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Introduction

The computer game series *Halo* has become one of the largest and most profitable transmedia franchises in the world, reaching lifetime sales of more than \$3 billion in 2013 (*Halo Waypoint*). The narratives within the *Halo* universe unfold across several computer games, as well as in the pages of comic books and novels, in short films (including advertising shorts), and in alternate reality games (ARGs). On top of these corporate products that form the core 'canon,' fan communities have built intricately connected, additional narratives (e.g. Rooster Teeth's *Red vs. Blue*), which are based on the fiction and/or technology provided by the *Halo* games.

Within this sprawling medial network, a variety of serial structures – both linear and non-linear – can be discerned. Focusing particularly on the original series produced by American video game developer Bungie, this paper seeks to explore the different modes of seriality that *Halo* expresses, elicits, and engages with in its various contexts of production, consumption, and textual as well as ludic interfacing. It thus traces *Halo's* narrative across what Denson and Jahn-Sudmann have called the “intra-ludic, inter-ludic and para-ludic” boundaries that define serial forms within, between, and beyond the individual installments of digital games and game series (2013). Denson and Jahn-Sudmann's approach lends itself to the analysis of the complex fiction of *Halo* as a whole, but also of its constituent parts and their interrelations, and it is particularly the latter which this paper seeks to illuminate.

As with many modern transmedia franchises, *Halo's* narrative universe is at once splintered and unified, each installment standing on its own while also connecting to a larger fictional history. Consequently, it represents the culmination of the “transmedia intertextuality” first described by Marsha Kinder (1993) and developed prominently by Henry Jenkins in several volumes and articles (e.g. 2003, 2011). Beginning with the big picture of *Halo* as a transmedia universe, this paper will analyze the relationships between the different layers of seriality that make up *Halo* as a singular, yet disjointed, narrative. While para-ludic and inter-ludic elements of *Halo's* seriality as a narrative universe are clearly delineated, intra-ludic seriality within the various *Halo* computer games is less visible and more subtle. Thus, in an effort to give a more detailed explanation of the role intra-ludic seriality plays in *Halo* as a whole, a large part of this paper will consist of a close reading of *Halo 3's* first chapter. A central concept for this analysis will be the notion of “serial one-upmanship” or “outbidding” (cf. Jahn-Sudmann and Kelleter 2012 and Kücklich 2006 by extension), which is at the core of *Halo 3's* intra-ludic seriality. While *Halo 3* is divided into clearly marked chapters, this paper will argue that its intra-ludic seriality extends further and is shaped by elements of the gameplay itself.

Elements of a Game and Computer Game Aesthetics

In order to grasp this level of intra-ludic seriality—where serial structures of repetition and variation, continuation and intensification are articulated within individual games and in the process of gameplay itself—I would like briefly to outline a framework for close analysis that will allow us to discern the emergence of a sort of low-level seriality that is less readily apparent than, though arguably foundational for, the higher-level serial structures of inter-ludic and para-ludic formations in the overarching context of a transmedia franchise. We need a framework, in other words, that will allow us to see seriality emerging “from the texts themselves,” and in players’ interpretive interactions with them, at a level not altogether unlike that of readers’ interpretive encounters with literary texts. This section therefore introduces some terminology and perspectives designed to help us engage with games at this level, before returning in the next section to the *Halo* franchise’s broader transmedial seriality.

Drawing from a wide variety of definitions of systems in general, Aki Järvinen (2007) argues that games—if seen as systems—have different states, or game states, that are determined by the inputs provided by the player(s) and the rules of the game (pp.49-52).¹ The current state is conveyed to the player through an output, if necessary, that can then be acted upon with new input. Järvinen categorizes the parts of these systems as behavioral, compound, and systemic elements. This framework comprises the game system, the player(s), and the connecting (compounding) layers in between.

The elements of a game, as described by Järvinen, are (2007, p.55):

- systemic elements
 - components
 - environment
- behavioral elements
 - players
 - contexts
- compound elements
 - ruleset
 - game mechanics
 - theme
 - interface
 - information

Components are the objects controlled by the player (*components-of-self*), other players (*components-of-others*), or the game system (*components-of-system*) (Järvinen 2007, p. 63ff). These components exist within the geometry that creates the *environment*, which they can usually traverse and/or interact with (p. 66ff). Outside of the game itself, players interact with the game through *compound elements*, interpreting it against the background of their cultural and individual contexts (p. 55). While the *game mechanics* comprise all possible ways of player interaction with the systemic elements (e.g. shooting, walking, running, using objects)

(p. 73), the *ruleset* contains all rules governing these elements and describing the state changes according to player input through the game mechanics (p. 69ff.). The *interface* is the connection between the player and the game mechanics (e.g. gamepads) (p. 81ff.), while *information* is textual, visual, or other output displayed for the player (e.g. the “heads-up display” including health bar and ammunition counter) (p. 74). Finally, the *theme* includes many narrative/meaning-bearing aspects of a game (e.g. the visual design of the environment or components) and works as a metaphor for the ruleset (p. 77ff.).

In conjunction with Järvinen’s terminology, Julian Kücklich’s “Literary Theory and Digital Games” (2006) offers a particularly helpful approach to the aesthetic dimensions of computer games. Kücklich argues that the three core areas around which literary theory is formed—poetics, hermeneutics, and aesthetics—can also be applied to computer games (p. 107); significantly, the hermeneutic aspects in particular can be seen to connect players’ low-level engagements with games to the high-level serializations typical of transmedia franchises like *Halo*. Kücklich writes, “it is now almost universally recognized that ‘making sense’ is a creative process that is necessarily influenced by the reader and the context in which the reading takes place” (Kücklich 2006, p. 105). Arguably, the player of a computer game has much more direct control over the influence she exerts on the text, but the interaction remains similar to that of reading in that, as Kücklich rightly claims, “hermeneutic interaction is embedded in the process of playing itself” (p. 104). A player has to constantly “make sense” of the game in order to make further progress in it. Kücklich argues that this process is necessary for the player to overcome obstacles in the game. Once these obstacles are overcome through interpreting and understanding the game’s rules and the mechanics that interact with those rules, the player is again in control of the game, requiring that another obstacle be inserted in order for the process to begin again (p. 109)—hence establishing, we might add, a serial hermeneutic progression at the very heart of gameplay.

This basic seriality is established as a central, if only implicit, dimension of Kücklich’s computer game aesthetics in the recourse that he takes to Janet Murray (1997), who identified three main “pleasures” that computer games can elicit: interactivity, immersion, and identification. Interactivity allows players to take “meaningful action” with visible consequences, which Murray describes as a “satisfying power” (qtd. in Kücklich 2006, p.126). Immersion and identification of the player with his or her components-of-self (in Järvinen’s term) are possible because the player interacts with the fictional world through those components. Thus, Kücklich goes on to say that the aesthetics of computer games is necessarily an aesthetics of control; the player controls and is controlled by the game. This means that “the pleasure of [a] digital game can be said to derive from equilibrium between the player’s control over the game and the game’s control over the player” (p. 108). Following that claim, Kücklich argues that pleasure is derived from overcoming obstacles (which inhibit the player’s full control of the game) and thereby reaching the control equilibrium for at least some time. This is where difficulty and player skill come in, as the game will become boring if the player never loses at least some control (p. 109).² Thus, while the focus of Kücklich’s approach is not on seriality per se, the serial quality of this “aesthetics of control” is clear, as it centers on overcoming increasingly difficult obstacles. Emphasizing its serial nature, this process can be described as a low-level form of “outbidding” or serial “one-upmanship,” which Jahn-Sudmann and Kelleter have

examined in contemporary television (2012); this inter- or intraserial outbidding can take many shapes (e.g. a bigger budget, more graphic violence, or higher stakes for the characters) and allows TV producers to sell an old concept as something new (p. 207). As we have seen, however, the logic of outbidding in interactive digital games is distinguished by its being rooted directly in gameplay itself, at the level of intra-ludic seriality, which thus might serve as the basic foundation for more elaborate narrative serializations at the inter- and para-ludic levels of a transmedia franchise.

Transmedia Foundations

Let us return, then, to the *Halo* franchise and to the various levels of seriality that it articulates together. The foundations for the first *Halo* game were laid early in Bungie's history with the first-person action title *Pathways into Darkness* (1993) and the *Marathon* trilogy of games (1994-6), all of which were produced for the Apple Macintosh as the primary platform. While these games were clearly inspired by the early work of id Software (i.e. *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3D*), Bungie added a more involved story and experimented with components-of-system that integrated the story into the game itself (e.g. through in-game computer terminals that would offer new plot details to the player, but were often hidden or out of sight). While many of the early first-person shooters offered little in terms of story, Bungie created an entire universe with these four titles, tying *Pathways* into the *Marathon* world, even though it was not explicitly labeled as part of the series. In the following years Bungie remained a major Macintosh developer, announcing the first *Halo* title at Macworld Expo in 1999 (Lopez 1999). But Microsoft acquired Bungie shortly thereafter, and *Halo* was instead featured as a central launch title for Microsoft's foray into the gaming console market, the Xbox. Bungie's prior history is nevertheless strongly reflected in the *Halo* series, which features many elements found in the *Marathon* trilogy (e.g. the terminals in *Halo 3*). Today, Microsoft is in full control of the *Halo* intellectual properties; Bungie was not even involved in the production of *Halo 4*.³ But Bungie's influence continues because it was they who, from the beginning, laid the foundations to turn *Halo* into a broad narrative framework or universe.

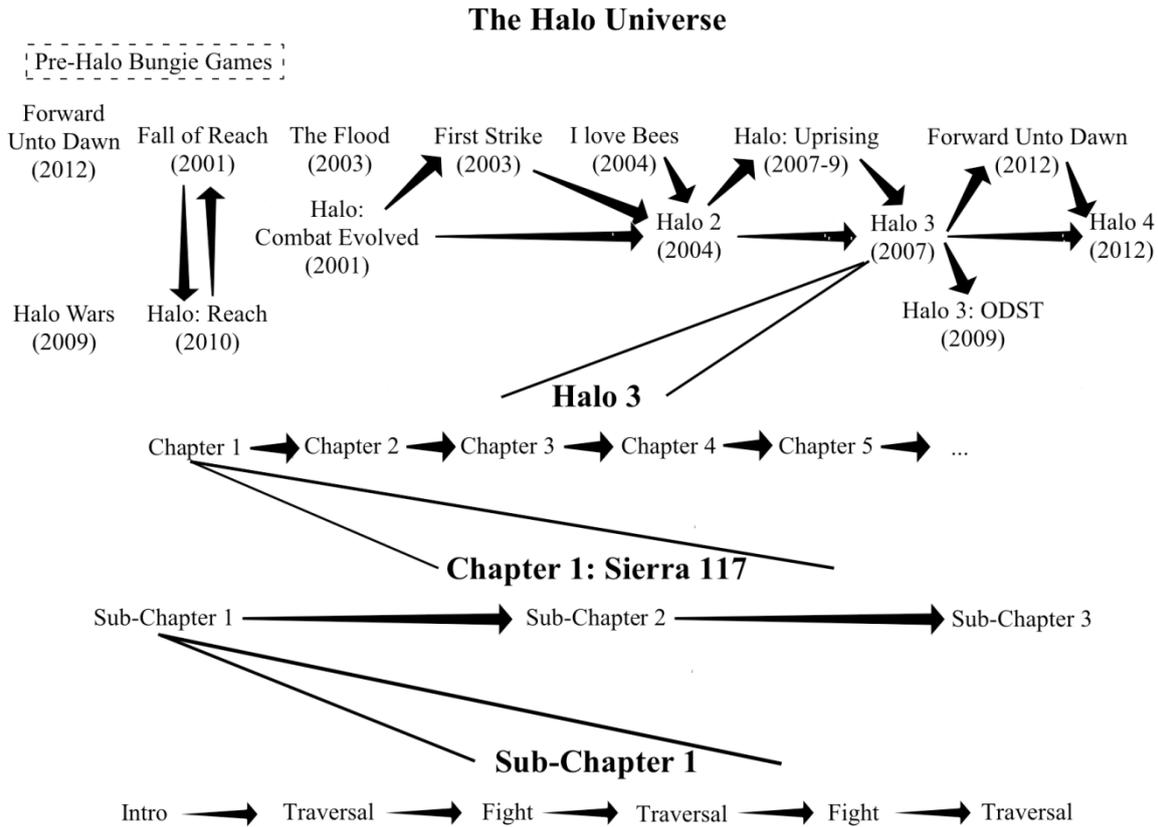


Figure 1: Para-ludic, inter-ludic, and intra-ludic levels of seriality in the Halo series. The horizontal axis represents the diegetic chronology of each level; arrows represent direct narrative relationships.

While the *Halo* series always has been a major marketing device for the promotion of Microsoft's new consoles, it can also be seen as a major force behind the popularization of first-person shooters on consoles in general. The first entry in the series, *Halo: Combat Evolved* (2001),⁴ sports a subtitle that already shows what Bungie aimed to accomplish. The more conservatively named *Halo 2* (2004) was also made for the first Xbox console, while *Halo 3* (2007) was a major promotional tool for its successor, the Xbox 360. These three games were followed by several spin-offs, two of which remained in the first-person shooter genre and were developed by Bungie (*Halo 3: ODST* and *Halo: Reach*), while *Halo Wars* is a real-time strategy title made by Ensemble Studios. On top of that, the series features transmedia storytelling extensively through twelve novels,⁵ a short story collection, eight comic book series and graphic novels,⁶ three alternate reality games (mainly used for promotional purposes), two board games, as well as seven animated short films, a live-action web series, and countless commercials.⁷ The novels in particular played an important role in the *Halo* fiction early on. *Halo: The Fall of Reach* was published just weeks before the release of the first *Halo* game, which shows that *Halo* was conceived as a transmedia series from the beginning. Taking place before *Combat Evolved*, its story was later picked up by the spin-off game *Halo: Reach*, and it plays a significant role in the overarching narrative of the entire *Halo* series and the development of its main protagonist (see Figure 1).

Thus, the storyworld of *Halo* is actually a prime example of transmedia storytelling (cf. Jenkins 2003, 2011). The various installments, instantiated in a variety of media, gradually fill the gaps in the history of *Halo*'s universe and refer back to earlier or later works depicting the same events. Only the main game series is essential for following the plot, though. Being familiar with the main trilogy allows players to play, read, or watch other entries in whatever order and timeframe they want, adding a non-linear element to the *Halo* series (cf. Figure 1). The story branches out in different directions and involves many optional installments in different media. This does indeed create a more complex and rich fictional universe and facilitates the serial consumption that is typical of large, modern entertainment franchises (cf. Hagedorn 1995 and Jenkins 2003).

As there are relatively few direct relationships between the inter- and para-ludic parts of the *Halo* universe—few relationships, that is, that mark a particular progression or sequence of consumption as necessary or non-contingent—the overall series remains non-linear in many respects. While the main inter-ludic series (from *Combat Evolved* to *Halo 4*) is strongly tied together by its main characters and a linear story, many different para-ludic parts of the *Halo* series bridge the gaps between the main titles. Importantly, these are optional stories, but even if they are not necessary in order to follow the core series, they still have a specific place in its strictly linear unfolding (cf. Figure 1). Ranging from novels, comic books, and films to ARGs and commercials, these elements of the series represent the broad spectrum of media that is part of the *Halo* series. Since even these integrated entries of the *Halo* series are not essential for understanding the core series or other inter- or para-ludic spin-offs, the overall story can be read, played, or watched in many different configurations. On a para- and inter-ludic level, *Halo* allows for consumption without consideration of chronology or other temporal limitations. Most games, novels, comics etc. are instantly available through digital technology, bundled together (e.g. in the upcoming *Master Chief Collection*) or freely shared online (e.g. ARGs and advertisements). Thus, *Halo* is an example of “synchronized” media, which Denson and Jahn-Sudmann describe in terms of “historically diverse media contents exist[ing] in a state of synchronicity, permanence, and random and repeatable accessibility” (2013). Moreover, its structure is also representative of “convergence culture,” which Jenkins defines as the “flow of content across multiple media platforms, cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences [...]” (2006a, p. 2). *Halo* is thus a particularly poignant example of current popular seriality and has been on the forefront of these developments for several years.⁸

***Halo 3*: A Case Study in Intra-Ludic Serialization**

In order to see how these higher-level serial structures are rooted in gameplay itself, I will now take a closer look at *Halo 3*, which will serve as a case study in intra-ludic serialization processes. *Halo 3* marks both a beginning and a continuation within the *Halo* storyworld, standing on its own while also being tightly integrated into the *Halo* series overall. This liminal state is typical of media that is “synchronized” in Denson and Jahn-Sudmann’s sense (2013): it is accessible, for example, without specific prior knowledge, but at the same time serves as the third act of a trilogy. Its function

in the overall *Halo* story depends on when, in what order, and how the games (and novels, comic books etc.) are accessed.

At its core, *Halo 3* is a linear chain of interactive, semi-interactive, and non-interactive events. It is impossible to sway from the intended path and still make progress in the campaign. Overall, the structure of the game consists of four layers: The outer layer includes the broad theme (i.e. upholding justice, honor, and Western morals against all odds⁹), the plot, and a history in which the main chapters are wrapped. Each chapter then consists of several sub-chapters, which, in turn, consist of several events in the form of cut-scenes or gameplay events. The sub-chapters usually have a common theme and often introduce new, rare components (e.g. enemies or items) that will become common later on. Some sub-chapters may only consist of a single driving sequence (e.g. the very last playable sub-chapter of the game), or involve no driving at all (e.g. most sub-chapters in the beginning). In general, most of the sub-chapters in the game are dominated by on-foot combat, which is why *Halo 3* can properly be called a first-person shooter, despite the inclusion of driving sequences that would not be part of a traditional first-person shooter. The sub-chapters are usually not self-contained from a narrative perspective, as they rely heavily on story elements in the other sub-chapters and lack an independent narrative arc. Moreover, their endings do not even necessarily coincide with a cut-scene or other forms of narration. However, the breaks between sub-chapters are still clearly noticeable as they are marked by a screen indicating that a new autosave point is being created.¹⁰ These interruptions are very brief, and the player remains active during the process (e.g. able to walk around, fire a weapon etc.), but no enemies are present at this time. As these breaks are usually found directly after an intense fight event, they also offer relief and satisfaction, a brief respite before the next obstacle or challenge is introduced. For its part, as Kücklich makes clear, the new obstacle is necessary and must soon follow the break in the game's action, so that the player will stay engaged with the game (cf. Kücklich 2006). This, then, is the serialized functionality of *Halo 3*'s chapters, where one sub-chapter already teases or anticipates the action of the next.

***Halo 3*, Chapter 1, Sub-Chapter 1: A Close Reading**

Halo 3 begins with an opening cinematic that bridges the gap from *Halo 2*. Master Chief has just escaped a spaceship when he crashes into a lush forest in Eastern Africa where he is found by a platoon of Marines accompanied by Sergeant Major Johnson (a human soldier who has been with Master Chief from *Halo: Combat Evolved* onwards) and the Arbiter (a former enemy turned ally). This opening of the game already puts the player right in the middle of the *Halo* transmedia narrative. The events directly preceding this scene take place in the graphic novel *Halo: Uprising*, which is the direct continuation of *Halo 2*, but *Halo 3*'s intro works just as well right after its predecessor (i.e. without having read the graphic novel). The player is almost immediately thrust into Master Chief's perspective, and the start of the first chapter, "Sierra 117," follows after the very brief interruption of a loading screen.

The environment of the first sub-chapter is a canyon in a jungle-like forest. The player starts out with a basic weapon¹¹ as a component-of-self and is surrounded by several characters as components-of-system (some nameless Marines, along with Johnson and the Arbiter). After the introductory cinematic event, the next few minutes

are spent in an empty part of the canyon, where no enemies are present. Here, the player may familiarize herself with the interface and game mechanics to a certain degree, but the game offers no goals and only provides tutorial-like information if the player fails to advance. At the end of the previous event (the introductory cinematic), Johnson warns Master Chief and the Marines of an enemy presence in the canyon. This cliffhanger creates tension, especially given the amount of visual obstruction that is part of the environment (trees, bushes, rocks etc.), behind which an enemy might lurk. This event is quite long, compared to other “traversal events” later in the chapter. When it begins, the player spawns next to a piece of debris in a crater. As this part of the environment was visible in the opening cinematic, it serves as an anchor to the earlier narrative event and connects it to the first chapter of the game. The group of Marines gets going, along with the Arbiter and Johnson, as they lead the way for the player, waiting at pre-determined points in the environment, which triggers dialogue urging the player to move forward. This happens throughout the chapter, allowing the player to choose the pace of the progress and to act as the main active agent in the group. The first obstacle the group reaches is a large log that blocks the path in the small canyon. The press of the “A” button catapults the player character several meters into the air, while the non-player characters (NPCs) grunt and moan as they slowly crawl across the log. This event foregrounds both the interface and the background of the player character and alludes in this way to the history of the character (i.e. his super-soldier origin) as well as the evolving interface and game mechanics of the *Halo* series. While there are some differences, the interface and the game mechanics of all first-person shooters within the *Halo* series are very similar. Each new sequel adds some mechanics or rules, but the basic system remains the same. This purely ludic seriality is typical of many computer game franchises and creates a cohesive experience across all sequels that can scarcely be realized in other media. While there exists ludic coherence, the first chapter of *Halo 3* can hardly be called an “introduction” from a narrative or ludic point of view—there is neither a recapitulation of the first two *Halo* installments, let alone the related para-ludic stories, nor a tutorial introducing the interface, ruleset, or game mechanics. Instead, there are little pointers, such as the Chief’s jump or the Arbiter’s presence, which offer reminders, but no explanations.

During the traversal event in the canyon, the group also jumps or climbs down a cliff along the way. These cliffs appear often in such traversal sequences, obstructing the path back; and since there are no enemies present they are usually used for automatic saving and loading. As such, the cliffs ensure that a) the player does not return to an empty area where nothing happens (as there are no more scripts to trigger) or where the player might get lost, and b) the newly loaded part of the chapter cannot be left. While the reasons for the inclusion of these cliffs are thus two-fold, the effect is clearly the creation of a linear seriality. The previous events and sub-chapters are rendered inaccessible, there is only one path that the player can possibly take, and it leads ineluctably to the next event. Thus, the temporal and spatial dimensions of the narrative are inextricably linked. Only if the player character keeps moving in the correct direction does the narrative advance.

The first objective¹² in the sub-chapter is to reach a nearby river, where the group is supposed to be picked up by a Pelican aircraft. It is implied that this river is not far off and that the evacuation will not take long. Of course, the objective will change over the course of the chapter, as the situation quickly becomes much more complex.

During the next several minutes, the player advances through a winding section of the canyon and the only enemy activities are the audible shouts and roars of the Brutes, which one of the Marines comments on fearfully, saying that they “sounded close, too close” (*Halo 3*, chapter 1.1). Moreover, there are several other noises that cannot be easily identified. Along with the jungle-themed environment with its many plants, trees and rocks, these audio cues foreshadow the future battles and are emphasized by the slowly building, ominous synthesizer music. On top of that, the humans soon receive a radio message warning them of incoming enemy forces, before the connection breaks up. Finally, not having encountered any enemies yet, the group has to split up when Covenant drop ships, so-called “Phantoms,” fly over the area. The Sergeant Major takes some Marines and climbs up a large cliff (something the player cannot do, as there is no game mechanic that would allow for climbing), while the player character, along with the Arbiter and the rest of the Marines, have to continue through the canyon. Thus, there is no actual—but only a seeming—branching path or fork in the road here, so that the environment remains directly linked to the linear temporal dimension of *Halo 3* (see Figure 2).

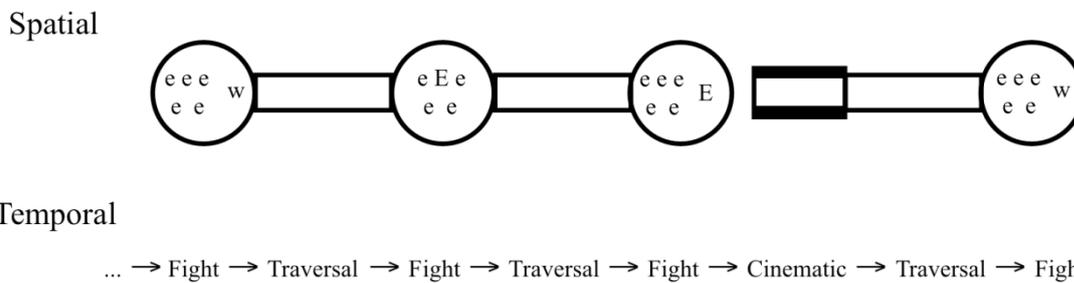


Figure 2: Abstracted depiction of the prototypical structure of events in Halo 3. The letter “e/E” represents enemies (common and uncommon, respectively) and “w” a new weapon or item.

After this, the canyon widens a bit and an enemy search party becomes visible. The player character's group is situated on higher ground. All the while, the music has slowly begun incorporating more and more drumbeats and has risen in tempo and volume, in accordance with the tension rising before the first enemy encounter. As soon as the player crosses a certain boundary (i.e. a script is triggered), the enemies attack. The player controls the pace of the game here. She can choose to stay put and observe the enemies, or charge ahead directly without delay. This interruption of the game is not strictly enforced then, but controlled by the player. This is typical of *Halo 3*'s intra-ludic seriality, and it allows for individual “jumping off” points at which the player may exit the game to resume at a later date. Unlike a DVD box set of an ongoing TV series, with its regular interruptions every 45 to 60 minutes, the event structure of *Halo 3* is much more fine-grained. Only if the player ends the game session during one of the events is the game actually interrupted by the player. The layered intra-ludic structure of events, sub-chapters, and chapters provides interruptions that also act as cliffhangers (e.g. here the player already sees the first enemies in the game, but is not in a fight yet). On the one hand, this structure encourages the player to play on and lengthen the session¹³; on the other hand, it provides a clear break and creates tension until the next play session.

After the player triggers the invisible script, the first fight event begins. The enemy forces are weak compared to later fights; there are only one Brute and a few Grunts. The latter also drop the first new weapon of the game, the Plasma Pistol, which can be used to deactivate the Brutes' shields quickly. The weapon drop therefore also connects this event with the next fight, where such a tactic might be utilized. After all the enemies are dead, the game saves a checkpoint, which confirms that all threats in this area have been dealt with. The fight event ends and a short traversal event begins. But before the group gets going, the Arbiter can be observed talking to the dead Brute. This is a poignant example of narrative and gameplay intertwining, as the game is not stopped and a player hurrying onwards may well miss the dialogue. As the dialogue refers to the political situation within the Covenant, it shows that the fighting is not hanging in a narrative vacuum, only motivated by immediate threats; rather, it connects this one event with the overall fiction of the *Halo* universe.

Moving forward into the widening canyon, the player can see a small pool of water with a Phantom hovering above it. An NPC manning the mounted gun in the Phantom's loading bay opens fire, which marks the beginning of the second fight event. The drop ship quickly leaves again, not allowing time for a real fight, but leaving some infantry on the ground. Gradually, the encounters with these large aircraft/spaceships become longer over the course of the first chapter, each appearance teasing the next, more involved one. This development is a good example of the "outbidding" mechanics that are typical of the intra-ludic seriality in *Halo 3*.

In both fight events up to this point, the player's group occupied higher ground (and therefore looked down onto the enemies), thus allowing for easier orientation and a better awareness of enemy positions and movement. While the advantage during the first fight is enormous, the player is stripped of some degree of control in the second encounter. Thus, the difficulty of the game slowly increases with each fight event, ramping up ludic suspense as narrative suspense also rises. This concerted build-up of tension through the fight events, and through the events interrupting them, creates an arc. Just as a season of a TV show, for example, might culminate in a season finale, "Sierra 117" also brings many ludic and narrative ends (e.g. the fights against the Phantom) together in the last two events of the chapter, only to end with a cliffhanger.

After the player has disposed of the small enemy group dropped by the Phantom, a Brute becomes visible along the shoreline. The next fight event serves as a pointer in the environment, leading the player in the right direction. Again, the Brute is accompanied by a few Grunts; the only thing that differs from the previous event is the lack of any elevation advantage on the side of the player. This could mean stagnation in the event chain, but instead the game introduces a new feature (new, indeed, to the *Halo* series as a whole): "equipment." As soon as the player character moves near the enemy group, a script is triggered that makes the Brute drop a Bubble Shield. This device creates an energy field big enough to fit two characters inside and shields the interior from any weapons fire for a limited amount of time. Thus, the event provides a new obstacle, keeping with Kücklich's demand for new and more difficult obstacles than those previously overcome, outbidding the previous events (see above). This fight also introduces enemy reinforcements, as one Marine exclaims: "More are coming!" (*Halo 3*, chapter 1.1), and three more Grunts come out

of a cave. After all the enemies in the area are dead, the player is led to a short tunnel to the next area. During this traversal event, a short piece of dialogue between a Marine and the Arbiter can be heard (if the player is close enough), which again focuses on the interior politics and culture of the Covenant but is not an immediate continuation of the earlier dialogue. It thus functions similarly to many para-ludic parts of the *Halo* series: it provides a more complex narrative through the combination of various *optional* pieces. This kind of intra-ludic seriality, which already anticipates the para-ludic seriality budding within and around the franchise, is particularly suited for computer games, as they allow for a range of different playing styles: many players will never even hear the dialogue in question.

The tunnel, which again includes a sheer cliff to prevent backtracking and another checkpoint save, leads the group (which may include fewer Marines by now, depending on the player's performance)¹⁴ to a Covenant camp in a swamp/forest area. Around the lower level of the camp, several Grunts are sleeping, introducing a stealth mechanic to the game. Even this early on in the game, the constant outbidding of foregoing events becomes apparent. All elements of the game are part of this process, all involved in a synchronized effort to increase tension, to keep player enjoyment or interest high, and to allow the player to reach a state of flow. Thus, the background music, for example, adds a choir, again rising in tension alongside the gameplay, but still remaining vaguely menacing and quiet. It provides a fitting backdrop against which the gameplay and narrative can unfold, and creating an even more immersive experience.

Once again, the game allows the player to take her time and offers an even higher vantage point from which to view the camp and plan a strategy. At this point, another equipment type is (re)introduced as the Arbiter uses his cloaking device. This piece of equipment is only briefly shown here (as it was in *Halo 2*) and will be used by Brutes in later chapters, before it finally becomes available to the player, though with a limited capacity. The device is thus a good example of a ludic and narrative thread that is woven through several chapters; it creates an underlying arc that increases consistency within the game by building the later introduction of the usable equipment upon the foundations laid by its appearances as a non-actionable item in earlier chapters.

Obviously, the player may attack the camp outright, as well. This means that the Grunts will wake up and join the ensuing fight, which, depending on the difficulty setting, may make it much harder to survive (especially for the NPCs). The fight is much larger in scale than the earlier events and also involves a literal up-hill battle for the first time. Furthermore, there are enemy reinforcements that join the battle midway through. While thus taking up many elements from the earlier events, this combat sequence is already much closer to the battles in later chapters, also introducing a new weapon with a moderate homing function, making the Grunts much more of a threat. The fight event leads to the end of sub-chapter one, with some down time at the camp, allowing the player to pick up ammunition and switch weapons at will. The Pelicans that were supposed to pick up the group are radioing in that they are approaching, even though Bravo team (another search team, not the group led by Johnson) went missing, which is a cliffhanger that leads directly to the first event of sub-chapter two. The music takes a more hopeful turn, following the

promise of rescue, and the sub-chapter ends with a checkpoint save as the player group enters a tight canyon to advance through the next traversal event.

To conclude, the first sub-chapter of *Halo 3* is, strictly speaking, a chain of events (which I have categorized as either “fight,” “traversal,” or “cinematic” events). The events interrupt each other constantly, never allowing one type to dominate for a longer stretch of the game or even an entire sub-chapter. Additionally, narrative and ludic events are often intertwined, directly triggering each other and thus bringing story and gameplay together. All of the following sub-chapters are structured very similarly. As I have discussed above, this structure makes the chapters very coherent and consistent with regard to both the story that is being told and the actions the player takes and skills she acquires. Taking away one of these two aspects of the game would not only lessen the impact, but it would actually undermine the structure of the chapter. The excitement of the Marines in the final cinematic of the first chapter, for example, comes as a response to the huge final fight event that they and Master Chief have just survived. It is thus part of the cathartic response to overcoming this obstacle and, at the same time, preparation for the appearance of the next threat. Following Kücklich (2006), this is only possible because the chapter's structure is built around player progression in terms of skill and knowledge, including an outbidding process akin to a crescendo in music (which the actual in-game music in fact exhibits). Every obstacle is slightly different and introduces something new to the game, which, in turn, is then already common in the following event. Taking away this constant outbidding would diminish the aesthetic impact that this form of seriality is capable of developing, impairing player progression and finally the ludic and narrative appeal. Seriality is thus essential to the first chapter of *Halo 3*, and it ties the chapter together, even if, or precisely because, it involves references outside the chapter or even beyond the game itself. In the end, it is *Halo 3*'s carefully introduced intra-ludic seriality that creates not only a complex narrative (see Mittell 2006 and Hagedorn 1995) but also complex gameplay and then, finally, ties all loose ends of the chapter together—only to reveal a new opening for the next chapter to begin.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that *Halo 3* is not just part of a larger series, but that it is also serialized in itself. As a consequence, the game's narrative and ludic elements are closely connected and interrelated. They respond to, interrupt, and overlap each other and cannot therefore exist in isolation from one another. *Halo 3* relies heavily on seriality to build tension and to motivate the player to move forward, thus corroborating Kücklich's approach to the aesthetics of computer games, which implicitly postulates the foundations of a serialized intra-ludic process.

Of course, seriality within *Halo 3* relies on its linearity. As my analysis has shown, *Halo 3* does not only collapse the traditionally distinct levels of narrative temporality into one (cf. Juul 2001 and Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013); its environment is also inextricably intertwined with the conflation of the time of *histoire*, *discours*, and actual consumption.¹⁵ This collapse of temporality and spatiality creates a strictly linear seriality combining gameplay and narrative events to create a unified whole. The only way to break apart the collapsed levels of temporality and the environment, therefore, is to stay in one place. Then, while “story time,” “plot time,” and the time of

reception (cf. Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013) remain collapsed and continue, the spatial dimension ceases to change. Arguably, however, the narrative comes to a stand-still as well. The only way to advance the story in *Halo 3* is to advance spatially.¹⁶

Any study of computer games has to acknowledge that there are many variables inherent to the medium. This paper has approached its subject as an average player is likely to do: not skipping narrative scenes, progressing quickly without using advanced tactics and without cheating. While this may be conducive to analyzing certain aspects of a computer game, it is important to keep in mind the difficulties and contingencies that an interactive medium introduces. Such a medium allows for a very strictly controlled, linear form of intra-ludic seriality on one end of a continuum, but it also allows for a completely open, blank-slate type of freedom on the other. Of course, most games fall somewhere in between, but the tension between the two extremes is part of every computer game. In the end, it is this flexibility that makes computer games such a unique medium. Every time one plays through a game, a different story is brought into existence. Some of these stories may be only slightly different, but others may just as well take place in different universes.

My analysis has shown that tension in *Halo 3* is achieved through constant outbidding and new combinations of known elements from previous events. It is precisely because of these features, I contend, that *Halo 3* works so well as a computer game. "Cinematic" gaming is becoming more and more of a major avenue for large game developers and publishers when it comes to big-budget computer games. I would argue that *Halo 3*, and the whole *Halo* series by extension, pioneered this style of game design and that well integrated seriality is an integral part of Bungie's (and now 343's) approach. Even now that 343 Industries is working on *Halo 5: Guardians*, it will remain a central aspect of the *Halo* games. In cooperation with Ridley Scott's Scott Free Productions, 343 are creating another film project that is supposed to bridge the gap between *Halo 4* and *Halo 5: Guardians* (Collura 2014). Moreover, 343 is also working on a live-action TV series set in the *Halo* universe, which is supposed to premiere on Showtime in 2015 (Spangler 2014).

Thus, *Halo* as a transmedia universe will continue to grow in the manner I have outlined above. Obviously, the corporate ownership of the series has become a fitting example for the industrialization of serial cultural production that Hagedorn (1995, p. 28) and others have described. The next core game trilogy in the *Halo* universe is being developed right now, with many other products (such as the film projects mentioned above) promoting the continuation of the series. The only end for the *Halo* story seems to lie in the waning of its profitability. Otherwise, it might be told in ever-new episodes, indefinitely. As I have argued, however, the industrialized seriality of *Halo* as a big-budget transmedia franchise is based squarely in the low-level intra-ludic serialization of narrative and gameplay events. The continued success of the franchise thus depends, we may surmise, upon the strength of this foundation.

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Notes

- ¹ In this part of his dissertation, Järvinen discusses games in general and uses many examples from sports or board games, as well as computer games. The broad applicability of the model is one of its major strengths.
- ² Kücklich compares this to reader-response theory, which, he argues, also entails a struggle between reader and text. This struggle is not about control but about meaning, though. Arguably, this is a remarkable similarity between two kinds of cultural texts that appear to be very different on the surface.
- ³ In fact, Bungie split from Microsoft in 2007 and is now an independent developer again.
- ⁴ All three *Halo* titles were played in their German versions for this paper. The versions are identical to the original English version, except for the translated dialogue, and offer English subtitles. Piggyback Interactive's *Halo 3: The Official Guide* was used for reference. It reprints the environment of *Halo 3* complete with enemy and item placement.
- ⁵ *The Fall of Reach* (2001), *First Strike* (2003), and the Forerunner trilogy by Greg Bear are of particular note. *First Strike* bridges the gap between *Halo: Combat Evolved* and *Halo 2*, while the Forerunner trilogy takes place thousands of years prior to the events in *Halo* (see Figure 1).
- ⁶ Among the artists and authors of these comic books, several are particularly noteworthy: Brian Michael Bendis, Jean Giraud (also known as Moebius), Peter David, and Fred Van Lente. While a novel bridged the story gap between the first two Halos, the limited comic book series *Halo: Uprising* (2007) connects *Halo 2* and *Halo 3*.
- ⁷ As odd as it may seem to mention advertising here, many of the *Halo* commercials have dealt with characters and events that were not covered in any other part of the *Halo* story. The "Believe" campaign for *Halo 3*, for example, featured several very short live-action films involving veterans of the war depicted in the games. Shot in a documentary-like style, these ads show the admiration Master Chief garnered, implying, in the end, that he was killed during the events of *Halo 3* and single-handedly saved humanity and the galaxy.
- ⁸ Missing from this short overview of the transmedia foundations of *Halo* are the many contributions by players and fans of the series. In spite of the technical limitations, there are many examples of machinima using the *Halo* games, for example. The most popular series, *Red vs. Blue*, lampoons tropes regularly found in multiplayer games, as well as the military science fiction genre. It has

become hugely popular and successful, spanning over 240 episodes and accumulating millions of views on YouTube (Rooster Teeth 2008). The vast transmedia universe outlined above is just one essential part to inviting many different forms of participation (cf. Jenkins 2006b). Obviously, another, if not the key element, has been the hugely popular multiplayer component of each of the *Halo* games, which created a dedicated community of players (especially with the introduction of online play and matchmaking in *Halo 2*). However, I will not be able to deal with the fan contributions to *Halo's* para-ludic context or the multiplayer component further here, as it is beyond the scope of the present paper.

- 9 Outside of the computer games, this broad theme becomes much more complicated. While the games usually feature clear distinctions between good and evil, many of the other stories create a more nuanced scale of greys (e.g. the human government is totalitarian and the Spartans are recruited and genetically altered as children).
- 10 In *Halo* parlance, the point in the game that triggers the auto-saving mechanic is called a checkpoint.
- 11 This weapon is the iconic standard assault rifle, the “MA5C Individual Combat Weapon System,” which has been part of the series since *Halo: Combat Evolved* and is often featured prominently in promotional materials.
- 12 Objectives are displayed in the pause menu, as well on the heads-up-display as a pop-up, when they change or a new one is issued. These pieces of information are supposed to remind the player of the bigger picture and help the player to reorientate herself when rejoining the game later.
- 13 Especially in the early history of computer games, coin-operated arcade machines relied on similar mechanics to create more revenue.
- 14 This is also the reason why some players may not see/hear all narrative content of the game. The Arbiter cannot die, but if none of the Marines are left, their dialogue is not triggered for obvious reasons.
- 15 Of course, the cut-scenes between different ludic events are usually an exception.
- 16 The exceptions to this rule are the instances of incidental dialogue triggered by player inaction. These reactions to player inaction are common in many games (often called “idle animations”) and usually express a trait of the player character (e.g. Sonic the Hedgehog tapping his foot). In *Halo 3*, the non-player characters usually display this behavior and sometimes even urge the player character to move on. Thus, the story of *Halo 3* only continues if the player continues to move ahead in the intended direction within the environment.