Chapter 1

Arkham Epic:
Batman Video Games as Totalizing Texts

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a model that explains how the epic is a narrative genre that has become popular across a variety of new media. It demonstrates how the Arkham series of Batman video games – Batman: Arkham Asylum (Rocksteady Studios, 2009), Batman: Arkham City (Rocksteady Studios, 2011), Batman: Arkham Origins (Warner Bros. Games Montreal, 2013), and Batman: Arkham Knight (Rocksteady Studios, 2015) – is constructed as an epic narrative within the larger Batman media franchise. The Arkham series aspires to epic status by eclipsing competing Batman texts or by assimilating those texts into its continuity. The series is an example of how video games now influence the evolution and cross-adaptation of derivative and parallel works such as comics, movies, and other paratexts. The chapter concludes by observing how games like the Arkham series relate to representation and theories of postmodernism.

INTRODUCTION

I shall provide him with plans for the greatest asylum the world has ever known... – Cyrus Pinkney, Batman: Arkham Origins (Warner Bros. Games Montreal, 2013)

Arkham is a looking glass. And we are you. – The Mad Hatter, Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth (Morrison & McKean, 1989)

According to Dictionary.com’s list of “The Worst Words of 2012,” the descriptor “epic” – as a mere synonym for “great” or “incredible” – was already so overused that it had topped popular lists of banished words for three years running. “But,” the site notes, “epic refuses to be banished.” (Dictionary.com, 2012) For anyone versed in the study of the classical epics of antiquity, this resurgence of the term was at once validating and depressing. On the one hand, it described fascinating new digital works such as Dan Sinker’s The F***ing Epic Twitter Quest of @MayorEmanuel, which is a print collection of a

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two-thousand-post Twitter feed that periodicals such as Wired and The Economist have mooted as “the first real work of digital literature” (A. T., 2011). On the other hand, the term “epic” has been slapped on other works, such as the video games Kirby’s Epic Yarn and Disney’s Epic Mickey, which are perhaps epic only in the popular sense lamented by the curators of Dictionary.com.

Despite this renewed popular awareness, the epic as it has been conventionally understood has often been considered a dead, or hopelessly antiquated, genre. This has been a tradition in literary scholarship going back as far as the Poetics, in which Aristotle (1951) argued that the seriousness of Homer’s poetry had already, by the fifth century BC, been supplanted in Greek culture by tragic drama. But, here too, the epic refuses to be banished. Not only have there been notable revivals of the classical epic poem in the hands of such geniuses as Virgil or Milton, but other literary forms, such as the novel, and even other media, such as film, have vied to be the inheritors of epic storytelling. (Harrigan & Wardrip-Fruin, 2009; Bates, 2010; Phillips, 2012; Elliott, 2014) What makes all of these disparate works somehow, almost intuitively, “epic”? Is there some critical need that narratives of great scope fulfill across cultures? What does the epic look like in the twenty-first century, and what are the implications of its contemporary forms?

This chapter will briefly outline a genre theory of the epic that is as applicable to the traditional epic as it is to narrative works in new media, ranging from film and television to comic books and video games. This theory will enable a definition of epic that allows critics to consider it on four separate levels of analysis, from the textual to the socio-historical. The chapter will then deploy this definition to show how a particular video game series, Batman: Arkham Asylum (Rocksteady Studios, 2009) and its sequels, can be critiqued as a cohesive epic. The Arkham series reveals processes of intertextuality and paratextuality that are particular to video games, and the complexities of adapting narrative material both to and from video games and films, novels, and comics. Furthermore, the chapter will argue that the Arkham games reveal the role of video games within contemporary, transnational capital, and that they are a compelling way of modeling postmodern notions of space.

BACKGROUND

A Theory of Genre across Media

Genres are not stable. Pierre Bourdieu (1993) has noted how they are in a constant state of flux within what he calls the “field of cultural production”; the status of particular works or authors, according to Bourdieu, is determined partly by their “position-takings” within that field in relation to the other works and authors, and these positions influence the positions taken by works and authors that will follow. More recently, critics have noted similar shifts in video game genres (Arsenault, 2009), and even entire media forms jockey for cultural supremacy within a dialectical logic of remediation. (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) Therefore, before dealing specifically with the epic, a few general observations about genre are in order: how genres can evolve over time, and how a genre that develops within a particular socio-historical context can be extrapolated into other, sometimes vastly different, cultural contexts. This can also help account for how generic categories are transferred across different media.

Norman Fairclough’s (2003) critical discourse analysis offers a model for understanding genre along these trans-media lines. Fairclough considers genres as types of discourse within social contexts, and this definition accords well with more traditional approaches from literary criticism that see genre as a
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