Tools of the Trade: Storytelling Methods in Different Mediums

“Yes, I liked it, but the book was better.”  Who hasn’t heard that leaving the movie theater before?  Maybe the writer cut out an important chapter, an actor didn’t fit a character, or some important inner monologue was lost in the adaptation.  Whatever the reason, saying that the book was better makes an important claim: that the story was better told in a different medium.  While not explicitly said, it implies that the original medium (a book, in this case) had tools and methods available that the second medium (a film) did not.  It was the use of these tools and methods that made for a better storytelling experience.

Storytelling has existed for as long as humans have communicated.  Fully realized language was not even necessary for the advent of storytelling: even a caveman grunting and pointing to show that his compatriot was tragically killed in a mammoth hunting accident counts as a story.  As language developed, oral traditions and histories became the dominant methods of storytelling.  Those in primitive cultures who told historical and mythological stories were respected and revered.  Once the written word was developed, the practice grew even further.

Amazing tales were created and printed long before books were mass produced or populations learned to read.  Classics like The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, and The Holy Bible are some of the most important literary works ever, and they were only the progenitors of the art of writing.  Once the printing press was invented and literacy became a priority, storytelling became a much sought after opportunity.  I could fill up the rest of these pages with titles and authors, but there are more methods of storytelling than just writing, and they are just as important in the modern day.
The invention of film and the moving picture is perhaps the most important artistic invention, after the printing press. The moment that the first story was brought to life in front of viewers changed the world of storytelling. No longer did the reader have to do all of, or truly any of the work. Imagining what people and places looked like was not necessary, since everything was designed for the viewer. Stories that could not be told in a novel or short story were more feasible on film, and it was certainly more entertaining and popular to go to the movie theater on a Saturday night than stay in and read a book. The film industry swiftly became much more profitable than publishing, and films were cemented as one of the most popular methods of storytelling in the world.

Both film and writing are still dominating the field of storytelling today, but one newer method has risen up since the end of the 20th century. The first video games ever, usually simple board games, were demonstrated on computers that took up entire rooms. These arose in the 1950’s, and continued growing in capability while shrinking in physical size. In 1972 Pong was released, and laid the foundation for video games as an industry and art form. Pong is the reason arcades, home consoles, multiplayer games, and essentially anything that can be found in a video game today exists. As the years passed, companies like Nintendo and Sony created machines that could handle a lot more than board games or tennis, and video games began to tell complex and interactive stories. The appeal of crafting a unique adventure and experiencing firsthand a story that could only be seen in a film or read about in a book made, and today still makes, video games a distinct and wildly popular storytelling medium.

Since writing and film have been solidified in the storytelling canon, there is an immeasurable amount of scholarship on the storytelling methods of both mediums. Countless articles exist that discuss the ways that writing uses the power of the word, and how film uses the power of the camera. Video games are still an emerging scholarship, however, and have yet to be standardized in how their stories are analyzed. The very fact that there are arguments over what even constitutes a video game is a sign that it is not equally regarded in an academic sense. I aim to find a generalizable method of analyzing video game stories, by comparing directly the specific ways that writing and film stories are analyzed.
Determining exactly how a writer discusses narrative in literature and in film will allow me to compare the process to a video game, therefore finding counterparts or differences in the medium.

Dissecting these three mediums will be possible by examining three texts: “Created in the Image of God: The Narrator and the Computer in Harlan Ellison’s ‘I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream’” by Darren Harris-Fain (Image of God), “From Technology to Transcendence: Humanity’s Evolutionary Journey in 2001: A Space Odyssey” by Carrol L. Fry (Technology), and The Talos Principle. The first two are pieces of scholarship that examine the narrative functions of their respective works in regards to their respective mediums, and the third is a video game that I have selected as a representative of its medium. Understanding the methods used and the parts of their subjects that the authors focus on in the first two texts will allow me to set an example for later authors to do the same with video games like the third.

To understand any of these three mediums and how they use narrative, one needs to understand first what exactly defines a narrative and a medium. After that, the three mediums that will be discussed will also be more clearly defined. The first important thing to that must be understood about narrative is not what it is, but what it is not. Paul Cobley makes the distinction between story, plot and narrative in his aptly titled *Narrative*. He uses the example of Dickens’ *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* to differentiate these three concepts. The story of *Oliver Twist* is the tale of Oliver being born an orphan and fighting against poverty and the people who seek to cause further unhappiness in his life. Story, therefore, represents the events that occur, centered on the main character. The plot of *Oliver Twist* is the reason that these events happen, such as who Oliver’s parents are, the locations he ends up at, and what happens to other characters that brings them into Oliver’s life. Plot can be called the sequence of events that chain the story together, in a straightforward and direct, “point A to point B to point C” manner.

The narrative of *Oliver Twist*, finally, is the way in which the story and plot are unveiled and told. Cobley points specifically to the original novel from 1838, in which Oliver’s parentage is not revealed until very late, and a television adaptation from 1999 in which the first episode shows the love affair that brought Oliver into the world. Not only does this change the temporal sequence (the plot), it also changes
how the events (the story) are revealed. In the novel, characters give accounts of Oliver’s parents, their love and their untimely death, but in this television version, the entire affair is seen firsthand. Regardless of when the events took place, the narrative was crafted in different ways in the two different tellings of the story.

A narrative needs to be told, and for that to happen it has to come through a medium. The first way to understand a medium is by its definition, which is “one of the means or channels of general communication, information, or entertainment in society, as newspapers, radio or television.” The important part to note is that a medium is a means of communication. Whatever medium is used, and for whatever purpose, it always communicates something to someone and in a specific way. A handwritten letter cannot communicate to a fully-attended theater, and it cannot communicate a message with sound. The writer of a letter intends for it to be read by one person, and it only communicates through handwritten messages, whether they be words, drawings, or symbols. It is important to understand both the tools and limitations of a medium, especially when seeking to understand how a narrative is told through a medium.

The first medium that will be examined is the short story. The dictionary definition reads, “a story with a fully developed theme but significantly shorter and less elaborate than a novel.” The main points are the length and the complete story. The rules for the Nebula Awards for science fiction and fantasy writing require that a short story be less than 7,500 words (Nebula). The more important part of the definition is the “fully developed theme.” A short story reads differently from a chapter of a novel, despite the similar lengths. The short story needs to have a complete story, beginning, middle and end, whereas a chapter is simply part of a larger story. It can be part of any genre, just like any other piece of writing. The only requirements are the length and the complete story.

The definition of a film, the second medium that will be analyzed, is as follows: “A film, also called a movie, motion picture, theatrical film or photoplay, is a series of still images which, when shown on a screen, creates the illusion of moving images due to the phi phenomenon.” That definition seems very loaded, especially with the “phi phenomenon,” which is the optical illusion that makes a viewer
perceive multiple still pictures as a depiction of movement. All films are comprised of these still pictures, captured as a video by a camera. Whether the film is two minutes or two hours long, it is comprised of hundreds or thousands of pictures combined to create the motion that is seen. Films are usually created to tell a story or give information, the former being the kind on which I will focus. How a film connects story, plot, and narrative differs greatly from how a short story does, but before that is explained, there is one more medium to examine.

Finally, the third medium and the third definition. “A video game is an electronic game that involves human interaction with a user interface to generate visual feedback on a video device such as a TV screen or computer monitor.” This explanation is fairly straightforward, but it can be broken down a bit further. A “user interface” is what the player of a video game sees on their screen, whether that be pictures or words. The “human interaction” is some sort of input, whether from a touch screen or controlling apparatus (mouse, keyboard, controller) to achieve that visual feedback. The back-and-forth between the user interface and the human interaction is what defines the playing experience of a video game. It is important to note that every game has a different playing experience, and every player will also have a unique experience with every game they play. These varying experiences craft the narrative of each game for each player.

Now understanding the what exactly defines a narrative and a medium, and knowing how each of the three mediums work, it is time to combine all of this knowledge. How does each medium present a narrative? What should a reader, watcher or player expect from the narrative of whatever medium they choose to indulge in? There are specific trends in each of these mediums, and examining what these trends are and how professional critics analyze them will provide answers to these questions.

A short story is a pretty easy concept to grasp. All you need to know is right there in the name, right? It is a story, and it is short. That is the easy answer, but when it comes to dissecting a medium and creating an analytical framework based off of it, the easy answer is never good enough. From their size to the types of stories that appear in them, short stories are a unique medium that must be understood.
specifically to see how they are analyzed. Marilyn Singer’s compilation of professional definitions of short stories, “What is a Short Story?,” will aid in defining these characteristics.

The first distinction that must be made about short stories is that they are different from larger pieces of writing. Some might write off the short story as training wheels for a novel, but that is hardly accurate. In many ways, creating a meaningful story with a significantly shorter word count can be harder. A novel allows for so much room for characters to develop and events to unfold, while a short story requires economic use of language. The setting must be clear without devoting time to exposition, the characters must be understandable through their real-time actions instead of back stories, and the plot must unfold within (as the name suggests) a very short time. Donna Bray, in her section of Marilyn Singer’s piece, describes it with a metaphor: “A short story is like the illumination of a match. All the details have to work toward that illumination.” The illumination of a match is very short indeed, and the written work must completely focus on that illumination. There is no room to describe anything but the main concept. The size of a short story is not a benefit; in fact, it is usually a handicap that must be overcome to tell a good story.

Short stories do not have the luxury of creating detailed worlds. They instead use broad implications that allow the reader to create the setting in their mind. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Harrison Bergeron* opens with one such statement:

> “THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.”

This paragraph certainly explains a lot, but so much is left to the imagination. How do the people become equal? If the Constitution has over two hundred amendments now, what were all the one that led up to this? What does a “Handicapper General” do? What is going on in this world? Not all of these questions get answers, and that is the beauty of a short story like this. Editor Matt Rosen sums it up beautifully,
stating: “However, what I think I liked the most about them was the fact that there was always something left to the imagination. I valued the room that the author had left for me, the reader, to explore” (Singer). Not everything is defined; so much is up to the reader’s interpretation. The open-endedness of the short story has no rival in other mediums.

Finally, the short story sets itself apart with the potential of perspective and method of narration. Most long form stories, even outside of written mediums, have traditional narrative methods. Whether first-person or third-person, they usually focus on one person or a select group of people who are related in some way. The narrative exists to display the plot and the story, however it is constructed. The narrative style will usually not be very confusing or profound, instead letting the story itself bring the complexity. In a short story, however, anything goes. Since the page count is always so low, authors can really experiment with how they tell their stories without seeming gimmicky or getting old and annoying. Jennifer Armstrong’s contribution to “What is a Short Story?” encourages different narrative styles: “While there are many satisfactions to be found in the conventional beginning-middle-end narrative that is common in short fiction for kids, I believe young readers can respond to many other forms of short narrative” (Singer). My favorite example, Isaac Asimov’s "The Last Question,” is made up solely of short paragraphs, each from a completely different person, each in a different time period, each ending with the same question: “Can entropy be reversed?” Each time until the end, the answer is always “insufficient data to answer.” At the end, it is revealed that all of the universe has formed into one cosmic supercomputer and it has become God, creating a new universe in the last sentence. This form of narration cannot go on for much longer than it does in “The Last Question.” It works because it is a short story, and that is why the medium is well-suited for these experimental techniques.

These methods that make short stories shine will all be explored further later on, but first the methods that let creators of film and video games express themselves must also be understood. Film, of course, differs from the short story in many ways. There are obvious ones, like the fact that there is a screen involved instead of a book with words. The process of making it differs completely, and the way a film is viewed, consumed and understood is nothing like that of a written work. The narrative is one of
the parts that differs, through both obvious and hidden techniques. Bao Bo’s “The Difference Between Literature and Films - Enhance Literature Teaching by Using Films” describes the differences highlighted below.

At the Academy Awards, Oscars are given out to directors, writers, actors, composers, and to many other contributors. They are all necessary, because one person alone cannot make a film. There is a reason that the credits take so long to scroll through because at least dozens of people work behind the scenes to create the final product. Literary awards like the Pulitzer usually have no one to applaud but the author, and so the author is always cited as the reason for the quality of the work. The success of a film can be attributed to almost anyone involved in its making. This is the first point that must be understood about the narrative of a film. Bao Bo discusses how the adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* utilizes more than just the director’s vision to make a scene impactful:

“it can’t reveal Austen’s detailed description about people’s changing attitude toward Darcy, specifically, how ‘Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room’ at first, and why ‘everybody thought Darcy was the proudest, most disagreeable in the world,’ and finally, ‘everybody hoped that he would never come there again.’ The film presents this rather complicated course through Darcy’s cold facial expression and the dialogue between Elizabeth and Charlotte.” (59).

The director, Joe Wright, is not the only one responsible for understanding Darcy. The actors, costume designers and cinematographers all made this one scene, along with the whole movie, possible. The narratives of this and all films are crafted by too many people to count, and so they must all be considered in narrative analysis.

Since it is clear that film is a more visual medium, another narrative difference must be the use of the camera. In a written work, there must be someone who is telling the story, or who the story is experienced through. This can come from a first-person narration or from a third-person narration that follows one or more characters. Whichever it is, there will always be an unclear portion where the narrator does not cover a certain perspective. In a film, because a camera has to actually point at something and record it, a scene can either give all the information, withhold some of it, or make
everything a complete mystery. This can also change between scenes, whereas most written works use the same perspective throughout. If a novel wants to show how five different people react to a situation, it needs to devote multiple sentences or even paragraphs to it. It can be told from one character viewing the other four reactions, or an omniscient narrator describing all five. In a film, they can all be understood immediately by having the camera point at them. This is only one example, since any scene can be dissected in this manner of narrative presentation. Bao Bo includes the use of sound to show that the audiovisual aspect of film is its greatest strength:

“The magic of the sound in films is that it could duplicate the sounds in real life, and together with the images, it creates and displays the real life to the audiences directly and immediately. By contrast, the novel could only describe things through words. The film director could show ‘a successful ball’ with fantastic music, joyful laughter, excited conversation and all kinds of noise, but what the novel writer could do is using silent words. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the multilayered film is much more powerful in creating the real life than the novel” (59).

It is clear that film has so many tools and options available to suit whatever narrative is being presented. There can be infinite uses of a camera to tell a story or showcase part of a story that the written word cannot do.

Finally, and potentially most importantly, is the ability of the director to force the viewer to understand something. I’ve frequently heard people say about film adaptations of famous novels, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, that a certain scene, place, or character “looked just like I pictured them in the book.” The opposite could also be true in that the adaptation does not match one person’s vision. The director of the film gets to make the decision of what is shown and how, creating their own vision of the narrative. A piece of writing gives the reader the opportunity to develop their own version of a story, but that can lead to issues with the narrative. One person’s version of Aragorn might seem like a lean, nimble fighter when he’s riding his horse throughout a battlefield, whereas someone might see how well he does in hand-to-hand combat and thinks of him as a hulking brute who dispatches foes without a care. When Viggo Mortensen steps into his costume and onto the screen, there is little room for debate about his
physique, or even the more minute details like his personality and relationships. This lets the filmmaker tell a story exactly how they want it to, instead of letting the reader decide (and potentially get the completely wrong idea) for themselves. Bao Bo shows another example of this authorial theory:

“Monaco describes that Hitchcock had one of his characters narrate a flashback which is a lie. The audiences reacted angrily when they finally realized that it was false, because they weren’t able to believe that the image could lie” (59). Hitchcock showed a piece of the story that turned out to be untrue, but was still part of the narrative. Another person might have viewed the situation differently, and so the narrative presentation is a direct result of the creator’s intention.

The defining characteristics of literature and film have been laid out, and certainly none of them are surprising. Both mediums have been accepted as critically relevant and artistically significant for so long that it would be strange if either of them were not clearly defined. The third and final medium that I will explore is the one less clear and less understood. Video games are a much younger medium, and even today are not universally accepted the way that literature and film are. Can you imagine a world where generations clash because one insists that books are art, and one argues against it? It seems almost silly, yet that is where video game criticism lies currently. My goal is to show that the same sort of traits that were examined above can be found in video games, too, thus opening up a path for the same criticism that exists for more accepted mediums. Using Thomas W. Malone’s “Toward a Theory of Intrinsically Motivating Instruction,” I will show how players experience the unique narratives that video games offer. Through Malone’s writing, I have extrapolated three traits that are found in video games: interactivity, lack of forced direction, and the potential for failure.

I aim to isolate these unique aspects to show how video games can be analyzed on an equal level with literature and film.

Just as short stories have their size and films have the pointed camera, video games have a special property that immediately defines them. The fact that the player of a video game directly impacts the story through their actions gives the potential for a completely unique narrative. Reading or watching some of the stories that occur in video games would make them far less interesting. The process of saving
the universe in the *Halo* game series is only so fun because the player is the one doing the saving. Only hearing about other people hopping across worlds and single-handedly destroying the forces of evil pales in comparison. Malone speaks to the epic nature of many video game stories, saying, “It seems fair to say, however, that computer games that embody emotionally-involving fantasies like war, destruction, and competition are likely to be more popular than those with less emotional fantasies” (362). It is for this reason that video games tend to have these epic stories, and their interactivity is what makes the video game the most common and useful medium for narrating them.

Video games may have these epic stories and engaging first-person narratives, but an equally important quality that uses the notion of interactivity can fight against those stories. In a video game, the player has the power to choose what they do and what they see. The one moving the mouse or the joystick decides what happens, and that can mean skipping the story entirely. *The Elder Scrolls* series is famous for this, as the player is always thrown into an expansive world with no forced path. Stepping out of a burnt village or a sewer system, they can choose to go in any direction. Whichever they choose, they will find an adventure somewhere. Any other medium cannot portray the open-endedness of these stories, with diverging paths and the ability to simply move on to something else before completing a task. The narrative is completely subject to the player’s will, and that gives video games immeasurable opportunity to tell a unique story. If the game’s creator wants the player to follow a certain path, it is up to them to make it worthwhile for the player. Malone suggests piquing their curiosity via their senses, saying,

“Computers provide even more possibilities for graphics, animation, music, and other captivating audio and visual effects. These effects can be used: (1) as decoration (e.g., circus music at the beginning of Darts), (2) to enhance fantasy, (3) as a reward, and perhaps most importantly, (4) as a representation system that may be more effective than words or numbers” (363).

While Malone was speaking about games that cannot compare to *The Elder Scrolls* in terms of graphics, animation, and music, the meaning remains the same. Whatever the reward is, the player must be
incentivized to follow the intended path. It is up to the creator to set proper rewards for following the intended narrative, or the player will simply cast off and construct their own.

Once the player begins to take part in the narrative (whether intended or self-created), they will encounter in almost every video game the third important distinction. The most video game-like aspect, because it fulfills the “game” part: the potential for failure. The word “game” implies a winner and loser, and in a video game the player can end up being either. There is little need to cite a specific example, because there are so few games that do not include the potential for failure. Whether it is through puzzles, combat, or luck, practically any game will give the player the ability to lose. This contributes to the narrative by adding a level of compulsion, a desire to see things through that increases every time a state of failure is reached. Thomas Malone’s take on this concept of failure revolves around the compulsion brought on by challenge: “The implication here is that well-designed instructional environments, by providing high-level goals, can take advantage of a "natural" cognitive motivation to optimize existing mental procedures” (359). Players will keep playing because of the challenge provided by a video game, which in turn invests them in the narrative created by this challenge.

Finally, all three mediums have a framework for their narratives. This conceptual understanding can now be applied to specific examples to prove it. Using two articles, one analyzing a short story and one analyzing a film, I will prove that these narrative frameworks are generalizable to their specific mediums. Following that, I will show that video game scholarship has room to operate in the same manner, and the narratives of video games can be understood using the framework I have established.

The first piece of analysis I have selected is Darren Harris-Fain’s “Created in the Image of God: The Narrator and the Computer in Harlan Ellison’s ‘I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream.’” It is an article in Extrapolation, a science fiction scholarly journal. The article’s thesis is that both the protagonist and antagonist of this short story, Ted the human and AM the evil computer take on godlike images in the story. Harris-Fain uses many parts of the text and also outside knowledge to prove this idea, but there is another layer that I’m going to examine. I am going to show how the ways that the author analyzes this story are only possible in a literary form. There are three ways that show how Darren Harris-Fain and all
literature scholars analyze writing, that only work on writing. They are: references to specific words and passages, understanding the ambiguity of the story, analyzing inner dialogue of characters, and postulating the meaning of unique narrative perspectives. These three strategies could not work in film criticism, video game criticism, or other non-literary forms of criticism. Let’s look more in-depth at how the author uses these three strategies and why they only work in this medium.

Any published literary work goes through multiple printings and editions. After the first edition, the author can clean up any language after the fact and change it for the next edition. If the work wins some awards, or is included in a collection, or even sees a rise in popularity after the author releases a new work, it will be printed once more. The author has the opportunity each time to edit it once more, and Harlan Ellison carefully shifted the message of “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream” with each of the five official publishings. Harris-Fain pays careful attention to these subtle changes and how they impact the narrative of the story. He selects these three changes to illustrate the evolution:

“‘The passage of time was important to it. (If 25; Alone 16)
‘The passage of time was important to him. (Mouth 24)
‘The passage of time was important to him...it...AM. (FHE 187; EE 168; Ellison’s ellipses)” (144-145).

These editions were published within a twenty-year period, meaning that Ellison took two decades to decide which word choice was best. Harris-Fain focuses on this so much because of the narrative functions of short stories that were described earlier: word choice is so important in short stories because of how few words they contain. The way that the story is presented changes drastically simply through this small change of pronoun, completely shifting the characterization of the evil computer AM. This is a change that could not be examined in a film, for example, because the creators would have to go back and completely redo entire scenes to make that change. The author of a short story can simply change one word and shift the entire narrative, and that is why Darren Harris-Fain focuses on it so much.

The next unique short story trope that he focuses on is the uncertainty and open-endedness of *Scream*. The main focus of Harris-Fain’s piece is on the humanity and reliability of both Ted, the narrator, and AM. He hypothesizes that perhaps the entire work is untrue, stating,
“Not only is Ted an unreliable narrator, but it is often difficult to know how much of what he says is true and how much a projection of his own psyche...it is not simply his delusion either, unless the entire story never happened and is merely an elaborate construction within Ted’s mind.” (146).

This is a perfect example of the lack of clarity present in short stories. If Scream was turned into a full novel, it could made very clear whether Ted is insane, purposefully lying, or somewhere in between. More scenes, shifting perspectives, and more character interaction would allow this to be defined. A film would make it even more obvious, as it would provide an objective view on the story. Just like in Harrison Bergeron, the minimalistic treatment leaves things open to the interpretation of the reader. Darren Harris-Fain focuses on this and how it improves the complexity of the story. Most of the entertainment in stories like Scream comes from the ambiguity of the details, and that ambiguity comes from the nature of narrative in short stories.

The piece shifts focus from discussing the implication of the narrative to how the actual narration takes place as it wraps up. The last point that Harris-Fain makes is exactly how Ted tells the story, specifically as to who he is telling it to. This connects to the final separating element of the short story: perspective. The nature of Ted’s narration is constantly called into question in Image of God, and rightfully so. Ted is as unreliable as it comes, especially when you consider that he speaks in the past-tense. As the title and the final sentence show, Ted has no mouth. He has become a formless being, incapable of expressing itself. He is likely beyond insane at this point, destined for an eternity of isolation. Harris-Fain hypothesizes what this means for the narration, saying:

“The most probable answer is that Ted is telling it [the story] to himself, and likely not for the first time...Ted probably repeats the story to himself, possibly to alleviate the sense of guilt he feels at the death of the others and his uncertainty that he did the right thing” (153).

If this is true, it changes the meaning of Ted’s narration completely. The point was never for the reader to understand the events, because Ted is attempting to cathartically report them to himself. This sort of narration works because it is told in such a short time. A whole novel of Ted’s inner musings would be unrealistic, and the beauty of Ted’s fate is in his infinite repetition of his story. The size of it implies that
he must have shortened it along the way, having memorized the details so well. Knowing that Ted is narrating to himself creates the powerful sense of unending misery that Ted is doomed to. *Scream* being a short story is what gives this all of its power.

Those three short story must-haves are all very important to how *Scream* tells its story, and also how Darren Harris-Fain analyzes it. It is clear now that literature scholars examine these primary attributes of short stories when writing about them, but what about the other mediums? Is this practice generalizable? Carrol L. Fry’s interpretation of *2001* might provide the answer to that.

This next piece of scholarship, coming from the same journal as the first, is called “From Technology to Transcendence: Humanity’s Evolutionary Journey in *2001: A Space Odyssey.*” Much like Darren Harris-Fain’s piece, it attempts to use the finer details of its subject to extrapolate (not surprising that they both appear in *Extrapolation*) a hidden narrative. Whereas *Image of God* claimed that Ted ascended to form of metaphorical godhood, *From Technology* claims that as technology evolves, humanity becomes more reliant on it and eventually gets left behind. In a similar vein to the previous piece, this one uses three qualities that are specific to its medium to explain how this subtle narrative is formed. Like they were listed above, these are: how the input of more than one creator impacts the narrative, the use of the camera in addition to sound to tell the story, how the vision of the director tells the viewer all that they should know, and what the little details say about the world and the story. These three elements of filmmaking all contribute to both the original narrative and Fry’s proposed one.

*2001* won the Oscar for Best Visual Effects, while being nominated for Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Production Design. Stanley Kubrick, the director, was involved but did not earn all of those awards and nominations. In the first two sentences of *From Technology,* Fry shows that Stanley Kubrick is not solely responsible for the quality of his film, saying, “Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (co-scripted with Arthur C. Clarke) has become an American icon. The *Also Sprach Zarathustra* theme is so recognizable that advertisers use it to sell everything from luxury automobiles to hamburgers” (331). She then goes on to cite the different ways that story is told between the film and novelization. Challenging claims that the literary form had a better (in this case, meaning clearer)
narrative, she argues: “And indeed, Kubrick agreed that the plot outline of the novel is that of his film. Something is lost in a simple plot summary, however. Kubrick's description and Clarke's novel transform visual poetry into prose” (333). The story might have been thought up by Clarke, and perhaps on its own it is clearer, but the “visual poetry” that Fry describes it as comes from Kubrick and Clarke’s ideas coming together. It is the contribution from these two, and of course of all others, that made 2001 the beauty that it is. Fry will use the blending of Clarke’s story with Kubrick’s visual narrative to make her forthcoming claims about technology and humanity.

For starters, the elephant in the room. The obvious difference between film and other mediums is the fact that it is an audiovisual art form. There are a lot of ways to tell a story besides via text, and most films take advantage of all of them. Using images and sounds adds the wonderful concept of silent storytelling, an art that Carrol L. Fry does not hesitate to call attention to in her work. She notes a sequence at the beginning and uses the implied messages and unspoken narrative to begin her case about the evolution of technology and humanity:

“The opening segment, "The Dawn of Man," offers a visual suggestion of the Garden from "Genesis," a natural enough choice of metaphor for humankind's beginnings. But Kubrick's Garden allusion remains wholly ironic, for it is a post-Darwinian version: an anti-Eden, a place of eating and being eaten where only those species with adaptive characteristics that allow them to evolve and pass on those traits privileged by the environment to their progeny through natural selection can survive” (334).

She continues analyzing this segment of the film, noting all the images that are shown and stating what they say about mankind, evolution and technology as apes develop tools and begin to show a form of humanity. The entire sequence has no dialogue or voiceover narration, so everything that the viewer learns comes from visuals and sounds. This is only the first part of the film, but it already demonstrates what film is capable of. A written version of this would simply state the things that happen, but viewing it creates a sense of wonder at the rapid evolution of humanity’s ancestors. Fry focuses on this moment and others throughout her piece to prove that the film version of 2001 has a more meaningful narrative.
While it was stated above that the director is not solely responsible for the quality of a film, there are some parts that can be attributed to Stanley Kubrick. Many critics of the film cited the lack of sympathetic and relatable characters, something that Fry notes in her piece. She then immediately claims that this is completely purposeful, stating:

“However, the characters' lack of humanity is exactly Kubrick's point, a point demonstrated through the film's imagery. As in the folk wisdom of the sheep and the shepherd coming to look alike, humanity has become more machinelike, and machines, we discover in the "To Jupiter" segment, may come to behave like humans” (336).

After seeing the evolution granted by technology in the “Dawn of Man” segment, the fast forward to the future shows that technology has nearly replaced humanity. All of the characters lives are run by computers, and the famous computer HAL-9000 is one of more dynamic and influential characters as the film progresses. The way that Carrol L. Fry cites that this is “Kubrick’s point” and “Kubrick’s insistence that viewers see his story rather than have it told to them by dialogue” (332) shows that she is completely focused on this statement about humanity and technology coming from Stanley Kubrick’s direction.

Having heard about what critics focus on when analyzing both literature and film, it is clear that all mediums have different contributing factors that make them worth criticizing. After determining the ones that set these two apart, now it is time to look at a third. “Video game” is a term that people associate with many different images, due to the genres and demographics that exist within the term itself. It is not nearly as defined as a medium as the other two, since many people still argue whether some video games even deserve the classification. This, combined with the fact that video games have only been proposed to be (let alone accepted as) an art form within the last decade, makes it difficult for them to be analyzed the same way that Darren Harris-Fain and Carrol L. Fry looked at their respective pieces.

My goal now is to look at one text, *The Talos Principle*, the same way that those two did, and find the elements that define its genre. I selected this game because of its similar story elements to *Scream* and *2001*, specifically the “man versus machine” theme that they all share. With those discovered and defined, perhaps the analysis performed by Harris-Fain and Carrol L. Fry, along with countless others in
their fields, can be structured and disciplined in a way that makes it easier to create and find analysis of video games.

Before even playing *The Talos Principle*, the player experiences the element of video gaming that sets it apart the most from other mediums: interactivity. At all stages of play, the game requires input from the player to function. The game cannot start itself, the title menu cannot decide on an option for itself, and without keys or buttons being pressed, the game itself will simply sit and exist without the player. The puzzles that are required to receive encouragement and helpful tools from Elohim, the mysterious self-proclaimed God, cannot be accomplished without the player doing all of the work. This immediately sets any video game apart from film and literature, which can occur without the reader or watchers consent or influence. Even though reading or watching is a form of interacting, the reader or watcher has no effect on the outcome of the story. This notion of interactivity sets the stage for most of the unique traits that video games have, including the next two.

The next trait that can only be found in a video game is the lack of direction. Even the most structured and linear games are chaotic and open-ended compared to any film or book. This is because of the control that the player has. In a book or movie, the author or director have all the say in what happens and what is shown. If a character speaks and the creator wants the audience to hear about it, they will be the only thing that is recognizable. In *The Talos Principle*, there is not much speaking, but it is completely up to the player how much they focus on it. When Elohim drones on about the bountiful gifts he has given the player, it is completely in their hands to stop and listen to him or continue their puzzle-solving. Similarly, when the player hears the incessant beep of a computer terminal with new messages, they can forgo interacting with it and receiving those messages, with zero penalty to their ability to play and complete the game. In a written or filmed version of this story, it is very likely that these skippable elements would be forcibly included in a scene somewhere. It is a trait specific to video games that the player can choose to stare at a wall, inspect a blade of grass or jump around in circles seeing how many times they can spin instead of paying attention to any specific element. Critics like Harris-Fain and Carrol L. Fry could examine how video games present their narrative despite this hindrance to their
storytelling process. I think it makes it even more impressive when the player understands the story even with the beautiful visuals and engaging gameplay to distract them.

With all those distractions comes the player’s real investment in the game, and that is to win or complete the game. Completing the story is not a unique goal to video games, as someone can feel accomplished for understanding a challenging book or sitting through a confusing movie. The special element that a video game adds is the possibility of failure. A book or movie has one potential failure, and that is giving up on finishing it. Even that is usually more regarded as a failure on the text’s part, being uninteresting or not appealing to the specific audience. Within a game, however, the greatest fan can fail countless times. The puzzles in *The Talos Principle* constantly increase in difficulty, becoming long and frustrating adventures by the end of the game. Even early on, the player can lose to explosives, turrets, and unforeseen barriers. There is a reason that books and films do not have a button that restarts at a checkpoint: one cannot fail in reading or watching. Video games are created with the potential for failure in mind, and this can allow for unique narrative development that other mediums cannot recreate. Analysis of how Elohim encourages giving up when a player takes too long on a puzzle is just one example in *The Talos Principle*, and there are countless games that utilize their specific ways to fail to form narrative. There is so much room for narrative criticism of video games as a medium with this and its other unique traits.

So now that it has been shown that the narrative frameworks of both short stories and films are generalizable to their entire mediums, and that video games have their narrative framework despite the lack of scholarship making use of it, what comes next? I want to highlight two parts of my discoveries to sum up this dissection. The first is the nature of the differences between all of these mediums, and the second is the meaning all of this has for the study of video games going forward.

No reader of this essay should be surprised that all of these three mediums are different. In fact, they should be well aware that there are a lot more than three narrative mediums, and a lot more than three traits unique to each one. What should be taken away from all of this is that there are countless differing aspects between each and every medium that exist. All I did was point out a few, so that it can
be understood that any reader, watcher, or player should try to understand what they are experiencing. As soon as a writer, director or designer selects the medium of their choice, they are immediately constrained and yet also liberated by that medium. Each one has both tools and limitations, and each one plays with narrative in a different way. It is up to both the maker and user to know what they are getting into to properly appreciate and understand the narrative before them.

As for video games, which I have noted have significantly less scholarship, I hope that this newly identified narrative framework can help introduce their potential as art to other writers. In my analysis, I hardly even touched on the narrative of The Talos Principle. I focused more on creating the framework, because I hope that others can use it to create their own knowledge. Darren Harris-Fain and Carrol J. Fry came up with their ideas about their works, and now that techniques for analyzing video games have been uncovered, Talos and every other game ever created can be thought of as literature. Knowing the tools that video games have available to them, I hope to see scholarship that equals or even surpasses the other established mediums.

Works Cited


The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. Directed by Peter Jackson, performances by Wood, Elijah, McKellen, Ian, Tyler, Liv, Mortensen, Viggo, Astin, Sean, Blanchett, Cate, Rhys-Davies, John, Boyd, Billy, Monaghan, Dominic, Bloom, Orlando, Lee,