

Northrop Frye and the Story Structure of the Single-Player Shooter

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SINCE THEIR APPEARANCE IN THE EARLY 1990S, shooters have become some of the most popular video games available: the science-fictional shooter *Halo: Combat Evolved* from Bungie Studios, for example, was the killer application for the Xbox console, and has sold about five million copies since its release in 2001. As their name suggests, these games are about shooting enemies and are often categorized according to the player's point of view: in a first-person shooter, the player views the game world from a character's subjective viewpoint; in a third-person shooter, by contrast, the player's view is objective and the character is visible onscreen. But a much more fundamental distinction can be made between single-player and multiplayer shooters. In a single-player shooter, the player's opponents are computer-controlled. In a multiplayer shooter, the player's opponents are controlled by other players. Nor do the differences end there. Most multiplayer shooters are gameplay-driven: play sessions consist of one or more matches, in which players compete with each other (either individually or as teams) to win the game, either by scoring points or capturing objectives. Most single-player shooters, by contrast, are story-driven: play sessions consist of one or more levels, in which the player is told the story so far and then must overcome a series of obstacles to find out what hap-

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pens next. Each level is part of a campaign, and the player wins the game by completing the last level, concluding the campaign, and finding out how the story ends. Indeed, in the case of one popular and critically-acclaimed shooter, *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment, 2001), the story is told using three different media and three different narrative modes: graphic-novel panels, in-game movies, and voice-over narration. As a result, players will spend as much time watching and listening to the story of Max Payne as they do playing the game.

The question to be considered here is this: if single-player shooters like *Halo* and *Max Payne* tell stories, then what stories do they tell? What is the story structure of the single-player shooter? Scholars working in the field of computer game studies do not seem to have paid much attention to this question. Jonas Carlquist, for example, has compared the story structure of the single-player shooter to Joseph Campbell's theory of the hero's journey, but with disappointing results: "computer games borrow parts from the hero's journey," he concluded, "but they very seldom use all stages" (30). Paul Budra, by contrast, has used the work of literary critic Richard Slotkin to argue that single-player shooters all share a master narrative: the particularly American myth of regeneration through violence. "The games force the player to become the gunslinger," he argues, "to purify through violence, to reveal truth by stepping outside the bounds of genteel propriety" (11). Beyond this master narrative, however, Budra's discernment begins to falter: "No generalizations can be made about the kind of narrative that these games reveal," he says (10). Indeed, one of the most prominent figures in the field, Espen Aarseth, has written as if the stories told by video games do not even warrant serious consideration. "While many adventure games are clearly attempts at telling stories, cleverly disguised as games," Aarseth says, "the limited results they achieve (poor to nonexistent characterization, extremely derivative action plots, and, wisely, no attempts at metaphysical themes) should tell us that the stories are hostage to the game environment, even if they are perceived as the dominant factor" (267).

Guided by the work of literary critic Northrop Frye and using evidence from a dozen sixth-generation (6G) single-player shooters, this article will show that these games have told (and continue to tell) a type of story to which they are particularly well-suited as a medium. Single-player shooters are mostly romances—adventure stories in which the hero is superior in degree to other men and to his environment. (As opposed to myths, in which the hero is a divine being, superior in kind). Like the heroes of romance, the player's character in most single-player shooters

is distinguished chiefly by his mastery of both violence and guile. Being male, however, the player's character generally possesses more brawn than brains—a weakness which can be exploited by his female enemies, who possess more cunning than strength: fortunately, the player's character often has female allies as well as enemies. The player's character is thrown into the story by some sort of catastrophe that forces him to fight for survival in a strange and hostile environment. In the course of his adventures, the hero frequently finds himself descending into a real or metaphorical underworld, where monsters lurk and where the hero himself sometimes becomes a monster. The hero confronts and defeats his deadliest enemy at the bottom of this lower world or pursues this enemy to a world above our own, where the final battle between good and evil is fought and good emerges triumphant. In the work of Northrop Frye, this was the story-structure of the “naïve and sentimental romance,” but, as we shall see, the great Canadian literary critic might have been describing the single-player shooter—a video-game genre that appeared only after his death.¹

Mode and Mythos

In his classic work *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, published in 1957, Frye described the romance as a genre that flourished in both poetry and prose during the classical and medieval periods: after the ancient period of “myth” but before the period of “high mimetic” ushered in by the Renaissance. According to Frye, the romance was both a mode and a mythos. The romantic mode was distinguished from the mythic and the high mimetic by the relative power of its heroes. “If superior in degree to other men and to his environment,” Frye says,

the hero is the typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvelous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moved in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established. (*Anatomy* 33)

In this respect, the hero of the single-player shooter closely resembles the hero of romance. In a single-player shooter, the player's character almost routinely triumphs over small armies of enemies, while surviving wounds

¹ Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from Northrop Frye's *The Secular Script*.

that would kill a normal man. Indeed, some 6G single-player shooters like *Max Payne* and *F.E.A.R.* (Monolith Productions, 2005) feature heroes with inhumanly fast reflexes, represented by “bullet time” or “SlowMo,” in which the hero’s enemies move in slow motion while the hero himself continues to move and even shoot at normal speed, with devastating effect.

Frye’s comments about the traditional romance in his *Anatomy of Criticism* prefigure the single-player shooter in other ways as well. As a mythos, or generic plot, the romance is all about adventure: a series of minor adventures are parts of a major adventure, which Frye calls the quest. “The complete form of the romance,” he says, “is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero” (187). Single-player shooters pass through these three stages as well. Throughout the “perilous journey,” the player’s character does battle with his enemy’s minions, including his enemy’s lieutenants or “bosses”; then, during the “crucial struggle,” he defeats his enemy—the “final boss.” After this, the hero is recognized and any remaining mysteries are revealed and resolved.

Frye also says the romance “is characterized by the acceptance of pity and fear, which in ordinary life relate to pain, as forms of pleasure.” In particular, the romance “turns fear at a distance, or terror, into the adventurous” and “fear at contact, or horror, into the marvelous” (*Anatomy* 37). Single-player shooters do the same: indeed, their titles often promise “doom,” “fear,” “pain,” and “suffering.” The romance, Frye says, “peoples the world with fantastic, normally invisible personalities or powers: angels, demons, fairies, ghosts, enchanted animals” and “elemental spirits” (*Anatomy* 64). Single-player shooters teem with such creatures, along with their science-fictional counterparts, like aliens, mutants, and clones. “The mode of romance,” he says, “presents an idealized world: in romance heroes are brave, heroines beautiful, villains villainous, and the frustrations, ambiguities, and embarrassments of ordinary life are made little of” (*Anatomy* 151). That the same tendency toward wish fulfillment exists in single-player shooters hardly requires comment.

But Frye’s most detailed analysis of the romance appeared not in *Anatomy of Criticism* but in a later work, *The Secular Scripture*, published in 1976. For the rest of this article, we will see how the parallels between traditional romances and single-player shooters are borne out by this extended treatment.

Forza and Froda

According to Frye, the distinguishing characteristics—indeed, the cardinal virtues—of the romantic hero (and heroine) are *forza* and *froda*—violence and cunning (65–66). In single-player shooters, of course, the player-characters rely mostly on force. Represented onscreen as hands holding guns, they are violence embodied: their chief attribute is their ability to triumph in battle against overwhelming odds—always outnumbered but never outgunned. Players and their characters must sometimes use their wits as well as their weapons. In *Half-Life 2* (Valve Corporation, 2004), for example, the player’s character is often required to solve puzzles in order to defeat his enemies, complete his missions, and proceed in the game. The game’s emphasis on puzzle-solving is reflected in its most innovative and interesting weapon: the gravity gun, which fires tractor and repulsor beams. Among other things, this versatile weapon is used to pick up objects and then either launch them at enemies or simply move them around. A barrel marked “flammable,” for example, can either be thrown as an improvised bomb or stacked as part of an improvised stairway.

But *Half-Life 2* was unusual in this respect: in fact, one of the most notable new trends among 6G shooters was their increasing emphasis on primitive, even brute *forza*. In the 1990s, melee weapons in single-player shooters were comparatively weak. They were used only when guns were unavailable or when ammunition ran out. But this paradigm began to shift with *Halo: Combat Evolved*, in which the player’s character—a futuristic super soldier known as the Master Chief—can use his weapons to bludgeon his enemies if they get too close. In fact, the Master Chief can sometimes do more damage by clubbing his enemies than by shooting them. A butt stroke to the head from behind, for example, causes instant death.

After the success of *Halo*, most 6G single-player shooters incorporated similar mechanics. *Killzone* (Guerrilla Games, 2004), for example, features elaborately animated melee attacks that are immediately fatal to ordinary enemies, while in *F.E.A.R.* the player’s character can unleash devastating martial-arts kicks, in addition to clubbing anyone who comes too close. Some 6G single-player shooters also feature very powerful melee weapons. The player’s character in *Painkiller* comes equipped with an eponymous weapon—a rapidly whirling fan of knife blades that resembles a handheld aircraft propeller—while the player’s characters in *Halo 2* can arm themselves with deadly Energy Swords. Even *Half-Life 2*’s gravity gun is often used simply to hurl circular saw blades at enemies, with very gory results.

The Eternal Feminine

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This increased emphasis on masculine *forza*—on fighting as well as shooting—helps explain why there are so few playable female characters in these games. Out of twelve games reviewed for this article, only two—*Killzone* and *Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment, 2003)—offer women as playable characters. During certain levels in *Max Payne 2*, for example, the player will assume the role of the title character’s love interest, Mona Sax—a professional assassin armed with a sinister-looking Russian sniper rifle. Halfway through part two of this game, Payne falls from a building and is knocked unconscious. The player then takes the role of Mona Sax. When Payne regains consciousness, the player, as Mona, covers him with her sniper rifle, shooting his enemies from a distance while he searches for an escape route. If Max is killed, the game will end.

Mona Sax’s moment in the limelight is fairly brief, and, from a purely functional perspective, she is indistinguishable from Payne himself. This, however, is not the case in *Killzone*, a science-fictional war story like *Halo*, in which the player can take four different parts. The player begins the game in the role of a futuristic soldier named Templar, who is trying to defend his colony world against an invasion by a race of Naziesque aliens, the Helghast, but after completing the second of the game’s eleven levels, he will have a chance to play the rest of the game as a female commando named Luger.

Luger’s femininity is emphasized by her form-fitting black bodysuit but also by her different gameplay capabilities. She is quicker than her male comrades and recovers from wounds more quickly as well. She is also smaller and more agile than the bulky Templar, which allows her to climb ladders and wires and crawl through tight spaces. But her body armour is also considerably lighter than Templar’s, forcing her to rely on finesse instead of brute force. While her comrades carry assault rifles and even heavier weapons, Luger comes equipped with a combat knife and a silenced submachine gun. Assisted by thermal night-vision goggles, she can often ambush her enemies and eliminate them without having to risk a face-to-face confrontation.

In all these respects, Luger conforms faithfully to the conventions of the 6G single-player shooter—and the traditional romance—in which women (and other females) always possess more *froda* than *forza*. Northrop Frye notes that the heroes of romance are most commonly defeated by *froda*, “usually some magical or other power which may be physically weak but is strong in other areas that the hero cannot control. Such a power is

often wielded, or symbolized by a treacherous woman” (68). And the few female enemies that players confront in 6G shooters are also generally distinguished by their magical powers, their cunning, and their treachery: as Frye also notes, in the romance, “the physical weakness of woman makes craft and guile her chief weapons” (69).

The gothic western *Dark Watch* (High Moon Studios, 2005), for example, features ghostly flying female banshees who can harm the player’s character from a distance with their screams. There are banshees in *Painkiller* as well, although, in this case, their screams dim the player-character’s vision and slow his movement, leaving him vulnerable to his other enemies such as witches, who fly overhead on broomsticks, hurling fire down on the player’s character. The cybernetic Iron Maidens in *Quake 4* (Raven Software, 2004) combine all these characteristics. These legless creatures float through the air, ghostlike, and will sometimes teleport away, only to reappear and attack the player’s character from another direction. Their principle weapon is a rocket launcher, but if the player’s character comes too close, they will scream at him, releasing a cloud of disorienting poison gas that makes it difficult for the player to see what his character is doing.

The few female bosses whom players fight in 6G single-player shooters are also distinguished by their *froda*. Some of these bosses are femmes fatales, like the character of Tala in *Darkwatch*. Tala begins the game working as a Regulator for the Darkwatch—an organization dedicated to fighting supernatural evil in the Old West. By the game’s end, however, Tala will have seduced the player’s character, betrayed the Darkwatch to its undead enemies, and become a powerful vampire herself. In fact, the player’s character must defeat the winged, vampiric Tala to complete the game.

Other female bosses are Evil Queens. In *Max Payne*, for example, the final boss is Nicole Horne—the ruthless and corrupt CEO of Aesir Corporation. At the beginning of the game, police detective Max Payne returns home after work to discover that his home has been invaded and his wife and child have been murdered by drug addicts. Years later, Payne discovers the truth, that the deaths of his wife and child were not a random crime. Instead, his wife had inadvertently uncovered evidence that Aesir Corporation was secretly distributing a deadly designer drug, the product of a failed military research program. The drug addicts who had invaded the Payne residence were test subjects, dispatched by Nicole Horne herself. But while Horne is wealthy and powerful, and commands a secret army of mercenaries and business-suited gunmen, she is physically weak

and no match for the vengeful Payne. When Payne confronts her at the game's end, she tries to flee from her nemesis, only to die in a spectacular helicopter crash.

But even though women in 6G single-player shooters rely on *froda* more than *forza*, not all of them—or even most of them—are treacherous and evil. In fact, it is quite common for the male player-character to have a female assistant and confidant. And this, once again, is in keeping with the 6G shooter's essentially romantic nature. Frye has noted the frequent presence of female supporting characters in traditional romances. “We have the Ariadne who guides Theseus out of the labyrinth,” he says, “the Isis who restores Lucius to his human shape in Apuleius, the Lucia and Beatrice whose love and care get Dante through Purgatory, and other forms of the *Ewigweibliche* [eternal feminine] that draws us upward to our more deeply desired goals” (89).

Some of these women are the player-character's comrades-in-arms, like Mona Sax in *Max Payne 2*. This is also the part Luger will play in *Killzone* if the player chooses another character. Others merely provide information and assistance. Interestingly, many of the player-character's female helpmates are disembodied and ghostly. Cortana, the Master-Chief's guardian angel in *Halo* and *Halo 2*, is an artificial intelligence who sometimes appears in holographic form. After her death early in the game *Darkwatch*, the spirit of another female Regulator, Cassidy Sharp, will return to help the player's character battle the forces of darkness. In *The Suffering* (Surreal Software, 2004), when the player's character Torque is faced with scripted moral dilemmas, he will hear voices urging him to do both good and evil. The voice that urges him to do the right thing is the voice of his dead wife, whom he may or may not have murdered. His guilt or innocence is determined by his choices during the game and is revealed at the game's end.

A Break in Consciousness

“From the beginning,” Frye says, “the poetic imagination has inhabited a middle earth. Above it is the sky with whatever it reveals or conceals: below it is a mysterious place of birth and death from whence animals and plants proceed, and to which they return” (97). As a consequence, the romantic narrative moves either upward or downward. Sometimes the hero descends from the world above to the middle world. In traditional romance, this means “the birth of the quasi-divine hero, who really has two fathers, his real father, who is a god, and his assumed father, who is normally the husband of his human mother” (99).

In 6G single-player shooters, in which magic and technology are often interchangeable, science just as often takes the place of god. The player's character in *F.E.A.R.*, for example, is a child of science, without an earthly father. At the beginning of the game, the player's character, known simply as the Point Man, flashes back to his birth: a scientist in a white lab coat looks down at him, and says, "You will be a god among men." By the end of the game, the player will discover that the Point Man is the son of Alma Wade, the ghostly little girl in the red dress who has haunted him throughout the story. The psychically gifted Alma was forced to take part in a secret and mysterious project called Origin and died after twice giving birth to genetically engineered super-soldiers. The scientist in the Point Man's flashback is Alma's father, Harlan Wade, who sacrificed his own daughter on the altar of science and ultimately pays a horrible price for this crime, killed by his daughter's vengeful ghost. Interestingly, the Point Man in *F.E.A.R.* is at first unaware that he is the product of scientific incest between Alma Wade and her father. During the game, he re-experiences the trauma of his own birth as a series of hallucinations, until the secrets of his own origin are finally revealed.

According to Frye, "it is natural for the romance 'to begin its series of adventures with some kind of break in consciousness, one which often involves actual forgetfulness of the previous state. We may call this the motif of amnesia. Such a catastrophe, which is what it normally is, may be internalized as a break in memory, or externalized as a change in fortunes or social context'" (102). Such breaks in consciousness are ubiquitous in 6G single-player shooters. Some player-characters have actually lost their memories when their stories began. *The Suffering*, for example, begins with its hero, Torque, being led to his death-row cell. Although convicted of murdering his wife and sons, he truly cannot remember what happened; as already noted, the player's choices throughout the game will ultimately determine if Torque is guilty or not. Other characters in other games awake from an enchanted sleep or its technological equivalent. *Halo*, for example, begins with the Master Chief being revived from suspended animation and with a technician testing his combat armour—a powered exoskeleton that gives him superhuman strength, speed, and resistance to damage.

Other 6G games tell stories about characters who suffer "a sharp descent in social status, from riches to poverty, from privilege to a struggle to survive, or even slavery" (104). These catastrophes take various forms. Game narratives frequently begin, for example, with invasions. We have already seen, for example, how *Killzone* starts with the invasion of planet

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Vekta by the Helghast. *Halo* begins not long after an attack on the human colony world Reach by the alien Covenant. The player's character escapes the destruction of Reach aboard the starship *Pillar of Autumn*, but soon after the Master Chief is revived from suspended animation the *Pillar of Autumn* is attacked and boarded by Covenant forces, while in orbit around an artificial ring-shaped world called Halo. In *Half-Life 2*, the Earth itself has been taken over by the alien Combine, who defeated humanity's forces in what is called the Seven-Hour War.

Even more fantastic invasions occur in *The Suffering* and *Doom 3*. Not long after *The Suffering's* player-character is confined to his death cell in Abbot State Penitentiary on Carnate Island, Maryland, an earthquake strikes and the island is overrun by monsters that embody different aspects of its dark past. For his part, *Doom 3's* player-character, a twentieth-century space marine, has just been assigned to guard the Union Aerospace Corporation's research centre on Mars and is carrying out a routine first assignment when the installation is invaded by demons from hell.

Some of these disasters are smaller in scale. We have already seen how *Max Payne* begins with the violent death of the hero's family. Its sequel *Max Payne 2* begins *in medias res*, with Payne waking up in the hospital, wounded and delirious. After stumbling around, hallucinating, looking for a way out, Max encounters his police superior. This officer accuses Payne of murder and is then shot to death himself, before Payne's eyes. The first two-thirds of the game are an extended flashback, explaining how Max Payne found himself in this deadly predicament. Even more interestingly, one of the two storylines in *Halo 2* begins with a high-ranking Covenant officer being tried and condemned to death for heresy. In this scene, the Covenant's ruling council sentences the officer to be hanged by his own entrails but gives him one chance to redeem himself. He can instead assume the office of Arbiter and become a suicide commando: "The tasks you will undertake are perilous," he is told. "You will die, like each Arbiter before you." After accepting this offer, the alien becomes the player's character for parts of the new game. His crime: failing to defeat the player's other character, the Master Chief, in the previous game, *Halo: Combat Evolved*.

Finally, in one case, a personal disaster plunges a player-character into a much wider conflict. In the opening scenes of *Painkiller*, Daniel Garner and his wife Catherine are killed in a car crash. While the soul of Catherine Garner ascends to heaven, Daniel is left behind, trapped in purgatory, where he is offered an unusual chance to redeem himself: the forces of Hell are massing, preparing to wage a second War in Heaven; if

Daniel can forestall this infernal offensive by assassinating the leaders of Lucifer's armies, he will be released and allowed to join his wife in paradise.

In the Labyrinth

Painkiller tells a fairly simple story, even for a single-player shooter. Over the course of the game, Daniel battles his way through purgatory and kills Lucifer's four generals, with a little help along the way from his celestial handler, Sammael, the Angel of Death, and from another example of the "eternal feminine," the spirit of Eve, who has been condemned to purgatory for succumbing to temptation in the Garden of Eden. Near the end of the game, Eve is abducted by Lucifer and Daniel has to make a choice: either abandon Eve and go to heaven, or descend into hell on a suicide mission to rescue his female helpmate from the Devil's clutches. Like a true hero, Daniel decides to try to rescue Eve, battles his way down to hell, and kills Lucifer Himself.

Like most 6G single-player shooters, Daniel Garner's diabolical quest follows the generic plot or mythos of the romance. At one point, Frye defines the romance quite simply as "the story of the hero who goes through a series of adventures and combats in which he always wins" (67). The stories told by single-player shooters fit this definition exactly. In fact, the player-character's path in a single-player shooter is often so narrow and linear compared with the wide-open battlefields of multiplayer shooters that some players refer to single-player games as "corridor shooters." Each of the game's levels becomes a virtual funhouse, in which the player follows a set path from the entrance to the exit, encountering a predetermined series of events along the way. One 6G game, *Max Payne 2*, even features levels in which the setting is an actual funhouse—an abandoned amusement park inspired by a Twin Peaks-like television program, *Address Unknown*. In these chapters, the narrative becomes a kind of metanarrative. Payne even comments at one point that "a funhouse is a linear sequence of scares, take it or leave it—it's the only choice given," exactly like the levels in a single-player shooter.

Once again, the connection between these virtual funhouses and the traditional romance is clarified by reading Frye. "When hero and heroine go through one adventure after another, always threatened with disaster and yet somehow escaping," he says, "the plot acquires a wriggling, serpentine quality reminding one of the labyrinthine caves which so often occur in the setting" (74). This description applies perfectly to 6G single-player shooters, the settings of which are sometimes actual caves and which

always resemble a cave's passages and caverns, no matter what specific form they take.

Take, for example, the popular and critically-acclaimed *F.E.A.R.* Recall that this game's hero, the Point Man, is a super-soldier created as part of a project called Origin. The game itself begins with a prologue in which a powerful but insane psychic, Paxton Fettel, escapes from imprisonment and assumes telepathic control of a battalion of cloned Replica soldiers. As part of an elite military unit whose mission is to investigate and forestall paranormal threats to national security—First Encounter Assault Recon, or F.E.A.R.—the player's character must find and recapture Fettel. This mission takes the Point Man and his comrades (including a psychic female helpmate, combat medic Jin Sun-Kwon) to three different sites, three modern urban "caves": a wastewater treatment plant, a corporate office tower (the headquarters of Armacham Corporation), and, finally, the secret underground installation where Project Origin's weird experiments were conducted. At each location, the player's character navigates a maze of corridors that periodically open up into wider areas. In these wider areas, the Point Man engages and defeats detachments of Replica soldiers (or sometimes members of Armacham's heavily-armed private security force, which was trying to cover up evidence of corporate wrongdoing). In spite of the ways these different sets are dressed, each location's resemblance to the passages and caverns of a cave should be clear.

After his initial break in consciousness or sharp descent in social status, the romantic hero continues his descent into the world below, pursuing his enemies like a hunter, and, as Frye notes, "The image of the hunter pursuing an animal is never very far from metamorphosis, or the actual changing of the hunter into an animal." Indeed, "Every aspect of fall or descent is linked to a change of form in some way, usually by associating or identifying a human or humanized figure with something animal or vegetable" (105). Once again, Frye could have been writing about the 6G single-player shooter, in which the hero is often transformed, becoming both less than human and more. Sometimes these transformations are temporary. In *Painkiller*, for example, Daniel Garner can absorb the souls of his defeated enemies; if he absorbs a sufficient number of evil souls, he will temporarily transform into a demon. Similarly, in *The Suffering*, Torque's battles with the monsters that have overrun Carnate Island cause him to lapse periodically into insanity. During these bouts of madness, Torque becomes a hideous monster.

Just as often, however, this transformation is permanent. In *Darkwatch*, the player's character—an outlaw named Jericho Cross—is turned into

a vampire. In *Quake 4*, by contrast, the player's character is yet another futuristic soldier, Corporal Matthew Kane, part of an army that is invading the home world of an evil race of alien zombie cyborgs, the Strogg. Like many science-fictional aliens, the Strogg reproduce by capturing and assimilating members of other species, and at one point during the game, in a surprising twist, the player's character is captured and Stroggified. His physiology is altered, parts of his limbs are amputated and replaced with cybernetics, and a powered exoskeleton is grafted onto his body. Luckily for Kane, however, his comrades rescue him before the Strogg can wipe and reprogram his mind.

At the end of the romantic hero's descent we find what Frye calls "the night world," a place of cruelty and horror, of cannibalism and human sacrifice, where human beings are reduced "to something subintelligent and inarticulate" (116). "Such a theme is important," he says, "not for its horrific frisson, but as the image that causes that frisson, the identifying of human and animal natures in a world where animals are food for man" (118). In the night world, by contrast, men become food for animals.

The player's characters often encounter scenes of cannibalism, human sacrifice, and dehumanization in the deepest, darkest depths of the 6G single-player shooter. Perhaps the most famous example of this occurs in *Halo*. After battling Covenant forces on the surface of the ring-world, the Master Chief goes underground and explores Halo's maintenance and control systems. At the bottom of this lower world, he discovers that the Covenant has accidentally released the Flood—a malignant, virus-like alien species that Halo was constructed to contain. Like mindless organic versions of the cybernetic Strogg, the Flood reproduce by infesting and mutating other life forms, turning them into fungal zombies. If left unchecked, they will pose a threat to every species in the galaxy.

Other examples are easy to find. In *Half-Life 2*, the night world is the town of Ravenholm, which the player's character actually explores at night and whose inhabitants have been reduced to various kinds of "headcrab zombies." In *Quake 4*, the night world is the Strogg medical facility, where captured humans are either transformed into Strogg or turned into Strogg food. In *Max Payne*, the hero first descends into the night world in pursuit of a mobster named Jack Lupino. Payne finally catches up with Lupino at the Ragna Rock Nightclub. "This was the rotten core of the Big Apple," Payne reflects. There he discovers that the devil-worshipping Lupino has been sacrificing his men to some unnamed demon goddess. A mask-like tattoo obscures Lupino's face, and in his mind he has become more animal than man. "I'm the wolf, yeah!" the insane mobster shouts. "I am the wolf!"

Single-player
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today.

In many 6G games, the climactic battle with the final boss is fought in the night world itself. The last levels in *Doom 3*, for example, involve a descent through a series of caverns, where extraterrestrial archaeologists have found the ruins of a lost Martian civilization and opened up a gateway to Hell. At the bottom of these caverns, in the Primary Excavation, the player confronts the final boss, a huge and hideous cyber-demon. In other games, however, the player's character has to ascend once again, to the middle world, and sometimes even to the heavens, just like the heroes of classical and medieval romance. In the final level of *Max Payne*, for example, the hero must fight his way up from the ground floor of the Aesir Corporation building to the top, while in the final level of *Half-Life 2* the player's character is on a mission to destroy the "dark-energy reactor" at the top of the Combine's great skyscraper Citadel. And the final level of *Killzone* even takes place onboard a space station—quite literally, the world above.

Single-player shooters continue to follow the story structure of the romance, even today. Consider, for example, the very popular and critically acclaimed seventh-generation (7G) single-player shooter *BioShock* (2K Games, 2007). In this game, the player controls a character named Jack, whose adventures begin with an externalized break in consciousness—a plane crash in the middle of the ocean. Jack descends from the middle world to the world below. He rides in a bathysphere to the underwater city of Rapture. He pursues first one enemy, then another through the rooms and passages of this drowned city, and in his battles with its weird, mutated inhabitants Jack distinguishes himself chiefly by his violence and cunning. He has more *forza* than the maniacal Splicers and more *froda* than the brutish Big Daddies. Along the way, Jack acquires female helpmates in the form of Dr Brigid Tenenbaum and the Little Sisters whom he rescues from genetically engineered slavery. Toward the end of the campaign, the player discovers that Jack's break in consciousness was internal as well as external. Jack, like so many other characters in single-player shooters, is a child of science; his descent from the world above was metaphorical as well as literal. And in order to defeat the final boss, Jack must transform himself into something resembling a Big Daddy. Even *BioShock*'s moral choices and multiple endings may remind us of other, earlier games—in this case, *The Suffering*, whose main character must also choose his fate by helping others, or harming them.

Thus, it should be clear by now that Aarspeth's verdict on the storytelling potential of the video game was mistaken. Far from being hostage to the game environment, both the mode and the mythos of romance

are particularly suitable for the storytelling medium of the single-player shooter. Similarly, when Aarspeth dismisses the “limited results” that games have achieved, this reveals perhaps more than he intended about his own views of what constitutes a proper story. The sort of views that Frye described as “low mimetic prejudices” (*Anatomy* 96) which judge all other forms of storytelling against the literary novel and find them wanting. What Aarspeth would describe as the “extremely derivative action plots” of single-player shooters are the quests of romance. “*Agon* or conflict,” says Frye, “is the basis or archetypal theme of romance, the radical of romance being a sequence of marvelous adventures” (*Anatomy* 192). Characterization in the single-player shooter is consistent with characterization in the romance, in which “subtlety and complexity are not favoured” (*Anatomy* 195). Instead, characters are defined by their attitude toward the quest—the good are for it, and the evil are against it. And Aarspeth’s claim that video games make no attempt to explore “metaphysical themes” is also wide of the mark. The metaphysics of the single-player shooter are those of the romance, with its upper, middle, and lower worlds and its cycles of death and rebirth: “The enemy is associated with winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age, and the hero with spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigor, and youth” (*Anatomy* 187–88)

Aarspeth’s judgment seems especially short-sighted when we consider that single-player shooters are just one example of the widespread revival of the romance over the past few decades, especially the last ten years. Romantic narratives are everywhere: in fantasy fiction (both traditional and modern), in tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*, and in blockbuster films (many of them based on comic books). Interestingly, Northrop Frye predicted this revival in *Anatomy of Criticism*: “No matter how great a change may take place in society,” he wrote, “romance will turn up again, looking for new hopes and desires to feed on” (186). Sure enough, in the wintry decade of 9/11, the War on Terror, the Occupation of Iraq, and the Great Recession, North Americans turned once again to the “mythos of summer” for warmth. It therefore seems appropriate to turn to Northrop Frye for help in understanding the story structure of this new type of romance—the single-player shooter.

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