



# HANK WHITSON - NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO

hankwhitson.com | linkedin.com/in/hank-whitson-iii/  
626.818.6648 | rhwhitson@gmail.com

## CONTENTS

P. 1: Marketing Experience & Campaign Overviews | P. 2-5: Journalism | P. 5-6: Copywriting (Social)  
P. 6-7: Copywriting (Branded) | P. 7-18: Academic Excerpt | P. 18-25: Technical Excerpt

## MARKETING AGENCY EXPERIENCE & CAMPAIGN OVERVIEWS

*The following is a brief overview of the various agency campaigns I worked on. Please follow the links for detailed video recaps, where available!*

**RANDOM ACTS OF FUSION (2012-2013):** A nationwide multimedia campaign and contest launching the 2012 Ford Fusion. Most of my responsibilities were dedicated to quality assurance, editing, and visual layout design. [www.42entertainment.com/work/randomactsoffusion](http://www.42entertainment.com/work/randomactsoffusion)

**INFAMOUS PAPER TRAIL (2014):** A serialized DLC series for inFAMOUS Second Son on the PlayStation 4. My duties entailed concept, narrative, and game design, and co-writing for story content. The goal of the project was to provide free added content and a retention incentive for customers. [www.42entertainment.com/work/papertrailinfamous](http://www.42entertainment.com/work/papertrailinfamous)

**VOYAGERS (2014-2016):** A companion interactive experience for Random House's Voyager series of YA books. I composed additional in-universe lore and digital item descriptions. [www.voyagershq.com/index.html](http://www.voyagershq.com/index.html)

**DIG DECODED (2015):** An ARG for USA Network's DIG: I contributed writing, editing, and narrative design for the show's Alternate Reality Game, which provided expanded lore and content to supplement the show's plot. I also provided the designs for a handful of puzzles included in the game's puzzle suite. [www.42entertainment.com/work/digdecoded](http://www.42entertainment.com/work/digdecoded)

**ZEDD TRUE COLORS (2015):** A nationwide, track-by-track launch party for ZEDD's album True Colors. I helped with event conception, planning, and on-the-ground execution for the parties and scavenger hunts that celebrated the world premiere of each track on the album. I also performed content moderation and design duties for various activities at the parties. [www.42entertainment.com/work/zedd](http://www.42entertainment.com/work/zedd)

**RAM IDEATE MEDIA UNIVERSE (2015-2016):** I was the chief writer and architect of a plot and character bible for Ideate Media in adapting the works of Ramlee Awang Murshid to establish a new, transmedia franchise similar to Star Wars, or the MCU. [www.forbes.com/sites/dongroves/2016/08/23/42-entertainment-creates-characters-for-malaysian-action-thriller-tombiruo/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/dongroves/2016/08/23/42-entertainment-creates-characters-for-malaysian-action-thriller-tombiruo/)

**THE ORDER OF 10 (2016):** A puzzle suite/ARG released in promotion of NVIDIA's GTX 1080 graphics card launch. Again, I contribute concept, puzzle, and narrative design, as well as writing.

**SECRET ORDER OF KEYS (2017):** A subscriber retention and rewards program from Loot Crate. I wrote all the copy, hints, emails, and promotional material for this campaign, in addition to contributing puzzle design.

I have continued to collaborate with 42E as a narrative designer on a consulting basis since my departure. My most recent freelance project entailed brand and narrative development for Tyra Banks' Location Based Experience, **MODELLAND**. [www.model-land.com/](http://www.model-land.com/)

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 2

---

## VIDEO GAME & ENTERTAINMENT JOURNALISM

---

*Below is a list of links to select features, news stories, and guides I've written for GameRant, as well as the full text of two stories I penned independently on Medium. You can find a full list of GameRant articles under my byline at [gamerant.com/author/hank-whitson/](https://gamerant.com/author/hank-whitson/)*

### Features

**Final Fantasy 7 Remake Part 2 Needs to Fix One Big Criticism from the First**

[<https://gamerant.com/final-fantasy-7-remake-part-2-jrpg-trope-side-quests/>]

**Why Persona 5's Joker Wears Fake Glasses, Explained**

[[gamerant.com/persona-5-joker-fake-glasses-why-explained/](https://gamerant.com/persona-5-joker-fake-glasses-why-explained/)]

**Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order 2 Has a Cal Problem**

[[gamerant.com/star-wars-jedi-fallen-order-2-cal-kestis-character-arc/](https://gamerant.com/star-wars-jedi-fallen-order-2-cal-kestis-character-arc/)]

### News

**Sony Trademarks New PS5 DualSense Controller Slogan**

[[gamerant.com/ps5-dual-sense-slogan/](https://gamerant.com/ps5-dual-sense-slogan/)]

**Disco Elysium TV Series Announced**

[[gamerant.com/disco-elysium-tv-series-announced/](https://gamerant.com/disco-elysium-tv-series-announced/)]

**Olivia Munn in Talks to Join G4 Revival**

[[gamerant.com/olivia-munn-g4-revival/](https://gamerant.com/olivia-munn-g4-revival/)]

### Guides

**Marvel's Avengers: Best Builds for the Hulk**

[[gamerant.com/marvels-avengers-best-builds-hulk/](https://gamerant.com/marvels-avengers-best-builds-hulk/)]

**Ghost of Tsushima: Best Charm to Unlock First**

[[gamerant.com/ghost-of-tsushima-charm-best-inari-get-find-where/](https://gamerant.com/ghost-of-tsushima-charm-best-inari-get-find-where/)]

**Fortnite: How To Complete the N1 Punch Card**

[[gamerant.com/fortnite-n1-punch-card/](https://gamerant.com/fortnite-n1-punch-card/)]

---

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 3

---

## Medium Articles

### The Curious Non-Release of Granblue Fantasy

*Granblue Fantasy*, or GBF to fans, is a Japanese mobile role-playing game that boasts over 23 million players worldwide. Critics have praised the amount of freely available content, myriad upgrade mechanics, and the surprisingly deep battle system. Most of the game's menus and all of its narrative are completely translated into English as well, with excellent localization at that. Despite this, the title cannot be downloaded through the US iTunes or Google play stores. As a result, relatively few US gamers have heard of it.

This may seem like a perplexing move on the part of the game's developer and publisher, Cygames, since there is a voracious US market for what it has on offer. GBF is a "gacha" game; an entry in an increasingly crowded market that also includes *Fate Grand Order*, *Fire Emblem Heroes*, *Final Fantasy Brave Exvius*, and the recently released *Dragalia Lost*. Each of these titles is available from US digital storefronts and turning hefty profits despite fierce competition.

The defining feature of gacha games — named after the capsule toy dispensers seen in supermarkets — is actually a distinct kind of monetization model rather than thematic or mechanical genre. Rather than purchasing digital items outright, players buy premium currency which they may spend to acquire content (usually playable characters) through semi-randomized "draws," much like putting a quarter into a capsule toy machine and seeing what you get. This paradigm prevails beyond mobile gaming to. Gacha is a business strategy that is almost indistinguishable from western games that feature purchasable loot boxes, like Blizzard's *Overwatch* (or the latest beloved franchise to be corrupted by EA).

So why would a company go through the trouble of hiring translators, editors, and localizers for a game with more written content than many console RPGs, and neglect to make it available for broader audiences with a proven appetite?

Part of it is that Cygames has been burned once before. In 2012, they released the digital card game, *Rage of Bahamut*, and while it initially did well enough to top app charts in June of that year, by December 2015, interest had flagged and the company declared that supporting the game was unsustainable. Servers were ultimately shut down in February of 2016.

There are other obstacles preventing an occidental launch. Currently, both US and Japanese players are hosted on a single server, resulting in a healthy, large community that enjoys a fun fringe benefit — disparate time zones mean there is never a lull in activity. But if a US edition of the game was launched, a new backend might be necessary to accommodate transactions through the US app stores. And migrating players from the Japanese server would cannibalize the community, while building a completely new player base without the support of any of the existing English-speaking fans is a dubious proposition at best.

Furthermore, there is the question of voice acting. The Japanese title features hours of voiced content, featuring the talents of some notable seiyuu. This aspect of the title could be neglected in a US release to save costs — it wouldn't be the first unvoiced gacha on the market — but it may limit appeal, or be perceived as an inferior port. If the decision drew criticism from existing fans, that could be enough to torpedo word of mouth, which is key to standing out in the competitive mobile gaming market place.

Also, despite the language barriers, account set-up hurdles, and occasional technical troubles, GBF has a fairly active English following. The game *can* be downloaded and played on smart phones through a variety of work-arounds, or on Chrome and Safari. Even though certain menus and support text are in Japanese — like the ones required to purchase premium currency — the game's existing fans are dedicated enough to make it work, and their participation is still profitable without requiring the investment for a full English release.

All that said, GBF may still be coming across the Pacific in a more official capacity in the near future. Aniplex of America has released subtitled and dubbed editions of the 2017 anime adaptation on the Crunchyroll streaming service. And Cygames has had a strong promotional presence at several big gaming conventions, including Seattle's Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) West, and Anime Expo in Los Angeles, with booths featuring characters from the franchise.

Given the manifold issues involved with a port of the mobile game though, it seems more likely that these moves are intended to whet appetites (and gauge interest) for the potential release of a new game in the franchise: *Granblue Fantasy: Relink*. The forthcoming action RPG is currently being co-developed with Platinum Games, with some high-profile names attached to the project. Both Nobuo Uematsu, composer of *Final Fantasy* fame, and art director Hideo Minaba, have signed on.

Who knows what the future holds? A US release of *Relink* has yet to be announced, but if it hits our shores and sets the world ablaze, solving the technical hurdles associated with the mobile game may be worthwhile after all.

---

## **Saving the Ghost: Two Ways Hollywood Can Crack Anime Adaptations**

It should not surprise you to hear that the live action adaptation of *Ghost in the Shell* is awful. But it is awful to the extent that it raises a question: should Hollywood give up on anime?

You could write a film studies dissertation on all the ways the movie fell short, but I will try to be brief. White washing was the brightest red flag; a clear sign that the studios and suits involved were unwilling to take some risks in the service of their source material. I suspect the root of that problem (in this specific instance) is the way we approach adaptations. The be-all, end-all goal is to take something unique and broaden its base; make it palatable for the widest audience possible.

Will an Asian lead put some people off? We don't know (because we are terrified to try it), so let's put in a famous white star to hedge our box office bet. Is there nudity and extreme violence in the original that will prevent us from hitting that crucial PG-13? Nix the nipples, get rid of the gore. Is the movie "high concept," with hard-to-grasp philosophy and political themes? Have the characters speak slowly and carry big guns instead. Refer to the distinction between "Ghost" and "Shell" with ham-fisted, artless exposition. This kind of weapons-grade blandness pervades the script, direction, and performances.

Rupert Sanders' most characterful contribution to the movie was to have Scarlett Johansson walk as if she were a gorilla, stomping dourly from room to room, throwing shoulders slightly with every step.

The visual effects are impressive, and *Ghost* steals many of the original anime's most visually-striking scenes: the initial rooftop skydive, the optical camo fight in the flooded street, and the climactic spider-tank battle. But the evocative imagery is forced into an otherwise unremarkable revenge flick. What results is something devoid of personality, yet thoroughly artificial.

Artificiality can have its charm; Luc Besson manages to gleefully skip from one surreal set piece to another. But Besson's films always have a flagrant, manic disregard for reality, whereas Sanders' film is defined by its constraints. The source material is imprisoned, rather than expanded. The excessive exposition raises new questions that were non-issues in the original. How did Makoto attain the rank of major in a year? Who taught her how to fight? As 'property' of Hanka Robotics, who does she belong to at the end of the film?

But again, the movie being bad is not news. The question is: what would we have Hollywood do? Movie business is still a business after all, and the goal behind blockbuster adaptations is not to appease the narrow band of fans who adored the original cult classic. The goal is to put as many butts in seats as possible. So how can we tap this rich entertainment vein and bring it to the masses?

The obvious answer is to find a director who reveres the source material, and understands the mode of storytelling. In anime, the journey is often more important than the closure that concludes it. Sanders' film ends with the death of the obvious villain, whereas the original film finishes on an uncertain note, where Kusanagi has just merged ghosts with the Puppet Master, possibly compromising her identity in the process.

Ideally, this director would take the appropriate risks with mature content (a move that already paid dividends with *Deadpool* and *Logan*), and higher concept themes (an area that television is dominating with shows like *Westworld*, and *Stranger Things*). And at the very least, they would cast people in races appropriate to the film's region and narrative. It is a point that has been belabored greatly, but it is not just a matter of seeing more diversity in Hollywood (which is a reasonable concern in itself). A Japanese cast, and a Japanese lead in particular, add authenticity and coherence to a story set in Japan.

Even if we did find that magic director, I think the best we could hope for is a movie that is very much like Disney's new *Beauty in the Beast*. A faithful reproduction would at least convey some of the appeal from the original, which may be enough to satisfy critics. Word of mouth from established and pleased fans would grow the base; and many of the ideas considered cult and obscure in the original are clearer now. Unquestionably, it would be superior to the film we got. But speaking frankly, the live-action, near-shot-for-shot approach to remakes is a practice that reeks of cynicism. A levy on nostalgia. Remakes always beg a question: what has been adapted, and why was it adapted in the first place?

If we truly want to capture the spirit of anime in films while migrating it to Western tastes, we should look to the examples of films like *The Matrix*, *Pacific Rim*, and *Inception*. Each is a blockbuster with Hollywood's signature big budget magic, and each was strongly influenced by Japanese anime; the original *Ghost in the Shell*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and *Paprika* respectively. The concepts that are being explored are what carry over, rather than the aesthetics. To put it tritely, the focus in these films is on the Ghost.

Many of the challenges facing straight-forward adaptations remain in this approach, and some are more pronounced. Stories re-imagined through the lens of occidental norms will gravitate even more strongly towards white casting conventions. That needs to change. And for that to happen, we need to learn how to tell stories where a character's race and gender can matter without coming across as fulfilling diversity quotas, or being completely superficial. There are other ways to explore foreign locales than the tired "white savior

in a strange land" narrative; the most potent and obvious being a lead who personifies a foreign

---

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 5

---

setting while managing to tell a story with universal appeal.

After a worrying trailer for Netflix's take on Death Note, my hopes for future anime adaptations are low. The medium simply doesn't have the traction to warrant a Beauty and the Beast budget yet. But I cannot wait to see how the next generation of western directors — the kids growing up on imported manga, Toonami, JRPGs, and Crunchy Roll subscriptions — bring the soul of anime to the silver screen through original narratives.

## COPYWRITING - SOCIAL MEDIA

---

*These are Facebook posts and tweets I have written for medical practices and healthcare professionals through the Patient Pop growth platform. Each was written to follow one of three branded formulas: A) branded posts highlighting client services, B) interest posts pertaining to the practice's specialty, and C) tweets with useful or interesting medical facts.*

### Branded Post 1 – Pacifica Care of Suncoast

Are Your Kids on the Naughty List? Anxiety May be to Blame

[[www.pacificacaresuncoast.com/blog/how-childhood-anxiety-leads-to-disruptive-behavior?utm\\_source=googleplus&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=Social\\_SEO](http://www.pacificacaresuncoast.com/blog/how-childhood-anxiety-leads-to-disruptive-behavior?utm_source=googleplus&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=Social_SEO)]

Anxiety doesn't always present itself in an obvious way; especially when it comes to children. Kids who have been getting in fights, or withdrawing from social situations may be exhibiting an exaggerated fight or flight reaction. Similarly, symptoms of obsessive or attention-seeking behavior may be the result of a need for greater reassurance.

If your children need help with chronic anxiety, call our offices now to make an appointment.

A cum laude graduate of University of Missouri, trained at the Howard University College of Medicine with a specialty in psychiatry from University of Florida Jacksonville, Dr. Tait is exceptionally trained and has served Punta Gorda, Florida, for over 5 years. She views her patients as valued collaborators in their own treatment and offers personalized, compassionate care. Call today at 941.347.8447 to make an appointment.

#PuntaGorda #Psychiatry #MentalHealth #Anxiety #ChildCare #Misbehavior

### Branded Post 2 – Dr. Marc L. Ladenheim

So. Cal's Diabetic Treatment, Counseling, and Insulin Management Experts

[[www.marcladenheim.com/services/diabetes-management?utm\\_source=googleplus&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=Social\\_SEO](http://www.marcladenheim.com/services/diabetes-management?utm_source=googleplus&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=Social_SEO)]

Diabetes is always hardest to deal with over the holidays, when time is short and sweet temptations are lying around every corner. We can help you develop coping strategies that keep your insulin levels healthy without disrupting your lifestyle or spoiling the fun of the season. From medications to exercise goals and special menu planning, Dr. Ladenheim will help you have a memorable, happy holiday season.

Check out our diabetes Q&A here, and book with us online now.

Dr. Marc L. Ladenheim is a certified cardiologist with over 30 years of experience treating patients suffering from internal pathologies and heart conditions of every kind. He is proud to serve Burbank and the surrounding Southern California area, and it is his passion to help his patients live longer, fuller, and healthier lives. To schedule an appointment, visit us online or call us at 818.617.2846.

#Burbank #Hollywood #LosAngeles #Cardiology #HeartHealth #Diabetes #InsulinManagement

---



# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 6

---

## Interest Post 1 – Georgia Hand, Shoulder, and Elbow

8 Bone & Joint Friendly Tips About Virtual Reality

[[www.bonejoint.net/news-events/blog/eight-things-you-should-know-about-virtual-reality/](http://www.bonejoint.net/news-events/blog/eight-things-you-should-know-about-virtual-reality/)]

Dabbling in Virtual Reality for the first time this December? Be careful! Headsets that block your seeing and hearing abilities paired with games that demand full-body movement are a simple recipe for serious injuries. In addition to hitting objects that you can't see, not being able to see your arms also makes it easier to tax your joints! #Atlanta #Marietta #VirtualReality #InjuryPrevention #HandCare #ShoulderCare #ElbowCare

## Interest Post 2 – Dr. Geeta Vaze

7 Ways Storytellers Screw Up Medicine

[[www.sgu.edu/blog/medical/medical-my](http://www.sgu.edu/blog/medical/medical-my)]

Hospitals' fast-paced, high-stakes atmospheres make them a natural backdrop for compelling drama. But sometimes writers get a little carried away with their portrayals of doctors and nurses. These fibs are all in good fun, and make for exciting stories, but if you're curious to know the facts behind the fiction, St. George's University has a list of seven common medical myths you'll see on TV. #MedicalMyths #DocDrama #HuntingtonValley #Storytelling #FactVsFiction

## Tweet 1 – Pacifica Care of Suncoast

There are two halves to drug abuse! Opioid dependency refers to your body's physical need a substance, whereas addiction refers to the mental drive to continue abusing it despite your better judgment. #PuntaGorda #OpioidAbuse #DrugDependency #DrugAddiction

## Tweet 2 - Perio Health Professionals

Bone regeneration is a grafting procedure to treat extensive damage from periodontal disease. A bone graft provides support and structure to achieve greater regrowth than would normally be possible. #Houston #Periodontics #DentalGraft #BoneRegeneration #OralSurgery

## COPYWRITING - BRANDED CONTENT & INSTRUCTIONS

---

*Here are some social posts, instructions, and copy written for Loot Crate's reward program and the brands featured in their crates.*

### Secret Order of Keys Facebook Group Mission Statement

We unite Looters through a shared love of pop culture and explore new frontiers of fandom with puzzles and challenges! Adventure is our calling, our creed is having fun, and our society is Looters everywhere. We're calling all you sci-fi savants and fantasy fanatics, gaming gurus and anime aficionados, to explore the multiverse of pop culture and unlock your loot's full potential.

### Facebook Intro Posts

**General:** Calling all Looters! The Secret Order of Keys, a fraternity of fandom for exclusively for Core Crate subscribers, is now live. What does The Order do? Each month, your crate will be packed with mysteries and puzzles that will challenge you to use your loot in inventive ways. Completing a challenge will earn you achievements and completing every challenge will unlock a piece of bonus loot in your next Core Crate.

**Customer Support PSA:** Having trouble with a puzzle? Run into an issue? We're here for you. Contact support with your question for hints and help. But keep in mind, assistance *will* contain spoilers for your crate! If you

---

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 7

---

want to be surprised, wait until you receive your loot before seeking assistance. And remember: your fellow looters are your greatest resource!

## Optimus Prime Puzzle Blurbs – Alter-Ego Crate

**You Can Learn a Lot from an Autobot:** Optimus Prime has appeared in many forms throughout the years, but his leadership remains constant. No matter what identity you adopt, it is crucial to stick to a personal code. That is the key to becoming something more than meets the eye.

**Switching Gears:** Alter Egos are about more than disguises or secret weapons. Their key advantage is adaptability. Prime's strength is not defined by battle mode or vehicle mode alone, but the ability to switch between the two.

## Jekyll and Hyde Puzzle Blurb – Alter-Ego Crate

**Control:** In the end, Mr. Hyde's dark passions consumed the brilliant Dr. Jekyll. His sad tale demonstrates the dangers of alter egos. Staying safe is ultimately a matter of moderation. Let your secret self run free, but never surrender complete control over who you are.

## Rick and Morty Portal Puzzle Blurbs – Animate Crate

**Sci-Fi Sight Seeing:** The shortest distance between two points is a line—if you're a sucker. Folding space-time so that point A and point B merge is far more efficient, and it looks a lot cooler. It's not only the fastest way to travel; it's the only way to explore the entire multiverse. Get over linear thinking, and you'll be surprised by how much your world grows.

**Side Effects Include:** There are risks to traveling with portals. Each dimension has its own perils, and side effects include headaches, nausea, male pattern baldness, halitosis, palpitations, loss of appetite, sudden weight gain, and the occasional, hard-to-explain run-in with interdimensional and/or trans-galactic law enforcement. But what are you gonna do? Stick around on *Earth* your whole life? Please.

## Secret Order of Keys Insert Foreword and Afterword – Guardian Crate

**Foreword:** Whether they are bringing balance to the elements, defending Earth's Last City, or patrolling the galaxy for threats, Guardians are the keepers of keys. They hold the line against evil, open ways to new worlds, and serve as guides who reveal hidden knowledge. Each member of the Secret Order of Keys shares those abilities and duties. So what are you waiting for? Adventure calls!

**Afterword:** As this guide illustrates, keys can take many forms. To conquer these puzzles, you will need to master every tool at your disposal, from blasters to alien alphabets. At its core, progressing through the order is not about unlocking doors, but seeing the secret side of things. Good luck, looter. More puzzles are on the horizon.

## ACADEMIC WRITING - MASTER'S THESIS EXCERPT

---

*This is the second chapter of my master's thesis, "The Interpretive Spiral," where I present the focal point of my studies; an analytical rubric that can be used to structure literary close readings and interpretations of video games.*

### 2.1 A Rubric for Analyzing Videogame Interpretation

The Interpretive Spiral is a rubric to analyze the interpretive process in videogames. My model divides the game being analyzed into three inter-related categories: The Mechanic, The Thematic and The Affective. It also analyzes player interaction at four different levels of interaction: Pre-play, Fundamental Play, Secondary Play, and Tertiary play. It is designed to analyze the sort of interpretations that are inspired by videogame artifacts themselves, as opposed to the biases and experiences carried by individual players.

The greatest challenge to analyzing the interpretive process is that interpretation is an inherently subjective practice. Two people applying the spiral to the same game will most likely produce slightly different

---

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 8

results, particularly in the Affective Category, and at the Tertiary Level of play, which are both defined by metaphor-making. That said, each videogame, regardless of its complexity, has certain foundational features that will structure the play and interpretation of every player who interacts with it. *Civilization V* for example, is a game with multiple victory conditions that can be played in a multitude of different ways, but every type of play will involve common elements; such as building cities, negotiating with other civilizations and upgrading units and technology. Each unique type of play also utilizes the same graphical engine, textures, music and menu styles. Comprehensive interpretations of the game, which is to say interpretations that account for the game's mechanics, thematic content, and the affects that they give rise to, will be shaped by those common factors.

As Arsenault and Perron observe (p.120), play occurs in an interactive loop between the game (including hardware and software) and the player. Arsenault and Perron propose a 4-step loop that describes user interaction:

- From the game's database, the game's algorithm draws the 3-D objects and textures, and plays animations, sound files and finds everything else that it needs to represent the game state.
- The game outputs these to the screen, speakers or other peripherals. The gamer uses his perceptual skills (bottom-up) to see, hear and/or feel what is happening.
- The gamer analyzes the data at hand through his broader anterior knowledge (in top-down fashion) of narrative conventions, generic competence, gaming repertoire, etc. to make a decision.
- The gamer uses his implementation skills (such as hand-eye coordination) to react to the game event, and the game recognizes this input and factors it into the change of the game state.

These steps are problematic for several reasons. The first two steps are at once too specific, (referring to 3-D models and textures excludes sprite-based games) and too broad ("everything else necessary to build the game state," "other peripherals,"). Furthermore, some of the steps seem to arbitrarily combine machine and player actions that occur sequentially rather than simultaneously. The most problematic feature of this 4 step loop however, is that it does not account for changes in players' behavior as they learn, master and interpret games. Players analyze data differently when they are learning the game as opposed to when they have played a title for the 200<sup>th</sup> time. My model features several different loops, with different actions occurring at different levels of involvement.

On the following page, I present a chart that provides a complete overview of the Interpretive Spiral. Italicized processes refer to actions taken by the player, while un-italicized terms represent actions performed by the game and the system.

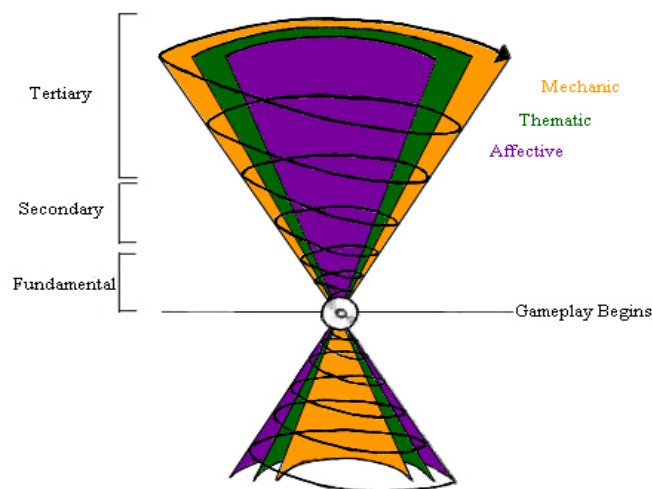


Figure 2.1: The Interpretive Spiral: Categorical Structure



# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 9

The Interpretive Spiral (Overview)			
Category	<b>Mechanic:</b> Software (Code, Game Mode), Hardware (Platform Specs, Controller), Mechanics (Rules, Constants, Game Objects).	<b>Thematic:</b> Diegesis, Graphics (sprites, 3D models, textures), Narrative (text, cinema-scenes), Music, Sound Effects, Menu Design.	<b>Affective:</b> Emotional Response, Experiential Parallels, Dynamics, Gamé
Level of Interpretation			
<b>Tertiary &amp; Post-Play</b> (Translation Phase)	Instantiation, <i>Prediction &amp; Reaction</i> , Feedback, <i>Reflexive Evaluation &amp; Comparison</i>	Instantiation, <i>Perception</i> , Feedback, <i>Reflection &amp; Analysis</i>	Instantiation, <i>Prediction &amp; Reaction</i> , Prescription, <i>Translation</i>
<b>Secondary</b> (Performance Phase)	Instantiation, <i>Assessment &amp; Reaction</i> , Feedback, <i>Evaluation &amp; Anticipation</i>	Instantiation, <i>Perception</i> , Feedback, <i>Evaluation &amp; Anticipation</i>	Instantiation, <i>Assessment &amp; Reaction</i> , Prescription, <i>Evaluation &amp; Anticipation</i>
<b>Fundamental</b> (Learning Phase)	Instantiation, <i>Experimentation</i> , Feedback, <i>Evaluation &amp; Anticipation</i>	Instantiation, <i>Perception</i> , Feedback, <i>Evaluation &amp; Anticipation</i>	Instantiation, <i>Experimentation</i> , Prescription, <i>Evaluation &amp; Anticipation</i>
<b>Pre-play</b> (Anticipatory Phase)	<i>Anticipation</i>	<i>Anticipation</i>	<i>Anticipation</i>

Generally, the interpretive process flows through my model from left to right and from bottom to top. Again, recognizing the inherent subjectivity of interpretation and play, this is only a general guideline. Some processes, like the player's Perception of thematic content, and his Experimentation with the game's mechanics will occur (or at least appear to occur), simultaneously. There are also times where players will still be experimenting well into the Secondary Level of play. This is especially true of titles that introduce new mechanics and game object types as play progresses—a process I refer to as **Escalation**. Consequently, the divisions presented between each level and categories are relative as opposed to absolute.

I realize that the distinctions between these processes, particularly Assessment and Evaluation, may be initially confusing. Both are analytical processes that modify and structure a player's performance in game. Assessment, however, is a forward-thinking process used to understand the ludic implications of the current gamestate and strategize accordingly, in the sense of "assessing a situation." Evaluation, by contrast, relies upon hindsight, and ascribes values to completed changes in the gamestate, answering questions like "Did I assess the situation correctly?" and "Did I accomplish my intended objective?"

In the following section, I define each of the processes and explain what they entail at each level of the interpretive spiral in greater detail.

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 10

## 2.2 Terminology and Processes

The three structural categories of games can be considered the foundation for my model. The general critical consensus among game designers (Hunicke, LeBlanc, Zubek 2004) and game researchers (Begy, Arsenualt and Perron) is that gameplay is the foundation of experiencing games, and **Mechanics** are the foundation gameplay. Mechanics are comprised of computer code and algorithms in the game's software which are translated to the game screen by the game's hardware, or platform. I use the category Mechanics to discuss game objects (discrete, interactive objects that exist in the game world), essential game actions (running and jumping, shooting, camera control), purely ludic types of feedback (scoring, player death, spawning) and controls. In short, Mechanics are the machines, math, logic and rules that make gameplay possible.

The **Thematic** category of videogames describes the audiovisual and narrative elements of a game. Begy states that the audiovisual category of games encompasses "...All of the visual and audio aspects of a game, which include the game's fictional elements, as well as some non-diegetic and paratextual elements directly connected to the game." My Thematic layer also accounts for the narrative conventions and storytelling structures (chapters, levels) that shape the play experience and help establish experiential parallels to other activities beyond gameplay.

These parallel activities are recognized in the third structural category of games, which I borrow from Begy to refer to as the **Affective**. The emotional responses that are provoked by both Mechanics and Thematic content and the experiential parallels suggested or invoked by playing the game are all elements of the affective level. The content of the Affective Layer is actualized as player's mental maps of a game system. To describe these mental maps, or schemas, that are created during the interpretive process, I borrow Arsenualt and Perron's term; **Gamé** which is to be read in the same way as the algebraic concept of prime. The Gamé is the mental model of a game system that exists in the player's mind. It does not only account for a game's mechanics, but also the ways that the game makes him feel. A Gamé is both a playbook for and a thematic interpretation of the game it is based on.

The first level of the Interpretive Spiral, which may be thought of as "level 0," describes the interpretation that occurs before the player even begins playing the game. This **Pre-Play Level** is solely based on the player's expectations which in turn, may be based on anything from promotional materials, to word of mouth, to expectations for future, as-of-yet non-existent installments in a game franchise. I may begin to anticipate *Resident Evil 7* by reading a review of a trailer of the forthcoming *Resident Evil 6*. By writing that sentence, I have already started creating my Gamé for the not-yet-existent (but inevitable) *Resident Evil 7*.

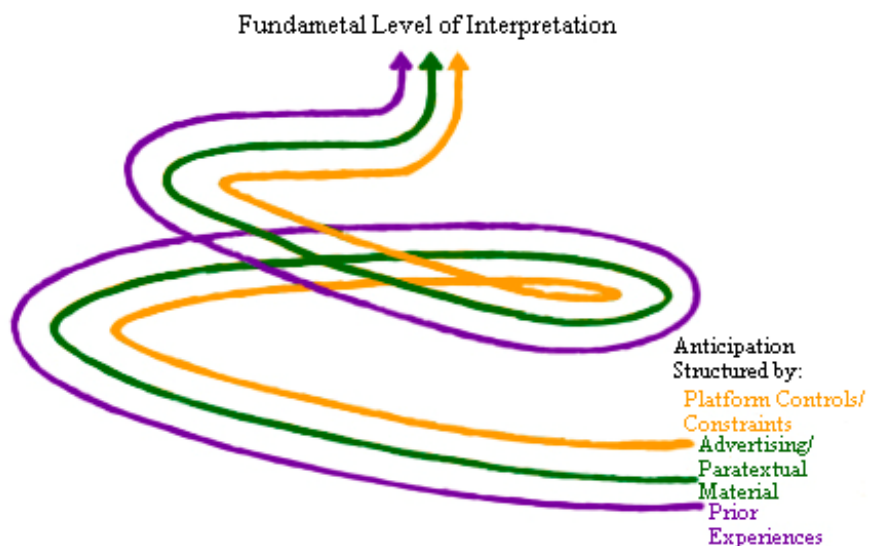


Figure 2.2: The Interpretive Spiral: Pre-play Level Process Loop

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 11

The Interpretive Spiral: Pre-Play Level		
Affective	Thematic	Mechanics
<i>Anticipation:</i> Player begins conceiving the emotional and experiential dynamics of a Gamé based on his prior experiences with the game.	<i>Anticipation:</i> Player begins conceiving the diegetic and aesthetic aspects of a Gamé based the manual, promotional materials, prior installments of the franchise, etc.	<i>Anticipation:</i> Player begins conceiving the mechanical aspects of a Gamé based on the game's platform, controller and prior installments of the franchise

Interpretation begins with anticipation, and it can be considered the conclusion of each interpretive feedback loop, at each level of the spiral save for the last. It entails the creation of expectations, and the player's projection of those anticipations onto the game artifact. When old expectations are discarded in favor of new and or refined expectations, a single interpretive loop concludes.

It is important to note that the pre-play spiral progresses in an inverted fashion from the rest of the interpretive spiral. The player begins creating his Gamé by drawing from his own experiences, memories and emotional associations that are relevant to the title being interpreted. If he has played other games in the same genre or the same franchise his memories will provide the base of his speculative Gamé. As such, the affective layer envelops the preplay process, just as the mechanic layer envelops the Foundational, Secondary and Tertiary Levels of play. As the player consumes promotional material (commercials, posters, etc) and paratextual materials (game manual, maps of the game world) 'funnels' the player's Gamé toward the actual experience of videogame play by hinting at the game's content. Platform considerations, like platform's available control inputs and graphical capabilities narrow the player's expectations even further.

When gameplay begins, the mechanical encompasses all the other interpretive acts. The game's thematic content is accessed by participating in and altering the gamestate, and the game's affective content emerges from the combination of mechanics and thematic content. Instead of narrowing in on gameplay, the interpretive spiral begins to expand outward through gameplay. This change marks the beginning of the Fundamental Level of interpretation.

This level begins with the game process of **Instantiation**, which is the procedural generation of a game state. This process occurs in all three categories of the game simultaneously; the player is presented with game objects, the objects are "skinned" according to the diegesis, and their combination establishes an affect (tense, light-hearted, oppressive, humorous). This affect is fairly simple before the player begins to participate, but becomes increasingly complex as the spiral continues.

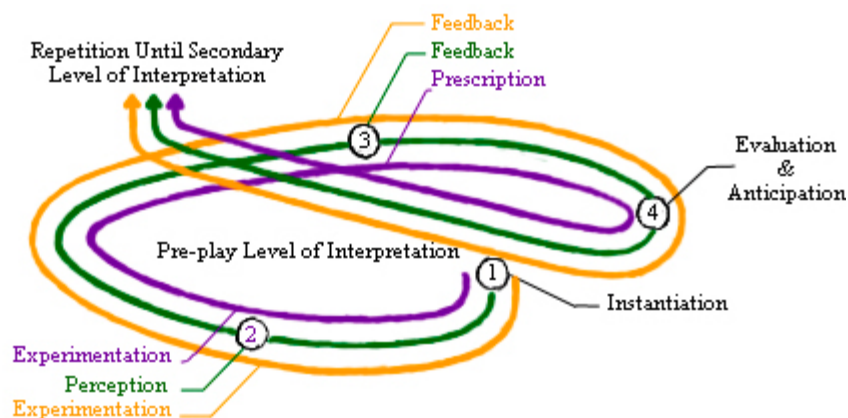


Figure 2.3: The Interpretive Spiral: Fundamental Level Process Loop

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 12

The Interpretive Spiral: Fundamental Level		
Mechanics	Thematic	Affective
<p><b>Instantiation:</b> The game creates the game state according to rules and mechanics.</p> <p><b>Experimentation:</b> The player reacts to the gamestate, identifying game objects and learning the rules and mechanics through experimentation.</p> <p><b>Feedback:</b> The game registers the player's actions and alters the gamestate accordingly. Escalation (modification of mechanics and/or introduction of new game objects) may occur where applicable.</p> <p><b>Evaluation &amp; Anticipation:</b> The player determines whether the game conformed to his expectations of the mechanics and modifies them accordingly.</p>	<p><b>Instantiation:</b> The game creates its diegesis using audiovisuals, text, cut-scenes, etc.</p> <p><b>Perception:</b> The player becomes accustomed to the graphical motifs, music, sound effects and explores the game's diegesis. The player uses his various literacies to comprehend the game's narrative (if applicable).</p> <p><b>Feedback:</b> The game registers player's actions and alters the diegesis accordingly. Narrative progress may occur, if applicable.</p> <p><b>Evaluation &amp; Anticipation:</b> The player determines whether his narrative expectations were met, and predicts what will happen next.</p>	<p><b>Instantiation:</b> The game's thematic content and mechanics invoke certain emotions and modes of thought.</p> <p><b>Experimentation:</b> Curiosity for both the game system and the diegesis drive the player's early progression through the game.</p> <p><b>Prescription:</b> The game's mechanical and Thematic feedback adds value to certain actions in gameplay.</p> <p><b>Evaluation &amp; Anticipation:</b> The player begins developing a mental model of the game, a or Gamé. This Gamé serves as a list of strategies, and a distinct interpretation of the game's narrative and affect.</p>

At the Fundamental Level of play, this participation is entails to player processes: **Experimentation** and **Perception**. Experimentation is exactly what it sounds like, and consists of the player testing the controls and game objects to see what effects he can inscribe on the gamestate. This process is informed, but not entirely structured by a player's capabilities to play the game, which I refer to as **Ludic Literacies**. Different videogame genres, which feature different control schemes and require different skills, require different literacies. Questions of interaction like "What does the A button do?" "What happens when I hit this object" and "How does the camera work?" are resolved through experimentation. Recognizing and comprehending Thematic content relies on a player's Perception, as opposed to experimentation. Again, this process is informed by the player's literacies (visual, textual, auditory), but not by his skills. Experimentation again occurs in the affective category, because at curiosity is guiding the act of meaning-making.

The computer answers the player's experimentation with **Feedback**. Ludic feedback may result in ludic changes like a restriction or modification of a player's available actions, or a change in score. Ludic feedback almost always results in new mechanical instantiation, but it may also be exclusively thematic. Pressing the button that honks a car horn in *Halo: Combat Evolved*, or *Grand Theft Auto III* for example, will not have any effect on the game objects that create the gamestate, but it will play a horn sound, deepening the player's conception of the game's diegesis.

In the affective category, the mechanic and thematic feedback coalesce in the game process of **Prescription**. The results of player actions prescribe certain behavior. There is a degree of subjectivity involved

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 13

in Prescription. In *Grand Theft Auto III*, random acts of violence are both rewarded (with money) and penalized (by summoning law enforcement). Players who simply want to play as anarchistic criminals are rewarded with money and the thrill of police pursuit. Players who want to see how the narrative progresses however, are prescribed to keep a lower profile, as they are unable to start new missions (which will reward them with new narrative content) while they are being pursued by police.

Prescription gives way to the final player processes in the fundamental loop: **Evaluation & Anticipation**. Evaluation entails a player reflecting on his experience of the game. Did the game behave as expected? Did the game's feedback suggest a value to the player's actions, by rewarding him or penalizing him? The answers to these questions inevitably shape the player's anticipation of future play, and the cycle will begin a new, either with Instantiation (if there was a change in the gamestate) or further Experimentation (if there was no noticeable change in the gamestate).

The transition from the Fundamental to the Secondary Level of Interpretation can be defined by the shift from experimentation to informed decision-making, which is **Assessment & Reaction**. New Instantiations will likely result in Escalation—the introduction of new mechanics and game objects. The player's developing Gamé will allow him to analyze these new features more accurately. If he has experimented with several different power-up game objects, he will like recognize a new one and know how to react to it appropriately.

**Perception** remains constant in the thematic category, as no new skills or literacies are required to receive audiovisual content, though increased familiarity with the diegesis, narrative and theme will allow the player to **Evaluate & Anticipate** the game's narrative progression more accurately. Learning more about characters allows the player to predict their actions more accurately. Even if players are deceived, they have more narrative information to base their opinions on. Predicting narrative behavior is more dependent on player's familiarity with various storytelling conventions than with their literacies or gameplay conventions.

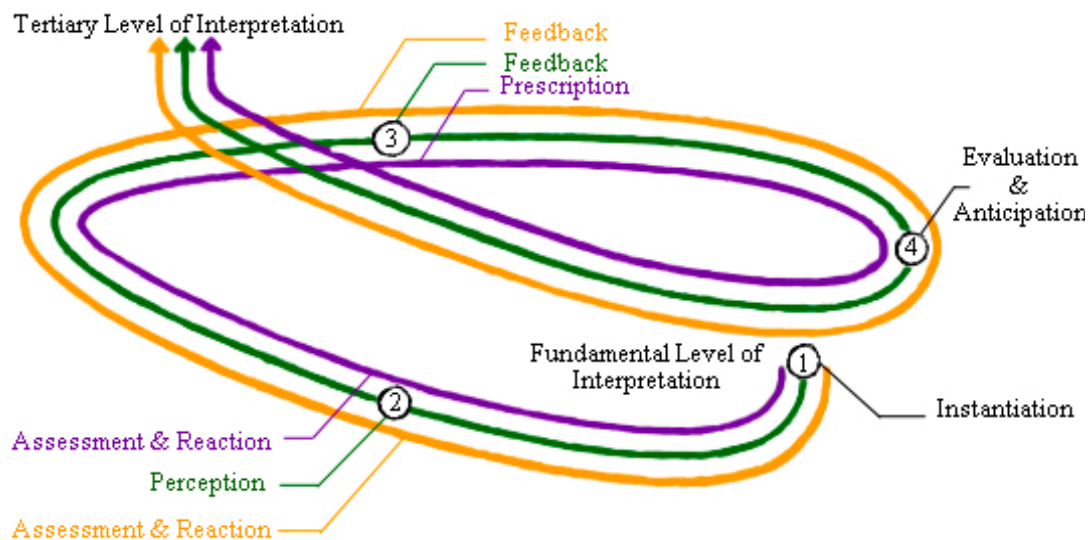


Figure 2.4: The Interpretive Spiral: Secondary Level Process Loop



# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 14

The Interpretive Spiral: Secondary Level		
Mechanics	Thematic	Affective
<p><b>Instantiation:</b> The game presents the player with a new gamestate, though Escalation likely occurs.</p> <p><b>Assessment &amp; Reaction:</b> The player's Gamé now allows him to make informed analyses and reactions to changes in the gamestate.</p> <p><b>Feedback:</b> Same as above.</p> <p><b>Evaluation &amp; Anticipation:</b> The player recognizes specific dynamics that shape gameplay. He also learns to assess his own performance independent of the game's feedback.</p>	<p><b>Instantiation:</b> The diegesis continues to grow and is fleshed out by new sounds, images and story.</p> <p><b>Perception:</b> The player continues to explore the diegesis and narrative and becomes familiar with audiovisual motifs</p> <p><b>Feedback:</b> Same as above, the narrative progress will almost inevitably occur (if the game features a narrative).</p> <p><b>Evaluation &amp; Anticipation:</b> The player has a more developed understanding of the story, allowing for more accurate predictions.</p>	<p><b>Instantiation:</b> Changes to the gamestate and diegesis present the player with new affects</p> <p><b>Assessment &amp; Reaction:</b> The player encounters a wide range of situational dynamics caused by various combinations of the gamestate and diegesis.</p> <p><b>Prescription:</b> The player is exposed to a wider variety of prescriptions, or existing prescriptions are imposed with greater specificity.</p> <p><b>Evaluation &amp; Anticipation:</b> The player's Gamé is sufficiently advanced to begin anticipating new gameplay experiences.</p>

**Feedback**, as a hard-coded process, remains consistent with the game's programming. Even if a tremendous deal of escalation occurs, offering a wide and disparate variety of experiences, "it is the game's space of possibility that expands, and not its design" (Arsenault and Perron, 116). New **Prescriptions** do arise in the affective category based on the player's growing body of experience. While conforming to one prescribed course of behavior, the game's feedback may present a new enemy or obstacle that forces the player to reconsider his tactics. Or, a player may discover a more efficient way to pursue old prescriptions.

As the player's Gamé expands, so does his ability to **evaluate and anticipate** the game's mechanics. More significantly, the player begins to extend the evaluation process to his own performance. He begins to understand what constitutes "effective" play and recognizes his own mistakes more readily. He will also begin to purposefully, and self-consciously modify his Gamé to include specific tactics.

In the affective category, the player's Gamé becomes sufficiently advanced that he may begin to predict experiences he has yet to encounter. After playing a snowy world in Mario, the player may anticipate a volcanic world. More obviously, a player who has progressed to level 7 in *Tetris*, and experienced speed increases at each level, will likely anticipate further speed increases.

Before continuing, it is important to note that not all players participate in the Tertiary Level of interpretation. Just as it is possible to read a book without developing a critical reading of the text, it is possible to play a game without a comprehensive reflection on what a game's experience entails and signifies. Engaging a game at the Tertiary Level entails a certain degree of meta-level extra-referential thinking that is blissfully not-essential for enjoying, or even understanding games. One does not need to appreciate the links between gladiatorial combat and football to appreciate and comprehend the Super Bowl or to play a game of touch

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 15

football in the front yard. That said, those metaphorical connections will become increasingly apparent to fans who become more deeply involved with the game.

**Instantiation** is largely unchanged from the Secondary Level of interpretation, except that all instances of Escalation have likely concluded. At this level, the player has seen all, or almost all, of the game's new tricks. No new game objects, or rules are introduced. Just as it is common for people conducting close-readings on literature to re-read books, it is common for players to re-play game narratives. They may replay the entire game, or, if the game allows for it, through save-states or other modes, they may only replay their favorite parts.

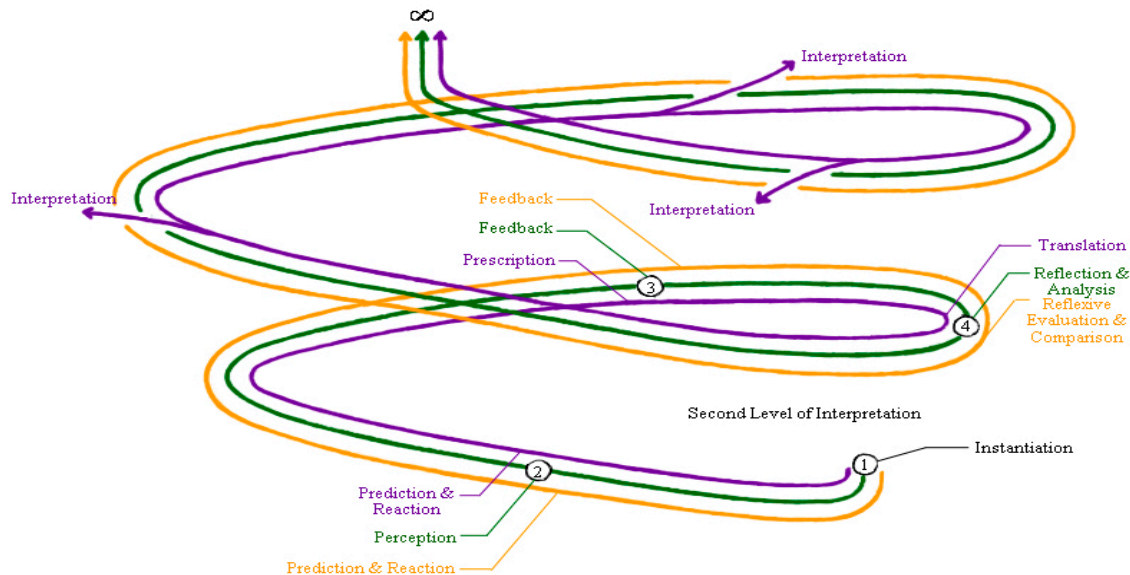


Figure 2.5: The Interpretive Spiral: Tertiary Level Process Loop

The Interpretive Spiral: Tertiary Level		
Mechanics	Thematic	Affective
<p><b>Instantiation:</b> Mechanical Escalation concludes.</p> <p><b>Prediction &amp; Reaction:</b> The player's highly developed Gamé allows him to accurately predict most non-randomized changes to the gamestate.</p> <p><b>Feedback:</b> same as above.</p> <p><b>Reflexive Evaluation &amp; Comparison:</b> The player reflexively evaluates his own performance during gameplay, and reflexively compares other activities to his gameplay experience.</p>	<p><b>Instantiation:</b> Same as above, though the player has likely completed a game's narrative or structural progression at least once.</p> <p><b>Perception:</b> The player is intimately familiar with the game's diegesis, audiovisual motifs and structure.</p> <p><b>Feedback:</b> Same as above.</p> <p><b>Reflection:</b> The player can comprehensively analyze the game's diegesis and look back at the significance of certain isolated elements.</p>	<p><b>Instantiation:</b> Escalation and narrative progression have concluded. Player may replay specific instances of gameplay for purposes of reflection, analysis and enjoyment.</p> <p><b>Prediction &amp; Reaction:</b> The player has internalized most of the game's affects.</p> <p><b>Prescription:</b> The player has encountered all of the game's normal prescriptions.</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> The player can readily recognize parallels between his Gamé and other experiences.</p>

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 16

---

Consequently, the player will begin to rely upon his prior experiences and Gamé to guide his actions, as opposed to looking at the game's signifiers. **Assessment and Reaction** gives way to **Prediction and Reaction**. The player's Gamé is not necessarily perfect; such a thing is almost impossible, especially for very complicated games. While the player will not always predict things correctly, he will be right most of the time. **Perception** largely remains constant from the prior level, though the player is now intimately familiar with the title's diegesis, audiovisual motifs, and narrative. The player's interpretation of certain songs, sound effects and graphical symbols will carry additional emotional significance based on the player's history with the game.

**Feedback** and **Prescription**, like instantiation, are now largely 'fixed' phenomena that the player is familiar with. The player has experienced all, or most, of the game's normal prescribed behaviors.

Since the player is so familiar with the game at this state, the **Anticipation** process disappears in each category of the spiral. In the mechanical category of this level, the player no longer needs to 'anticipate' the game because he is so familiar with it. He knows how enemies will behave and what obstacles exist. These predictions are not trivial or transparent, but must be achieved through considerable practice.

In the mechanical category, he still **Evaluates** his own performances. In fact, his knowledge of the game likely renders such self-assessment inescapable. Instead of anticipating, the player begins to **Reflexively Compare** his experience of the game to other experiences.

This will cause the player to find parallels between his experience of play and other unrelated activities. The player may transpose the experience of waiting for an I-block in *Tetris* onto the act of hoping for a specific card in poker, or searching for a specific puzzle piece when constructing a jig-saw puzzle. Both of these parallels are imperfect, of course. The poker example only accounts for waiting and the semi-random game object generation, and the puzzle example only accounts for the spatial-fitting aspect of the I-block.

In the Thematic category, **Anticipation** and **Evaluation** gives way to **Reflection**. This allows players to consider discrete elements of the game as individual parts and aspects of a comprehensive whole. This is the same sort of process that occurs in the close reading of texts and movies.

The relationship between **Reflexive Comparison** and **Reflection** is similar to that of **Assessment** and **Evaluation**. They are both meaning-making processes, but the former pre-emptively attempts to make metaphorical connections by imposing the game onto other activities, while the latter recognizes connections based on experiences. When these processes combine in the affective category, **Translation** occurs. Translation can be thought of as affective metaphor making, and it allows the player to accurately connect his experience of play to other domains. In order for an interpretation of a game to be comprehensive it must be translatable to other experiences. I do not mean to imply that the game must correspond to a single other experience or concept. In fact truly successful and unique games often can only be described through translations that include several different experiences. I will demonstrate examples of Translation with each of the three main titles I analyze.

Other processes that may occur during any level of the Interpretive Spiral include **Indexical** and **Subversive** practices. **Indexical** practices include consulting walkthroughs, reading articles such as reviews or interviews with a games creator, and playing other titles in a game series. Games are capable of encouraging indexical activities through references, but these references are not essential for the interpretive process. **Subversive** practices can include playing a game in a way that deliberately runs contrary to the designer's apparent intentions. One obvious behavior that can be both Indexical and Subversive, is cheating. Games often send players to the internet if they get stuck, or even frustrated. This is not an essential aspect of videogame play or interpretation however, and as such it is not included in my model.

---

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 17

---

In Chapter 6, I demonstrate that purely subversive forms of play are most likely to occur during the Tertiary Level of interpretation, and they can be modeled with a separate application of the Interpretive Spiral. Even less than cheating, they are not essential to the process of interpretation, and as such, they are not included in the Interpretive Spiral. Other subversive practices, like modifying the code in the game's software (modding), exploiting existing bugs and glitches in the game software, and repurposing the game's software as a platform for other activities like movie-making (machinima), exceed the scope of the interpretive spiral.

## 2.3 Useful Practices

As you may have noticed, certain repeating processes in the interpretive spiral decrease in significance. If the reviewer using the Interpretive Spiral adequately describes the instantiation and feedback cycles at the fundamental and secondary levels of play, there is often little reason to revisit them in great detail in the Tertiary Level of analysis.

It is also not necessary to apply every level of the Spiral to a game for effective analysis. If one only wants to assess interpretation in the learning phase of a game, they may apply only the Fundamental Level of the Spiral to the game. Admittedly, it is more difficult to apply higher levels of interpretation to a game in isolation. Before one can describe the "Translation," processes that occur in the Tertiary Level of interpretation, it is crucial to know what experiences are being translated. Since these experiences are defined in the Fundamental and Secondary levels, one will likely end up performing the analysis of those earlier levels anyway.

This partial translation can be used to easily describe alternative game modes that feature simple variations. I define a **game mode** as a programmed variation in the way a game must be played. Adjustable difficulty settings tend to be the simplest form of alternate game modes, and generally only adjust variables governing health, speed, and power. These simple numerical tweaks often only affect the pace at which the player proceeds through the levels of play and interpretation. The Interpretive Spiral can be applied to unique game modes in isolation as well. This is a particularly fruitful practice for designers who are trying to discern whether their alternate modes provide meaningfully different play experiences. If a designer is hoping to create "Normal" and "Hard" settings that result in entirely different experiences, for example, subjecting them both to the spiral would provide a telling comparison.

There are also certain game modes, like "Multiplayer" versus "Campaign" modes that feature substantial mechanical and thematic differences that are more accurately analyzed with unique applications of the interpretive spiral. In certain cases, choices between playable characters will result in drastically different experiences. In Capcom's *Mega Man X 4*, players have the choice of either playing as X, who attacks using a canon and acquires special weapons with limited ammunition, and Zero, who attacks using a sword and learns special techniques he can use limitlessly. Both characters also have unique thematic segments and fight unique bosses. These choices not only affect the difficulty of the game, but the tactics the player must use and the narrative that frames the action. Conversely, in the arcade game *Metal Slug 2* players can pick between Marco, Tarma, Eri, and Fiolina. These characters are primarily a method for visually distinguishing between multiple players, and only affect the appearance of the player's avatar. Consequently, applying the Interpretive Spiral to playing as Marco and to playing as Eri would be heavily redundant and unproductive.

Gamers can and frequently do impose extra rules on themselves (avoiding war at any cost in *Civilization V*), but those specialized styles of play are arguably analogous to playing meaningfully different game modes, which deserve their own applications of the Interpretive Spiral. I refer to this practice as **Constraint Play** and discuss it in greater detail in Chapters 5 and 6. When a preference becomes a hard rule that the player consciously and deliberately adheres to, the player's play style should be considered a form of Constraint

---

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 18

---

Play, as the player is effectively experiencing a different game. For example, in games featuring moral choice systems, such as Bioware's *Knights of the Old Republic* or Bethesda's *Fallout* franchises, when a player decides to play a "good" character at the exclusion of making any decisions that would earn their character "bad" points, they are playing in a thematically distinct way that will yield a unique interpretive experience. Consequently, to fully interpret a game that offers players with many meaningfully distinct game modes, multiple applications of the interpretive spiral may be necessary.

## TECHNICAL WRITING - BOARD GAME INSTRUCTION MANUAL

---

*This is an excerpt from the manual for the game I am currently designing. While it is still a work in progress taken out of a broader context, it should offer an idea of how I approach technical language for games (specifically, core mechanical loops and actions).*

### Introduction

**Amagium: The Arroyo Cases** is a narrative-driven, urban fantasy boardgame for four players, featuring tactical combat, camaraderie, and magical detective work. Gameplay is similar to a tabletop RPG, with a mechanical emphasis on exploration and combat. Each session is designed to cover a single case file in 90 to 180 minutes.

**Theme & Roles:** Three players assume the roles of **Keepers**: officers rigorously trained in magical combat and criminal investigation. Keepers comprise the police force of the Amagium, a global order which is responsible for legislating, licensing, and moderating the supernatural in a world where every human has an in-born capacity for magic. This capacity is known as a *wyrd*. This three-person team, or *Venture*, will face fae, shapeshifters, vampires, demons, and other familiar mythological creatures, as well as original entities and terrorists opposing the Amagium. Closing cases entails more than combat, however. Players must search for evidence to determine the true nature of threats, save lives, and avoid actions that will bring shame upon the Amagium. The fourth player assumes the role of a **Fate Master** (or FM) who selects and runs a Case File by controlling enemies, throwing in unexpected obstacles, and guiding the general course of the scenario. An FM can be as antagonistic or merciful toward the Venture as they wish, but the game is designed in the spirit of giving the other players an enjoyable challenge and fun story to tell. Crushing the Keepers at every turn will make for a dour experience, but a nail-biting loss is often more satisfying than an easy win.

### Game Structure

The game has three main phases: the set-up, repeated rounds of turn-taking (the primary gameplay "loop"), and a conclusion that occurs when players have either lost (by failing a mission's mandatory criteria or being comprehensively incapacitated) or succeeded (by satisfying all the case's mandatory mission criteria). In success, the FM will ascribe a rating to the mission completion based on scoring Commendation points based on criteria set forth by the Fate Master's Plot manual.

**Set Up:** The amagia begin the game by choosing their Keepers from a roster of 10. Each Keeper is defined by the following "kit," or collection of components:

- A character mat listing the following stats:
    - Attribute Values (A total of 12 points, spread across Arms, Masks, Gears, and Tomes)
    - Maximum Health and Wyrd
    - A unique Ability (such as a unique Action, tactical option, or other bonus)
  - A 6-page grimoire with a total of 18 distinct Skills
  - A 30 Card Skill Deck used to resolve Skilled Action Attempts and Focus Checks
  - A 30 Card Reflex Deck used to determine Initiative and Reflexive Action Checks
-



# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 19

---

After the players have assembled their Venture, or team, the Fate Master selects a Case File which includes:

- A unique map that serves as the gameboard for that case
- Three separate Plots for the FM to choose from
- Entity Cards, describing the stats and behavior of enemies and neutral parties
- Enemy Action Decks, defining enemy groups' initiative and available turn actions
- Map tokens to set up the board

Each plot has a public Premise representing the Amagia's starting knowledge of a scenario—such as a call for backup, a brief from dispatch, or an all-points bulletin for a malefactor or monster. After the FM issues the Premise, the Amagia select equipment and resources from an available pool outlined in the Premise. This may include:

- Up to 6 Anima – Ammunition for powerful spells known as Contracts
- Up to 2 Standard Issue Equipment Cards – commonly available items issued to Keepers
- Up to 1 Special Issue Equipment Card – more powerful equipment for Keepers.

While the Keepers get set up, the FM draws the pertinent entity cards and enemy decks, map tiles, and starting pool of Fate Points (resources used for triggering Plot events, FM Abilities, and certain Enemy Actions). Some entities' inclusion and token placement will be specified by the Plot, while others are left to the FM's discretion.

The entire course of the game is measured in Rounds. A Round begins with determining turn order, and ends when every active Entity Group and Keeper has concluded their turn.

## Initiative Phase Actions

Every round begins by determining entities' base initiative values.

**Ready Action (Keepers):** Keepers begin each round with an automatic "Ready" Action. This entails drawing 3 Reflex Cards, and selecting one to be active during the current Round. Each Reflex Card has a Speed value that determines turn order, and Initiative Bonuses that usually impart standing defensive or offensive bonuses. Slower initiative cards tend to be cautious in nature, while fast initiative cards often impart extra attack power.

**Order Action (Fate Master):** Fate Masters draw 2 Action Cards for each Entity Group, which will determine that entire group's speed and available Actions during that turn. The FM reveals their Action Cards and the Keepers reveal their Reflex cards simultaneously. Ties between Keepers or Entities are resolved by Black Die Roll Checks, with the victor having an effective Speed of +1.

## Fate Phase

Turn Order is not set in stone after the Order Phase. In the Fate Phase, the FM has the power to tweak turn order or impart bonuses by expending Fate Points.

**Boost Action (Fate Master):** A Fate Master may expend one Fate Point to increase an Entity Group's Speed by 5. This action can be performed up to two times—both on the same group, or once on two separate groups.

**Delay Action (Fate Master):** A Fate Master may also expend one Fate Point to reduce a specific Keeper's Speed by 5. This action can be performed only once.

---

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 20

---

## Keeper Turns

Keeper players only need to manage one entity in combat, and for this reason, it is recommended that first-time players assume the role of a Keeper rather than a Fate Master. At the start of each Round, a player receives 5 Action Points (AP) to do whatever they want, and a Free Initial Action. Some Actions can be performed in any phase, while others must be declared in a specific turn phase.

**Start Phase:** Any pre-existing effects specifying “At start of turn” take place automatically, and must happen before any other actions. If multiple effects occur at the start of a Keeper’s turn, they are resolved in this order:

1. HP Loss, HP Gain
2. Wyrd Loss, Wyrd Gain
3. Evidence/Item Loss, Evidence/Item Gain
4. Automatic Actions (“Battle Trance,” for example)

**Main Phase:** The main phase is where a Keeper makes their decisions. They may move, attack enemies, use items, trigger objects on the map, and more. Each type of Action has a unique flow, described in detail in the next section.

**End Phase:** When the player is out of AP, their turn ends immediately. A player can also elect to end their turn early if they do not have AP they can put to good use. All effects specified “On Turn End” are resolved.

1. Any player “On Turn End” Abilities
2. Flat HP Loss, Threshold Loss, Threshold Gain
3. Wyrd Loss, Wyrd Gain
4. Evidence/Item Loss, Evidence/Item Gain

## Keeper Actions 1: Automatic & Special

These actions must automatically occur at the beginning of a Keeper’s turn if they fail to meet certain criteria, or if certain tasks are imposed on them by the plot.

**Battle Trance & Exus:** As Keepers push their wyrds to their limits, they gradually gain supernatural momentum that leads to a dangerous state called exus, which is tracked by levels ranging from 0-6. Exus often accelerates wyrd depletion by increasing Skill costs or it adds certain negative and unintended side effects to a Skill. That said, most Skills also become more powerful and/or adopt additional positive effects when under the effects of exus. If a Keeper starts their turn with a completely depleted wyrd (OWP), they will gain 2 levels of exus, regain all their WP, and skip their turn. This usually results from poor planning. Even if a player is seeking to gain exus levels, there are often other more nuanced ways to gain exus without losing a turn, such as certain Grimoire Skills or items.

**Plot Actions:** Sometimes, circumstances will demand Keepers to perform checks or spend AP at the start of their turn (such as keeping their balance on unsteady ground, or dodging an environmental hazard). These automatic actions are announced and explained by the FM.

**Free Initial Actions:** At the beginning of their turn, a Keeper can select any Action to be their Free Initial Action, which will cost 0AP instead of its normal AP cost. Ideally, players want to use this opportunity Focus Checks, complex item Activations, or other AP-expensive Actions, but Free Initial Actions allow players to have a free area of movement, and still have a full serving of AP to be effective in Combat.

---

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 21

---

## Keeper Actions 2: Standard

Actions that do not require skillful execution or fast reflexes do not require deck checks. These include uncontested movement, using equipment items, entities, or map objects, 'centering' themselves, and investigating points of interest that may yield evidence or resources.

**Move:** When no enemies are "local," or occupying the same Area as the Keeper before moving, a Keeper can move into an adjacent Area on the map (that is not at-capacity) for 1 AP. It does not matter if an enemy occupies the final destination, but a player cannot pass through an enemy occupied area without making a Contested Move Action (described below).

**Search:** Outside of combat, a Keeper can investigate a "??" Map Tile. These tiles will always contribute to the venture's commendation points. But they will also often yield Evidence, prompting the FM to provide characters with useful clues, such as enemy numbers and positions, or impending, hidden deadlines. On rare occasions, "??" Map Tile will yield Equipment Items or Anima that a player can pick up.

**Use:** The Keeper can Activate an item based on its AP cost, as specified by map tiles, Entity Cards, or Equipment Cards.

**Center:** A Keeper can take a few seconds to regain their bearings in combat, clearing all active Skill Cards that modify their Attributes, or calm themselves to reduce Exus build up by 1 level.

## Keeper Actions 3: Skilled

Skills are governed by a Keeper's 4 Attributes:

- Arms (inherent physical ability) | Masks (inherent mental ability)
- Tomes (trained mental ability) | Gears (trained physical ability)

A Skill can only be performed when a player meets the required attribute values listed in their grimoire entry. However, each turn players must first Attempt a skill by drawing Skill Cards that modify their total Attribute values.

**Attempt:** If a player wants to perform a Skill from their grimoire, they must perform at least one Attempt Action that turn. Attempt actions have the following flow:

1. The Keeper selects and announces a Skill from their Grimoire and declares a legal target.
  2. The Keeper must pay all the associated costs (AP, and WP/Anima if specified) to expend the necessary effort for that Skill.
    - a. Some skills have multiple costs that a Keeper can choose between. They must announce which cost they are choosing to pay before the next step
  3. The Keeper performs a Skill Check by drawing the top Skill Card from their deck, and places it on the leftmost Skill Slot on their player mat, shifting any previous, Active Skill Cards one slot to the right.
    - a. 3 Skill Cards may be active at a time
    - b. Cards in the third Skill Slot are discarded as new cards are slotted
    - c. Active Skill Cards persist from turn to turn
  4. The Keeper looks at the sum total of their Base Attributes and active Skill Cards' Attribute Modifiers to determine if the Skill succeeded or failed.
-

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 22

---

- a. Many skills can succeed with different Attribute value combinations. If the Keeper's total Attribute values satisfy *any* of the combinations specified in the grimoire entry, the Skill happens immediately and the player makes any subsequent checks (such as dice rolls) to determine damage and other effects (more on that in Detailed Combat Rules)
- b. If the total Attribute values do not meet any of the specified value combinations, the Skill fails.

**Example Success:** Hace announces his intention to attempt to perform Empyrean Gale for 2AP. The skill requires 5 Masks and costs 4 Wyrd Points, or 1 Air Anima and 1 Wyrd Point. He elects to use the Anima and 1AP. After expending these resources, he makes a deck check and draws the "Inspired" Skill Card, which increases his Masks value by 2 and decreases his Arms value by 2. Since Hace has a base Attribute value of 4 Masks, he satisfies the Skill's criteria, rolls for damage, and inflicts the Skill's other effects on his targets.

**Failure Example:** Instead of the example above, Hace announces his intention to Attempt Vortex Edge for 2AP. The skill has no WP or Anima cost, and requires only 2 Arms. But since Hace's base attribute value is 3 Arms, the "Inspired" Skill card reduces his Arms Attribute by 2, leaving him with a value of 1 Arms, failing the skill.

- After a Skill has been successfully performed, it cannot be performed again that turn
- Players may make as many Skill Attempts as they would like, for 2 AP each
- Some Skills have extra effects when used immediately after another specified skill, resulting in a Combo.

**Shift:** If a player has already failed a Skill during their turn, but their total Attribute values meet the requirements for a different Skill, they may spend 3AP to "Shift" and immediately perform that Skill without another Attempt Action. This is more expensive than a subsequent Attempt, but it is effectively a sure thing, and can allow players to capitalize on unexpected Skill gains.

**Chain:** If a player has already succeeded at a Skill during their turn, and they have the necessary Attributes to perform a different skill, they can spend 2AP to "Chain" and perform that Skill without making a second Skill Check. Certain rare skills can *only* be used as part of a Chain.

**Focus:** Focus Actions are used to recover expended Wyrd at a cost of 3AP. After declaring a Focus Action, the player makes a Skill Check, but examines the Skill Card's Power value rather than its Attribute bonuses. They recover WP equal to the card's power value, and immediately discard it rather than placing it in a Modifier slot.

**Overpower:** If a Keeper needs to reposition or restrain an enemy, they must first overpower that enemy. This is reflected by expending 3AP and engaging in a Black Die Check against that foe. Adjacent enemies can be pulled, or pushed 1 Area. Local enemies can be pushed 1 Area or arrested.

- Only certain enemies can be arrested, as determined by their type-tag and intelligence. (Usually only sentient, "Human" enemies can be arrested, though there are exceptions.)
- Arrestable enemies must be at or below a certain level of health to be arrestable (specified by a threshold on their Entity Card)
- Powerful enemies receive a bonus to their Black Die Rolls, making arrests harder.
- Ultimately, arrests are subject to FM discretion. They may provide bonuses or penalties to arrest rolls based on circumstances

**Revive:** if a Keeper falls in battle (by having their health reduced to 0 or below), it's not the end of the world for their Venture—but it is definitely bad news. A Keeper can spend 4AP and 4WP to assist a local, downed ally by assisting them and bolstering them with an energy infusion. This is reflected by a double black die roll which

---

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 23

---

will revive the Keeper with health equal to the rolls' sum +2. Keepers are revived with half their maximum wyrd, and their exus level is increased by 2. Given the heavy costs and scant HP afforded by revival, this Action is best taken out of combat, or, in desperate measures, as a Free Initial action.

## Keeper Actions 4: Reflexive Actions

Generally speaking, Reflexive Actions refer to Keeper's responses to the environment and enemy actions rather than conscious decisions.

**Defense:** Out of turn, a Keeper may spend 1 AP to draw a Reflex Card and use its Defense value against an incoming attack. This decision must be made as soon as an attack is declared, before any variable damage or effects are calculated. Typically, Defense values negate a single incoming physical, magical, or dual attack. Once used for defense, the Reflex Card is discarded.

- A player who has not taken their turn yet can defend against as many attacks as they wish, but if they reach OAP before their turn, they will only be able to perform their Free Initial Action.
- If a Defense successfully negates an attack, all of its negative effects are negated as well.
- If a defense negates the wrong type of attack (for example, a magical negation drawn against a physical attack), all of that attack's negative effects still come into play

**Escape:** If a Keeper attempts to leave, or move through an Area that is populated with enemies, they must make a Reflex Check, checking the Speed of the drawn card against the enemies' Entity Group's Speed for 2AP. (The Reflex Card is then discarded immediately.) If the Keeper fails to exceed the enemies' speed, the 2AP is wasted, and the player is trapped in that Area until they succeed at a subsequent Escape Action, or the enemies are moved or defeated.

- If there are multiple enemy types, the check must beat *every* local Entity Groups' Speed.
- Keepers who are Pushed or Pulled through enemy-occupied Areas are automatically moved, and do not need to make Escape checks

## Fate Master Turns & Basic Actions

The Fate Master's turn structure is much more fragmented than Keepers' since they must govern multiple entities in multiple groups and respond to certain player actions (like springing traps) in the middle of turns. For this reason, the role of FM is recommended for more experienced players, or those who have experience running other games.

**Fate Points:** Fate points fuel a Fate Master's ability to play God, allowing them to spawn extra enemies, shift initiative values, use special, impactful enemy abilities, and more. They are gained through the following:

- A base amount of FP is allotted by the Plot
- More FP may be gained when certain Plot events trigger
- 1 FP is gained when a Keeper fails a Skill Check, Reflex Check, or Non-Skill Die Check
- 1 FP is gained when a Keeper is Stunned
- 2 FP are gained when a Keeper enters a Battle Trance
- 3 FP is gained when a Keeper is incapacitated
- A Keeper may gain 5 FP by using a Reprieve action

**Act:** Each entity can perform 2 Actions selected from the default options listed on their Entity Card and the 2 options listed on their Active Action Card.

**Hold:** If an FM draws an Action Card with promising tactical properties, but the enemy group is poorly positioned, they may elect to Hold that entire group for 1FP. That group will forgo all actions this Round and

---



# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 24

---

keep the same Action Card for the next Round, but their Speed cannot be Boosted that round.

**Follow-Up:** Once per round, an FM can have any entity perform a third Action at a cost of 1FP (in addition to any other costs associated with that Action).

**Reprieve:** Once per turn, after landing a lethal hit on a Keeper, the FM may immediately cancel the effects of that hit to receive 5FP instead. This can be employed for thematic or strategic reasons. If a Keeper is at low HP, one enemy can strike them dead, have the hit reprieved, and then kill them anyway with their second Action, earning the FM a whopping total of 8FP.

## Entity Turns Flow

Entity turns are structured around an Entity's Card, and their 15-card Action Deck. An entity can always use any of the default actions on their Entity Card, as well as either of the Actions listed on their active Action Card, selected during the Initiative phase.

- Every entity in the group does not need to take actions, especially if some enemies are lying in wait or poorly positioned for combat.
- Unless otherwise stated on their entity cards, enemies cannot Escape Keepers if their Speed does not exceed the Speed of a Keeper's active Reflex Card. If their speed *does* exceed a Keeper's Initiative Speed however, they may freely move without making any checks
- As with Keeper Skills, the same Enemy Action cannot be repeated by the same entity in a single turn with the exception of Movement. Entities *may* use an Action previously used by a different entity in their group, however.

**Enemy Start Phase:** Any pre-existing effects specifying "At start of Entity turn" such as passives or conditions, take place automatically, and must happen before any other actions. If multiple effects occur at start of the turn they are resolved in this order:

1. HP Loss (from Banes like Burning, Bleed, or Poison, for example)
2. HP Gain (from regenerative passives)
3. Any mandatory Actions as determined by the Plot, Bane/Boon effects, or Keeper actions (For example; attacking a Keeper with the Taunt Boon)

**Entity Main Phase:** Declare other/remaining Actions taken by the entity

**Entity End Phase:** Order of operations.

1. HP Loss
2. Hp gain
3. Free/Additional Actions
4. Any Enemy "On Turn End" effects (from Boons or Banes)
  - a. HP Loss
  - b. HP gain

**Boss Turn Flow:** Boss turns are identical to regular enemies, but they may enjoy a broader menu of Actions as specified by the Plot. Bosses are also more likely to have objectives or mandatory actions they must perform, again specified by the Plot. Like normal enemies, bosses can take only two actions per turn, they cannot repeat the same action in a single turn, and turn effects are resolved in the same order.

---

# HANK WHITSON: NON-FICTION PORTFOLIO - 25

## Variable Fate Master Actions

These events can happen at many times during the plot, and may even interrupt a Keeper's turn. In such cases, an interruption's effects are resolved immediately, before a Keeper finishes spending their AP. Once the interruption is resolved, control returns to the Keeper, unless the interruption somehow depletes their remaining AP, in which case, the game progresses to the next entity in the turn order.

**Trigger:** When a Keeper enters an Area with an undetected trap, the FM will announce it and inflict its effects. Some traps can be enhanced with FP when they are spawned.

**Spawn:** Keepers may spend FP at certain points (specified by the plot) to place additional entities in areas that are out of the Keepers' lines of sight. They do not have to reveal these entities until Keepers can see them, though unless the enemies are lying in ambush, it is often thematically appropriate to warn the players of their approach, especially if the Venture is currently outside of combat, or the enemy is particularly loud, large, or magically powerful.

**Special Plot Events and Actions:** Certain Plots will call for events to occur after each turn, a set number of turns, or a set number of Rounds. The mechanics of these actions are generally self-evident, or carefully explained by the Plot book.

## Skill Reference Cards & Symbol Legend

FATEMASTER ACTIONS	KEEPER ACTIONS	SYMBOL LEGEND
<b>Combat Round-Start Events &amp; Actions</b> <b>Order:</b> 2 and select 1 for each group and reveal after reveal their, then finalize turn order. <b>Boost:</b> When finalizing turn order, increase an group's speed by 5. Can be used up to 2 times per round on same or different groups. [1] <b>Delay:</b> When finalizing turn order, reduce 1's Speed by 5. Can be used once per round. [1] <b>Intervention:</b> Give 1 +3 until next turn. [1]	<b>Automatic &amp; Special Actions</b> <b>Ready:</b> At the start of each Round, 3 and select 1. <b>Free Initial:</b> Each turn, your first action costs [0]. <b>Battle Trance:</b> If you start your turn with 0, raise by 4, recover all, and end turn.	<b>Points</b> Action, Wyrd, Exus, Health, Fate, Charge
<b>Combat Turn Actions</b> <b>Act:</b> Select 2 Actions from Default or Active for each in group. [0-3 per Action] <b>Hold:</b> Keep current for group and skip turn. This group cannot be Boosted next round. [1] <b>Follow Up:</b> Once per round, have an perform a 3rd Default or Active action. [Action Cost +1] <b>Relieve:</b> Cancel a lethal hit against a. Gain 5.	<b>Standard Actions</b> <b>Move:</b> When no are Local, move 1 Area. [1] <b>Search:</b> Out of combat, investigate a tile. [2] <b>Use:</b> Activate items, entities, or map objects. [1-3] <b>Center:</b> Clear active Skill Cards or lower by 1. [2]	<b>Targets</b> Keeper, Enemy, Entities <b>Damage/Defense</b> Physical, Magical, Dual
<b>Variable Phase Actions</b> <b>Trigger:</b> Initiate legal Twist event. [0-5] <b>Spawn:</b> Summon a Trap or in a legal area out of the line of sight. [0-5]	<b>Skilled Actions</b> <b>Attempt:</b> Declare a Skill & vs. your new total Attribute pool to see if you succeed. [2] <b>Shift:</b> After any failed Attempt, perform a new, legal Skill without a. [3] <b>Chain:</b> After a successful Attempt or Shift, perform a new, legal Skill without a. [2] <b>Focus:</b> & restore equal to Power. [3] <b>Overpower:</b> vs. a local at low to Arrest or push 1 Area, or to pull/push an adjacent 1 Area. [3] <b>Revive:</b> Give a downed, local 2 +2. [4, 4]	<b>Checks</b> Skill, Reflex, Action, Roll <b>Evidence</b> Material, Arcane, Info
<b>Fate Gain Events</b> <b>Failed</b> / / : +1 <b>Stunned</b> : +1 <b>Battle Trance:</b> + 2 <b>Downed</b> : +3	<b>Reflexive Actions</b> <b>Defend:</b> Out of turn, vs. 1 incoming Attack. [1] <b>Escape:</b> & check Speed vs. local to move 1. [2]	<b>Attributes</b> Arms, Tames, Masks, Gears <b>Anima</b> Air, Earth, Any, Water, Fire

For more information about Amagium: The Arroyo Case files, head to [HankWhitson.com/Amagia](http://HankWhitson.com/Amagia).

THANK YOU FOR READING!

Don't find what you were looking for? Be sure to check out my Fiction Portfolio as well, or if you want to see what I can do for you specifically, let me know and I will compose something to spec.