Conquest* community during its official production, with players wondering what cards FFG would release next. This sort of fannish speculation could take several forms: in one form, it was transmedial, hoping to see new corners of the *40K* storyworld represented in *Conquest*; in another form, it was the hope of seeing new and powerful cards in the future; and in another, it was about filling in the mechanical gaps in the existing cardpool, hoping to see new ways to use old cards. These perspectives are quite similar to the player archetypes in *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game* discussed in the previous chapter: Ned's investment in the lore, Jaime's competitive eye for powerful effect, and Shagga's deckbuilding tinkering and experimentation. The *Conquest* community never developed its own nomenclature for these archetypes.

Parviz felt the game left some loose ends: "the way they designed Cycle Three [the last set of cards released] clearly had Cycle Four in mind. […] if they just released one more cycle, it could have been a closed game." As we shall see in the following section, this longing for closure—in terms of the game's designs, rather than narrative closure—animated the efforts of the Black Crusade League (of which Parviz was a member). This runs counter to much of the

philosophy behind transmediality, which frequently foregrounds the endless deferment of closure. This longing for a "closed game" speaks to a particular approach to treating *Conquest* as a post-object text—though this longing was not shared universally among *Conquest*'s players, many of who welcomed the endless deferment of FFG's Living Card Game release model.

Though my focus is on *Conquest* throughout this chapter, it is important to not lose sight of the wider impact of the end of this licensing arrangement. Vaël rightfully corrected me on when I asked about *Conquest*'s cancellation, stating "it wasn't only *Conquest*, but all *Warhammer* content being cancelled." As mentioned above, twenty different product lines were discontinued following the end of this licensing arrangement, including other board games and role-playing games produced by FFG. David was one of the few respondents to go into detail as to how other *Warhammer* cancellations affected him: "[FFG] had a dungeon crawl *Warhammer Fantasy* game [*Warhammer Quest: The Adventure Card Game* (2015)] that they had just released that was intended to be expandable. So I had just bought that and then it was like useless, basically, because it just got one adventure thing."[54] His description of this game as being "useless" demonstrates an important perspective that many of the players I spoke with took towards FFG—these games are not consumed as solitary media texts, but as part of an ongoing economic relationship between FFG and its players. The replayability and the expandability of a game like *Conquest* are intertwined—the consistent flow of new content motivate further gameplay, with each new release allowing incremental adjustments to existing strategies and the potential for new interactions. David's purchase of *Warhammer Quest* was an investment in this future potential of eventual expansions. The routine of FFG's release is not only about the affectively pleasurable dimensions of this continuity—there is also fundamentally an ongoing

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[54] One potential area of future research would be to expand the pool of interview subjects to include representatives from other cancelled FFG *Warhammer* games—additionally, the cancelled *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* continues unofficially in *The 9$^{th}$ Age* fan-made ruleset, an alternative to GW's successor system *Warhammer Age of Sigmar*.

economic relationship between consumers and producers, as well as the constant back-and-forth of fannish expectations that bedevil most fandoms at the heart of games like *Warhammer Quest* and *Conquest*. One can see echoes of typical fan complaints—which frequently take the form of "I am upset things have not gone the way I expected"—in discussions of the lost opportunities for FFG's future product releases.

This economic dimension even extended to reactions to the game's cancellation: for several of my respondents, the initial announcement generated an impulse to stock up on the game. Some resisted that impulse, like Mark, who said "I was very tempted to buy all the packs when they were steeply discounted on FFG's online store, but the prohibitive shipping costs stopped me." The costs of *Conquest* as a hobby were far lower than the wargame—purchasing every *Conquest* card would cost about $450 USD; for the wargame, Baumgartner explains, "the cost of unassembled and unpainted tanks usually hovering around 60 US$ and that of even larger models going up to 100 US$, fielding a whole army can be seen as a considerable investment" (Baumgartner 2015, 40), and miniature hobbyist blog Creative Twilight estimates the cost of a single standard-sized army for a new wargame player, including both the models and supplies like rulebooks, paints, dice, and rulers, at $815 (Thor 2018)—but card games remain an expensive hobby, especially for an international player like Mark.

The other extreme was Neal, who was just getting into the game when it was cancelled: "I panic-bought what must have been a couple thousand dollars of remaining FFG inventory and large collections from players who started hanging it up when they saw the game was no longer being officially supported." As Neal notes, many players chose to sell their collections once the game ended—the players I spoke with had all remained engaged with *Conquest* to some extent post-licensing, but for other players, the end of its official support from FFG was more final.

Without the continued expansion of the game through new cards being regularly released, the players who sold their collections may have felt it was time to move on to something new. Here again we see ways that this newfound ontological insecurity, or the ways "fans respond to threats that may occur as a result of the loss of favourite aspects of their fandom, or the loss of the object entirely" (R. Williams 2015, 21), influenced *Conquest* players in different ways. For someone like Neal, the "panic-buy" instinct was a reaction to securing the soon-to-be-scarce cards; for the players selling their collections, once the game was officially over and no more new content was forthcoming, they made the decision to leave *Conquest* behind them.

In my interviews, several subjects described players (themselves or others) moving on to other LCGs, including *A Game of Thrones* and *Legend of the Five Rings*, to find a new-but-familiar routine with another card game from the same company. There are a number of reasons players would have abandoned *Conquest* for these other games, beyond simply the lack of new product releases described above. For one, even during its official run, *Conquest* was a niche title with scattered small pockets of players. In my years of playing, I was only able to find two other Austin-area players (both fellow graduate students) who stayed committed to the game long-term; other players were far more transitory—and in my interviews, it was clear this was a common experience. Without the support of a strong local community, many would have found few people to play with. This would be especially true for players who highly valued the competitive aspects of *Conquest*—without the institutional support of FFG, the circuit of large in-person tournaments was no longer available. Moving to one of FFG's active competitive LCGs[55] would allow these players to continue to experience the type of gameplay they most valued.

[55] The company's two other active card games, *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* and *Arkham Horror: The Card Game*, are both cooperative games.

One question I asked all of my interview subjects was on their understanding for the reasons for the split between FFG and GW. Neither company has ever or likely will ever provide an actual account of the reasons—Neal's response, "The whole reason for the FFG/GW divorce is pretty opaque to me," is fairly universal across my respondents—but I was curious to know how fans understood the licensing issues at the core of the end of *Conquest* and other GW-licensed games. One prominent theory was that corporate ownership of FFG was the wedge issue: the French tabletop publisher Asmodee acquired a large number of smaller American and European companies throughout the 2010s, including FFG in 2014. The power relation between GW and FFG would thus have changed significantly between the start of the two company's licensing arrangement in 2008 and its cessation in 2016: FFG had gone from being a large but independent tabletop gaming company to a subsidiary of a multinational conglomerate that had very rapidly taken over a significant market share of the industry.[56]

The other main driving force players speculated on was FFG's increasingly large role in the miniature wargaming segment of the tabletop market, the niche that GW has long dominated. As Parviz explained, "my understanding is that FFG had the *Warhammer* license on the provision that they didn't make products that was a direct competitor to any of Games Workshop's ones." FFG's *Star Wars*-themed *X-Wing*, launched in 2012, was outselling GW's *Warhammer* lines (ICv2 2016),[57] and in August 2016 the company announced the *Runewars Miniatures Game*, which was a very direct competitor to the *Age of Sigmar* line. Other players, however, felt that speculation was pointless, like Ivan: "Companies and licensing is an area people outside the companies will never know why some things happen. […] I don't know, and I

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[56] This explanation would also account for FFG's loss of the *Netrunner* license, owned by Wizards of the Coast, a subsidiary of Hasbro.

[57] More recent numbers from Fall 2018 show that GW has since regained control of the market, with *Warhammer 40,000* and *Age of Sigmar* as the top two miniature games; FFG has the fourth and fifth spots, *X-Wing* and *Star Wars: Legion*, a launched in 2018 (ICv2 2019).

try not to waste mental cycles on things I can't decipher or affect." Ultimately, the reasons behind the end of the licensing deal between FFG and GW are of limited importance to the community—what is much more important is how the players responded in order to maintain and ultimately control the game.

Fanfiction, defined by Hellekson and Busse "as derivative amateur writing—that is, texts written based on another text, and not for professional publication" and "the imaginative interpolations and extrapolations by fans of existing literary worlds" (2014, 5-6), has played a central role in the lives of innumerable fan communities, and has been extensively research by fan studies as a field. There is not a perfect analogy between fanfiction writing and the fan-labor found in *Conquest*'s post-life; the production of fannish prose involves a very different set of aesthetic standards and media affordances than the design and distribution of new cards for *Conquest*, and the modes of reception for both will be similarly distinct. Though the specific forms of fan creativity are quite different, I argue that the fan collectives that I discuss in the following sections can serve a similar communal function. Writing about the potentially therapeutic or palliative role that fanfiction can play in post-object fandoms, Williams observes that "The communality of fanfiction allows fans to work together to create and protect the memory of a beloved show, also functioning to enable fans to ward off any anxiety or rupture to their fan ontological security" (R. Williams 2015, 168). The groups I discuss each took a very active role in working to "ward off any anxiety" in the *Conquest* community—with sometimes mixed results, producing new sources of anxiety. Unlike other card game post-lives, like *MECCG*'s and *Netrunner*'s, which coalesced around a single organization, *Conquest*'s post-licensed after-life has been highly contested, with competing fan collectives trying to lay claim

to the game's legacy. The tension between these groups, the Black Crusade League and Team Apoka, has had a lasting impact on the community.

### THE BLACK CRUSADE LEAGUE

Of these two collectives, the Black Crusade League[58] is the older of the two, predating the cancellation of *Conquest*. In its original iteration, it was literally a league, organizing player-run online tournaments that used a computer program called OCTGN (Online Card and Tabletop Gaming Network), pronounced "octagon," which is used to play card games online. The program can be quite difficult to learn how to use, and players have to upload scans of the game's cards—more popular LCGs like *Netrunner* and *Game of Thrones* have more user-friendly browser-based platforms at Jinteki.net and TheIronThrone.net, but the smaller *Conquest* playerbase makes due with the more cumbersome OCTGN.

Steve, the lead organizer for BCL, got involved with online tournaments right away, by filling in a gap left in the community when another player-run tournament organizer stepped away. The Adeptus Podcastus[59] podcast and its tournaments were short-lived fixtures of the early days of *Conquest*'s community, and Steve took it upon himself to organize his own: "I emailed some of the guys who were in the league with me, […], 'Who wants to keep this going?' And from there I built what became the Black Crusade League." Tournament sign-ups were done through a Google form on BCL's WordPress blog, and Steve and other volunteers would organize tournament brackets. Steve provided participation prizes in the form of alternate art cards (or "alt arts")—cards that had the same text and effect of a pre-existing card in *Conquest*, but with different artwork. Such prizes are commonly provided by FFG themselves in the

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[58] Named for "black crusades," regularly occurring military incursions by the demonic Forces of Chaos.
[59] A play on the pseudo-Latin names of human organizations in the *40K* universe, including the "Adeptus Mechanicus," a religious order of technologists.

tournament support kits the company sells for local game stores and other venues to host their own tournaments—fan-made alt arts like Steve's are a common practice, one which replicates the company's established practices that have become an expected part of the tournament routine (see Figure 4.3). As Steve explained, "that was costing hundreds of dollars just in postage and with the printing of the cards and all this. So multiple people recommended I set up a GoFundMe page and ask. There's no requirement to play, just donations for anyone who wants to, and really quickly that completely paid off." The BCL tournaments were quite successful, and ran throughout the entirety of *Conquest*'s life. Thus, even before the game's cancellation, the players were actively cultivating a strong sense of communal ownership of the game.

As a pre-existing fixture of the community, BCL was well-positioned to respond to player demand for an unofficial continuation of the game. The same day as the news of the game's end, Steve posted on the games' Facebook group to reveal "the upcoming Black Crusade Expansion"—in his post, Steve states "I'm not willing to roll over and let *Conquest* die because

**Figure 4.3** – Three versions of the Warlord card "Captain Cato Sicarius." R-L: the original printing, included in the Core Set; FFG's alt-art card, a participation prize in the company's "Winter 2014 Game Night" events; and BCL's alt-art card, a participation prize for the final BCL tournament season, Winter 2017. Copyright Fantasy Flight Games and Black Crusade League.

some business deal between two big companies went sour. I love this game and I know many of you do too. We still have our cards and it's up to us to keep this thing alive!" Steve's post contains an important observation about the ownership of the physical materials of *Conquest*: although the game may no longer be actively supported and developed, the "end" of an analog game like this "does nothing to decay the copies of the game still in the drawers and sitting on the shelves of gamers all over the world" (Garcia and Duncan 2019). Nothing about the lapsed licensing between GW and FFG could take away the cards players already owned—but players could take it upon themselves to maintain the cycle of continual expansion they had come to expect in a card game, an effort to ward off the ontological insecurity of the game's end.

According to those involved in BCL, the group's goals were relatively modest. The core of this new BCL expansion team was composed of other players in the community Steve had developed a strong relationship with: "I reached out to […] people that I knew personally, that I respected, that I knew […] there was about 10 or 12 of us." The post-cancellation BCL team was composed of major tournament winners and playtesters (players selected by FFG to test out cards before release, effectively analog beta testers). According to Patrick, who took over BCL when Steve later left the community, "Black Crusade was not about advancing the story or game. Its stated purpose was to shore up some of the lesser warlords." Statements like this demonstrate the scope of BCL's design ambitions. They were not positioning themselves as permanent stewards of *Conquest*, but rather a team working to provide some closure for the game and its community—the issue BCL aimed to rectify was that the game had ended *too soon*, not that it had ended altogether.

The BCL team solicited suggestions for card design ideas from the community, although according to Steve, none of those ideas were used, at least not as-is; he described a process that

was "a conglomeration, you would pick little pieces from these different ideas and try to assemble them into something new." Creating a small batch of new cards to help balance out the existing cardpool was the primary objective—according to Parviz: "[BCL]'s focus was always to close the game, it was just making an expansion that tidies up loose edges"—and in January 2017, BCL released their fan-made expansion, "The Eye of Terror," which introduced 29 new cards (see Figure 4.4).

**Figure 4.4** – "Boxart" for BCL's "The Eye of Terror." Card images were distributed online, so there was no physical box for the release, but this design replicates one of FFG's larger "deluxe expansion" boxes. Copyright Black Crusade League.

There are two ways to look at the composition of the BCL team. According to one member, David, "the BCL *was* the people most engaged in the game. And people I respected a lot. They were good players and good people." BCL's team was composed of many of the game's top players and the community's most engaged participants, but this created some of its own problems; David also felt like there was limited commitment to the long-term sustainability of BCL, in part due to the highly competitive nature of many of its members: "they're gonna go to where the competition is, they're gonna go to another place, another living card game." Another perspective came from Ivan, who, when asked if he had been interested in participating in BCL, stated: "No. I'm not a top player, I never won a convention, I don't playtest anything. So I wasn't interested in being on the creation side of any play test effort." BCL may have been

composed of top players of *Conquest*, but this created an impression of insularity, which also extended to the limited scope of BCL's membership relative to the international range of *Conquest* communities. As Parviz noted, BCL "alienated a lot of the non-English speaking communities, particularly the French, and the ones more further afield, like the Chinese community." This perceived insularity, coupled with the limited scale of BCL's plans for expansions and the team representing solely (some of) the interests of the English-language community, allowed a more transnational set of rivals to thrive.

### TEAM APOKA

In the months following *Conquest*'s end, another group quickly emerged as BCL's competition: Team Apoka. Whereas the BCL team members were already major figures in the English-speaking community—players like Steve were highly active and visible on the game's Facebook group and other online forums—Apoka is much more of a black box. I have interviewed the founder and lead designer of Apoka, "Ktoto," but I could tell you little about him personally—he is not especially forthcoming, and English is not his first language. He used only his online moniker of Ktoto in our emails, and his name is not public knowledge in the *Conquest* community. He has professional experience in game design, which he plugged frequently in our emails ("I worked for years in the mobile game industry") and in promoting Apoka. Unlike BCL, which had a heavy Anglophone bias, Apoka is a much more transnational group—the profiles of the eight individuals credited on their site mention the following countries: China, Iraq, Poland, Ukraine, Russia, and France. In contrast to those listed on the site, in our emails, Ktoto described an even smaller core team of three individuals: himself, handling game design; a graphic designer; and a community manager tasked with handling the Apoka's communications—"in English," Ktoto noted, emphasizing the transnationality of the team.

According to both sides, there was some effort early on at communication between the two teams, though neither side exactly agrees on how this played out. The narrative presented to me by the BCL side paints a picture of Team Apoka emerging as a result of Ktoto's exclusion from the BCL design team. As Steve tells it, "their lead developer guy contacted me and wanted to be part of our design team, and I just turned him down. I mean I didn't know him from Adam […] we literally already have like 12 people at this point, and I didn't want to add any more pieces to the puzzle. And then he went and did his own thing." Similarly recollections were provided by other BCL alums (Patrick, Parviz, and David). Ktoto's version of events is quite a bit different: "I contacted them to warn them—as a professional game designer—that it's nearly impossible for a small group of amateurs with no experience. But they decided to continue on their own and politely refused my proposition for a merge." Both sides frequently cited their level of experience: on one side, a group of the top competitive players in *Conquest*, offering experience with the game itself; on the other, a mobile game developer, offering experience with development generally. Both sides took for granted that their particular perspectives and design interests made them qualified to take the reins of *Conquest*. Exactly where the truth lies is difficult to say, though one does have to wonder what might have been had Steve and Ktoto reached some sort of accord during those first correspondences.

Apoka's first pack, "Promise of War," was released in December 2016, and included 20 new fan-made cards, with the promise of more to come (see Figure 4.5). Unlike BCL's "The Eye of Terror," a one-time attempt at providing balance for the existing cardpool and closure for the game, Apoka heavily promoted a planned release schedule that mirrored FFG's own. Cards would be available in cycles of regularly-released packs, with larger expansions between each cycle. Apoka's efforts are aimed at continuing the familiar routine of incremental expansion of

*Conquest*'s cardpool, keeping the game going as long as interest remains among the community (or, more likely, within Team Apoka). According to Williams, "Fanfiction can offer a broad way to avoid accepting the commercially driven demise of a favourite series by allowing many fans to continue what they did while a series was on-air" (R. Williams 2015, 188). A similar philosophy animates Apoka's approach to releases, which is an interesting blend of both "affirmational" and "transformational" fan practices, a distinction laid out in an influential blog post by Dreamwidth user obsession_inc. Affirmational fandom elevates and reifies the central author of the fannish text, with a high premium on the author's word-of-god; as obsession_inc summarizes "These are the *sanctioned* fans" (in the "approval" sense of the word, not its opposite meaning of "discipline"). Transformational, on the other hand, is "all about laying hands upon the source and twisting it to the fans' own purposes" (obsession_inc 2009).[60] On some levels, *Conquest*'s post-licensing era has transformational dimensions in its development and expansion on the original FFG cardpool, and its functioning outside of

**Figure 4.5** – "Box art" for Team Apoka's first release, "Promise of War." Like BCL, Apoka's design replicates the material packaging of earlier *Conquest* releases, in this case the clam-shell plastic of the monthly "War Packs." Copyright Team Apoka.

[60] There is fluidity between these subject positions, which should not be treated as absolutes.

licensing is certainly non-sanctioned. But it is also quite affirmational in other ways, particularly in its replication of much of how FFG produced and managed the original game, and in the ways that Team Apoka and Ktoto in particular situate themselves at the center of the community, becoming the reified authors of the game. Many player practices are not significantly altered in the transition from FFG's ownership of the game to Team Apoka's. Even when *Conquest* is no longer limited to the profit-driven practices of FFG, the established routines of the originary company are replicated, because these routines are familiar and expected.

Both BCL and Apoka released their cards as digital images to use in OCTGN or as "print-to-play" files—players could download the files and print them out, using other cards as backings—but Apoka also offers the option to purchase the cards through small-batch printing website MakePlayingCards.com. Importantly, Apoka does not profit off these sales. Ktoto explained, once again citing his experience in game design: "every single little extra step a player must do in order to complete a process will see a dramatic drop of population." Though providing a purchase option is convenient for players, Ktoto noted that "because the players trust us with real money, it puts a lot of pressure on our quality management process." Importantly, the use of MakePlayingCards.com provides yet another bit of ontological continuity for the *Conquest* community. Players understood that their participation in *Conquest* involved an ongoing economic relationship, regularly purchasing new content from FFG. Apoka allows—but crucially, does not require—this routine to continue, with their products sold at about the same price point as FFG's release, albeit on a less regular schedule: FFG's 60-card "War Packs" sold for $15 USD, with Apoka's equivalent packs (of either 54 or 72 cards) sell for $14.52 or $17.77.

Unlike BCL's relatively modest goals, Ktoto outlined three objectives he and the Apoka team have in designing new cards: "1 - Finish the core of the game. 2 - Release new stuff

enjoyable enough to keep the players interested. 3 - Enjoy the exploration of the themes that I (Ktoto) love the most to keep the morale high." According to Ktoto, Team Apoka sees themselves entirely dependent on the community: "we are a part of the community, and our work is only for the community. […] It's non-profit and serves no other function." Apoka has also offered more transparency and communication throughout their design process, previewing cards on Facebook and frequently taking player suggestions into consideration as they tweak the wording before printing. Józef, who is in charge of the Polish translation of Apoka's cards, explained the design and testing process: "The cards are tested for a long time by various testers and before the official premiere, the fans are given time to check them and give us feedback for possible corrections." And this is something which can at times be necessary given the transnationality of Team Apoka; Ivan noted that: "I believe there are no native English speakers on the Apoka team, so minor vague points in translation sometimes create confusion as to how a card plays in certain circumstances." Aspects of this process again mirror the professional standards set by FFG, in terms of the use of playtesting, but the feedback loop between Team Apoka and the playerbase is more active and reciprocal—the sort of pre-release proofreading seen here would not have happened under FFG, where cards could only be corrected after the fact.[61] Under Apoka, players take a much more active role in ensuring the cards are worded as clearly as possible—although they have little say in the design process itself. This approach to feedback and revision would be nearly impossible for the economies of scale involved for a company like FFG—by the time cards are being previewed, the cards are usually already being printed overseas—but it is much more conducive to the practices of a group like Apoka, whose

[61] Each LCG maintains a regularly updated FAQ document available on FFG's website, which contains an often extensive Errata section, correcting typos or poorly worded cards.

cards are being distributed online via publically shared images or printed through small batch printing services.

One perception of Team Apoka I encountered from several respondents was that many of the designs stem less from an interest in balance than in what Ktoto is personally interested in in the *40K* storyworld, and this certainly seems to be the case based on his own description of the process. There is, however, an important contradiction in Ktoto's self-reporting on Apoka's design philosophy and its relationship with community demand. According to Ktoto, "If tomorrow the community would like to see only Tyranids cards, we would do so." Unlike the design ethos of BCL, which focused on designing cards that would provide the most balanced closure to the existing cardpool (and potentially ignoring player-submitted designs that did not conform to this ideal), Ktoto's stated goal is to provide the community exactly what it wants, even it meant something as balance-disrupting as abandoning all but faction of cards. But this is difficult to square with his previous statement that "the themes that I (Ktoto) love the most" motivate Apoka's design priorities. Ktoto seems to overlook this distinction, assuming that his own interests in designing new content for *Conquest* are one and the same as the community's interests. And as I discuss more below, conflicts do arise when Team Apoka's and the community's interests do not overlap.

Team Apoka's efforts are more centered on maintaining and sustaining long-term interest in new *Conquest* cards, something that BCL avowedly was not—as Steve admits, "we were planning on maybe like two releases a year, probably, at tops. So it wasn't like we were throwing out enough new content to keep a community of players engaged and interested." Given the different design philosophies governing these two groups, it is perhaps inevitable that conflict would emerge.

### “THERE IS ONLY WAR”

Immediately, tension developed between the two collectives. Beyond simply dividing the community into camps supporting two different card pools, things got personal and heated, with both sides accusing the other of operating in bad faith. Patrick, for instance, characterized Ktoto as an “unknown game designer with little game experience or knowledge of the game.” Ktoto was similarly dismissive, describing BCL as “a small group of amateurs with no experience.” Both sides evinced a sense of entitlement to the future of *Conquest*. For BCL, their claim to the game was based in experience as the top *Conquest* players—or their interpretation of the top. BCL was entirely limited to English-speaking players, cutting out the communities of players in France, China, and other countries. The BCL members I interviewed frequently described the group’s formation as some sort of all-star team, composed of those most active in the English-language community and on the leading-edge of competitive play. This attitude reflects an ideology of meritocracy that runs throughout gaming culture (see Paul 2018). They had *earned* control of the game through their years of community engagement and high-level play. Ktoto put forth a similarly claim to ownership of the game’s future, by dint of his professional experience. Neither group could own the game on a legal level, but they could pit their affective claims to *Conquest* against each other.

The BCL/Apoka conflict played out across the various major online hubs for the *Conquest* community: the game’s Facebook group, the forums at the FFG-owned CardGameDB, the comments sections of fan-created ConquestDB, and a Skype conversation thread frequented by many members of the community. In addition, even private conversations between BCL and Apoka members became public parts of the ongoing conflict. Parviz, who was one of the admins for the Facebook group, describes “heated words between specifically [Steve] and [Ktoto]. I saw

the DMs [direct messages], they were not pretty on either side. There were some very direct personal attacks being thrown around, some of which ended up as Facebook posts or as CardGameDB posts. Bans dropping left, right, and center. It was a very messy time to be involved in the game."

Several of my interviewees accused Apoka of employing "sock puppets"—fabricated accounts controlled by Team Apoka itself or by Apoka fans, posing as additional voices of support for Apoka. One player, who asked for anonymity when discussing the conflict between BCL and Apoka, described:

> these profiles that would just pop up on CardGameDB that I'd never seen before that were new, that would talk shit about the work that BCL was doing. […] Even on Facebook, there were profiles that if you Google search their image on the web, it would be some random image that was pulled. It wasn't an actual person. […] When I brought up the fake accounts popping up both on Facebook and on ConquestDB, a lot of people didn't see that.

As the player acknowledges, opinions differed on the provenance of these accounts, and as far I know there is no evidence one way or another (at least not anymore). There were major flamewars, although much of it has been heavily edited by moderators or outright deleted. This is one of the challenges of this sort of research—though still more accessible than the non-disclosure-agreement-bound opaqueness of licensing partnerships.

Another major site of the conflict was OCTGN, the software platform used to play *Conquest* online. According to Patrick: "Because [Ktoto] was new, his cards had issues, and some of the BCL guys called him out for it. He than retaliated by getting his cards on OCTGN instead of ours." When both set of cards were eventually playable for the software, this raised other issues: Steve described the problems that arose from having competing "card pools that should not coexist, because they were not tested in tandem with one another." As Patrick acknowledges, OCTGN was in some respects the central stage of the conflict between the two

fan collectives: "The biggest problem wasn't the bad blood, it was having two sets [of cards] both on OCTGN that weren't compatible. This created a natural divide that the bad blood just made worse." The animosity between the two groups was bad, but the content put out by BCL and Apoka most critically disrupted the playability of *Conquest* itself, and at a critically precarious time for the newly orphaned game.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, licensed games stage a complex negotiation between the property, the games, and the communities for both—*Conquest*'s cessation puts these dimensions in stark relief. Players are usually situated between the contingency of the relationship between licensor and licensee, but in the case of *Conquest*, as the legal arrangements that made the game's production possible came to the end, the playerbase found itself split between a new set of competing interests as BCL and Team Apoka fought for ownership of *Conquest*.

Steve, who described himself as "the most prominent and I guess you could say public face of the Black Crusade design team," took the brunt of the animosity toward BCL's designs, which ultimately drove him to leave both the design team and *Conquest* entirely. According to Steve, "it just went from flinging mud at people's design to flinging mud at people. That's ultimately what led myself and a few others to just disband the whole Black Crusade project, and even leave." Although the conflict between the design teams may have been ultimately the straw that broke the camel's back for Steve and BCL, there were reasons to question the long-term sustainability of the team even outside the external threat of Apoka. David, for instance, found himself "bummed out by the level of commitment with the BCL team," with many of the players moving on to other games. Ktoto shared a similar perspective, feeling that BCL's internal problems were more to blame than the competition from Apoka: "Before their first pack was out

a part of their team left and the last remaining members finally decided to release the little they had before stopping. It was unfinished and botched, and a part of their team was bitter about the whole thing. Hence some animosity toward our project."

According to BCL partisans, Team Apoka's stance treated *Conquest*'s post-life as a zero-sum game, where there could be only one active source for new cards. Efforts at collaboration were rejected, with Patrick describing "some attempts to merge, but they failed because [Ktoto] had a basic stance of insisting on being in charge while we wanted a shared system." Ivan, a very active player of Apoka's cards described one instance of the hardline stance Team Apoka took in undercutting community support for BCL's content: "[Parviz] was a BCL guy and former administrator of the FB group. I remember someone from Apoka hitting the roof when he dared to list BCL cards next to Apoka cards in the listing of pinned resources." Despite the understandable resentment some felt over Apoka's all-or-nothing approach, from a practical standpoint, a single unified effort to extend *Conquest* was likely necessary. Licensing, for all its flaws, provides order and structure (via legal enforceable contracts) that avoid these kinds of ownership disputes—FFG enjoyed exclusivity in producing a card game based on the *40K* license. The fracturing of the community that came with the conflict between BCL and Apoka is only made possible in this sort of post-licensed context, where affective claims to ownership of the game cannot be easily mediated. According to Vaël, "I understand the reasons behind everyone feeling bad about the issue, but it was really badly managed (on both sides). That was a real shame, specially since the game needed the community together to be able to survive." In the months following the game's cancellation, the conflict between BCL and Team Apoka revealed just how precarious the community was—although fans can successfully take over the corporate structures that once governed a game as it transitions to a post-licensed era, the fraught

fight between these two fan collectives for ownership of this niche card game reveal the vulnerabilities and fault lines that can jeopardize this transition.

### CONCLUSION: *CONQUEST* TODAY

Ultimately, BCL and Apoka could not coexist. As Ktoto stated, “The community couldn’t have supported both groups. A dead game needs, above all, to be united.” Other post-object fan texts would arguably not face this same sort of tension—disparate sub-communities of fanfiction writers, for example, exploring different narrative priorities might not get along, but they would most likely be able to coexist. There’s a particular interactivity to post-object *Conquest*—not simply the interactivity of competitive gameplay, but the way that the material production of BCL and Apoka would interact with the original cards and with each other. The two group’s card designs inevitably come into conflict. The community has already suffered the effects of the conflict between BCL and Apoka, but it is likely that this wedge would have been driven even further had both groups attempted to continue producing new cards.

Exactly *who* is responsible for the division remains a sore point for some members of the *Conquest* community—tellingly, of the members of BCL I have interviewed, only one, David, is still active in the game. Patrick did admit to helping with Apoka’s designs, but remained hostile to the group: “I rules-lawyered a bunch of his sets for him after it became clear he didn’t know the rules very well, but I wanted no credit as the cards were bad for the game [in my opinion].” After the release of “The Eye of Terror,” BCL did not announce any additional fan-made cards, although the group continued to run online tournaments through June 2017.

According to Parviz, *Conquest*’s contested ownership “completely fractured the community, and it fractured it three ways: the people who are on the side of Apoka, people on the side of the Black Crusade, and the people who are just like ‘Fuck both of you.’” My research

has focused on this clash between these fan collectives, and much of this stems from how I approached recruiting interview subjects, reaching out to members of both BCL and Apoka and recruiting on the *Conquest* Facebook group, whose current membership is biased toward those who have remained active in the community and the game. But this is not the full scope of *Conquest*'s post-life. Williams notes that "Post-object fandom is a broad and varied period which cannot be easily categorized" (R. Williams 2015, 198). In future research, I will try to widen the scope of my interviews to include more players who do not fit neatly into the BCL vs. Apoka binary—players who fall in to the "Fuck both of you" camp, or those who left *Conquest* behind entirely when the licensing ceased (and there would likely be significant overlap between these two groups).

Importantly, the clash between BCL and Apoka is not the only dimension of post-life fan labor within the *Conquest* community. David, a former BCL participant, remains active in the community because of his deckbuilding website, TraxisSector.com. Like many of the examples discussed in this chapter, David's site came out of the cessation of another player-run resource for the community, another deckbuilding site called ConquestDB, which at the time of the cancellation had not been updated in months. As part of the BCL design discussions, David volunteered to create a new site—which turned out to be far more work than he had realized: "what I thought would be quick, and what ended up being a huge amount of my time to build it." Although ConquestDB did eventually become active again, it has since gone down permanently, and TraxisSector.com remains one of the few active *Conquest* sites online.

According to David, one of his primary goals in designing the site was providing a platform for new cards: "one of the first things I did was put together a policy for what fan made content I would put up there and what I wouldn't, just to prevent people that didn't test their

cards or just wanted to do like a their own personal fun project, because it was just a lot of work to get the cards up there." David's policy requires a degree of rigor and even professionalization for anyone interested in posting new *Conquest* cards, though so far no one other than BCL and Apoka have ever contacted him about hosting their cards. Initially, TraxisSector.com served as the primary venue for BCL's content, with the temporarily-reactive ConquestDB hosting Apoka's cards. David contacted Apoka about hosting their cards initially, but they had some conditions: "originally what they said when I asked if they wanted to put their cards on my site, they said that they didn't want to be on a site with other fan made cards, they wanted to be exclusive." Eventually Apoka's cards needed a new online home, and by that point Apoka's former hardline stance had softened and the team accepted that TraxisSector.com would host both theirs and their former competitor's cards—and in fact, Apoka is the biggest contributor to David's Patreon to support the ongoing costs of hosting the site.

In the current community, Ivan stated quite plainly, "Apoka pretty much owns the game now." Beyond simply releasing new cards, Apoka also supports both real-world and online tournaments, encouraging the competitive energy that drove the community during the FFG years. Józef, who became involved with translating Apoka's cards for the Polish market, discussed his efforts to organize a *Conquest* tournament in Gdańsk: "I wrote to Apoka about the idea. They stated that it was a great idea and they sent me a playmat and tokens of faith for the prize and I got files with promo cards for prizes." Here again we see how fannish ownership of the game involves replicating the practices of the original owners of *Conquest*: the playmat, tokens, and alt art cards Apoka provided Józef are precisely the sorts of physical prizes that FFG uses in their own tournaments. Unfortunately the turnout was quite low, and Józef expressed a dim outlook on *Conquest*'s long-term sustainability—"After the tournament I knew that the

game would not come back"—but the effort on Apoka's part to support small, locally run tournaments is encouraging. More successful have been the Apoka-run OCTGN tournaments, picking up where the BCL left off—which had in turn been picking up where the Adeptus Podcastus tournaments had left off, demonstrating the ongoing chain of fannish ownership that players of *Conquest* have built for themselves, providing some sense of ontological continuity for the community as routines and traditions are carried on by new unofficial stakeholders.

Despite some missteps, Apoka has done much to grow *Conquest*: since late 2016, Apoka have designed and distributed ten sets of cards, with their most recent release in January 2019. Apoka has released 309 new cards for *Conquest*—in comparison, the complete cardpool at the time of the game's cancellation was 705. Although Apoka has managed what remains of the community well, some Apoka players did voice anxiety about the future of *Conquest*, like Neal's concern that Apoka's design priorities could be shifting: "my larger concern is if Apoka […] sets out to obviate, instead of enhance, the FFG card pool." Apoka must navigate a delicate balancing act—players want new cards, but too much novelty or divergence from the style of cards produced under FFG can risk alienating the playerbase, who want to both see the game continue to grow and feel a connection to the original cards they were playing with. This is a common issue in all card games, the tendency for new designs to supplant older cards, but the change in control of the card game from FFG to Apoka amplifies the question of whether new cards are enhancing the previous card pool or outright replacing it.

As evidence of this tension, one recent source of controversy has been two cards Apoka released in late 2018, "First Dawn" and "Last Dawn." These banned a number of powerful cards, all from the original run of FFG published content. Several of my interviewees brought the cards up in their discussion—for former BCL partisans, they were further evidence of the clumsiness

of Apoka's design; for Apoka fans, they were a troubling development, a sign that, despite the important role of player feedback in Apoka's development cycle and the community-first ethos Ktoto espoused in our interview, Apoka's ideas for maintaining balance in the cardpool may run counter to the desires of some of their loyal players.

Although some of the bad blood still remains between BCL and Apoka loyalists, one of the most striking feature of my interviews with members of the *Conquest* community is how varied the perspectives of players have been about the game's past, present, and future. The former BCL members I interviewed frequently struck a mournful tone, a wistful nostalgia for the game-as-it-was and at what could have been—a viewpoint shared by a few other interviewees who spoke of the fiercely combative relationship between BCL and Apoka. Parviz noted, "There's still a lot of resentment from that time. I know that London as a whole outright refuses to touch Apoka as a result of it, initially based on the cards themselves, and then supplemented by the perceived aggression from the Apoka community." But for other players—who remain active in the post-BCL, Apoka-run game—there seems to be little community memory of this conflict.

Parviz predicted that the game's longevity will ultimately be contingent on Apoka's continued support: "the game will keep going within the Apoka circles for as long as they're willing to make the cards, and the second they stop then it would just be the odd person here and there playing with the cards they have." And he may be correct, and this would mirror the fundamental contingency of licensed game production itself. But the history of the fannish ownership of *Conquest* is filled with examples of players filling in vacuums as they emerge: BCL emerging as a replacement for the Adeptus Podcastus tournaments, Apoka later running its own online tournaments after BCL collapsed, TraxisSector.com as a replacement for

ConquestDB. As Ktoto notes: “The community couldn’t have supported both groups. A dead game needs, above all, to be united, certainly not divided. Today there is only one format, and even so, it’s a battle every day to make the game alive.”

Team Apoka’s lead designer’s foregrounding of the negotiation and contestation necessary to continue supporting and expanding *Conquest* is not particular to his team. BCL faced this same struggle; so did FFG during the game’s original run; so will whoever may pick up the mantle from Apoka someday. For members and supporters of BCL, the contested nature of *Conquest*’s post-life came as surprise—players like Steve considered themselves the natural stewards of the game’s legacy, only to discover a set of unexpected and unfamiliar competitors, drawing upon a broader transnational set of complementary *Conquest* communities that, for the Anglophone BCL members, language barriers had kept isolated. The heated conflict between BCL and Apoka threw facets of the *Conquest* community into harsh relief, but they were always there. It was a further challenge to their ontological security within the *Conquest* community—and the abuse that Steve and others received only made this all the harsher.

By turning my attention in this final chapter to this “dead” game, I do not intend to position *Conquest* as a unique case. As I have discussed in terms of other, perhaps more successful post-licensed games like *MECCG* and *Netrunner*, this sort of “post-object fandom” is a common, perhaps even inevitable reaction to a cherished game’s cessation. But even beyond that, the history of *Conquest* is emblematic of larger trends and tendencies in licensed gaming and transmedial production more broadly. The complex negotiation of competing interests to *Conquest*’s future demonstrates the often-deeply personal dimensions of a transmedially expansive game. Be it official or unofficial, licensed or fan-made, the example of *Conquest* also raises questions about how we understand media ownership. BCL and Apoka were not the only

ones designing and distributing content based in a world they both owned (affectively) and did not own (legally)—in many ways, the designers of *Conquest* at FFG had a similarly multifaceted relationship with the game they were making. As I move into the Conclusion, I want to foreground the ways that *all* transmediations stage the sort of negotiation and contestation that Ktoto describes—with fundamental tensions discussed in this and the preceding chapters including the dynamic between licensors and licensees, producers and fans, narratives and mechanics, and broad range of competing and complementary canons, communities, and fannish subject positions.

# Conclusion
## Why Licensed Games?

This dissertation takes as its principal focus the intersection of the industrial practice of licensing, the textual property of transmediality, and the creative process of worldbuilding through the lens of licensed games. Licensing, the legal agreement by which owners of intellectual property sell the rights for use of an IP for a limited period under specific terms of use, provides the framework but not the boundaries of these ludic paratexts that stage a complex negotiation of intellectual property and fannish affect. As I have argued throughout, licensed games are a fertile medium through which popular brands, franchises, and storyworlds are productively transmediated. Attending to the ways these games draw upon the emotional, subjective, and affective dimensions of our media histories and our investments in popular storyworlds can tell us much about game design specifically, media franchising generally, and the creative process of transmedia worldbuilding inherent to both.

Returning to a quote discussed in my introduction, Jonathan Gray notes that, "To play with or in a storyworld is to gain more ownership of it, to personalize it, and to move it out of the space of the spectacle and render it a malleable entity" (Gray 2010, 187). This observation is central to the argument that I have put forth throughout the preceding chapters: that the modes of engagement that licensed games encourage or allow provide a myriad of highly individualized ways that popular intellectual properties can become personally meaningful. Licensed games, as assemblages of their textual, cultural, industrial, and affective contexts, are vibrant sites of transmediality. By centering licensed games, my aim has to been to nuance and advance transmedia scholarship, which has frequently discounted licensed media as too ancillary and

derivative, while simultaneously privileging a small corpus of highly coordinated texts which provide a too-narrow perspective on what transmediality is and what it can be.

In the previous three chapters, I have utilized a broad range of examples from several different IPs, ranging in scale from decades-spanning mega-blockbuster *Star Wars* to recent pop culture sensation *A Song of Ice and Fire / Game of Thrones* to tabletop niche hit *Warhammer 40,000*. I have examined how licensees use the raw material of the intellectual property as the building blocks for game design approaches that foreground certain facets of the originary storyworld, privilege varied interpretations of the "main" texts, and expand the boundaries of the diegesis. And I have charted, through interviews with players of various *A Song of Ice and Fire / Game of Thrones* games and of defunct card game *Warhammer 40,000: Conquest*, the complex negotiation of fan affective investment in the IP, in the games, and in the communities that grow around both. These chapters each explore different frameworks for understanding the playful ways these licensed games encourage and sustain long-term engagement with transmedial worlds.

In Chapter One, I started with one of the most successful media franchises, *Star Wars*, examined using approaches to worldbuilding from the fields of narrative theory and game studies (Klastrup and Tosca 2004; Juul 2005; Wolf 2012) and prior scholarship of *Star Wars* transmediation (Brooker 2002; Clarke 2014; Freeman 2018; Guynes 2018), I chart a historical overview of the role of licensed paratexts throughout *Star Wars*' forty-plus year history, with licensing evolving from dispersed and hands-off to the highly coordinated and carefully managed approach we have come to expect from contemporary media franchises. I explored four different approaches to transmedia worldbuilding, each coming at different key moments in the overall history of the franchise. First, I examined *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*, from West End

Games, which served as a foundational worldbuilding document not only for imaginative roleplaying but for the franchise as a whole, defining and refining the storyworld's mythos, topos, and ethos in ways that are still felt in *Star Wars* to this day. Second, I turned to *Shadows of the Empire*, produced by subsidiary LucasArts and thus one of the only non-licensed games discussed in this dissertation, to explore a game at the center of a highly coordinated transmedia project, and the inherent limitations of that approach, both narratively and ludically. Third, I discussed *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game*, made by Traveller's Tales, a game offering a fresh and humorous perspective that privileges evocation over narrative fidelity, deconstructing the prequel films through virtual construction toys. And finally, I examined *Star Wars: The Card Game*, made by Fantasy Flight Games. Released immediately after Disney's purchase of the *Star Wars* IP, the game foregrounds the fundamental precarity of licensed game production. As a massive media franchise, *Star Wars* exhibits robust and long-term transmediality, as hundreds of paratexts have built upon and been in constant dialogue with the franchise's motherships, the films. This chapter demonstrates how licensed games function as sites of expansive worldbuilding creativity and contingent interplay between licensee and licensor.

In Chapter Two, I turn to a franchise with a shorter (but still extensive) history, *A Song of Ice and Fire* / *Game of Thrones*. Building upon Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007), other games studies literature exploring the intersection of rules, narrative, and agency (Juul 2005; Aarseth 2012; Salter 2014), and genre theory (Mendlesohn 2008; Mendlesohn and James 2012), I survey the franchise and its licensed games through the lens of game design and the rules-bound nature of storyworlds, genres, and games. Examining three games based on George R. R. Martin's novels, the HBO adaptation, or a combination of both, I show how the implementation of these rules can structure and inflect our understanding and

appreciation of the storyworld. First, I looked at *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game*, a series of card games produced by Fantasy Flight Games, which have served as vibrant sites of player community formation for almost twenty years. Despite its heavy abstraction, *The Card Game* utilizes a complex set of rules, which the players themselves must carefully enact, that foreground a strategic back-and-forth of incremental decisions by players pursuing multiple paths to political power. Next, I examined *Game of Thrones*, a digital roleplaying game by Cyanide, which combines the literary and televisual canons in sometimes incoherent ways while foregrounding characters who are archetypal video game protagonists but not archetypal *ASoIaF* protagonists. Finally, I examined *Game of Thrones: A Telltale Game Series*, produced by the now-defunct Telltale Games. Set in the televisual canon, the game goes to great lengths to replicate the aesthetic experiences of the TV series, which places severe limitations on player agency. In this chapter, I showed how licensed games could act as launching pads for community building and fan engagement, and as platforms for competing interpretations of the source texts.

And in Chapter Three, my focus shifted to the fundamental precarity of licensing and its impact on the players themselves, viewed through the lens of a *post*-licensed game, the defunct card game *Warhammer 40,000: Conquest*, produced by Fantasy Flight Games under license from Games Workshop. At the center of this analysis are two competing fan collectives, the Black Crusade League and Team Apoka, both working to stake their claim as the stewards of *Conquest*'s post-life, and their frequently ugly clashes over affective investments and fan ownership of this card game. Utilizing Rebecca Williams' concept of post-object fandom (Williams 2015) and other fan studies literature (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007; Fathallah 2017; Lamerichs 2018), in tandem with scholarship on post-licensed card games (Bisz 2009; Garcia and Duncan 2019) to frame the interviews I conducted with both past and present

players of *Conquest*. I examined the myriad responses to the cessation of a favorite game and the difficulty of supporting a game once the legal licensing framework that allowed its production has ceased. This chapter examined how licensed games could be sites for the contestation and negotiation of what it means when media texts comes to an end. This conflict at the center of my final chapter raised questions of ownership, which I will explore more in this conclusion.

**OWNERSHIP**

In the preceding chapters, I explored a broad set of transmedial games, both analog and digital, across a range of styles and genres. With the exception of *Shadows of the Empire*, made by Lucasfilm subsidiary LucasArts, and the post-licensed era of *Warhammer 40,000: Conquest*, which spawned a highly contested struggle for control of the defunct games by competing groups, the games I have discussed have been produced through licensing. I ended the previous chapter on the question of ownership, noting that *Conquest*'s fan-producers are ultimately in a very similar position to those of the previous producers of the game, Fantasy Flight Game—both were working on a game set in a storyworld, which they likely felt a deep sense of affective attachment for, but which they did not have a legal claim to. Licensed games stage a complex negotiation of who gets to build storyworlds. I return to that question here: Who *owns* a licensed game?

The licensors? As the owners (or representatives of the owners) of the underlying intellectual property, the licensors have a significant stake in a licensed game—both in terms of the monetary value of the revenue generated by the release, but also in terms of how the game may aid in the growth and expansion of the IP. They unambiguously have the legal claim of ownership. As Johnson notes, "control of intellectual property resources became increasingly central to corporate strategy, both in their potential to be protected as proprietary and their

potential to be widely shared and flexibly multiplied on a production level" (Johnson 2013, 4). They also exert control over the continued distribution of the licensed game itself—an issue that is even more fraught with digital releases of games, downloaded from digital storefronts like Steam, the PlayStation Store, and the Nintendo eShop rather than purchased on physical media like discs or cartridges. The website DelistedGames.com tracks the process of games being removed from digital storefronts, and as of August 2019, lists 705 games.[62] Although not all are tied to lapsed licenses for major media properties, many of them are, including multiple entries for games tied to *Marvel Comics*, *Barbie*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Dragon Ball Z*, and *SpongeBob SquarePants* ("All Delisted Games"). We even see this with one company discussed in Chapter Two, Telltale Games, which went bankrupt in late 2018. Since the company's closure, 21 of Telltale's titles have been removed from at least one major digital store ("Telltale Games"). Many of these games received physical releases, so have not been entirely lost, but the issue of the temporarily-limited nature of licensing is one of the most significant issues facing the industry's continued push towards digital purchasing.

The licensees? As the designers, producers, and manufacturers of the licensed game itself, the licensees will frequently feel a tremendous sense of investment in the games they have made, even if their labor is bound by the terms of their licensing contract. Clarke's study of the contract labor behind MMO *Star Wars Galaxy* provides excellent insight into the ways that such labor is frequently framed as a form of enacted fandom, with one interview subject noting how "he has 'come full circle, transitioning from a kid playing with models of *Star Wars* stuff to an adult building models of *Star Wars* stuff' (Clarke 2014, 217). Even if licensed media producers may not count themselves as fans, the creators of the licensed games I have discussed in the

[62] A small number of these titles are eventually "relisted" and made available for purchase again, and frequently (but not always) players who have purchased a delisted title retain the ability to download the software.

previous chapters all experienced a sustained engagement with the properties they were contracted to work with—their investment may have been more professional and affective.

The players? This is one of the central pillars of much fan studies scholarship, charting the innumerable permutations of personal engagement with media texts, “an engagement that visualizes a non-commercial, shared ownership with the media company that holds the commercial, legal property rights” (Shefrin 2004, 273). Throughout my interviews, the players I spoke with staked their affective claims to their games repeatedly and forcefully. This was a key part of the rallying cry posted by Steve, head of the Black Crusade League, on the community’s Facebook page immediately after *Conquest*’s cessation was announced: “I’m not willing to roll over and let *Conquest* die because some business deal between two big companies went sour. […] We still have our cards and it’s up to us to keep this thing alive!” The corporate exigencies of licensing may have ended *Conquest* and innumerable other games, but they live on thanks to the continuing devotion of players.

The answer, of course, is all of the above. As Nicolle Lamerichs notes, “affect helps construct the identity of the fan, which is grounded in an emotional ownership of media content. This emotional ownership is achieved through creative practices, the purchase of objects or memorabilia, and the establishment of social bounds with like-minded individuals” (Lamerichs 2018, 19). Yet these fan practices are always already circumscribed by the legal constraints and corporate structures under which media is produced and distributed. Numerous scholars have documented the shortcomings of licensing (Jenkins 2006; Johnson 2012; Clarke 2009)—my research here is not meant to absolve or excuse licensing, but to foreground how in spite of (or indeed, sometimes because of) these shortcomings, licensed media becomes deeply meaningful to a variety of stakeholders.

## WHAT LICENSED GAMES TELL US ABOUT (TRANS)MEDIA

Throughout this dissertation, I have used licensed games to discuss broader issues of transmediality and worldbuilding. Games, both analog and digital, are excellent settings to examine the creative process of worldbuilding, owing to the specific affordances of games—necessitating the construction of rules-bound worlds of evocative and spatial narratives. Schröter observes "an important structural analogy between games and storyworlds: both are abstract, rule-based models that map relationships between their constituents" (Schröter 2015, 70). Licensing is also rules-bound, mapping relationships between its own constituents: licensors, licensees, and consumers. The legal framework of licensing is neither an albatross around the neck of these productions nor something incidental to their production and consumption. The licensed games I have discussed here are richly textured case studies to examine the complex negotiation between stakeholders, texts, and fans. Licensed games are elaborately layered assemblies of their contexts and meanings, bringing together the narrative trajectories of their storyworld, the production histories of their creation, the affective traces of their fandoms, and the personal and interpersonal dimensions of their play and proliferation.

Building upon prior scholarship on transmedia worldbuilding (Klastrup and Tosca 2004; Wolf 2012; Ryan 2013; Thon 2015; Hassler-Forest 2016; Boni 2017), I have argued that this framework is not only better attuned to analyze licensed game; it is also central to how transmediality functions in the contemporary media moment. The sprawling franchises that dominate the media industries are intrinsically transmedial in nature, expanding across as many media platforms as possible, but we frequently see little of the dispersed and systematic narrative continuity promised by "transmedia storytelling." Instead we see the proliferation of playfully

expansive storyworlds in which to stage recurrent inter-related media texts, as in franchises like *Pokémon*, *Transformers*, and Marvel Comics.

In comics, films, television, games, and other media, Marvel transmedially "repurposes very specific, well-defined, instantly recognizable (and copyrighted) characters, iconographic elements, and even storylines" (Brinker 2017, 213). There is often extensive media-specific narrative continuity, but transmedial narratives are rarer. The closest to a true example of transmedia *storytelling* has been Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), a sub-franchise centered on a series of film starting with 2008's *Iron Man*. The MCU has received extensive academic attention both for the meteoric rise of Marvel Studios as an industry juggernaut and the films' dense intertextuality (Johnson 2012; Harvey 2015; Flanagan, Livingstone, and McKenny 2017). Alongside the films, there are a number of transmedial MCU extensions, including comics set in the continuity, video games based on the films, and several television programs airing on ABC and streaming on Netflix. Despite the marketing buzz of an all-encompassing continuity between these media platforms, the transmedial connections in the MCU are fairly limited and the transference always one-way, with televisual Marvel referencing and reacting to the events of filmic Marvel, but never the reverse (Scott 2017b). Even in film, Marvel properties are not continuous, owing to the complex web of film rights ownership: the *X-Men*, *Wolverine*, and *Deadpool* films have been produced by Fox (see Johnson 2009), while the *Spider-Man* films were produced by Sony.[63] Marvel's transmediality is marked by the extensive development and refinement of its storyworld—or rather, storyworlds, complementary settings that allow the company to evoke the transmedia memory of the mythos, topos, and ethos of Marvel's superheroes. The narrative continuity of transmedia storytelling—"the logistical difficulties

[63] Marvel Studios entered into a deal with Sony in 2015 to co-develop *Spider-Man* films, and Disney and Fox merged in March 2019.

involved in telling connected stories across multiple feature films, let alone multiple media" (Harvey 2015, 80)—would only hamper Marvel and Disney's efforts to maximize the value of their roster of brand-name superheroes.

Transmedia worldbuilding is how franchises grow. The transmedial spread of the iconographic traces of these storyworlds, detached from traditional narrative forms, allows the transmedial world to affectively proliferate in the imaginations of audiences, and this process is central to how these texts are produced and consumed, interpreted and interrogated, played and played with. Licensed games are sites where these worlds are realized and (re)produced in ways that privilege interactivity and immersion. Licensed games allow us to directly play in the storyworld, and their modes of engagements foreground the playful ways we experience and understand the transmedially expansive storyworlds that dominate the media landscape.

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