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Essential Narrative Structure of Medieval Romance and Video Games

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Medieval literature, history and culture has been a subject of interest to me for much of my life. At a younger age, I looked at the surface level of works such as J.R.R Tolkien's _Lord of the Rings_ and similar fantasy fiction and enjoyed them without realizing that they were drawing upon a rich body of literature of a period long past. These novels were my introduction to a wide variety of writings and media that focused on medieval settings and content, and such stories became one of my primary sources of entertainment. As my interest turned to video games, I realized how many of my favorite games, such as _The Legend of Zelda_ series, drew inspiration from the characters, setting, and narratives of medieval romance: dragons were slain, magical swords were acquired, and gallant knights rode off to save princesses. As I matured and played video games with more "nontraditional" narrative elements, I began to wonder to what extent, exactly, they drew upon medieval literature in ways other than content. I began to study the subject at Skidmore, beginning with EN 229H (Stories of English) in the Spring semester of 2016, I came to realize that these two storytelling forms, medieval romance and video games, despite separated by hundreds of years of history, cultural development, and technological progress were more similar than they initially seemed, and not just in content. The structures of the narratives now employed by video games, even outside of an experimental context, use story-building strategies of medieval romance. The persistence of such narrative construction tools and arrangements connects these two narrative forms in significant ways.

In this study, I have sought to understand how and why the structures of medieval romance have persisted for so long and have so profoundly influenced a narrative form as different as video games. What is the connection between content inspired by medieval romance and structure inspired by medieval romance? What parallels exist between the tellers, poets and authors who determined the pathways of these narratives according to their imagination and available resources, and the game designers who create structured games while allowing for some amount of selection on the part of the player? Is this open-natured video game structure visible in medieval romance?

I will argue that there is a clear, important, and compelling structural connection between contemporary video games and medieval romance narratives, and the study of such a bond enables better observation of the permanence of medieval storytelling conventions and structures in the emerging cultural cornerstone of video games. Sections two through four discuss the tools that enable this analysis and the ways these can be employed in narrative studies, while sections five through eight apply these tools and others to connect the narrative structures of video games and medieval romance.

By examining how medieval romance narratives have "migrated" into video games, I hope to understand something more about both our continuing desire for stories and the persistence of story-telling strategies over many centuries and cultural changes. Some elements have been discarded—for example, oral narration is not practiced as much today—but video games have taken up the structural and contextual staples of medieval romance to carry them into a new age of storytelling that remains surprisingly similar to its predecessors.

1: Texts and Methodology

It is important to first establish what definition of "medieval romance" I am employing in this study. Medieval romances were first recorded in narrative verse form in twelfth-century France and soon gained popularity across the rest of western Europe. Common elements of medieval romance include chivalry, courtly love, religious piety, adventure, magical elements and fantastical antagonists. Medieval romances tend to have specific recurring elements and episodic narratives that can spawn multiple variations and derivations from an "original" work. Since many romances were originally performed before an audience, variations were common as poets sought to differentiate their work from other versions or tailored it to fit their audience. Written versions could further deviate from pre-existing interpretations of a story. Because of this, their structures can be more visible than works in genres with less repetition in the story or variation in the narratives.

I have chosen the story of Tristan and Isolde, which exists in many forms from approximately the twelfth century to the present day. I have based my study on Thomas of Britain's 12th century fragmentary Old French poem, *Tristan*; Gottfried von Strassbrug's 13th century lengthy but incomplete Middle High German courtly romance; Joseph Bédier's 1900 retelling *Le roman de Tristan et Iseult;* and Richard Wagner's 1865 opera *Tristan und Isolde*.[1] To help answer questions related to episodic narrative, I will also discuss the early 12th century *Peredur Son of Efrawg*, a Welsh romance analogous to Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval, le Conte du Graal*. These romances also contribute to my final discussion in the paper, which focuses on endings.

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[1] For ease of reference, these versions will be referred to as *Tristan and Isolde* regardless of the spelling of the title and be differentiated by reference to the author.

To study these texts, I rely on Vladimir Propp's 1928 work *Morphology of the Folktale*, As the title suggests, his work anatomizes the narrative structure of folktales, illustrating the ability of a storyteller to assemble a story from a body of conventional components or create a different version of this story by selecting alternative narrative elements that serve similar functions. In this paper, Propp's theory of the functions and variables of character and plot provide a foundation for the theory of narrative assembly.

Why is it appropriate to connect video games to medieval romance? Many video games draw décor, character types, structure and inspiration from the Middle Ages. While a game does not need content inspired by medieval romance to be related in narrative structure, all of the video games I am discussing here have content inspired by, or related to, the content of medieval romances. I originally played all of them before work on this project had begun: however, playing them as I learned about medieval romance at Skidmore helped me notice similarities in structure as well as content, and laid the groundwork for their inclusion in this project.

I will focus on Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*[2] for a variety of reasons. First, the video game takes significant inspiration from medieval romances: giants are slain, maidens are rescued, and magical elements are abundant. However, beyond content, *Breath of the Wild's* open-ended structure, where the player can explore the game with very few limitations, enables each player to recreate the medieval poet's ability to add, subtract, and alter material, inserting digressions and tailoring the story according to their audience's tastes.

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[2] A trailer for *Breath of the Wild*, offering visual and audio perspective on how it contains medieval romance content, can be viewed at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zw47_q9wbBE.

Another useful video game, Team Cherry's indie game *Hollow Knight*[3], also helped me see connections between medieval romance and video games. *Hollow Knight* offers some of the multicursality of *Breath of the Wild*, but its primary contribution to the paper is related to a critical query: How can we ascertain that different versions of the same story are exactly that—variations—rather than entirely new tales? *Hollow Knight* is an example of a video game in which grounds for this sort of determination, by intentional design, are not present. It thereby serves as a critical counterpoint to *Breath of the Wild* and *Tristan and Isolde*, since a feature of this game is its deliberate absence of thematic unity.

The *Dark Souls*[4] series offers the same sort of multicursality as seen in *Breath of the Wild* and *Hollow Knight*. Like *Hollow Knight,* it is also an example of thematic absence and narrative mystification, though the series expresses its narratives more clearly than *Hollow Knight*.

I consulted Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* supplies the vocabulary I used in this study. Martin Lister's *New Media: A Critical Introduction* supplements Aarseth by defining a central concept used in this connection: "hypertext."

2: Hypertext, Nets, Nodes and Courses

To build a resemblance between video games and medieval romance, I rely on a theory of narrative interconnectedness known as "hypertext." While neither video games nor medieval romances are purely hypertextual in nature, they both contain elements of hypertext which form

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[3] A trailer depicting the audio and visual design of *Hollow Knight* can be viewed at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAO2urG23S4..

[4] The introduction to the first *Dark Souls* game, which provides an example of its medieval romance connections, is visible at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lmEqpgg3B4.

the basis for creating a connection between them. In *New Media: A Critical Introduction,* Martin Lister defines hypertext as

> a work which is made up from discrete units of material, each of which carries a number of pathways to other units. The work is a web of connection which the user explores using the navigational aids of the interface design. Each discrete 'node' in the web has a number of entrances and exits or links. [In] a digitally encoded text any part can be accessed as easily as any other so that we can say that every part of the text can be equidistant from the reader…Such technology offers the idea that any data location might have a number of instantly accessible links to other locations built into it. Equally the many interventions and manipulations enabled by this facility create the qualities of interactivity. (Lister 26)

Hypertexts are defined by this open-endedness: the ability to make connections from any part of the text to any other with equal speed, clarity, and complexity. A true hypertext has a very large number of pathways from each point to every other point in the text, to the extent that it can become impossible to map all of the possible connections.

In *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen Aarseth discusses the navigational capabilities enabled by hypertext, and weighs different options for how to best define and designate them. To try and categorize hypertext, he employs an analogy where stories are made up of distinct "nodes" forming points in a "net." To describe the various ways that a story can travel through this "net," he considers several terms such as "multilinear" and "nonlinear" before favoring "multicursal." "Multicursal" is best illustrated by Aarseth's arguments leading up to his definition of the term, where he states that

A topology of nodes and links is not linear (or unilinear) if there is more than one possible path between node A and node B. The question is, then, which of the two terms, *nonlinearity* or *multilinearity* is better suited to describe such a network. If the paths are parallel, never meeting before B, then *multilinear* is the natural choice, just as *linear* describes one such path. But if the paths fork, with at most one direct path between any two nodes, as is usually the case in hypermedia, we can no longer talk about paths in any other sense than as a potential path, a course or itinerary. The lines of such a net are not identical to the possible courses, since the same line can occur at different positions in a single course. So, should we decide to use the term *multilinear*, what lines are we referring to, the lines of the net or the lines of the courses? If we refer to the individual lines of the net, the term *multilinear* makes only trivial sense and could, in fact, be wrong, if the whole net can be subsumed under only one line. If we refer to the courses, *multicursal* would be a much more accurate term than *multilinear*, indicating that the lines are produced by movement rather than drawn in advance. (Aarseth 44).

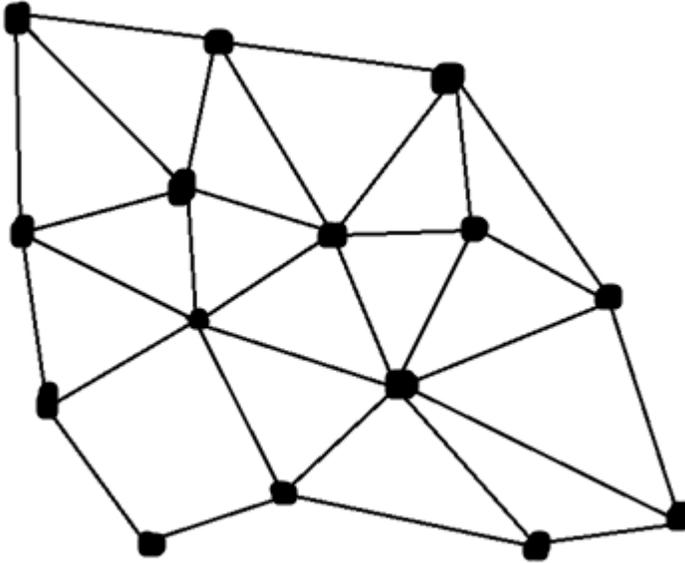(An example of the structural net can be seen in Figure 1).

Figure 1: An illustrated example of Aarseth's "Net." The shape is unimportant, so long as there are distinct points and connections.

I will use this definition of multicursality as "exploration along determined, but not *pre*determined pathways." The distinction is important: a *pre*determined pathway offers no possibility for deviation from a pre-determined sequence of events, characters, objects and settings, while a *determined* pathway means a course of action made by the reader of the text. The reader can get lost, but does not have to. Aarseth uses the various possible structures of labyrinths as an example, highlighting "two kinds of labyrinthine [structures]: the unicursal, where there is only one path, winding and turning, usually toward a center; and the multicursal, where the maze wanderer faces a series of critical choices, or bivia." (Aarseth 5-6) This illustrates the ability to make choices and follow multiple courses as significant to the definition of multicursality.

Because the course exists within the structure of a net, the lines of the "course" and the lines of the "net" are distinct from one another. The lines of the course refer to a specific path of

lines through the options afforded by the wider net. Although the lines of a course are dependent

on the existence of this narrative "net," there are more lines available through the various courses

of a net than literal lines that exist as part of the net's structure. For example, a path, however

meandering or direct, from point A to point B (or G and so on) of a net is referred to as a

"course": the lines taken in this course are separate from the total lines available in the net itself,

meaning that there are more lines available through all the courses in a net than the net on its

own (see figure 2). Even if every node in the net is touched by a course through the net, the path

through them is only one of several possible orders where every point is touched. A user

following a course can still double-back on themselves as many times as desired: since each

travel from one node to the next constitutes part of a course, there are theoretically infinite

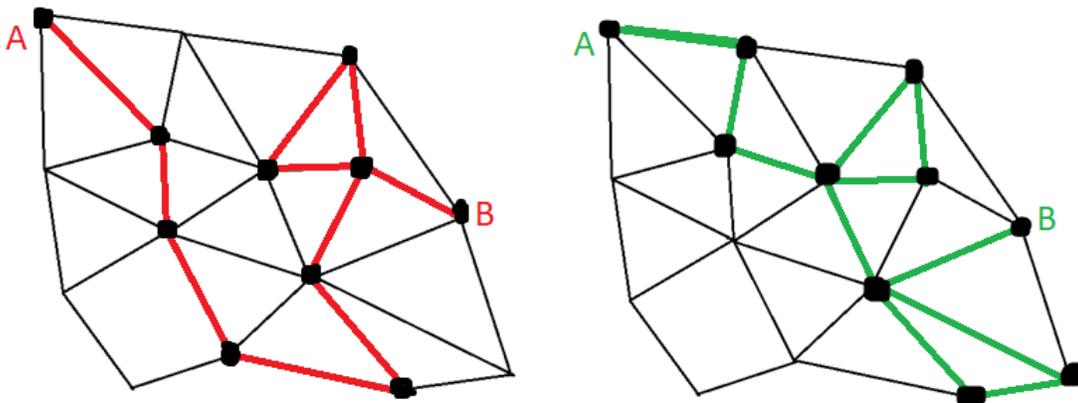courses in a single net, while the net itself only has a finite number of lines.

Figure 2: Two possible courses through the narrative net. Both contain loops that could be potentially repeated an infinite number of times. Another factor that exists, but is more difficult to represent in this type of model is the act of doubling back from one point to another and then back again on a course.

This type of networked, hypertextual structure provide this project's primary grounds for a comparison between medieval romance and videogames. As used here, the application of the term "net" to medieval contexts refers to the cultural matrix of motifs and elements that serves as the potential building blocks for a story, while the "courses" are versions of that story that appear as a result of assembling these blocks in various ways. I define a "medieval cultural matrix" as a set of oral or textual categories and narrative resources available to a medieval storyteller, including elements, motifs and storytelling devices, and the options for how these are assembled into a linear sequence. These factors exhibit a significant degree of interchangeability that resembles contemporary video game narrative structure. The relationship between a medieval storyteller to the cultural matrix available to a specific medieval romance is reflected in the relationship between players of multicursal games and the games themselves. By playing a video game that has multiple story courses, the player is performing the same role that a medieval bard would when crafting a narrative or a new version of this narrative. Video games are more concrete representations of the proto-hypertextual cultural resources available to a medieval storyteller[5].

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[5] The narrative structure linkages employed by medieval literature existed in other cultures alongside, before and after the Middle Ages themselves. Frances Yates's *The Art of Memory* makes observations on the existence of mnemonic devices such as lingering mental images from direct experience for logic and storytelling practice as far back as ancient Greece: indeed, they invented the term *mnemonic*, closely related to the name for the Greek Titaness of Memory, Mnemosyne (Yates 2). While the medieval narrative structure which will be a focus of this study did not necessarily create these concepts, their manifestation here is of particular interest given video games' affinity for medieval content and structural style.

The romance of *Tristan and Isolde* illustrates this through the many variations of it that exist: Wagner's opera, Gottfried's incomplete romance, Bédier's retelling, Thomas of Britain's fragmentary poem and Tristan's presence in Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* are all specific "courses" through the story made possible by the net. They each touch on many common nodes and lines, but ultimately the path they take through the net of *Tristan and Isolde* is unique. By keeping track of which elements can be applied to different versions of *Tristan and Isolde*, each connection drawn between elements of a different version could be extrapolated as a miniaturized hypertext connection: an element from one version, told by one storyteller, is drawn upon by another storyteller for their own version. In the same way that a hyperlink within a webpage directs one away from that page and to a related one, so too could it be argued that the existence of common elements and alternate pathways in stories such as *Tristan and Isolde* are reflections of the same sort of connection.

A useful analogy for how medieval romance connects to hypertext comes from one of the forefront works on hypertext theory, Vannevar Bush's 1945 essay "As We May Think." To confront the problem of information overload in an increasingly interconnected world, Bush proposes the creation of the theoretical "Memex," a system of information organization that retrieves material by associations, rather than by index (Lister et al 27). In arguing for the establishment of such a system as facilitated by the hypothetical "Memex," Bush notes that "The human mind operates by association. With one item in its grasp, it snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by association of thoughts, in association with some intricate web of trails carried by the cell of the brain." (Bush in Meyer 1999:33) Vannevar Bush puts forward an argument that is familiar to anyone who has journeyed through sites such as Wikipedia from one topic to a seemingly unrelated one: indeed, it is no coincidence that the tools that facilitate the travel from

one article to the next are referred to as "hyperlinks." The same principle applies to the

connecting of two texts, hence the term "hypertext." Bush further specifies that "[The Memex]

affords an immediate step...to associative indexing, the basic idea of which is a provision

whereby an item may be caused at will to be select immediately and automatically another…The

process of tying two things together is the important thing." (Bush in Meyer 1999:33) Bush's

point rests on the theory that organizational systems that exploit the brain's tendency towards

association are more effective, which gives rise to the appeal of hypertext. As a text that can link

to associated texts, a hypertext mimics the route of human mental cognition in this manner. For

example, the Welsh Triads are texts, originally passed down orally, that record the verses,

associations and mnemonic devices used to teach Welsh bards the storytelling tools available to

them without comprehensively recording the narrative resources employed by the trained bards

(Bromwich lxiii-lxiv). Following the logic above, the Welsh Triads are proto-hypertexts that

assist Welsh bards in making connections through mental association across the body of

narrative resources available to them. This facilitates the process by which the cultural matrix is

then drawn upon to create a story, making it a process dependent upon hypertext connections.

Games can afford opportunities for multicursal navigational capabilities as well. The

"net," in the case of the video game, is the software itself: in *Breath of the Wild*, the resources

available to a player to craft their story with are contained within the game: the enemies they

choose to fight and the order they are engaged in, the characters they assist, the environments

they choose to explore or ignore, and similar elements. These are drawn upon during play to

determine what story the player engages in and serve as the video game hypertextual counterpart

for a medieval romance's "cultural matrix." The multicursal dimensions of a video game rely on

this: in a multicursal video game, the individual player's experience through the progress of the

game represents one of their courses. *Breath of the Wild* is multicursal because two or more players, experiencing the game on their own, can draw upon the "net" containing the elements described above in different ways for different narrative courses.

If *Tristan and Isolde* and *Breath of the Wild* are made up of their "nets" and "nodes," and the various versions of the story are the "courses" through them, then a concern arises: how do narratives of stories such as *Tristan and Isolde* and *Breath of the Wild,* with specific directions and visible pathways, exist in a space that is multicursally navigable? The state of being a course from one point in the text does not give that course logical meaning on its own. It is possible to create a course within the limited nodes of the net that moves nonsensically or infinitely. Courses exist that take logical steps from one point to the next, since the stories we read often have comprehensible narrative progression: *Tristan and Isolde's* various versions that we read and enjoy have navigable movement of events, characters and other elements as opposed to infinite repetitions, and *Breath of the Wild* has definitive start and end points. Stories like these can exist because of the resources used to make sense out of a possible course. The themes and structure that the storyteller uses to define how their narrative moves from point A to point Z create the boundaries of the course in such a way that we can understand them. The same is true of video game development: in order for a game that uses hypertextual elements to have a compelling narrative structure, some sequencing must be imposed on even the most open-ended video game.

Lister outlines this need for configuration and structure as he cites Stuart Moulthrop's argument for using video games to understand human-media relationships since "Games – computer games in particular – appeal because they are configurative, offering the chance to manipulate complex systems within continuous loops of intervention, observation, and response." (Moulthrop in Lister 2004:64) This highlights the importance of configuring video

game narrative events using structures imposed by the developer. For events to be arranged in a meaningful manner, the story is constructed in such a way by its creators that things either *have* to happen in a specific order, or *should* happen in a specific order. This will be explored in greater detail in section 4.

3: Vladimir Propp

The Welsh Triads are one of the more concrete examples of storytelling resource collection, since they serve as recommendations for how to organize sets of three narrative elements for a variety of possible narratives (Bromwich lxiii-lxiv). However, due to lack of distribution outside of oral tradition, they are not a formal scheme for storytellers as there was no permanent or accessible collection of the tools they provided: these are reminders of a cultural storytelling memory, but not an archive of the culture's narrative options. The crafting of a comprehensive collection of narrative resource elements only became a reality upon the completion of Soviet Russian formalist Vladmir Propp's 1928 work *Morphology of the Folktale*. Vladimir Propp created a schema of narrative resources as observed in Russian fairy tales (Pirkova-Jakobson XIX), but his conclusions and formulization of stories are applicable to medieval literature and game narratives, or any other storytelling format. Propp classifies events performed by characters that contribute to the story's progression as "functions," assigning variables to them according to their placement in a scheme of his own devising (Propp 21). By assigning each of these functions a variable, a tale can be represented by a collection of the variables in a specific order, with different variations of a story (or entirely different tales) open to creation (see figure 3). These variations and new stories are based upon rearrangement within each function, removal of these elements, the insertion of new elements, or any combination thereof (Propp 99). However, because each element cannot be applied or rearranged

inconsequentially due to their appropriate place within a narrative (for example, a function

related to the "death of the villain" cannot be placed before a function that "introduces the

villain"), this is not an example of pure "hypertext" (the interconnection at any point in a

narrative to another potential point) but is rather a more structurally sequenced form of

multicursality, if each possible story from a substitution is viewed alongside the "template" of

the story. In comparing two tales using Propp's theory of functions, a connection can be seen

between how they differently assemble the same narrative and character functions in a different

order: this reflects the variations employed by multicursal narratives.

α	initial situation
β^1	absentation (departure) of elders
β^2	death of parents
β^3	absentation (departure) of younger people
γ^1	interdiction
γ^2	order or command
δ^1	interdiction violated
δ^2	order or command carried out
ε^1	reconnaissance by the villain to obtain information about the hero
ε^2	reconnaissance by the hero to obtain information about the villain
ε^3	reconnaissance by other persons
ζ^1	the villain receives information about the hero
ζ^2	the hero receives information about the villain
ζ^3	information received by other means
η^1	deceitful persuasions of the villain
η^2	application of magical agents by the villain
η^3	other forms of deception or coercion
θ^1	the hero reacts to the persuasions of a villian
θ^2	the hero mechanically falls victim to the influence of a magical agent
θ^3	the hero gives in or reacts mechanically to the deceit of the villain
λ	preliminary misfortune caused by a deceitful agreement
A	*Villainy*

Figure 3: Examples of Propp's abbreviations for functions

To demonstrate how these can be applied, we may examine a work that came far before Propp's time, *Tristan and Isolde.* To win the hand of Isolde, the princess of Ireland, on behalf of his uncle Mark, Tristan must confront and slay a dragon in Bédier's and Gottfried's versions of the story (Gottfried 109-165, Bédier 19-30). Below is a list of the 15 functions that make up this chapter in Gottfried's version and the actions that they correspond to, starting from Mark's desire for a wife and ending with Tristan presenting Isolde to Mark[6]

1. a: One member of the family desires or lacks something (Mark wishes to have a wife)

2. B^3: The hero is allowed to depart from home (Tristan offers to leave to fetch Isolde of Ireland)

3. C: The seeker agrees (Mark acquiesces)

4. ↑: The hero leaves home (Tristan departs Cornwall)

5. O: The hero arrives, unrecognized, at a new place (Tristan arrives, disguised, in Ireland)

6. G: The hero is led to the object of interest (Encountering Isolde/the dragon that he must slay for her)

7. H: The hero and the villain engage in combat (Tristan battles the dragon)

8. J^1: The hero is branded (Tristan is wounded)

9. I: The villain is defeated (The dragon is slain)

10. L: A false hero presents unfounded claims (Rival suitor pretends to have killed the dragon)

11. Q: The hero is recognized (Isolde, healing Tristan, recognizes him)

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[6] The imbibing of the love-potion that causes Tristan and Isolde to fall in love, which in these versions occurs as Tristan and Isolde are returning from Ireland, is omitted from this examination of functions.

12. Ex: The false hero or villain is exposed (Rival suitor revealed to be a fraud)

13. ↓: The hero returns (Tristan returns with Isolde)

14. K: The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated (Mark receives Isolde to marry)

15. W^O: (Mark rewards Tristan for his efforts)

Written linearly, the chapter can be represented as:

$a B^3 C \uparrow O G H J^1 I L Q EX \downarrow K W^O$

When applying Propp's functions to stories that are not Russian folk-tales, it is important to remember that the exact words used to illustrate a function are not necessarily representative of that function's importance: for example, the function related to the branding or marking of a hero after a struggle is called "J." It can be further divided into J^1 and J^2. J^1 refers to instances where the hero has an application of a mark to their body, generally in the form of a physical wound (Propp 153). In Bédier's and Gottfried's *Tristan*, this could refer to the physical injuries Tristan suffers at the hand of Morold, the dragon, or any of his other battles. However, the second version, J^2, refers to the "transference of a ring or towel." (Propp 153) The transfer of such specific items of value is difficult to translate to other kinds of stories where a ring and towel might not be present in the same way. Therefore, to facilitate the application of Propp's functions to other contexts, functions such as J^2 with very specific conditions can be read more generally: for example, a generalized J^2 would simply refer to the transfer of objects of value, such as clothing or jewelry, to the hero after a struggle, while J^1 could remain unaltered. Such interpretations allow for the intent of the function to be preserved by altering the language of the function's meaning for the study of a story, though its purpose remains unchanged. These functions and the equations that result from them are essential to mapping any multicursal narrative. Using them, one can more easily spot where, when and how the courses or versions of

a story overlap or diverge, and facilitate these connections across different narrative forms by creating a common lexicon.

4: Substitutable, Internally Necessary and Fundamentally Necessary Narrative Events

These functions help craft some order for a potential course through the net. If a trophy is obtained from a struggle, there must be a struggle, and then there must be a motivation for a struggle, and so on. The storyteller, by adding on more and more events underwritten by functions, directs the course of their story to hit specific nodes in the net, giving it meaningful movement from one node to the next. This course then has the logical structure of a story placed upon it because these events *must* occur in a specific order.[7] Different versions of *Tristan and Isolde* contain events that can be differentiated based upon their content, order in the story, or both. These variation in the events where these differences are seen informs the likelihood of that event appearing in another version of the story: fundamental characteristics of a story occur in a common fashion across each iteration. For instance, Gottfried's version contains an episode where King Mark's steward, Marjodoc, tries and fails to expose the infidelity between Tristan and Isolde (Gottfried 178-187). This is entirely absent from Bédier's version: instead, nameless nobles at Mark's court call upon the services of a dwarf, Frocin, to expose the lovers (Bédier 47-57). A dwarf, Melot, is present in Gottfried's version and has the same characteristics as Frocin, but is inserted into the story at a later point, and is in direct cooperation with Marjodoc (Gottfried 188-198). This establishes a different context and order of events for the same sequence in two

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[7] Propp's functions are explicitly concerned with physical character actions and not emotional character consequences: for instance, Propp is only concerned with whether the hero receives a wound, not how they react to it. Therefore, since Propp forms such an essential part of this study, the emotional consequences and motivations of character actions will largely remain unaddressed in this study. That is not to say that these ideas are not worth examining, for they are an integral part of any *Tristan and Isolde* reading and can similarly be connected to newer, experimental game narratives dealing with such ideas. However, a thorough investigation into these ideas is beyond the scope of this work, and therefore will not be addressed.

different versions of one story. The variable navigation present here resembles the hypertextual

connections that enable multicursality discussed earlier in the paper: by making different

connections at the points in the story, each version of the story has ended up with distinct details

and a distinct order of events.

This same variability in events is visible in multicursal video games. In *Breath of the*

Wild, two different players can arrive at the same point in the game with very different

equipment or resources due to differing experience, skill, or time playing the game. If a player

takes a wide detour early in the game and ends up in the desert in the southwestern part of the

game's playable area, they will find themselves underequipped to deal with the heat and cold of

the desert's day and night, while a player that takes a different path that has them arrive at the

desert later in the game will have more resources at their disposal to deal with the desert's

hazards The same is true of the objectives presented within the game: players can complete tasks

put forward by computer-controlled characters before they were even issued. A request to find a

man's lost hiking companions can have two different versions depending on the player engaging

with the game. In one version, the player meets the man, learns about his request, and completes

it. Another player could locate the hiking companions ahead of time and first meet the man with

the request having already been fulfilled.

Both events in *Breath of the Wild*, however, and the examples using the variously-named

dwarf of *Tristan and Isolde* share a critical similarity: they do not have to happen. While the

dwarf puts pressure on Tristan and Isolde's relationship with Mark, Isolde's husband, the dwarf

is not responsible for any chain of events that lead to the unification or death of the two lovers.

The man asking for assistance in *Breath of the Wild* can be ignored, while the desert can remain

unexplored for the entirety of the game. These events fall into a class of events that will be

described as "substitutable narrative events." They may be replaced without fundamentally altering the narrative, and eliminated with little impact on the plot.

However, what of the details within the substitutable narrative events themselves? In some instances, such as the lost hikers in *Breath of the Wild*, the specifics of the substitutable event are unimportant: the hikers may be found after meeting the man, ignored, or found ahead of time. However, the desert is a different story: to resolve the subplot within the desert, the player must complete events in a very specific order, even if entering the desert is optional. In the same way, in both versions of *Tristan and Isolde* Frocin/Melot engineers a situation where Tristan's blood in Isolde's bed reveals the two to be lovers (Bédier 55, Gottfried 201). This requires that Tristan and Isolde are a) already together and b) about to be discovered and suffer the associated consequences. This suggests that, even within events that can be substituted and removed from the story, some details must remain consistent across most versions. While not essential to the primary motivation of the story, these elements are consistent and will be classified as "internally necessary narrative events," as they are internally mandatory within an optional inclusion. Though the event itself can be excluded, if it *is* included the sequencing of the story around it requires that specific details be included.

However, there are some events that occur in all versions of a story in the same way, without fail. In every instance of the *Tristan and Isolde* story, the two lovers drink a love-potion on the way to Cornwall from Ireland and thereby begin the romance that leads to their deaths. In *Breath of the Wild*, the character that the players controls (a young man named Link), and by consequence the player, is prevented from leaving the introductory area of the game until they learn about the gameplay elements, the narrative they are expected to follow, and the foe they are expected to defeat (further discussed in section 5). These events *must* occur for the story to

progress at all, since *Tristan and Isolde* requires the titular characters to be in love and *Breath of the Wild* prevents players from leaving the introductory area until the above conditions are met. Therefore, these events are essential to the progression and existence of the story, and are best described as "fundamentally necessary narrative events." Their existence, and the details of their presence in the story, must be consistent across all versions. The details of these necessary steps follow the same logical sequencing of Propp's functions: if the story is about a particular topic (say, Tristan and Isolde's romance), then the events that pertain to this topic must be ordered in the same manner that Propp maps out stories. If the story ends with their tragic demise due to separation, then a function (and event) must occur beforehand that results in their separation, which itself requires a backdrop of events and functions that build the situation to the point where the separation must occur, and so on.

This dynamic of varying substitutability and narrative necessity has several applications when we examine portions of narrative sequence. Every event in a narrative must be divided between "essential" and "substitutable," and then further divided within these categories: the differences in what is included and what is excluded lead to the rise of different versions of a story. Battles that take place within a narrative illustrate the importance of this distinction, and can make the difference between a fight being essential to a story's resolution or replaceable, depending on the version of the story being told.

5: Battles and Boss Fights

When we consider how conflicts are organized in a narrative, the context that precedes the battle and the situation that comes afterwards inform the substitutability of any conflict. The act of engaging in battles is a key part of medieval romance: whether these be against fantastical foes such as dragons or giants, or more grounded conflicts against other humans, combat is a

critical and frequent obstacle standing in the way of the hero's progress. In many video games, fighting is a crucial aspect to overcoming obstacles: in games inspired by the settings or themes of medieval romance, this might exist as a continuation of its elements (for example, a video game containing dragons will almost always require a conflict with said dragons), though in many instances it can be a consequence of violence being one of the primary means of interacting with the game's world. The battle events in both medieval romance and video games can fall into several categories;

A: The climax of a sub-plot or sections of the main story.

B: Replaceable and repeatable confrontations.

C: Final confrontations, or confrontations that resolve or enable crucial elements of the main theme

A and B both share a critical fundamental quality: the details of both are not necessary for the main narrative to progress, and can be avoided or otherwise have their place in the narrative changed without meaningfully altering the story, with some exceptions. In video games, all three confrontations are generally referred to as "Boss Fights," climactic encounters that are intended to rise above the challenge or significance of common combat encounters. In certain instances (such as the giant Urgan of *Tristan and Isolde*), the specific nature of the monster or obstacle in question is irrelevant: it needs to exist to provide an immediate challenge, and therefore could be substituted for any other monster or obstacle and the sub-plot or episode involving it would have the same consequences. By employing these sorts of conflicts, certain romances (such as *Lancelot* or *Peredur*) can depend on an isolated, episodic structure, which consists of characters confronting obstacles and overcoming them, then repeating the process with a new barrier to

their progress. These obstacles may be duels against other humans, spiritual or physical trials, or battles against great beasts and monsters.

Disconnected episodes are not unique to episodic narratives: for example, despite its chapter-based structure, Bédier's *Tristan and Isolde*'s segments depend upon one another for narrative unity. An important exception exists, however: the confrontation between Tristan and the giant. This conflict takes place over a single chapter and it, and its associated elements, are never mentioned again. A conflict such as this is an example of battle types A and B: the giant is replaceable and the kind of conflict it embodies is repeatable, but at the same time the giant is the primary antagonist of the sub-plot regarding the acquisition of a dog for Isolde and the journey to that location. Bédier holds that Tristan goes to Wales to battle the giant to flee Mark's renewed suspicions in their romantic involvement (Bédier 103), inserting an incident where they are discovered between Isolde's trial by ordeal[8] and Tristan's decision to leave for Wales (Bédier 96-102). Gottfried, in contrast, maintains that Tristan left for Wales before Isolde had had a chance to complete her trial, putting the confrontation with the giant at an earlier point in the story and in a different context (Gottfried 207-208). These details, however, do not alter anything about the content of the giant episode: he is not important enough to be significantly changed by an altered place in the story, reinforcing his substitutability.

Another example of this sort of medieval episodic conflict narrative is visible in *The Story of Peredur Son of Efrog*, a Welsh analog to romances such as Chrétien de Troyes *Perceval* and *Lancelot, le Chevalier de la Charrette* (Bollard 29). Peredur's tale follows him as he seeks to

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[8] Mark grows suspicious of Isolde's infidelity once again and orders her to enter a church and grasp a piece of red-hot iron after swearing that Mark is the only man she has touched in her life: if her oath is true, she will not be burned. She tricks Mark by having Tristan disguise himself as a pilgrim and stumble into her as they're crossing a river in full view of everyone else. By then amending her oath to "Mark and the nameless pilgrim who everyone saw touch me," she grasps the hot iron and is not burned since the literal words of her vow are true (Bédier 89-96)

become a knight and embark of further adventures, but the greater part of the romance consists of unrelated conflicts against foes such as several unfortunate knights (Bollard 35, 39), a lion (Bollard 45), a one-eyed murderer (Bollard 49), an addanc[9] (Bollard 51), a serpent (Bollard 52) and other assorted men and monsters. Many of these smaller conflicts are examples of type B battles, but some are so irrelevant to even a localized sub-plot (the serpent, for example, exists for less than a paragraph and contributes nothing to Peredur's temporary diversion) that it is debatable whether they can even be considered type A battles as well. To return to the distinction between "substitutable versus fundamental narrative actions," the slaying of the serpent is a necessary narrative action once it is encountered, but encountering it is optional. Such a conflict requires a sub-plot, and while the serpent is the focus of a sub-narrative, the sub-narrative itself is so small that it stretches the definition of the term: it lasts less than six lines (Bollard 52). Therefore, many of these conflicts could be considered a pure type B battle.

The dragon presents an unusual case. The dragon-slaying episode of *Tristan* is, in almost all versions of the story, critical to the "acquisition" of Isolde. The dragon itself *being* a dragon is tied to this process: To properly establish Tristan as a knight of superhuman renown, he must face a deadly and infamous creature, a fire-breathing dragon, meaning that the conflict cannot be considered replaceable or extraneous. In the context of the narrative as a whole, the event is crucial to establish the primary dynamic—that of the connection between the lovers— and the dragon's identity cannot be substituted in that context. Considerable variation exists within the episode itself: Bédier's dragon incident gives a name to the fraudulent hero (Bédier 24), while Gottfried's leaves him as a nameless steward (Gottfried 120); Gottfried maintains that Tristan's horse died of shock and does not specify whether the dragon's claw or fire caused Tristan's

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[9] A welsh lake monster described as a cross between a beaver and a crocodile

wounds (Gottfried 119), but Bédier holds that the dragon killed his horse with its fiery breath and wounded Tristan with the same attack (Bédier 24). What makes the dragon so unusual is that despite the variable details of the encounter itself, which would suggest that it is replaceable and type "B," it plays the same fundamental role every time it appears: it is the primary barrier to Tristan's access to Isolde. As discussed in section 6, the love and unifies the souls of Tristan and Isolde is the "theme" of all versions of the story. This makes the dragon's death an integral part of maintaining or realizing the theme in all[10] versions of *Tristan and Isolde*. Therefore, although it does not occur at the end of the story, the dragon is an example of a type C conflict because its death is necessary for the resolution of the unifying theme rather than a subplot: in this case, enabling Tristan and Isolde to be together, although they are not yet romantically involved. While it occurs at the climax of a smaller narrative within the larger story and would therefore seem to be a type A battle (in this case, being the "boss" of Tristan's "Irish voyage for Isolde" subplot), because the events that require the dragon's death are fundamentally necessary for the story as opposed to integrally necessary for a substitutable part of the story, the dragon must be a type C conflict. This places it in the position of being a battle that resolves the main theme of the tale (that of uniting and maintaining the unity of Tristan and Isolde) while occurring approximately halfway through the story. To address this, recall that Tristan and Isolde are yet to be romantically involved, even as they are brought together by this action: while a portion of the story's theme is satisfied, it has yet to be carried through to its end, where they are so deeply in love that departure means suffering and eventual death. Therefore, the dragonslaying enables the continuation of the story's theme and partly resolves it, but does not end its importance: that

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[10] It should be noted that the dragon is completely absent from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* opera. However, the opera begins when Tristan and Isolde are returning from Ireland, rather than before, and mention is made of a conflict with Morold (Isolde's betrothed rather than uncle in this version): thus, the offstage battle with Morold fills the same role as it does in the other versions by being the fight that enables Tristan's access to Isolde.

would only occur if the battle with the dragon occurred at the very end of the story, which is impossible as it always must precede Tristan and Isolde's romantic relationship.

Furthermore, the conflict against the dragon is an example of Proppian sequencing. A condition (the king of Ireland only marrying Isolde to the slayer of the dragon) prevents access to Isolde. This requires a situation that creates this condition (the dragon's presence in Ireland), and then a desire to acquire what is being safeguarded by the condition (Mark's desire for a wife). This reflects the structural sequencing illustrated by Propp's use of functions: the lack of a bride is followed by a desire for a bride, which is followed by a search for a bride, an obstacle to acquiring her, and so on. Propp's functions illustrate the sequences underlying each step in the narrative, creating structure in multicursal by mandating a logical progression of events. As will be discussed in section 6, a common element underlies every step in the application of these functions: the unity that binds two lovers until they become as one.

Breath of the Wild addresses its conflicts in a different manner. The player can (ill-advisedly) rush towards the very dangerous final threat, a monstrous being known as Ganon safeguarded by the large fortress of Hyrule Castle, as soon as he is made available to them by their completion of the tutorial area. They are encouraged, however, to visit four far-flung areas and engage in the subplots located therein to avoid being confronted by the game's most difficult challenges. These conclude in confrontations against dangerous monsters whose appearance and abilities are fitting to their sub-plot and would feel out of place if removed or placed in a different location. For example, one such monster (which would qualify as a Boss) attacks the player with fire-based weapons at the climax of a sub-plot that occurs in an area surrounding an active volcano; it could not be translocated to the climax of the sub-plot that occurs in a windy tundra. There is a schism between how critical these monsters are to the sub-plots to the way the

sub-plots are not critical to the main story. *Breath of the Wild's* four specific monsters cannot reasonably be moved to separate locations and, should they be engaged, must be slain before Ganon is killed. What *is* malleable, however, is their placement in the plot: in the same way that the dragon can usually be placed anywhere in the story so long as it precedes Tristan and Isolde's romantic establishment or climax, so, too, can these four conflicts be placed anywhere in the plot as they relate to Link and his quest to slay Ganon. A player can, with nothing more than a little patience and time, complete the four conflicts in any order, finish the game, and then replay the game, completing them in a different order to see how inconsequential the order of their completion is to the central plot. Indeed, after the player completes the initial portion of the game they are guided to speak to characters who will explain the nature and importance of these four sub-narratives: however, if the player deviates from this path, these sub-narratives can be completed before they meet the characters who would illustrate their significance or ignored entirely. This highlights how variable these four goals are with relation to the central goal, in the same way the events of *Tristan and Isolde* are only important insofar as they relate to the relationship and unity between the titular characters. Though these four goals and the battles they contain in *Breath of the Wild* can be skipped, doing so would minimize the impact of the final confrontation in the same way that eliminating the dragon (in the sole version where it does not exist) might remove some of the splendor from Tristan and Isolde's perfect courtly love.

Episodic confrontations in the vein of Gottfried's giant also exist in this game and others. As the player travels through the game's setting, getting lost in the multiple courses that make up the game structure, encounters can occur against foes such as Hinox (a cyclops-like giant), Talus (golems consisted of various mineral elements), and Lynels (lion-headed centaurs). While these encounters only occur in specific locations and can be found intentionally or accidentally, a key

feature is that any of these battles could be substituted for each other with no difference (save for balance of the game's difficulty, which is woven into the plot structure by making the most difficult encounters farthest away from the places the player will usually go). Other examples of these types of battles include Titanite Demons (difficult but optional foes from the first *Dark Souls* game) or the relentless Pursuer of *Dark Souls II* (a foe that chases the player across a variety of locations but is equally difficult in each area, making his placement irrelevant: in fact, he can be skipped should the player be particularly clever or cowardly, further emphasizing how non-essential he is). Such conflicts are examples of a pure type B battle, where not only are the foes not part of a sub-plot narrative, they are ultimately replaceable.

Because the changeability of these conflicts represents the same variability of *Tristan and Isolde's* assorted courses, each differentiated playthrough of *Breath of the Wild* is a unique "course" in the same way that each version of *Tristan and Isolde* is a different course. The player is creating their own variation of *Breath of the Wild*, putting themselves in the role of the medieval author crafting a different version of an existing tale.

6: Thematic Unification

Propp's functions alone, even coupled with logical narrative step ordering, cannot impose recognizable coherence on a multicursal narrative. If there are so many variations on the same story, a multitude of possible courses connecting the nodes of the net, how can they be a part of the same net? How could an observer see two versions of *Tristan and Isolde* and know that they are versions of one story, rather than entirely distinct tales in their own right? How does the course stay coherent? The answer to these questions relies upon an understanding of what connects different versions of the same story: the theme that unifies its versions under a common signs. When discussing the "central story" of a multicursal narrative (for example, Tristan and

Isolde's love or Link's quest to destroy Ganon), what is in truth being discussed is the common theme across all versions of the story. While other elements could be altered, this will bind the story to still make each version recognizable as one of the "courses" of a story, rather than a separate story altogether and helping to impose narrative structure on each course. Wagner's opera makes several far-reaching departures from the majority of *Tristan and Isolde* tales: the number of named characters is drastically reduced, there is no dragon, no giant, and even Tristan's first major human opponent is changed from the uncle to the betrothed of his future beloved. Looking only at this, it might appear that, besides the names and behavior of characters such as Brangane, this is too different from the central premise of *Tristan and Isolde* to be a version of the story: rather, it is a separate story altogether, even accounting for these events being part of the "substitutable narrative events" mentioned above. This fails to factor theme into analysis of the story, focusing only on plot elements as the definitive features of a narrative. In a story with as many versions and courses as *Tristan and Isolde*, the "theme" is the part of the cultural matrix that facilitates different versions of the story. The theme of a story such as *Tristan and Isolde* mandates that the different versions of a story share fundamental events so that they do not deviate too far from the story's template. This ensures that each of these stories are identifiable as versions derived from a blueprint, as opposed to original tales.

These core events are themselves examples of Proppian functions, mandating the order in which events should or must occur according to how they serve a theme. If the theme of all versions of *Tristan and Isolde* is the unity of the titular lovers to the extent that they are of one soul, then all functions must be organized in terms of how they serve this theme. A function that corresponds to an event that forces their separation must be preceded by a function that dictates an event that brings them together, which itself is preceded by the functions that enable them to

overcome whatever obstacles arise before them, and so on. The fundamental functions prescribed by a story's theme determine the sequence and structure of multicursal texts, of stories with multiple versions.

The various versions of *Tristan and Isolde* are courses, touching upon different nodes in the narrative net. Whatever the variations, a key similarity holds between all versions: that Tristan and Isolde, through the love potion, and whatever other forces have contrived to make them fall in love, have become as one being, mirrors of each other's state of mind and body. Thomas of Britain's Ysolt bemoans that "Certes, I know not what beseemeth me to do, but I desire you above all things. God grant us either to come together that I may heal you, love, or to die, us twain, of one anguish." (Loomis 281) Wagner's interpretation of the imbibing of the love potion involves the two characters proclaiming that "You are all that I know," (Wagner 62) and the opera ends with Isolde proclaiming, near death, that the dead Tristan's words are "From him flowing,/through me pouring." (Wagner 92) Gottfried's course includes several examples of the establishment or restatement of this theme. In the story's prologue, Gottfried intones "A man, a woman; a woman, a man. Tristan, Isolde; Isolde, Tristan," (Gottfried 5) tying the two together so closely that they can be substituted for each other. Later, they are exiled when Mark, Isolde's lawful husband and Tristan's uncle, finds evidence of their intrigue. As they are hiding in an isolated cave, Gottfried holds that instead of food

> Their high feast was love, who gilded all their joy; she brought them King Arthur's Round Table as homage and all its company a thousand times a day. What better food could they have for body and soul? Man was there with Woman, Woman there with Man. What else should they be needing? Now some people are so tactless as to declare (though I do not accept it myself) that other food is needed for this pastime. I am not so sure that it is. There

is enough here in my opinion. But if anyone has discovered better nourishment in this world let him speak in the light of his experience. (Gottfried 222-223)

By holding that the two are so emboldened, united and sustained by their love that they need nothing else, not even food, Gottfried is restating his prior mentioned point: that they are so intertwined and connected to each other's well-being and happiness all they require is each other's love, and all other bodily concerns such as hunger and thirst can be conquered by their unification. Furthermore, not only do they only need each other, they are dependent on each other as if they were said food, offering critical sustenance and amplifying their need to share each other's pleasures and pains. Earlier in the text, shortly before their exile, Isolde removes the bell from the collar of Petitcreiu the little dog (the dog that Tristan acquired by killing a giant), crying out

> O faithless woman, how can I be glad? Why am I happy for any time at all while Tristan, who has surrendered his life and joy to sorrow for my sake, is sad because of me? How can I rejoice without him, whose sorrow and joy I am? And however can I laugh when his heart can find no ease, unless my heart has a share in it? He has no life but me. Should I now be living without him, happily and pleasantly, while he is pining? May the good God forbid that I should ever rejoice away from him. (Gottfried 215).

Bédier's version includes similar proclamations: Isolde and Tristan are not just two lovers, but one being in two bodies. This thread, and the associated elements of inseparability and mirrored experience is maintained in all versions of the tale, whatever other differences are present, and all events exist only in relevance to this theme. For instance, the removal of elements such as the dragon, the giant, and most of Tristan's gallivanting adventures from Wagner's opera puts the focus on the time Tristan and Isolde share together and the critical

nature of their bond. As an anachronistic work drawing from multiple versions of the text, serving as a sort of anthology of various *Tristan* versions in a single tale, Bédier's version involves more digressions, but beyond the first few chapter all events serve to reunite or discuss the separation of Tristan and Isolde. The major dissentions in Thomas of Britain's and Gottfried's courses come in the time it takes for one half of the pair to make an appearance: in the former, Isolde is not encountered until approximately 80 pages in (slightly less than a third of the way through the story), while Gottfried's Tristan does not concern itself with Isolde until chapter ten (just under halfway through the tale). As demonstrated by Wagner's ability to edit out almost everything except moments between Tristan and Isolde, narrative events (Proppian functions) must occur as a function of the theme underlying the story, no matter how much else is edited out: Wagner simply takes this a step further and removes all functions and events not intrinsically tied to Tristan and Isolde's immediate romance. We can also see that there are different versions of these narrative events, which relates back to the idea of multiple courses, but in every version the two lovers are together, even in different contexts. The Proppian functions that lead to situations such as the conflict against the dragon are based upon this love, as all the steps (the desire for a wife, the discovery of conditions blocking access to the wife, the conquest of these conditions, and so on) exist because the primary endpoint is the union of two characters. In every case except the first (Mark's desire for a wife), this union is between Tristan and Isolde, and even then it is still out of love. All of the functions in *Tristan and Isolde* can be connected in this way. The "theme" adds further clarity and cohesion, reminding us that, however different it may seem, it is still part of the archetype of *Tristan and Isolde*: the functions that make up the story sequences will be familiar.

This question of a "guiding theme" lends itself well to video games with multicursal narratives, especially if they allow a degree of freedom in navigating the course that travels through the net of the narrative. This can be achieved in a variety of ways: *Breath of the Wild*, for examples, has zero restrictions on where the player can go in its large landscape after the introduction, with the only barriers being practicality (navigating across a tundra is easier if the player has acquired snow shoes) and difficulty (a specific foe might prove to be more of a challenge than a player is prepared for if encountered before certain tools are obtained, such as finding a hostile golem without acquiring the hammer needed to more easily shatter the magic stone holding it together). How, then is a narrative structure imposed on the parts of the game that are "suggested" events, which in the case of *Breath of the Wild* is the entire lengthy game besides a two-hour introduction and an hour-long confrontation? How does it remain a game with a clear final objective (to destroy Ganon) when the player can run in the exact opposite direction and perform actions that would seem to serve no purpose for this goal? As with *Tristan and Isolde*, the answer lies in the theme that ties all the courses in the story together. Just as every action in *Tristan and Isolde* serves to heighten their relationship and unity (even the digressions emphasize Tristan's sorrow at their parting), so too does every action in *Breath of the Wild's* many optional courses tie into the game's necessary narrative event: the triumph of a hero over a monster, of "good" over "evil." Every action taken is one in a struggle against a foe, in however form it may come: liberating a fishing community requires driving out those who would prey upon it, improving equipment requires the rescue of beleaguered fairies, and even the trivial task of gathering honey necessitates avoiding or confronting the bees that guard it. The importance of these events to maintaining the theme of conquering adversity is emphasized by the fact that, in the same way that everything in *Tristan and Isolde* serves the purpose of their

union, even if only tangentially, every reward gained from the tasks in *Breath of the Wild* serves the purpose of making the attainment of the final goal more and more possible. Liberating the out-of-the-way fishing community results in currency that can be used to purchase supplies for the battle against Ganon, improved equipment leads to better odds in the final battle, and even the gathered honey can be used in service of the final goal. By tying every single action in *Breath of the Wild* to this final goal, the theme of "good over evil through the defeat of Ganon" imposes narrative structure on a game with such a vast number of courses that, without this unifying theme, attempting to see them as part of the same text would be difficult. These tasks can be carried out in any order, but the theme and the functions that underlie the narrative remain unchanged.

However, video games offer an alternative possibility for the use of unifying themes: abstaining from sort of unification. What happens to a narrative when there are multiple courses, but no theme to make it clear that they are part of the same story? Team Cherry's 2017 release *Hollow Knight* experiments with this "lack of a theme." In *Hollow Knight*, there is deliberately no real plot structure. Narrative exists as isolated sequences of events, disconnected and often indecipherable, as opposed to in clear and consistent threads that can be followed. Story elements such as prior events, character motivations, names and more are left unexplained unless clues are gathered and examined thoroughly, and even in this situation a great deal of information is left up to interpretation due to unfillable gaps in knowledge. Eventually, elements of a coherent narrative thread such as progression of events and character names and motivations can be constructed, but there is always just enough missing that the player never feels comfortable putting their full faith in their interpretation of a plot point. Climaxes and falling action exist, but they are relegated to sub-plots that do not have any bearing on the climactic progression of the

central story beyond offering additional context. Like *Breath of the Wild*, *Hollow Knight* allows for deviations from the "recommended" path after a short introductory period, but unlike *Breath of the Wild*, the various courses that the player navigates through cannot be definitively connected to each other or to a main goal. Because no such a "main goal" or "connecting theme" exists, one can look at the individual narrative snippets scattered throughout the game and never realize that they were part of the same story. An entire area is dedicated to a subplot concerning a hive of sentient bees and is never mentioned in any other context, meaning that it would be impossible to tell it was part of the same game as another plot point unless the player spots very subtle cues separated by hours of game time. This connection does differentiate these subplots from the replaceable and episodic digressions of *Peredur* because they have relevance towards the primary conflict of the game, even if spotting that importance is difficult due to the intentional absence of thematic connection. *Hollow Knight* takes this ambiguity[11] and carries it to an even farther position by having the ending[12] open to interpretation and confusion as to whether the setting of the game is improved or worsened by the choices the player made. Viewing the ending with context and climactic buildup does not lead to understanding or certainty of what it means. Even after my own experience with the game, I cannot say that I understand all the details of what occurs in the game's final moments: this illustrates that the game is avoiding the use of narrative organization elements as established and defined by Propp. The narrative that exists is not ordered or categorized in a way that can be assembled by Propp's narrative functions.

8: Climaxes, Final Bosses, and Endings

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[11] See footnote 7.

[12] Visible at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEpU23XNzu8&t . Note that this is one of three possible endings, and the one most open to interpretation: the variability of endings is discussed in section 8.

The most difficult type of challenge to examine is the meaning behind the Final Encounter, hereafter called the "Final Boss" in video games. In video games, this is usually clearly defined: the final combat-related challenge the player must overcome before the game is "completed" and no further content is immediately available. The "Final Boss" is almost always strictly tied to a game's ending (their defeat usually marks the end of a player's ability to interact with the game, whether it be because control is taken away from the player for a cutscene, the credits begin, or any other event that ends the player's immediate experience of playing the game), and therefore discussion of final bosses must be connected to their role in the ending of a game in the same way that the climax of literary narrative must be tied to the ending of the narrative itself. For *Breath of the Wild,* this is Ganon, while various other characters of importance fill the role across the *Dark Souls* series and multiple possible characters can end up being *Hollow Knight's* final challenge. Even *Peredur* employs this, with Peredur himself discovering the true nature of the previously amicable witches and slaying them at the story's end (Bollard 61). How, then, would a final boss exist in *Tristan and Isolde*, which is notable in all versions (excluding Wagner's, which will be discussed shortly) for ending with an unexpected wounding and a death long after any kind of combat? The answer lies not in Tristan, but in Isolde herself: her final, failed attempt to make it past the rocks in time. The battle that inflicts the injury that demands that Tristan be healed by her is so far removed from the falling action of the narrative (the deaths of the two lovers and the events that ensue) that the closest conflict that resembles a "final challenge" is Isolde's desperate and ultimately unsuccessful flight to Tristan. The rocks, tides, waves and other assorted delays serve as the obstacles for her to complete her task. In a fashion, she *does* succeed: these obstacles do not prevent her from reaching Tristan, but slow her just enough that, combined with the intervention of Isolde of the

White Hands[13] in most versions (Loomis 285), she is unable to save her love. This failure, in and of itself, or the fact that it is not a true "battle" does not disqualify this challenge from being a "final boss". Indeed, a final boss need not provide a true challenge (and, indeed, their comparative powerlessness given their placement at a story's climax can serve a narrative purpose), nor do they need to be followed by a success, which means that it is not unreasonable to perceive Isolde's final rush to Tristan as the "final challenge" of the narrative. *Hollow Knight*, for example, ends with a confrontation against a barely mobile, disease-ridden character whose death is meant to invoke sadness and pity more than triumph, and most narrative outcomes that follow this "victory" are unpleasant in the context of the game's setting. However, this is not the only outcome: depending on actions the player has taken, a more positive ending can be achieved with greater difficulty, though it still follows the same notes of the tragic outcome. *Dark Souls* follows the same philosophy by allowing the player to have options in how they wish the narrative to end, some of which are only available if specific courses have been taken. In *Hollow Knight's* case, a choice is not presented directly to the player: the narrative outcome is determined by the path they took throughout the whole game and several implicit decisions, while *Dark Souls* offers an explicit decision, the specifics of which also vary depending on the course taken through the game. The most "positive" endings in *Dark Souls II* and *Dark Souls III* requires finding several areas hidden to the player and difficult enemies in order to find what is needed to make the most positive outcome a possibility: and even then, the player can make mistakes and miss the chance to accomplish this outcome.

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[13] In all versions except for Wagner's, Tristan marries a woman who shares Isolde's name in an effort to avoid committing further infidelity.

This is multicursality in action: by choosing to make connections in a narrative along a course (or by being directed along a course without necessarily making a clear decision), a different path and outcome can be reached, or reached with different levels of information on hand. While all versions of *Tristan and Isolde* end with the death of the titular lovers, the element of "variable outcome" present in *Hollow Knight* and *Dark Souls* is visible slightly in the fact that Wagner's opera ends with the death of almost all named characters in a case of tragic misunderstanding (Wagner 90), but only Tristan and Isolde die in Thomas of Britain's version (Loomis 289). Gottfried's further deviates by ending before either character can die, though it can be presumed that were it complete it might have ended in the same way as Thomas of Britain's (Gottfried 254). The variable courses in the *Tristan and Isolde* narrative taken by each author not only lead to deviations in the story (however they cleave to the unifying theme), but to slight variations in ending. Even Bédier's, which matches Thomas of Britain's course by keeping Kurwenal/Kaherdin alive[14], varies by having Kaherdin inflict violent revenge upon those who betrayed Tristan (147). The course taken by the different authors through *Tristan and Isolde* led to slightly different endings, while the player supplants this role in games such as *Hollow Knight* and *Dark Souls* by having the variable course of their journey affect the story's outcome. In so doing, the player is connecting the act of playing a video game back to the proto-hypertexts that informed the medium, the medieval romances. By putting themselves in the role that would have been filled by the medieval and contemporary authors who made different decisions in their interpretation of medieval romance, the multiple courses video games become connected to the multiple courses text of works such as *Tristan and Isolde* and vice versa.

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[14] The name "Kurwenal" does not actually appear in any version other than Wagner's: however, because Kurwenal fulfills the same role that Kaherdin does (excluding Kaherdin's love of Brangien/Brangane) in Wagner's opera as Tristan's closest friend, his role has been composited into that of Kaherdin.

9: Concluding thoughts

What difference does it make to a reader or player if they can understand these connections? What is the significance in bridging video games, a contemporary entertainment form, to medieval romances whose original versions are hundreds of years old?

This paper is about the sharing of tales: the way humans tell, have told, and will continue to tell stories. The structural elements of narrative in video games are very much the same ones that have persisted since the Middle Ages and even earlier time periods. By enjoying, recognizing and uncovering these elements as they appear today, we are participating in the same sort of dynamics that would have been present when these stories were being created or told. These refractions of ancient story mechanisms speak well to the permanence and strength of these elements in the construction of a tale. Not only are the messages and content of medieval romance still popular today, but this paper demonstrates that how these stories were constructed and told are still being employed by writers today. The durability of such a fluid concept as storytelling is of interest to a great many fields other than literary studies: as demonstrated, technology employs storytelling, while the professional fields of anthropology, psychology, history and archaeology, among others, are all at least in part concerned with the study and preservation of how humans tell stories. My intention is that this paper can demonstrate that, at least for one historical period, contemporary fiction can create new insights into the storytelling of the past by showing just how little has changed.

Glossary

Balance: In reference to difficulty in a video game, this refers to a design philosophy where the level of challenge is fair given the player's current expected skill at the game. Expecting the player to overcome a challenge that they have not yet acquired the tools or skills to acquire is an example of poor difficulty balance.

Boss Fight/Boss Battle: A climactic encounter in a video game where the player, usually through combat or violence, must defeat a foe of greater skill and/or importance than usual.

Course: A path through the nodes of a narrative net. In the context of this paper, a "course" refers to a specific version of a story with multiple variations: for example, Gottfried's *Tristan and Isolde* is a course, while Bédier's is a different course.

Cultural Matrix: The collection of ideas, motifs, settings, characters and more that are drawn upon by creators of a culture to create stories. For example, the idea of *Tristan and Isolde* is a cultural matrix, and the specific elements are then chosen and assembled by a creator to make a version of that story.

Cutscene: A moment in a video game where control is taken away from the player, usually to present narrative information in the form of an in-game animated "movie."

Episodic: Consisting of loosely connected but still noticeably related events.

Final Boss: The final climactic encounter in a video game before the end of the experience: otherwise follows the definition of a "Boss Battle."

Game Mechanics: The methods by which the game is interacted with and the patterns that the player familiarizes themselves with as their proficiency in the game increases. For example,

getting used to the timing required to maximize jumping distance in *Super Mario Bros.* is a demonstration of a player improving their ability to manage game mechanics.

Hypertext: Texts made up of discrete but still connected units that can be explored in a multitude of ways. For example, whenever Gottfried refers to "other tellers" of *Tristan and Isolde*, as he does when discussing the "Cave of Lovers," (Gottfried 222-223) his story is engaging in a form of hypertext.

Medieval Romance: A narrative verse thought to originate in twelfth-century France before spreading to the rest of Western Europe, primarily concerned with matters such as chivalry, courtly love, religious piety, magic, and confrontations against fantastic obstacles. Generally divided into three categories: the *Matter of Britain*, which is concerned with Arthurian legends; the *Matter of France*, focused on the era of Charlemagne; and the *Matter of Rome*, which were made up of stories consisting of classical characters and locations such as Alexander the Great and Troy. This paper, in examining *Tristan and Isolde*, is primarily concerned with the *Matter of Britain.*

Net: The "net" which contains nodes and their connections. The "course" is defined by the path it takes through this net. In the context of this study, "net" refers to the elements, characters, settings and motifs drawn upon by a creator to make a specific narrative. The "courses" are then the specific connections made between these elements by an individual creator.

Node: The points in the narrative net: these are theoretical concepts used to illustrate the net, and only exist to help visualize it. The "course" of a story is determined by which nodes the course travels through, and how many times each node is touched.

Playthrough: The specific instance of completing a game, usually in reference to the entire experience from start to finish (however long that may be). For instance, "My playthrough of *Breath of the Wild* took me 3 months."

Theme: In this study, a "theme" refers to the unifying element of a story with multiple versions or courses that allows a reader to recognize the story as a version of a wider tale, rather than an entirely original creation. For example, every version of *Tristan and Isolde* relies upon the inseparable nature of their love, helping make every version of the story recognizable as a variation of another.

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