

Merci Hammon  
Final Paper  
Prof. Daniel Tiffany

## **Crafting An Avatar**

### *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Visual Information in Video Games

#### Introduction

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* uses a concept familiar to most gamers: What you do in the video game affects the reality of your avatar or in-game character. And yet the user is themselves unscathed, free to tell or not the number of chickens they kicked in *Fable* or prostitutes they beat to death in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. In comparison with the player's default world, the game is a consequence-free environment. Likewise Dorian is allowed a magical, isometric view of his character. His actions are saved onto the image of himself. Video game character skills and abilities evolve according to player choices, usually based on the role-playing game metric of experience points (XP). Visually the XP are small modifications like the changes that come over Dorian's portrait. Sometimes the transformation is textual; more often than not the change is visual. Visual change in response to player choice in video games is often contiguously embedded into the environment or available in a head-up display. Dorian's old schoolroom houses his true character, growing old in perpetual childhood.

We rarely place ourselves in a position to disassociate with the world to the extent that Dorian Gray does. Because he is protected by the displacement of his experiences onto a visual surrogate he is somehow no longer culpable to the rules of his default world. This is a common position in video gaming: the player is often watching their character interact and change with the video game world while remaining physically

separated from the experience. The subject matter is likewise similar: Dorian sought out experience for its own reward; he could have been collecting experience points as a character in a video game.

Someone who reads *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is reading about minute changes in a painting. Someone who plays a video game is reading visual artifacts about themselves and applying it to their decision-making patterns. Both Dorian Gray and any video game player are able to watch their selves change in response to patterns created by surveillance information. Human beings are not often in this relationship to information and, like Dorian Gray, the player is allowed to experience situations they would otherwise have no concept of.

### Texts and Images Become Interchangeable

Dorian visually reads his portrait; he watches the changes to Basil Hallward's likeness of him and recognizes that the wear of his experiences are displaced onto it. The portrait contains the information of his character's shift. Viewing the portrait becomes pleasurable for him:

“Often, on returning home from one of those mysterious and prolonged absences that gave rise to such strange conjecture among those who were his friends, or thought that they were so, he himself would creep upstairs to the locked room, open the door with the key that never left him now, and stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and aging face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his own sense of pleasure. He grew

more and more enamored of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. (124)”

Dorian's separation from the consequences of the natural world is fun for him. He enjoys doing as he pleases and then enjoys viewing the evidence of what he has done. His pleasure seeking is enhanced by the visual experience of viewing the changes to his surrogate. Dorian understands the painting to be a record of his misdeeds, a narrative of his opulent life. The record of the experience was what damned him and he was delighted with the evidence. The ease with which Dorian discerns the meaning of the changes in his picture suggests its readability. He almost immediately recognizes that the changes to the portrait are created by the events of his life and reasons as to what the cause of the changes are. The immediacy of the change helps increase its readability. It seems that the portrait changes simultaneously with his action, especially at the scene of his death. The connection between the portrait and his actions is spelled out for him and he recognizes it as a readable artifact:

“Dorian Gray smiled. There was a curl of contempt in his lips. ‘Come upstairs, Basil,’ he said, quietly. ‘I keep a diary of my life from day to day, and it never leaves the room in which it is written. I shall show it to you if you come with me.’

‘I shall come with you, Dorian, if you wish it. I see I have missed my train. That makes no matter. I can go to-morrow. But don’t ask me to read anything to-night. All I want is a plain answer to my question.’

‘That shall be given to you upstairs. I could not give it here. You will not have to read long’” (147).

Basil Hallward painted the original picture. Dorian's showing the changed picture to him confirms its readability and its reality. Basil examines the painting, discerns the change to be a truthful record of his friend's misdeeds and knows that the rumors he's heard of Dorian's behavior is less than the full tale of his actions:

“Hallward turned again to the portrait, and gazed at it. ‘My God! If it is true,’ he exclaimed, ‘and this is what you have done with your life, why, you must be worse even than those who talk against you fancy you to be!’ He held the light up again to the canvas, and examined it. The surface seemed to be quite undisturbed, and as he had left it. It was from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror had come. Through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosy of sin were slowly eating the thing away. The rotting of a corpse in a watery grave was not so fearful” (150).

The readability of the artifact and its connection to the written word is compounded by the reader's knowledge of the portrait. The reader of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* cannot help but ascertain exactly the nature of the change because they are told precisely the cause and effect. Their experience is narrated. There is no moment of revelation for the reader in the way there is for Basil and for Dorian. The full text for the story *The Picture of Dorian Gray* necessarily takes longer to "read" than the picture of Dorian Gray itself. The immediacy of the experience is stalled. Therefore a video game player is in the position of Dorian Gray within the work, as opposed to the position of the reader of Oscar Wilde's novella. A player makes decisions that affect their character in the same way that Dorian affects his portrait. The obviousness of the change for a video game player is similar to the immediacy of the change for Dorian, and to a lesser extent

for Basil, because the artifacts from which the characters derive their information are similarly readable.

Much as a video game player is privileged with an isometric view of their character, and Dorian is privileged with an isometric view of his character, the reader is privileged with an isometric view of Dorian. The reader appreciates a fuller story about Dorian than the story Dorian derives from his portrait. But Dorian's appreciation for the complex guilt suggested by the portrait is far from shallow. He gleans understanding of his deeper character from the portrait: "One thing, however, he felt that it had done for him. It had made him conscious how unjust, how cruel, he had been to Sibyl Vane." "But here was a visible symbol of the degradation of sin. Here was an ever-present sign of the ruin men brought upon their souls. (93)" Perhaps Dorian reads into the changes of his portrait because it is himself. A gamer identifies their "self" in the gaming environment with their "self" outside of the gaming environment. Though Dorian is not connected physically or held responsible to the crimes portrayed on his visage, he owns them. He recognizes the changes that take place in his character as the changes that take place on the portrait. He is connected both to his changed and his unchanged self. The reader is not in the same position as a gamer or as Dorian.

But Dorian is also a reader. Lord Henry gives him a book that describes a young man's corruption. Dorian feels prefigured by the book and identifies strongly with the protagonist: "And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life; written before he had lived it. (123)" Dorian's experience in reading the book is transportive and transformative. He feels that the book corrupts him: "It was a poisonous book. The heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the

brain. The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated, produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter, a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming, that made him unconscious of the falling day and creeping shadows"(121).

While reading, Dorian is immersed in the senses that the textual artifact recreates for him. The experience of reading becomes more than itself. He is immersed in the world of the young Parisian protagonist. The experience is sensually heightened. Dorian buys many copies of the book and spreads them around his house. He returns to the experience often and continues to enjoy it because of its immersive sensuality. And so a player returns to the world of the game. The experience of reading visual and textual artifacts, deciphering visual clues, hearing music and sound effects, and moving through the experience by one's own volition is sensually immersive. In this relationship to textual or visual artifacts the player is in a similar position as Dorian.

The cycle of influence is layered: Lord Henry's book influences Dorian, Dorian influences Basil Hallward's picture. It can be said that a gamer likewise is influenced by events of the game over which s/he has little or no control. And player choice influences the world of the game, the head-up display, and the avatar or character. But Dorian does not say just that he was influenced by Lord Henry's book, or that he merely influenced the picture of himself. The word "poisoned" is reiterated several times and is clearly the nature of the relationship between the book and Dorian and between Dorian and the picture. A popular criticism of video games is that they corrupt the minds of gamers and expose them to inappropriate sensory experiences and situations. This argument is often

used, sometimes in front of Congress. What Lord Henry's book and a player's game have in common is their heightened sensory immersion.

Dorian pleads his lack of responsibility for his own corruption to Lord Henry, and blames the immersive experience of reading the book: "As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame" (208). Lord Henry, like so many gaming advocates, denies the responsibility of the book in Dorian's corruption. This is at the heart of many arguments for gaming's lack of negative influence on youth crime. The world is responsible for its own poisoning influences and that the immersive gaming experience is a substitute for immoral behavior rather than an appetizer.

### Conclusion

Dorian's relationship to Lord Henry's book is primarily textual. But the artifact overcomes its medium and the information simulates a sensual experience. Instead of remaining "superbly sterile" the events of the book come to life. Likewise Dorian's relationship to his portrait, though primarily visual, overcomes its medium. He relates to the image of himself as an interactive representation of his actions. He reads the portrait for information about the consequences of his actions. The portrait is at once Dorian's avatar and heads-up display. Dorian's distance from his actions place him in the position of a video game player. Reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is like watching someone else play a video game.