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Playing (with) the Villain: Critical Play and the Joker-as-Guide in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (VG 2009)

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PLAYING (WITH) THE VILLAIN

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KRISTIN M. S. BEZIO

> I just wanted to bring down your grim façade and let you see the world
> as I see it. Giggling and bleeding.
> —The Joker

Rocksteady's 2009 video game *Batman: Arkham Asylum* begins with a proto-
typical ending: when the game begins, the player is shown a cinematic cut-
scene (in which the player is a passive viewer) that begins in Gotham City
while the static-y voice of the police dispatcher says, "The Joker has been ap-
prehended; Batman is now en route to Arkham Island."[1] The scene cuts to a
sign pointing the way to Arkham Asylum as the Batmobile speeds past. We
see Batman—driving—for only a few seconds before the "camera" shifts to
focus on the Joker, bound and semiconscious in the back seat. Batman drives
through the gates of Arkham Asylum, and the title, *Batman: Arkham Asy-
lum*, appears before the scene goes black. Already the player's expectations
have been challenged; instead of beginning with a crime, the game shows
us resolution, "playing" with narrative convention and establishing a sense
of confusion and disruption that continues throughout the game. From the
very beginning, the player confronts and is confronted by violations of social
and institutional order that he must accept in order to progress.[2] Throughout
Arkham Asylum, the player is compelled to accept directives from the Joker,
the one character he assumes he should not obey. In the game, the Joker
orchestrates the primary narrative, forcing the player (and Batman) to ei-
ther "play along" or quit the game entirely. Without the Joker's guidance, the
player cannot progress; indeed, were it not for the Joker, there would be no

game to begin with, no experience of the ludic ("fun"), and no recognition of the need for play in the "real" world beyond the asylum walls.

In the sphere of games, play is defined as "an autotelic approach to the world, a way of engaging any variety of activities as ends in themselves."[3] Play is performed for its own sake, and is also how one approaches (or can approach) games. Games are essentially problem sets, mathematically or logically based puzzles in which "we look for a 'solution,' a description of what each player should do and what the outcome should be," explains Morton Davis.[4] According to Chad Carlson, the relationship between play and games is not as simple as we might presume: "Play is only incidentally related to problem solving. Games are built squarely around it. . . . Therefore, although play and games are highly compatible, often experienced together, and offspring of common parents, they are still distinct phenomena."[5] In *Arkham Asylum*, it is the Joker who encourages gameplay: the player faces a series of problems, but solving them should be *fun*. *Arkham Asylum* should be *played*.

The process of play in *Arkham Asylum*, as in most video games, includes both narrative (story) and *ergodic* engagement (interaction which can impact the outcome of, or events within, the game, distinguishing video games from other forms of narrative audiovisual media, such as television or film).[6] The ergodics of a game are dictated by the player's interactions with it—movement, combat, et cetera—and are distinct from, although related to, the game's narrative. Scot Brendan Cassidy explains that video games contain both a narrative and a *ludonarrative*—a sequence of actions based on the gameplay choices of the player, which may or may not influence the narrative.[7] In *Arkham Asylum*, the ludonarrative does not alter the narrative, although it is a part of what makes playing *Arkham Asylum* a ludic experience: in other words, *fun*.

The narrative of *Arkham Asylum* "is a culmination of years of Batman stories, fused together with an original plot penned by Paul Dini, creator of *Batman: The Animated Series*," reports *darkzero*'s Ian Dickenson.[8] In both *Arkham Asylum* and *Batman: The Animated Series*, the Joker is voiced by Mark Hamill, although, Dini explains in an interview with Mike Snider, "just as we rethought the world for the video game, they rethought their roles a little bit and stepped up to give it that extra menace and determination. . . . The Joker is a little more gravelly, a little more manic, a little more hateful."[9] In *Arkham Asylum*, the Joker's role is both villain and game designer—antagonist and author—and, despite claiming Batman as the titular figure (*Batman: Arkham Asylum*), the game is centered narratively and emotionally on the Joker. Snider remarks that "longtime archenemy The Joker is at center stage

in this original story."[10] The Joker's character in *Arkham Asylum* is so compelling that one reviewer, *Impulse Gamer's* Edwin Millheim, began his review in the Joker's voice:

> Joker here, so the guys and gals at Impulse Gamer are reviewing my game. With a not so special guest star, my old pal Bats. . . . It even gives you a chance to know what it's like to be the bat. Why anyone would want to is beyond me. . . . but it is a fun game . . . and I know fun![11]

Not only does Millheim imitate the Joker's language, but he tellingly refers to it as "my game," and says, "I know fun!" Dickenson provides perhaps the most accurate comment on the Joker's role: "the game becomes an insight into the relationship between the Joker and the Batman, with Joker narrating Batman's movements about the island, toying with him as he goes."[12]

The Joker's narrative control forms the foundation of *Arkham Asylum*, just as the "relationship" between Batman and the Joker has traditionally shaped their characters, as Chris Kohler observes: "Making you feel like the Joker is constantly plotting your demise in some elaborate trap . . . that's what being the Dark Knight feels like."[13] Kohler continues, explaining how, in *Arkham Asylum*, the Joker serves the same purpose for the player: "The game's titled *Batman* but Joker is the central character; he's there in the beginning luring you in, and thereafter constantly on the P.A., taunting you and moving the plot along."[14] By allowing himself to be "lured," the player agrees to follow the Joker's directives, entering into a kind of contract-of-play in which both parties agree to ergodically engage one another. In fact, it is in both their best interests that he does so: after all, there is no point to the game (either the Joker's or Rocksteady's) if the player is unable to advance. It is through this "guidance" that we see the Joker's manipulative power over not only Batman, but over the player's ludic experience of the game.

The narrative of *Arkham Asylum* is highly scripted—predetermined by the developer—and the Joker's role parallels the developer's: he offers Batman control over the ludonarrative, but no control over the narrative, creating a deliberate illusion of agency. The moments of ergodic engagement permitted to the player—when the player-character fights henchmen, glides through the air, examines clues, and so on—establish the feeling of control, when in fact the entire sequence has been scripted. From the player's perspective, this illusion of agency is not only ludic ("fun"), but also facilitates immersion in the game's narrative, a relationship visible in the overlap of player-Batman and developer-Joker; this overlap is where we find the crux of *Arkham*

Asylum's critical engagement with the importance of play to the negotiation of the gamespace of Arkham Asylum and the real-world spaces it allegorically represents. In *Arkham Asylum*, the Joker's influence maps play onto the "work" of gaming, defying rules and restrictions by prioritizing the ludic, but also actively encouraging the player-qua-Batman to relinquish control and just have "fun."

As the designer of the in-game narrative, the Joker relies upon and exploits gaming conventions and *Batman* narrative traditions to create his ludic role. One significant aspect of his characterization is that, as in Christopher Nolan's 2007 *The Dark Knight*, Rocksteady's Joker has no clear origin. Anthony J. Kolenic has argued that the Joker's multiple origin explanations "differ, intentionally on his part, which can be read as simply him furthering chaos, or, perhaps as how that chaos becomes efficacious."[15] In *Arkham Asylum*, Dr. Young asks the Joker about his childhood:

> YOUNG: I thought I'd skip back to our previous conversations about your family.
> JOKER: Of course. I was born in a small fishing village. I always wanted to join the circus, but my father wouldn't really let me.
> YOUNG: I don't believe you.
> JOKER: My father was a cop, one week from retirement when the mob . . .
> YOUNG: I've seen the movie.[16]

The Joker refuses to give a straight answer, and his diagnoses vary similarly: "Every doctor that has ever interviewed you claims a different type of psychosis. Everything from multiple personality disorders to, well . . . the list is endless."[17] In his multiple answers, the Joker "plays" with Dr. Young's questions, exploiting the rules by which she attempts to inscribe him in order to illustrate how "chaos becomes efficacious."

Through the Joker's refusal to be defined by either Dr. Young or the institutionalized understanding of psychosis she represents, he engages in Derridean play, denying the symbolic order of psychiatric practice while disrupting its attempts at categorization. With many possible "substituted" histories, the Joker cannot be compartmentalized by the dry limitations of the understandable—he is uncertain, unpredictable, what Jacques Derrida might call "the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity."[18] As Eric Garneau argues in another of this volume's chapters, the Joker's play is "monstrous" because he provides too many possible origins, too many diagnoses, too much talking, too much color. The glut of possibilities is more dangerous—and more playful—than

none at all because each possibility forces the reevaluation of all possibilities. And yet within the gamespace of *Arkham Asylum*, this same monstrous excess provides the player with a source of ludic engagement; the ability to choose which quests, which collectibles, which paths contributes to the game's "fun," but also to the player's illusion of control. By providing these ludic options, the Joker—as developer and antagonist—perpetuates the illusory agency necessary to both the narrative and to the player's external experience of play.

Play, in this understanding, acts outside of proscribed social rules and normative behaviors, and aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptualization of the carnivalesque, a link made apropos by the Joker's physical resemblance to the clown or fool and his presiding role over the carnival-space of Arkham Asylum. The world of carnival, like Arkham Asylum, is "a 'world inside out'" that contains "giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals," descriptions that apply to the various inmates of Arkham Asylum.[19] Within the boundaries of Arkham Asylum, madness is permissible—as in carnival—because it is institutionalized, and therefore restrained. *Arkham Asylum* (as both game and in-game locale) offers a bounded virtual space in which the player-character is able to enact his ludic fantasies—to become, as the Joker repeatedly remarks, a madman worthy of Arkham's ludic world. Carnival, like gamespace, "does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. . . . Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people."[20] Carnival was associated with games and gameplay even in the medieval era:

> The images of games were seen as a condensed formula of life and of the historical process. . . . At the same time games drew the players out of the bounds of everyday life, liberated them from the usual laws and regulations, and replaced established conventions by other lighter conventionalities.[21]

Gameplay and carnival are interactive, not simply "allowing" participation, but demanding it. The Joker similarly demands Batman's interaction; because of its reliance on ludonarrative, *Arkham Asylum* must manipulate the player-qua-Batman into accepting the Joker's challenge and entering into a contract of play as a participant rather than as a spectator. Such participatory engagement is unique to games and to play because it refuses to permit passive observation; unlike a film or graphic novel, a game—here, a video game—embodies the ergodic complexities of the Joker's varying personae

more fully and more powerfully than the experience of spectating a cinematic text. In *Arkham Asylum*, the player becomes the Joker's subject of ludic experimentation, fully reifying the theoretical underpinnings of his carnivalesque character through play.

Within Arkham Asylum's ludic walls, it is the Joker—not the player-character—who is in control, a situation that is immediately apparent in *Arkham Asylum*. When the doors open, Batman is standing and the Joker is kneeling, seemingly subdued, but laughing maliciously. Batman's comment—"Warden, something's not right. I'm going with him"—establishes this subservience as an act.[22] The Joker is restrained in an upright gurney and wheeled into the asylum, and the player's first ergodic interaction with the game is to follow him. If the player either does not do so or moves off course, the Joker prompts him: "You're not coming, Bats?" and "Hurry up, you'll be late for the party!"[23] The Joker's demands indicate his presumption of control over both the player-character and the game. Batman recognizes this, saying, "You've never let me catch you this easily."[24] The emphasis here is on "let"—the Joker has permitted Batman's actions, just as he will permit the player-character's actions throughout the game. Thus far, the player has been limited to following the Joker and enduring his insults, and when the Joker springs his trap, the player remains helpless; this sense of powerlessness is what creates the opportunity for play.

By refusing player-control, *Arkham Asylum* creates a (false) sense of ludic freedom when the player is finally able to really play the game, but even this "freedom" comes as a consequence of the Joker's explicit orders. The Joker both constructs the challenges Batman must overcome and narrates each encounter through the asylum's PA and via frequent appearances on the asylum's closed-circuit television system, both of which serve as a vehicle for the transmission of his "rules." Miguel Sicart observes that "games force behaviors by rules: the meaning of those behaviors as communicated through the game world to the player, constitutes the ethics of computer games as designed objects."[25] The Joker's rules comprise the ethics of *Arkham Asylum*, and, in order to progress through the game, the player must accept and be willing to play by that ethos, even (and especially) if he doesn't fully understand it.

The first ergodic combat sequence in the game is orchestrated by the Joker, who introduces the enemies in waves. The player and Batman both rely upon the Joker for the production of the narrative, which itself provides the space for this ludonarrative to exist. Similar Joker-coordinated attacks continue throughout the game, and at one point, the Joker says, "I suppose I'd

better warn my boys you're on your way. Hey . . . maybe I won't. It'll be a nice surprise."²⁶ The henchmen are placed to produce ergodic encounters, which, while under the player's control, are designed by the Joker, who says, "Hey, Bats. I know you can hear me. I want you to hurt these guys. They're nothing to me."²⁷ Within combat, the player decides whether to dodge, attack, block, throw a projectile, or perform one of several special combat moves, producing the illusion of ergodic play, moments of illusory control bounded by the Joker's script. This ludic illusion is essential to the perpetuation of *Arkham Asylum*'s larger ideology, in which there must be a place for both order and chaos.

Batman is traditionally affiliated with *logos* (law and order), in contrast to the chaos created and embodied by the Joker. The Joker's game is not only aware of, but predicated on the manipulation of, Batman's self-imposed order as a means of forcing him to submit to chaos. Even the player-character's defiance of the Joker through gameplay subscribes to his authority: although the player-character fights to defeat the Joker, he does so only because the Joker encourages it. He taunts the player-character, saying, "Why don't you just come find me?" He assists the player-character's progress by painting arrows and symbols showing the way through the labyrinthine corridors, underscoring his claim that "I'm in control of the Asylum. You're not going anywhere I don't want you to. Understand?"²⁸

Before Batman leaves the first building—Intensive Treatment—the Joker forces him to engage in the game's first "boss fight" (a combat sequence with at least one particularly challenging enemy), an encounter attended by the Joker "in person," rather than via television screen. When Batman walks through the doors, the Joker taunts him, saying, "What took you so long?" and Batman counters:

> BATMAN: There is no escape, Joker. I will find you.
> JOKER: I'm counting on it. Just not yet.²⁹

The Joker then releases an inmate dosed with Dr. Young's TITAN formula, and the player-character engages the enemy, but is not allowed to complete the fight: control is abruptly wrested away from the player into a cut-scene, during which the TITAN-enhanced inmate suffers a brain aneurism and dies. The Joker exclaims, "Well, that was unexpected, wasn't it? Oh, well! Note to self: need stronger test subjects."³⁰ He then addresses Batman from the top of the inmate's cage, which is suspended over a very long (probably fatal) fall: "Seeing as how I'm feeling generous, I'll give you this one for free. Knock

Figure 10.1 The Scarecrow's world resembles a side-scroller or platformer-style of game, rather than a three-dimensional interactive game world (Rocksteady, n.p.).

me off, I dare you! End this! Pull the plug! Stop me once and for all!"[31] He then waits, feet together and arms outstretched in a parody of the crucifix. Batman (still in the cut-scene) pulls out a Batarang, but hesitates, unable to throw it and cause the Joker's death.

This (in)action confirms that Batman needs the Joker in order to secure his own identity as the Joker's antithesis. Recognizing the hesitation for what it is, the Joker laughs, saying, "You're getting so predictable, Bats," before riding the suspended cage back out of the room.[32] Batman's self-imposed rule against killing (which the player-character cannot break) prohibits him from killing the Joker, a rule the Joker both recognizes and exploits. As Davis explains, attempting to maximize one's "winnings" in a game system is often compromised by one's "utility function," a "'quantification' of a person's preferences with respect to certain objects."[33] Batman's utility—his unwillingness to kill—modifies the strategies available to the player-character, but also allows the Joker greater avenues of manipulation because he is aware of this utility. However, the Joker is limited by his own utility: his unwillingness to end the game prematurely. What is particularly interesting in the mixture of these two utilities is that neither Batman nor the Joker ever wants to definitively end the game: the end of the game is the end of play, and it is therefore undesirable to the Joker. As long as Batman refuses to kill the Joker, their "play" will continue, even if this specific game will end.

In order to perpetuate their interaction, the Joker manipulates Batman into adopting governing principles that embrace the ludic over *logos*. Within the space of Arkham Asylum, misrule and chaos are the dominant paradigm, and as Sicart notes, "rules are insurmountable laws the player has to acknowledge and surrender to in order to enjoy the game."[34] The process of surrender permits ludic engagement, and also moves the player-character from the space of order and reason to disorder and insanity. Temporary madness—the entry into the carnivalesque—is necessary for Batman to engage with the Joker's play, evident in the Joker's comment that "we have an escaped patient. Dresses like a bat."[35] This remark illustrates not simply the elision of the boundary between order and chaos, but the larger point that in order to pursue the Joker, Batman must adopt part of his insanity.[36] However, what the Joker manages to accomplish is ultimately only temporary and illusory insanity—a veneer of the ludic overlaying the player-character's rational gameplay. Yet that veneer is enough to produce the player's willingness to temporarily accede control to the game's insanity in order to achieve ludic engagement.

However, the choice to embrace the Joker's ideology of insanity is not left to the player-character's agency. By employing the Scarecrow (and his hallucinogenic compound), the Joker is able to force Batman into episodes of actual—if temporary—insanity. These scenes transition visually from the rooms of Arkham Asylum to scenes depicting the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents, revisiting thematically the psychological trauma of Batman's past. The ludonarrative, too, participates in the alteration of perspective by changing the gameplay during these episodes from over-the-shoulder third person to a more two-dimensional distant perspective, as seen in figure 10.1.[37]

The last of these episodes invades the player's expectations of gameplay beyond both narrative and ludonarrative. When Batman attempts to regain entry into Intensive Treatment in pursuit of the Joker, he reenters the same hallway through which the player-character escorted the Joker at the start of the game. The screen blurs, shows static, and the game appears to "crash," then transitions into a cut-scene. The cut-scene is a reversal of the game's opening sequence: the Joker is driving the Batmobile with Batman tied up in the back seat. They arrive at Arkham Asylum, and the player is thrust into a role reversal in which Batman is bound to the gurney, and the player assumes the Joker as his avatar. Such a reversal "plays" with the player's understanding of his role, requiring him to adopt and play as the villain. In order to progress, the player *must* play as the Joker, reinforcing the idea that the Joker is an essential element of the game: without an opponent, there can be
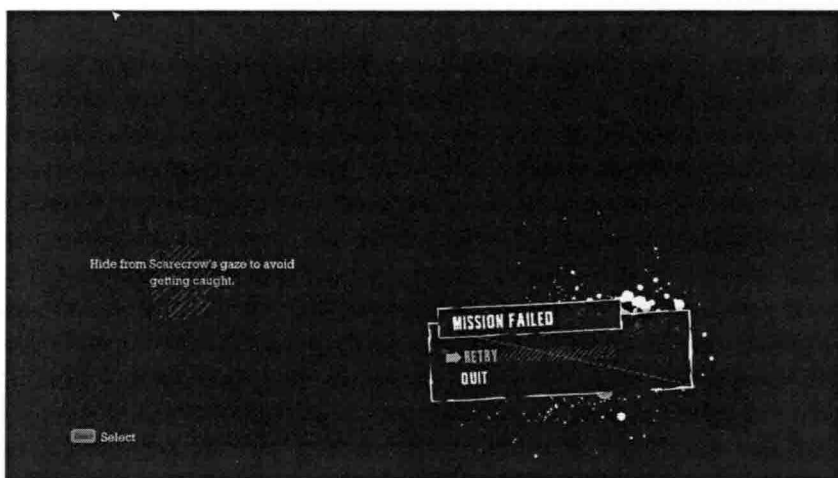
Figure 10.2 When the sequence begins, the computer or console appears to crash (top), leading to a fake "death screen" (bottom) (Rocksteady, n.p.).

no experience of the ludic, even if that opponent is ultimately a part of the player himself, his own best friend and worst enemy.

Once the player reaches the end of the entry corridor, perspective switches again, and the player resumes the "identity" of Batman, still bound to the gurney. The Joker says, "I've waited a long time for this. Let's start the party. With a bang," holding a gun to Batman's head and pulling the trigger.[38] The player has no option to dodge or free himself, and Batman's sudden "death" is shocking. Immediately, the game's "death screen" (black, with a character—here, the Joker—taunting him for having "died," and containing a "tip" on how to avoid death in the future) appears with the suggestion to use the "middle stick" to dodge the Joker's bullet and the option to either "Retry" or "Quit," seen in figures 10.2 and 10.3, which contrast the "standard" death screen with the "false" one.[39]

Either choice takes him not back to the previous scene or the menu (as would be expected), but to a cut-scene of Batman crawling his way out of a grave. By this point, the player will likely have realized that the preceding sequence is the product of an injection from the Scarecrow. The "crash," "death screen," and change of perspective are all a part of a scripted sequence which functions as a meta-ludic corollary to Batman's experience within the game narrative. Just as the Joker-qua-Scarecrow is manipulating Batman's perception of his experience, so, too, is the game-qua-Joker manipulating the player's experience by "playing" with the conventions of gameplay. The player

Tilt the mouse to dodge Joker's gun fire.
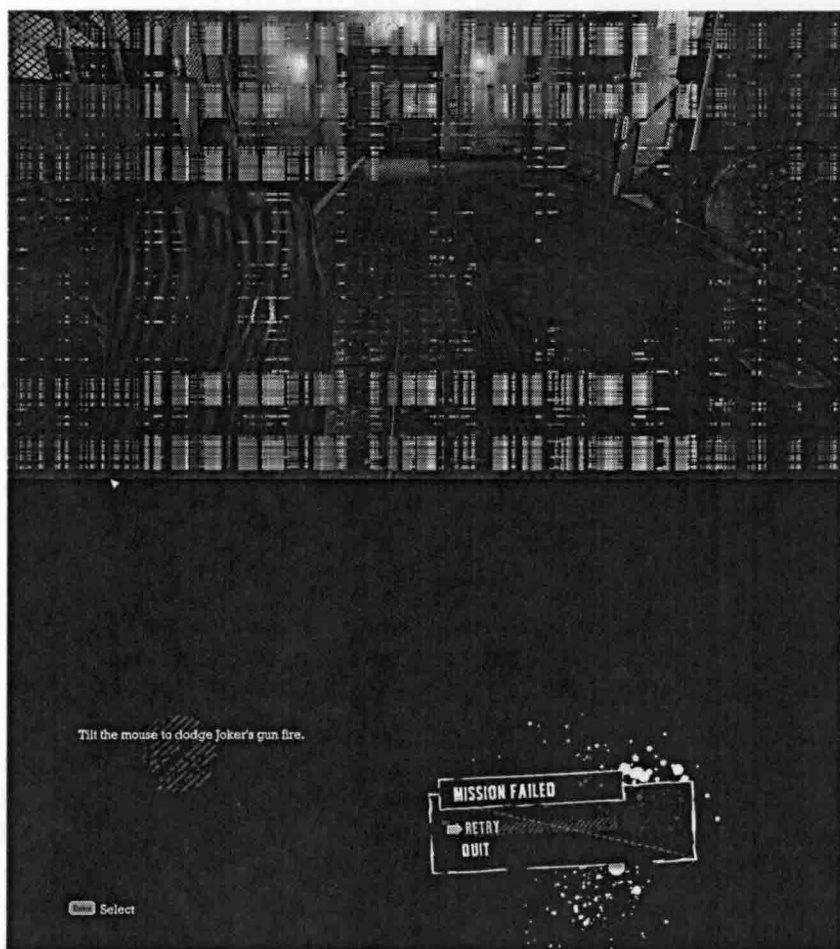
MISSION FAILED

RETRY
QUIT

Select

Figure 10.3 A genuine "death screen" (Rocksteady, n.p.).

expects the game to remain confined to the on-screen narrative, but here it breaks through the boundaries of gameplay.[40]

This sequence ends with Batman's defeat of the Scarecrow, one of many villains the Joker has placed in the player-character's path, including Killer Croc, Zsazz, Poison Ivy, Bane, and Harley Quinn. Once they are defeated, Batman is invited to the Joker's "party" in the Visitor Center, where, throughout the game, henchmen may be found working on the doors. Gradually, their "work" is revealed to be a funhouse-esque entry through the Joker's mouth—reifying the game-long process of "getting into the Joker's head" when Batman
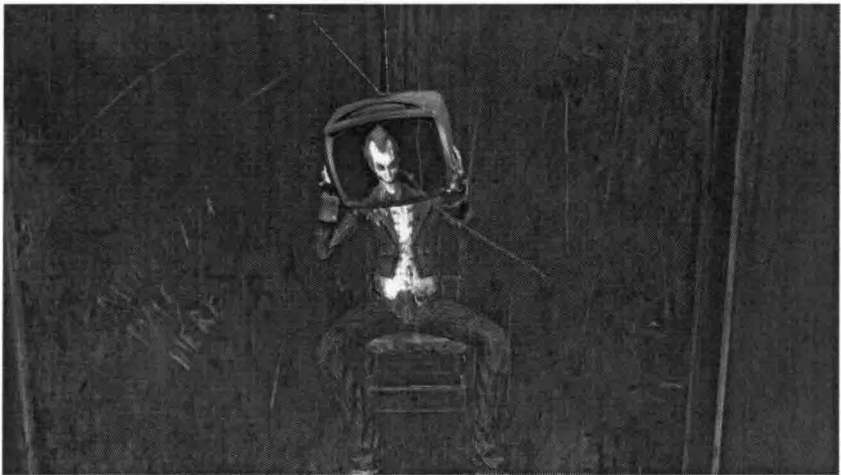
Figure 10.4 The Joker wearing his own image on a television in place of his head, from the final sequence in *Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady, n.p.).

literally walks into a giant representation thereof. Upon entering the Visitor Room, the player-character is confronted by a Joker mannequin with a static-filled television replacing its head. When the Joker begins speaking, his image appears, completing the "body."

This alludes to the Joker's use of the monitors and PA system throughout the game, but is also a physical representation of the player-character's interactive persona: a combination of both a digital avatar (present on a television or computer screen) and the physiological person of the player. The Joker says he has been "looking forward" to this final confrontation, then shouts "Surprise!" as he lifts the television off his own head (the "mannequin" was his "real" body).[41]

At this point, the player-character is given a final objective: "Defeat Joker before he destroys Gotham." The Joker says, "You don't want to miss this. Really. It'll be a blast."[42] As he sets the television down on his chair, he begins a countdown, slowly backing his way out of the visitation area (behind glass where the player-character can't reach him). On "one," the television explodes ("a blast"), and the player-character follows the Joker through the newly created hole in the window, where Batman finds the Joker waiting. When Batman says, "It's over, Joker," the Joker responds, "Over? It hasn't even begun," forcing Batman to face a series of enemies.[43] Throughout the fight and following its completion, the Joker praises Batman: "Nicely done, Bats! You deserve a prize!"[44] The "prize" is Commissioner Gordon, whom the

Joker is about to inject with TITAN when Batman (in a cut-scene) intercedes and takes the dart himself. The Joker's response is gleeful: "We're gonna have some fun now kiddies!"[45] After all, TITAN produces monstrosity and insanity, the two things the Joker spent the game attempting to enforce. During this confrontation, the Joker explains his motivation—to get Batman to forsake his adherence to *logos* and join him in the lawlessness of carnivalesque play: "I just wanted to bring down your grim façade and let you see the world as I see it. Giggling and bleeding."[46]

The Joker then injects himself with TITAN, and although he encourages Batman to join him in monstrosity—"Change, get crazy! It's the only way to beat me!"—Batman refuses and administers the antidote to himself.[47] As the transformation begins, the Joker says, "You can't beat me. I'm actually going to win."[48] However, if he wins, the game is over, and the Joker only has power during gameplay—if he defeats Batman, he has no opponent with whom to play, a relationship evident in their exchange just prior to the final fight:

JOKER: Ready for the next round?

BATMAN: Always.

JOKER: What?!

BATMAN: I'll never let you win. Never.[49]

Batman cannot allow the Joker to win because to do so would end the game— both for themselves as players within the narrative structure of the game and for the external player controlling the Batman-avatar. However, if Batman defeats the Joker, Batman's self-imposed rule against killing ensures a future play-transaction for both of them (a sequel). After all, play is only possible if there are rules, reason, and order from which that play allows escape: play without the opposition of order becomes simply chaos, not play at all—the "bleeding" without the "giggling" of the Joker's worldview.

So, when the Joker willingly accepts the effects of TITAN, allowing himself to be transformed into a physical—as well as psychological—monster for the game's final battle, he undermines what he has been attempting throughout *Arkham Asylum*. Under the influence of TITAN, the Joker abandons his position of control and play, entering the arena of ergodic rationality embodied in the player-character's mastery of the game's combat mechanics. Once the final "boss fight" begins, the player-character falls back on the skills he has learned in a predictable combat sequence that falls entirely within gaming conventions. By agreeing to meet Batman on his own terms, the Joker has forsaken the only thing that gave him any power—after all, the Joker's goal

in manipulating Batman is not to destroy Batman, but to force him "to see the world as I see it." By using TITAN, the Joker automatically loses: he becomes what Batman and the player see him as—a monster—instead of showing Batman what it is like to be the Joker.[50] Apprehending the Joker effectively ends both his play and the game, ostensibly also putting an end to the player's interaction with gamespace and returning them to the real world. However, the process of the capture—strapping the Joker into a gurney and readmitting him to Arkham Asylum as a patient—echoes the game's opening sequence that allows for both replay ability and sequels: the promise of continued play.[51]

Games present us, as players, with idealized elements that engage us critically and intellectually, but that are also *fun*—they are both playful *and* critically aware, something Jane McGonigal suggests is lacking in reality: "Compared with games, reality is too easy."[52] *Arkham Asylum* agrees that "reality is too easy," and is therefore no fun. This is how *Arkham Asylum* begins—with the grim reality of the streets of Gotham, institutionalized order imposed through law and psychiatric categorization. But there is no challenge in an ordered world, no critical engagement, no unanswered questions or unexpected surprises (good or bad). This is the argument against hierarchy and *logos*, and the source of the carnivalesque and Derridean play—order without challenge, according to McGonigal, quite simply makes us "bored out of our minds."[53] The problem with boredom is that it produces apathy and complacency. But while McKenzie Wark argues that the constant pressure of gamespace "carries within it the strange ectoplasm that both drives it and can overturn it—boredom," McGonigal and *Arkham Asylum* implicate reality, rather than games.[54]

Like the reality against which *Arkham Asylum* and McGonigal react, Arkham Asylum without the Joker is boring, apathetic, and complacent. The Joker's presence makes play possible, but it also enables Batman's heroism: without the Joker, there is no need for Batman, no game, and no play. *Arkham Asylum* encourages both ludic- and gameplay through the Joker because both are necessary components of engagement with reality—not just with games. Games are, in their most basic form, problems, and problems are plentiful in reality. *Arkham Asylum* presents play as a means of stimulating creativity and innovation in basic problem solving—the introduction of even simulated ludic play (as the Joker provides in *Arkham Asylum*) gives the problem solver (the player) the freedom to engage both creatively and critically with the problem, allowing for willing surrender to the limitations of the problem (the rules of the game) in order to embrace the freedom of critical, creative ludic

engagement. In McGonigal's words, gameplay "gives us explicit permission to do things differently," and, as Wark observes, "what displaces boredom is the capacity to act in a way that transforms a situation."[55] The veneer of ludic play removes the oppression of restrictive limitations, permitting the player to transform problem to game, apathetic work to critical play, and, in the process, to become—like Batman—a hero.

If the player were not motivated to engage with the Joker's game—to adopt his ethos and participate in his challenges—there would be no tension between order and chaos, no catharsis, no ludic, and the Joker would "win." *Arkham Asylum* sees the penetration of reality by gameplay as ideal: the possibility for creative and critical engagement with the problems (the games) that form reality. After all, play is only possible where rules exist for it to defy or circumvent, when there is a norm for the carnivalesque to invert. And, *Arkham Asylum* argues, all that is necessary to transform boring work into ludic play is a simple paradigm shift: the game's efforts, like the Joker's, force the player to "bring down your grim façade and let you see the world as I see it," a rich mélange of the serious and comic, ordered and chaotic, work and play.

Notes

1. Rocksteady Studios, *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, Xbox 360, PC (London: Eidos Interactive, 2009), n.p.

2. For the sake of brevity and because the player-character Batman is male, I will use male pronouns.

3. Chad Carlson, "The 'Playing' Field: Attitudes, Activities, and the Conflation of Play and Games," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 38, no. 1 (2011): 78.

4. Morton D. Davis, *Game Theory: A Nontechnical Introduction* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1983), xv.

5. Carlson, 83.

6. See Thomas Apperly, "What Games Studies Can Teach us About Videogames in the English and Literary Classroom," *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 33, no. 1 (2010): 12–23; James Newman, "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame: Some Thoughts on Player-Character Relationships in Videogames," *Game Studies* 2 (2002): http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman; Scot Brendan Cassidy, "The Videogame as Narrative," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 28, no. 4 (2011): 292–306; Jesper Juul, "Games Telling Stories?—A Brief Note on Games and Narratives," *Game Studies* 1 (2001): http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/.

7. Cassidy, 292.

8. Ian Dickenson, "*Batman: Arkham Asylum*, Xbox 360, PS3 Review," *darkzero*, September 13, 2009, http://darkzero.co.uk/game-reviews/batman-arkham-asylum-xbox-360-ps3/.

9. Mike Snider, "'Feel Cool Like Batman' Playing This Game," *USA Today* (August 25, 2009), 05d.

The game finds its roots not simply in a long tradition of comics, animated series, and films, but, more specifically, in Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's graphic novel, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (New York: DC Comics, 1989). Elements of the game's Joker appear in Morrison and McKean's novel, as well: his remarks in a patient interview about inkblot tests,

his obsession with Batman's madness, and his invitation to Batman to Arkham Asylum. Most of the Joker's characterization and manipulation of media throughout *Arkham Asylum*, however, are not in Morrison and McKean's novel.

10. Snider, 05d.

11. Edwin Millheim, "Xbox 360 *Batman: Arkham Asylum* Review," *Impulse Gamer*, August 2009, http://www.impulsegamer.com/360batmanarkhamasylum.html.

12. Dickenson, n.p.

13. Chris Kohler, "Review: Creepy *Batman: Arkham Asylum* redefines Comic-Book Game," *Wired*, September 1, 2009, http://www.wired.com/gamelife/2009/09/batman-arkham-asylum-review/.

14. Ibid., n.p.

15. Anthony J. Kolenic, "Madness in the Making: Creating and Destroying Narratives from Virginia Tech to Gotham City," *Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 6 (2009): 1027.

16. Rocksteady, n.p.

17. Ibid., n.p.

18. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 280, 293 (originally published in 1967).

19. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11, 5 (originally published in 1965).

20. Ibid., 7.

21. Ibid., 235.

22. Rocksteady, n.p.

23. Ibid., n.p.

24. Ibid., n.p.

25. Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 22–23.

26. Rocksteady, n.p.

27. Ibid., n.p.

28. Ibid., n.p.

29. Ibid., n.p.

30. Ibid., n.p.

31. Ibid., n.p.

32. Ibid., n.p.

33. Davis, 62.

34. Sicart, 27.

35. Rocksteady, n.p.

36. This is a theme resonant throughout the Batman tradition—after all, one must be at least a little mentally unstable to assume the guise of a flying nocturnal mammal in order to fight crime.

37. These episodes in *Arkham Asylum* are not fully two-dimensional, but they are reminiscent of early side-scrollers (like Nintendo's *Super Mario Brothers*), perhaps an acknowledgement by the game of its origins, just as the episodes reflect on Batman's origins.

38. Rocksteady, n.p.

39. There is no "middle stick" on an Xbox 360 or PS3 controller, and generally no stick at all on a PC control system. This is a clue to the player that the screen is "fake," although fan reports indicate that quite a few people immediately powered down their systems upon seeing the "crash," not noticing the small bat icon telling them that it was still a part of the game.

40. This "breaking of the fourth wall" has been done to great effect in other games, most notably *Eternal Darkness*.

41. Silicon Knights, *Eternal Darkness*, Nintendo GameCube (St. Catharine's, Ontario: Nintendo, 2002).

42. Rocksteady, n.p.

43. Ibid., n.p.

44. Ibid., n.p.

45. Ibid., n.p.

46. Ibid., n.p.

47. Ibid., n.p.

48. Ibid., n.p.

49. Ibid., n.p.

50. From a player's perspective, this final battle is a disappointing slog through a sequence of button-mashing combats with TITAN-Joker and his henchmen. When the player realizes that he is engaged in the final combat, the game loses some of its luster, and the ending is deliberately anticlimactic. However, it is also necessary in a very practical sense: the game must end sometime, and, therefore, the Joker must lose.

51. There are two: *Batman: Arkham City*, released by Rocksteady in 2011, and *Batman: Arkham Origins*, a prequel released in 2013 by Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment. The Joker appears in both.

52. Jane McGonigal, *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 22.

53. Ibid., 29.

54. McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 153.

55. McGonigal, 106; Wark, 161.