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Using Literary Theory to Read Games: Power, Ideology, and Repression in Atlus' *Growlanser: Heritage of War*

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For a long time game scholars have been arguing about video games and whether they are games, simulations, narratives, or something else. Today, at least 10 years after the debate began, there are still advocates for two major sides of the argument. Aarseth and other ludologists claim that the field of game studies is a new discipline that should be studied with its own theories, and that narrativists are simply attempting to colonize the growing field of game studies with literary theory and that games should be analyzed in terms of play and rules. On the other hand, compelling arguments have been made in favor of games being narratives to the extent that even Jesper Juul has acknowledged that games do use narratives. Aarseth and others have already published a large body of literature on how to analyze games using certain game-based approaches, and even carried out several analyses on specific video games. However, while all of the pro-narrativist approach arguments are certainly enlightening, and might give the creative mind some ideas, I have yet to read an actual article that applies literary theory to a video game. Furthermore, of the three major works that seem to attempt to apply a literary approach to games – Ian Bogost's *Persuasive Games*, Hilde G. Corneliussen's and Jill Walker Rettberg's *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity*, and Nate Garrelt's *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto* – only one, Bogost's *Persuasive Games*, succeeds in any way, as Walker's and Rettberg's work seems to focus on how *World of Warcraft*, an immensely popular MMO, mimics real life mechanisms in contexts such as economy and cultural organization and Garrelt's work, although at times shows hints of using theory to understand racial representations and other cultural aspects found within the game, dedicates most of its pages to the controversy of *Grand Theft Auto* and how it impacted society or on how the player negotiates meaning through the game.

Certainly, there are some, although not many, articles that work with specific games, just as literary criticism works with specific texts. However, most of these articles analyze aspects of the game other than the narrative content or the theoretical postulates. After reading through several paragraphs of what seems to be promotional material for the *Grand Theft Auto* games, Joris Dormas (2006) proceeds to engage with the interactivity concepts of the game and only superficially mentions what the game might be telling the players in respect to identity. It almost feels like switching the title *Grand Theft Auto* for any other open world game would not impact the effect of the article. In this case, the game is an example for a general idea, as in most game related academia, instead of the focus of the idea being analyzed. Similarly, the reference to *Counter-Strike* in Talmage Wright's *Creative Player Action in FPS Online Video Games* (2002) could have been switched for almost any other FPS and the article would not have suffered. Likewise, most other articles dealing with specific games, except perhaps Greg Smith's *Computer Games have Words*

Too: Dialogue Conventions in Final Fantasy 7 (2002) and *Halo and the Anatomy of the FPS* (2002), don't deal with the games themselves, but with a certain idea or concept, often revolving around gaming, and uses the games as examples. Even out of the two articles that seem to be the exception, one seems to be nothing more than an attempt to give academic praise to the game play wonders of *Halo*. It doesn't explore any ideas or conventions within the game itself. This is far from the expected colonization from the fields of humanities, which focus on texts and ideas found in the texts themselves, and where changing the name of one text for another would result in an academic disaster. This begs the question: is it possible to do a close reading of a game? Is it really possible to apply literary theory to a game and explore the ideas presented in the game successfully? To answer those questions I decided to apply Foucault's and Althusser's ideas on power, ideology, and repression to the game *Growlanser* – specifically to the Peace Maintenance Brigade (PMB), an institution found within the game – to demonstrate that through the exposure of the institutionalization of peace enforced at gunpoint, the inclusion of an all-seeing eye in the form of the PMB's Admonisher, and the active participation of the player in the founding of the PMB and in the furthering of its cause, this specific *Growlanser* game does, in fact, encourage the use of ideological and repressive state apparatuses for the founding of carceral societies.

Growlanser's Heritage of War

Growlanser: Heritage of War is the fifth installment in the *Growlanser* series. It was developed by Career Soft and published by Atlus. Released on September 2007 in North America, the game sported a limited edition case which included a 100-page art book, a multimedia disc including music and artwork from the game, a keychain, three pins, and two collector cards. The game went through a single printing and was then discontinued.

The game play is a mix of standard exploration and a dialogue-centered storyline, and the battle system is a mixture of real time strategy and traditional menu-driven commands, as is usual of the *Growlanser* games. The most interesting aspect of the game is found within the narrative itself, as the game, besides having an intriguing plot, allows the player to speak to the non-playable characters in different ways and make choices that affect the outcome of the game.

Growlanser's plot is divided into five main chapters spanning twenty years, with more chapters being unlocked depending on the course and outcome of the game. The game is set on an island continent which is surrounded by an eerie force field which lets nothing in or out. The continent is overrun by Screapers – biologically engineered monsters – and the three main kingdoms in the continent – Cyrilthia, Grangale, and Neylern, are at war. The game's story opens with Seldous, an explorer who is trying to bring peace to the continent in a nonviolent way, and his childhood friend and lover Vanette. In *Growlanser's* first prologue Seldous is researching the "Paradise Legend", a story that tells that a long time ago there was a kingdom in the island that lived in total peace. During his travels he meets Isaac, an adventurer who wants to put an end to war at all cost. Together with Professor Pernagi they travel the continent in order to find something to put an end to war. Their discovery was an ancient weapon – The Admonisher, a floating eye that rains destruction wherever it

aims. With this weapon Seldous and Isaac found the Peace Maintenance Brigade and force the nations to a peace at gunpoint after demonstrating its power on a number of Grangale soldiers. The PMBs's politics say that if any kingdom should engage in war with another they will be obliterated.

The following three scenarios, in which the player controls Randall, a historian who makes an appearance during Seldous' scenario, General Rockbein, a Neylern general plotting rebellion against Grangale and the PMB, and Fannile, a researcher for the PMB, help to give the player background information on the state of various nations twenty years after Seldous and Isaac.

The main scenario begins roughly ten hours into the game. In this scenario the player controls the main character of the story, a young orphan called Haschen from the village of Warslee, as he is operated by the PMB Haschen receives the ability to weaken Screapers and goes on missions for the PMB which eventually culminate in a colossal battle with the Screaper Queen.

The village of Warslee is under the protection of the PMB. To the PMB staff and all those who live in PMB-protected villages the PMB is a wonderful organization and the Admonisher is a heaven-sent gift, but to the inhabitants of Neylern and Grangale, nations disputing for land in the PMB's conferences, the PMB is nothing more than a nuisance, as these nations would rather march to war than negotiate. It is here where the game demonstrates that it supports the implementation of what Foucault calls the Carceral State. Even though throughout most of the story Krious, Seldous' son, argues that there should be a better way to have peace than at gunpoint, the majority of the characters in the game, and very often the player, begin to think that without the Admonisher peace will be broken and the land will be submerged in war again, as it indeed happens in the latter stages of the game. Although the game ends in a somewhat hopeful note with Rufus, one of the commanding Grangale officers, saying "yes, we could work towards a peaceful world without some form of admonisher-like weapon", it is a doubtful hope. In the end the player is given the idealist notion that it is possible to work towards a peaceful world, but the game does not actually show any of the characters actually doing anything to strive for peace – there is no happily ever after. In fact, should the player unlock Sherris', Rufus', and Zeikwalt's hidden scenarios they will witness nothing more than additional battles, and with all of the kingdoms, including the PMB, still having a large standing army and no sign of the disbanding of said forces at the end of the game it seems doubtful that true peace will be achieved. Because of this it can be argued that *Growlanser's* statement is not really that "a peaceful world can be achieved", but that "for there to be a truly peaceful world someone must force it on people."

Growlanser's heritage is war.

Power, Ideology, and Repression in Atlus' *Growlanser: Heritage of War*

According to Foucault, the ideal prison follows a model "that concentrates all coercive technologies of behavior" (2001a, pp. 1637). This means that a true prison is in itself an ideological state apparatus and a repressive state apparatus at the same time. If

this is the case, then all manifestations of a culture – school, church, government, politics, etc. – are an ideal prison model, as they all use all the 'coercive technologies of behavior' available at their disposal. In all of these institutions individuals are given a certain set of rules to live by, and if those individuals break some of the rules they are punished accordingly, be it by school suspension, exile from the church, or imprisonment. Although this goes against Althusser's vision of state apparatuses, where the repressive state apparatus is composed of some parts of society, such as the army or the police force, and the ideological state apparatuses composed of others, such as school and government, it seems more accurate to say that in a society each node of power represents a single state apparatus which is both repressive and ideological, each aiming for its own goals, and each varying on how much ideology or force to use. Even Althusser agrees that while the repressive state apparatus functions mainly by force and the ideological state apparatus functions mainly by subversive ideology, repressive state apparatuses hold themselves up with, or hide behind, ideology while ideological state apparatuses use force to some extent, sometimes in the form of expulsion or exile. In this case, it is more accurate to say that state apparatuses use varying degrees of repression and ideology depending on circumstances. These state apparatuses can be found in many, if not all, major works of literature. However, they can also be found in other means of narrative, such as film and video games.

In Atlus' game *Growlanser* the player is treated to a representation of a state apparatus being both repressive and ideological, as well as having the coercive qualities of a prison. Because of its narrative and the role the gamer plays in the unfolding of the narrative, the gamer is taught that both repressive and ideological state apparatuses are acceptable to some extent depending on the circumstances, thus strengthening the player's belief in a society where repression might be acceptable – to live in a carceral city is fine.

The Peace Maintenance Brigade is a nationless group founded by Isaac, an explorer who lost his wife to war and wants to put an end to it by whatever means accessible, Seldous, an explorer who wants to bring peace in a nonviolent manner, and Pernagi, a professor who knows about the planet's innate energy, in order to prevent massive war efforts between Grangale, Neylern, and Cyrilthia. The player, as the main character, takes the role of PMB founders Seldous, Isaac, and Pernagi, and later of PMB commanders Haschen and Krious and PMB lead researcher Fannile, among other characters. Through these avatars the player gets to experience the thought processes and points of views of the characters. In other words, just as the characters on screen become extensions of the player, the player becomes extension of the characters (Gee 2003, 2005, 2007).

According to Althusser (2001), when children go to school they learn know how, skills that are useful for different jobs. Furthermore, he argues that in school children also learn the rules of good behavior. This type of systematic brainwashing is seen in *Growlanser's* PMB in two levels. On the surface level, the characters in the game go to the PMB Training Grounds to receive schooling in fields best suited to further the PMB's agenda, such as archeology (in order to explore ruins and discover ancient weapons), zoology (in order to learn how to dominate animals and monsters), and military tactics. A few born with enhanced intelligence are taught biological engineering in order to experiment with the life-force of humans. As they learn these

skills, they are drilled in the PMB's philosophy of "war is bad, we are the keepers of peace, we must use the Admonisher to destroy any opposition." The second level of the proposal in favor of the state apparatus is seen in the player. Players, assuming the role of PMB founders and commanders, take on the view that the PMB is a good thing. The player has become the agent for furthering the PMB's agenda of peace for the benefits of its high ranking officers. In furthering the reach of the PMB, the player has become the capitalist. And why should the player not feel joy when furthering an agenda that is supposed to bring peace to the land? It is here where the PMB's agenda is noticed in full effect.

Although the PMB holds diplomatic meetings between the leaders of the three kingdoms in order to maintain peace, the true reason that the leaders of each kingdom don't declare war on each other is the existence of the Admonisher. The Admonisher is a giant floating machine controlled by the PMB that can obliterate armies and restructure the continent's surface in seconds by firing enormous bursts of energy at single targets. The PMB's peace at gunpoint by means of an all-seeing eye seems to do little for the citizens of the continent who constantly have to deal with Screapers (genetically engineered beasts that feed on humans), a force field surrounding the continent which does not allow for external trade, and a rapidly eroding land that began to rot faster than usual since the founding of the PMB and the launch of the Admonisher. Furthermore, the conferences held at the PMB headquarters seem to ensure that a power shift does not occur instead of actually encouraging change. The player, in the mentality of a PMB founder or commander, accepts this as a way of life – the way it has always been. The player accepts the PMB as the world's sovereign entity and acknowledges it as good under the excuse of war is bad. However, the player disregards the well-being of those outside the PMB, and often of those in the PMB not in close relations to the player's lead characters. It is often the case that a player will rather sacrifice three or four PMB soldiers permanently than sacrifice one of the primary characters during a single event or battle and revive the character afterwards. Whether the reasons for this are strategic or for narrative purposes, the fact remains that those characters closer to the player, who holds the power, will have more benefits than temporary characters.

According to Althusser, ideological state apparatuses "present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions" (2001, pp. 1489). Ideological state apparatuses includes religion, education, family, legal systems, political systems, trade unions, communications, and culture. In *Growlanser*, the PMB is such an institution. It presents itself as an institution that upholds peace. However, this peace is enforced at gunpoint.

The PMB was established in the center of the continent, and the Admonisher floats on the sky atop the highest point of the land, threatening to smite everyone with its laser, as it did Grangale when it was launched. When it was founded, Grangale had just finished an invasion against Neylern, and Cyrilthia had finished a short-scale invasion of the city-states to the west. The PMB's existence froze all the borders, causing an abuse of power from Grangale to Neylern and from Cyrilthia towards the city-states, and not allowing the smaller areas a chance to retake their lands. This results in resentment from all parties towards the PMB. Furthermore, the PMB's politics of not interfering with negotiations ensures that the PMB remains as the sovereign entity in the land. In every conference held, Neylern and the city-states

appeal to the PMB for help, and the PMB responds by turning a blind eye as long as there is no war. This freezing of borders (and taxes from weaker kingdoms to support the PMB unwillingly) ensures that the state apparatus remains in power.

Althusser's further explanations on state apparatuses fit the PMB as well. He further explains that "the state apparatus defines the state as a force of repressive execution and intervention" (2001, pp. 1487). With a self-given authority of executing even kings who order wars and the self-imposed right of being able to obliterate kingdoms, the PMB is nothing short of Althusser's definition. The PMB is indeed a fusion of army, police, courts, prison, school, and church.

Foucault suggests that truth, or at least the idea of truth, is in a way sponsored by whoever holds the power (2001b, pp. 1668.) He continues by arguing that truth is centered in scientific discourse which is backed by political and economic institutions in power. This is also the case with the PMB. The PMB's idea of truth, war is bad, is indeed sponsored simply by the fact that the Admonisher can wipe out any dissention from their way of thought. The PMB is the powerful apparatus that produces (ideological state apparatus) and enforces (repressive state apparatus) their version of truth.

According to Foucault (2001b), one of the results of normalizing the 'truth' spoken by those who hold power is that the power to punish becomes legitimate. Another is continued surveillance. Both of these things are seen in the PMB. Their authority to punish, even to the point where they are allowed (by themselves) to send small ground troops into the cities of other countries, becomes legitimate after the lifting of the Admonisher. The sense of continued surveillance on neighboring countries is, once again, embodied in the floating, all-seeing eye at the center of the continent – the Admonisher.

Finally, Althusser (2001) states that the state apparatus may survive political events which affect the possession of power. This is observed by the end of the game, when the founders of the PMB die, the Admonisher is destroyed, and Krious and Haschen, now the top ranking commanders, set off in order to subvert the leaders of other countries with their ideology of peace through the PMB and diplomacy and the threat of a large, Admonisher-less, yet powerful, army. Even though the union proposed by the end of the game is one where various sovereign states gather, the complete unity of the continent under the PMB seems inevitable, as the PMB officials are appointed as a "best among equals." Whether this peaceful union is best for the continent and the people in it remains to be seen. That tale will be dealt with, possibly, in other *Growlanser* titles. However, the design of the PMB in this specific *Growlanser* game does, in fact, seem to encourage the use of ideological and repressive state apparatuses, at least under certain circumstances.

Closing Comments

In the end, the PMB is not as nice or benign of an organization as it may appear when the game begins. The true nature of the PMB comes to surface thanks to Foucault's and Althusser's theories, and their integration into the game's plot. This shows that thanks to the integration of literary theory into a video game we can

explore ideas present within a game with a level of depth that is not possible to reach without literary theory. The reason for this is that the main function of literary theory is to explore specific ideas presented within specific texts. By applying literary theory to texts one can discover different levels of ideas found within the text. The same is true of applying literary theory to video games. Although this exploration of ideas might not fit the more traditional game studies approach, where a certain gaming aspect, such as interactivity or design, is explored, the only real difference is what we look at – ideas or game play. Neither approach is wrong. If someone wanted to look at the notions of human behavior presented in *Ar Tonelico* then that individual would have to resort to theories of human behavior and sexuality, and probably reference Freud on sexuality related topics and Skinner on behavior related issues; while if someone wanted to look at the Dive System in *Ar Tonelico* that person would have to use a ludologic approach, as suggested by Frasca, Juul, and Aarseth, and talk about levels, accessibility, and progress in the game's design. With so many varied approaches at our disposal we should ask, is it convenient to use literary theory to analyze games? That depends. To do a good analysis might take at least two times playing the game through and a lot of reading of literary theory. Is it worth the effort? Only if you want to find out what the games are really saying.

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