How do digital games convey meaning? Academic studies of video games seem concerned with creating discipline-specific new methodologies for examining the medium. From the standpoint of the rhetorical critic, however, new forms of communication can still be examined with traditional techniques. This paper analyzes the 2001 video game Tropico using the dramatistic pentad, a methodology derived from the work of literary and rhetorical scholar Kenneth Burke. Since the world created by certain video games are recreations of a series of events, then the five elements of dramatistic theory – the act, the agent, the agency, the purpose and the scene – are also present. In this paper, the game is broken down along the lines of each of the five pentadic elements, in addition to the ratios between the elements, taking into account the peculiarities to dramatistic analysis that this particular medium generates. It is argued that the dominant pentadic element in Tropico is that of purpose, that all other dramatistic elements are ultimately subordinate to monetary desire, and that this allows the designers of the game to create a world of economic and political cynicism they use to describe the benefits of modern Western-style social welfare.
Studies like this will be important not only to establish a link between traditional scholastic methodologies and the discourse surrounding the study of digital games, but to advance the academic understanding of how video games create persuasive meaning as well.
A Pentadic Analysis of *Tropico*: Dramatism and Digital Games

by
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A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

Presented June 12, 2009
Commencement June 2010

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Matthew J. Shields, Author
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express his sincere appreciation for the support of his friends and family, including his parents John and Beth Shields, the faculty and staff of the graduate school and his coworkers and friends from The Wizard's Chest in Denver. And, of course, the infinite patience, cajoling, support and friendship of Trischa Goodnow.
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To Elizabeth
Introduction

In their landmark game-design text *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Salen and Zimmerman quote veteran industry designer Warren Spector: “It's vital,” he says, “that we determine how games make meaning” (363). One of the Spector’s frustrations is the relative dearth of critical material surrounding the medium. Indeed, only a handful of scholars have begun working in the emerging field of (depending on who you cite) either video game studies or computer game studies. Most people who consider themselves video game theorists of any stripe generally also consider themselves to be ludologists. Frasca elaborates:

We will propose the term ludology (from ludus, the Latin word for “game”), to refer to the yet non-existent “discipline that studies game and play activities”. Just like narratology, ludology should also be independent from the medium that supports the activity (Ludology meets Narratology, 1999).

For scholars of rhetoric, this is an exciting time to turn our attentions to ludology, for the majority of communication research being done now on video games is cobbled together from a wide variety of academic disciplines – giving us new ground to break in terms of discovering what games can mean, how games communicate and how games persuade. The field also presents some fresh challenges to examine: the limits of textual analysis, the problem of interactivity, and the capacity of extant techniques to create deep analysis of new media forms. These are not novel concepts in the history of academia, either in the study of any developing media or of the early studies of games themselves. We take up as our standard here the rallying cry of Mr. Spector: how do games make meaning? Is that meaning different from the meanings of films, books, speeches, etc.? While these questions are incredibly broad in scope, we still have to begin somewhere, and, indeed, across the world an increasing number of academics have come to ponder this very interesting question.

In the field of rhetorical criticism a few tentative steps have been taken but little serious attention has been paid to this increasingly rich source of cultural artifacts. It is the task of the rhetorical critic to discover how it is that communication succeeds, and to this end I offer my analysis here. To begin with
the smallest question, we must not ask ourselves how the medium functions in general, but rather how a particular sample functions. How does one particular game work?

As a medium, the digital game is a tremendously interesting subject for criticism. It is in many ways new to academia as a source of analysis, although some research, such as Janet Murray’s 1997 *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Brenda Laurel’s 1993 *Computers as Theatre*, or Gary Sernow’s 1984 *Playing videogames: the electronic friend* has been around for decades. Why study games? The answer is not a simple one. As a medium, games have been around for as long as humans have. Huizinga noted famously that play behavior predates civilization itself, and that the increasingly-complex encodings of play -- games -- have existed for quite some time as well. Indeed, games have often in human society served as arbiters of culture, containers of social meaning and even meaningful attempts and persuasion. For example, as Parlett notes in *The Oxford History of Board Games*, the modern game of *Monopoly* is derived from a game called *The Landlord's Game* developed by Quakers as a rhetorical tool to illustrate how rents impoverished tenants and enriched landlords. As computer technology makes it possible for humans to enter into and play around with increasingly complicated interactive worlds, the importance of digital games is only going to increase. Numerous critics such as Juul, Aarseth and Frasca have written flights of fancy, predicting significant shifts in paradigms and alterations in the fundamental nature of human communication. This study makes no such assertions. I merely wish to observe that here is a new thing – a video game – oughtn't we to study how it communicates?

I will be examining in this study a particular computer game – the 2001 PopTop Games release *Tropico*, where a player takes on the role of governing a small Cold-War Era Caribbean island and managing its economy, population and industries. My tool for analysis will be dramatistic analysis, a critical methodology derived from the works of Kenneth Burke, who
postulated that, since humans understood re-tellings of events primarily as “drama,” that is, primarily through the metaphors of stage, actors, roles, and so on, that a critic ought to be able to examine the language used in any re-telling or “statement of motives” in order to build conclusions about the motives and world view of the speaker. I will attempt to reconcile this primarily linguistic technique with the rather nebulously-defined concepts of game play and interactivity. In Burke's dramatism there exists a pentad of five elements of the drama – the act, the agent, the agency, the purpose and the scene, each of which is “featured” or dominant in any given rhetorical artifact. I propose here that in Tropico the element of purpose is dominant, even though the other elements share their role and certainly important conclusions can be drawn from the development team's treatment of each.

It is true, then, that some few pages have already been written on the study of digital games. If the task of the rhetorical critic to explain how an argument has been made, then it stands to reason here that this study should begin with an examination of where arguments can exist in the digital game. Although as of this writing a rhetoric of digital games has not been written, some initial theorizing has. To begin with, I would point out Davidson's assertion that “the rhetorical elements [of a game] are how the mechanics show the player how to play.” For example, in the game *Tropico*, the subject of this study, the island of Tropico is sometimes covered with lush trees. These trees serve many functions in the secret calculations the computer performs behind the scenes -- they provide scenery, which makes tourists happy, they create a pleasant environment and they can be cut down and sold as lumber. It is not unreasonable to notice that real life trees are appreciated for many of these reasons, and as such a player of *Tropico* can expect trees to behave like trees -- they can be planted, harvested or enjoyed. To cut them down a player will need to order the construction of a lumber mill, to enjoy them a player
need simply lean back in his or her chair. A simplistic example, to be sure, but the answer of how these games convey information is certainly an important and challenging one. This study aims to answer the question of how this game conveys information, how it argues with the player, how it makes its point, and what, indeed, its point is -- if it has one.

As an artifact, *Tropico* is a rich source of material -- ranging from a discussion of the nature of government to discussions of international and local politics, feminist theory, class issues, education, environmentalism and religion. Although the game was not widely popular, this is due perhaps primarily to the relative idiosyncrasy of the genre rather than any failing on the developers' behalf. Indeed, those who played the game generally considered it to be a superior product, earning top marks from many reviewers and maintaining an on-line fan base for many years. Any perusal of message boards dedicated to the discussion of *Tropico* reveal that the gaming public has already taken an interest in the game's unique rhetorical qualities -- and it is this that first piqued my interest as a critic in the game. As a result of this study I had hoped to begin working on a way of understanding games with many layers of meaning, and to this end I chose to examine *Tropico*.

To begin my study I will first start with a review of the literature in the field, which will help to define the “field” of digital game studies as it exists as well as to understand some key terms for the understanding of how digital games may be considered and, of course, for the study itself. Later, I will provide an in-depth discussion of the dramatistic methodology, before applying it to the artifact itself. In my discussion of the artifact I will attempt to describe the motivations of *Tropico*'s creators using the elements of the pentad as a unit of analysis. Ultimately I will draw conclusions about the work itself, about the use of the pentad and about what this analysis means about the study of rhetoric, of games and game playing, and of *Tropico* itself. I hope that these
contributions to an understanding of one game can help lead to conclusions about all games – if we are, indeed, entering a time when digital games will become increasingly prevalent, then the moment has come to begin the work of rhetorical analysis.
Literature Review

Introduction

In order to understand both the challenges and the opportunities presented to a critic looking to apply contemporary techniques of rhetorical criticism to new media forms such as computer games, it is important to first examine the current theoretical conclusions surrounding the medium and what the predominant ideas in academic game criticism are. In addition, to be able to discuss the findings in a manner compatible with the state of game scholarship it is crucial to examine the origins, histories and current usages of the language of computer game studies. This literature review will first closely examine the history of the study of games. Next, it will also help to define some of the field's most critical terminologies. Finally, it will examine the current understanding of how a rhetoric of computer games may be established.

Games

The study of games is perhaps as old as human civilization itself. Avedon and Stutton-Smith, in their ambitious 1971 work *The Study of Games* note that writers such as “Homer...Plato, Pliny, Plutarch, Seneca and Xenophon recorded information about games played in ancient times” (22). Similar records exist in China, the Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent. They go on to mention that in 1689, Thomas Hyde wrote *De Historia Shahiludii*, perhaps “the first scholarly historical treatise on games” (23). They go on to mention Charles Cotton's 1674 *The Complete Gamester* which had to be published anonymously “because of the author's position” (23) and the book considered to be its “companion,” *Memoirs of the Lives, Intrigues and Comical Adventures of the Most Famous Gamesters* by Theophilus Lucas. Then, “during the period 1800 through 1850 a number of articles on chess, playing cards, and athletic games and contests begin to appear in a variety of popular and scholastic journals” (24). Avedon
and Sutton-Smith also note that “the last fifty years of the nineteenth century” (25) was the beginning of “serious” game scholarship. Notable publications after the turn of the century include H.J.R. Murray's exhaustive 1913 *The History of Chess* and companion book, *The History of Board Games other than Chess*.

Aside from the history of game-related research, Avedon and Sutton-Smith's most relevant idea for this study is that

When nongame playing cultures are compared with game playing cultures they tend to be tropical groups with simple subsistence patterns, simple technology, low political organizations, no class stratification, kin-homogenous communities, and to have low stress in child socialization...if competitive games are not universal then they must be cultural inventions and relate to levels of cultural development (Avedon and Sutton-Smith, 4).

If games are a cultural creation, then they can be said to have a cultural meaning, which allows a rhetorical critic to find meaning in them in the same way that a book, film or speech can be examined.

In *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005), Jesper Juul comments on the history of video games as being “both very brief and very long. The first video game was probably Spacewar!...the video game is thus a little more than forty years old, and it has been a part of popular culture for around thirty years” (3). As the successors not of “cinema, print or new media, but continuations of a history of games that predate those by millennia” (4), video games arise out of “a basic affinity between games and computers: Like the printing press and cinema have historically enabled and promoted new kinds of storytelling, computers work as enablers of games” (5).

Increasingly relevant, then, is Salen and Zimmerman's examination of games as semiotic systems. As they argue:
Semiotics emerged from the teachings of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, in the early twentieth century. In general sense, semiotics in the study of how meanings are made. The question of what signs represent, or denote, is of central concern to the field. Semiotically speaking, people use signs to designate objects or ideas (42).

They go on to discuss four semiotic concepts they draw from the definitions of American philosopher and semiotician Charles Peirce and how they apply to games. The first is that “A sign represents something other than itself,” and, to apply this to games they argue that...

...games use signs to denote action and outcome...these actions gain meaning as part of larger sequences of interaction...on the other hand, games use signs to denote the elements of the game world...they gain their symbolic value of meaning from the relationship between signs within the game... (42-43)

The second concept is that “Signs are interpreted,” and to expand on this they observe that...

...although a home base does have to possess certain functional qualities, such as being a touchable object or place, there is nothing special about the tree or rocks that make them 'home base' other than their designation as such by the players in the game... (42-44)

The third and fourth concepts are that “Meaning results when a sign is interpreted” and that “context shapes interpretation.” As an example of this concept, they note that “in Rock-Paper-Scissors the concept 'rock' has identity only in opposition to the concepts 'paper' or 'scissors’” (42-46). Games are systems composed of designer-created symbols with which players can interact in proscribed meaningful ways. Juul, in Introduction to Game Time, proposes that we may take a cue from computer science, saying that a game is actually a state machine: it is a system that can be in different states; it contains input and output functions, and definitions of what state and what input will lead to what following state (132-133).

While this definition of game is certainly not exhaustive and certainly is by no means the consensus (differing definitions appear in Parlett 1999, Huizinga 1955, Callois 1961, Crawford 1984, Costikyan 1994, Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971, etc.), it is enough to assert that, as
symbolic constructions, the medium offers rich material for the rhetorical critic.

Play

Inexorably tied to the subject of games is the subject of play. Celia Pearce argues that “The first and most important thing to know about games is that they center on play. Unlike literature and film, which center on story” (144). In the introduction to Replay: Game Design and Game Culture, Eric Zimmerman asks “Regarding play: why should we take it seriously? Games and play have always been part of our lives” (1). That this collusion need to be pointed out at all is mostly a peculiarity of the English language. In The Oxford History of Board Games David Parlett elaborates:

By a circuitous process of definition, a game is what you play, and to play is to do a game; therefore play and game are basically the same, except that one is a noun and the other a verb. Hardly any other language renders it desirable to start with such a simple observation. In French, on joue à un jeu; in German, man spielt ein Spiel; and so on. English is remarkable in using words from different roots for different grammatical functions (1).

Dutch historian Johan Huizinga notes in the introduction to Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture that

Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing...we have only to watch young dogs to see that all the essentials of human play are present in their merry gambols (1).

In this work Huizinga examines the role of play as the central motivating force in human culture. War, religion, work and all of the trappings of human civilization are, for Huizinga, governed by the same laws that govern play:

...the first main characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom. A second characteristic is closely connected with this, namely, that play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own....Play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and
duration. This is the third characteristic of play: its secludedness, its limitedness (8-9).

The separate nature of play versus the “real” world is central to Huizinga's notion that the play instinct of childhood becomes the ritual instinct of adulthood: “Ritual is thus a matter of shows, representations, dramatic performances, imaginative actualizations of a vicarious nature” (15).

Building on Huizinga's ideas, French anthropologist Roger Callois introduced his categories of play in *Man, Play and Games*, beginning with his taxonomy of games: “I am proposing a division into four main rubrics, depending on whether, in the games under consideration, the role of competition, chance, simulation or vertigo is dominant. I call these agôn, alea, mimicry, and ilinix, respectively” (13). He goes on to admit that “even these designations do not cover the entire universe of play” (13), and that a spectrum of play behavior between “diversion, turbulence and carefree gaiety...a kind of uncontrolled fantasy that can be designated by the term paidia” and “a complementary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to bind it with arbitrary, imperative and purposely tedious conventions...I call this second component ludus” (13). These neologisms are then codified by Frasca in the seminal article *Ludology meets Narratology* in 1999:

Paide[a] is “Prodigality of physical or mental activity which has no immediate useful objective, nor defined objective, and whose only reason to be is based in the pleasure experienced by the player”. Ludus is a particular kind of paidea [sic], defined as an “activity organized under a system of rules that defines a victory or a defeat, a gain or a loss.”

Salen and Zimmerman expand Huizinga's concepts to their idea of meaningful play, which “refers to the way game actions result in game outcomes to create meaning” (33). To engage in ludus is to follow the rules set out by the designer in order to try to attain some designer-implemented recognition for the effort, whereas to engage in paidia is to engage with the game as one pleases, without regard for the objectives or constraints of the game. Meaningful play, then, is usually ludic in nature since unregulated play within a computer game is ultimately meaningful only to the
player and not within the formalized system of symbols that constitute the game.

**Ludology**

The first work generally regarded as computer game studies is Brenda Laurel's 1986 Ph.D. Thesis *Toward the Design of a Computer-Based Interactive Fantasy System*. This work, together with Janet Murray's 1997 book *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* and Espen Aarseth's 1997 *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* formed the beginnings of both the study of the craft of interactive fiction as well as the field of “cyberdrama,” both concerned with the change (and the possibility for change) of traditional narrative forms with the added dimension of interactivity. In *Ludology meets Narratology* (1999), Gonzalo Frasca wrote the words which would become a touchstone for a new generation of media critics by giving their discipline a name:

> We will propose the term ludology (from ludus, the Latin word for “game”), to refer to the yet non-existent “discipline that studies game and play activities”. Just like narratology, ludology should also be independent from the medium that supports the activity.

Later elaborated on in *Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology* (2003): “Ludology can be defined as a discipline that studies games in general, and video games in particular”. Later on in this same article he contends that “narrative may excel at taking snapshots at particular events but simulation provides us with a rhetorical tool for understanding the big picture”. This early admission from the concept of ludology as an academic discipline sets the stage for the use of traditional rhetorical criticism in this study.

**The Magic Circle**

In *Homo Ludens* (1955), Huizinga touches on the notion that games have “illusion – a pregnant word which means literally 'in-play' (from inlusio, illudere, or inludere)” (11). Indeed, the
entire concept of illusion is bound up in this concept of being “in play.” The play of children requires imagination – not simply the modern understanding of the term as a creation of a fanciful mind but, quite literally, the manifestation of images – these images have meaning only within a particular realm. Huizinga expounds on the need for a

...play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot ' cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis-court, the court of justice, etc...all are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to a performance of an act apart (10).

Within this sphere of imagination the imaginings, procedures and tokens of play are realized, that is, they have an effect. Outside of the sphere the same actions would be meaningless. Playing a number of poker chips at a poker table in the course of a game has meaning, moving chips around an empty table alone does not. Salen and Zimmerman expand on Huizinga's ideas in Rules of Play: “In a very basic sense, the magic circle of a game is where the game takes place in” (95). They argue, as does Huizinga, that games can constitute “temporary worlds” with their own sets of rules, and that, as systems, games are either open or closed, either exchanging meaning with the world outside the magic circle or containing only its own meaning of internal relations between its own symbols. Considered as closed systems, they argue, games are just sets of rules, and considered as open systems are either gameplay (i.e. user experience) or cultural objects.

Considering an “open system” game is advantageous to this study, because if games can serve as repositories of cultural meaning, then a criticism of such a game ought to be able to discover the nature of this meaning, or at least the means by which it is conveyed.

**Ergodicity and Interactivity**

Games, especially computer games, are interactive, that is, they will respond back when a
user interacts with them. To describe the difference between texts that always occur in the same way every time and texts that change with each reading Aarseth coined the neologism “ergodic, using a term appropriated from physics that derives from the Greek words ergon and hodos, meaning 'work' and 'path.' In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (Aarseth 1).

The traditional view of rhetorical and literary theorists is that all texts are to some extent interactive. As Aarseth notes in Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature (1997),

Whenever I have had the opportunity to present the perspective of ergodic literature and cybertext to a fresh audience of literary critics and theorists, I have almost invariably been challenged on the same issues: that these texts (hypertexts, adventure games, etc.) aren't essentially different from other literary texts because (1) all literature is to some extent indeterminate, nonlinear, and different for every reading, (2) the reader has to make choices in order to make sense of the text, and finally (3) a text cannot really be nonlinear because the reader can read it only one sequence at a time, anyway (2).

One argument of Cybertext (Aarseth 1997), a central text for many ludologists, is that these concerns represent a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of traditional literary critics. To this end he rejects the use of the word nonlinear to describe ergodic texts since it is a fairly commonplace term for contemporary literature. To clear up the distinction, Aarseth uses the metaphor of literature as labyrinth, a concept he borrows from literary criticism itself: “I refer to the idea of a narrative text as a labyrinth, a game, or an imaginary world, in which the reader can explore at will, get lost, discover secret paths, play around, follow the rules, and so on” (3). There are, for Aarseth, two relevant kinds of labyrinths: “the unicursal, where there is only one path, winding and turning, usually toward a center; and the multicursal, where the maze wanderer faces a series of critical choices, or bivia” (5-6). A novel, for example, would be represented by the former, whereas an ergodic text such as a text adventure or a computer game would be
represented by the latter. While the first may be nominally interactive, that is, it would require effort to traverse, a reader has only one choice, to go forwards along a single winding path or to stop. The wanderer through the unicursal labyrinth, just like the reader of the novel or the viewer of the film, will see the entirety of the creation – everything the author includes will be observed at one point. “This is a maze in which the user cannot get lost,” in the words of Umberto Eco (Aarseth, 6). The ergodic text, however, is a multicursal labyrinth. Every choice taken is also a choice not taken – every decision made will exclude something. “The study of cybertexts reveals the misprision of the spaciodynamic metaphors of narrative theory, because ergodic literature incarnates these models in a way linear text narratives do not” (4). However, he argues, essentially, that a labyrinth is still a labyrinth, and, as such, traditional models of literary (and hence rhetorical) criticism can be applied to new media forms just as readily as to the old.

Aarseth's primary comparison was between textual narratives – novels, short stories, and their ilk – and cybertexts, works that were primarily textual in nature such as “Choose Your Own Adventure” style books, adventure games, text adventures, and so on. However, it was not long before ergodicity became a part of the parlance of ludology. To refine this distinction, in The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame Newman argues that

Quite simply, videogames are not interactive, or even ergodic. While they may contain interactive or ergodic elements, it is a mistake to consider that they present only one type of experience and foster only one type of engagement. Videogames present highly structured and, importantly, highly segmented experiences.

His argument is not that it is not possible for a truly ergodic video game to exist, simply that there isn't one in the present. He notes that current designers break off into ergodic segments where the user has true control over what happens, and “these sequences are punctuated and usually framed by periods of far more limited ergodicity and very often, apparently none at all”. Later he
introduces the concept of the “two fundamental states of engagement” in computer games: “on-line” and “off-line” -- ergodic and non-ergodic, respectively. Indeed, the torch of ergodicity is most fervently carried by 'cyberdrama' theorists such as Janet Murray, who argue that computers are allowing “a new kind of storytelling emerging to match the need for expressing our life in the twenty-first century” (4). Ultimately their concerns are similar to Aarseth's – their *idée fixe* is on the difference between traditional nonergodic drama and computer-aided multicursal 'cyberdrama.' Although the concept of ergodicity in computer games as a medium unto itself is a controversial one, this is not, however, Newman's most interesting insight – he goes on to argue that

> The On-Line relationship between primary-player and system/gameworld is not one of clear subject and object. Rather, the interface is a continuous feedback loop where the player must be seen as both implied by, and implicated in, the construction and composition of the experience.

A point, which, for a rhetorical theorist is far more engaging – knowing that ergodicity might exist in a medium under consideration is less important than recognizing that that medium contains ergodic elements and that the nature of that user-medium interaction creates the necessity for a highly symbolic system of interaction. Salen and Zimmerman introduce similar themes in their discussion of interactivity. Discussing choice in relation to games they introduce the anatomy of a choice:

1. What happened before the player was given the choice?
2. How is the possibility of the choice conveyed to the player?
3. How did the player make the choice?
4. What is the result of the choice? How will it affect future choices?
5. How is the result of the choice conveyed to the player? (63-64).

These are crucial questions for the computer game designer, since any multicursal or ergodic
medium will require some way of informing the user of these details, just as the page numbers in a novel or scene breaks in a film inform the user about where they “are” in relation to the text. Huizinga anticipates this need to representation in any form of play-activity: “Representation means display, and this may simply consist in the exhibition of something naturally given, before an audience” (13). Without a meaningful set of symbols informing the user about the state of the game the game's internal mechanisms would be essentially useless – that is to say, although a change in the state of the game may have some meaning for the computer crunching the numbers, it will not be meaningful to the user unless the system contains some way of conveying this meaning.

**Agency**

In order to navigate a system of meaningful symbols a user must have the agency to affect an intended alteration to that system. Many have commented on the 'fun' of interacting with a computer game as a unique aspect of the medium (Douglas and Hargadon 2004, Eskelinen 2004, Koster 2005). Murray defines this pleasure of interaction as agency:

> The more realized the immersive environment, the more active we want to be within it. When the things we do bring tangible results, we experience the second characteristic delight of electronic environments – the sense of agency. Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions as choices (126).

Murray's first “characteristic delight” of interactive media is immersion, “a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water” (98). Insofar as video games are concerned the subject of whether or not they are truly immersive has been debated fiercely (Newman 2002, Manninen 2003) and few conclusions have been reached. In *The Amniotic Sac: Intersubjectivity and Affect in Computer Games* (2005) Veale argues that “the recombination of the player and the technological substrate leads to a hybrid space. Immersive
paradigms of interaction emphasize the sensory pleasures of spatial exploration, and this is carried into vicarious kinaesthesia [sic]” (12). It is not, as earlier theorists suggested, that a player steps “into” the virtual world and acts with unregulated agency, but that

the perception of agency held by the player is an illusion. The player as a distinct entity has no way of interacting with the mediated digital world of the game without interacting with the technological substrate, the code and the hardware through which the code is manifest. The instant the player interacts with the technological substrate, he or she becomes a hybrid entity during the exchange. It is the hybrid who possesses agency within the mediated digital space of the game, and the hybrid is in part mechanically constituted (13).

Players of a game, then, do not have unrestricted freedom to interact with the virtual worlds they are presented with – they are limited to a specific set of symbolic interactions that are predefined and limited by the designer of the game. There will always be for physical structural reasons some things that a video game player will not be allowed to do – the nature of the technology limits the size of virtual spaces that can be rendered, for example, limiting freedom of movement within the world. Often, however, within the world that has been rendered players have complete control to interact with the game as they see fit.

Computer Games and Rhetoric

Davidson argues quite boldly in *Games and Rhetoric* that “there is a rhetoric of gameplay”. Inspired by Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Davidson argues that the mechanics of a game assist the user in understanding the nature of the symbolic relationships present. These rhetorical elements invite players into the game by giving them clues and directions as to what is going on and how to proceed through the game. The gameplay mechanics are how players play the game. The rhetorical elements are how the mechanics show players how to play. This is the subtle distinction between the rhetoric of the gameplay and the gameplay itself.

Within the “boundaries of the game world” the player can and will experience many things.
Davidson argues, essentially, that the elements of the game that seem to simulate real life should act like real life and elements that are fantastic should feel fantastic. This is not a new idea in the field of game design (Crawford 1984), but gives theorists examining game rhetoric a way “in” to apply techniques of criticism to computer games.

Although his focus is primarily on the physically technical elements of gaming, Harpold's (2007) coinage of the term “entanglement” to describe moments of intersection between “semiotic and technical elements in an interesting and rewarding way” (1) allows critics to easily conceptualize the means by which any given input by the user may lead to what he describes as “semiotic” changes in the state of the game. Harpold is concerned with the limitations of hardware – that is to say, the ways in which the user's agency is limited in-game not by the developer's intent but by the physical limitations of the platform on which the game is being played. This underscores a crucial between videogames and other media formats – a film on a DVD, or 35mm, or even a Laserdisc is still arguably the same “film” – a work of fiction may be written by hand or reproduced electronically, and so on. Unlike a novel, for example, a videogame is in most cases inherently tied to the particular set of hardware and software for which it was intended, and, as such, the inherent restrictions and demands the parameters create. What this ultimately means is that videogames must be interacted with by the critic in order to produce a satisfying “close reading” of the artifact.

Walz offers his own “first steps to a rhetoric of digital games” in Delightful Identification & Persuasion: Towards an Analytical and Applied Rhetoric of Digital Games. Walz applies a few concepts of Kenneth Burke to digital games, namely the idea of consubstantiality, that games require “identification” on the part of the user, and demand “acts of cooperation between human and computer.” His model of applied rhetoric considers computer games to be a
“performance loop of symbolic game action based on the player's identifiedness with the game design’s consubstantiality offers and demands, and her persuadedness with the game's argumentation surfacing in the form of functional circles”. The rhetorical critic can examine games as a sort of co-created performance art, an approach that both preserves the unique qualities of games as a medium while at the same time opening up avenues for critical examination.

**Contemporary Methods**

Recently, ludologists have become increasingly concerned with formalizing methodological approaches to the study of videogames as texts in their own right. Consalvo and Dutton (2007) argue that there has been “little or no effort to develop a method for the qualitative, critical analysis of games” (1). Their paper outlines the tentative steps to creating a unified methodological approach, even going so far as to create a four-part structure for future critics to rely on. Their work outlines a short taxonomy of potential areas of analysis, however, rather than a concrete method for criticism.

The notion that an exhaustive list of analytic capacity can be completed is refuted in part by Steven Malliet (2007), who outlines his own units of analysis and in fact entreats other researchers to examine areas of each game appropriate to the content of their own individual studies. His study, for example, uses a multiple-reader approach borrowed from media studies in order to more accurately record the impressions of any given artifact. In his “qualitative content analysis” study, multiple players are given the opportunity to play the same game under different conditions and asked to record their impressions. This media studies approach places the emphasis on the experience of the user, however, rather than on the symbolic capacity of the original work. Werning (2007) proposes “object-oriented” modes of game criticism derived from the terminology of programming languages. He supposes that a game's narrative structure may be
broken down into narrative “objects,” similarly to the computation of object-oriented programming. He does note that “the ideal level of fragmentation has to be determined independently for each analysis” (7). His primary focus is on the means by which games serve ostensibly as a vehicle for narrative, and is certainly valuable for games which can be broken down into “story objects” but is insufficient to describe games that are absent a strong central user-independent narrative structure.

Ultimately, recent scholarship in the field has not left ludologists with any discipline-wide traditions of analysis to perpetuate. The attempts to solidify approaches to study also seem focused primarily on the narrative capacity of videogames. As such, while they are interesting to consider and valuable for the critic, the prerogative for a methodological approach is still the prerogative of the individual researcher, especially in the analysis of a game which is not inherently a platform for narrative structure.

Conclusion

Current game scholarship draws its inspiration from the study of games reaching back into antiquity. Modern theorists have re-purposed terms used to describe traditional board, card or social games as well as ideas from traditional literary and semiotic theory to better help them describe the world of digital games. These games have been the subject of intense scrutiny by a small but ever-growing group of dedicated academics, who continue to find new ways to reexamine computer games as well as many other new media forms. Currently the opportunities for rhetorical critics to apply contemporary techniques to these mediums are virtually limitless. An understanding of how modern theorists address core concepts of video game design and structure will allow us to engage not only their ideas directly but to establish new methodological precedent for ourselves in the broader context of traditional rhetorical criticism.
Methodology

Introduction

“Strictly speaking,” says American social philosopher and literary critic Kenneth Burke in his 1945 work *A Grammar of Motives*, “we mean by a Grammar of motives a concern with the terms alone, without reference to the ways in which their potentialities have been or can be utilized in actual statements about motives” (xvi). The “terms” he refers to in this section from his introduction are the five terms of the dramatistic pentad – the central idea in the methodology for rhetorical criticism he proposes in the book: *dramatism*. In constructing his grammar he conducted an exhaustive analysis of literature and philosophy – a powerful legacy that remains with us today in the works of the “students of composition, communication, psychology, sociology and history” (Blakesley 8), and, most important to this study, rhetorical critics. In *Grammar of Motives* Burke outlines the theoretical basis and steps to the dramatistic approach. This section will outline both these ideas of Burke's as well as a theoretical justification for their application to new media forms, especially certain digital games. As Burke notes, a language is a means to symbolically represent reality and dramatism is a means to deconstruct the use of language to find rich critical material. If computer games are also symbolic constructions, then any game that represents “reality” to some extent is rich material for a system of analysis meant to dissect such artifacts. As well, this section will detail the methodology as it will be used in this study.

Scope and Reduction

In *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, Sonja K. Foss describes pentadic criticism as “a means to understand the way in which a rhetor encompasses a situation through rhetoric – through the selection and highlighting of particular terms” (457). She points out the
origins of this methodology in one of Burke's primary contentions – that languages arose as people tried to communicate with each other about things in the world. However, language use is inherently symbolic, and symbols only have meaning insofar as they have limits – that is to say, there must be something which is meant and something which is not meant by a symbol in order for there to be any meaning (and hence any language) at all. He described the situation to discuss his ideas of scope and reduction:

Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful reflections of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are selections of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection of reality. Insofar as the vocabulary meets the needs of reflection, we can say that it has the necessary scope. In its selectivity, it is a reduction. Its scope and reduction become a deflection when the given terminology, or calculus, is not suited to the subject matter it is designed to calculate (59).

Central to the subject of scope and reduction is the idea of the “representative anecdote,” a unifying central position around which to construct a terminology. Burke notes that for instance, the behaviorist uses his experiments with the conditioned reflex as the anecdote about which to form his vocabulary for the discussion of human motives; but this anecdote, though notably informative, is not representative, since one cannot find a representative case of human motivation in animals, if only because animals lack that property of linguistic rationalization which is so typical of human motives. A representative case of human motives must have a strong linguistic bias, whereas animal experimentation necessarily neglects this (59).

Burke's representative anecdote is clearly that of drama – to examine the recreation of the world he turns to an already-established vocabulary that is used to describe recreations of the world. He elaborates:

it is enough to observe that the issue arises as soon as one considers the relation between representation and reduction in the choice and development of a motivational calculus. A given calculus must be supple and complex enough to be representative of the subject matter it is designed to calculate. It must have scope. Yet it must also possess simplicity, in that it is broadly a reduction of the subject matter. And by selecting drama as our representative, or informative anecdote, we meet these
requirements (60).

By motivational calculus Burke is referencing the product of an applied methodology – an argument as to who or what in any given artifact can be said to be the origin of action as opposed to motion – ideas that Burke borrows from Hobbes: all things will go through “motion” -- change that is animalistic, basic, instinctual, and is ultimately derived from chemical processes, evolution, fate, physics and a wide variety of other culprits. Objects driven by blind forces act without symbolic intent. But humans do act with symbolic intent. We do things not simply because we are doing them, but for a reason. At the moment that a distinction is drawn between action and motion and thus often when a situation is described, humans will attribute action to a myriad of things. This is the subject of dramatism. “What is involved,” Burke asks in the introduction, “when we say what people are doing and why?” (xv). To solve this problem he introduced the five terms of the pentad and their correlated philosophical ideas.

**The Pentad**

Burke was concerned with the use of symbols, linguistic and otherwise, and through a close examination of the vocabularies of philosophy and drama codified what he referred to as the dramatistic pentad in *A Grammar of Motives*. As a tool for rhetorical analysis, the pentad is used to break down the attribution of “motives” or justifications for action. Burke reasoned from an examination of the the vocabularies of drama that humans viewed the world primarily through a “dramatic” lens, meaning that when they described the world they tended to cast it as a drama with its own requisite characters, locations and motivations. Burke identified the five key parts of drama and assembled them as a “generating principle for philosophical investigation” into understanding what people meant when they said what they did. To let Burke explain: “any complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers to these five questions: what
was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)” (xv). These five “elements” -- the act, the agent, the agency, the purpose and the scene – make up the dramatistic pentad.

**Container and Thing Contained**

Perhaps one of the most central ideas to dramatism is Burke's discussion of container and thing contained. The essential ideas being that the elements of the pentad can “contain” one another (1). This idea is fairly straightforward from a strictly dramatic perspective – the scene contains the actors, the act contains the purpose, etc. He used this notion to introduce the concept of ratios – dialectic and synecdochic interrelationships between each of the five elements and each of the others. The ten possible ratios being act-agent, act-agency, act-purpose, act-scene, agent-agency, agent-purpose, agent-scene, agency-purpose, agency-scene and purpose-scene. The order of the terms in the ratios, Burke notes, is largely arbitrary and can be reversed if necessary to make analysis clearer. The idea that the elements can “contain” one another is crucial to the central methodological step of dramatism – the identification of the “dominant” term or ratio in any artifact. Burke argue that the ratios serve as “principles of determination” (15), the central idea being that a critic will examine in turn each of the elements present in an artifact, take note of interesting ratios and discover which element is the “dominant” term – that is to say, which element's essential nature influences the nature of the other elements. If a critic can establish which element is dominant, then the critic can examine the philosophical terminology that underlies the conscious or unconscious authorial world view in any given artifact.

**The Philosophical Schools**

To understand how Burke intended the pentad to be employed we must examine its theoretical underpinnings – the vocabulary of philosophy. Burke believed that language had great
power, and, as Blakesley notes in *Elements of Dramatism*, constituted “a form of symbolic action...language is not simply a tool to be used by people (actors), but the basis for human beings acting together, and thus, of all human relations” (5). If language use is symbolic, then it has meaning, and if it has meaning than it can be said to have purpose. Burke sought out this purpose in order to “formulate the basic stratagems which people employ, in endless variations, and consciously or unconsciously, for the outwitting or cajoling of one another” (xvii).

These stratagems he observed in the arguments of various philosophical schools of thought – in their attempts to both recreate the world and argue for the veracity of that recreation he observed certain patterns of language. This led Burke to the idea that “speaking broadly, we could designate as 'philosophies' any statements in which these grammatical resources [the elements of the pentad] are utilized” (xvi). Each of the five elements of the pentad correspond to the ideas of a particular philosophic school, and one result of any pentadic analysis is to discover, by identifying the dominant term in any piece of rhetoric, the corresponding philosophical implications. Any description of an event, Burke contends, where the recreation is dramatistic in nature, will say not just what happened but will also imply what the speaker thinks about what happened. All statements about motive, as he would put it, are also statements about the world – how one sees the world, one's place in the world, the nature of things, the nature of people, etc. When considering that any description of the world is a rhetorical creation, then it becomes clear to what extent the pentad may be used as a “generating principle for inquiry” that would “enable” the critic to “anticipate these different idioms” of philosophy (Burke 127). The elements of the dramatistic pentad correspond as such:

For the featuring of scene, the corresponding philosophic terminology is materialism.

For the featuring of agent, the corresponding terminology is idealism.
For the featuring of agency, the corresponding terminology is pragmatism.

For the featuring of purpose, the corresponding terminology is mysticism.

For the featuring of act, the corresponding terminology is realism (Burke 128).

Burke argues that the philosophies featured in *Grammar of Motives* should be considered to be in a “hypothetical state of purity” (131) in order to avoid the inevitable wash of confusion from the migrating of terms from one school to another. He begins his search for each school with its definition from Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*. In his discussion of materialism he quotes Baldwin:

> materialism is defined as 'that metaphysical theory which regards all facts of the universe as sufficiently explained by the assumption of body or matter, conceived as extended, impenetrable, eternally existent, and susceptible of movement or change of relative position' (131)

In this chapter he discusses at length the work of classic materialist philosophers such as Hobbes and Spinoza. The central idea of the featuring of scene is, as Burke describes in his discussion of Darwin, “reducing all phenomena to terms of motion” (157) and describing the world as having arisen from the interaction of physical forces. For example, he notes that biologists such as Darwin refer to agents as organisms, a phrase he claims is “Grammatically the equivalent of ‘agent-minus’” and that “‘conditions’ [are] the locus of motives” (157) in materialist sources. We may consider, then, an artifact that features scene to be making a statement about the state or essential nature of the material world.

He begins his discussion of agent with another definition: “Idealism, in the Baldwin dictionary, is described thus: 'In metaphysics, any theory which maintains the universe to be throughout the work of reason and mind’” (171). He notes that “Idealistic philosophers think in terms of the 'ego,' the 'self,' the 'super-ego,' 'consciousness,' 'will,' the 'generalized I'...and any such
'super-persons' as church, race, nation, etc.” The idealist philosophers he discusses are centered around “the English empiricists Locke, Berkeley and Hume” (177). He sums up idealism as “the basic Berkelian equation: To be is to be perceived, 'esse is percipi.' And everything that makes up the 'real' world for us must meet this test” (178). For idealists, motion is dependent on the mind – it is the “equating of ideas with sensations” (181) that characterize idealism. The agent's reasoning is the source of action, and as such, are extensions of it. He also discusses the development of the idealist philosophy through Kant, Marx, Hegel and eventually Santayana. In all cases, however, he returns to the same discovery – that idealist philosophies describe the essential nature of things as concepts, and that these “essences” can, and in fact, often do exists far beyond the scope of a person's actual existence.

To open his chapter on the act he begins with Aquinas, who describes “existence as 'the act of essence'” (227) and Aristotle, who argues that “things are more or less real according as they are more or less energeia (actu, from which our 'actuality' is derived)”. (227) He sums up his introduction with Aquinas: “It is the nature of action that a like agent should produce a like action, since every thing acts according as it is an act”. Burke argues that “the Realist grammar ...begins with a tribal concept, and treats individuals as participants in this common substance, or element” (248), or, to summarize, “man's acts are characteristic of him” (250).

These elements of the pentad, act, agent and scene, are “the big three” (274) and thus take up the bulk of A Grammar of Motives. Agency and Purpose are considered together. Burke considers Baldwin's definition of pragmatism:

we read: 'This term is applied by Kant to the species of hypothetical imperative...which prescribes the means necessary to the attainment of happiness.' In accordance with our thesis, we here seize upon the reference to means, since we hold that Pragmatist philosophies are generated by the featuring of the term, Agency (275).
Burke struggles to find enough cogent philosophy to generate a grammar in pragmatism, noting that “in one sense, there must be as many 'pragmatisms' as there are philosophies. That is, each philosophy announces some view of human ends, and will acquire a corresponding doctrine of means” (275). He examines Papini's metaphor of “the pragmatist stress [as] the corridor in a hotel. Each room of the hotel may house a guest whose personal interests and philosophic views differ from those of the guests in the other rooms. But all guests use the corridor in common” (275-6), but ultimately rejects this in favor of a pragmatist doctrine that evaluates a thing by what it is good for, what its function is. He notes that “two men, performing the same motions side by side, might be said to be performing different acts, in proportion as they differed in their attitudes toward their work” (276). Pragmatism, he argues, makes “a concept synonymous with the corresponding set of operations” (280), giving the example of the same temperature recorded with two separate means: the two values will be different, but will represent the same material thing – the results are dependent on, and thus are the means by which they are obtained.

“In the Baldwin dictionary,” writes Burke, “we are told that Mysticism embraces 'those forms of speculative and religious thought which profess to attain an immediate apprehension of the divine essence of the ultimate ground of existence'” (287). He continues, noting that “often the element of unity per se is treated as the essence of mysticism. We should contend, however, that not mere unity, but unity of the individual with some cosmic or universal purpose is the mark of mysticism” (287-8).

Burke summarizes his discussion of philosophy by noting that our five terms are 'transcendental' rather than formal...in being categories which human thought necessarily exemplifies. Instead of calling them the necessary 'forms of experience,' however, we should call them the necessary 'forms of talk about experience.' For our concern is primarily with the analysis of language rather than with
the analysis of 'reality' (317).

The pentad represents thus a tool for the evaluation of a linguistic artifact. Using the pentad as a “generating principle” created from philosophical examination, as critics we can draw conclusions about what a rhetor is trying to say about the world and how they are trying to say it.

**Digital Games and Dramatism**

It is the contention of this paper that digital games represent a form of purposeful, symbolic communication that can be examined via the same techniques and methodologies as more “traditional” forms of symbolic communication. The basis for this assumption lies in several key theories of game design and criticism. While the former half of this assumption has gained widespread support among academic video game scholars, it is the latter which deserves a more careful analysis. In *Rules of Play*, Salen and Zimmerman outline three schemas for the study of digital games: as rules, as play, or as culture:

- RULES = the organization of the designed system
- PLAY = the human experience of that system
- CULTURE = the larger contexts engaged with and inhabited by the system (6).

To discuss games as sets of rules is certainly engaging from a perspective that seeks to find deep analysis of system mechanics, and to examine games as part of a larger culture is interesting from an anthropological or sociological perspective, but for the rhetorical critic the most germane idea is that games are play, that is, a system as experienced by the user. Salen and Zimmerman note that the schema do not exclude one another, “rather, they are conceptual design tools to help focus our thinking for particular design problems” (6). While Salen and Zimmerman's three schema are valuable as game design theories they have also been adopted by a new generation of game theorists. Jesper Juul in *Half Real* argues for a more hybridized approach:
“the main argument of this book [is that] video games are rules and fiction” (12). For example: "the rules of chess govern the movement of pieces; the representation fiction of chess is the shape and color of the pieces. No matter how the pieces are shaped, the rules, gameplay and strategies remain identical” (57). For this study, however, Juul's most critical argument is that “in the game design process, the game designer must select which aspects of the fictional world to actually implement in the game rules” (163). This notion is reminiscent of Burke's idea of selective vocabularies – the designer of a game can choose to model parts of the real world, but, because of either technological or rhetorical constraints, must choose which parts of this world to exclude. When recalling Davidson's argument that “the rhetorical elements are how the mechanics show the player how to play”, then it is not unreasonable to postulate that, in digital games that contain some representation about the real world, that the gameplay mechanics describe a rhetorical layer superimposed over these images. Without the gameplay present to describe the strategic and symbolic interrelations of these images, then, they are static and, while not completely robbed of their rhetorical weight, are in any case greatly diminished. As an examination of rhetoric, then, any analysis of a digital game can begin with the assumption that both game mechanics and the visual, written and audio symbols in the game can carry at least equal rhetorical weight.

To build a foundation for the power of dramatism to create new theoretical meaning in the study of the rhetoric of digital games we may begin by examining how the vocabulary of the pentad is already present in existing ideas about the medium. The clearest example is the discussion of agency which begins with Janet Murray, who describes agency in a computer application as

the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices...we expect to feel agency on the computer when we double-click on a file and see it open before us or when we enter numbers in a spreadsheet and see the
totals readjust. However, we do not usually expect to experience agency within a narrative environment (126).

This agency we can equate in a very real way with the element in Burke's pentad. The user becomes the agent and the user's “double-clicking” serves as the act. The program itself constitutes the scene and the purpose is the user's own. While this is an interesting idea it is not deep enough since it describes simply a means of interaction with a medium and not access to its content – the same pentad might be described of a potter throwing clay on a wheel; the artist feels the same sense of agency as the computer-user. Where this comparison fails (and the work of the rhetorical critic begins) is that this “pentad of observation” overlaps with the actual pentad of the work itself. Clay will not inform the potter that he or she has “won” at pottery and made a successful vase; but a digital game constructs (to borrow language from mathematical game theory”) a formalized incentive system. When a user interacts with a computer program the program will interact back.

This back-and-forth interaction is what many veteran game designers argue is the fundamental characteristic of their medium, an idea that is somewhat new to the field of rhetorical criticism. The primary importance of this observation is that the multiple pentads of a digital game all share a common point in agency: the means by which the player interacts with the game has implications both for themselves and for the game mechanics. It is important, then, to distinguish between what actions take place in the game (or inside the “magic circle”) and outside that game (the actual clicks of the mouse and button inputs of the user). Because the peculiarities of it is important to briefly discuss who the “rhetor” is in a digital game, since the player's input is required for any message to exist at all. In many ways questions of the origin of any specific playing of a game are fundamentally outside the scope of rhetorical criticism, since they would
require a discussion of sociology or psychology since they deal with the mind of the player as well as the designer. Rhetorical critics must restrict themselves the design of a digital game, as discussing an actual user experience is so difficult -- studying what the designers allow a user to create, rather than what users do create.

**Methodology**

In *Rhetorical Criticism*, Foss describes the procedure for pentadic analysis: “the critic who wishes to use pentadic criticism as the source for units of analysis approaches an artifact in four steps: (1) selecting an artifact; (2) selecting a unit of analysis; (3) analyzing the artifact; and (4) writing the critical essay” (457).

The artifact for this study is a digital game called *Tropico* released in 2001 by PopTop games and designed by Phil Steinmeyer. In it, the player serves as the dictator of a small Caribbean island during the Cold War. The game is a “city-builder” similar in scope to *SimCity* but with more depth of local color in the vein of *Caesar's* ancient Rome, the imperial Egypt of *Pharaoh* or the ancient China of *Emperor: Rise of the Middle Kingdom*. As the game deals in depth with both political, social and economic variables, my research question is this: can digital game designers make arguments about real political ideals? Whether or not *Tropico* itself actually serves as a serious argument is immaterial; the academic importance of this research question is that such conscious design decisions are (1) possible and (2) accessible to the rhetorical critic through dramatistic analysis. Since the pentad itself serves as the “generating principle” by which we obtain our units of analysis (the elements of the pentad) the next step is to conduct the analysis.

The first step in the analysis will be to identify all of the elements of the pentad, both those shared by the user and the program and those that exist within the program itself. These elements
will be identified both from nonergodic symbolic elements such as graphics, sounds, passages of
text, etc. as well as ergodic elements such as gameplay mechanics, symbolic interrelationships and
procedural outcomes. After these elements are considered in depth, the predominant ratios will be
identified. The examination of ratios will ultimately lead into an argument about which element is
predominant and at that point, conclusions about the philosophic “world” presented by Tropico
(as well as its rhetorical implications) can be made.

Conclusion

It is my contention that Burke's methodology of pentadic analysis or dramatism serves as a
perfect model for the analysis of certain digital games; namely those that attempt to model some
aspect of the real world – this simulation serves as a form of digital reflection that can be analyzed
in the same way as a linguistic vocabulary. Foss notes that

pentadic criticism provides a means to understand the way in which a rhetor
encompasses a situation through rhetoric – through the selection and highlighting of
particular terms – it is particularly useful for answering questions about
rhetors'...attempts to structure audiences' perceptions of situations (457-8).

Digital games can present a “situation” as an interactive world the user may participate in.
In Tropico a player is given such a situation and must manage the economic, social and political
terrain presented. In this experience I will attempt to draw conclusions about the implications of
design choice on both “structuring of audience perception” and the creation of an underlying
philosophical ideal.
Application

Introduction

Before being able to draw general conclusions about the nature of ergodicity, it is important to begin with a close examination of a single artifact. With the principles of Burke's dramatism as a tool for analysis, this study will examine one game in depth in order to make arguments about potential meanings it may contain. In this section I will apply the ideas of pentadic analysis to my artifact. I will introduce each part of the dramatistic pentad in turn, propose rhetorical interpretations and come to conclusions about meaning. Then I will examine several of the dramatistic ratios to further develop my analysis.

Before beginning the analysis, we must come to an understanding of the special problems associated with applying the pentad to digital games. Let us say that we would begin a pentadic analysis with a discussion of the scene. When we attempt to define what is the scene in a digital game, we are faced with a quandary. Many things in the game could be described as the scene, and, in fact, many of them may be the scene if one considers a game from one perspective and not when considered from another. On a symbolic level, the scene in a digital game may be the place that is represented. That is to say, in our case, that the scene would be the island of Tropico itself, as if it were another place that the game were either accessing or simulating. On another level the scene may be the user interface. So, the island of Tropico as the user experiences it – with informational panels and floating arrows and overlays – things that would not exist in real life and are summaries of information that would be presented otherwise in the “real world” to an actual El Presidente. This means that the “scene” includes the opening and closing cinematics and the main menu, as well as the row of buttons on the bottom of the screen and the mouse pointer itself. The game may also be considered as a set of interacting tokens, and this may be the scene – the
“state machine” created by the interaction of the game's internal calculations and the player's commands. On this level, the scene is not supposed to be a “real” place in the sense that anything is being reproduced by the game, but rather the game serves as an excuse for the scene – it would not be “Tropico” but a series of tokens and variables. Finally, the scene may be the game itself – that is to say, a software application with a series of commands and functions available to the user. I will consider each of these possibilities.

Part of the problem with defining the scene, or indeed any part of the dramatistic pentad, is that digital games themselves are hard to define. They straddle so many boundaries, between fiction and computer program, between toy and simulation, that any definition tends to exclude many things that many people would consider to be “a computer game.” As a way of approaching this discussion from the software side, if I were to examine a spreadsheet program, as Murray does in her discussion of agency, I could present myself with the same set of quandaries when trying to define the scene. Is the scene of Microsoft Excel, for example, an endless grid of numbered boxes or the concept of things being laid out in rows? Is it a “spread sheet” as a simulation of the forms accountants would actually use in the analog eras to keep track of their information, or is it the series of buttons and commands provided by Microsoft to help the user manage that information? Approaching the problem from this side seems recursive.

By considering the application of the pentad to literature, however, I find that these questions of interactivity are easily resolved. By remembering the unicursal vs. multicursal labyrinth metaphor, that is to say, one that can only be traversed one way and another that may be experienced multiple ways, it is clear that, at some point, these distinction between multiple scenes is arbitrary: I would not argue that the scene of a novel is the novel itself, a collection of ordered black marks on a series of sheets of paper, or that it was the user interface of the novel,
the shape and style of the chapter headings, etc. Nor would I declare that the scene was a book, and that the turning of pages was the act, and the reader the agent. This insight breaks down some of the distinctions caused by interactivity and we may make some assumptions about where the scene lies in a digital game. The trappings of the game – the buttons, the menus, the mouse pointers, the cinematics, and so on, we can find equivalent to the chapter breaks of a novel. Considering the scene to be the game is just as curious as considering the scene of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* to be a 900-page sheaf of paper. What we are left with if we wish to access the real rhetorical content of a digital game is that we must consider the simulation of a world, and that the game simply provides us access to it. Thus, the conclusion is that the scene of *Tropico* is the island of Tropico, beginning in 1950. The discussion above does not simply serve as an academic detour to an obvious solution, it allows this criticism to more strictly define what is and, perhaps more importantly, what is not part of any particular pentadic element, and, as such come to a more satisfying conclusion. What we can ignore when rhetorically unpacking a digital game is just as helpful, if not more so, than what we must pay attention to.

**Description of the Artifact**

*Tropico* is a “city-building” game of strategic economic management set on a Caribbean island, starting in 1950 during the height of the Cold War, designed by Phil Steinmeyer, developed by his company, PopTop games, and distributed in 2001 by Gathering of Developers. The player of *Tropico* assumes the role of “El Presidente,” the autocratic tyrant of the island of Tropico and manages the lives of its citizens. The player is in charge of the construction and placement of new buildings and their wages, rents and fees, as well as a variety of social and governmental policies. The game play of *Tropico* feels very familiar in many respects to players of other games in the same genre including, among others, *SimCity*. However, unlike the settings of many similar
games, Tropico is populated by discrete citizen units who act according to their own desires instead of population “effects” calculated behind-the-scenes. This is what drives the primary game play decisions – to appease the residents of Tropico. Each Tropican comes with their own set of desires and dislikes, as well as an opinion about the island's leadership and loyalty to one or more political factions. There are six political factions on the island, most with mutually contradictory goals, and player success is dependent on appeasing the majority of residents in order to avoid being voted out of office in one of the game's periodic elections, deposed in a military coup d'etat, popular revolution, guerrilla rebellion or foreign intervention. The player may define various victory criteria before the game begins, which includes general citizen happiness, the size of the island's treasury or the size of El Presidente's personal Swiss bank account.

The island of Tropico is populated with a number of individuals, divided into two groups: citizens of the island and tourists. Each citizen has a personal and family history, including relationships with other “Tropicans.” They will have certain likes and dislikes which are randomly generated to some extent, but more popular positions become more and more likely as the game progresses. Each Tropican will have a job and will belong to various political factions. From the Tropico FAQ:

Employment is sorted into three main categories: uneducated, high school, and college. Jobs that would allow uneducated citizens include the following: dockworkers, farmers, miners, and prostitutes. Jobs that need at least high school education include: shopkeepers, teachers, and priests. Lastly, jobs that need college level education include the following: generals, bishops, bankers, doctors, and journalists. All citizens in their job will start off with a skill level 0, and they will be able to work their way up to a skill level 5 (or less, depending on their intelligence).

The six political factions in Tropico are the intellectuals, the environmentalists, the militarists, the capitalists, the communists and the religious faction. The extent to which a particular Tropican identifies with any faction will affect how their opinion of El Presidente
changes when conditions of the island change. For example, intellectuals want well-funded high
schools, colleges and lots of freedom, the environmentalists want a clean island, the communists
want equitable pay and affordable housing, and so on. Each faction also has a leader whose
personal opinion of El Presidente is very powerful. Each Tropican will also have a job. Indeed,
this is how Tropicans are visually identified on the main game interface – each job on Tropico will
change the appearance of the citizen who fills it. In addition to regular “jobs,” Tropicans will also
become “students,” “retirees,” “mothers,” “unemployed” and begin life as “children.” Each
Tropican will live a complete life cycle on Tropico, they will be born, wander around as a child,
and, upon turning 13, will become an adult and get a job or go to school until the mandatory
retirement age, when they will wander around until they die. Tourists will arrive on the island as
soon as there is something to spend money on and someplace for them to stay, and will wander
around, spending money, until they lose enough happiness to drive them off or run out of money.

While the game always refers to the player as “El Presidente,” exactly who El Presidente is
varies from game to game and can, often dramatically, change the nature of the game. Before
playing, the player must “create” a Presidente by choosing various attributes, including how they
rose to power, their background, positive traits and negative traits. These initial character-
creation steps will affect some things on the island, (for example, a player with the “Green
Thumb” trait will increase agricultural production) some relationships with certain political
factions (the island's capitalists will mistrust a leader installed by a communist revolution) or
relationships with foreign powers (such as a flatulent Presidente, who will lose foreign aid each
year to “sensitive U.N. microphones” or an alcoholic, who enjoys increased relations with
Russia). Players can define their own Presidente from the ground up, or they can choose from a
variety of famous and infamous revolutionaries and despots including Fidel Castro, “Che”
The player's primary actions in the game will be the placement of new buildings. The game features 60 different buildings which have a variety of effects on the game. These include housing, tourism, industry, infrastructure, military, human services and agriculture, among others. Each building provides its own effects – housing will provide Tropicans a place to sleep, agriculture will produce food to eat and to export, industry will refine raw materials for export, and so on. Tropicans will spend time at their “job” building for a set amount of hours, and then will leave. In their “free time” Tropicans will try to fulfill their “needs” they will eat if they are hungry, return home to sleep if they are tired, go to the church if they need religion, go to the doctor if they are sick, go to a pub if they are bored, and so on.

In addition to the construction of buildings, the player can also act by issuing various “edicts” which change the nature of the game. Players can issue “political” edicts to change their relationship with either the U.S. or the USSR, “social” edicts that affect the economy or the behavior of citizens or “personal” edicts such as bribery, assassination or imprisonment that are targeted at a specific Tropican. El Presidente can also access various information overlays which allow the player to see the effect of various buildings on the island by rendering it in shades of green and red. Many buildings have what the developers describe as an “aura” -- an invisible radius of something that affects the other buildings and citizens. These effects are accessed through the information overlays, which also give access to things like the fishing value of waters surrounding the island, the fertility of soil, the average rainfall patterns, the location of subsurface minerals and other properties of the island itself, in addition to information about individual buildings, like occupancy, profitability, etc. The final information overlays allow the player to see individual Tropicans – it renders an arrow shaded in the same scheme as the on-the-ground
patterns, but allows you to visualize which citizens are the most natural leaders, or have the most respect for your government, or any iteration of a Tropicman's overall happiness score. These overlays and edicts allow the player to interact with the game in a much more robust way than simply deciding which buildings to place and watching construction workers build them. Game play continues in this way, in real time, for a set amount of “years” in game time. At the end of a predetermined amount of time, ranging from 50 to 70 “years,” the game ends and the player’s score is calculated.

**The Scene**

We can begin, then, to describe Tropico as a place. It is a small Caribbean island, governed by a single autocratic ruler. Tropico may have excellent fishing waters nearby. It may have any number of trees and it also may have veins of gold, iron or bauxite (from which aluminum is refined). It may have low-lying or flat lands and it may have high, rocky lands. The people of Tropico are always Catholic and predominantly communist. These are the constants of the scene. What may change from playing to playing are the particular makeup of the island's political demographics and the relations the country shares with the United States and the Soviet Union. The character of the island's populous may be altered by starting a game with a different set of characteristics for El Presidente. What we may also consider is that a player may choose to either play a “regular” game of Tropico with randomly generated conditions, wherein the island will always start with a presidential palace, with a single soldier guarding it, a dock, some corn farms and as many rubble shacks as are needed to house the residents, or a “scenario” where an island will come prepackaged with its own victory conditions and appearance. While these setup options will certainly result in a wide variety of maps, except for the ending conditions, the player will have access to the same game play. And, finally, although the player may define any length of
time to play the game, the story of *Tropico* always begins in 1950 at the height of the Cold War, and, of course, always on Tropico.

This last point is certainly salient for the critic even though to the player of the game it might seem obvious. It is not just to say that the game always takes place in the same “place,” but that the trappings of the place are always the same. Any playing of the game will necessarily bring the player into consciousness of the same tokens, again and again. Each time the game is played the player will need corn farms, schools, dockworkers and tenements. Governmental control is always a result of military and police and newspapers will always increase freedom. While this is not a profound insight, this basic realization allows this criticism to discuss the rhetorical nature of these relationships that always exist as part of the scene.

Perhaps the easiest examples of these relationships are religion, health care and education. As El Presidente, it is the player's prerogative to set the prices for service buildings. This can be used either to recoup money spent on wages as fees at the pub or to keep lower-class Tropicans out of desirable tourist destinations by setting the prices above their monthly salaries. However, at the high school, college, church, cathedral, clinic and hospital the prices are fixed. Instead of the normal price-setting interface of a grid of coins, the player is presented with a simple message: “education (or 'health care' or 'religion') is always free on Tropico.” The implications here for the scene are both clear and obvious: Tropico is a place where education is always free. The same observation can be said about other aspects of the game as well. El Presidente can build a prison, for example, but the prison's only function is to incarcerate specific citizens (usually leaders of political factions, protesters or popular – and thus threatening – members of the military), not to fight actual crimes. A conclusion for the scene is this: Tropico is always a place where the prisons are full of El Presidente's enemies. Government actions usually restrict rights, if not removing
them altogether. Even if a player did not choose to build a prison (or, for that matter, a high school or church), the scene remains the same. Since the story of *Tropico* is ergodic, a player can choose which parts he or she wants to experience, but cannot change the parts of the story they never encounter. Should a player ever build a cathedral, they could not charge their citizens for the use of it.

The final piece of the scene puzzle is the scenic component to the Tropicans themselves. Burke notes in *A Grammar of Motives* that someone's physical appearance may very well constitute a scenic element (10). In *Tropico*, your citizens' physical appearance will be defined by what they do. An individual Tropican may be a banker, or a general, or a doctor, etc. Their physical appearance will change if they select a new occupation. The elements of their “persona,” however, are not outwardly visible. You may “click” on an individual Tropican and find out what they like to spend their free time doing, whether or not they are hungry, or how much respect they have for you, but with few exceptions these are not visible on the map. The most notable exception is that when a Tropican's desire for a particular thing causes them to change their behavior, a tiny “thought balloon” will appear momentarily over their heads. In a sense, a Tropican's individual appearance is just a “suit” that they wear, as it has no bearing on their actions or attitudes.

These appearances contribute to the scene in two ways, the first is a very immediately visual way – rich, blue suited bankers will swagger around with cigars in their mouths, lanky, bow-legged fishermen will amble slowly back from the docks, peasant farmers are dressed in loose-fitting equatorial clothing and straw hats, and so on. The second way in which Tropicans' appearances contribute to the scene has to do with gender and class roles on the island. As a place and a time, the setting of *Tropico* also contains certain realities insofar as an individual person is
free to do what they like. Many jobs on Tropico, especially at the lowest-paying levels, are available to both sexes of Tropicans – farmers, construction workers and factory workers can be of either gender – but many jobs are segregated. Only women, for example, can be high school teachers, while only men can be college professors. What is interesting is the way in which this was handled by the designers – what is most notable is not how Tropico has similar gender roles as the “real life” Cold War-era Caribbean, but that it does not. An average player might expect a world with clear genders to conform to stereotypical gender roles – men working and holding positions of power and women taking care of families, and so on. To a certain extent this is the case – only women can be maids, waitresses and cooks and only men can be priests, miners, bankers and soldiers, and so on (In a clear division of gender roles, only women can be cabaret dancers, and only men can patronize a cabaret).

However, this is not always the case. Only women, for example, can be engineers (that run power plants and airports), journalists and administrators (that run the diplomatic ministry and immigration office). In addition, women will take time off of their jobs to become “mothers” in yellow dresses and white sun hats in order to produce more children. These realities are always extant on the island, and so “built in” to any game of Tropico are very specific gender roles.

Additionally there are quite clear class distinctions on Tropico, centered around education level. There are three “levels” of education on the island, and at each level new jobs are available. A Tropican may decide to “slum it,” so to speak, and put their university education to work as a corn farmer, but not the other way around. In order to get Tropicans to go to school (which must be voluntary), there must be high-paying jobs available to entice them. Thus, college educated Tropicans will have the nicest houses and be able to visit the most expensive buildings, while the poorest Tropicans will tend to be laborers who live in tenements or shacks and visit the least
desirable buildings. Just as was the case for gender realities on Tropico, the game's scene includes certain realities of social stratification based on education.

In the end, then, the world view created scenically by *Tropico* is one of certain progressive political attitudes. In this game, citizens are clearly stratified according to their gender and educational level, but not according to race, national origin or nearly any other commonly-held prejudice. A citizen (or, for that matter, a tourist) on the island may be from Boston or Berlin or Port-Au-Prince, but will always appear exactly the same.

Indeed, the concept of prejudice itself is not present on Tropico because it is not possible (except manually and arbitrarily) to discriminate against people. Candidates for jobs will be automatically hired if they possess the single requirement necessary – an education. To explore this further, Tropico presents a world in which social advancement is available to everyone, regardless of their background. Education is free and limited only by the capacities of the schools. Furthermore, education is the cause and enabler of social mobility – without an advanced degree a citizen cannot hold a technical position. This can clearly be construed as an argument for the proper role of education in society and the importance of universal access to education for all people.

A parallel conclusion can be realized for the other social services on Tropico – clearly a world view that construes health care as freely available to everyone, regardless of their ability to pay for it – indeed, in spite of this – can be seen as presenting an argument for both the conception of health care as a universal human right as well as a need for socialized health care that eclipses even the egregious human rights violations an otherwise dictatorial Presidente would visit on his population – a dissenting citizen could be imprisoned for life or executed in the streets,
but not under any circumstances, denied access to the hospital.

These rather progressive political ideals are mirrored in the gender roles present in the game. In any game of *Tropico* in which a player wishes to build a structure that uses electricity – typically the most effective and most profitable in the game, that player will need a large group of highly-educated women to run it. In this case the game clearly presents the world view of a society reliant on a female workforce. The rhetorical implications are that the advanced education of women, as well as the need for women to hold powerful, influential positions in society, are a foregone conclusion. The game essentially argues that women must be in positions of power because society could not function without it.

This liberal political position is also mirrored in the treatment of the political parties, especially the two with the most “political” positions, the communists and capitalists. The others – environmentalists, religious, militarists and intellectuals – hold more “issue-oriented” platforms with specialized requirements, but whether the communist faction or the capitalist faction is happy will depend on more broad-scale social realities. The perspective the game presents of these two factions is itself telling. It can be argued that the developers tend to sympathize with the communist movement in general, based on the desires of the party on Tropico. The communists always want a fair wage for all workers, adequate housing and social services and and equitable distribution of income – all ideas that sound like they come from the AFL-CIO rather than than any popular American conception of Communism during the Cold War. Indeed, the creators of the game could have chosen to make Tropico's communists much more conventional, demanding government control of resources, centralized means of production and a strong state authority. These, however, are all already present on the island, so those who consider themselves “communists” seek social justice, not an aggrandized “people's government.”
By casting the party in “opposition” to communism as “capitalists,” the game makes an interesting rhetorical statement. There are no “democratists” on the island who seek popular government as its own end. Tropico's intellectuals will be miffed if you do not run a fair election, but are much more concerned with the presence of schools, literacy programs, etc. The primary desire of the island's capitalists is profit – the size of the island's treasury is of utmost importance, and to that end they demand development. While the island's communists will be perfectly content to work on state-owned farms as long as everyone has a job to go to, a clean house and access to the doctor, the island's capitalists want El Presidente to industrialize, develop the tourism sector and, in general, grow the economy. What is most interesting of all is that these two positions overlap. A Tropican may consider themselves both a capitalist and a communist, desiring both industrialization and equitable wages. A curious inclusion because the stereotypical assumption might be that number of people who, in 1950, would or even could publicly declare themselves both were probably few and far between. The implications of this are clear: immediately it can be argued that the game presents a world where communist and capitalist ideals are not only compatible but symbiotic, and, in effect, that the most effective governments ought to strive for a mixture of both profit and community.

The remaining political factions also have a great deal of rhetorical importance. Their presence alone speaks volumes – most notably the environmentalists, who want a clean, pollution-free island, an idea that seems strangely out of place for an agrarian dictatorship. Indeed, often environmental goals are secondary if not contradictory to the industrial or agricultural concerns of real-world developing nations. Admittedly, the environmentalists, along with the intellectuals, are the smallest factions, but still command the attentions of not a few of El Presidente's citizens. The implications of this are quite clear – that progressive political ideals like access to education and
environmental regulation are not partisan “issues” but foregone political conclusions that demand attention.

In the end the scene of *Tropico* is much different than the “scene” of what someone might expect of a genuine attempt at simulation – this in and of itself is not a criticism, because Tropico is clearly possessed of not a little tongue-in-cheek cynicism and so represents its own world, perhaps as commentary on traditional political realities, perhaps as an idealized political environment – but in any case, El Presidente clearly ought to be prepared to enter into a world more informed by contemporary American progressive ideas than historical South American ones.

**Agent**

In the world of Tropico there are numerous entities that it is tempting to label as agents. Some of these are clear – the player's character as El Presidente is clearly an agent, since they are integral to the story. The individual citizens as a collection of atomistic individuals can also be grouped roughly together as a quantity of agents. Where we may hesitate to apply this category is to forces who, while they certainly affect the ongoing game, are so similar from game to game, that is to say, always like and dislike the same things, will always act in predetermined ways, etc., are the political factions of Tropico and the powers of the Cold War, namely the United States and the Soviet Union. Since these forces are always present in the game, and do not act on their own but react to decisions that occur in the game, it may be fair to characterize them as a part of the scene rather than as agents in the story. To say that the United States has intervened on Tropico and sent gunboats to patrol the waters certainly seems indicative of the desires of an agent, but these actions are taken in direct response to the actions taken by the player. Even the opinions these groups have are based on both the player's characteristics and play decisions. The Soviet Union does not have a choice if you were to set your Diplomatic Ministry to “pro-Russian
policies” and issue several “Praise Russia” edicts. Their opinion of you as a leader would rise automatically. The same is true for the political groups on the island – they will be happy when they get what they want, otherwise they will be angry.

At this point, it would be tempting to extend this line of analysis to the individual Tropicans themselves. However, what excepts the island's citizens from this are two things: first, they will change from game to game. They are randomly created and are each possessed of their own desires and motivations, and, secondly, that, while their actions can be managed as a collective, their actions as individuals cannot be controlled. An important distinction must be made here – their bodies are scenic, but, for the lack of a better term, their “selves” are clearly agents. Even if their own decisions are controlled by a strict mathematical calculus, this should not matter for the rhetorical critic, since the player does not (and arguably should not) have access to the source code for the game, and the actual composition of any island's populace can only be estimated by the player, never truly anticipated. The language of the game itself even goes so far as to make this clear – in the “tutorial” mission the player is warned that he or she cannot “force” a Tropican to take a particular job because “they have free will!” This language choice settles the matter – even if the realities of software mean they are automatons, dramatically they are clearly supposed to be participants.

Any discussion of agent in a digital game will also have to include the reality of the player. In many games the player will be represented by a player character, sometimes with a visible “avatar,” sometimes not. In Tropico, the player is El Presidente and governs the island as they see fit. It may seem straightforward, (perhaps even obvious) but the decision to let the player experience Tropico as El Presidente is certainly a rhetorically important decision. Specializations and particular talents aside, a developer could clearly create whatever game they wanted to. This
fact alone allows us to generate some immediate conclusions. The most important is that all of the decisions on the island, good or bad, that are made by El Presidente are made by the player, which means that every time a dissident is locked up or kicked off the island, or whenever repressive policies are enacted, people are summarily executed or bribed it is because the player did it. This idea is extended by the “character creation” section of the game where the player must choose what strengths and weaknesses that their Presidente will have before playing the game.

This, in effect humanizes the actions of the world's dictators – which can be seen as either an endorsement, or what is more likely, a further condemnation, since actions considered abhorrent by the international community are not wrought by monsters or super-villains but human beings who have, in a sense, ignored their own humanity for their own particular ends. This also creates a certain amount of contemplation on the part of the user – people may for the first time in their lives (or at least their gaming careers) be considering having one of their political enemies permanently imprisoned. The decision to stomp any of an endless number of cartoonish “bad guys,” while certainly important, does not carry this same significance. The flip side to this is that the Tropicans, possessed of their own agency and thus agents, are also presented as human beings – irrational (or at least erratic but somewhat predictable) and moved by their own desires, political and family affiliations. If you have someone gunned down in the street, other citizens that see it will be affected, and their opinion of you will drop. In spite of its sometimes comic treatment of the situation, Tropico creates a very humanizing world view in which political actors are not only held accountable for their decisions, but must acknowledge their own failings and strengths. Even El Presidente, with his or her sycophantic assistants and total control over the island is still just a person. What this implies is that all leaders are “just people” and that any system which exalts a single person perhaps ought to be reconsidered (if not abolished). Players
may choose to be any of a wide variety of historical dictators – and it is not insubstantial to note
that in any given game of *Tropico*, we may find “Papa Doc” Duvalier or Manuel Noriega in
collusion with United States-backed capitalist forces, building schools and hospitals and
encouraging a free press. In this world where the player-dictator is free to act, the background of
any one person is not a guarantee of how they will lead. This, ultimately, is still an individual
choice. The implications here are a radical denial of apologist or historicist perspectives – in this
world view a leader, any leader, at any point in time, could always have been a “good” leader,
regardless of the necessities of the time or personal ambitions. Ultimately we must consider “El
Presidente” -- whoever he or she is, with whatever qualities, to be the agent of the game.

**Act**

Some difficulties arise when attempting to identify other elements in the pentad, such as
act and agency, in an ergodic work. Allow me to begin with an example. Let us say, for example,
that a player places a lumber mill. The scene and the agent are clear here: the player is the agent,
the island is the scene, etc. The player's purpose is interesting but we will discuss it in a moment.
What actually happens is this: the player will move the mouse to the “build” menu, and will select
the “natural resources” sub-menu, and then the “lumber mill” button. When the player returns the
mouse to the island map they will see a shaded yellow “footprint” of the as-yet-unbuilt lumber
mill. The player will select a location, and click the button. The lumber mill is thus ordered to be
built, and nearby construction workers will arrive on the location, clear out the ground and
construct the building. We can say, then, that the act is a number of things: ordering a building to
be constructed, placing a “footprint,” clicking a number of buttons, etc. But if agency represents
the means by which an act is accomplished, then each of these things could also be said to be the
agency. The implication of this dilemma is that we could banish one of these elements to the realm
of the computer, that is to say, if the act is “El Presidente ordered the construction of a lumber mill,” then the agency is the series of clicks and commands required to carry it out.

This, however, is an unsatisfying conclusion. The problem we face is that there seem to be multiple overlapping pentads at work in any ergodic medium. The game itself will present a world where the elements of dramatism exist and can be examined, but the player his- or herself will also be possessed of their own agency, and will certainly themselves be an agent and commit acts, etc. With this realization (that we are falling into the same trap as in our discussion of scene) we can make more subtle distinctions about the world presented in the game. From a strictly representational point of view, then, the act in our example is the commissioning of the building, but the agency is El Presidente's power, so to speak, as a unitary executive. No one else on Tropico gets to decide what buildings are constructed, and where. The conclusion we can draw from this understanding is that, within an interactive medium, even if we consider that the user and the medium coordinate via an overlap in agency, that, for critical purposes we must still examine the simulated or imagined means within the scene by which the actions of the player are enabled.

We can begin, then, to discuss individually what acts and agencies exist on the island of Tropico. While it is certainly true that the majority of power on the island rests with the player's character, the citizens of Tropico have free will. They do not do what they are told, but rather what they want. As El Presidente, you can pay your tobacco farmers more than your corn farmers, which will cause Tropicans to gravitate naturally towards higher-paying jobs, but you cannot force anyone to work on a particular farm. You can, however, fire a particular Tropican from job after job until they eventually choose to work at the building you have in mind, but it is clear even in this case that the leader's agency is thus subsequent to the individual citizen's.
A wide variety of acts are available to El Presidente, and not without reason, since the choices available to the player at any given moment are what constitute the game. The most immediately apparent of these is the placement of new buildings, which most players will spend the majority of their time doing. In fact, as the game's website notes, “there is only one building that a Tropican will build by himself - a shanty. This is a barely adequate bit of shelter that they create wherever they can find space if you do not provide adequate housing. Living in a shanty for any length of time will make a Tropican angry” (FAQ).

El Presidente may set wages and fire employees from a building, but, curiously, may not hire a specific person unless they are hiring a foreigner with a specific level of education. Similarly the player sets the rent of buildings and may evict tenants, but cannot assign specific housing. A player can also set various options at buildings in the game that affect how they function – what crop a farm will grow, what kind of fuel a power plant should use, the level of maintenance at housing developments, what is broadcast or published at media buildings, the kind of care at clinics and hospitals, the kind of education at schools, the length of the work day for construction workers and teamsters, and so on. A few are exceptionally notable – for example, El Presidente may order a bank, which is normally set to “economic development” and reduces the cost of construction, to either “presidential slush fund,” which funnels money out of the treasury and into the leader's private Swiss bank account, or to “tourist off-shore banking” which generates income from wealthy tourists. Similarly interesting are the immigration office and foreign ministry (both of which, it should be noted, can only be staffed by female administrators). The immigration office may be set to “open immigration,” “love it or leave it,” (which increases emigration,) “Tropico first,” (which reduces immigration) “skilled workers welcome,” and, perhaps most rhetorically, “no one gets out of here alive” (which reduces emigration to nothing). The foreign ministry is
necessary to request development aid from a foreign country and may be set to “pro-U.S.
policies,” pro-Russia policies” and “neutral policies.” -- a function which only serves to reinforce
the extent to which the actual Cold War is largely scenic. The United States and Russia cannot
react (for the most part) to your actual government policies, just to whatever setting your foreign
ministry is on.

In addition to these functions, El Presidente also has access to a robust system of “edicts”
which change the play of the game. These are divided into five categories: “personal,” “social,”
“economic,” “foreign policy,” and “political/religious.” Personal edicts are enacted against specific
members of the population, and include “arrest,” (which throws someone into prison) “bribe,”
(which raises their opinion of you for a price) “eliminate” (in public, with an AK-47) and
“heretic” (which causes them to be ignored by other Tropicans). The social edicts include things
like “prohibition,” “contraception ban,” “anti-litter ordinance” and the happiness-boosting “Food
for the People,” which doubles the amount of food everyone consumes. Economic edicts include
ad campaigns for industry and tourism, “tax cut,” and “special' building permit,” which pads the
price of construction and delivers that extra to El Presidente's Swiss bank account. Foreign Policy
edicts deal with policies towards the United States and Russia and allow the player to gain
development aid, trade deals, military alliances or just generic praise towards a particular country.
The “Political/Religious” edicts have perhaps the most interesting effects, allowing amnesty for
rebels, calling early elections, opening the jails to let prisoners out and most of the “no turning
back” edicts like “inquisition” and “martial law.” A particularly religious Presidente can also
commission a “Papal visit” or hold an ironically-titled “book BBQ.” These functions extend the
power of the player far beyond the typical scope enjoyed by players of similar games who are
usually restricted to placing buildings and setting tax rates.
The rhetorical implications of this breadth of executive power can be seen as an argument for the wide-reaching capacities of real-world leaders to either effect genuine social change or enforce existing social standards of behavior. Indeed, in *Tropico*, the leader of the island is not simply the leader of the economic infrastructure, but the enforcer of social ideals. This speaks to not only the centrality of executive power, but if its necessity to enact any of these changes at all – for any changes to take place, no matter how popular, there must eventually be governmental consent. Widespread support for any given action among the populace can only be truly realized with the permission of the governmental system.

**Agency**

Related to the acts that can be performed by both the citizens of the island and El Presidente is the agency, or means, by which these acts are possible. Although the acts are present ergodically, that is to say, that the acts themselves exist as potential things that could change the state of the game, the agency is a constant, an exists only in the fictional world of the game. Put simply, El Presidente has the agency to command such a wide variety of actions because on Tropico, El Presidente has singular unitary power as the island’s leader. Ultimately all decisions about the island are up to El Presidente. What is interesting, however, is that this agency, however potent and far-reaching, does not ultimately come from the government, but from the citizens of the island itself.

For example, a certain amount of agency is extended to Tropicans themselves beyond normal day-to-day activities, and usually in response to a presidential policy decision they disapprove of. Tropicans can protest in the streets, for example. They will stop working and a burning Tropican flag will appear over their head. Any other Tropicans that encounter this individual will have their opinion of El Presidente's government slightly lowered. When a
Tropican's opinion drops too low, they may abandon their job and become a revolutionary guerrilla. At this point they vanish off of the map and reappear only during periodic attacks on the machinery of the state, attacking power plants, airports, hospitals, etc. The last agency extended to Tropicans is much less explicit – Tropico is (at least nominally) a democratic state. All adult Tropicans get to vote whenever there is an election (unless of course El Presidente was “Installed by the CIA,” in which case there aren't any elections). If a player loses the election to their opponent – one of the leaders of the six political factions – then the player loses the game. It is by this interaction that the player must split his or her agency with the citizens of the island – if happiness drops too low, a player may be voted out of office. El Presidente may decide not to allow elections to take place, but suffers the additional risk of angering any extremely vocal opponents and filling the ranks of the guerrillas with angry citizens.

The rhetorical implications of this are immediate and clear – the game presents, basically, a point-by-point proof of a traditional “social contract” theory of governance wherein the leader gains acceptance only through popular concession, and that the people may (and perhaps even ought to) take action against that leader when they see fit. The leader in this world view is dependent on Tropicans to run both the economy and the machinery of the state, and, to remain in power for anything other than a brief “reign of terror” must ultimately capitulate and act in the people's interest (or, in effect, in the interest of the peoples' happiness). Indeed, it is not possible to play Tropico in anything other than a “social contract” environment and so it can be argued that the game attempts to serve as a platform that promotes this view. Curiously, however, this view is also weighted against the sheer scope of presidential power in the game. As mentioned above, there are a wide variety of edicts that El Presidente can issue to change the course of the game. Most of them require the outlay of capital and many have additional requirements. While it
may be tempting to end this analysis with an argument that the game is in favor of martial law or book burnings, it is more appropriate to suggest that game is supposed to take place in a world where these things could happen – or, more accurately, where El Presidente could enact martial law if he or she saw fit, and would only need to press a button. True, a player will need to curry favor with the island's militarists or religious factions before attempting to enact martial law or religious persecution, but there is no need for collusion with your generals or elaborate planning in the end – you just select the item, as if off of a menu. In conjunction with the game's social contract bent, there seems to be a world view that celebrates a depth of executive power. El Presidente, though popularly elected, is certainly not limited to the political deal-cutting and compromise of a democracy. El Presidente's power is nearly absolute. However, while many extreme options are available, it does not necessarily mean that they are always a good idea – a player may build a throne of bayonets, to paraphrase another dictator, but they cannot sit on it for long, and an unduly strict Presidente will soon find themself battling rebels and popular scorn. In this way, the presence of the edict system seems to reinforce the central idea of the “social contract,” since a player that will soon learn the consequences of radical action is more likely to use innocuous or generous edicts like “Food for the People” since few Tropicans will object to these.

As a final observation, it is curious to note that this is a game that seems to celebrate corruption – a player is not only able to embezzle money from the public treasury, but is in fact encouraged to do so. A player may, in fact, set the size of their Swiss bank account as their criteria for success at the game's end. Bribery of influential figures like journalists, bishops and generals is routine, as well as the leaders of sympathetic political parties. This would seem to stand at direct contrast to the “social contract” philosophy the game seems to espouse via
elections and popular opinion. The inclusion of corruption in the game can be interpreted in two ways -- on the first level as a criticism of the governmental philosophies outlines earlier. Not a rejection outright, but instead a tacit acknowledgment that such graft and misappropriation exist. At a second, more nuanced level, it could be argued that the use of corruption is a parallel statement to the excessive power the player holds -- perhaps as an argument that the “social contract” philosophy will only result in a satisfactory government when the leader's power is curtailed and governmental authority is widely (instead of centrally) held. Indeed, in a nation of autocracy (as opposed to a nation of laws) the personal relationships between powerful individuals and the authority cannot be genuine friendships, since any given military leader represents a threat to power but ultimately a necessary evil for the dictator -- thus, in the game they are abstracted and reduced to simple monetary exchanges. Powerful individuals will be your allies as long as they are paid well, but they can never be your friends. The implications of this are quite interesting – as El Presidente the player can closely examine the lives of any particular citizen (or tourist for that matter) but there are not genuinely any non-player characters. Tropicans as a group can be seen as a collective agent, but not as companions. It is lonely at the top in Tropico, and El Presidente must buy his allegiance when he has few supporters.

**Purpose**

Just as the nature of an ergodic medium muddles the discussion of the other pentadic elements, the discussion of purpose here is equally tangled. This is because nothing will happen in a digital game unless the player does take action. Thus, the player's purpose becomes intertwined with the dramatistic purpose of the represented game-world. Even though El Presidente may have a particular reason for taking an action, that action will not be taken unless the player takes it for their own reason. In a digital game these purposes must coincide – that is, they must lead to
similar acts – if the player wishes to “win.” While an individual player's motive to win is certainly interesting, it is rather outside of the scope of our study and so we will avoid examining the implications of this idea. To some extent, Burke's notions about the 'appropriateness' of a particular element – which he discusses most thoroughly as the act being 'contained' by the scene – applies here when considering Davidson's assertion that the rhetoric of a game is how the game teaches the player to play (1). If the purpose of a “player character” in the drama of the game does not lead to actions that would lead that player to successful strategies, then it may be observed that this purpose does not “fit.” It would not, as Burke noted in the discussion just mentioned, “express in fixed properties the same quality that the action expresses in terms of development” (1). The dramatistic purpose of the game-world should be “in keeping with” the strategic purpose of the player. For example, in *Tropico* this is fairly straightforward, since a player should “want” to win the game, and El Presidente should “want” to embezzle a lot of money, make a lot of citizens happy, stay in power, and so on, and these desires clearly coincide with the player's actions.

Perhaps it could even be said that, to a different degree than another medium, the digital game (and other ergodic representations) forces that player to understand the purpose of the player-character by making his or her actions “in keeping with” the purpose of successful leaders and makes other actions unlikely. In the opposite case, players will understand, at least, that they are making bad decisions when they begin losing the game (and if they are losing it on purpose, then they will understand that a “real” El Presidente would soon find himself deposed). What is germane to this study is that a different purpose at the start of the game, that is, a different criteria for success, will result in different game play, which means that any purpose the player wishes to accomplish will become realized through the course of the game.
Aside from the player/El Presidente's purpose it is also important to discuss how Tropicans, possessed of their own agency, have their own motivating forces. The clearest of these is economic. Tropicans will always choose higher paying jobs and more expensive services and entertainments. If El Presidente wishes to attract skilled workers to positions that require an education, there will have to be unfilled, high-paying jobs that require a degree. Tropicans will only pursue an education or change careers if it is profitable to do so. It would be tempting to dismiss this as a natural extension of any economic management simulation, but it is telling that one of the players' primary means of interaction with (and sole means of motivating) his constituents is through monetary reward. Even the edicts that cause happiness either cost money, like “Mardi Gras” or “Papal visit,” or are just outright attempts to buy favor, such as “tax cut.” Ultimately all happiness on the island is ultimately tied to money, and thus it could be argued that all measurements of success in the game are in some way a measurement of monetary success. A few of these are obviously economic, such as “Swiss bank account size” or “size of treasury,” but when the economic component of the happiness calculation is taken into account, even “happiness” as a victory criteria is largely a measure of the creature comforts that Tropico's citizens can afford.

There are a few key implications for this discussion of purpose. The first is that, since the game comes with relatively few designer-implemented goals and, to a large extent, how “well” a player does is up to the player, it certainly creates implications for the game's treatment of power and authority. Any leader has the capacity to act in any way they wish – but at the end of the day they are striving towards a single goal, irregardless of what benefits are created indirectly along the way. The player of the game is not trying to “govern effectively,” they are trying to win the game. And, since this measurement of success is paralleled in the purpose of El Presidente, the
implications carry even further. The message created then is that leaders in general try to become wealthy, or powerful, or secure a place in history. Even if a player burdened by altruism decides to use citizen happiness as an ultimate arbiter of success, this success is still enumerated at the end – any given player can make his or her citizens happier and thus receive a higher score. In this manner the game reinforces the idea that rulers will seek their own ends, and that, perhaps, genuinely selfless authority is impossible.

In keeping with this idea, a second set of implications surrounds the central position of money as a motivating factor. In the world view of *Tropico*, people are ultimately selfish. Yes, they may become upset with El Presidente for having their beloved family member arrested or disposed of but in many cases their happiness can be quite literally purchased, either with increased wages, which will lead to higher quality housing and services, or an outright delivery of cash by a presidential banker. As illustrated by the agencies present in the game, there is a certain amount of reckless capitalism at work here. The rhetorical result being a rather cynical observation about the world and the way it works; clearly the presence of the almighty dollar is felt on the island, and the game's developers may be trying to make a statement about the degree to which the distribution of monetary wealth concerns the citizens of the modern world.

The Ratios

While the elements of the dramatistic pentad are valuable in and of themselves, a critic can also gain valuable insights by examining the dialectical tension between paired elements. Burke observed that in many cases the distinctions between the elements were not clear, and, indeed, many of this study's conclusions have overlapped. As a means of gaining deeper analysis, Burke proposed that the critic also examine the elements as they were interrelated – in pairings he called ratios. The ultimate goal of examining the ratios is to expand on the rhetorical observations made
by the elements individually.

In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke discussed two ratios in particular and mentioned the importance of two others. His primary examination of ratios began with scene-act and scene-agent relationships he considered central to any discussion of dramatistic ratios since the scene contains (often literally) the agent and the act, and so an interrelationship is immediately apparent. This concept of inherent relationships also applies to the scene-purpose and agency-purpose ratios, which Burke mentions as well. I will also include a discussion of the agent-act ratio because of their inherent interrelationship in an ergodic medium.

**Scene-Act**

In his discussion of “Container and Thing Contained,” Burke begins with an analysis of the scene-act ratio, noting that “it is a principle of drama that the nature of acts and agents should be consistent with the scene” (3). He summarizes the essential nature of the scene-act ratio: “all we need note here is the principle whereby the scene is a fit 'container' for the act, expressing in fixed terms the same quality that the action expresses in terms of development”. The primary question implied by this ratio is this: Are the acts representative of the scene? Is what is being done “in keeping with” where it is being done?

In *Tropico*, as in perhaps any other digital game the scene is quite literally transformed by the succession of acts the player performs. As the game is played the population, skyline and even topography of the island may literally be altered as a result of the player's decisions. The complexity of the various scenic variables allow for very sweeping changes, although most changes to the scene will happen gradually (although forcefully) over time. On an immediate level, if a player commissions a building to be built, then that building will exist on the island – but this is just a cursory observation. Just as immediate, too, is the observation that the island will
determine the likely acts that will be taken. An island with low-lying rainy areas will inherently be more conducive to tobacco and sugar farming (and thus cigar and rum industries) than an island with high mountains and wide beaches (which may rely on coffee and tourism).

A deeper analysis involves a recognition of the acts available to the player as being representative of the game's setting. The game is set in a Cold War-era Caribbean island ruled by a dictator; the player may exercise their rule over the island in a variety of ways. The implication is that the choices available to the player in this circumstance either are or should have been available to “real life” dictators. So, even if some edicts may seem far-fetched for the setting, like “sensitivity training” or “anti-pollution ordinance,” the fact remains that they still are available and are thus always possible. In order, perhaps, for a player to truly feel like they are “acting like a dictator,” they must, at some level, be able to not act like “a dictator,” otherwise as a ruler they have no choice in the matter, and the weight of individual actions is not as rhetorically powerful.

If a player was simply obligated to arrest citizens or stifle freedom of speech, then the decision to do so would be robbed of a great deal of its meaning. To choose between, for example, which newspaper on the island to change to propaganda, while clearly possessed of rhetorical implication, is certainly different than having to choose whether to close a newspaper at all. The first implies that tyrannous leaders are compelled to tyranny despite any objections, the second (and the choice available to El Presidente) implies that leaders must elect to act tyrannically and are purposefully not ruling justly. It is this relationship between act and scene that is central to Tropico's treatment of authority – the people, any people, even, the game designers may be saying, these people, these people ruled by an autocrat and subject to his or her whims, are still possessed of the capacity to act against the leader. And that leader is ultimately responsible for their actions. This pairing only serves to reinforce the ideas of responsible
leadership and the “social contract” that were observed above.

**Scene-Agent**

Just as the acts are “in keeping” with the scene, the agents are, as well. In Tropico there are two ways that the scene-agent ratio is immediately apparent. This first comes with an examination of the citizens of the island as a “collective” agent. In any given game, the composition of the island's population will be different – the political parties will be of various strengths and sizes and thus the citizens will have varying degrees of social and political demands. In this way, each game presents an entirely new political scene to navigate; the same tactics used to appease an island of largely anti-intellectual religious citizens will not work for an island with a plurality of die-hard capitalists. True, there will always be similar techniques but the political scene is still dependent on the nature of the agent. Similarly, the nature of El Presidente will alter the island's political scene. During character creation the player may select various attributes that will permanently and irrevocably affect the relationship that particular leader-character will have with the common people. The result of this is twofold: firstly, that a player will often choose their traits with a tactical eye, aiming for a specific effect with a specific strategy for the game in mind. For example, a player may choose traits that boost agricultural and industrial production because their ultimate goal was to build an empire shipping bananas.

This observation carries with it several implications. In the world view constructed by *Tropico* the political situation is comprised of both the pre-existing opinions and party affiliations of the island's citizens as well as the particular quirks and background of its leader. While not a wholly unrealistic concept, it is nevertheless present in any given playing of the game. The rhetorical implications of this are that all politics, so to speak, are local, and that the particular demands of any group of constituents either do or should influence the policies of that region. In
this, the game conveys the realities of political government and attempting to woo the support of various groups. Indeed, this balancing act is what provides a great deal of the challenge in the game. To make just one group happy is never really enough, but to devote too many resources to “fringe” groups is a risky strategy. The realities of government on Tropico are that, since the people hold the ultimate power, what they say goes.

**Scene-Purpose**

In the scene-purpose ratio, as well, the game's developers make it clear that government action is created to respond to the pressures of various groups with relatively inflexible positions. On Tropico, however, it is possible to make everyone happy, because for the most part there are relatively few positions on which parties disagree. The realities of partisan government in the real world are of course more complicated, but they nonetheless exist to some extent in our artifact as well. To say that the purpose ought to be “in keeping with” the scene has a specific meaning in the world of *Tropico* – as El Presidente the player is allowed to define their own purpose, and this has been discussed above, but within a clearly delineated range of purposes, and it is these that we ought to consider as being of the scene. The developers of the game gave players a choice as to how they would measure their success at the end of the game, and this in turn would affect the choices of the game, which, in turn, would eventually become realized on the island. A player who is attempting to maximize the size of their Swiss bank account, for example, will eventually find themselves governing an island with robust banking and construction sectors, with substantial ties to the capitalist faction. In this way the scene at the end of the game is dependent on the purpose at the beginning.

The rhetorical implications of this are fairly straightforward. It is not a stretch to observe that eventually human civilizations become constructed around their motivating forces, but other
world views are possible – the developers could have restricted both the possible choices available to the player, and, perhaps more relevantly, the purposes available to the player at the opening of the game. As they did not it may be fair to argue that the game presents a theory of government as being the creation of humans, idiosyncrasies and all – and as well in the game the governmental structure is a constant – all that changes is the layout and composition of the island's cities. In this world, the structure of society is not dependent on the nature of its government, but rather, the ultimate aims of its leaders. The argument here is clear: the structure of a government does not matter in the long run, as long as it is run by the right people. Even if Tropico is not a nation of laws, it may still produce happy, peaceful citizens.

**Agency-Purpose**

In his discussion of agency and purpose Burke uses the metaphor of a piece of laboratory equipment – an instrument designed to fulfill a specific need by performing a specific function. In this case, he muses, which is the agency and which is the purpose? Clearly an examination of the agency-purpose ratio will be ultimately more beneficial in this case than a discussion of either element alone. Similarly, we can observe in our artifact an equation of agency and purpose in many aspects of the game's design. Although Tropicans may be myriad, each individual will serve, at most, a handful of functions in the running of that society. Their primary function will be their job, and others may serve as the heads of political parties or as gun-toting rebels. As regular citizens however, it is noticeable that Tropicans are identified primarily through their jobs – each banker, storekeeper, waitress, priest and dockworker will look the same as all the others of their ilk – Tropicans are literally defined by their role in the machinery of the state. To this end it becomes difficult to distinguish agency from purpose – each job fulfills a specific function.

Rhetorically, this is an interesting observation, although not a new innovation in the
history of game design. The game's online F.A.Q. describes all the Tropican roles as “units,” a term most familiar to players of games about war. But Tropicans are not infantry or cavalry, they may serve in many functions, attend school, work at higher paying jobs, etc. This only further serves to reinforce the message here. Tropicans are not generated by the buildings they work at, nor are individual “units” commissioned by the player as the situation calls for. Rather, the same person on the island has whatever job they find (usually a high paying one) but keeps all the same political ideals, family relationships and individual desires. People may be their jobs in the eyes of the state, so to speak, but they are still people. It could be argued that this constitutes an evaluation of a given populous as perhaps nominally atomistic but ultimately communal – a given Tropican may have their own political leanings but at the end of the day they still look like and serve the same function as every other doctor or administrator or journalist.

Agent-Act

The intensely personal nature of an ergodic medium gives us special pause to examine the act-agent ratio in *Tropico* or, indeed, nearly any other digital game. For although the acts are enumerated by the designer ahead of time, the agent is entirely up to (and perhaps even is) the player his- or herself. It is curious to note that in his discussion of agent and act, Burke observed that, although the act and agent were contained in the scene, neither the act or the agent could positively be said to contain the other. “The agent does not 'contain' the act,” writes Burke, “although the results might be said to 'pre-exist virtually' with him” (16). Oddly prescient words perhaps, for indeed in any digital game all available acts exist only virtually, and do not appear unless the agent, in the form of the player, realizes one of them. At the beginning of any given game of *Tropico* all possible actions are in something of a quantum state – they have already been specified in advance by the coders of the game but cannot, perhaps, be said to truly “exist” until
the player elects to utilize one of them. The nature of ergodic media make this a substantially different kind of “virtual pre-existence” than all of the actions of a novel's character having been written before they were read about, since the occurrence of these acts is dependent on the player choosing which acts to perform. But this is something of a diversion. The real meat of the criticism begins after a realization that it is potential actions that are under the developer's control, not actual actions.

To this end, as described above, the act-agent ratio as a generating principle leads to a similar conclusion as the discussion of agent itself. In the world of the game the player is always El Presidente, and always an autocratic ruler, but in each playing may govern differently – and the ultimate results of any playing are largely dependent on a player's decisions. “A game,” in the words of veteran designer Sid Meier, “is a series of interesting choices,” and in any reduction of the medium to this it becomes clear that the act-agent ratio is of particular interest. The choices available to the player are ultimately what the game is. A game allows the player access to a realized world and delineates what actions are possible and what are not. In *Tropico*, El Presidente may have a protesting citizen summarily executed in the market square, imprisoned for life or even fired from their job, but cannot make a man an engineer nor a woman a college professor. El Presidente can build only military schools but can never charge for them, and may unduly persecute members of an opposition party but can never abolish the idea of the party.

This ratio summarizes a great deal of this criticism's previous conclusions. Since a player is restricted to both their role and their available decisions we can say that in this way the game serves as a glimpse into the complex decisions of the dictator. Can a person, coming away from a playing of *Tropico*, also come away with a greater understanding of the mindset of such leaders? In *A Grammar of Motives* Burke discusses a “former cabinet member” who claimed that “you can
safely lodge responsibility with the President of the United States,' owing to 'the tremendous sobering influence of the Presidency on any man’”. He observes that in this case “the sheer nature of an office, or position, is said to produce important modifications in a man's character” (16). The parallels to Tropico are quite clear – although a player may do whatever they like within the game, they are still placed in the governor's chair and made almost solely responsible for the happiness (or otherwise) of their citizens. Heavy is the head, so to speak, that wears the crown.

**The Dominant Element**

Although the world of Tropico is richly detailed and the possibilities for gameplay are virtually boundless, the pentadic elements of act, agent, agency and scene are all ultimately dependent on purpose. As discussed earlier, although the act-agent ratio is central to any discussion of an ergodic medium, the most important ratios in our discussion of Tropico are scene-purpose and agency-purpose. It is clear in two ways that scene is dependent on purpose. The majority of what exists in Tropico is dependent the game play decisions of the player (and the reactions of Tropico’s citizens). Although the game’s scene never changes to a different place and time, within those parameters the player is free to create whatever world he or she chooses. In addition, the world that is created for the player is heavily dependent on purpose, since the appearance and character of the scene at any given moment is an end result of the user’s actions. And, since the actions that any given user takes are dependent on their ultimate purpose, both the scene and the acts that occur in any playing of Tropico are inherently ultimately dependent on the player’s purpose.

**Conclusion**

A pentadic analysis of Tropico reveals a variety of interesting positions and a rather nuanced world view. The game tends to idealize contemporary liberal or progressive political
ideals, including an almost tacit support of third-wave feminism, socialized health care and the international workers' movement, the Western ideal of a “social contract” between governors and governed, the potential of education, and a sense of personal moral responsibility on the part of leaders. At the same time, however, the game also recognizes the realities of the political life, including the persuasive power, so to speak, of the dollar. It may be tempting to dismiss these conclusions out of hand due to the game's often irreverent or comic tone, but Burke himself noted that even though “comic and grotesque works may deliberately set these elements at odds with one another, audiences make allowance for such liberty, which reaffirms the same principle of consistency in its very violation” (3). A game has to be fun, or nobody will play it – or, to propose the converse, a game may contain weighty lessons even though it is “fun.” It is hoped that further criticisms like these will allow the academy access to this rapidly-developing art form and its rhetorical potential.
Conclusion

Results

The ultimate goal of this study, as is the goal of any work of rhetorical criticism, is to contribute to and enrich the understanding of rhetorical communication. To this end there are three distinct areas to discuss in this concluding section: the implications of the study for a reading of *Tropico*, a discussion of how this study contributes to an understanding of pentadic criticism and finally an examination of how these ideas can contribute to an understanding of rhetorical study in general. This final section will also include a discussion of the particular difficulties of this study, the implications for users and developers of digital games and finally potential areas for future study.

In *Tropico* the player experiences a world recreated in the processors of their computer – an interactive imagination of the underlying system of mathematical interrelationships, functions and processes. This layer of interface is given rich contextual meaning by the developers and so offers fertile ground for rhetorical conclusions. As the dictator of a Cold War-era Caribbean island, the player will experience dictatorship, democracy, trade, export and tourism in the pursuit of their own ultimate goal. In this study we have examined in detail the various elements of Burke's dramatistic pentad – act, agent, agency, purpose and scene -- insofar as they exist in the world of *Tropico*. Although the drama a player will experience is richly detailed, the ultimate conclusion of this paper is that purpose is the dominant pentadic element in the game.

The purpose of analyzing purpose is to uncover what the speaker is asserting an agent's justification for action is – or, put more simply, the “why” in any retelling. In *Tropico* the experience is purpose-dominated in two ways – the first is by the intrinsic motivations of the “citizens” of the island, and the second – and perhaps more significant – is the game-long purpose
of the player character as El Presidente, the island's autocratic leader. As noted before, the citizens on the island are presented as having the “free will” to engage in what activities they wish – guided by a set of internal likes and dislikes, Tropicans will go about their lives in an attempt to fulfill their constantly changing needs. The player's behavior will also be informed by this observation and the management of the island's population becomes a matter of locating the facilities and tweaking the variables so that El Presidente's subjects will achieve what he or she wants in the course of achieving what they want, first. There is no loyalty to the government except in when it is convenient. In addition to their own private desires, each of the citizens of Tropico shares desires with their political parties, whose happiness (and thus endorsement of the island's government) is directly related to their own purposes – each is governed by a strict and unchanging ideology that may have, depending on the size of their membership, a significant impact on the island's events. It can be noted, then, that the game of Tropico presents a very specific theory of human motivation – that people, guided by purpose, will go and do what they want, and, more specifically, that this creates an aggregate purpose that serves as the ultimate source of power as derived from popular opinion (or at least popular tolerance). In the political reality of Tropico (insofar as a digital game can be considered a reality) the people get what they want, they do what they want, they go where they want, and any successful leader must acquiesce to this or be curtly removed from power.

On a second level, as well, the game makes a statement of the centrality of purpose to government. In any given playing of the game the user will have, at the outset, one of a variety of different goals, each of which will necessitate different – in many cases, mutually exclusive to each other – strategies to accomplish. These decisions in turn will engender a much different experience for both the player (as El Presidente) and the game (as both the citizens of the island
and the island itself). In this way we can see that even the scene is ultimately malleable under the hammer of purpose in *Tropico* – and that the society that develops will be – were the digital metaphor made real -- a physical manifestation of both the leader's ultimate purpose and the purpose by which the lives of individual citizens are governed. A player, for example, who wishes to leave office with a sizable Swiss bank account, for example, will have to manage citizen happiness, to be sure, but not to the same extent to which someone using that as the primary criteria for success will need. This will require a different set of actions on the behalf of the player (or El Presidente) to accomplish and as such will govern the placement of buildings, the makeup of the island's population, the nature of the island's industries, the flaws and good points in the island's government, and so on. As such, the other elements of the pentad are dependent on purpose.

The rhetorical implications of this featuring of purpose are very interesting – in the world of *Tropico* the purpose of government – indeed the purpose of anything – is teleological. All actions have some end goal in mind, and in the end -- to frame this conclusion in Burkean terms -- in *Tropico* the motive of all human actions is purpose. To this end, we may conceive of *Tropico* as an argument for a teleological theory of government, and that ultimately all leaders must select personal goals compatible with the collective goals of their constituency. Broadly speaking, the game presents an argument about the humanness of leaders of government. On Tropico, any given Presidente is going to be flawed, sometimes deeply flawed, and on a level beyond simply having to be played by a real person and thus inherently subject to the whims of the player, but flaws are even hard-coded into the experience – El Presidente is a character with his or her own peculiarities. To this end, the message is that even though all humans are flawed, and all leaders are human, that successful leadership comes through a kind of embracing of these inherent
frailties. Leaders are, after all only human, so to speak, and they may have the best interests of their citizens at heart, but ultimately in *Tropico* there is a high-score list, and some leaders will have made it their goal to make their citizens the happiest. All leaders must have their own motivations, separate from the perceived motivations of any given group of citizens. However, since, on Tropico the “social contract” is hard at work enforcing the will of the people on any leader, a leader who wishes to get what they ultimately want, be it wealth, fame, a place in history or even the happiness of that leader's people, they must align their own personal purpose with the purpose, collectively, of all that they govern.

Insofar as implications for rhetorical study are concerned, the primary advantages of this study are twofold: first, this work provides future scholars with specifically a theoretical justification of pentadic analysis as a generating principle for the examination of digital games, and, in general, secondly it provides a methodology for applying textual standards of analysis to ergodic works. The use of Burke's methodology as a means of examining a re-created world provides the rhetorical scholar with a means to examine ergodic works as dramatic utterances even if they are not specifically intended as intrinsically cyber-dramatic works. In addition, it also expands the scope of the use of the pentad itself, as a rhetoric tool for analysis, into types of artifacts that are relatively novel in the world of rhetorical analysis. From this study a critic may take that the symbolic interrelationships between game elements can and ought to be given as much credence as any language, or, at the very least, could be examined in the same fashion. In addition, this thesis provides a theoretical foundation for applying the pentad and what the limits of analysis can be, given the unique nature of the medium under examination. When the lines between player, creator and work are blurred it is important to establish exactly what is under examination at any given time. And while it may be true that these are fundamental questions that
can never be resolved, it is important that they be examined, at least, from a variety of frameworks. This study proposes a simple premise, that, for the rhetorical scholar at least, that the game be examined as a whole, inasmuch as that is possible, and not as one of any number of player-experiences.

On a final level, this study makes tentative steps towards an academic understanding of the digital game as rhetorical artifact. The nascent field of ludology has gathered expertise from a wide variety of disciplines and it is important for the scholar of rhetoric to understand that this emerging medium is as accessible as any other to methodological examination, and, in fact, can yield the same rich conclusions as the analysis of any other media about its creation and interpretation. I propose that this is the case for three reasons: first, that gameplay constitutes its own language and as such can be examined in the same way as language, second, that designers must make decisions about gameplay in the same way as rhetors must about language, and finally that ergodicity makes meaning. Just as rhetorical critics must assume that word choice is intentional, so too can we assume that the digital game developer must make intentional choices about gameplay. To this end we can assert that these intentional choices make available to us as critics the worldview of the artifact and all its implications. Additionally it can be observed that through gameplay a developer's worldview can be communicated to the user, and that this communication must necessarily take place ergodically due to the nature of the medium. We can conclude then, that if digital games can communicate then they must constitute a valid subject for academic study.

Implications

What does this study mean for the player and crafter of digital games? As part of a growing idea that games are worthy art it is of course primarily a justification of the medium's
status. To this end I believe it is important for more players of digital games to develop a sense of “critical play” and begin to think seriously both about the messages that they absorb from their games as well as the potential for these games to develop as a genuine art form with not only the academic attention that would entail but the capacity to deliver powerful and profound messages and communicate significant ideas in new ways. I think the most direct conclusion from this would be an urging of people to become more informed consumers of ideas. As digital games become increasingly pervasive in our world it will become only more important to pay attention to the messages that these games contain, and, that, to develop skills for interpreting these messages that those who play them ought to have an understanding of not only how arguments are made in general, but how the established methods of criticism can still hold with modern means of delivery.

Problems

The problem, so to speak, with writing an opinion of one's trip through a labyrinth, to revisit a metaphor, is threefold: first, any rhetorical criticism will be a largely subjective study. It is, after all, a personal interpretation, albeit one guided by a critical methodology that aims to reduce as much bias on the part of the critic as possible. Theoretically any two given methodological examinations of the same work would produce a similar reading, but there is, in the end, nothing that can be measured. This is exacerbated in this instance by the second and third problems – namely, that any two critics playing the same game will have different experiences, and that even for a single critic, any given playing of a game will result in a different experience. Thus, not only may two critics not even agree on what the “text” is, but that a single critic even attempting a “close reading” will be somewhat confounded by its ergodicity. Indeed, it is the uniqueness of the medium – the centrality of interactivity – that creates problems for the critic.
While it is true that any given rhetorical criticism will come to a subjective conclusion, this can be addressed by multiple readings, or the observations of multiple critics, to create an ongoing dialog about the meaning of the text. In this case, however, academics are still hard at work establishing the nature of the texts under discussion, and so any conclusions about “meaning” ought to be considered at least partially tentative. Even though reliance on a methodology is helpful to minimize this, the nature of the artifact still creates a few unique problems. This study attempts to address this obstacle by examining a game wholesale rather than focusing on the experience of a particular playthrough, although this may be an unsatisfying compromise, since each of any particular critic's experience with a digital game – especially one with as many different possibilities as Tropico – is necessarily co-created by themselves and the game's developers – bringing an additional layer of critical bias to a discipline already struggling with objectivity. Even if I – or any other critic for that matter – were to play a game dozens of times to gain an aggregate “feel” of the text, those individual play experiences would still be partially the result of my own play style and individual ideas about what games are, how they should be played, and so on. To this end, then, it is of great importance to find out where – if at all – the text “ends” and the user “begins” in the criticism of digital games as rhetorical artifacts.

Compounding these concerns for the individual scholar is the virtual impossibility of creating a discussion based on comparative opinions, since critics may have widely divergent playstyles, and thus widely divergent experiences. Indeed, it may not even seem that two people are playing the same game. This concern is not unique – indeed, the world of academia is populated with a wide variety of alternative readings to the same text, but in the majority of cases many critics are at least working from the same text – the same set of pages, the same string of letters, the same series of frames, the same brush strokes and tints, and so on. Critics of digital
games will have to find a way to reevaluate the concept of a “text” since what any given person sees when they approach the artifact will be unique. Admittedly the wheel will not have to be reinvented, so to speak, since critics have been coping with the intertextuality of postmodernist works for many years, but it is, at the very least, a concern that ought to be central to the field of digital game studies.

A final concern may be the relatively undefined nature of what, actually, the “text” is, even if issues of co-created meaning are “resolved.” Is the game's manual, for example, part of the “text?” In many cases, like with Tropico, the manual is intended to enhance the “feel” of the world created. The manual for Tropico appears to be a leather-clad briefing manual for incoming Presidentes. Many games also have expansions, which Tropico also has, or have significant alterations made post-release due to developer-implemented patches. Film critics face a similar dilemma when faced with multiple “cuts” of the same movie, although many digital games will update themselves automatically, and, increasingly, will simply not allow a user to play an old version. This is thankfully not the case with this study, which based its conclusions on a single unpatched version of Tropico. What is the case with Tropico, however, are a variety of potential user experiences – the game comes not only with a user-defined “free play” mode, but many developer-crafted missions and a tutorial scenario in which the player has less control over what the initial setup will be like. These modes are similar enough that general gameplay remains the same, but problems with textual definition remain.

**Potential Future Research**

While this study's preliminary findings certainly contribute to enhanced rhetorical understanding, there are several areas of potential future study that could be undertaken using these initial observations as a starting point. The clearest successor to this study would be simply
another pentadic analysis of *Tropico* and a comparative analysis of any differences in opinion to begin understanding the extent to which critic bias factors into examination of digital games as rhetorical artifacts. Since this particular approach to ludology is relatively untrodden ground, any study -- either with a different methodology or of a different game – would yield important contributions to the understanding of the medium. Insofar as other games are concerned, it may also be interesting to examine either the games of Phil Steinmeyer or PopTop Games as a corpus to discover if there is a larger rhetorical vision at work. Many of these games contain similar gameplay elements – not the least of which is the sequel, *Tropico 2: Pirate's Cove*, which, although retaining many of the same elements of gameplay, is widely divergent from the setting of the original, since it is set in the 1800s and the player is the king of an island of pirates. A very interesting comparison may be made here, since the scene, agent, agency and acts of both games are largely different, but a critic may find similar purposes in both games. As well, it would be very interesting to examine other games with similar styles, such as *SimCity*, and the previously-mentioned *Caesar, Pharaoh* and *Emperor*. Is the featuring of purpose particular to Tropico or is it shared broadly across all city-building type games?

**Conclusion**

A pentadic analysis of *Tropico* reveals a featuring of purpose as the central element, which corresponds to a complex argument about the nature of power and the relationship between people and governments. Paradoxically, the game makes a case for responsible leadership in a world where leaders are autocrats and martial law can be enacted with the touch of a button. Through this analysis, we can see not only that *Tropico* itself is capable of carrying an interesting philosophical message, but that digital games in general are likewise capable and worthy of similar study.
Bibliography


