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The Dark Knight's Many Stories

Arkham Video Games as Transmedia Pathway

Abstract

This article examines the Batman Arkham video game series (Rocksteady/WB Montreal, 2009-2015) as part of a wider transmedia franchise that encompasses comic books, films, merchandise and multiple animated and live-action television series. It will be posited that the video game series is a successful entry point for non-fans into this ever-expanding transmedia universe. Batman: Arkham Asylum (2009), the first of the series, was critically acclaimed and established the gameplay, mechanics, and rules for the sequels Arkham City (2011), Arkham Origins (2013) and Arkham Knight (2015). Gameplay mechanics are linked to 'player agency,' i.e. how the user controls the avatar within the game environment. Player agency is somewhat restricted in the series; however, this will be argued to be a benefit for audiences. There are somewhat ludic conditions that can either be beneficial or detrimental for the player, to ensure they learn from failure. This essay will further argue that players accumulate a wider understanding of the Batman universe by collecting artefacts as they deviate from the central narrative. The player unearths character biographies and interview tapes that are based on the character's extensive history and, thus, provide a gateway into the transmedia world of Batman.

Keywords: *transmedia studies, video games, fan service, Batman, superhero franchises, agency*

Transmedia franchises run the risk of alienating a certain portion of audiences. Cinephiles, for instance, may not want to read the source material, or play the video game spin-off of a film. There is also the question of how to successfully adapt, or rather 'spread' a narrative across multiple mediums without losing the essence of the original text. Perhaps a simplistic response to this dilemma is "you cannot please everyone." However, with the development and proliferation of transmedia storytelling, and the ease of access to multiple mediums, audiences can follow a franchise, "enjoying the interrelationships that are created across the textual galaxies" (Summers 2019, 207). It can also be argued that significant franchises, particularly superhero-based transmedia, rely heavily on 'fan service,' a degree of power audiences have over the creation of content as producers alter material in an attempt to please core fans, regardless

of narrative cohesion. This approach has the potential to disorientate audiences who are unfamiliar with a franchise's multi-media history. A final question to consider is how can audiences find an entry point into a large transmedia world and its extensive, multimedia history? This article examines the Batman *Arkham* video game series (Hill 2009; 2011; 2015; Holmes and Ricer 2013) as part of a wider transmedia franchise that encompasses comic books, films, merchandise and multiple animated and live-action television series. Video games are a blend each of these mediums as they incorporate "spoken text, written text, as well as all kinds of sounds and images, both still and moving" (Domsch 2013, 4). It will be posited that this video game series is a successful pathway for audiences into Batman's ever-expanding transmedia universe.

The term 'video game' is used to distinguish it from "more traditional type of board or card games which do not need a visual display of any sort" (Kraus 2009, 76). Both board and card games are governed by rules and video games are no different. As with cinema, theatre, and literature, video games have their own frameworks, mechanics, and expectations. For example, 'gameplay,' the primary mode of interaction between user and text, "consists, on the part of the player, a type of semiotic analysis, in and of itself, in which the player actively engages in understanding the specific sign systems exhibited in the particular game that she is playing" (Westecott 2009, 2). Players respond to the virtual game environment, making decisions as to how they navigate and interact with what they see on the screen. Video games, in effect, give players "control over the point-of-view (camera), thus controlling the point and position that the game world presents" (Schott 2016, 114). There is also the degree of control a player has within the game world which is, again, dictated by the video game's rules. This relates to 'player agency.' Gordon Calleja asserts that players "are active participants in the creation of their experience through interaction with the underlying code during gameplay" (2011, 55). This essay argues that the *Arkham* series has limited player agency. Despite restrictions in how the player can interact with the gaming environment, the series rewards fans with visual cues, or homages, to the pre-existing universe of Batman comics, films, television shows and animations. *Batman: Arkham Asylum's* (2009) success spawned numerous acclaimed sequels, including *Arkham City* (2011), *Arkham Origins* (2013) and *Arkham Knight* (2015) employing the same gameplay mechanisms but expanding the visual environment in which the player can navigate. Players can deviate from the central narrative by pursuing extra tasks, accumulating artefacts that provide character biographies and 'interview tapes,' both of which are based on the character's extensive history. This introduces audiences into the transmedia world of Batman.

1. Transmedia

Transmedia storytelling refers to “stories that unfold across multiple platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the [story] world” (Jenkins 2006, 334). Multiple platforms include films, video games, books, comics, television series, and so on. Big-budget franchises rely heavily on transmedia storytelling to maximise their potential to attract as wide an audience as possible. Arguably, film has predominantly been the first medium audiences engage with in a transmedia franchise, as cinema can be considered, “the most dominant instantiation of transmedia storytelling phenomena” (Atkinson 2019, 15). However, transmedia storytelling does not necessarily require that the same narrative is spread across different platforms. It offers audiences “the worldbuilding experience, unfolding content and generating the possibilities for the story to evolve with new and pertinent content” (Gambarato 2012, 72-73). Henry Jenkins comments that for a transmedia franchise to be successful, each entry “needs to be self-contained so you don’t need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice-versa” (2006, 98). This highlights a problematic notion within contemporary transmedia storytelling that, if an audience member is unfamiliar with the history of a franchise, and its numerous media, they are in danger of missing key references within the wider storyworld. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) provides an interesting example. At time of writing, there have been 23 films released since 2007. Each entry lay the foundation for several ensemble films in the franchise—*Avengers* (Whedon, 2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon, 2015), *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo, 2016), *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo, 2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo, 2019)—featuring characters from all individual instalments. The creators devised a serialised approach to expand “the narrative across multiple platforms, producing a robust mythology” (Graves 2017, 235). However, if an audience member has not seen all individual entries, they would not have a clear understanding of the character origins, dynamics, relationships, and motives. Additionally, there is also the extensive comic book history on which these cinematic adaptations are based that have their own mythology, history, and character origins. In essence, the more the audience consumes multiple mediums, the more knowledge they gain, thus achieve a seemingly more satisfying experience of the storyworld.

1.1 Fan service

The term ‘fan service’ originated from various Japanese manga and anime series. Predominantly, fan service is associated with male devotees and their desire to see female characters in degrees of undress. Producers often create scenes that might not be essential to

either narrative or character development but exist “only to gratify the wishes of the fans” (Brenner 2007, 88). While not necessarily sexually explicit, there are parallels within the development and continuation of transmedia franchises. The increase of immediate social media responses to promotional materials for films, video games, and television series has had a substantial effect on their final release versions. Popular characters and film series such as *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Fowler, 2020) and the MCU have been altered prior to release. Disappointed fan reaction to either promotional materials or prior instalments in a film series have led to substantial changes of creative works. Hollywood producers often ‘test screen’ films to audiences for feedback, providing filmmakers time to re-shoot, re-edit, and even change characters before a wide release, essentially to “develop a marketing strategy, focussing on a target audience” (Wasko 2003, 192). Arguably, this ‘target audience’ is the fan service that is shaping creative works. Pre-established audiences, meaning fans of the original source material (for example, comic books), of any franchise have certain expectations for beloved characters. Any deviation from these expectations has resulted in negative responses. Immediate social media reactions, where “fans from all over the world can instantaneously post messages that can be accessed, read, and responded to within a moment’s time” (Lieberman, Plugh and Geltzeiler 2015, 63), essentially make or break a forthcoming release. Live-action film adaptations often draw the ire of fans, either due to casting, departures from the source material, or choice of director. However, within transmedia storytelling there are multiple interpretations of a character, where specific narratives are constructed based on the medium in which they are adapted. For instance, a film adaptation of Batman will not be the same as the comic book version and vice-versa. Films require actors, a director, screenplay, mise-en-scène and so on. Comic books can expand and exaggerate a character in a manner that films cannot. Additionally, a video game adaptation will have certain restrictions due to the nature of its gameplay, rules, and narrative. Transmedia storytelling, therefore, caters to wide and varied fans of a particular franchise. In terms of fan service, content creators give aficionados “exactly what they want” (Wolk 2007, 6). While not all fans will respond positively to each incarnation, adaptation, or depiction, there is a range of media to engage with according to their preference.

1.2 Transmedia video games: rules, gameplay, and agency

Video games have often been overlooked within transmedia studies and have been regarded as “just one, and often minor, part of a wide transmedia franchise” (Koskimaa, Maj and Olkusz 2018, 7). However, individual media platforms, such as video games, can provide a gateway into

the wider storyworld history. Video games were initially difficult to categorise with regard to their medium. In their original incarnation, video games were “text-based games, emulating choose-your-own adventure books, [and] arcade games” (Kudláč 2019, 192). Video games have become critically acclaimed for their narrative, visual, and character complexity, rivalling other well-established visual mediums. The mechanics of video games are multifaceted through their “play and interactivity [...] while film and media are narrative, non-interactive and linear media” (Eichner 2014, 53). Cinema has its own mechanics and frameworks with certain expectations: characters, narrative, visualisation. Video games also incorporate these elements, however, they also contain “narrative rules with no narrative meanings” that are related to “how the game is played” (Ang 2006, 310). Within these rules and meanings is the added element of interactivity, which encompasses how a player engages with the activities in the video game (Landay 2014, 173). This relates directly to player agency where gamers “take on new goals and accept different sets of abilities” (Nguyen 2020, 1). Agency is also the degree of freedom players have to progress through a game’s environment and narrative. Certain actions may be restricted. ‘Platform games’ are a genre that utilise a “2D environment characterised by ledges (platforms) on which the characters move” (Greenslade 2006) but are restricted in terms of their gameplay. Platform games can either have a ‘static camera,’ meaning that the player is confined to a fixed image, or a ‘moving camera’ that follows the player side scrolls through the environment. Alternatively, ‘sandbox games’ offer an open environment “in which the player has a great deal of choice over exactly what they do” (Tavinor 2009, 2). Potentially, players may have more degrees of freedom within a sandbox game to deviate from central narratives and explore the environment at their leisure. Player choices can also impact character development, depending on the structure of the gameworld. An example of this can be found in *Red Dead Redemption* and its sequel *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games 2009, 2018). Players have the option of killing or helping bystanders not central to the narrative. This then shapes the response of non-playable characters to the player which can either impede or advance development in the game.

Players use additional hardware in order to interact with a game, which can range from a joystick, keyboard, or console-specific controller. An Xbox or PlayStation controller may also have “numerous triggers, rumble devices, additional speakers, touch screens, and motion-capture technologies” (Mauger 2014, 36), which enhances the gameplay for particular haptic effects, for instance an explosion within the game will cause the controller to vibrate. Players experience a video game by utilising these controllers and having their presence “fixed to a single entity” (Calleja 2011, 60). Specifically, gamers operate an ‘avatar’ that represents them

on screen. An avatar can be a pre-established character that cannot be altered in terms of their appearance, function, or personality. Batman would be considered a 'player character,' "a largely predetermined fictional character" (Schott 2016, 115). Conversely, certain games allow players to devise and change their representation from a character model, altering facial features and selecting gender to the gamer's preference. The *Mass Effect* series (Hudson 2007-2013; Walters 2017) utilises this avatar design component in which it enhances "the representation of agency on screen" (Westecott 2009, 1). The player can, essentially, create an avatar as close to their likeness as possible, or exaggerate by choosing the opposite gender, sexuality, and visual appearance. This provides a great degree of freedom in an attempt to immerse the player further into the gameworld. However, if games do not offer this function, they still immerse the player through the format of the 'game perspective.' There are two primary perspectives video games employ depending on the genre: first- or third-person. The former is primarily associated with 'first-person shooter' (FPS) which has an "emphasis on combat, typically involving firearms" (Hitchens 2011). Classic FPS, such as *Doom* (Id Software 1993), feature only a hand wielding a weapon and a non-descript face as an avatar which changes depending on the amount of damage the player receives. Third-person is typically used in action-adventure games, such as *Tomb Raider* (Hughes Chayer and Neuburger 2013), where the player sees a whole character in 2D or 3D.

2. Batman's transmedia universe

Designed by Bob Kane and Bill Finger, and released through Detective Comics (DC), Batman has been a staple of comic books since 1939. Numerous film serials were produced in the 1940s, starting with the 15-chapter *Batman* (Hillyer, 1943). The next substantial live-action adaptation arrived in 1966 as a television series starring Adam West as the Caped Crusader in *Batman* (Dozier, 1966-68). This incarnation was noted for its departure from the noir-influenced comics and had a tongue-in-cheek, 'camp' approach that made it a cult hit. The moving-image adaptations found its maturity in Tim Burton's 1989 blockbuster *Batman*. Burton's dark interpretation of the character, visually and narratively, was a massive success, generating \$251 million at the box-office (Elliott 1992, 25). The film spawned video games, merchandise, and two soundtrack music albums, developing its own transmedia franchise. Burton's gothic visuals became central to the Batman universe, particularly for the video games and subsequent moving-image adaptations. In 1992, Burton created a sequel, *Batman Returns*, which advanced the dark, mature tone established in its predecessor. During this time, due to both films' box-office successes, an animated television series was produced to appeal to a younger market.

Batman: The Animated Series (Radomski and Timm, 1992-1995—*B:TAS* henceforth) maintained Burton's noir, gothic visualisation and adapted several of its comic book sources into 22-minute episodes. The series demonstrates that the "look and the visuals of a media brand [...] could function to develop a storyworld transmedially" (Freeman 2014, 49). *B:TAS* utilised the talent of Batman comic book writer Paul Dini. Central to the development of the animated series, Dini's knowledge of Batman's comic book history would later be pivotal to the *Arkham* video game series, writing the script for both *Asylum* and *City*. Burton's departure from the film series led to shift in the tone and visualisation for the next two entries, *Batman Forever* (Schumacher, 1995) and *Batman & Robin* (Schumacher, 1997). Both were financial successes but were criticised for their 'over-the-topness,' with the latter film considered "all vacant camp and hollow flash, with virtually no reference to anything beyond itself" (Philips 2002). Batman live-action adaptations would not find a mature tone again until Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005), which explored the character's origins.

Batman video games became available in 1986 with the release Ocean Software's *Batman*, an adventure game playable on Amstrad PCs. As noted above, the Burton and Schumacher films expanded their transmedia worlds with video games. Each release adapted basic narrative and visual elements from the cinematic works. *Batman* (Sunsoft 1989), *Batman Returns* (Konami 1992), and *Batman Forever* (Probe Entertainment 1995) were platform games, whereas *Batman and Robin* (Probe Entertainment 1998) employed the sandbox format. However, each of these titles were restricted in terms of their visuals, gameplay, and narrative. For example, the *Batman Returns* video game adaptation is confined to a 2D, side-scrolling environment. The player must combat several enemies before progressing to the next area and conquer a 'boss,' "a more resilient foe, taking considerably more skill and time to defeat" (Newman 2012, 78). The game's rules dictate what the player can and cannot do. The player can jump, move, test gadgets whilst not in combat but cannot deviate from the environment. While in combat, Batman cannot flee or avoid enemies, restricting player agency. However, the player is awarded points depending on what fight tactics are employed. Attaining points is not the goal of the game but can be accumulated to award players with extra lives. For fans and non-fans, these titles were limited in their capability to expand the Batman franchise further, both as a transmedia storyworld and the character's potential within the medium of video games. Batman's video game incarnation would not be developed further until *Arkham Asylum*.

2.1 Arkham video game series as transmedia pathway

Arkham Asylum was released on the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 consoles in 2009. It received critical acclaim for its gameplay, design and utilisation of the Batman universe, with critics considering it the “greatest comic book videogame of all time” (Miller 2009). Employing a third-person perspective, the player navigates Batman throughout Arkham Asylum, a sanatorium for the criminally insane, and has to overcome a series of tasks before progressing to the next stage. The game features a visually immersive environment with a script written by Dini. Though Nolan’s critically acclaimed *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* (2008) were released prior to *Asylum*, attracting a wide-range of audiences, the video game engages with Batman’s extensive comic book and animated series. There are audio and visual cues featured throughout the *Arkham* series to Batman’s various adaptations. What follows is a discussion of how the *Arkham* series evolved throughout its 7-year run, both in terms of its relationship with the larger transmedia world and as video games. *Asylum* lay the foundation for its sequels and prequels. While the gameplay, visuals, and narratives would become more epic in scale, and the graphics enhanced, the mechanics only moderately changed.

Arkham Asylum takes for granted that general audiences, and even non-fans of the franchise, have an understanding that Batman (Kevin Conroy) is a masked, caped vigilante, who fights crime in the fictional Gotham City and that his arch-nemesis is Joker (Mark Hamill). The game begins in-media-res: Batman has apprehended the Joker once more and is returning him to Arkham Asylum. The opening ‘cutscene’—short movies which “briefly take over the gameplay from the player and use animation and audio to explain the direction the game is going in, quickly and usually with intense, sweeping imagery” (Mitchell 2012, 78)—sets the dynamic of the relationship between the two characters. This is visualised as Batman towers over a kneeling Joker, questioning how easy it was to capture his foe, suggesting that this power dynamic will become subverted. This destabilises narrative conventions and “establishes a sense of confusion and disruption that continues throughout the game” (Bezio 2015, 129). The player takes control of Batman as they enter the asylum. However, controls are limited and the player must follow guards as they take Joker to his cell. As the journey unfolds, more controls are permitted for the player to use, such as learning how to use the ‘zoom’ function on the virtual camera to focus on specific people and objects. This demonstrates ‘agency mechanics’ embedded in the game design, and “these experiences oscillate between empowerment and disempowerment” (Habel and Kooyman 2014, 1). The restricted ludic conditions provide a sense of intrigue for the player. The teasing out of agency is fairly typical of video games as they centre on “player movement through game space constructing the player character as some type of

action hero displaying enhanced capacity as the player progresses through the game” (Westecott 2009, 4). The next pivotal stage of the game is the introduction, and function, of combat. Players must combine various methods to overcome enemies including, “a complex hand-to-hand combat system that is easy to progress along but difficult to master, stealth encounters in which Batman stalks and evades his enemies, and free-roaming that requires spatial exploration and puzzle-solving” (Arnott 2016, 7). Once players understand the basics of how to utilise the combat mechanics, they are incrementally provided with Batman’s familiar gadgets, such as batarangs, grappling hook, and gliding cape. The player must consistently upgrade these gadgets in order to traverse the asylum and its grounds before the final confrontation with Joker, or risk stalling the game. This demonstrates both the ‘narrative progression’ and ‘gameworld progression.’

Gameworlds tend to develop under the assumption that players get better at the game the more they play. Thus, games of skill scale the level of challenge with tougher enemies, riskier hazards, or harder puzzles. In narrative games, the progression occurs at the level of the plot. But the player character can also develop, acquiring new abilities or items, and improving the ones it already possesses. (Igarzábal 2019, 79)

Arkham Asylum blends the narrative games progression with the gameworld development. As the player navigates Batman through the environment, engages with tougher enemies, they acquire points to upgrade. And in order for the narrative to progress to its conclusion, the player must improve their combat skills. For instance, users can eliminate the threat of a henchman with planned stealth attacks, or they can engage in combat which invariably results in Batman’s death and restarting the sequence over again. Effectively, learning through failure is “an essential part of game-play experience” (Schott 2016, 136). This conditioning of developing stealth manoeuvres, again, limits the agency of the player; without honing these skills, the game becomes repetitive and progress is stalled. Additionally, within these combat controls is a recognition of Batman’s pre-established ethics in the wider franchise history, i.e. “a lust for revenge, a desire to prevent future harm, or a vow not to kill” (Johnson 2014, 952). The fight sequences in the game result in enemies being left unconscious rather than lifeless.

Within the wider Batman universe, the 1989 graphic novel, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* by writer Grant Morrison and artist Dave McKean, is one of the few publications that explore the sanatorium in detail. While the video game is not an adaptation of this publication, there are certain gothic, abstract contours of McKean’s drawings incorporated into the mise-en-scène, particularly in the asylum’s grounds, its cemetery, and the exteriors of buildings. In narrative terms, the few similarities the graphic novel and video game share lie within Batman’s journey through the asylum and Joker’s goal to “toy with Batman in

more cerebral ways” (Garneau 2015, 40). Despite the expansive environment, player choices are predominantly restricted to completing the necessary tasks in order to advance the central narrative. However, the player can wander around the asylum and grounds at their leisure. This freedom of movement is a fundamental component that “allows players to act upon the environment and is thus a necessary condition for the sense of agency that is a crucial factor in the game experience” (Calleja 2011, 67). By deviating from the central narrative, players can become acquainted with Batman’s wider transmedia history via engaging in ‘side quests’ or ‘side-missions.’ Unlike a cutscene where the player cannot alter the narrative or actions, side-missions are optional, playable scenarios “outside the main storyline, allowing players to improve their skills or gain additional resources” (Laskowski 2019, 14). Players can pursue challenges set by supervillain The Riddler (Wally Wingert). This involves discovering trophies and scanning for riddles that appear as text on the screen. The player accumulates a wider understanding of the Batman universe by collecting these artefacts as well as extra points in which to acquire new skills and gadget upgrades. These artefacts release character biographies and interview tapes that are based on Batman’s extensive history that, in essence, provide a pathway into its transmedia universe. This presents an interesting dynamic within the game: fans of the series can progress solely on the main narrative as they already have this prior knowledge; non-fans can gain knowledge and insight of the Batman universe, its various characters’ origins, and their primary motivations, by digressing from the central narrative. For example, during the opening sequence of guiding Joker to his cell, the action is halted by the arrival of Killer Croc (Steve Blum). While fans of both the comics and *B:TAS* will identify the character, non-fans will be at a loss as to his importance in the wider universe. By collecting the interview tapes and attaining the character biography, non-fans will understand the dynamics between Batman and Killer Croc. However, this is not essential to the narrative or even the gameplay but does provide the opportunity to develop knowledge of Batman’s transmedia world. In this sense, the creators have made their own ‘non-fan service,’ providing players the knowledge required to fully appreciate the game and franchise history.

2.2 Arkham series as its own transmedia world

Asylum lay the foundation of the gameplay mechanics and character depiction for the series. Its sequel, *Arkham City*, “took the game formula and gave players even more mechanics in an even larger virtual world with a better story” (Robbins 2014, 66). The gameworld map is expanded, and players are no longer restricted to 3 island zones of the Asylum. Nevertheless, the player cannot venture into the greater Gotham City area, they are confined to Arkham City, a division

of Gotham that has been converted into a prison, monitored by armed guards and vast, impenetrable walls. Due to the success of Nolan's trilogy, which concluded with *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), general audiences were now familiar with a depiction of Batman that reflects "the moral complexity and ambiguity of our own society, an element missing in many earlier superhero comic book films" (Johnson 2014, 952). Nolan's depiction of Batman attempted to 'ground' the character. Any point where the films depicts Batman having seemingly extraordinary powers or gadgets, "it shows how he acquired it, which has the effect of demythologizing Batman and his powers" (McGowen 2012, 98). This interpretation has had a substantial effect on how audiences perceive the character and, by extension, their 'believability' in Batman's capabilities. The *Arkham* series' depiction of Batman does not deviate from character's pre-established ethics, or roots in the comics/*B:TAS* world. The video game series embraces and emphasises the more fantastical elements of the universe and has less concern for realism. However, *City* combines elements of Nolan's 'realism' with the comics and *B:TAS* interpretations. This is demonstrated in minor alterations in the visualisation of *City*'s sandbox environment. For instance, Arkham City features an array of high-rise buildings that reflect Nolan's mise-en-scène but at the centre of the map stands a gothic cathedral, littered with gargoyles for the player to grapple on, mirroring elements of both Burton and *B:TAS* visualisations. This demonstrates aspects of what transmedia scholar Matthew Freeman considers 'transmediated branding,' where:

media property such as Batman [...] both diverged and converged [...] into a steadily unified and transmediated entertainment phenomenon, a textual embodiment of [...] packaging of media brands in ways that promoted the dispersion of intellectual property across [...] transmedia extensions without confusing consumers. (2012, 48)

This does not necessarily mean that there is a prescribed visual style for all adaptations of Batman that must be spread throughout every medium of its transmedia franchise. This would be too complex and difficult to differentiate between the various texts. However, utilising certain visual elements of different adaptations or source material presents a sense of continuity for audiences, particularly those who wish to engage with the video games after watching the films. A further example of this fusion can be found in the musical scores for the game. *Arkham* sound designers and composers Nick Arundel and Ron Fish blend "the use of rhythmic, string-based ostinatos recalls Hans Zimmer's music, while the motifs are reminiscent of the alternately brooding and triumphant choral melodies of Danny Elfman's music" (Arnott 2016, 8), Zimmer

scoring for Nolan, Elfman for Burton. Again, in an audio sense, establishes continuity for the audience.

The Dark Knight Rises and *Arkham City* take elements of the 1999 comic series *Batman: No Man's Land* (Gorfinkel et al.) in which Gotham City is cut off from the rest of the world by an earthquake. The supervillains form gangs and maintain their own territory. *City* utilises a similar scenario where the supervillains have their own areas of the gameworld map in which the player has to navigate. *The Dark Knight Rises* finds Batman challenged by supervillain Bane (Tom Hardy) when Gotham is transformed into a crime-ridden island, severed from the rest of the world. Additionally, Bane's (Fred Tatasciore) appearance in *Asylum* and *City* adapted the comics/*B:TAS*' depiction of a hulking, steroid-enhanced, wrestler. *Arkham Origins*' Bane (JB Blanc) is a blend of Nolan and *B:TAS*' depiction: a masked, muscled, military figure. It can be argued that *No Man's Land*, *City*, *Origins*, and *The Dark Knight Rises* are attempting transmediated branding, sharing common narrative and visual elements in an effort to provide a sense of continuity between each medium.

In terms of expanding its own transmedia potential, *Arkham City* spawned its own comic series (Dini 2011) that featured short prequel narratives for key plot elements of the video game. Certain issues focused on specific characters introduced in the video game that have not been part of the wider franchise history, for instance the Abramovici Twins, separated conjoined twins that are employed as henchmen for both Joker and Penguin (Nolan North). In this manner, the video game replicates Jenkins' model of traditional transmedia storytelling where "each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (2006, 97-98). Again, audiences can engage with these comics to understand the characters' backstory, motivations, and circumstances that led them to *Arkham City*, expanding the narrative in another medium. While the comics developed the narratives of several characters, the creators of the video game extended the gameplay by producing 'Downloadable Content' (DLC), which typically "comes in the form of new costumes, weapons, or playable characters [...] to expand the game's story, including new areas, levels, and plot elements" (Lebowitz and Klug 2011, 29). There are two key playable DLC that expands the narrative of *Arkham City*. The first establishes Catwoman's (Grey Griffin) storyline and motivations in a prologue. Players control Catwoman at certain points throughout the game and can utilise her distinctive combat skills and gadgets. Without the DLC, Catwoman only features in small portions of the game in cutscenes. The second game add-on, *Harley's Revenge*, is an additional story where players navigate Batman through a limited section of *Arkham City* (the environment is restricted to a specific location) as he combats Harley Quinn (Tara Strong), Joker's romantic partner-in-crime,

as she seeks revenge for his death. The add-on also allows players to control Robin (Troy Baker), Batman's ally and sidekick. As with Catwoman, Robin has his own skills and gadgets. While *Harley's Revenge* has its own narrative—what could be considered *Arkham City's* epilogue—Catwoman's subplot rectifies gaps in the game's original narrative structure. In a transmedia sense, this fits the model of Jason Mittell's "What Is" model, where the fiction is extended "canonically, explaining the universe with coordinated precision and hopefully expanding viewers' understanding and appreciation of the storyworld" (2014, 314). This model "encourages forensic fandom" (2014, 314) where players will have a greater understanding as to Catwoman's presence in the city and, at a key moment in the game, is able to save Batman's life. Without this content, players would have to take for granted that Catwoman has been a figure offscreen. This supports Jenkins' notion of each individual text making a contribution to the central narrative, in this instance the DLC content, an extension of the game's original story.

Arkham Origins, a prequel to *Asylum* and *City*, was produced by a different developer (WB Montreal) as Rocksteady, the original creators, were busy working on the finale of the series, *Arkham Knight*. *Origins* was criticised for being a "fun game, but is not very innovative" and for video game players "it falls short" (Swope 2013). On the contrary, the game was also considered "a must-have for any serious player or Batman fan" (Robbins 2014, 66), the implications of which suggest that *Origins* was a fan service game. The game features lesser-known villains, such as Black Mask (Brian Bloom), Copperhead (Rosa Salazar), and Deathstroke (Mark Rolston). While invested fans of Batman's universe will recognise these characters, general audiences may find them relatively obscure compared to, say, Penguin or Riddler. However, to contextualise *Origins* within the series, it should be noted that it is the first video game to enable the player to navigate Gotham City as a sandbox environment. This gameplay mechanic would be advanced further in the final instalment of the series, *Arkham Knight*.

Knight was released in 2015 on the next generation consoles, Xbox One and PlayStation 4, with enhanced graphics, gameplay, and mechanics. The game was a culmination of the best aspects of the entire series both in terms of narrative and gameplay. However, as a sequel to *City*, there would potentially be elements of the narrative that would be confusing for new audiences. A sequel, as Carolyn Jess-Cooke comments, "usually performs as a linear narrative extension, designating the text from which it derives as an 'original' rooted in 'beforeness'" (2009, 3). While there are several plot threads that have been established in *Asylum*, and continued in *City*, they are expanded upon and concluded in *Knight* that would not disorientate new audiences. Side-missions stemming from *City*, such as *The Identity Thief*, is resolved in *Knight*. The player does not need to have completed this mission in *City* in order to understand the nature of the conflict

between Batman and supervillain Hush (Kevin Conroy) as it is explained once it is completed via unlocking the antagonist's character biography. *Knight* provided a further advantage for new players by introducing Batman's famous vehicle, the Batmobile. Players can deviate from the central narrative and drive through the city at their leisure, engaging with criminals on the street, or pursuing additional side-missions that will unlock further details of the wider history of the franchise. Additionally, as Batman is considered 'The World's Greatest Detective' throughout the *Arkham* series, the player can utilise 'Detective Mode' a "combination [of] x-ray vision, infrared, and heads-up display" (Arnott 2016, 12). This technique alters Batman/player's vision to investigate crime scenes, gather clues, and find potential secret passages, which either help progress to a new area on the map, or unveil another Riddler trophy. The additional feature to Detective Mode, introduced in *Origins*, is being able to visually recreate a crime scene. Players must navigate footage generated by examining a crime scene and rewind, pause, and study clues in order to progress the investigation. This allows players "to experience Batman's rationally based superhero qualities in an embodied way" (Fahlenbrach and Schröter 2016, 263). Though these are slight advancements of the original *Asylum* gameplay mechanics, they serve the same function for the player: in order to progress the narrative/gameworld, you must upgrade and utilise these tools or the game will stall. As conclusion to the series, *Knight* cements Batman's place in the medium of video games that can provide a pathway for new audiences to gain knowledge about the wider transmedia history.

3. Conclusion

This essay argued that the *Batman: Arkham* video game series was a pathway into the wider Batman transmedia universe. Within the context of historical Batman video games, either developed as an adaptation of live-action films or independently, the *Arkham* series utilised innovative gameplay to appeal to both fans and non-fans of the franchise. As a video game, non-fans could enjoy the game in itself; fans would be able to control their beloved character and the restricted agency does not impede their enjoyment of the game. On the contrary, the restrictions provide satisfaction to the player as they develop their combat, detective, and stealth skills, meaning "that players influence, to varying degrees, what happens in a game environment creates the potential for meaningful exertion of agency" (Calleja, 2011, 55). The games are able to introduce non-fans into the franchise history via its side-missions, namely the Riddler challenges, which unlock biographies, audio interviews, and detailed stories that explain the origins of the video games' key narrative plot elements. As part of a wider transmedia storyworld, *Arkham* draws heavily from both the original comics and *B:TAS*. However, there

are also continuous audio and visual cues to cinematic adaptations, or more precisely both Burton and Nolan's interpretations of the character, notably through the visualisation of Gotham, and the *Arkham* music scores. Finally, the video games demonstrate the capacity to be a successful entry point into an ever-expanding transmedia franchise. Batman to the rescue!

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