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Procedural Monsters: Rhetoric, Commonplace and ‘Heroic Madness’ in Video Games

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Procedural Monsters: Rhetoric, Commonplace and ‘Heroic Madness’ in Video Games

This paper draws on Ian Bogost’s argument that video games constitute a form of ‘procedural rhetoric’, in order to re-examine the representation of heroic madness in First-Person-Shooter games. Rejecting the idea that games attempt to recreate the experience of madness to the player through linear representation, the paper instead identifies two persistent commonplace figures which appear within the genre: the monstrous double, and the reaching tentacle. While Bogost’s notion of procedural rhetoric allows analysis to move away from the more facile interpretations of gameplay, the paper argues that these figures also demand an account of the commonplace itself – the rhetorical ‘topic’ – which links the technical structure of gaming procedures with the tropes and figures that enable them to make sense within their wider cultural context and tradition. While the figures of the double and the tentacle purposefully draw on existing tropes and processes associated with the cultural meanings of mental health, a rhetorical analysis of their use of commonplaces suggests that they are not simply recycling older clichés, but constitute a creative ‘reobjectification’ of madness.

Keywords: madness; video games; rhetoric; commonplace; mental health

Madness and Clichés¹

Reflecting on his personal experiences of mental health, the poet William Styron comments that ‘[t]o most of those who have experienced it, the horror of depression is so overwhelming as to be quite beyond expression.’ (Styron 1990, p. 83) And yet, of course, this horror is expressed all the time. Western culture has always provided a glut of discursive tropes, tools, caricatures and clichés which not only articulate the meaning of depression and wider mental health concerns, but also actively shape its contexts. Indeed, as Schoeneman, Schoeneman and Stallings (2004) remark, for all that Styron looks to poetic invention to express such horrors – and has been lauded by clinical and lay readers for his articulation of them – his work abounds with banal idiom. And perhaps this should not be surprising: objectifying experience into a representational

form must, after all, be comprehensible to be successful; and a reader's comprehension is rooted in images and metaphors that are consistent with existing implicit or explicit cultural knowledge, thus allowing them to 'resonate with stereotypical images of mental illness, metaphoric conceptions of emotion (e.g. "happy is *up*/sad is *down*"), the medical model of mental disorder, and literary traditions of describing depression and related concepts.' (Schoeneman et al. 2004, pp. 330-1).

Given that experiences of mental health can be reported in paradoxical and obscure accounts (see, for example, McCann, Lubman, and Clark 2012, p.337), utilising a commonplace of shared metaphors and similes are, no doubt, useful strategies for making sense of the experience, whether poetically, therapeutically or clinically (Lawn, Delany, Pulvirenti, Smith, and McMillan 2016; Rofé 2009). But the fact that those experiencing mental health problems often frame their experiences in terms of the stigma they encounter (Quin and Chaudoir 2009) suggests that such a cultural rhetoric permeates both popular culture and individual experience, often without a clear boundary to separate the two.² Whatever the function it serves, the language of mental health is clinically and culturally embedded within a genealogy of 'madness' which long precedes the clinical specialism of 'mental hygiene' William Sweetzer first identified in 1843. Consequently, while there are frequent calls to challenge the cultural clichés of mental health in favour of a more authentic 'first-hand' experience (see, for example, Repper 2014), it is far more difficult to distinguish between the motifs which result in exclusion, and those that allow a 'genuine' experience to emerge and be expressed: as the functional use of a trope within a particular clinical or therapeutic practice is no less embedded within this broader cultural rhetoric of madness than those of popular culture. As Schoeneman et al. argue: 'making up truly novel metaphors for depression and recovery seems to be impossible'

(2004, p. 338). In the place of novelty, they argue that ‘Styron’s assemblage of available cultural metaphors could be better described as reobjectification – a refamiliarization that perhaps adds depth to the usual signifiers of [...] disorder.’ (p. 339)

To what extent can we apply this notion of ‘reobjectification’ to the representation of mental health in video games? The relationship between the cultural concept of ‘madness’ and video games has historically been dominated by scientific discussions of whether gaming itself causes mental or behavioural change; whether these are critical discussions (the extension of the ‘video nasties’ debate of the 1980s), or encouraging discussions (such as the more recent growth of ‘serious gaming’ aimed at translating ‘traditional evidence-based interventions into computer gaming formats’ (Fleming, Bavin, Stasiak, Hermansson-Webb, Merry, Cheek, Lucassen, Lau, Pollmuller, and Hetrick 2017, online)).³ But these approaches, rooted in model of direct cause and effect between game and player, are clearly problematic on a number of levels; not least because they typically limit their analysis of the game *in itself* to a ‘black-box’ artefact. When the game is seen only as an object which causes certain behaviour to take place, the inner workings of that object are frequently left under-examined. The result is that far less work is done on examining the actual assemblages of trope, narrative and interactivity of gameplay within contextualised situations, and the question of how the expressions of madness within games draw upon and develop its cultural genealogy is left unattended.⁴ Yet, given the huge influence of the gaming industry on contemporary culture, it is entirely reasonable to assume that such assemblages actively shape the available imagery and language of mental health as much, if not more, than the storehouse of literary metaphors Styron draws on.

I want to suggest in this paper that the *rhetoric* of video games is a distinct medium for the kind of ‘reobjectification’ of mental health commonplaces which

Schoeneman describes. This is not to claim, of course, that there is a direct correlation or unique connection between gaming and the experience of mental health; or that games ‘represent’ inchoate experiences better than literature. Rather, the paper argues that video games can engage reflexively with these experiences and some of the key tensions within them: namely, control, expression and knowledge. In the case of gaming, this is not limited to a lingual or visual rhetoric: as Rehak argues, games are not ‘conceptually separable’ from their technologies, and the interface between player and game surface – including touch, control, image and graphical engine – are not secondary to play (2007, p. 141). In his development of this idea, Bogost has employed the notion of ‘procedural rhetoric’ as a way of understanding the effects of this on representation. Bogost argues that these aspects of gaming constitute a persuasive (and, thus, rhetorical) act of sense-making, which goes beyond the more traditional tools of representation found in other cultural forms.

I want to develop this rhetorical approach by examining video games which juxtapose the ‘horror’ of madness with the ‘heroic’ acts of the player. In this particular context, I argue that games negotiate the cultural rhetoric of madness by both building directly from the existing literary and cultural tradition of heroic madness, melancholic geniuses and counter-cultural renegades, and developing this in terms of the interface between the human and the non-human which the procedural aspects of gaming requires. In turn, the significance of the commonplace, as a rhetorical function, becomes a key site for the interaction between procedural and aesthetic aspects of sense-making, and between the individual player and the contextual order of mental health. The apparent clichés of games’ representation of mental health constitute a form of rhetorical ‘topic’ which links the technical structure of gaming procedures with the tropes and figures that enable them to make sense within their cultural context and

tradition. I examine this through two such topics which are particularly prominent in the re-objectification of madness within video games: the monstrous double, and the reaching tentacle. While these purposefully draw on existing tropes and processes associated with the cultural meanings of mental health, a rhetorical analysis of their use of commonplaces suggests that they are not simply recycling older clichés, but constitute a form of ‘reobjectification’ of mental health.

The Limits of Insanity

While video games have long employed images of madness as a narrative trope (for example, *Alice: Madness Returns* or *Fahrenheit: The Indigo Prophecy*), a plot device (such as *Arkham Asylum* or *Condemned*) or, in some cases, a condition of play itself (for example, *Catherine* or *The Suffering*), it most frequently appears as it does in literature, film and television: as a readymade narrative foil to the traditional ‘heroic’ characters. With its long association with ‘otherness’, deviance and villainy, these figures follow the clichés of mad scientists, insane despots, and chaotic evil-doers whose abnormality very much defines the boundaries of accepted and ‘decent’ behaviour. Given the cartoonish caricatures at work in such narratives, these rarely engage in depth with the notion of madness: by positing an insane despot as the dyadic opposite to the rational hero, the aim of the game becomes to restore order, and in doing so ‘complete’ the game. The Joker in the *Batman: Arkham* series is thus ‘chaotic’ rather than mad, which allows the game to throw unexpected obstacles and tasks in the way of the player’s Batman; *Alice: Madness Returns* plays more on the hallucinogenic properties of a world turned topsy-turvy; Vaas in *Far Cry 3* combines both by quoting Lewis Carroll while committing random acts of violence; but these are in cut-scenes rather than gameplay. This kind of madness is reserved for non-playing characters and hence, typically enemies or villains: the player themselves can never ‘be’ the evil genius within the

game, far less employ the logic of the super-villain, unless each and every player possessed that level of intelligence (not to mention evil). The player can never inflict absolute chaos in a game-world, because game worlds are driven by environments authored by designers and programmers. Even if the range of ways those processes are used can be flexible, these forms of representation ultimately result in rather straightforward procedural paths for the player to follow. Thus, in both the examples above, the employment of madness is a veneer to what are, otherwise, relatively traditional First Person Shooter (FPS) and platform games: *Alice* is no different, operationally, from the earliest *Super Mario Bros.* platform games.

On the one hand, this seems to be an obvious limitation to the value of the gaming genre; after all, what is the Joker in *Arkham*, if not a worn cliché within a too-familiar narrative? But on the other hand, the limitations themselves are created from the unique way in which the expression of computer game imagery is bound with a particular sense of engagement between player and game. It is, then, important not to approach the concept of representation in gaming too simplistically, by assuming a passive or linear relationship between screen and viewer (see Shaw 2014; Vahlo 2017). As Atkins and Kryzywinska suggest, ‘it is only in the act of playing a game, becoming subject to those formal regimes that act to interpolate the player and shape their experience, that we are able to understand at a deeper level the experience of playing video games.’ (2007, p. 5) Sageng likewise suggests that, while computer games exhibit some highly traditional ‘semantic mechanisms’ of representation and narrative, such ‘mechanisms of representation cannot account for [...] the nature of *gameplay*’ (2016, p. 263); which ‘involves a number of on-game actions attributed to the player herself (or her avatar) rather than some non-existent fictional subject.’

In this context, Ian Bogost has argued that video games should be understood as a form of rhetoric; that is, a persuasive discourse aimed at securing the ‘adherence of minds’ (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 2008, p. 8) in a given audience. This, Bogost argues, situates them as a cultural form, for ‘just as photography, motion graphics, moving images, and illustration have become pervasive in contemporary society, so have computer hardware, software and video games.’ But the latter group differs from the former in terms of the ‘unique properties of procedural expression.’ (Bogost 2007, p. 29) Hence, just as the ‘new rhetoric’ of Burke, Perelman, Booth and so on translated the oratorical focus of classical rhetoric into one of texts and written media, so Bogost develops a rhetoric which utilises the specific aspects of gaming as a form of persuasion.

This provides an important counter to what Bogost terms the ‘naïve-behaviourist view’: that is, where gaming content matches real world contexts, the game will reinforce particular behaviours across one to the other. Instead, a rhetorical approach insists on the materiality of communication and as such, in Laclau’s words, it is this ‘rhetorical milieu’ which ‘ultimately dissolves the illusion of any unmediated reference.’ (2014: 79) Just as rhetoric organises its presentation around specific configurations of speech and audience – the key to successful oratory is connecting what matters to whom, at a given point – so too Bogost argues that:

Videogames do not just offer situated meaning and embodied experiences of real and imagined worlds and relationships; they offer meaning and experiences of particular worlds and particular relationships. [...] Put differently, rhetorical positions are always particular positions; one does not argue or express in the abstract. A game’s procedural rhetoric influences the player’s relationship with it by constraining the strategies that yield failure or success. (Bogost 2007, pp. 241-2)⁵

The ‘meaning and experience’ that is of interest in this paper is not the fairly typical representations of madness as villainous or evil, but rather those which situate madness as a *heroic* construct, utilising the tensions surrounding the experience of madness in order to position the game’s ‘hero’ – typically, the character controlled by the player themselves – and, in doing so, constituting a reobjectification of commonplaces around both heroism and madness.

Rhetorics of *Suffering* and *Darkness*: Monstrous Doubles and Reaching Tentacles

Agency in gaming typically requires a ‘controller’ – both the player and the interface through which they play – which must conform to a set number of buttons one can press (or movements one can make, or voice commands one can give). Indeed, the functional role of the game in providing this sense of agency through a ‘functional relationship between the gameworld environment and the game system that lies beyond the interaction and governs it’ (Jørgensen 2013, p. 2) has prompted much critical discussion (see, for example, Juul 2005; Taylor 2003). But this clearly sits in tension with aspects of ‘madness’, and the loss of control or struggle with sense-making which is frequently associated with it, both culturally and clinically (McCann et al. 2012). In order to be persuasive, then, a game seeking to express some kind of ‘heroic madness’ must perform through certain tensions around control, expression and knowledge, which convey a sense of madness that can, nonetheless, be ‘played’, and played successfully. Drawing on the long-established archetypes of melancholia (the unstable and fundamentally misunderstood characters who *through these deviations* come to reinterpret and challenge the accepted cultural norms: Nietzsche’s Madman alerts us to the death of God; Gogol’s Poprishchin exposes the nonsensical bureaucracy of middle-

management; Lautréament's Maldoror who takes on the apathy of moral sentiments, and so on), gaming procedures must create something that is both painfully integral and wholly other to madness itself, while at the same time, retaining a sense of engagement which is based on the player as a 'hero', with its corresponding sense of control and autonomy.

Two figures or motifs are remarkably commonplace across the span of video games that attempt to negotiate these challenges and express madness in relationship to the hero-player. These commonplaces can be broadly identified as the *monstrous double*, and the *reaching tentacle*. The figure of the monstrous double typically involves confronting players with a 'dark side' to a character's personality, an uncontrollable (or less controllable) 'other' whose relation to the player is usually embedded within a wider moral choice within the game's plot. In the FPS video game *The Suffering*, for example, the player takes control of a protagonist wrestling with a madness linked to an ambiguous set of memories, and a seemingly uncontrollable anger. To persuade the player of this, the game persistently subjects the player to a tortuous and uncontrollable monstrous aspect: as the game proceeds, they hear whispers and voices in their heads, and were constantly bombarded with violent images of their own murdered children at seemingly random times. The player not only battles monsters – as enemies *and* as inner voices from their 'past' – but, once they have filled up an 'insanity meter', are also able to transform themselves into a fiery monster. This transformation was a gameplay mechanic to help traverse difficult levels: the monster is stronger and more resilient to damage, but also harder to control. But the extent of the player's use of that mechanic is one factor in determining whether the ending of the game shows the protagonist to be guilty or innocent of the crime they have been incarcerated for (killing their family); the more the monster is used, the more likely they are guilty.

The figure of the reaching tentacle also plays on conventional horror motifs in order to disturb the player's sense of control of the 'hero' of the game. Whether attached to an enemy (among many examples: *Death Stranding*; *Darksiders*) or the player themselves (*The Darkness*, *Prototype*, *The Elder Scrolls: Dragonborn*), the tentacle expresses an unpredictable and slippery force which defies conventional gameplay strategy. In the latter cases, where the tentacle is embedded within the players in-game agency, this lack of control and predictability is almost always tied to the protagonist's loss of memory. The loss of self-identity is, of course, a common trope for any figure of heroic madness; but whereas the monstrous double tends to use memory as a means of directing the player's choices in the game (an either/or which corresponds to whether the protagonist is 'really' a monster, or a hero), the tentacle's relationship to memory is less decisive. For example, the FPS *The Darkness* places the player in the game as a lost and confused protagonist with no sense of identity, who's only guide is a haunting voice in their head. The voice itself is actualised through shadowy, and at first uncontrollable, tentacles that are released from the protagonist's body. The tentacles that the player is able to summon thus become a trope for both the protagonist's madness itself, but also the weapon against it: as the player masters the game, the tentacles can be controlled in order to complete the storyline and, consequently, recover the protagonist's identity. The problem of memory is, then, not simply narrative (the protagonist loses their memory, or is haunted by memories), but also operational: the player does not know how to play the game at the beginning, and (presumably) does by the end. In this sense, the fracturing of a player's experience of memory – an experience which crosses between the narrative of the game and the physical immersion of its playing – is, in effect, an operationalising of 'heroic madness'.

Immersion, Representation, and Commonplace Procedures

Of course, it could well be charged that neither of these figures constitute a ‘reobjectification’ of madness in the sense that Schoeneman et al. described, but instead simply recycle conventional horror tropes in order to increase the immersive value of the game. *The Suffering* is clearly designed to shock, just as *The Darkness* is designed to unsettle. On this reading, the figures of madness are simply commonplace tools to induce a greater response in the player which Rehak refers to the ‘prison of presence’ at work in FPS games, when ‘embodied vulnerability (*they’re coming for me!*) deliciously complimented its violent agency (*take that, you bastard!*).’ (Rehak 2007, p. 140) This prison of presence defines immersion in terms of the player’s sense of the game’s ‘reality’: in short, the game replicates a terrifying situation, and the more real this situation feels to the player, the more enjoyable the game will be. On such a reading, the immediate violence of the figure of the monster, or the disgust at the figure of the tentacle, can tend to dominate their meaning over and above the ways in which they are constructed as part of the game’s procedures themselves.

But the problem with this particular notion of immersion is that it assumes the game is *replicating reality* in some sense. It is true that, in Bogost’s words, ‘the interactivity of (good) video games might locate those games higher on the “vividness spectrum”.’ (2007, p. 45) But when considering the more ‘vivid’ aspects of video games such as *The Suffering* or *The Darkness*, it would be a mistake to assume that such vividness relates to how closely it depicts ‘real experience’. Instead, Bogost argues that such ‘vividness comes not from immersion, but from abstraction.’ (2007, p. 45):

meaning in video games is constructed not through a re-creation of the world, but through selectively modelling appropriate elements of that world. Procedural representation models only some subset of a source system, in order to draw attention to that portion as the subject of the representation. Interactivity follows

suit: the total number and credibility of user actions is not necessarily important; rather, the relevance of the interaction in the context of representational goals of the system is paramount. (2007, p. 46)

This is a key point as, for all of its cartoonish violence, the visual depiction of the protagonist's 'madness' within *The Suffering* resonates with accounts of those experiencing psychotic episodes (for example: 'the physical symptoms, the feeling of being burnt [...]. Something was biting my head as well. I had a few occasions where I felt I was being eaten alive' (Rhodes and Jakes 2009, p. 57)). It would be tempting, therefore, to align the monster-infested world with a paranoid condition, or inner voices with that of the schizophrenic. But, as Bogost's argument suggests, this link between the game's depiction and patient experience is *not* a representational likeness, so much as an *abstraction* of the principle which both try to express. This approach requires avoiding the straightforward visual representation of madness within the game, or the more traditional and heavy-handed black box interpretations of video games as somehow causally affecting the individuals who play them. He thus uses rhetoric as a route to developing an object-oriented ontology as a way of sidestepping the traditional focus on gaming as a form of linear representation.

If procedural rhetoric is used to make the case that gaming forms a distinctive version of what Schoeneman et al. identified as a 're-objectification' of madness, something of a tension seems to emerge. On the one hand, Bogost's argument that video games constitute a form of procedural abstraction which embeds the core act of gameplay into a series of choices, tropes, narratives, and establishes the game as a persuasive activity 'through rule-based representations and interactions' (2007, p. ix), is convincing. On the other hand, in the case of a game such as *The Suffering* or *The Darkness* this abstraction is not procedural alone, but employs longer-standing motifs, cultural genealogies and straightforward clichés: in short, commonplaces.⁶

While Bogost argues that procedural rhetoric is a process of abstracting particular worlds and particular relationships, the sense of madness conveyed by the monstrous double and the reaching tentacle depend on multiple and overlapping resonances which seem to render the game world ambiguous, rather than particular. This means that, in the games discussed above, the boundary between the ‘me’ and the ‘bastard’ within Rehak’s account of embodied vulnerability are in a constant supplemental exchange as each of the game’s choices presents itself. The ‘rational choice’ for the player is in fact rendered constantly suspect, as is the nature of the ‘control’ being exercised.

Thus, in the specific case of ‘heroic madness’, it would seem that more needs to be said about the procedures of rhetoric, than the rhetoric of procedure. When Bogost claims that ‘procedural expression must entail symbol manipulation’, and that the ‘computer magnifies the ability to create representations of processes’ (2007, p. 5), the commonplace figures of madness employed in the examples above form a *particular kind* of symbol or process, the particularity of which needs to be accounted for if we are to avoid a simplistic ‘black box’ interpretation, and see them instead as something like Schoeneman’s notion of an ‘assemblage of available cultural metaphors’. To understand what kind of symbol or process this might be, a short detour through the rhetorical structure of the commonplace is pertinent. In classical rhetoric, the commonplace – from the Latin *locus communis*, in turn from the Greek *koinos topos* – was a tool of the Sophists, whose persuasive strategies were built upon the circulated knowledge of local communities; the ‘topics’ which filled their arguments were employed on the grounds of their likeliness to mirror the beliefs of an audience. These were not systematic, but were employed instead as a ‘plurality of instances’ (Jarrett 1991, p. 33) to be used against the universalist pretensions of dialectic: generally accepted arguments which

could be applied to persuade particular audiences through the application of syllogism, which Quintilian described as the ‘storehouses of trains of thought’ (quoted in Curtius 2013, p. 70) Whereas the topics provide a technical mechanism for ‘reasoning from generally accepted opinions (*endoxai*) about any problem in a way “which will avoid contradiction”,’ (Swearingen 1991, pp. 112-3) the separation of this mode of reasoning from formal logic over time led to what had been initially headings of a very general nature (‘more is better than less’; ‘the cause is superior to its effect’, etc.) becoming far more specific ‘oratical themes’ (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 2008, p. 84). These were themes embedded within the structure of the language and issues affecting a community, and ‘available to anyone who spoke or wrote the language in which they were couched and who was reasonably familiar with the ethical and political discussions taking place in the community.’ (Crowley and Hawhee 1999, p. 76) Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca thus argue that, today:

Our commonplaces are really merely applications of “commonplaces” in the Aristotelian sense of the term to particular subjects. But because the application is made to a frequently treated subject, developed in a certain order, with expected connections between the *loci*, we notice only its banality and fail to appreciate its argumentative value. (2008, p. 84)⁷

Two points follow from this attribution of banality to the commonplace. The first is that there ‘is a tendency to forget that *loci* form an indispensable arsenal on which a person wishing to persuade another will have to draw, whether he likes it or not,’ involving as they do ‘primary agreements in the sphere of the preferable.’ (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 2008, p. 84) This is, in many senses, a confirmation of the point which began this paper over the ways in which discourses of madness draw, intentionally or not, on its cultural genealogy. The second point is that, as a particular form of topic, the commonplace is not simply a passive reflection of the cultural milieu. Rather, its use is

determined within the ‘particular argumentative situation in which the speaker finds himself.’ (p. 96) That is to say, the content of a particular set of topics does not necessarily determine their meaning, as this is determined instead by the interaction between topic and contextual use. As such, ‘conceiving them in terms of *loci* that one considers fundamental, can give *loci* a variety of aspects and the same locus, the same hierarchy,’ but ‘when given another justification, may lead to a different vision of reality.’ (p. 99)

How does this account of the commonplace develop the preceding analysis? Fundamentally, it suggests that the commonplaces of the monstrous double or the reaching tentacle operate not by the power of representational vocabulary itself, but rather according to a configuration of associated meanings; after all, it is the circulation of a word, not its classification, which renders it clichéd. That is to say: as well as understanding the nuances of video gaming as a medium through its procedural aspects, it is also necessary to understand the procedures of the commonplace as a rhetorical technique, in order to interpret the form of ‘re-objectification’ at work in games such as *The Suffering*. This rests on a crucial difference between the search for an articulation of the experience of madness, and its presentation through the medium of gameplay. Recall Styron’s claim at the beginning of this paper that the experience of heroic madness was ‘indescribable’ (1990, p. 16); and his reflection that ‘since antiquity – in the tortured lament of Job, in the choruses of Sophocles and Aeschylus – chroniclers of the human spirit have been wrestling with a vocabulary that might give proper expression to the desolation of melancholia.’ (p. 82) Styron limits ‘expression’ here to words (and, to a lesser extent, sounds and images) which are invariably treated as direct, linear substitutions for experience: in searching for a vocabulary, he is pursuing a meaningful object of representation that can relay his experience. For example, Styron

describes the phenomenon of those in depression ‘being accompanied by a second self – a wraithlike observer who [...] is able to watch with dispassionate curiosity as his companion struggles against the oncoming disaster’ (p. 64). This wraithlike observer may well constitute a form of the monstrous double motif encountered in video games; here, it is used to express the detached voyeurism that Styron feels as he prepares for his own death. Because this monster is only mentioned once, its specific character is left largely assumed. It is not clear, for example, why the double would be a *wraith* in this case and not, say, a shadow, a statue, or a spider (which Styron references later, again to highlight its inadequacy as an image). The problem in this case is not with the *vocabulary* available to Styron, but rather with the sense of how ‘wraithlike-ness’ affects the activities the trope is being used to describe. It is thus limited to a brief analogy, and as such does not *abstract* any particular relationships the wraith may typically invoke between subjective experience and the broader regimes of mental health – that is, the ethical, legal and procedural management of social space and movement. In attempting to sidestep the unnecessary or superfluous excesses of the cliché (by limiting with brevity each figure he employs), Styron in fact empties such figures of their potency.

The point here is not to critique Styron, but to contrast his representational approach with the notion of the commonplace as a form which enables the configuration of a particular set of persuasive relations, drawing on both implicit and explicit syllogistic reasoning. In many ways this echoes de Man’s famous reading of Proust’s clichés, whereby the referential structure of the text is embedded within a broader rhetorical foundation concerning grammatical relations and habits: ‘the coupling of words, in a cliché, is not governed by the necessary link that reveals their potential identity but by the contingent habit of proximity’ (1973, p. 31); and the ‘mechanical,

repetitive aspect of grammatical forms is shown to be operative in a passage that seemed at first sight to celebrate the self-willed and autonomous inventiveness of a subject.’ (1973, p. 32) The procedural basis of video games provide a distinctive type of what de Man refers to as ‘grammatical forms’, and the underlying theme remains essentially the same: the figures of heroic madness in *The Suffering* and *The Darkness* draw upon a set of *loci* in order to establish what Perelman termed a ‘sphere of the preferable.’ This sphere constitutes a ground which interrelates player choice, vividness, experience and understanding into the gameplay decisions available to the player. While both games work predominantly with clichés – indeed, *The Suffering* is overtly saturated with them – these commonplaces are drawn upon as *procedural techniques in and of themselves* which allow a range of associated images and meanings (violence, burning, horror, and a lack of control) to be drawn together and present the player with a coherent, convincing sense of ‘heroic madness’.

In this sense, it could well be argued that the stronger examples of ‘heroic madness’ in gaming are *precisely* those which are overloaded with clichés, because it is these which draw most explicitly on these procedural commonplaces, which exposes the procedural relationships at work in the cultural meaning of ‘heroism’ and ‘madness’. As discussed, the linearity of Styron’s approach means that the idea of mental health as a form of ordering and managing of both the circulation and movement of communities, and the integration of the individual within it, is inessential to his employment of the figure. Contrast this with *The Suffering*, where the mechanic to transform oneself into a monster, and its effect on the game ending, is dependent upon a particular set of familiar relationships between ethical-legal ‘right’ (being innocent or guilty of murder) and procedural functionality (completing the game satisfactorily); use of the monster mechanic is precisely to reduce guilt and innocence to a function of

Heroism Re-objectified

Both the figure of the monstrous double and the reaching tentacle subvert the conventional figure of the hero to different ends by arranging the commonplaces of mental health in specific relationships to the gameplay itself. Each figure does this to different ends, by drawing on different *loci*. The interactivity of *The Suffering*, for example, consists of a functional arrangement of the gaming environment, and the configuration of a number of traditions in and around the motifs of control, fear, madness and heroism; or, in line with Bogost's account of rhetoric, it offers 'meaning and experiences of particular worlds and particular relationships.' Its first particular relationship is borne from its excessive invocation of generic horror tropes: the game takes place in a high security prison, which is built on a suspicious World War II bunker, near to an abandoned mental hospital which used to be an orphanage; at various points, the player battles the sadistic prison warden, encounters a moral but mistreated prison guard, recruits a cowardly sidekick and so on. Second is a relationship between the ordeal of *The Suffering's* protagonist (in particular their metamorphosis into the monster) and its resonance with accounts from individuals with paranoid delusions. Interlinking both of these particular relationships are meanings which can only be understood in terms of their procedural context, and that make sense only in the game's relationship with its predecessors in the genre. In one level, for example, the game uses on an old FPS cliché of the toilet cubicle. It has been long-established within gaming design (from *Duke Nukem 3D* in 1998 onwards) that, if a player encounters a toilet with a series of cubicles, some kind of reward will lie behind one of the cubicle doors: a health pack, an amusing scene of an enemy using the toilet, and so on. In *The Suffering*, the player encounters just such a room; but upon opening the cubicle door, discovers their (dead) child facing the wall, a flashback image of a bloodied floor appears suddenly, and the player is immediately attacked by a monster.

Importantly for the commonplace to be effective, there is no discernible hierarchy between these relationships: instead, they constitute an interwoven rhetoric of madness that shifts between generic cliché and unsettling twists on the player's control. As such, madness within games is embedded in relation to a particular mode of sense-making, which very often only becomes intelligible in the actual performance of playing the game itself (after all, how else can one explain why a player chooses to take the time to search in every toilet cubicle of an abandoned prison, otherwise infested by killer demons?). To put it another way: the monstrous double which emerges may appear as an image of violent irrationality, but the sense of agency that this produces in the player – in Bogost's terms, the abstraction which situates the player's interaction with the game – itself follows a logic of procedure, a logic generated *both* from the language of computer programming, *and* from a range of particular cultural logics surrounding and resonating with those images. It is in this sense that the commonplace operates as a threshold between the rendering of mental health as an order or regime within the game world, and without it.

This is emphasised in *The Darkness*. In his work on the horror genre, Eugene Thacker points to the relationship between the scientific taxonomies which create the boundaries of monstrosity in the first place (by establishing the boundaries for 'normal' genus and species), and the failure of these taxonomic efforts to remove the threat of an 'in-between' or displaced being (2015, p. 53). *The Darkness*' figure of the tentacle situates the player within the tension of 'control' that was present in the figure of the monstrous double: as the player learns how to control the reaching tentacles, these specifically takes the place of the protagonist's *hands*; they become, in this sense, an expression of the player's possibilities of interacting with the game world, replacing more standard interactions (a gun, a sword, a 'press button' symbol) with a shifting,

slippery ‘feeler’. In this way, the tentacle marks an ambiguous line between the human and the inhuman; both in a narrative sense (the tentacle emerging from the human body is monstrous), and in a procedural sense (the apparent randomness of the tentacle imposes a barrier between the player and the game’s controls). But the reaching tentacle also invokes a particular crisis of *knowledge*. It both raises, and destabilises, the question of ‘what is going on?’ both procedurally (the player cannot fully control the tentacles attached to them) and visually: *The Darkness* employs low-lighting, inky shadows and winding corridors to create an effect of what Thacker describes as ‘alienation’:

Whether one puts it in the language of fiction or science, the result is the same – the sudden realisation of a stark, “tentacular” alienation from the world in which one is enmeshed. For these and other texts the cephalopod stands in as a manifestation of that indifference of the black, inky abyss. (2015, p. 153)

Discourses of mental health are, of course, replete with the commonplace of the abyss (Atwood 2012). But, as before, in this case the figure is not straightforwardly referential. The very prevalence of the figure raises a further point of note about its rhetorical performance: while tentacular movement within games like *The Darkness* remains procedurally generated – it is destabilising to the player, but never really truly ‘random’ – its metaphorical and metonymic movement always-already overloads the trope: it invokes a glut of possible associations, from the mythical symbolism of the all-consuming strength of ‘the depths’, to the inherent sexuality of the trope as an uncontrollable yet dangerously alluring supplement seen more commonly in images of the tentacle within, for example, Japanese manga (see Vigilant and Powell 2004). In other words, the procedural aspect of the tentacle as a commonplace figure involves a necessary indifference to knowledge, and the techniques of certainty, itself. The tentacles within *The Darkness* continue and develop this set of relationships between

knowledge and control which not only establish the figure as a general literary commonplace, and subsequently appear as readymade illustrations of aspects of mental health, but also establish a convincing world for gameplay.

In this way, the figure of the monstrous double emerges from a configuration of commonplaces which, whether drawn from visual, cultural or procedural sources, all encourage players to identify an either/or between hero and monster, and in doing so create a tension between the player's control and the narrative resolution of the game. Likewise, the reaching tentacle draws on a wider cultural association with otherwise unrelated threats, which create a tension around the notion of knowledge and understanding. For both, it is entirely possible to argue that a 'reobjectification' of madness has taken place in the sense that Schoeneman et al. identified in Styron's work: 'a familiarization that [...] adds depth to the usual signifiers of [...] disorder.' But whereas Styron's work was an ill-fated pursuit of a more 'sincere' account of madness, explorations of the rhetorical relationship between process and commonplace suggest a more complex set of relationships – from the seemingly banal to the blatantly grotesque – concerning the ways in which the ordering of mental health is constituted.

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² One specific example of this has been shown with the case of dementia. Asking what the available images of personhood are for those diagnosed, Behuniak (2011) argues for a link between the representation of dementia as ‘the walking dead’, and a broader cultural interest in zombies in the United States. Mitchell, Dupuis, and Kontos (2013) likewise note that popular literature – replete with book titles such as *Death in Slow Motion* or *The Living Dead: Alzheimer’s in America* – is beset with a discourse of decaying monstrosity. ‘These images, coupled as they usually are with the tragedy discourse of being doomed, gutted, ravaged, taken over by a beast, and turned into the living dead, perpetuate a deep and pernicious fear of, and disregard for, persons with dementia.’ (p. 2)

³ Fleming et al. provide an excellent overview of a number of ‘serious games’ aimed at educating players on mental health. ‘Serious games’ are mostly educational by design; in contrast, attempts to capture the affective experience of depression through game mechanics can be found in efforts such as Videodante’s ‘game poem’ *Depression Presented Ludically in the Style of a Videogame*. The present paper is, however, more interested in the relationship between procedures of gameplay and the circulation of commonplace imagery, and how the medium of gaming exploits the commonplaces of madness to create a form of re-objectification. As such, the games examined are from mainstream entertainment, which have madness as a core feature of gameplay, but without an ‘educational’ agenda such as those in the ‘serious gaming’ category.

⁴ In some respects, this follows what Lawn et al. identify as a more general lack of consideration of tropes and metaphors and, while abundant around mental health, a lack of work on how these *actively shape* decision-making by both service users and mental health workers (2016, p. 2).

⁵ Bogost echoes Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s take on the figures of discourse here:

For us, more concerned with the techniques of persuasive discourse than with the justification of a literary mode of expression, the important thing seems not so

much to study the problem of figures in its totality as to show *how and in what respects the use of particular figures is explained by the requirements of argumentation*. (2008, p. 168, emphasis original)

⁶ Hence the difference between these games and more ‘direct’ representations of mental health, such as in the aforementioned *Depression Presented Ludically in the Style of a Videogame*, where the game mechanics simply prevent the player from achieving typical gaming goals, and thus produces frustration which may be akin to depression:

And every time you fall a nasty message appears. “You suck.” “Stop trying.” This is what it feels like. The tired climb, the obstacle too great, the eerily slow fall back into the abyss. Overcoming depression is never a straight shot upward, and [the game] represents that. (Dalbey 2016, online)

This clearly veers towards the didactic rather than the rhetorical. In games such as *The Suffering* there may well be direct representations of specific conditions, but I would argue that their *persuasiveness* lies in their interlinking of a range of procedural and aesthetic commonplaces which constitute an order of mental health; hence my use of the deliberately broad and ambiguous term ‘madness’ in this paper.

⁷ There is a dispute as to whether the rhetorical commonplace should be linked to the modern cliché, and this is a far from straightforward argument to engage with due to both the complexity of the history of rhetoric, and the cliché’s resistance to answering such questions in itself (see Grimwood (2016) for a detailed discussion of this). However, the link is not necessary to make in this instance, because we are suggesting that the motifs of madness within gaming can be interpreted as rhetorical commonplaces – whether they are clichés are not.