

Prose and Pixels: An Analysis of Video Games in a Literary
Context

LT109

Category: Literature

Introduction

Public opinion of video games has started to change. Once seen simply as mind-numbing forms of entertainment, video games are attracting a growing number of studies on how they affect and shape modern culture. Among the crowd of those who look to video games as a new ground for exploration is author and video game analyst Mark Wolf, who promotes the video game as a something more than just some moving pixels on a screen.

In the introduction to his compilation of critical essays, *The Video Game Theory Reader*, Wolf argues that “[t]he video game is clearly a unique medium and worthy of attention and forms of theory that can address it specifically,” largely due to the fact that “narrative elements and conventions taken from other media are still present to a great degree in many games, and a spectrum of positions exist combining ideas and terminology from various movements [...]” (11). In his statement, Wolf brings up an interesting observation, the fact that, video games as a “unique medium” have a “great degree” of “narrative elements and conventions,” as well as “ideas” of significance, that seem to make them “worthy of attention.” The word “narrative” is generally associated with written works, such as novels and stories, and even literature. In this sense, if people like Wolf are calling attention to the “narrative elements” of video games, there may be the opportunity to look at video games through a literary lens.

The merit of video games is subjective and varies from person to person; however, as a written work, the video game has the potential to be analyzed in a literary context that can highlight their depth and quality. Before video games can be analyzed in such a way, however, it is vital to understand two main questions:

What makes literature literature? And how could that apply to video games?

In the world of written works, distinctions have been made between the typical fiction and non-fiction titles, and works of literature. Often times, the latter are considered to have more literary and artistic merit than the former, and thus are deemed worthy of attention in academic institutions and beyond. Yet, one must ask, what qualities distinguish works of literary merit?

A dictionary is a reasonable first step. Dictionary.com defines literature as “writings in which expression and form, in connection with ideas of permanent and universal interest, are characteristic or essential features, as poetry, novels, history, biography, and essays.” John Johnston, English and Philosophy professor at College of the Redwoods breaks down this definition in his online analysis, titled “What is ‘literature’?” and concludes that literature is the combination of three main elements.

The first is a “connection with ideas of permanent and universal interest,” that is, ideas “that are of deep interest to many, many people” and include those centered around “freedom, truth, beauty, love, loyalty, despair, hope, hopelessness” and so on. The second element is the fact that the idea is presented in a way that “freshens, intensifies, deepens, and/or challenges our understanding of something we are interested in [...] and [makes] us feel like we understand something new about what it means to be human and experience the world we live in.” Finally, the third and last element is simply “form.” Johnston refers to the “form” as something that “works to create a special impact on the ways listeners of a song, the viewers of a painting, or the readers of a story think about, feel, understand, and relate to the ideas represented in the artistic work.” Such “form” could be presented through “the rhythm of a song,” “the perspective of a

painting,” or in the case of literature, something like the “metaphors in a poem.” Ultimately, Johnson concludes his analysis with one defining statement: “Dramatize [the] messages with narratives and characters and symbols and now you have something that has a unique and lasting impact. That’s literature.”

With this classification of literature in mind, a way to view video games in a literary context arises. Through the identification of “ideas of universal interest” and an analysis of how use of literary techniques, such as “characters and symbols,” helps communicate that idea, one could study video games and open up another world of interpretation and understanding.

Among the plethora of video games that exist, three have been identified as ones that stand out among the rest, especially through a literary lens. Square Enix and Jupiter’s *The World Ends with You*, Clover Studio’s *Ōkami*, and Spike Chunsoft’s *999: Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors* all skillfully use the literary techniques of allusion, motif, and point of view to communicate a message of universal importance. This paper explores the usage of these techniques in these three video games to show that within some video games, especially text-heavy ones, there is literary merit to be found.

Case-Study I: *The World Ends with You*

Since it was released in mid 2007, Square Enix and Jupiter’s action role-playing game *The World Ends with You* for the Nintendo DS has been critically acclaimed not only for its unique gameplay, soundtrack, and art direction, but also for its compelling story, dynamic characters and commentary on the modern youth culture of Japan.

The World Ends With You takes place in a fictional version of modern day Shibuya¹ in Tokyo, Japan, where reality itself is divided into two planes of existence. The world as we know it exists on the Realground, or RG, while a chosen few of the dead are brought to the second plane, the Underground, or UG, in the same city. There, they given the chance to be brought back to life by winning a game referred to as the Reapers’ Game, where the players must fulfill a set of assigned tasks every day for one week, or else be erased from existence entirely. Within the Reaper’s Game, there are entities that intentionally act to impede the players’ progress². In order for players to be able to protect themselves against such entities, they must form a pact with one other person that lasts the entire week of the game. If players fail to complete their assigned tasks or are unable to withstand the attacks of the hostile entities, they are erased—their identities lost forever.

The game itself is overseen by a god-like entity referred to as the Composer, whose human alias, which he gives to Neku and his allies, is Yoshiya Kiryu, or Joshua. Other high-ranking Reapers under the Composer include the Conductor, who undertakes the Composer’s missions and relays messages from the Composer to lower ranking Reapers, and the Producer, who acts as a guardian of the game by overseeing and documenting its events. Among these beings, the highest forces

¹ Although officially the name of a special ward in Tokyo, in *The World Ends with You*, Shibuya refers to the shopping district by the same name surrounding Shibuya Station. It known for its influential fashion center and youth culture.

² Such entities include creatures called the Noise that both cause and are attracted to the negative thoughts of the living, as well as beings called Reapers, administrators of the game itself who facilitate the game and attack players.

of spiritual existence are the Angels, which supervise the game and are sometimes sent into the game itself as a Producer when necessary. The overall purpose of the Reapers' Game is to judge whether certain people are worthy of a second chance at life; however, at the start of the game, the Composer deems that there are ultimately no people in Shibuya worth saving since he has lost faith in humanity's ability to survive as unique individuals and express themselves in a way only humans can. The Composer plans to destroy Shibuya entirely in order to recreate it from scratch, but at the insistence of the Conductor, the Composer agrees to a deal: he would play a game with the Conductor through a proxy, and the winner would decide the fate of Shibuya.

The Composer decides to select an anti-social teenage boy, Neku Sakuraba, as his proxy in his game and forcefully drags him into the Reapers' Game by killing Neku in the Realground. As a result, Neku finds himself in the midst of the Reapers' Game, with no memory of how he got there or what his purpose is. Neku is forced to play the Reapers' Game three times, for three weeks, but as each week passes, the friends he makes through his pacts and attempts to survive the game slowly begins to change his outlook on the world, and he learns to trust others and embrace the diversity and uncertainty of the world around him. At the end of the third week, Neku finds out that his partner for the second week, Joshua, was in fact the Composer in charge of the game itself, and that he had simply been a proxy in the Composer's game with the Conductor. At this point, the Joshua hands Neku a gun and challenges him to one final game. The winner of the game is named the Composer, and "gets to... do whatever he likes with Shibuya." The Composer then adds an ominous statement: "...Of course, I've already decided" ("Week 3 Day 7"). In the end, it is revealed that, though Neku lost Joshua's final game, Joshua saw that even the most close-minded boy in Shibuya could accept change, and decided that Shibuya could still be saved.

In the telling of this story, *The World Ends with You* is split into three chapters centered around the three weeks Neku spends playing the Reapers' Game, with each chapter subdivided into the individual days of the week³. After beating the game, the player can return to each chapter and complete certain tasks to unlock "Secret Reports", the Producer's documents about the Reapers' Game, which provides backstory about both the Reapers' Game and the Composer's game with Shibuya at stake.

As a video game, *The World Ends With You* has been received positively across the world. Professional entertainment website IGN.com awarded *The World Ends with You* its Editors' Choice Award, and in its review stated, "Few games make it into the 'amazing' category in our opinion, but with a game that sets as many standards, breaks down as many walls, stomps as many preconceptions, and offers as much depth and versatility as *The World Ends With You*, we simply can't consider it anything but exactly that" ("*The World Ends With Us* Review -IGN") Despite being such a well received piece of media, there is still more that can be discovered in its layers of visual and narrative symbolism combined with rich literary technique. Square Enix and Jupiter's *The World Ends with You* uses biblical allusion, a motif of sound, and a third person script-style point of view to convey the idea that people must embrace change and diversity to grow and find happiness.

Biblical Allusion

³ As there are no chapters or page numbers in video games, in *The World Ends with You*, quotes are cited by the week and day they are from within the game.

In *The World Ends with You*, biblical allusions are used to forward a theme of embracing change and diversity. Throughout the game, the presence of biblical allusion is frequent and obvious. One of the main characters, Joshua, holds “absolute authority” over and is “the sole creator” of the “Underworld” (*The World Ends with You* “Secret Report 3”). Joshua also has the power to levitate, call forth beams of light which sometimes resemble angels, and works with Angels themselves. To further emphasize his holiness, he is referred to as He and Him by those who know his position, apparently dies to save Neku, then appears to be revived, and, when captured by an enemy, is shown with his arms outstretched as if crucified. With Joshua’s holiness in mind, as well as his initial decision to destroy Shibuya due to its “dull and clouded” people, it seems that the producers of the game are arguing against diversity and rather for the idea that humanity cannot be saved (“Week 3 Day 7”); however, the motif is twisted. Joshua, though an important figure in the Bible, is neither God nor the Messiah, and the Joshua of *The World Ends with You* is observed by the Angels, not the other way around. Joshua is also snarky and sometimes cold, killing Neku for the sake of his own agenda, and mercilessly dropping a car and vending machine on his attacker when threatened. In other words, he is far from a sinless and righteous God or Christ figure, which the game seems to compare him to at first glance. Joshua is imperfect, and his values cannot be taken as the game’s messages just because he is compared to various holy figures in the Bible. Instead, we must look to the Angels, who more clearly parallel their role in the Bible, for clues to the central message of the game.

Unlike Joshua, the Angels follow their allusion of origin much more clearly. First of all, Angels in *The World Ends with You* are from a higher plane than both the Realground and the Underground. Additionally, the Angel known as the Producer is called the “Guardian” of the game, and Angels are also “beings meant to jump between worlds” (Secret Report 3; Secret Report 19). The Angels in the game thus mimic the Angels in the Bible, for they reside in a higher plane than Earth, are sometimes known as guardians, and play the roles of messengers from Heaven to Earth. When confronted with the Conductor’s plan of unifying the minds of all in the city—a plan to which Joshua commented, “You know, I liked your idea”—the Producer says that “the city’s destruction is not far off” (“Week 3 Day 7”; “Secret Report 18”). The Producer even clearly states the game’s theme, that “people... must actually make contact, clash, and learn about others through their foreignness. Differences should not be denied; they should be accepted and enjoyed” (“Secret Report 18”). After connecting Joshua’s character with the Producer’s penultimate piece of exposition, the theme of embracing change is emphasized. Though the Angels once agreed that “Shibuya was plagued with problems”, by the end of the game, “Shibuya has shifted into what We Angels believe to be the optimal parallel world”, specifically “As [Joshua] changed” (“Secret Report 22”). As Joshua, the creator of Shibuya and origin of its values, “[a]ccept[s] society as an ever-changing thing”, Shibuya itself is also “born anew” (“Secret Report 22”). Joshua’s inability to accept the idea that Shibuya may change for the better is ultimately the cause of Shibuya’s problems. As soon as he learns to embrace change and realize that “[d]ifferences must be accepted and enjoyed”, Shibuya transforms into the Angels’ optimal city (“Secret Report 18”). As the Angels are truest to their holy biblical counterparts, the theme of the game is clearly that embracing change and diversity are necessary to happiness.

Motif of Headphones and Sound

In addition to allusion, *The World Ends with You* employs a sound motif to add to the message that it is necessary to embrace change and diversity, specifically through the use of headphones

as a symbol. In the game, two major characters incorporate headphones into their designs: the protagonist, Neku, and the antagonist, the Conductor, both of which wear headphones around their necks that symbolize their evolving beliefs that people must embrace change and diversity to grow and achieve happiness.

Neku's headphones change in meaning as he develops as a person, from initially acting as a barrier between him and the world, to finally being left behind as Neku learns to embrace the world and its diversity. At the very beginning of the game, Neku is shown walking through a crowd of people, internally scorning the world, saying to himself, "Outta my face. You're blocking my view. Shut up!!! Stop talking. Just go the hell away!" and finally declaring, "All the world needs is me" ("Week 1 Day 1"). As he thinks to himself, he is shown putting on his headphones, as if they act as a barrier to the sounds around him. The fact that the noises in the background of the opening cutscene, specifically the music from a CD store and the voices of the crowd, are audible imply that Neku's headphones do not even play music for enjoyment, and are there only to block out the noise around him. Before the events of the game, the purpose of Neku's headphones is to block people—what Neku refers to as "the real Noise"—out ("Week 1 Day 4").

Over the course of the game, however, Neku does not wear his headphones. Instead, they are permanently hung around his neck. During this time, he is forced to engage with others, for he is advised to "[t]rust [his] partner", or face certain death ("Week 1 Day 3"). As he begins to trust others and open up to the world, he himself changes. Neku himself begins to acknowledge the use of his headphones as a barrier between him and the world, and starts to see what he has been keeping out all this time. When he reflects on his love for the graffiti of a certain artist, he marvels how "[e]very piece seemed to shout, 'Enjoy life!' And outside my headphones, the rest of the world heard it, too" ("Week 3 Day 7"). Neku recognizes that the message, "Enjoy Life!" was one that as always there, but needed to be heard "outside [his] headphones," suggesting that he is now aware that his headphones once acted as a barrier to embracing life and the world around him. He also acknowledges his change at the end of the game in a monologue to one of his partners, where he "I'm glad I met you guys. You made me... pick up on things, I probably would've just gone on ignoring. Trust your partner... and I do" ("7 Days Later"). Furthermore, the last image in the game before the credits is a picture of Neku leaving his headphones behind on the ground while facing upwards toward a light. At this point, he is ready to embrace the world and enjoy life as it comes. Neku's development clearly demonstrates the necessity of an open mind to grow and become happy. It is only because he was able to accept diversity and the world around him that he was able to not only change, but also accept the change. Neku's headphones, an element in the motif of sound, symbolizes this progression, and demonstrates his growth throughout the game.

In contrast to Neku's headphones, which are left behind in the end to symbolize his acceptance of change, the Conductor's headphones are never removed at all throughout the entire game, reflecting his inability to accept change and embrace the world as Neku learned to do. In addition to the shades he wears which already block out the world, the Conductor constantly has a pair of headphones hanging around his neck. As the main antagonist, the Conductor is portrayed as a foil for Neku, and even their headphone colors clash—the Conductor's are bright red, a much harsher color than Neku's subdued blue, near-periwinkle headphones. The bold color of his headphones, as well as his additional layer of sunglasses, further emphasizes the Conductor's resistance to change and diversity.

True to his role as a foil, the Conductor is also unable to let go of his belief that individuality is the root of all evil, unlike Neku, who decides to embrace clashing ideals. This belief causes him to believe that, in order to win his game against the Composer, he needs to forcibly change the minds of Shibuya's people. With this mindset, he creates a pin that can control the thoughts of anyone who wears it, human or Reaper, causing a "unification of minds", which "the current [Shibuya]... [was] not ready" for on its own ("Secret Report 18"). The pins force the entire district to think of "true redemption" and "[w]hat a wonderful world that would be" as a single entity, completely eliminating the individuality, diversity, and unpredictability of a once chaotic but vibrant social center. The pins only "funnel" the "blind ego" of the Conductor "into everyone in Shibuya", and to some Angels, it seems that the "the city's destruction [...] is not far off" ("Secret Report 18"). The Conductor's hatred for diversity is made even more clear when he meets Neku and tries to convince him to switch sides. When Neku questions his motives, the Composer reveals that he sees himself as a Conductor of the world, convinced that, "[b]y tearing down the differences between [them], [he] can make the world a paradise!" and that "[a]ll the world's ills can be traced to individuality," a construct he seeks to tear down ("Week 3 Day 7"). Due to Neku's interference, however, the Conductor ultimately loses in his game against the Composer, and is erased, as per the terms of the game. This, combined with the Angels' disapproval for what the Conductor actions, conveys an obvious disapproval of Conductor's ideals. As opposed to Neku, who leaves his headphones and disdain for the world behind in the end, the Conductor removes neither his sunglasses nor his headphones throughout the entire game. He is unable to change, and is thus destroyed, further emphasizing that rejecting individuality is detrimental for a society, for society needs those values to grow and thrive.

Script-like Point of View

An analysis of the point of view in which *The World Ends with You* presents its story, third-person and focused on the protagonist with frequent cuts to other characters, also contributes to a greater understanding of the game's theme of embracing change and diversity. With a third-person, semi-omniscient narrator, *The World Ends with You* is able to show the player both sides of the conflict and provide the audience with a picture of Shibuya that displays the merits to its diversity and the individuality of its people.

First of all, the player obtains far more information than the protagonist does, providing a larger picture of the story. This is especially prominent when Neku is about to erase a pair of Reapers that attack him. The player, however, has already seen in a previous scene that the two Reapers are being controlled and would not attack Neku otherwise if they could help it. The Reapers are portrayed as far more human to the player than to Neku. Although they constantly threaten Neku throughout the game, once even nearly tricking him to kill his own partner without telling him that he would die if he did, the point of view of the game allows players see a softer side to them. They promise to buy each other bowls of ramen in order to motivate themselves, and one even asks the other, "You got a crush on me or something?" when wondering why her partner turned down a promotion ("Week 3 Day 3"). Though Neku's mercilessness when dealing with them is justified, as the two Reapers clearly intended to kill him, the player is able to sympathize with the Reapers and understand them. Fortunately, Neku's partner, who had once known the pair, intervenes and prevents Neku from erasing them entirely. Their erasure would have been immoral, since, as Neku's partner says, "They ain't bad... They jus' screwy, like everybody else" ("Week 3 Day 5"). The point of view, however, emphasizes that Neku could not have made a morally correct decision. Only by understanding the two Reapers—what they were like

offscreen, and knowing they were being controlled—could someone accurately judge them and their actions. This semi-omniscient position lets the player see the importance of understanding that each person's situation is different, and although one may encounter people that seem completely unredeemable, there is often much more to them than what meets the eye, which contributes to the theme that an open mind and an acceptance of the differences between people are necessary in ensuring the happiness of all.

Another important aspect of the game's point of view is the nature of the protagonist that the narrator follows, as well as the natures of the partners he encounters. When the player first meets him, Neku Sakuraba is a bitter, anti-social teenager who antagonises the world. Forcing the player to view the world through the eyes of such an initially unlikable protagonist forces the player to consider Neku's viewpoint. However, throughout the course of the game, as Neku changes, and as the player learns more about him, the player comes to terms with Neku's mindset and the way he views the world—or is unable to enjoy the game. The point of view thus forces the theme onto the player, in that, to truly enjoy the world, people must accept others and their viewpoints, rather than assuming the worst of everyone. Likewise, the narrator's focus on Neku brings the player into contact with all of Neku's partners, who, again, may be unlikeable or annoying. The point of view again argues for acceptance of others, as the game reveals the characters' motivations, dreams and personalities. For example, one of Neku's partners initially prompts thoughts such as "I'm going to choke this kid" and "I'll deal with the devil if that's what it takes" ("Week 2 Day 1"). Eventually, though, the partner sacrifices himself to shield Neku from a Reaper's blast. Another becomes a Reaper by the end of the first week, attacks Neku throughout the second week, but becomes his partner at the beginning of the third. He appears to be a hasty teen, added for the sake of comedic relief. He certainly leaps before he looks, but both Neku and the player learns that he once sacrificed himself in an attempt to save his sister from a speeding car, and that his and his sister's deaths had affected him to the point that his personality was altered significantly. By following Neku rather than the Conductor or the Composer, who have the highest stakes on the line, *The World Ends with You* is able to introduce a myriad of characters, whose values and personalities will likely clash with the player's. As the player comes to understand them, the player discovers the value of accepting all kinds of viewpoints, and *The World Ends with You* succeeds in passing on its message through the skillful use of point of view.

Case-Study II: *Ōkami*

While *The World Ends with You* is an example of a game centered around modern values, Clover Studio's *Ōkami* brings the player into an ancient world of Japanese myths and folklore. *Ōkami* was first released in North America for the PlayStation 2 in 2006, and since then it has been critically acclaimed for its unique ink brush art style, original story and concept, and inclusion of elements of Japanese history and culture, specifically centered around the Shinto religion.

Ōkami follows the story of the Shinto sun goddess, Amaterasu, in the form of a white wolf, and her quest to save classical Japan from darkness, purify the world by reviving Guardian Saplings, and restore the land to its natural beauty. She is accompanied by Issun, an artist from a tribe of inch-high creatures called Poncle, who assists and guides her, while occasionally providing some comic mischief. His character is later further developed, light-hearted nature appears to be a façade. Tired of his grandfather pressuring him to become a Celestial Envoy, a Poncle painter

who accompanies and aids a god, Issun stole a painting of his and ran away. Over the course of her journey, Amaterasu seeks out the assistance of thirteen Celestial Brush gods who bestow various powers upon her, and with these powers, Amaterasu in turn gives back to her land and her people by performing selfless deeds for those she comes across. Her ultimate goal is to defeat the source of all evil, Yami, the ruler of the demons, and with the support and faith of all those she has helped on her quest, the goddess is able to vanquish Yami for good.

Compared to elaborate plot and message of *The World Ends with You*, the more simple and straightforward nature of *Ōkami* seems to be overshadowed by the [apparent] beauty of the ink brush world created within the game, where the land seems to be a painting come alive. Chris Roper of IGN declares that “[v]isually, no other game in existence compares with *Ōkami*. Its art style is entirely unique, mimicking a moving painting more than anything else” (*Ōkami* Review - IGN). In this way, one may consider *Ōkami* more of a case study in artistic merit rather than literary; however, the sheer depth of influence that Shinto mythology has imposed on this game, as well as its presentation and incorporation of such elements, makes it much more than just a pretty picture. Clover Studio’s *Ōkami* alludes to Shinto beliefs, develops a nature motif, and uses a third person, protagonist centered point of view to demonstrate the true importance of self-reliability as a staple in Shinto beliefs. An in-depth analysis of the literary techniques present in this game, as well as the classical Shinto messages it conveys, elevates it to a piece of art, not only in a visual, but also a literary sense.

Shinto Allusion

While *The World Ends with You* incorporates biblical allusions into its narrative, *Ōkami* alludes to traditional Shinto myths to demonstrate that, although self-reliance is important, no one can do everything by themselves, and thus, people must cooperate with each other, and lend and accept aid as needed.

The most obvious and most important allusion to Shinto mythology in *Ōkami* is the name and backstory of the protagonist, Amaterasu. Though she is just a wolf in *Ōkami*, Amaterasu was the incarnation of the sun in Shinto mythology. Her wolf form, however, may be more flawless than the goddess. One of the most well-known Shinto myths tells the story of how Amaterasu was frightened by her brother, Susanoo, and angered into leaving the sky and sequestering herself in a cave. To tempt her back out, the Eighty Myriads of Gods created a mirror out of stardust and held a festival just outside her cave (Hadland 28). As soon as she did, they “seiz[ed] her” so that she would light the sky again (“*Core Stories of Shinto*”). Amaterasu, as the sun goddess, plays a very important role in Japanese culture, as the First Mikado of Japan was supposedly descended from her, and the rising sun of the Japanese flag is also supposed to be Amaterasu’s symbol (Hadland 34; (“*Core Stories of Shinto*”). By using Amaterasu rather than another god or goddess as the protagonist, though, *Ōkami* calls the story of Amaterasu and Susanoo to the mind of the player. Her fear, anger and curiosity throughout the tale make her more human, and the story reminds the player that even the gods are not flawless. The allusion suggests that if the gods are not flawless, there is no reason for anyone to be — which supports the overall theme of *Ōkami*. This idea is added to even more by Amaterasu’s representation as a wolf. Though she is still clearly the sun goddess, as her weapons are representative of the weapons Amaterasu gave her grandson, and because she clearly draws her power from the sun, she is no longer a goddess who can “[stamp] on the ground till she had made a hole sufficiently large to serve as a fortification (Hadland 33; *Ōkami* “Kamiki Village”; Hadland 26). She is instead a wolf, and though she is “no

run-of-the-mill god”, her power is also significantly lower than in the myths (*Ōkami* “Kamiki Village”). Amaterasu the wolf must also gain her powers one by one by seeking out “brush gods”, who grant her divine techniques, unlike Amaterasu in mythology, who is first shown preparing for war almost immediately (*Ōkami* “River of Heavens”; Hadland 26). This, again, adds to the idea that not even major goddesses can rid the world of darkness single-handedly, but must help and cooperate with people along the way.

Another instance of allusion to Shinto mythology in *Ōkami* is in the story arc in which Amaterasu must destroy the dreaded snake monster Orochi. In Shinto mythology, Amaterasu’s brother, Susanoo, was sent away from heaven after he frightened Amaterasu into hiding. On earth, he finds an old couple bemoaning the loss of their daughters, who have been devoured by an eight-headed serpent year after year. This year, they were to lose their last one, Kushi-nadahime. Seeing her beauty, though, Susanoo offered to slay the beast in return for the daughter’s hand in marriage. He then hides her and prepares *saké* in order to get the monster drunk. The serpent falls for the trap, and sleeps while Susanoo cuts off all eight of its heads. In myth, Susanoo is portrayed as gallant, brave and resourceful. The Susanoo in *Ōkami* could not be more different. In *Ōkami*, Susanoo is the descendent of the hero Nagi, who had originally sealed the serpent one hundred years in the past. Tired of being compared to his ancestor Susanoo breaks the serpent’s seal to prove that the legend was, in fact, mere legend. However, the story of Nagi turned out to be true, and Susanoo’s selfish actions had unleashed darkness over the world. Terrified, Susanoo fled to a protected village, and blocked the entrance with a boulder, where he spent his days slacking off. Amaterasu, however, is charged with destroying the evil, and attempts to help Susanoo train, sometimes even just giving him more confidence by using her brush to destroy his targets. Susanoo, however, takes her interference as a sign from the gods that he cannot run from his misdeeds forever, but despite his words, he runs off and hides in his house. The maiden chosen to be sacrificed that night is the *saké* brewer, Kushi, but she shouts to Susanoo’s house that she believes he will come save her, and brings her *saké* with her in the hopes that she will be able to defeat Orochi herself. Amaterasu then follows her, and eventually, with the help of Kushi’s *saké*, Susanoo’s blade and eventual bravery, and Amaterasu’s brush techniques, Orochi is defeated. In *Ōkami*, the story is given much more depth, and the characters are changed quite a bit. Their roles were changed dramatically, and thus, their personalities had to be modified to account for the different roles they played. In this story arc, each character plays an equally important role. Without one, the others would fail. By modifying this Shinto myth, *Ōkami* has emphasized the importance of cooperation, and especially the importance of helping others when they need it. Had Amaterasu not helped Susanoo train, Susanoo would never have had the courage to face Orochi down. When she helped him, though, there was no way she could have known what good would come of her actions. The story thus emphasizes the importance of helping those in need. However, it also demonstrates that people must act to get what they want, instead of just relying on someone else to do it. Had Amaterasu simply trusted that Susanoo would be able to defeat Orochi, he would not have been able to, and the entire village would have perished. Instead, she acted, taking matters into her own hands. *Ōkami* thus stresses the importance of both self-reliability and cooperation with this retelling of the tale. Without Amaterasu’s action, but also without her help in Susanoo’s training, all three would have failed to seal the monster, and darkness would have settled over the land forever.

Motif of Nature

The motif of nature is especially common in *Ōkami*, especially in the form of trees, plants, animals, and elements of nature, and through an analysis of their significance in relation to the goddess, a theme of self-reliance is conveyed, in that, if one desires to do good for the world, it is ultimately up to them to take the initiative and do what they think is right, despite the difficulties, opposition, and inconvenience

Amaterasu's role in the rejuvenation of nature especially conveys the idea of the self-reliance present on her journey. Throughout her quest, the goddess actively seeks out withered Guardian Saplings, divine trees that protect the surrounding lands, to purify them and cast out the darkness and pollution enveloping the land in the form of fields filled with purple-red miasma. Amaterasu is the only one who can restore these lands, and does this by helping the saplings to bloom again. It is only through Amaterasu's self-reliance and initiative that she is able to purify the lands despite the growing fields of miasma that not only harms the people, animals, and plants of the region, but also Amaterasu herself.

As Amaterasu's work extends beyond the purification of Guardian Saplings, the motif of nature extends beyond that as well. Once a Guardian Sapling is rejuvenated, and pollution eliminated from the land, there are still people, plants and animals in need of assistance in recovering from the harmful effects of the miasma. Some trees have not fully recovered, and must be bloomed with the assistance of Amaterasu's powers, while animals are wandering around, homeless and hungry. Helping the nature around Amaterasu return to life is completely optional in the game, and they are often in hard to reach locations and places of inconvenience. It is ultimately up to both the player and Amaterasu herself to take the initiative and seek out those in need, yet the game makes sure that Amaterasu's time is well-worth the effort. If Amaterasu goes out of her way to feed a few animals, help a few trees blossom again, or clean up a patch of cursed grass, she is rewarded. While many video games have a mechanism dealing with experience points, in *Ōkami*, experience points are instead called praise. Relatively unique among role-playing games like *Ōkami*, praise, *Ōkami*'s experience points, is not gained by fighting monsters. Instead, Amaterasu is able to increase her power by aiding plants and animals whenever they need her. While feeding an animal may net Amaterasu a small amount of praise, helping a Guardian Sapling bloom generally awards Amaterasu a sizable amount. Though the plants and animals thus do reward Amaterasu for her help, the game also emphasizes the importance of the goddess's active search to help those in need, and her self-reliance in doing so.

Though nature does often help Amaterasu, as shown whenever Amaterasu aids the plants and animals of the natural world, parts of nature in *Ōkami* can seem apathetic, or downright hostile. For example, perhaps fitting with Amaterasu's theme of being a sun goddess, she drowns surprisingly easily. Even after she has released the god of the waterspout brush technique, she is only able to stand on water as it is carrying her upwards, or if she has a certain, optional rare item. Even after she has established a clear connection with water, water is still unwilling to support her, literally. In that vein, ice and snow are also able to freeze Amaterasu, despite the fact that she eventually learns to harness ice, as well. Though Amaterasu is a major goddess in a religion with close ties to nature, nature is apathetic about her, sending the message to the player that Amaterasu must rely on herself. After all, even the natural world, which she is closely tied to will not help her. Similarly, and perhaps even less logically, Amaterasu is unable to swim in, or walk across lava. Though she is a sun goddess, and thus, naturally associated with fire, fire hurts her immediately, while she can usually stay afloat in water for a short amount of time. Nature again is unwilling to yield to Amaterasu, even though she is doing her best to help the natural

world. Nature does not support Amaterasu in this case—she must instead rely on whatever help she can get. Lightning, the third element Amaterasu eventually wields, is also not particularly kind to her. Though she can control it, and though her mythological brother, Susanoo is the god of storms, lightning can still hurt her. It is also the main weapon of her foil, a nine-tailed demon fox who can also wield brush techniques and swords. The Ninetails is also the demon lord of that part of Nippon, the land that Amaterasu protects. This is, again, a demonstration that self-reliability is key for Amaterasu. Not only will the natural elements not help Amaterasu, but the natural elements can also be harnessed by her enemies. In the end, although the nature motif is a lot about cooperation and giving aid where it's necessary, it also emphasizes the importance of self-reliance.

3rd-Person, Protagonist Focused Point of View

Like *The World Ends with You*, *Ōkami* uses a third-person, limited omniscient point of view which follows the protagonist, but instead of being associated with diversity and individuality, *Ōkami*'s point of view highlights the message that self-reliance and cooperation must be combined for success. Rather than narrating in the style of a script, however, *Ōkami* uses a narrator, eventually revealed to be Issun, who uses traditionally painted scrolls paintings to illustrate and tell Amaterasu's story after certain major enemies are defeated. In *Ōkami*, there is only one section of the game where Issun does not accompany Amaterasu, and only a few events that Issun tells the player about, but was not present at. This is easily justified, as it is possible that he heard of other events by word of mouth. *Ōkami*'s usage of a third-person, limited omniscient narrator allows it to demonstrate the importance of self-reliance to the player. By limiting what the player knows to what Amaterasu knows and minor bits of foreshadowing integrated with the narration, the player is given, the game becomes much more centered on Amaterasu. The player has no idea what else is going on in Nippon, and Amaterasu and Issun are the only characters the player sees constantly throughout the game. They are isolated, and with such a large world, they seem lonely as well. The player feels as though Issun and Amaterasu are the only ones doing anything at all to save the world. To add to this feeling, the game designers made Issun's sprite fairly difficult to see as he bounces on Amaterasu's head. In some areas, if someone who did not know the game watched another playing it, the former may conclude that the game is focused on a white wolf's exploration of the world. He or she may never imagine that the game was about cooperation and the idea that people must all work together to achieve a goal. It is in this way that *Ōkami* emphasizes the importance of self-reliance — the player sees Amaterasu as alone for much of the game, and eventually begins to believe that Amaterasu is single-handedly saving the world. The player is not far off. The third-person limited omniscience point of view is meant to highlight the importance of self-reliability rather than the importance of cooperation, in this case. By Amaterasu and Issun the sole saviors of Nippon, *Ōkami* also forces the players to rely on themselves. If they were to stop playing the game and stop guiding Amaterasu, Nippon would never be saved. In other words, the players themselves are the sole saviors of Nippon. *Ōkami* thus uses point of view to demonstrate the importance of self-reliance.

Despite *Ōkami*'s heavy use of point of view to highlight that self-reliance is critical to success, *Ōkami* also manages to use its third-person point of view to demonstrate the importance of cooperation. As mentioned before, the unnamed narrator who tells of Amaterasu's major battles with painted scrolls is eventually revealed to be Issun himself. Using Issun as the narrator is a choice that cements the message that cooperation, along with self-reliance, is key to success. Throughout the game, he is plagued by the knowledge that he ran away from his responsibility of

being a Celestial Envoy, a Poncle who paints and praises the gods. Thus, he is unable to work with Amaterasu perfectly, instead hiding behind a mask of levity and hiding his past. By the end of the game, however, Issun finally comes into his role of Celestial Envoy, accepting the responsibility of working closely with the gods. Though he is separated from Amaterasu, he knows she's in trouble due to darkness falling over the land. He then paints countless pictures depicting her greatness. As he persuades the people of Nippon to pray to her, she regains the power her enemy had stripped away—and not only that, but she becomes powerful to defeat the root of the darkness once and for all. Before Issun had finally taken responsibility for his role, the pair were unable to defeat the “real calamity and chaos [that] had yet to visit the world”, and could only watch as it “emerged... splitting off in all directions and flying off into the distant sky” (“Orochi”). It is only after Issun resolves to work as a messenger of the gods, and thus, cooperate completely with Amaterasu, that the two finally defeat the source of the evil. His role as the Celestial Envoy and narrator, however, also holds another meaning. As the narrator, he is telling the story of “Okami Amaterasu's Adventure” to the players (“Epilogue”). He then grows angry, believing his audience “want[s] to know why [he] alone know[s] this tale that no one know[s]” (“Epilogue”). Finally, he claims that they have “missed the whole point” (“Epilogue”). Considering that he was narrating the story to the player, though, one must look carefully at what he intended the “whole point” to be in order to fully analyze the theme of the game. He is angry because it seems that his audience has forgotten that one being had been Amaterasu’s loyal companion throughout the entire journey: Issun himself. His anger stems from the audience placing too much focus on Amaterasu herself, and forgetting the people who helped her every step of the way. In other words, he is angry because the audience has forgotten that even Amaterasu herself needed help. This is the final instance of the game stressing the fact that cooperation must work hand in hand with self-reliance for there to be success.

Case-Study III: *999:9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors*

In 2010, Spike Chunsoft released their graphic adventure visual novel game *999: Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors* in North America. Since its release, the game has been critically acclaimed for its immersive story and presentation, and out of the three case studies in this paper, *999: Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors* is the most heavy in written narrative content.

999: Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors follows the story of 21-year-old college student Junpei Tenmyouji, who is abducted and forced to play a game called the Nonary Game with eight other individuals in a sinking cruise liner. Upon meeting each other, the participants discover that all nine players have a bracelet affixed to their wrists, each with unique digits from 1 to 9. While Junpei’s name is accidentally revealed when a childhood friend, Akane Kurashiki, codename June—also a participant—inadvertently introduces him, the other participants decide to refer to each other by code names inspired by the numbers on their bracelets. Afterwards, the host of the game, an anonymous being called “Zero”, explains to Junpei and the other eight participants that they must play the Nonary Game, in which the only means of escape is by finding a door marked with a “9” within nine hours, or else sink along with the ship they are on. The only way the participants can move from room to room and search the ship for the exit is to pass through certain locked doors that can only be opened and passed through by a group of

three to five people whose bracelet numbers add up to the digital root⁴ of specific number drawn on the door. If this criterion is not met, the door will not open. In addition, if the verification machine on the other side does not verify the bracelets of everyone who entered the door, a bomb planted in each participant's stomach will explode and kill him or her.

At the first numbered doors, one of the participants, the man who has a bracelet numbered nine and is referred to as the Ninth man, attempts to pass through a door on his own after forcing the group to help him unlock the door with the right combination; however, when he passes through the door alone, the bomb in his stomach detonates and he is killed, convincing the rest of the participants that the game is real. As the group explores the ship, the participants discover the stories behind the Nonary Game and their predicament⁵.

In the branching path that leads to the true ending, the events behind the current Nonary Game are revealed. Junpei's Nonary Game is in fact the second of two Nonary Games, the first of which happened nine years before. The first Nonary Game was secretly conducted by the CEO of Cradle Pharmaceutical, Gentarou Hongou, who is referred to as Ace, as he is wearing bracelet number one in the second game. Ace set up the first Nonary Game in an effort to understand morphogenetic fields⁶ and cure his prosopagnosia⁷. He kidnapped nine sets of siblings for his experiment and forced them to solve problems in a life-and-death situation to trigger the activation of morphogenetic fields between the siblings. Among the kidnapped children were four participants of the second Nonary Game, one of which was Akane, plus two children of another participant. In the first Nonary Game, a detective was able to rescue most of the children, but Ace recaptured Akane and forced her into an incinerator room to continue the experiment alone. She was unable to solve the challenging puzzle in the room alone, but managed to tap into the morphogenetic field, establishing a connection with the Junpei of the second Nonary game, who solves the puzzle for her.

At this point, it is revealed that the player has been playing the game through the eyes of the young Akane during the first Nonary Game, suggesting that she was successful in accessing the morphogenetic field and now has the ability to see into the future. "Zero" is actually future Akane, who recreated the Nonary Game to ensure that her younger self would be able to access the morphogenetic field, learn how to solve the puzzles in the game by observing the participants of the second Nonary Game, and survive. In the end, Junpei was successful in solving the puzzle in the incinerator, which Akane failed to do in the past. Through the use of morphogenetic field, young Akane was able to obtain the solution of the puzzle from Junpei in the future, and save herself from her fate, thus ensuring the existence of the future Akane. Afterwards, all eight

⁴ The digital root of a number is obtained by adding the number's digits together, and repeating the process until there is a single digit left. For example, the digital root of 26 is 8 ($2 + 6 = 8$), while the digital root of 999 is 9 ($9 + 9 + 9 = 27$, $2 + 7 = 9$).

⁵ It is interesting to note that many of the details provided in the game are merely red herrings to throw off the player. While the game includes many ideas, such as the paradox of the Ship of Theseus, as well as experiments which allegedly occurred, most of these only tangentially relate to morphogenetic fields, or in puzzles that appear in the game.

⁶ Morphogenetic fields are telepathic fields through which telepathy and precognition can occur, and are essential in Rupert Sheldrake's morphic theory, in which natural creatures inherit a collective memory from their own kind that they can access to obtain any sort of information from the past, present, or future.

⁷ Prosopagnosia is a cognitive disorder in which one loses the ability to recognize faces.

participants are able to successfully escape and leave the Nonary Game facilities behind for good.

The game itself organized in a branching plot line with multiple endings that depend on certain choices the player makes throughout the game, with a total six different endings, five of which are considered “bad” endings that involve Junpei’s and at least one other participant’s murder. The sixth ending, in which all the participants are able to successfully escape the ship, is only available after the completion of one specific “bad” ending. This final ending is considered the “true ending,” and provides most of the backstory behind the game. Between dialogue and monologue driven cutscenes, the player is also challenged to solve locked room puzzles and uncover secret files that provide additional information about the story. Overall, the player has access to a total of 16 escape sequences, each of which has a unique combination of puzzles, dialogue, and story.

As yet another critically acclaimed game, *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* was lauded primarily for its immersive, elaborate, and well-written story, especially the remarkable method in which the story was presented. On IGN, professional game reviewer Thomas M. Lucas concluded that, within the game, “[...] everything comes together to create one incredibly well-told and beautifully written story that will still have you thinking about all its details and complexities three sleepless days later” (“*999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* Review - IGN”)

With a much larger emphasis on written dialogue, monologue, and narration, as well as its classification as a visual novel video game, *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* seems to have the most potential merit from an analysis through a literary lens. Spike Chunsoft’s *999: Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors* alludes to well-known works of science fiction, makes use of a number motif, and uniquely utilizes a first person point of view to develop a humanity oriented theme, that appearances can be deceiving.

Allusion to Vonnegut’s Cat’s Cradle

In *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors*, there are several allusions to Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle*, which contribute to the message that people cannot judge based on appearances alone.

Perhaps the most obvious reference to *Cat’s Cradle* is the name of the organization that ran the first Nonary game, Cradle Pharmaceutical. In *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors*, Cradle Pharmaceutical is a company whose “flagship product is an anesthetic drug called [Soporil]⁸” (*999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* “Cargo Room”). In *Cat’s Cradle*, the game of *Cat’s Cradle* is used as an example of people seeing too much meaning in something that has none. One character of *Cat’s Cradle* explains: “No wonder kids grow up crazy. A cat’s cradle is nothing but a bunch of X’s... and the little kids look and look... *No damn cat, and no damn cradle*” (Vonnegut 165-166). Similarly, in *9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors*, Cradle Pharmaceutical’s significance has very few ties to medicine. Though they are seen only as a pharmaceutical company, they are eventually revealed to be far more. In fact, four leaders of Cradle Pharmaceutical were the ones who had run the original Nonary game so that they could study telepathy and the morphogenetic fields. In other words, Cradle Pharmaceutical was not simply a pharmaceutical company, and anyone who believed so would have been blind to the truth. The

⁸ *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* frequently uses brackets in the text to indicate important items or ideas. Here, the brackets are in the original text.

significance of the allusion to the title of *Cat's Cradle* does not end there, however. Though there is more to Cradle Pharmaceutical than first meets the eye, the player must not read too much meaning into the company, just as the cat's cradle is really a pattern of string and not a literal cat's cradle. Though Cradle Pharmaceutical is central to the game's storyline, a player reading too far into the meaning of the company may believe that someone related to the company is the current game's Zero. By alluding to the title of Vonnegut's work, *9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* subtly foreshadows the fact that Cradle Pharmaceuticals is not the organization running the current Nonary game. Far from being the villains, the four who had run the first organization are instead the victims, and the only ones who die in the true ending of the game.

The meaning of the *Cat's Cradle* allusion can also be extended to the CEO of Cradle Pharmaceutical, Gentarou Hongou. Gentarou Hongou wears the number 1 bracelet, chooses a codename of Ace, and "His composure... struck Junpei as rather like that of an elderly [lion]"⁹ (*9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* "Doors 4/5"). As he is only a leader of Cradle Pharmaceutical, the theme in *Cat's Cradle*, that truth is near-impossible to discover, is slightly twisted. In *9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors*, rather than sending the message that the search for truth is ultimately fruitless, the message is instead that looks can be deceiving. At first, Ace seems a kindly old man. He is even somewhat self-sacrificing, injecting himself with Soporil so that only he would be left behind when the doors and bracelet numbers didn't match up. His actions are more self-motivated than they first seem, however. Later, it is revealed that he knew all along that routes would so that the others would be brought back to where he was. He also had darker motivations — he had forced someone behind one of the doors, heard him die, and didn't want the others to find the body. The player also eventually learns that he was the mastermind behind the first Nonary game, and was the one who had forcibly dragged a girl into a working, activated incinerator so that his experiment could continue. He was also the one who had killed the Ninth man, by telling him that he would be able to go into door without everyone who had opened the door. This was a lie, and ultimately, the Ninth man's bomb explodes, killing him. Finally, he also derived pleasure from killing Clover in one ending, the girl with the bracelet number four. He is also strongly implied to kill everyone in other endings. This is a far cry from the way he was seen by the other characters, and is a major contribution to the message that appearances can be deceiving. Ace's relation to Cradle Pharmaceutical, and thus, the themes of *Cat's Cradle*, only serves to increase its contribution.

The next most prominent example of an allusion to *Cat's Cradle* in *9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* is in the inclusion of Ice-9. Ice-9¹⁰ is a smaller part of the game, and refers to the idea that, if one could force water molecules to crystallize into a certain structure, one could change its properties and have it stay frozen at temperatures upwards of 100° Fahrenheit. In *9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors*, the use of Ice-9 fits the themes of *Cat's Cradle* perfectly. Once again, *Cat's Cradle* suggests that people tend to read meaning into situations where there is none — and, fittingly, Ice-9 is a complete red herring in *9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors*. Though characters discuss the mummy of an Egyptian priestess¹¹ whose body was supposedly made out of Ice-9, Ice-9 never even makes an appearance in the game. Its presence instead misleads and confuses the reader,

⁹ Brackets in original text.

¹⁰ In *Cat's Cradle*, Ice-9 is a fictional polymorph of water that is more stable than typical ice and freezes at a temperature of 45.8 °C (114.4 °F) instead of 0°C (32 °F).

¹¹ In the game, it is said that the body of an Egyptian priestess was brought onto the Titanic in a coffin, and may have been relocated to the sinking cruise liner the Nonary Game is being held on.

especially when the Egyptian priestess continues to reappear, but Ice-9 serves no purpose in the game's storyline itself. This demonstrates to the player that appearances can be deceiving — though Ice-9 and the Egyptian priestess are mentioned several times, and it is suggested that the Nonary game originated in Egypt, which was when the priestess may have played it, the mummy ultimately has no relation to the Nonary game Junpei is playing. Ice-9, used as a red herring, can be seen as a direct analogy to the game of cat's cradle as interpreted in Vonnegut's work. It is simply a clue that means nothing, but players give it meaning anyways. Ice-9, however, holds another meaning. In *Cat's Cradle*, Ice-9 was the product of a scientist who approached the question of whether he could force water to stay frozen at high temperatures, but did not pause to think of the consequences of his actions. Eventually, Ice-9 contaminates the oceans, and causes an apocalypse. Similarly, though on a much smaller scale, Ace and the rest of Cradle Pharmaceutical were only trying to seek a cure for Ace's prosopagnosia. This may be a noble cause, but the group went too far in trying to achieve their goal, kidnapping and nearly killing nine pairs of siblings, and certainly causing them immeasurable amounts of mental and emotional trauma. This is another example of appearances being deceiving — Ace is irrefutably cruel and evil, but his evil stemmed from the innocent desire to “see the faces. Human faces”, and not, as another character suggests, from a desire to “research the prospect of controlling a human mind through sheer will” after all. (“True Ending”; “Library”).

Numerical Motif

The motif of numbers in *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* cannot be fully understood without knowing the significance of certain numbers in Japanese culture. According to professor Ju Brown in his book *China, Japan, Korea: Culture and Customs*, the numbers four, nine, and eight are all numbers of cultural importance. Brown explains that the number four, pronounced *shi*, is considered unlucky because it shares its pronunciation with the Japanese word for death, 死, *shi*. The number nine, pronounced *kyu*, is considered unlucky in Japan because some words starting with *ku*, a similar sound, are negative and often related to suffering, such as the word for painful, 苦し, pronounced *kurushi*. Finally, according to Brown, “Japanese like the number [eight], as its character 八 shape (wider at bottom) symbolizes [that] things are getting bigger and better” (Brown 62), and thus, eight is generally considered a lucky number.

With this information, the numbers motif in *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* holds more meaning. First of all, there is the significance of the number four. Despite the negative connotations of the number four in Japanese culture, in the game, four comes up in several positive ways. One character mentions that the leaves of a four leaf clover represent “Hope, Faith, Love, and Luck” in “a flower language... a leaf language... leaf words” (*999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* “Second Class Cabin”). Also, in the previous Nonary game, Snake used four leaf clovers to inspire and give courage to the other children with him. Finally, the character with bracelet number four is the youngest of the group, at eighteen years old. She has a shock of pink hair, and is fiercely loyal to her brother. She also acts peppy in general, is described as “like a child”, and is one of the most innocent characters in the game, choosing the name Clover for herself based on the four-leaf Clover's reputation for luck. At first, it seems that the relationship between the number four and negativity has been broken. Things take a turn — the Ninth man dies after entering the door marked with a four, and Clover's brother seemingly dies, sending her into a catatonic state. At this point, if the player makes a certain set of choices, they can be sent to ending four. In this ending, Clover has found an axe and has killed the people she believes to be her brother's killers, and approaches Junpei alone. She then holds her hand out to Junpei,

saying “Junpei... Let's get out of here. Let's leave this ship... Just the two of us...” (“Axe Ending”). Just as Junpei takes her hand, though, she hits him in the neck with the axe, leaving only “a twisted, broken corpse. (“Axe Ending”). This behavior is completely different from when her brother chastised her selfishness for refusing to split up from him and “Tears welled up in [her] eyes, or when she “thanked [Junpei]” and “threw herself into Junpei’s surprised arms” when she learned that her brother was actually alive (“Doors 4/5”, “Captain’s Quarters”). Though it may initially seem that the game did not choose to incorporate the negative connotations of the number four, the number regains its traditional connotations as Clover’s mental state deteriorates. On the other hand, Clover’s eyes only become “dead and empty” in a specific situation, while she is usually shouting for joy as Junpei works out answers to puzzles (“Axe Ending”). She is even peppy again as the group escapes in the true ending, shouting “Woohoo! This is so fun!... This is so awesome! Driving is so great when there’s nothing around!”, even though they had just narrowly escaped a fiery death from being locked inside an incinerator (“True Ending”). As it is entirely possible for the player to play through the game without viewing the fourth ending, the motif of the number four demonstrates the theme differently depending on whether the player has encountered the fourth ending or not. If the player has not seen the ending, the motif shows that the character associated with the number four is rather innocent, despite any stereotypes the player may have toward the number four. If the player has, the motif then foreshadows that Clover is more dangerous than she seems, and that her she does not offer the prospect of escape to Junpei out of the goodness of her heart. Even though she smiles and offers a hand to Junpei, the game takes the chance to reiterate that appearances cannot be trusted.

Another prominent part of the numbers motif is the interaction between the unlucky number nine and the lucky number eight. Most obviously, nine appears frequently throughout the game, not to mention in the title. From the mechanics of the Nonary game, to the number of years that have passed since the first Nonary game, the number nine is central to the game. In accordance with the cultural significance of the number nine, though, anything associated with the number nine is also associated with some sort of negativity. *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* itself is a horror game based on a dark premise, while the purpose of the first Nonary game was to have children participate in a potentially fatal experiment. The Ninth man is also the first to die in game, while the ninth door offers the promise of escape... But, the way the bracelets and criteria work out, some people must be left behind to die. Next, one character is the mother to a pair of twins named Nona and Ennea, the Latin and Greek roots for nine, respectively, but both the twins were kidnapped to participate in the first Nonary game. In many of these instances though, whatever is associated with nine is also connected with eight in some way. For example, the character who named her twins after the roots for nine is also the character whose bracelet number is eight. Similarly, after the death of the Ninth man, the group Junpei finds himself with is down to eight. In the true ending, it is also revealed that the final door had been changed. In both Nonary games, there were two doors marked with a nine in a chapel-like room. The door that led outside, though, could only be accessed through an incinerator. In the first game, the door was marked with a nine, meaning that not all of the children could escape. Fortunately, a detective managed to rescue the rest through a vent. In the second Nonary game, though, the door is instead marked with a lowercase q. The game then reveals that two members of the group were the ones who ran the second game. They escape through a second door, bringing Ace along with them, leaving only five left in the incinerator. Just in time, Junpei realizes that door’s marking, a “q” rather than a 9, in a base 27 number system, is 26. The five left in the incinerator have bracelets with

the numbers 2, 4, 5, 7 and 8, which add up to 26, or “q” in base 27¹², and thus meet the criteria. All five can escape the incinerator. The meaning comes into play, however, only when the digital root of 26 is taken by converting 26 to base 9. In base 9, 26 becomes 8, a lucky number. This is perhaps the most important instance of eight and nine motifs. In the first game, the door was a nine, with all its negative connotations. Without the detective, at least four of the children would have been burned to death. In the second game, though, the door was the lucky eight, indicating the more benevolent nature of the game. The confusion between the “q” and the 9 again emphasizes that people must not rely on appearances. The theme is also supported by the other two examples — one would not expect a woman with the lucky number eight to have had such a traumatic experience with her daughters, and would not believe the Nonary game with the reference to the unlucky nine, to end well. One might also think that *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* itself would not have a happy ending. Despite the superstition, though, both *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* and the Nonary game had a relatively happy ending, where everyone survives the game, save three of the four executives who had run the first, evil Nonary game.

First-Person Point of View

In *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors*, point of view plays a large part, both in terms of story and in terms of theme.

Most blatantly, *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* sends its message by using an odd point of view. At first, the game seems to be told from a third-person point of view, even though the player sees what Junpei sees. Everything aside from dialogue is narrated, and the entire game reads like a book, with lines such as “Before long, Junpei realized he had spent quite some time deep in thought. No time for that, he chided himself. He had work to do” (“Confinement Room”). In fact, the game belongs to the genre called “visual novel”. In this game, though, the lack of narration in terms of dialogue is a major piece of foreshadowing that the game is not actually narrated by an anonymous, third-person omniscient narrator. The game is played through the eyes of a younger Akane, who is playing the first Nonary game at the same time as Junpei plays the second. The game is thus in first person — but through the eyes of Akane, who watched everything that was reflected in his eyes... felt everything he felt” (“True Ending”). All of the puzzles the player solves and has Junpei solve are actually through the eyes of Akane, who is seeing the puzzles for the second time and thus knows how to do them. Through the morphogenetic field, she then sends the answers to Junpei, in exactly the same way as the way the player is controlling him. This is only switched in the final puzzle, when Akane has come upon a puzzle she cannot solve. At this point, the player must turn his or her video game *upside down*, playing from Junpei’s perspective for the first time as he gives Akane the answer. The multiple endings of the game also indicate that the game is from Akane’s perspective, since she “know[s] what happens on either fork of the river [of time]” (“True Ending”). In other words, when the choices that Junpei — or rather, the player — makes result in another timeline, or another ending, Akane sees and remembers it, just as the players do. The first-person point of view is thus a major method for the game to convey its message that things are not always as they seem.

¹² In math, a base is the number of digits used to count in the ones place in counting systems. For example, base 10 is the most common base: people count until nine before we change to using the tens place. Base 2 is also called binary, as people count to one, then move on to the tens digit. In base 27, people count to 26 before using the tens digit. To avoid confusion, letters are used after 9, so 10 is never considered a single digit. Thus, A represents ten as a digit in bases above 10, B represents eleven, etc.

Though the point of view in *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* is first-person rather than third-person, this is not revealed until the final plot twist in the book, perhaps an hour or two before the end of a twenty-four hour game. Even if the game had been in third-person, though, the point of view would still have conveyed the game's theme. Unlike the third-person point of view in *Okami* and *The World Ends with You*, the point of view in *999: 9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* is limited such that Junpei, and therefore Akane, see nothing that occurs while Junpei is not present. This style allows the game to hide other characters' thoughts and actions from the player, emulating reality, where most people do not suddenly obtain knowledge of events that they are not present at. The style also allows the game to build on stereotypes, then deconstruct them, further demonstrating the theme that people truly know someone just based on that person's appearance. For example, one character is "dressed... rather like a [dancer]¹³. Her clothes covered very little, and her prodigious jewelry little more" ("Doors 4/5"). Contrary to her appearance, though, the woman in question is forty years old, and the aforementioned mother of twins Nona and Ennea. In addition, in one puzzle room, she writes a program to brute-force a password. When Junpei asks, "What kind of job do you have?!", she replies that she "used to work for a cyber-security firm" ("Laboratory"). Though the woman looks like another young, scantily-clad character in a video game, she is developed well beyond that, reversing a standard player's first impression of her in every aspect of herself, from her age to her skill set. By making use of the point of view where the players can see everything Junpei experiences, but nothing that he does not, the game is able to set up situations like the mother of the twins, where a character seems to be something she is not. This, of course, then furthers the theme that appearances can be deceiving.

Conclusion

A thorough analysis of the games *The World Ends with You*, *Okami*, and *999: Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors* has shown that their respective uses of literary techniques, specifically allusion, motif, and point of view, contribute heavily to the communication of their message and their overall literary merit in this sense. By studying these video games just as one would a piece of literature, we have not only uncovered deeper meaning within the games themselves, but also proven that these kinds of analysis are not only fruitful to works typically considered literature, but to other mediums as well.

Perhaps such an idea can be taken even further. Could video games also be analyzed in an artistic way? Cinematic? Musical? The possibilities are endless, and it is clear that video games are evolving past the simplistic forms of entertainment we once knew. Video games are now rising as a new form of expression that combines multiple elements of mediums we are already familiar with. There is untapped potential at our hands, and if we decide to treat them just as we would a respected piece of literature or art, there is much to be discovered.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Ms. Alida Hanson and Ms. Lizzie Riemer, for providing so much help with the essay. Although our project mentor did not do very much in terms of editing the paper,

¹³ Brackets in original text.

she helped a lot with the logistics of our essay, and aided us in the research portion. Ms. Riemer, on the other hand, helped a lot with the essay revision process, and we are incredibly grateful for her advice and patience with formatting questions. We appreciate both Ms. Hanson's and Ms. Riemer's help and support immensely.

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