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Playing *Moby-Dick*: Agency, Disempowerment,
and Adaptation in *Nantucket*

MICHAEL FEAGAN
Linda Hall Library, USA

Abstract

Picaresque Games' 2018 video game *Nantucket* acts as something of a spiritual successor to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. *Nantucket* provides an *Oregon Trail*-like simulation of nineteenth-century American whaling with the themes and characters of *Moby-Dick*. In tackling the real history of American whaling and Melville's fiction, *Nantucket* provides an opportunity for players to expand and explore themes of agency, choice, and disempowerment. This essay asks how the medium of video games alters, enhances, and diminishes *Moby-Dick* and what potential insights video games can provide in adapting classic American narratives. *Nantucket* is uniquely suited to exploring the themes of agency, freedom, and power present in *Moby-Dick* because of its nature as a video game. Both *Moby-Dick* and *Nantucket* center their narratives on a character's inability to fully comprehend or reckon with the truth and power of what they pursue. By exploring the narrative and themes of *Nantucket* and how they relate to *Moby-Dick*, I argue that a video game can engage one of the great American narratives not only through traditional methods of text and visuals, but also by combining these traditional methods with game systems.

Keywords: *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville, *Nantucket*, American history, whaling, agency, disempowerment, adaptation, video games

"Call me Ishmael," the famous first words of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, establish a narrator of uncertain identity. A digital Ishmael similarly speaks the first words of *Nantucket*, a video game sequel to *Moby-Dick* by Marco Mantoan and Daniele Monaco: "Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm." These opening lines establish the human

scale of their narratives and the uncertainty of human identity and choices. Melville's masterpiece resonates with literary, biblical, and historical references but his story centers on the flesh. While his prose can be literary and biblical, it also oozes blood, blubber, and oil. American stories and histories of whalers cannot be divorced from the flesh, the bodies of humans and whales. *Nantucket*, released in 2018 by Picaresque Games, aims to straddle the line between being an *Oregon Trail*-like simulation of American whaling and a literary sequel to *Moby-Dick*. While *Nantucket* is hardly a perfect sequel to *Moby-Dick*, the game does foreground literary and historical themes of agency and disempowerment in an interesting way. Whaling stories often center on the smallness of humanity in the face of nature. Chroniclers of whaling often focus on the mortal consequences of work in the fishery and how it marks people's flesh. They also raise questions of purpose and agency, whether through Ahab's unswerving pursuit of Moby Dick or through histories like Margaret Creighton's *Rites and Passages* or Briton Cooper Busch's *Whaling Will Never Do for Me*, which examine the lives and choices of whalers at sea. What *Nantucket* offers to Melville's *Moby-Dick* is an opportunity to occupy that flesh. *Nantucket* provides a personal engagement with literary and historical whaling narratives, like *Moby-Dick*, through the story, choices, and systems of a video game. Though it may seem strange, there is really no more fitting medium for a sequel to *Moby-Dick* than one that constantly raises the questions of agency, choice, and (dis)empowerment.

What follows is an attempt to analyze the video game *Nantucket* as a representation of the history of American whaling, and as a sequel to, and adaptation of, *Moby-Dick*. It is not an attempt to offer an extensive literature review or literary critique of *Moby-Dick* itself, or a study on the novel's relationship to the history of American whaling. This essay asks how the medium of video games shapes the messages and themes of *Moby-Dick*, and the history of American whaling broadly. Both *Moby-Dick* and *Nantucket* frame their narrative structures around a greater power or truth that cannot be fully controlled or mastered. This is evident in Ahab's and Ishmael's inability to slay or even fully comprehend Moby Dick. Both stories also raise the issue of their actors' agency and freedom,

such as Ishmael and Ahab questioning whether Moby Dick is an agent or principal, or whether we are “fast-fish” or “loose-fish.” *Nantucket* reinforces these themes through its narrative and its gameplay.

Nantucket is a worthy and interesting adaptation of *Moby-Dick* because it captures and builds on the novel’s themes of agency, control, truth, and power in ways unique to its medium. To demonstrate these connections with *Moby-Dick*, I will begin by outlining the basic structure of the narrative and gameplay of *Nantucket*. This exploration of *Nantucket* is based on my own experiences with the game alongside journalistic reviews of the game. I then briefly explore the challenges of adapting *Moby-Dick* to film and compare those to the challenges of adapting and continuing the story of *Moby-Dick* as a video game. *Nantucket* is unique, both as a game that focuses on the historic “golden age” of American whaling and as an attempted sequel to *Moby-Dick*. I follow this discussion by connecting the themes of *Nantucket*’s narrative and gameplay to wider patterns of scholarly and literary analysis of *Moby-Dick* and the history of American whaling. This also connects *Nantucket*’s handling of larger subjects like player choice, agency, and disempowerment to the medium of video games generally. This exploration suggests that the medium of video games, and *Nantucket* specifically, shares many patterns of story and theme with *Moby-Dick*. I argue that a video game can engage one of the great American narratives not only through traditional methods of text and visuals, but also by combining these traditional methods with game systems.

Playing as Ishmael

Nantucket is a light roleplaying-game where the player can determine some of the characteristics of their captain. While the captain’s name defaults to Ishmael, a player can delete this and replace Ishmael’s name with whatever they want. Narratively, the game makes the most sense if one assumes the captain is indeed the Ishmael of Melville’s novel, as he carries Ahab’s doubloon and is explicitly described as the sole survivor of the Pequod. Yet Ishmael did not possess the doubloon at the end of *Moby-Dick*. In the novel, Ahab leaves the doubloon nailed to the main mast,

declaring, “Men, this gold is mine, for I earned it; but I shall let it abide here till the white whale is dead; and then, whosoever of ye first raises him, upon the day he shall be killed, this gold is that man’s” (Melville 413). How the player’s character comes to possess the doubloon is not made clear, but to players familiar with Ahab’s declaration, this foreshadows *Nantucket*’s ending. I asked Marco Mantoan, co-founder of Picaresque Games and designer of *Nantucket*, why the identity of the game’s protagonist was left ambiguous. He said: “In *Moby-Dick*, we never know Ishmael’s true name. . . . When we set out to tell our story, we wanted players to feel like this was their journey. . . . By giving players the freedom to name their character, we allowed them to make a personal connection to the journey” (Mantoan).

While the true identity of Ishmael remains ambiguous in *Moby-Dick*, in *Nantucket*, he becomes even more of a blank canvas. Players can dictate Ishmael’s true name and specify what nautical skills he is best at. A player is given the option to assign one “point” to increase their virtual Ishmael’s skill in Hunting, Sailing, Science, or Crafting. They are then prompted to assign Ishmael a “Trait” which provides him with a positive bonus. When I played *Nantucket*, I decided to give him a point in Sailing and the trait “Old Sea Dog,” to reflect his experience aboard the *Pequod*. In many ways, Ishmael functions as the ideal player avatar. For much of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael is a passive observer and narrator. In *Nantucket*, this is the character’s greatest asset. Before the game has even begun, players are given a degree of control, choice, and agency deciding who Ishmael is.

In this sequel to *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael survives the fate of the *Pequod* only to return to whaling and to take up the same relentless hunt as Ahab. He begins in Nantucket, seeking a ship and sailors willing to join him. In an opening cinematic (or “cut scene”), Ishmael explains in a monologue that he has twice been cursed: “By the Lord, for my blasphemous promise to hunt Moby Dick, and by Ahab, for surviving the *Pequod* and its sons, swallowed by the sea.” Ishmael then explains why he has set out to pursue and hunt Moby Dick: “I was craving to conquer my spot in Heaven by striking my iron in Moby Dick’s heart.” This is the only overt explanation players are given as to why Ishmael is still hunting Moby Dick. Anyone who has read *Moby-Dick* will no doubt be puzzled

by this narrative choice. By the end of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael's encounters with humans and whales lead him to developing a philosophy of compassion and valuing diversity. This is framed in stark contrast to Ahab, who values power and domination (Dowling 51). Later monologues in the game reveal that Ishmael is primarily motivated to continue the hunt for Moby Dick because of an unfulfilled oath to Ahab, and out of a sense of survivor guilt. Thus, *Nantucket* raises the interesting question of whether Ishmael is a fast or loose fish. Is Ishmael a free agent or still the principal of Ahab? Ishmael begins the game with Ahab's doubloon in his possession, suggesting that Ishmael is still indebted to Ahab. He has taken Ahab's coin but has not rendered the service he swore to perform. As long as Ishmael keeps the doubloon, which the player cannot ever be rid of – they can share it with other crew members, but never entirely give it away – they are never free of Ahab's influence.

Like many video games, *Nantucket* handles narrative and agency through a variety of narrative structures. The first and most direct type of narrative is conveyed through text and visuals, often communicated to the player via non-interactive cut scenes, not so different from a novel or a film. In *Nantucket*, this is accomplished through short vignettes containing monologues from Ishmael's perspective at critical plot points in the game's story. These cut scenes form the spine of the game's main plot, or *embedded narrative*. The other aspect of a game's story is generated by the player through the moment-to-moment act of playing the game and making choices. In *Nantucket*, this involves the player making decisions as Ishmael about the ship, crew, and whale hunts. This part of the story forms the *emergent narrative* of the game, as it emerges through the player's actions and choices.

Kaite Salen and Eric Zimmerman have defined emergent narrative as arising “during play from the complex system of the game, often in unexpected ways.” They contrast this to embedded narratives, which they define as “pre-generated narrative content that exists prior to a player's interaction with the game” (7). This is not to say that these forms are in opposition to each other, or that this is the only way to understand narrative in video games. Pedro Cardoso and Miguel Carvhalis emphasize instead the concept of “traversal,” a more active definition that stresses

players' personal roles and experiences in journeying through a game and experiencing the narrative that emerges from the intersection of the player and the game's systems (25). Similarly, Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin have emphasised ways in which the fiction, or narrative, of any video game is really about us, the players (165-167). While there is no single definition of what narrative in video games means (Koenitz 1230), I will continue here to use Salen's and Zimmerman's terms embedded and emergent narrative. At the same time, I will emphasise that these two kinds of narrative work together within the game's systems and the uniquely personal traversal of the game by the player to create a ludonarrative. By ludonarrative, I simply mean the presence of a narrative (whether embedded or emergent) that intersects with the player's action, influence, and progression through the game's systems of play.

Emergent narrative makes up the bulk of the player's experience with *Nantucket*. While Ishmael may be driven by the embedded narrative's text, trapped by fate to hunt Moby Dick, the player is obviously not. There is nothing stopping the player from piloting Ishmael to hunt other whales and make money for hours, days, or forever before interacting with the game's ostensible plot. The game even encourages this player agency and freedom to avoid the plot at many points, by providing obstacles that are too difficult to be surmounted or that require resources the player lacks. Hunting whales and making money by selling oil and blubber is more than a side venture; it is required to move the embedded plot forward. While it is possible in *Nantucket* to make money by performing non-whaling activities, such as delivering cargo or searching for lost ships, the game's tutorial, its embedded narrative, and its emergent narrative all push the player towards whaling as the most rewarding activity in terms of in-game currency, in-game progression of the story, and the player's skill and knowledge of the game.

What follows is an example of how narrative can emerge from play in *Nantucket*, and how my own personal choices and agency were reflected by the game's system and narrative. After plotting a course for my rotten ship, the *Melville*, on an interactive map, I began slowly watching my ship progress to its destination. Much of my time at sea was uneventful. What the game simulates and presents to the player are only

the more consequential or interesting episodes while at sea. Occasionally, while sailing, the game will pause, and the player will be shown a text box presenting a consequential scenario or dramatic episode at sea.

The first concrete direction a player is given to further the embedded narrative of the game is to discover the fate of *Rachel*, the ship that saved Ishmael after the destruction of the *Pequod*. The *Rachel* is found wrecked near Cape Horn, with its surviving crew fending off sharks. After helping to fight off the sharks, players choose how to inquire about the *Rachel*'s captain, Captain Gardiner, whom the player needs to track down Moby Dick. The rescued sailors will inform Ishmael that Gardiner had not been the captain of the *Rachel* for months. Gardiner left the *Rachel* to hunt the white whale and avenge the death of his son. Ishmael then reflects on the fate of the *Rachel* and its crew, saying, "I felt guilty for the *Rachel*'s destiny, as if it got rotten by my cursed presence on board." Ishmael's sense of survivor's guilt and obligation to Ahab grows.

Ishmael and the player track down Captain Gardiner, who has become the prisoner of a local pirate lord named "Diabolito" on the island of Madagascar. Players may choose to pay a ransom for Gardiner, fight the pirates for Gardiner's freedom, or bargain for Gardiner's freedom by offering Diabolito something in exchange. I chose to have my Ishmael pay the ransom. When Ishmael meets Captain Gardiner, he remarks, "He had Ahab's eyes, blood craving windows of a desecrated church."

The only clue Gardiner has to help Ishmael to track down Moby Dick is an old Haida legend written in his diary. To discover more, Ishmael must venture to the Pacific Northwest to find a Haida village. After venturing to the Pacific Northwest, Ishmael and the player discover that these stories about the white whale come from a blind storyteller named Skaay. But the Haida villagers do not appear welcoming to Ishmael and his crew. War canoes approach Ishmael with "belligerent-seeming intentions." The only option the player is given is to kill the Haida warriors, and Ishmael captures Skaay, the storyteller. Skaay will then tell Ishmael that it is impossible to kill Moby Dick with traditional weaponry. "A hero needs a weapon," Skaay says, "one forged in raven flesh and quenched in His sacred blood." Ishmael must then, like Ahab before him, forge a special harpoon. To do so, he needs the bone of a

“sea-wolf,” a legendary orca whale named Wasco that Skaay believes is the son of a god. After killing this whale for its bones, Ishmael must then dip the harpoon into the blood of two Haida men, one from each of the Raven and Eagle clans. Shaman Dayang of the Raven clan is willing to offer his blood to players in exchange for tribute, “blood for blood,” which the player can give by providing thirty units of food – or a crew member as a human sacrifice. I directed my Ishmael to pay the tribute in whale meat. But to get the blood of an Eagle clan member on the harpoon, Ishmael and the player must track down a Haida whale hunting party and kill their leader, Chief Koyah. After all this blood is applied to the harpoon, Ishmael can take his crew to pursue and kill Moby Dick off the coast of Chile, near Mocha Island.

It is important to note that, while the player can choose the least violent option to obtain Shaman Dayang’s Raven blood, either by offering whale meat or buying food to offer, there is no alternative option for Chief Koyah. To complete the game, Ishmael must find and kill Chief Koyah, and likely several other Haida in his hunting party. Similarly, Ishmael must kill the first Haida he interacts with and essentially kidnap Skaay. While books and films often depict protagonists performing heinous acts, it is harder to do this in video games, where players make choices and the character is supposed to be an extension of the player’s agency and experiences. This is especially troubling in *Nantucket* because, according to Mantoan, Ishmael is supposed to allow “players to feel like this was their journey” and allow them to “make a personal connection to the journey.” While this works for much of the game, how is an Indigenous player supposed to feel at this point in the narrative? How are they supposed to feel when the Haida are presented as violent foes, or when allusions to human sacrifice are made? This is one of the starkest examples where the demands of the game overpower the systems of emergent narrative and player choice demonstrated earlier. The player is not wholly free to choose how they interact with the Haida.

The most critical reading of this narrative reflects serious bias or ignorance on the part of the game’s Italian developers. A more generous reading may be that the players’ lack of choice is intentional, representing something that all players ought to morally disagree with and meant to

indicate Ishmael's moral and spiritual decline in his uncompromising and selfish pursuit of Moby Dick. It is not unprecedented for video games to force players into complicity with terrible acts of violence, as in *Call of Duty 4*'s level "Death from Above," where players must fire at vague human shapes without really knowing if the people they shoot are combatants or civilians. Or, more explicitly and horrifically, *Spec Ops: The Line* requires players to kill civilians with white phosphorus. Manuel Franz and Henning Jensen's analysis of *Bioshock: Infinite* argued that the pervasive racism in the game and the main character Booker De Witt's atrocities during the Battle of Wounded Knee were attempts to communicate historical guilt and responsibility about the treatment of Indigenous Americans (221). Similarly, the events with the Haida could be intended to reflect this. However, if this is the case, it makes the ending that Ishmael receives at the conclusion of the game all the more puzzling. Unlike Ahab, there are no negative consequences that Ishmael suffers as a result of his selfishness and actions against nature. Like Franz and Jensen's conclusion on *Bioshock: Infinite*, *Nantucket* fails to evoke feelings of responsibility for past atrocities because of the gameplay (232). In contrast to Melville's *Moby-Dick*, where Indigenous characters like Queequeg are given space to voice their own thoughts, desires, and worldviews, *Nantucket* lacks any strong voice or experiences from an Indigenous perspective. Unlike *Nantucket*, modern attempts to adapt *Moby-Dick* should carefully reckon with its handling of race and Indigeneity and should consult with the people and nations they want to depict.

When players in *Nantucket* begin to hunt Moby Dick, the whale is at first invulnerable to all damage. Players must arm one of their harpooners with the newly made harpoon, the Raven's Sacred Spear. The player can then attack Moby Dick with this special harpoon, hitting only on a one-in-six chance. Once players finally defeat Moby Dick, the hunt ends with a cut scene depicting Ishmael throwing the Raven's Sacred Spear into Moby Dick's eye, killing the creature. Ishmael declares, "Ahab! The blood of the Pale Devil dissolves my bond with thee!" Ishmael is then shown years later, writing his recollection of these events. The aged Ishmael wonders if the whale was "the son of a pagan god, a white Devil

fulfilling our Lord's will . . . or maybe just another whale." What matters to Ishmael is that killing the white whale secures for him his fate and his freedom.

The ending of *Nantucket* raises the question of whether this quest was worthwhile. Melville's *Moby Dick* is supposed to be unknowable and mysterious. Is the whale agent or principal? Melville's white whale remains beyond Ahab's mastery, control, or understanding. In some ways, this ambiguity is preserved in *Nantucket*. Ishmael kills Moby Dick and says that he still does not know whether the whale was the agent of some higher power or just a dumb brute. But in *Nantucket*, Ishmael can master and slay Moby Dick. For many, this ending will seem anathema to the spirit and themes of *Moby-Dick*. It does not wholly satisfy with its engagement of the question of whether Ishmael is a fast-fish or a loose-fish. The game ends with Ishmael's sense of obligation, guilt, and duty fulfilled; he lives out the rest of his life. One might think that, if *Nantucket* is a story narrated by Ishmael after the fact, then this must prevent Ishmael from dying at the end. While Ishmael cannot die in the novel (despite the impression and criticism of Ishmael's apparent death in the first printing of the British edition), this is less of an issue with a video game like *Nantucket*. The player is experiencing and directing Ishmael's journey with him. The player is not necessarily being told the events of his journey after the fact. The narrative structure of a video game more easily allows the possibility for Ishmael to perish at the end, unlike in *Moby-Dick*. In fact, Ishmael can die at numerous points while playing the game, ending the journey and requiring the player to load an earlier save of the game. But these deaths are all treated equally in narrative weight. While *Nantucket* does a lot right in emulating the themes and structure of *Moby-Dick*, it might have been better served by having Ishmael die at the end, like Ahab, in his relentless pursuit of Moby Dick. Or, perhaps an alternative ending cut scene could have been created if Ishmael perished during his fight with Moby Dick. That way, the player would be able to author their experience and decide which ending they would prefer for Ishmael.

Agency and Choice

Individual agency and freedom are common frames of analysis for *Moby-Dick*. Wai-chee Dimock sees Ahab's self as "the seat of agency," the "all-encompassing individual" (137). For Dimock, the exercising of individual freedom is a "disciplinary postulate," a process of "blaming the victim" for exercising their agency (111). This freedom, where one is their own worst enemy, points to a "negative individualism" where the individual becomes a subject, one whose actions constitute grounds for discipline (Dimock 112). Jonathan Arac disagrees, arguing that Melville's *Moby-Dick* highlights the "extraordinary entanglements for action" (46). For Arac, Ahab's sense of self is not free, total, or individual. As Arac says, "in *Moby-Dick* agency is not confined; rather, its uncertain borders are explored: things happen, but it remains a question of how" (54). Individuality, freedom, or agency is not the goal nor premise of *Moby-Dick*, but a "puzzling possibility" (Arac 54).

Nantucket is able to portray agency as a "puzzling possibility" because of its nature as a video game. The extent to which the player, and by extension Ishmael, has individuality, agency, or freedom is never certain. The decisions presented to the player are not wholly free. Like all video games, *Nantucket* limits player choice as much as it expands it. It only ever presents two to four options for players to choose from in story-critical moments. These choices are presented as different shades of Ishmael's thinking. They are all choices that Ishmael *might* make, and the player's role is to select the one they would prefer Ishmael to make. Conversely, there are points in the game where the player is given no agency over Ishmael's decision-making. For example, there is no way to complete the game in which Ishmael and his crew do not murder Haida people in some way. The player is, more or less, acting as the invisible authorial hand of fate that occasionally nudges Ishmael in a certain direction hoping for a certain outcome. Like all tabletop-roleplaying and video games, *Nantucket* is a dialogue between the player and the game's designers. The choices made by the designers constrain the choices a player can make. The player, and, by extension, their Ishmael avatar, is a collaborative agent completing the story as defined by Picaresque Studios. Since *Nantucket* is intended as a sequel to *Moby-Dick*, this also places

both the player and the game's designers in collaboration with Melville. In a similar vein to Maria Lindgren Leavenworth's writing on the paratext of fan fiction, each playthrough of *Nantucket* "initiates an imagined dialogue" (43) with the game's designers but also with Melville. Like all works of fan fiction, *Nantucket* functions as a platform for the designers and the players to enter into a creative dialogue with Melville through exercising some degree of agency and control over Ishmael and the world of *Moby-Dick*.¹

The players' freedom to paint the edges of Ishmael's journey depends on Picaresque Games' design intent. As game designer Mantoan said, "our main goal was to create a world full of alternatives. . . . Choose their crew, chart their course, take risks. . . . We want to create worlds where players don't just follow a tale, they steal the pen and write their own legend across the map." While many details are open to player input, the larger direction of the embedded narrative is unbending. If the game's main plotline is pursued to its conclusion, Ishmael must hunt Moby Dick and Ishmael must defeat Moby Dick. Yet, a player can choose to pilot Ishmael as a regular whaler and never once take any step to hunt Moby Dick. This allows for possible emergent narratives or endings. But there is no embedded ending to this story where Ishmael gives up his quest or dies hunting Moby Dick.

The design of *Nantucket* locates the agency of the player in the agency of whaling captains. Much like the historical whale fishery, the agency and freedom of whaling crews is limited and constrained by the choices of their captains. This does not mean that crew members are wholly passive agents, either historically or in *Nantucket*. *Nantucket*, like *Moby-Dick*, has to walk the fine line of depicting an environment that is hierarchal and deferential to authority while still highlighting the small forms of control and agency available to crew members. Melville largely accomplishes this through Ishmael's and Starbuck's disagreements with Ahab. *Nantucket* performs a similar feat by providing crew members with specific events which often depict disagreements between them, as well as with crew specific missions the player can decide to pursue. Some of these crew missions can result in the crew member leaving the player's ship, empowering the digital crew member and disadvantaging the player. Mutiny and abandonment are two of the most powerful choices that

historical whaling crew members could make, and this is accurately represented in *Nantucket*.²

Of course, *Moby-Dick* and *Nantucket* both prominently feature the agency and individuality of animals. Moby Dick is presented as an unknowable and inscrutable creature. As Ahab says of Moby Dick, “that inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him” (Melville 140). While revenge is the obvious motivation for Ahab’s hunt, there is clearly something more to his obsession. Ahab wants to unveil that “unknown but still reasoning thing” behind that mask of blubber (Melville 140). Ahab seeks a “deep and infinite truth” embodied by the whale (Lukacs 143). This is the unknowable truth behind nature, behind instinct. The unanswered and unanswerable question of why these whales exist, and why they behave the way they do. Uncovering the answer behind these questions is what ultimately motivates Ishmael’s divergence into cetology in the middle half of the book.

Nantucket’s framing of the whale’s agency is often problematic as it exclusively presents whales as violent adversaries. Whales in *Nantucket* do not exist to serve a purpose other than to be hunted. Feeding grounds and migration routes in *Nantucket* hint at a larger life to the whales but the behaviour of the whales in either location is no different. Newborn whales and full-grown adults are both equally aggressive. While the player can make moves to protect their fellow crew members from attacks, adult whales cannot make similarly strategic moves to protect their young. The obvious issue with presenting animals as monstrous and aggressive is that it could hurt perceptions of these animals and conservation efforts. Most whales are not naturally violent and aggressive towards humans. Despite this, whales are not passive receivers of player violence. Whales in *Nantucket* are afforded some agency and inscrutability within the hunts. They resist and can often kill crew members, or even Ishmael, resulting in an unceremonious end to the game. The whales’ exact actions in a hunt are always hidden from the player. The intent, or reasoning, behind the whales’ actions is difficult to understand and determine. Therefore, like Ahab and Ishmael, the player of *Nantucket* spends much of their time grappling with the unpredictable and inscrutable behaviour of whales.

A player can make an animal's actions visible, but to do so they must heavily invest in the Trait "De rerum animalia" for their captain or hire a crew member who has that trait. "De rerum animalia" references the Roman poem by Lucretius and implies that the character who possesses this trait has achieved some greater understanding of animals' inner minds and thoughts. While the existence of this trait in the game may seem to undermine the "inscrutable" nature of the whales, it requires a heavy investment of time and experience for it to be assigned to Ishmael. Taking this trait, or hiring someone who possesses the trait and bringing them on a hunt each time, paradoxically undercuts the ability of the captain and crew to be the most efficient whalers. By possessing this trait, a player chooses to forgo the more immediate benefits of Hunting and Sailing that are crucial to hunting whales and protecting the crew. Unlocking "De rerum animalia" is onerous on the player, and the benefit of having it is not that significant for gameplay. While this trait reveals the true details of a whale's actions, the player is already aware when a whale intends to move aggressively against a specific whale boat. Therefore, in a narrative and mechanical sense, *Nantucket*'s interpretation of understanding a whale's agency is, like Ahab's, Ishmael's, and Melville's pursuits, costly and unfulfilling.

Narratives of American whaling, whether fictional or historical, are defined by agency and choice. This is what drew Mantoan to this setting: "It's a world that invites agency. These were voyages that could last years, in which every day could bring fortune or failure. That's perfect material when you're building open-world games, where freedom of choice is more than just a feature; it's the soul of the experience." To be an American whaler, in Melville's text or in the past, involved wrestling with multiple choices and competing agencies. Those agencies and choices define and shape the narrative.

(Dis)empowerment

Video games generally try to elicit feelings of empowerment in their players. Video games frequently put players in positions of authority, power, or control over their environment, asking them to make critical decisions that shape their virtual worlds. This is most obviously present in

the narrative framing of most video games that make the player the hero. *Nantucket* does offer some narrative empowerment to the player's actions. After all, the goal of the game is to kill Moby Dick, and this is something that the player can accomplish. It is hard to imagine anything more narratively empowering than literally killing one's white whale. Yet much of *Nantucket* appears more focused on making the player feel disempowered and not in control of their environment.

The game never fully bends to the player's will and agency. *Nantucket* resists the player's will in a way that frequently makes players feel like they lack control or power over a situation. Whale hunts are the most emblematic of this. Since the availability of choices and actions a player can make are all based on chance, a player can never truly feel in control of the situation. Players are always only a few bad dice rolls or turns away from a whale killing a crew member or even their captain and ending their game. This is not to say that this disempowerment makes the experience negative for the player. On the contrary, this feeling of disempowerment makes victories feel more earned because the challenges are so real (Vornhagen et al.).

This also makes the player feel like whaling has real human risks to it. The real lives of nineteenth-century whalers were incredibly dangerous. Robert Weir's 1855 whaling diary documented an entire whaling boat and its crew that were lost because of an attack from a right whale. A similar tale involved the whaler Henry Howland who had his boat "stoved in" by a sperm whale's head. Howland was trapped in the whale's jaws and dragged under water (Creighton 66-67). The risk of a hunt could vary greatly depending on the environment and the whales in question. In general, right whales were considered less destructive and less aggressive. Sperm whales were considered the most dangerous of prey. Melville described the sperm whale as "sufficiently powerful, knowing, and judiciously malicious" (68). In *Nantucket*, adult sperm whales are easily the most dangerous and lucrative whales to hunt.

Despite the drama and trauma of these encounters, historically, deaths caused by whales' attacks were not common. As whaling historian Margaret Creighton suggests, approximately one man in thirty died during an average voyage of three and a half years. About half of all these deaths

were caused by accidents and the rest by disease (Creighton 67). William Scoresby Jr. described many of the events of whalers in the arctic during his expeditions, including accidents during hunts. One such event involved the harpooner William Carr, who struck a whale with his harpoon only to have the line catch his leg and pull him overboard and into the frigid water (Scoresby 123-125). Diseases and accidents on whaling voyages were far more likely to kill a whaler than the actual whales.

While whaling had its dangers, it also had its more monotonous side. It often took months for a whaler to even sight a whale. Once sighted, there was no guarantee that a crew would successfully kill its whale. Most hunts did not end successfully or in disaster. Scoresby documented the activity of the whaling ship *Baffin*; many of its sightings did not conclude in a successful hunt (41-42). When whalers did kill a whale, the actual gruelling labour of stripping large sheets of blubber, cutting them down, and rendering them down to oil could begin. Whalers' eyes would be filled with black smoke, and their hands and arms would be covered in burns from the hot oil. In short, the work of "trying out" a whale's blubber was long and arduous (Creighton 71-72).

Nantucket captures some of the difficulties and dangers of the whale fishery. There is an ever-present risk of disease, dehydration, and starvation that can occur as a result of running out of supplies or a random event spoiling and destroying supplies while at sea. Mantoan stated that the decision to make this game so lethal was inspired both by the real history of nineteenth-century whaling and the feeling of powerlessness against nature present in *Moby-Dick*: "It was a dangerous profession where death could come fast: from the sea, the hunt, disease, or your own crew. We didn't want to romanticize that." For Mantoan, this difficulty was not simply a way to challenge players. It was an intentional way of conveying the themes of *Moby-Dick*. That feeling of powerlessness against nature is "at the heart of *Moby-Dick*," according to Mantoan. "We wanted players to feel that tension," Mantoan said; "You can plan carefully, have the best crew, the best ship, and still a whale capsizes your whaleboat, a storm strikes, a disease spreads. The randomness isn't just difficulty, its design. It's the ocean reminding you that it doesn't care who

you are.” Disempowerment, being at the mercy of forces beyond one’s control or understanding, is at the heart of *Nantucket*’s design – something it shares with *Moby-Dick* and the real history of American whalers.

Adapting *Moby-Dick*

Moby-Dick is a difficult book to adapt because it contains so much. Evert Duyckinck, reviewing Melville’s book for the New Bedford *Literary World* in 1851, remarked that “There are evidently two if not three books in *Moby-Dick* rolled into one” (403). *Moby-Dick* scholar Paul Lukacs has identified three separate narrative modes within *Moby-Dick* that represent Ishmael’s struggles with the truth: Ishmael telling his own story from his subjective perspective, Ishmael abandoning his experiences in favour of more “objective” or “scientific” cetology, and, finally, Ishmael returning to narrative by telling Ahab’s story rather than continuing his own (139-141). *Moby-Dick* is thus a story about storytelling itself, one that shifts in narrative forms and conventions.

In a similar way, *Nantucket* shifts the way it tells its story. Chris Wray, reviewing the game, remarked that “*Nantucket* is effectively a game in two parts.” While Wray clearly identifies one of these parts as the “logistical, or management side” of the game, the second part is not as clear in his review. I believe *Nantucket* to be a game of three parts. The first part is the embedded narrative itself. This is the main story that sees Ishmael pursue and kill Moby Dick. The second part is the emergent narrative. In the video game, this narrative is created through player choice. For example, the player can choose to fight the pirate lord Diabolito, or to trade with him to get the information on Moby Dick. There are also managerial choices about the ship and its crew, as well as random events influenced by the weather, the status of the crew, and the ship’s supplies. The third part of the game is the whale hunting. *Nantucket* uses a board-game-like system to represent the hunting of whales. Whale hunts are turn-based dice rolling competitions between the whaling crew and the whales. While I am describing these sections of the game, it is not my intent to communicate that they are opposed to each other or operate separately from one another. All these parts work cohesively within

Nantucket. For example, the embedded narrative goal of Ishmael hunting Moby Dick (and whales in general) mirrors the incentives and rewards from the gameplay with hunts providing money and experience to make whaling crews and equipment better. The gameplay and the narrative reinforce each other and condition the player to obsessively hunt whales.

Many concessions made while designing *Nantucket* involved the simulation of whale hunts. Early in the game's development, a version of the hunting was proposed that put more weight on the crew's positions in the whaleboat. This reflected historic practices in the American whale fishery, where the harpooner or boatsteerer was positioned in the bow of the boat to harpoon the whale. The boatheader led the whaling boat in the hunt and was the one responsible for lancing the whale. After the whale was harpooned, the boatsteerer would change positions with the boatheader moving from the bow to the aft of the boat. The swapping of positions of the boatsteerer and boatheader was a critical and risky part of any hunt, as Melville described in *Moby-Dick* (234). The dynamics of whale hunts and the eccentricities demanded of a whaling boat's crew lend themselves to a unique game experience. Melville's descriptions of American whaling vessels are rich with detailed descriptions of processes and equipment. Mantoan agrees that "there's something inherently game-like about the world of *Moby Dick* and the American whaling industry of the nineteenth century." While Mantoan explored more historical versions of whale hunts for the game early on, he and his studio did not pursue this direction much further. Mantoan said of the earlier, more historically-accurate hunts, "It was intricate, faithful, [but] ultimately not the right fit." The critical issue of this earlier design was pacing. For Mantoan, a slower, more granular system, no matter how faithful to history, would slowly wear down the patience of the players, who were expected to perform dozens of hunts throughout the game.

Only a few whale hunts are described in detail in *Moby-Dick*, but, in *Nantucket*, players are expected to engage in dozens of hunts over multiple hours. Rather than history, Mantoan took inspiration from a different source. "We stripped it back and imagined the hunting system with a more board game sensibility, clear rules and faster turns," he said. Mantoan is not alone in seeing parallels between board game design and

Moby-Dick or American whaling.³ *Nantucket* ultimately eschewed other systems that, while historically accurate, slowed down and overly complicated the game. “We had plans for a deeper economic layer, whaling companies, contracts, shareholders,” Mantoan said, “but at a certain point, it risked becoming noise.”

Film and communication scholar David Dowling has documented the various screen adaptations of *Moby-Dick* and found that one of their most shared features is to villainize the white whale. Slower narratives that problematize the agency of the whale might defuse the tension of the story and go against audience’s dramatic expectations for conventional cinematic storytelling (Dowling 51). Dowling’s main critique of the depictions of whales in most film adaptations of *Moby-Dick* is that they only portray these creatures as “dumb brutes.” They do not capture the more nuanced, curious, intelligent, and protective behaviours that whales possess and that Melville lovingly describes.⁴

At first glance, *Nantucket* is guilty of many of the same flaws as the film adaptations of *Moby-Dick*. Moby Dick is presented as a colossal monster whose only behaviours are violent, such as the sinking of the *Pequod* and the *Rachel*. The game’s systems seem in agreement with the embedded narrative that something divine and unearthly protects Moby Dick from mundane harpoons. Despite *Nantucket*’s suggestion at the end that perhaps Moby Dick was “just another whale,” the embedded narrative and the game’s systems assign the digital Moby Dick more overt agency and significance than Melville’s text would suggest. Other whales in *Nantucket* are always depicted as violent towards the player’s crew. Whales in *Nantucket* never act protective of each other or non-hostile unless attacked first. *Nantucket*, through its combat system, effectively portrays all whales as monsters, akin to orcs or goblins in other roleplaying games.

If there is one area where *Nantucket* succeeds over film and other popular adaptations of *Moby-Dick*, it is its willingness to focus on the minutia.⁵ Players must effectively manage their ship, their crew, and their finances; they must gain familiarity with the conditions of whaling grounds and migration routes. Players must perform dozens of whale hunts throughout their time with the game, to the point where it may begin

to feel like a grind. Perhaps more than films or even novels, video games are able to test an audience's patience because of the engagement fostered through their interactivity.⁶ Much of the time spent playing *Nantucket* involves simply watching one's virtual ship sail the seas, waiting for an event to interact with. Providing a lack of narrative progress for hours on end may indeed make a player feel like they are at sea. *Nantucket* invites players to identify with Ishmael, cataloguing and tracking whales, trying to slowly unravel their behaviour and secrets. *Nantucket* shares with *Moby-Dick* a delight in exploring the specifics of the whaling industry.

Conclusion: The Value of Video Games in Expressing American Narratives

The most important lesson a game like *Nantucket* can provide for scholars and game designers is that emulating the details of historic systems or the tone of a novel is difficult to accomplish and to make enjoyable. While some scholars may bristle at the idea of simplifying the past or a complex work like *Moby-Dick* into a mere game, consider what *Nantucket* accomplishes in its finished state. *Nantucket* is a game that demonstrates the importance of contingency and individual choice in forming the narratives and experiences of historical actors. Players do not have full control or agency over their captain. In this manner, they are occupying and playing the "role" of a nineteenth-century American whaling captain. The world is not a passive receiver of the player's will. In this sense, *Nantucket* works to disempower and decenter the player in a larger web of exchanges and interactions.

A critical examination of *Nantucket* emphasizes themes of agency, freedom, and power also present in *Moby-Dick*. *Nantucket* is not a replacement for *Moby-Dick*, nor can it be the novel's true sequel. But for a younger audience that reads increasingly fewer novels, it may serve as a helpful companion piece. Just as a video game like *Oregon Trail* is not a replacement for learning about the expansion of American settlers westward, *Nantucket* is not a replacement for reading *Moby-Dick*. But, for a generation of young people, *Nantucket* could provide insight into the experiences of American whalers and, perhaps more importantly, generate curiosity and enthusiasm for learning more. When I asked *Nantucket*

designer Mantoan if he had intended to create an educational game, he responded in the negative. “We weren’t setting out to teach in the traditional sense,” he said. Instead, Mantoan offered an alternative: “What we were really after was evoking a feeling. We wanted players to experience the rough, rugged life of the sea in the nineteenth century. . . . We deeply hope that maybe, by completing the game, players will be inspired to dive deeper into the history, or crack open *Moby-Dick* again, or even take to the sea themselves.” Video games have the potential to do what we know all great works of art are capable of. They can transport us to a specific time and place to embody the experiences and perceptions of someone foreign to us. They allow us to occupy someone else’s flesh for a time and to be enriched by the opportunity.

Notes:

¹ For more on how fan fiction can help with understanding and teaching *Moby-Dick*, see Jenkins, *How Fan Fiction Can Teach Us a New Way to Read Moby-Dick (Part One)*.

² For more on mutiny, abandonment, and the consequences for those choices, see Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do for Me*, 87-104.

³ Numerous other board games have also taken inspiration from *Moby-Dick*, including *Leviathan*, *Moby Dick*, or, *The Card Game*, *New Bedford*, and *Moby Dick: Wrath of the Seas*.

⁴ For examples of this in *Moby-Dick*, see chapters 87 (The Grand Armada) and 88 (Schools & Schoolmasters).

⁵ For more information on Italian pulp-fiction adaptations of *Moby-Dick*, see Mariani, “Pulp(y) Fiction: A Dylan Dog Adaptation of *Moby-Dick*.” For more on film adaptations of *Moby-Dick*, see Dowling, “Revenge Upon a Dumb Brute.” Most adaptations of *Moby-Dick* do not attempt to be a narrative sequel, except for Philip Jose Farmer’s pulp-fiction sci-fi novel, *The Wind Whales of Ishmael*, which sees Ishmael transported to the future where flying whales are hunted from aircrafts.

⁶ Consider games where players are expected to “grind,” which means performing repetitive and unchallenging tasks in order to obtain rewards, advance characters’ abilities, or make progression in the game easier.

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