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“On soulless feet we cross the floor...”
The Illusion of Control in *Grim Fandango* and Virtual Spaces

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Compared to the messy, organic landscape of the material world, games provide their players with reliable satisfaction through their clear goals, black-and-white rules, and informative feedback. Cognitive scientist Marvin Minsky argues that “Our connection to the real world is very thin, and our connection with the artificial world is going to be more intimate and satisfying than anything that’s come before” (Minsky). Minsky suggests that the deliberate construction of games satisfies a longing for control that is not satiated by the material world. Gaming, like literature, uses the mechanics of its medium to tell stories. The manner in which a person gains access to and engages with a text is a critical element in how games tell their stories because while many games make significant use of conventions of literary narratives, it’s the added dimension of interactivity that transforms players from readers into co-authors of the narrative. This added dimension allows players to feel like they’re part of the story when in fact, players are—like readers—operating within the very strictly defined limits of the game designers. Minsky’s statement gestures to this: though the virtual world allows users the feeling of control of their surroundings it is a false sense of security for in neither space can a user actually have control. Grim Fandango calls attention to this in a way that questions the construction of the entire virtual space. Even though users can choose what they do in virtual spaces, they are forced to operate within the confines of realms designed by the invisible authors of the game’s code. The illusion of choice essentially blinds users to an assessment of the hidden structure supporting the virtual worlds in which so many of us spend so much of our lives; if readers could act out their personal decisions about finances, friendships, romances, shopping, entertainment, and
travel through their novels and newspapers, it would be critical to understand the narrative voice through which they accessed their texts.

A major aspect of this immersive dynamic in virtual spaces is the avatar, which commonly serves as the player’s surrogate in the game space (the virtual space within which a videogame takes place). The 1998 adventure game *Grim Fandango* by LucasArts uses the protagonist through which the player experiences the story as a Trojan Horse for this illusion of choice. Although players have a certain degree of freedom in moving through the game in a personalized way—exploring the rich details of the game space and interacting with certain non-player-characters purely for the sake of amusement—*Grim Fandango* ultimately always funnels players into facing the harsh limitations of their options in the game. Whereas many games study the implications and ramifications of decisions players make (e.g., if you kill too many innocent rabbits in Klei Entertainment’s game *Don’t Starve*, a monster called Krampus will come and steal your belongings as retribution for your naughty behavior), by narrowing players’ options *Grim Fandango* distances players to lay bare the fact that they have only been given the illusion of choice. The contrast between the joyful, false freedom of exploration and this forceful confrontation exposes how little control a person actually has when operating in this (and all) virtual spaces.

The filter through which all of these effects are experienced is the avatar. An avatar is “a graphic representation...animated by means of computer technology” (Holzwarth 19) or "graphic personifications of computers or processes that run on computers" (Halfhill 96). Note that despite cultural connotations, these descriptions do not tie avatars to exclusively the gaming industry or even representations of actual
people. There are many types of avatars that dictate different degrees of immersion, but an important feature of all avatars is that it is through these incarnations that players interact with the game’s environment and characters. Avatars not only act as mediating gatekeepers through which players access virtual worlds but also—in the case of games—players’ active presence shaping the story from within. Mark Wolf explains that part of what distinguishes the videogame from other narrative media is that it is “the first [medium] to combine real-time game play with a navigable, onscreen diegetic space [and] the first to feature avatars and player-controlled surrogates that could influence onscreen events: real-time user interaction in one machine” (Wolf). This interactivity that a game’s avatar-use allows for makes a story much more tailored to a player’s desires by connecting events that happen in the gamespace to choices directly made by the player through the avatar. In some games this engineered sense of responsibility adds to the illusion of choice and impression of co-authorship a player experiences. Grim Fandango take this potentially intimate relationship between a player and an avatar and uses it against the player in a startling way: the player finds him or herself identifying with the protagonist up until the moment the protagonist forces the player to choose from a set of decisions he or she may not agree with. At this point the illusion is broken and the player, viscerally conscious of him or herself, makes the choice scripted by the game designers.¹

¹ The analogy of online shopping might be useful here. As immersive and enjoyable as the experience of browsing an online shop is designed to be, this immersive enjoyment is part of a deliberate construction that optimizes for users taking the action of adding items to their virtual “shopping carts” and purchasing them; a user might genuinely enjoy the virtual shopping experience so much that they buy more than they would have otherwise bought or enjoy the experience up until the awakening moment they need to get their physical credit card out of their physical wallet and recall the implications of the virtual purchase on the material world.
The word “avatar” comes from Sikh and Hindu myths related to godly incarnation. In her article “Avatar-Space: The Ego Inc.,” Ralitza Petit summarizes that the term avatar is “from the Sanskrit word for ‘descent,’...used to describe the manifestation or appearance of an alternate body- often merging human and animal forms- through which a Hindu deity descends to earth” (Petit 94). Because the Hindu gods couldn’t appear directly to the inhabitants of the physical, mortal world, when the gods need to access the physical realm they used avatars. This historical meaning is not inconsequential to the modern usage of the term avatar in gaming because, in a crisp parallel, players literally enter game spaces using the bodies of their avatars. In a sense, just like a god descending to the world needs the help of a physical form, the player too needs the help of a virtual form in order to access the gamespace. The avatar is this mediating element between the gods and humans, humans and game programs: all entities need a conduit in order to cross the boundaries of consciousness (divine to material world, material world to virtual) and in Grim Fandango the player’s conduit is a deeply flawed one. While the player does achieve a sense of immersion through this imperfect protagonist, it’s often these imperfections of character that the game designers exploit to distance the player from the protagonist.

The first usage of the term “avatar” for an on-screen virtual representation of a player was in 1985 by computer game designer Richard Garriott. His game Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar dealt with serious, subtle ethical questions that he wanted players to confront deeply. It’s for this reason that he adopted the Hindu concept of an avatar to encourage users to interact with his game with their actual identities and personal codes being tested and called into question (O’Neill 41). Because many modern gamers
specifically choose avatars that are very unlike themselves (different gender, temperament, values, strengths, etc.) as a way to escape from their reality-laden lives, it’s particularly interesting that Garriott specifically introduced the term “avatar” to merge the material world and the gamespace. But even before the term “avatar” was used in gaming, a user’s representation in the virtual space began steadily evolving in the direction of projecting players’ bodies into the gamespace with the advent of early arcade games like *Pong* (1972) where the representation of the player in the game is a paddle, *Space Invaders* (1978) where the representation was a small turret, and the first representation of a user as an organic life-form in *Pac-Man* (1980). Zach Waggoner writes,

> The concepts of ego-investing in an avatar and of seeing avatars as the ambassadors of agency, provoking self-confrontation are interesting ones. It seems to me that these concepts, used by different theorists to try to explain the relationship between a user and her videogame avatar, are all related to one important concept: identity. How is human identity formed? (Waggoner 12)

The idea that Waggoner introduces, that avatar formation is closely related to the formation of human identity, comes to the foreground in games like *Grim Fandango*, which presuppose that the decisions we make are the foundational blocks of constructing our identities in the material world. *Grim Fandango* uses the disparity of decision-making in the material world and a virtual one as a tool to alert the player to the constructed nature of the game, and hence to interrupt the accustomed immersiveness of the gamespace to create a more critical, conscious mode of gaming. Without a conscious understanding of the virtual context within which an avatar exists, players (and users) are more likely to inadvertently accept scenarios or decisions they would eschew in the material world without an immersive, suggestive context to psychologically guide them.
Critical to the moments of alienation in the game are those of immersion. In an interview with *Grim Fandango* creator Tim Schafer, Schafer is noted to have said that while in the beginning of the game “the character will care about things that the player will not necessarily care about,” as the game progresses, players start to “ego-invest, they share the motivations of the character” (Pearce 9). This visceral connection between the material and the virtual is not new, but in what way does a player actually enter a given gamespace? Many theorists of play argue that it’s only through an inextricable connection to the physical world that immersion via avatars is possible—that the player necessarily must bring part of their identity and experience into the gameworld with them. Bob Rehak explains:

> Movement back and forth across the border separating self from other might therefore be considered a kind of liminal play. We create avatars to leave our bodies behind, yet take the body with us in the form of codes and assumptions about what does and does not constitute a legitimate interface with reality—virtual or otherwise...The worlds we create—and the avatorial bodies through which we experience them—seem destined to mirror not our wholeness, but our lack of it. (Rehak 123-4)

In this way, Rehak describes how players map their own rules for decision-making onto avatars and, though their body sits, unmoving and silent, in front of their computer, they transport their whole body of agency into the avatar. Rehak suggests that this is precisely what makes immersion in virtual spaces potentially dangerous, because virtual spaces—though they can have implications in the material world—are not the material world, they have been virtually constructed. Rehak seems to draw on Jacques Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage: if we imagine the screen as Lacan’s mirror and the avatar as the reflected self, then “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” allows for the player to identify with the avatar (Lacan 503). When a player wants to explore a room down the hall, he or she instructs the avatar to go.
avatar responds by walking or running there and the player experiences the room down
the hall via the avatar’s physicality in the gamespace (a first-person-shooter explores a
gamespace with a gun—Grim Fandango explores the gamespace with a flawed
character). Once this process has started it feeds on itself—as players get more
comfortable in acting their desires in the gamespace, their goals increasingly align with
the avatar’s; when shoppers first experience a new online shopping platform, they
hesitantly navigate around the space. Once they have gained a certain degree of
comfort with the platform, they are able to engage with the constructed goal of the
platform, to buy items.

Nicola Green echoes some of this too when he explains that even when players
are fully immersed in a virtual world, they’re not actually “disembodied” at all. Rather, all
of the experiences are being compared to or filtered through the players’ physical, non-
virtual experiences that already took place. Therefore these virtual, game-world avatars
actually require physical, non-virtual experiences and identity to exist as referents
(Green 59-60). This supports the idea that players instinctively compare their game
space decision-making to decision-making in the material world. This may also be why
so many online interactions are modeled on physical actions and objects (e.g. Google
“Hangouts,” a filing system graphically represented by folders, or representation of the
mouse on the screen as a finger which uses the tip of the finger to point out to the
clickable object).

The close relationship of a player to an avatar is also not new to storytelling;
prose fiction has long made use of the reader’s natural inclination to identify with a
story’s protagonist or narrator. Identification with the character telling the story means
that the player or reader must engage very closely with the perspective of that character. While agreement with that perspective is not guaranteed, the element of identification makes it far more likely that a sympathy with that perspective will occur. This is one of the reasons literature is so impactful—when all facts and experiences of a narrative are filtered through the perspective of another person or character the world is presented in a slightly different light. The differences in this new perspective, when compared to the reader’s own experience, help the reader or player understand their material world better. By introducing the game element of choice which inserts players into the narrative as an element of the story, a game also helps players better understand themselves. Instead of just examining the environment and non-player-characters of the game, players can also see and therefore reflect on their own involvement and impact in the game. In the case of *Grim Fandango*, the player directly accesses the protagonist’s perspective by selecting what he says and what he does from a menu of options available based on the protagonist’s predilections. In presenting only the things that the protagonist is willing to do, *Grim Fandango* restricts the player based on the protagonist’s flawed character; the protagonist’s weaknesses form the entire universe the player inhabits and is reflected in the lack of better choices available to the player.

Before an introduction to the game itself, it’s important to understand adventure games and what makes them (and specifically *Grim Fandango*) so relevant to a larger conversation about user behavior in virtual spaces. An adventure game is a game in which the player takes on the role of the protagonist in an interactive story the progression of which is driven by exploration and puzzle-solving. Thanks to adventure
gaming’s focus on narrative (compared with sports games, racing games, and first-person shooters), they’re also traditionally marked by rich atmospheres and character development which is part of the enjoyment of this kind of game. It’s also one of the reasons that adventure games are not typically designed for multiple players—it’s less about competition with non-player-characters or friends and more about engagement with the story. Adventure games typically employ two primary literary techniques to motivate the player: plot hooks—the “unanswered questions...that the player feels compelled to answer,” usually set up via backstory and cutscenes (short animated clips that ‘cut away’ from the interactive portion of the game that explain the story)—and emotional proximity—the “empathy and identification the player feels toward his or her avatar in a game” (Dickey 251).

The earliest example of an adventure game is widely considered to be Colossal Cave Adventure, which was released in 1977 (Alenda 61-62). The game is played entirely in the command line of a computer and resembles a conversation between the

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.run adven
WELCOME TO ADVENTURE!!!  WOULD YOU LIKE INSTRUCTIONS?

yes

SOMEBODY NEARBY IS COLOSSAL CAVE, WHERE OTHERS HAVE FOUND FORTUNES IN TREASURE AND GOLD, THOUGH IT IS DISCERNED THAT SOME WHO ENTER ARE NEVER SEEN AGAIN. MAGIC IS SUID TO WORK IN THE CAVE. I WILL BE YOUR EYES AND MINDS. DIRECT ME WITH COMMANDS OF 1 OR 2 WORDS. I SHOULD WARN YOU THAT I LOOK AT ONLY THE FIRST FIVE LETTERS OF EACH WORD, SO YOU WILL HAVE TO ENTER "SOUTH" AS "S" TO DISTINGUISH IT FROM "SOUTH". (SHOULD YOU GET STUCK, TYPE "HELP" FOR SOME GENERAL HINTS. FOR INFORMATION ON HOW TO END YOUR ADVENTURE, ETC., TYPE "INFO").

THIS PROGRAM WAS ORIGINALLY DEVELOPED BY WILLIE CRUZBERG. MOST OF THE FEATURES OF THE CURRENT PROGRAM WERE ADDED BY DON ROBES (DON'S CT-13). CONTACT DON IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, ETC.

YOU ARE STANDING AT THE END OF A ROAD BEFORE A SMALL BRICK BUILDING. AROUND YOU IS A FOREST. A SMALL STREAM FLOWS OUT OF THE BUILDING AND DOWN A CULVY.

east

YOU ARE INSIDE A BUILDING, A SMALL HOUSE FOR A LARGE SPRING. THERE ARE SOME KEYS ON THE GROUND HERE.

THERE IS A SHINY BRASS LAMP NEARBY.

THERE IS FOOD HERE.
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game and the player: the game delivers prompts to which players can respond with typed commands like “go left” or “get lamp”. The game then delivers a prompt explaining the effect of the action or why the action wasn’t performed. There were no visual aids to help players picture the world they were “in,” just the text to inspire imagination and suggest or hint at possible moves available to players. *Colossal Cave Adventure* is the genetic link between a traditional form of literature like a novel and the modern computer or video game. This close relationship between adventure games and narrative fiction makes adventure games a particularly rich place to study player agency as it is the main element added to the experience of storytelling (as opposed to, say, a medium like a racing game which has altogether different goals than player engagement with a narrative). *Grim Fandango* is sometimes considered one of the last, great adventure games because it was literally one of the last adventure games made by a big game company in the 90s as the genre lost broad consumer-appeal. It used boundary-pushing 3D technology (and even came up with some technological innovations of its own), used rich and nuanced characters, had a very popular sense of humor, and—most importantly—it dealt with mature themes related to the non-virtual, material world: *Grim Fandango* at times paints a very dark picture of the nature of humanity from its portrayal of crime and corruption to infidelity, exploitation, and addiction. Because games allow players to practice and master skills relevant to life within a safe, rewarding context, a game like *Grim Fandango* that allows the player to engage with difficult issues tied to the material world is particularly compelling. While it’s certainly not the only game to do this (*Grand Theft Auto* on socioeconomic stratification,
Typically, adventure games use what is called an “agent” as an avatar. An agent is a kind of avatar, but not all avatars are agents. The main difference is that with an avatar, the user has control over the evolution of characteristics it embodies (different strengths, weaknesses, and dispositions) whereas an agent is a fleshed out character that can be used, but not changed by the player. Veteran game designer Eddie Dombrower explains that in the case of an avatar,

> The player assumes a persona that changes over time. The persona is assigned a range of physical and other attributes that change over time. These attributes also change as a result of the user’s actions. The art of playing RPGs lies in mastering the complex relationships.” (Dombrower 31)

Some great examples of these avatars can be found in *World of Warcraft*, *The Sims*, *Master of Orion*, and *The Elder Scrolls*—players in these games can select from a rich tree of traits and skills when setting up their characters and can evolve them over the course of the game. Whether players chooses to depict themselves as closely as possible, idealized versions of themselves, or something completely different is part of the fun of the game. This latitude to craft something as intimate as an avatar extends to other virtual representations of the self like social media, but this too is just an illusion of choice: despite a carefully-curated selection of photos depicting a desired personal brand, the reality of the life behind the image remains. Because of the manipulability of the attachment users feels with their avatars, this mechanic has become popular not only in gaming but in other virtual representations of a user like in commerce where an

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2 One recent notable exception is *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016) about a family’s loss of their child which famously used the adventure game genre’s emotional proximity, interactivity, and immersion to incorporate the player deeply in the family’s experience of grief.
advertising campaign might create a virtual approximation of the user to target “the consumer's self-concept” to more effectively sell to them (Sirgy 331-332), social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter via curated content, photos, and profile pictures), entertainment (e.g., user profiles on Netflix), and travel (e.g., user ratings on Uber).

Because the player can never play *Grim Fandango* as anyone other than the protagonist exactly as the game designers envisioned him, he can be described as an agent because he does not have the changeable qualities Dombrower describes. His personality, history, and trajectory are already set and do not change—instead the player is presented with choices and the ability to explore, but all within the confines of what is already in the primary character’s nature to do. For example, if the protagonist doesn’t feel like going to a particular place you click on or doesn’t feel like talking to a character that you try to make him speak with, he’ll just tell you he doesn’t feel like it.

This “agent” kind of avatar is useful in a discussion about decision-making in gaming because it eliminates the variable of how someone might be playing the game. For example, in a game like *World of Warcraft*, someone might be playing as a braver, nobler version of themselves (or perhaps as someone more risk averse, evil, selfless, etc.) In these cases the player still “is” the avatar since they are driving the actions the avatar takes even though the avatar is behaving in a way that might be distinct from the player’s actual values or personality. In the case of *Grim Fandango*, the player “becomes” the protagonist in some ways and resists integration in others, but it’s the protagonist that’s responsible for the decisions in the gamespace (which is lucky because he doesn’t always do things the player would approve of). It’s this controlled
identification with this specific flawed protagonist that the game developers can take advantage of later—if players in Grim Fandango had the ability to craft their own avatars, the additional element of how closely players identified with their avatars would cloud the mechanic of alienation later in the game.

As for the depiction of these avatars, there are a few different depiction styles that promote different levels of self-identification and therefore, different degrees of immersion in a given virtual space. The first distinction is that of point of view (POV). The two traditional avatar POV styles are either first-person POV or third-person POV. In first-person POV a player sees “through the eyes” of the avatar. In many cases, only the hands of the avatar are visible on the screen during gameplay—if anything at all is visible. In third-person POV (the style Grim Fandango uses), a player can see much or all of the avatar depicted on the screen. While first-person might seem like the most natural candidate for self-identification since the player naturally fills in him or herself for the avatar, some theorists suggest that however flawed or unrealistic third-person POV avatar may look, it makes it easier for players to picture their avatars in the gamespace and this is what promotes immersion more (Waggoner 74-77). Most avatars in adventure gaming are third-person, which makes sense not only for the sake of immersion but also for the sake of a carefully constructed story—if every player could fill in their own version of a character, the nuanced conversation options or relationships with non-player-characters wouldn’t make sense.

The first thing a player will notice in Grim Fandango is that everyone is a skeleton, including Manuel “Manny” Calavera—the protagonist and avatar for the player. This is because the entire game takes place in the Land of the Dead—a limbo-
like world in between the Land of the Living and the Land of Eternal Rest (or something like hell if you were a terrible person) that it takes four years to cross.

Manny Calavera is a low-level office worker in the Department of Death (the DOD) which means that he’s not allowed to start his journey to the Land of Eternal Rest until he’s worked off his time—a penance for whatever sins he committed when he was alive. As an employee of the DOD, Manny’s job is to sell travel packages to newly-deceased souls based on the merits of their life to help them cross the Land of the Dead more quickly and safely. He can only sell the best, expensive packages (and get a good commission off of them) to people who earned them because they were morally good in their life. Manny can’t seem to get anyone good compared to his nun-reaping office nemesis.

Manny slowly begins to uncover corruption in the Land of the Dead—the newly-deceased good souls are being cheated out of their coveted travel packages by the nefarious, crooked, and well-connected who have chosen to stay in the Land of the Dead to make a profit selling the stolen goods rather than face the potential hell they’ve
earned. When the player solves the first big puzzle and manages to help Manny reap a devout humanitarian named Mercedes Colomar, Manny accidentally lets her slip through his fingers unaided (her travel package has been stolen—it’s not waiting for her) and she leaves on foot to cross the Land of the Dead. Manny decides to abandon his post and go after her.

In the beginning of the game Manny acquires a sidekick named Glottis (a benevolent demon who lives in the Land of the Dead), who becomes his best friend and accompanies him throughout the whole game. Manny’s journey will take him from the bustling city of El Marrow, through the Petrified Forest, to the Casablanca-esque port city of Rubacava, across the Sea of Lament, all the way to the temple gate of the Land of Eternal Rest, and back to El Marrow for a final showdown with the boss who orchestrated the scam. The whole journey takes Manny four years (uncoincidentally the same amount of time it takes a soul to cross the Land of the Dead without the benefit of a Department of Death travel package earned by good deeds).
The game is a 3D point-and-click adventure game. The player navigates Manny around the 3D environment and interacts with objects and people by clicking on them. Each puzzle the player faces has one unique solution, but that solution might involve handing a certain item to a non-player-character, selecting the right conversation option on a particular non-player-character, or moving an object to the right place. Each puzzle the player successfully completes unlocks more story and progresses the player further towards their ultimate goal of bringing down the boss and saving Mercedes Colomar.

Overall, the game is quite difficult, which has the simultaneous effects of enhancing the sense of accomplishment upon puzzle completion and keeping the player immersed in the challenges in front of them. The level of difficulty is mitigated by the game’s redeeming qualities like its humor and rich story, but overall it’s also a pleasure aesthetically to spend time in the Land of the Dead, a connection of the disparate worlds of mythical, sacred pre-Columbian Mexico and the more familiar corruption in 1930’s New York: the whole feel of the architecture, art, and music of Grim Fandango reflects the synthesis of film noir and Mexican folklore; skeletal gold embellishments on skyscrapers go well with a big band soundtrack accompanied by pan flutes (over three hours of original orchestral music was written and recorded for the game). The visual feast makes it easy for players to immerse themselves in the world and “get lost” in the exploration, which is key to the orchestrated moments of alienation. Grim Fandango was one of the most detailed, expensive, funny, and poignant adventure games ever made, which not only makes it a wonderful exemplar of the adventure game medium, but also a great opportunity to examine the deliberately selected mechanics that usher the player through the story.

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3 Navigation is variable based on the gaming system (arrows, WASD, gamepad, clicking, joystick, etc.)
The cities, sea, and forest of the Land of the Dead represent *Grim Fandango’s* “gamespace.” In his book *Gamer Theory*, McKenzie Wark uses Plato’s Cave as an analogy to explain the gamespace and a player’s relationship to it. In Plato’s Cave, a collection of prisoners have been held captive since birth. They have been restrained in such a way that they can only see the wall of the cave and the shadows cast upon it. Plato’s Cave also describes how an escaped prisoner will incorporate the new information about the world outside the cave and this will become the “real world.” Once a prisoner has been freed, they can never accept the shadows on the cave wall as their reality anymore. In *The Republic*, Plato wonders, “...if the cave-dwellers had established, down there in the cave, certain prizes and distinctions for those who were most keen-sighted in seeing the passing shadows, and who were best able to remember what came before, and after, and simultaneously with that, thus best able to predict future appearances in the shadow-world, will our released prisoner hanker after these prizes...?” (Plato 243). Wark’s suggestion is that playing a game is an agreement to go into a cave—to accept a simpler version of reality—in order to experience the joy of mastery. Everything the player sees on the screen when playing the game constitutes the reality they’ve agreed to emotionally invest in. This is one theory of a gamespace, and one that connects nicely to the larger argument about other virtual spaces—virtual spaces are constructed and stripped down representation of the material world. For example, a social media platform may reflects some elements of “real” life (photos of things that physically exist, actual opinions expressed by friends) but it is obscured by algorithms that prioritize popular posts, it limits the kind of information that can be expressed and in what way, and it delivers it to the user without any of the “real world”
stimuli. Gamespaces and virtual spaces in this way might be considered “separate” from the material world and yet both paradoxically capitalize on (and require) physical experiences.

No matter how foreign a gamespace may seem (whether it depicts a clay world like *The Neverhood* or the physics-defying floating islands in *World of Warcraft*’s Halaani Basin), this reliance on the skills needed in the material world—and therefore connection to the material world—is key. Johan Huizinga wrote, “All play means something” (Huizinga 1) and in order to describe how play relates to the material world, he describes a safe sandbox space that he refers to as a “magic circle” that is not part of the material world but “a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own” (Huizinga 8, 10). In his book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, Ian Bogost explains that,

...play helps constitute social and cultural functions of great gravity, according to Huizinga, including religion, politics, and warfare. Huizinga remains conflicted to the end on the interrelation between play and seriousness. As such, it is not surprising that scholars, business people, and developers thought they had fallen upon something new in “reuniting” seriousness and play. (Bogost 55)

It is in this bridging of the material world and play from within the safe confines of the magic circle that players can comfortably engage with elements of the material world in an altered or simple version of reality: first-person shooter games like *Halo, Call of Duty*, or *Overwatch* incorporate strategy—which weapon to use, which area to attack from, etc. Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft, Guild Wars*, or *EverQuest* incorporate skills like trading, communication, and teamwork. Adventure games like *Grim Fandango, Myst*, or *The Secret of Monkey Island* incorporate interpersonal puzzle-solving—how to motivate someone, how to use the objects around you to manipulate your environment. Even a game like *Tetris* that
doesn’t seem at all connected to life in the material world requires skills like spatial organization and fast reaction time. In this way, people who play games (or read literature) don’t reject the material world, but instead agree to temporarily release their attachment on the material world for a moment and head into a cave for the pleasure of mastery. People can never forget the material world completely, but the narrowing of focus serves the purpose of allowing for enjoyable skill-building and mastery that can be used in the material world.

In her book *Reality is Broken*, Jane McGonigal explains why games are such a pleasurable way to build skills. She writes,

...as [gamers] devote more and more of their free time to game worlds, the real world increasingly feels like it’s missing something...the real world just doesn’t offer up as easily the carefully designed pleasures, the thrilling challenges, and the powerful social bonding afforded by virtual environments. Reality doesn’t motivate us as effectively. Reality isn’t engineered to maximize our potential. Reality wasn’t designed from the bottom up to make us happy...Reality, compared to games, is broken. (McGonigal 3)

As McGonigal suggests, the role of games and literature is not to remove a person from the material world, but to allow them to hone skills used in the material world and be rewarded for it. With the rampant use of killing, hurting, stealing, etc. in games this might be an alarming statement, but morality has a slightly different meaning in a gamespace (speaking, specifically, about single player games rather than networked ones).\(^4\) Because nothing portrayed on the screen is “real,” no one is actually being harmed or cheated and so the rules of morality do not extend to them, no matter how realistic they may feel. Many games take advantage of this by creating worlds in which

\(^4\) Networked games are multiplayer games like *Super Smash Brothers* (or massively multiplayer like *World of Warcraft*) that facilitate person-to-person interaction. Because of this intimacy, in games like these there is the possibility of inflicting emotional harm on a physical person as opposed to just a non-player-character.
players can play out immoral scenarios beyond reprimand and consequence. Wark describes it thus:

The gamer is not really interested in faith, although a heightened rhetoric of faith may fill the void carved out of the soul by the insinuations of gamespace. The gamer’s God is a game designer. He implants in everything a hidden algorithm. Faith is having the intelligence to intuit the parameters of this geek design and score accordingly. All that is righteous wins; all that wins is righteous. (Wark 13)

Wark reiterates that not all games are inherently moral or about moral topics—that’s up to the game designers. In the case of Grim Fandango, doing the right thing in the right way (or, specifically, being aware that Manny is doing the right thing in the wrong way) is a theme used not to dictate moral behavior (at times these transgressions are used to provide humor), but designed to alienate the player from Manny. Decisions the player and Manny take together feel simultaneously natural as the player adopts some of Manny’s identity and goals as well as selfish or callous when he takes action that test the player’s comfort level. While many games offer players options from which they can choose how to act—Grim Fandango purposefully deprives players of many choices in order to highlight the lack of control they actually have. The game’s self-conscious morality is used as a tool not to teach morality but to highlight the differences between Manny and the player.

In addition to morality, time is also used as a mechanism to tease the player with the comfort of the familiar only to rip it away: while many gamespaces do not reflect a realistic concept of time with days that never end, requiring no sleep of the player, and no gradient shifts in the light (like in Age of Empires, Thief, Child of Light, or Myst), some respect them quite closely with a day/night cycle as a mechanic to drive gameplay (like Don’t Starve, The Sims, and Minecraft). Grim Fandango passes time in a far more nuanced way: the game is divided into four separate days that each occur one year
apart. This experimental mechanic of discontinuous time breaks the comfort of realism and the sense of immersion—when *Grim Fandango* jerks players from year to year it reminds them that even though they feel in control of the protagonist, they do not control the gamespace. This mechanic also inverts the theme of haunting and calls attention to the fact that players bridge the physical and the virtual dimensions when acting through Manny: each day coincides with the Day of the Dead celebration (in Spanish, “Dia de los Muertos”). Historically, on the Day of the Dead the strict division between the world of the living and the dead becomes permeable. Just as the dead can on this one day visit the land of the living, so too can the player access *Grim Fandango’s* Land of the Dead—or, more specifically, access Manny Calavera. *Grim Fandango* is therefore very self-consciously a glimpse into a world that humans (“the living”) should not normally have access to. The Day of the Dead trope subtly suggests that the player and Manny are not supposed to be connected but are through a mystical yearly loophole. This is an inversion of haunting because even though Manny is the one who is “dead,” the player visits his world—another reminder that the player doesn’t belong in the gamespace despite how comfortable it may sometimes seem. It’s easy to see why most virtual spaces would *not* want to call attention to this divide: reminding users that they are not actually spending time with their friends on a social media platform might encourage them to leave their computers. The player and Manny work together across a metaphysical divide (physical and virtual) to take down the corruption that taints the worlds of the living and the dead in a way that reflects the larger problem of a false sense of control inside a system, interface, or gamespace designed around guiding your actions.
Another important framing element used in *Grim Fandango* is that of fate. There’s nothing players can choose to do that will impact how the game unfolds; the story is set—there is only one possible ending. Visually this is represented through a progress mural that players see getting filled in as they uncover more of the narrative. It looks like an ancient gold carving which reinforces the “set” nature of the story, which undermines the illusion of co-authorship. This grand, gold carving also sets up the narrative as a grand one like an epic myth. While Manny is obviously not a larger-than-life mythical figure, setting him up in this way via this mural suggests that no one ever is, which lays the groundwork for his relatability as a character. The mural is also stylistically representative of the whole game; it is a seemingly ancient, cracked, gold carving in what would elsewhere be an incongruous art deco style and it depicts things the player has experienced including the magical (the spiders from the petrified forest, the flaming beavers, the great cats, and the Sea of Lament) as well as the more modern (dice, the luxury cruise liner, the El Marrow city skyline, an ashtray, and even a stylized LucasArts logo).

In the face of fate, players don’t have any control at all but it feels like they do because all of the options players are presented with are things that Manny is ready to consider. Manny would never do something that he felt uncomfortable doing (as
evidenced by his response to some player commands: “I don’t really want to do that”), and all conversation options the player is presented with are always things he can say. This means that all of the options the game directly offers for conversation are all things Manny would say and that will not influence the outcome of the game; the game makes use of this element of fate to demonstrate that Manny’s instincts (the menu of things he’s willing to do or say) in some cases are all unkind when they perhaps don’t need to be. By doing this, the game implies players have a whole menu of options while simultaneously calling attention to fact that Manny not only can’t impact the trajectory of the game, but that even within this boundary, he doesn’t consider acting in anything but an immoral way; though he has the agency and ability to treat others with respect, he doesn’t take advantage of the opportunity. By forcing players to make decisions like this, the game allows players to see their own lack of control through Manny’s forfeit of his. The player might take this as a gentle (or not so gentle reminder) that in virtual spaces even outside of gaming you can choose who are you—for better or for worse.

Though he is fighting a moral fight, Manny himself is a complex character. He is essentially good with a sprinkling of deception; though Manny cares about his friends, doesn’t want to harm anyone, likes to see justice served, and stands up for the little guy, he’s also not above rigging his casino, getting his alcoholic best friend drunk, faking deaths, stealing pantyhose under false pretenses, and locking waitstaff in pantries. The thematic focus on morality in Grim Fandango forces the player to be self-conscious in making choices in the gameworld via the imperfect, morally flawed character of Manny Calavera. Ian Bogost explains in his book Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames that “(v)ideogames are an expressive medium. They represent how real
and imagined systems work. They invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them...we must strive to understand how to construct and critique the representations of our world in videogame form” (Bogost vii). That players ultimately unlock the full story suggests the lack of import behind their individual choices in the game. How players steer a conversation in Grim Fandango is a good representation of this; though the conversations can’t alter the course of the game (all actions can only move the narrative forward or harmlessly waste time), players can only choose from a limited selection of pre-written options in order to have any conversations at all. When non-player-character Glottis is feeling down because he’s too big to drive the small company cars, the player can choose from a set menu of statements for Manny to say: “You’re not too big! You’re just right!” or “You’re not too big. You just have a self-image problem,” or “You’re not too big. The cars are just too small,” or “Okay, see you later, Chicken.”
Selecting any of these will elicit a different response from Glottis (ranging from proud of his large size to cowering unhappily in the face of the rules) and result in completely new conversation options for Manny. If a conversation path that the player starts is not critical to the story, the player will often find the conversation winds its way back to the initial options where the remaining unexplored options will be waiting. Whether or not the player can see that the ‘right’ answer to progress the story is the third one (once Glottis blames the cars instead of himself or the rules for his inability to drive he volunteers to make some alterations to the simple black town car), often the player will exhaust all other conversation options first just for the enjoyment of experiencing or uncovering the amusing dialogue. There is no feeling of risk in this since the player cannot make any decisions that will derail the story—the player enjoys the safety of only having choices that will further or have no tangible impact on the story progression. Without any possible negative fallout from decisions, player decisions are engineered to carry little meaning, and the player should wonder why.

This lack of consequences in making decisions allows the player (via Manny) to say or do hurtful things to other characters. A great example of this is when Manny takes a brief trip to the Land of the Living—it’s the only time the player gets to see it. It’s a self-referential moment because although the three individuals you see are depicted with skin, they are stylistically 2D and made of what looks like a paper collage. This not only makes it distinct from the Land of the Dead that Manny exists in, but gestures to the medium shift between the material world and the virtual one. When the player tries to interact with a living person, the person’s face changes from the static smile they had before to a grimace of fear, prompting Manny to say “Scaring the living is technically
against the rules, but we all do it.” The player can then choose to go and scare the other two living humans as well despite the fact that it’s a waste of time. When Manny crosses the boundary from the Land of the Dead to the Land of the Living, it mimics the way the player crosses the border from the material world to the virtual. As such, when Manny acknowledges that he is ignoring the rules that apply to him, players might also consider that upon entering a virtual world through Manny, their own codes are put aside in favor of Manny’s (or, entering a virtual space can, for many, signal that a different standard of behavior may be applied). Additionally, that the game designers chose to make the Land of the Living so garish (both visually and musically distinct and harsh compared to the rest of the game) makes this a moment of Brechtian estrangement; the Land of the Living is an uncomfortable depiction of the dimension the player supposedly plays Grim Fandango from, so by calling attention to the separation between the worlds that the player can drift between in their ghost-like role, the game designers offer it as a question as to whether or not these lands are governed by different rules. The lands look and feel completely different, but if the player identifies reality more easily in the Land of the Dead, then what makes the Land of the Living so strange to the player now? This brief passage between the lands suggests that the player may falsely rely on a modern illusion of separation of values between the material world and the virtual one (e.g., school bullying online is just as real as school bullying in person) and that choices in a virtual world can carry as much weight as ones in the material world.
This recalls the earlier discussion of why games are so satisfying; there are some things that exist in both games and the material world that make games relevant (Huizinga’s “all play means something”), but the gamespace constructions necessitate some simplifications. Fredric Jameson analogously undresses the genre of fantasy fiction by explaining that “the organization of fantasy around the ethical binary of good and evil” is rather too simple a delineation and does not reflect reality (Jameson, 58). It’s precisely this stripping down that makes games pleasurable in their straightforwardness and safe in their separateness.

Building on this, Kevin O’Neill explains that it is a “distinguishing feature of every computer game narrative...that it puts ‘you’—the player—into the narrative itself as an actor, so that ‘you’ become a character both engaging in and, to some extent, creating the story that the game is telling” (O’Neill 41). Players get to see how their/Manny’s conversations would go in a number of different configurations which is entertaining and helps craft the sense that the players are in control. When the game models many conversation options it is—on the surface—another puzzle and another avenue for
entertainment, yet there is an additional level present demonstrating that all conversations contain choices. Because all of these options are “safe,” they are not really choices at all. Each choice represents an imitation of the material-world act of making a choice, but there is nothing to hold players back from enjoying any of the conversation options even if they may be slightly offensive or hurtful. In *Grim Fandango* players are insulated from the effects of their actions (and any critique by non-player-characters) by the mediating force of Manny, through whom all decisions are funneled. It is on this ground that I am disregarding the moral content contained in the player’s decision-making in exchange for an examination of the illusion of control that is purposefully cultivated and then broken in *Grim Fandango* through the avatar of Manny. Though people may feel in control of actions they take in virtual spaces, the constructed presentation of those choices undermines the truth that choices have to be manufactured by someone too.

If we consider a virtual space that fully envelops and immerses people to be an example of Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk (a work in which all the elements come together harmoniously to cultivate an immersive experience), then *Grim Fandango* must first cultivate this immersive experience before it can distance players from it. The game designers often introduce a game element in order to undermine it; in order to understand this dynamic in the game, one might consider the following three examples.

The first immersive game element the game constructs and then undermines is that the protagonist is imperfect, which makes him relatable. Despite his flaws he manages to bring down corrupt actors, which suggests that one doesn’t even need to be untouchably good in order to affect goodness in the world. The player is supposed to
like him and enjoy his actions even without knowing his basic background information; it doesn’t matter where Manny came from or what he did in the past. The player forgives him his trespasses and enjoys spending time with him. One example of when this identification is undermined is a conversation Manny has with an old fling—a security guard named Carla. Manny needs to get her metal detector from her and after convincing her to give him a “strip search” in the back room, she begins to tell a long, meandering story that requires no input from Manny. The three conversation options the player has always include two meaningless contributions that don’t engage with Carla genuinely and do not stem the hilarious flow of Carla’s story (things like “Mmm-hmmm,” “Oh, really?” “That’s interesting,” “Never a big fan of prunes,” and “You don’t say?”) and a third option which always has to do with the metal detector that Manny needs (“Hey, Carla. That’s an awfully nice metal detector you have,” “Speaking of metal detectors,” “Could I hold that metal detector for one second?” and “You know what I like? METAL DETECTORS!”) Choosing either of the two first conversation options has no impact on changing or stemming Carla’s story, but the third one will anger her, causing her to throw the metal detector out the window. The game does not offer the player the choice to treat Carla as anything but a means, which indicates that it’s not in Manny’s personality to treat her as anything but a means. When Manny and thus the player treat Carla and her story as a means to get the metal detector, Manny (and the player) violate Kant’s dictate that people be treated as an end in themselves and not as a means to something else. This moral breach and Carla’s attendant anger feel real and justified and the game designers make it absolutely crystal clear why: the player sees that at all times while Carla is sharing her personal stories, Manny’s thoughts are really
with the metal detector and not her. Using Carla and offending her is an unavoidable part of the game, but by exposing the meaninglessness of Manny's first two conversation contributions, the game draws out that Manny is using her. The player is never given the opportunity to treat Carla with respect, and this gap highlights that fact. Because the conversation options are all viable things Manny might say, they could be considered his “thoughts” because they are all reactions to the world around him that may or may not be heard by non-player-characters depending on the player's choice. This level of access to Manny is more intimate than clicking on items because not only must Manny say what the player has suggested, but the ability to choose from among his thoughts brings the player inside Manny’s head as opposed to directing him from the outside. Though Grim Fandango uses Manny’s questionable taste for humor and to add to the pleasant immersion of the player, the game designers push it to an uncomfortable length and question the roads he does not offer the player to take.
For comparison, the games that emphasize complete, immersive integration of player and avatar (like *World of Warcraft*) offer frequent opportunities to respond to quests, threats, or other players in ways that define the player’s avatar’s values. Choosing to help a lost child or return someone’s sword to them may not be beneficial to the player, but it may offer emotional satisfaction. Decisions like those do not question how decisions are made but rather question the player’s values head-on without breaking the immersion.

The second immersive game element that is then undermined is that of feedback. When players take actions, the game often provides feedback via Manny. Feedback in games is meant to foster growth, learning, or progress within the gamespace and add to the comfortable, immersive experience. Nicola Whitton explains that “(a)t the heart of every computer game is a mechanism for providing feedback to the player” (Whitton 148). Jane McGonigal also lists feedback as one of the four defining traits of a game: “When you strip away the genre differences and the technological complexities, all games share four defining traits: *a goal, rules, a feedback system, and voluntary participation*” (McGonigal 21, emphasis in original). In *Grim Fandango*, the feedback system consists of mostly Manny’s opinions about or reactions to what players attempt to do (where they attempt to go, what they attempt to pick up, what they attempt to do with certain objects, etc.). In *Grim Fandango* the feedback is formative, which means that it happens right at the moment players take actions. It can also either be elaborative, providing general information that may have clues in it (“Oooh, I MIGHT get hurt if I try to get one down by myself…””) or verificative, providing immediate and direct commentary on an action (“It’s locked”). Almost all of the feedback
in *Grim Fandango* would be classified as negative feedback, which, according to Whitton, “stabilizes the game as it leads to players trying new possibilities” (Whitton 151). This is historically consistent with other adventure games which make use of exploration and experimentation because they free players from the fear of failure. An example of this feedback is when the player directs Manny to examine his message tube in the first room of the game. Manny says, “My message tube is full of nothing, as usual.” On its surface, this is a humorous commentary on Manny’s popularity at the office that gives us more color on what kind of DOD employee he is. It contains, however, one of the first hints of the game—that the tube is empty but could be full (the player will eventually jam the message tubes with packing material in order to gain access to maintenance room). Another example is when Manny reflects, “That’s no way to treat a photo as juicy as this,” to hint that the player can use it for blackmail. All of these clues in feedback make for a more immersive environment which works *with* players to guide them to the next solution. However, the game undermines this consistently by pitting Manny *against* players in some cases. Manny, when the player indicates an action for him to take, will sometimes comment, “I don’t really want to do that,” or “Nah,” which suggests a resistance to the player and calls attention to the distance between them. His commentary is sometimes unhelpful (“That’s the door to the garage”) or downright pokes fun of the player. For example, if players try to pick up certain non-player-characters like they would an object, Manny will respond based on the pun of “pick up” meaning to romantically engage, which calls attention to the game mechanics and breaks the wall of the gamespace. When the non-player-character is an
old sea captain Manny’s feedback is “No more picking up sailors for me.” When the non-player-character is the girlfriend of the mob boss it’s “Not Hector’s girl!”

The feedback can also be described as an inner monologue since he never address “you” or refers to anyone else and therefore seems to be talking to himself (“I could make a paper airplane with it, but I’m kinda busy.”). He does however speak out loud in the game, which suggests an almost schizophrenic relationship—the player is part of Manny that no one else can see, not even Manny, but he still has to communicate with the player. Occasionally non-player-characters will hear Manny when he communicates with the player (MANNY: “It’s a metal detector.” CARLA: “Oh, THAT explains why it never gets my hair dry!” or MANNY: “It’s my ex-boss’ ex-secretary, Eva!” EVA: “You’re never gonna let me forget the secretary thing, are ya?”), which compounds a sense of schizophrenia, subtly reminding players that Manny is a distinct entity and thus requires a back and forth conversation in order to accomplish something in the gamespace. This construction evokes the relationship of a first-person narrator to the reader in narrative fiction who delivers lines accessible only to the reader. The fact that in Grim Fandango all the other characters can hear Manny’s communications meant for the player suggests a clever blurring of the divides that would otherwise make Manny’s relationship to the reader one of a first-person narrator: as Manny comments on the gamespace in a way that’s helpful to the player, the gamespace comments on Manny in return and the player is insulated from any judgment.

A third immersive game element is Manny’s idle animation—if the player spends too long to make a decision (maybe mousing over the screen looking for objects to interact with, deciding what to do next, or taking a physical bathroom break), Manny will
become idle—his “idle animation” is to casually take out a cigarette and smoke it. The fact that Manny has an idle animation so fitting with his personality adds to the feeling that he’s a real person who needs to stay busy. Manny reflects something very familiar when he takes a smoke break—he reflects back not only our own break from *Grim Fandango*’s relentless exploration and puzzle-solving but also the physical act of attending to a bodily desire: if Manny’s not otherwise engaged, he’s probably going to smoke a cigarette. By acknowledging this desire, the game reinforces Manny’s verisimilitude. The smoke of Manny’s idle animation is also a lovely homage to film noir tradition and provides the player with a beautiful, mysterious animation of smoke. ...but how does a person smoke without lungs? *Grim Fandango* repeatedly undermines its own world-building by reminding the player that it’s just a simplified, magic circle representation of the material world.

Any virtual space is a refracted representation of the material world that has been deliberately constructed in adherence with a set of unbreakable, foundational principles. No matter how much “freedom” players feel when playing a game, they must learn to respond to the rules of the game as laid out by the game designers in order to maximize
their own success within the game. The more immersive the virtual space, the easier it is for people operating in that space to forget that they are in a separate, altered version of reality. This has frightening implications as so many physical experiences are made available via virtual spaces (shopping, entertainment, communication, gaming, etc.).

*Grim Fandango* boldly calls attention to this mechanic by undermining the very immersion it creates.

That said, immersion is not inherently bad in virtual spaces. McGonigal and Whitton point out the education benefits of a controlled, safe environment where mistakes have no negative consequences. When Huizinga’s magic circle is considered in this light, it’s almost a relief to enter a space in which the material world with its messy intricacies and exceptions can be shed in favor of a game or other virtual space that does good things like teach moral values, promote cooperative communication, or cultivate skill mastery.

No matter how “good” the message or goal may be, when a game or other virtual space seeks to influence user behavior, it’s an understanding of the mechanics at play that will allow users to make material decisions in virtual spaces rather than decisions inspired by the virtual space; whether it’s a Facebook feed being dominated by marriage announcements or a price that seems thrillingly low compared to the others on the site, an understanding of the algorithms that prioritize juicy relationship updates or subtle tricks of user experience psychology that allow users to better respond to the virtual spaces they sometimes find themselves vanishing into.

*Grim Fandango* exposes the very mechanics it uses on its players. The game designers often do this in an amusing, self-conscious way that suggest this is not a
public safety announcement disguised as a game so much as a game with an intelligent understanding of how virtual spaces interact with the material world. By offering and rescinding the illusion of control, *Grim Fandango* offers this epic, dramatic narrative simultaneously as a customizable experience for players as well as a standalone work to be admired. Wark comments on the role of the active, engaged gamer when he writes,

...The Cave is a world you can neither own nor control...be a gamer who thinks—and acts—with a view to realizing the real potentials of the game, in and against this world made over as a gamespace. You might start with the curious gap between the games you love and an everyday life which, by the light of the game, seems curiously similar, and yet somehow lacking. (Wark 25)

Wark specifically calls on players to apply lessons learned in games to exert control in the material world. As the material world incorporates more and more virtual spaces, *Grim Fandango* is an excellent model for how to unpack the forces we may not be aware are acting on us and ushering us along an engineered path.
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