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My Way or the Highway?

“Your face will be shaped by your past; the future, shaped by you.” These powerful words are uttered at the end of a trailer for the 2004 action role-playing game *Fable*. This game marked the beginning of the *Fable* series, which now comprises five video games in total with possible others on the way. Each game is unique in its own right, albeit due to gameplay features, enhanced graphics, so on and so forth, but they are also all similar in at least one facet – they promote an atmosphere of forging one’s own path through life, or more precisely, the path of life that the virtual character experiences in each game. This is the defining principle behind the series – “Who will you become?” another trailer prompts – but this notion seems too promising, too good to be true, right? Simply stated, this is because it *is* too good to be true. *Fable* promises a gameplay experience that is freeing, where the player makes all the decisions that ultimately decide how the journey will come to a conclusion, but what the game developers won’t tell players is that the choices made in the game are irrelevant to the ultimate outcome. Now this statement may seem totally out of line, but truly delving into the inner-workings and set-up of *Fable* illuminates the very reason this observation is completely on par.

Gameplay in *Fable*, set in the medieval world of Albion, is heavily focused on the player making his or her own choices and said choices lead to the main character ultimately becoming the epitome of good or evil. The game developers

sought to express the important emphasis of the player's control over the world portrayed in *Fable*. Along a player's journey, he or she will be presented with many different opportunities, many different alternatives to choose from. Some choices, such as the decision to tattle-tail on a woman's cheating husband or to keep it a secret, are much less dramatic than choices such as either sparing the life of one of your best friends or killing her in order to win a tournament of heroes put on by the game's main antagonist, Jack of Blades, gaining renown throughout the land.

The game sets up an illusion of freedom by stating explicitly that anyone playing is in control of his or her own destiny. It is true that *Fable* makes use of multiple differing endings to the game, but the process of unlocking one of these endings is by no means a "do-whatever-you'd-like-free-for-all." Maybe the player's objective is not to win the game at all but to simply have fun meandering around this virtual world that has been so painstakingly developed for the purpose of entertainment. Maybe that sort of goal is better suited for the likes of games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, however, where one can receive all the frills and thrills of excitement the game has to offer by repeatedly gunning down innocent pedestrians and stealing various automobiles, all the while never advancing through the storyline. *Fable* differs from this aspect in that in order to unlock the game's full potential, a player is, in a way, forced to complete the quests that further the character's journey through the game. As was previously stated, players are confronted with many choices throughout the game, but to arrive at these opportunities, one must advance through the story. There are, of course, side missions which delineate from the main story, but these are entirely optional and

their completion in no way affects the events of the central storyline. To put it in another perspective, these side quests are like filler questions on a psychological survey. Just as in a psychological survey, filler questions serve to keep participants from guessing the true meaning behind the study, the side quests serve to add to the illusion of freedom by giving the player more “control” in decision making (“I can complete that mission if I want to, but I don’t need to; it’s my choice”). In other words, the side quests function as another feature for the underlying control to hide behind.

To get to the ending of the game, no matter which one it happens to be, the player must follow a certain set of steps along the way. The game includes all the variations that video game enthusiasts could possibly enjoy, but if the player decides to deviate from the necessary steps involved in reaching the end of the game, the desired outcome simply will not arrive. So while *Fable* and its sequels are viewed as games where the player is given the ultimate freedom to decide his or her character’s own fate, the element of control is very much present underneath it all. This is to say that the game’s entire premise is based upon freedom and choices, but the player is truly being controlled all along the way. Therefore control has not disappeared, as game developers would like players to believe, but has rather transformed. As Galloway states in his writing, “While the disciplinary societies of high modernity were characterized by more physical semiotic constructs such as the signature and the document, today’s societies of control are characterized by immaterial ones such as the password and the computer,” (87).

Fable serves as a quintessential example of the point Galloway is expressing here. Whereas in games of more modern times people were relatively aware that they needed to follow the rules in order to win, games of more postmodern times attempt to hide this element of control and make the player feel as if he or she is the one calling all the shots. Going further, the generations of modern society, as opposed to postmodern society, were not so readily exposed to the use of the Internet and various forms of technology. All aspects of life were typically presented in a more concrete, straightforward form, but nowadays things are much more ambiguous and intangible. For example, information can be sent inconspicuously to places all over the world in a heartbeat through e-mailing, text messaging, and other avenues, without a trace of actual, physical evidence. Control has consequently taken on this more ambiguous form, as well, concealing itself whenever the need arises, whether it be for dastardly purposes, or for not so hideous agendas.

Therefore, control has not simply vanished; it has not gone by the way side. A video gamer can make all sorts of crazy choices in terms of his or her character's life in the game of *Fable*, but if winning is the goal, that player is not the one running the show. They have to follow the set path in order to reach the ending, and whether that ending is reached through the slaying of many innocent villagers or through the many generous acts of a hero-like individual, it is already laid out and dictated well in advance. Galloway comments on these elements of control further in his writing, quoting Delueze: "In making freeways...you don't enclose people but instead multiply the means of control. I am not saying that this is the freeway's exclusive

purpose, but that people drive infinitely and ‘freely’ without being at all confined yet while still being perfectly controlled,” (87-88).

This is, in essence, exactly the format that *Fable* follows. The game takes all these pieces, constructs a world where the possibilities are “endless” and tells the players that if it is to be, it is up to them. It puts on this grand façade of freedom through many means – the aforementioned plethora of choices, side quests, and the ultimate categorization as a good or evil individual. In this way, it has built all these “freeways” which video gamers can travel down if they so choose to. The roads may be long and abundant, but a player will end up following some preset variation of them, and are therefore being confined without their realizing.

It is not so much that *Fable* is an example of this idea of hidden control that is unlike any other game, but rather that the game heavily embodies this aspect and is therefore extremely exemplary of it. It cannot be claimed that *Fable* is the only game which utilizes the premise of alternate endings and varied ways of reaching each of those endings. It is also true, however, that every video game is unique, if only in some small way. Looking again at *Grand Theft Auto*, it’s apparent that players can control the main character in any way they wish. If they so desire to simply “shoot-‘em-up,” well they can have at it. If they wish to advance the story line, though, they must complete the missions, typically in a certain order as well. Choices play a much different role in *GTA* than they do in *Fable*, the very reason being why *Fable* serves as a better example of clandestine control. In *GTA: San Andreas*, for instance, the biggest decisions of the game include choosing whether or not Carl (the main character) will date a potential girlfriend, or whether or not he will park a certain

vehicle in one of his various garages, thereby saving it for later use. These types of choices have no effect whatsoever on the ultimate outcome of the game and video gamers are fully aware of this, thus it is not the finest illustration of this multiplication of the means of control that Galloway (through Deleuze) speaks of. This is not to say that the choices made in *Fable* dictate the outcome, as has been said. It is to say that the choices available in *Fable* put on a better disguise in terms of masking control; they play a slightly more prominent role in this endeavor.

With all of this information now on the table, the bigger picture is more easily formed. So, video games like *Fable* preach freedom but are really using controlling mechanisms underneath. Who cares? What does this have to do with everyday life in contemporary society? The underlying control that can be found in video games of the postmodern age is representative of and not unlike the control that media outlets force upon people daily. When it is put under the microscope, the media works to control public opinion, without the public realizing that they are being persuaded to take one side or the other on certain issues. Certainly, the control that media holds over the population is a little less pronounced than in the examples of video games discussed here. However, choices are made everyday by everyone, and the media, such as news channels on television, magazines, radio talk shows, and so on, do what they can to influence said choices. Just as there are many avenues that can be taken to reach the conclusion of *Fable*, there are many paths than can be traveled when making decisions in everyday life. It goes back to the metaphor about the freeways. The means of control have not disappeared nor have they somehow been vanquished. Rather, they have multiplied and gained the ability

to deceive people fairly easily, letting them think they have attained and are exercising freedom. It is hard to believe at first that a game like *Fable* could have such implications, but it merely takes a deeper look into mediums like video games to find hidden messages that one might never have even imagined.