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Rituals and Counter-Rituals: The Role of Ritual in Gamifying War and Undermining Oppression  
in the *Hunger Games* Trilogy

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how rituals gamify war in the *Hunger Games* trilogy. Using a formalist lens, I argue that ritual is a rhythmic, repetitive, and looped form found in both media and real-world conflicts. By comparing the forms within the novel to those in video games and war, I explore the ethical dangers of associating war with game, while also revealing the subversive potential of ritual. The Capitol and District Thirteen use rituals in the Hunger Games and Block simulations to instill automatic responses, impose values, and consolidate power, resulting in the unethical treatment of combatants and noncombatants. In contrast, Katniss employs rituals to challenge oppressive structures, foster empathy, and redistribute political power. Comparing dictatorial leadership to video game programmers reveals Katniss's dual roles as a passive player character and a proactive player. As a player character, Katniss experiences violence and is incited to it by familiar patterns, but as a player, Katniss uses her experiences to change the game. While rituals can perpetuate cycles, they can also break them, presenting progressive possibilities in the series as well as a new lens through which to view video games and war.

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## 1 Introduction

There's no going back. So we might as well get on with things.

—Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay*

No matter how much the characters yearn to move on, the entire world of the *Hunger Games* insists on going back. In the *Hunger Games* trilogy, which includes the novels *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010), Katniss Everdeen is a tribute, one of the citizens of the impoverished districts sent to the luxurious center of government, the Capitol, to fight to the death in a televised spectacle called the Hunger Games. Capitol propaganda advertises the annual Hunger Games as a punishment for the districts' rebellion, but no terms are given for its cancellation. Since the Capitol's need for revenge will never be satisfied, the eternal repetition of the Hunger Games demonstrates the futility of trying to compensate for unjust deaths in war. Worse still, this point is made through the proliferation of more death and more war, continuing the cycle of violence as district children are unfairly tortured and killed.

Not only does the Hunger Games create an entire industry out of digging up the past, but the event is also discordantly presented as entertainment. In the Hunger Games, rituals are used to gamify a conflict, disguising the war at the event's core by turning it into a glamorous competition between tributes. Repetitious elements like the cannon firing, parachutes, and the feast reward and encourage tribute violence whilst also unifying the Games thematically for their audience. By creating familiar symbols for the annual Games, nostalgia amplifies the delight for Capitol spectators whilst the never-ending cycle of death and sacrifice amplifies the traumatizing effect on District audiences. This dichotomy of entertainment and trauma provides the ambiguity necessary for the Games to thrive. To simultaneously achieve the political goal of punishing the districts whilst also entertaining the Capitol, the Games muddle the boundary between game and war to create one spectacle effective on two audiences.

In the second novel, the Hunger Games celebrates its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, marking the passing of seventy-five years and hundreds of children. For the first time, victors are sent back into the arena, forcing Katniss to relive what she already struggles with in her nightmares. From within and without, the repetition of horrifying events seems unstoppable until the districts

reunite under the long-lost District Thirteen to rebel against the Capitol. Even as the old regime starts to crumble, signs of tyranny begin to crop up in ruthless, man-made landslides and bombings orchestrated by district rebels. Indiscriminate attacks and war crimes sully the great cause of the rebellion, leaving Katniss to wonder if she's watching the rise of the Capitol all over again, just with different faces and uniforms.

The cycle of tyranny and rapidly intensifying war plague the characters in the final novel, reflecting reality in many respects but referring even more profoundly to simulations. Deep in the underground levels of District Thirteen, soldiers are trained with a simulation called the Block to prepare themselves for battle in the Capitol. Like the Hunger Games before it, the simulation exaggerates warfare and imbues it with political messaging in a way reminiscent of another type of real-world media: video games. The first- or third-person shooter game is a popular and controversial simulation in which players fight their way through highly realistic, sometimes modern war zones, but against enemies that are often unrealistically violent and othered. Popular examples include the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and *Ghost Recon* franchises. While modern armies do use in-person simulations for training, they also have a vested interest in the production of video games like *America's Army* for recruitment purposes. The first encounter the *Hunger Games* trilogy's young adult target audience has with simulated war is likely through home media like video games, so comparing the two media is particularly relevant when discussing youth in a conflict. Using video games as a jumping-off point takes into account both the simulated and ideological nature of the Hunger Games and Block, demonstrating the impact they have on youth within the series.

At its core, this thesis is rooted in the formalist perspective presented in Levine's book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, and Network* with a particular focus on the form of rhythm. While ritual is already mentioned as a rhythmic form by Levine, analyzing it in the context of video games and warfare both expands its definition and introduces another form: the loop. First, these three forms—rhythm, ritual, and loop—will be explored through the lens of a more critically well-trodden simulation, the Hunger Games. This is not to downplay the presence of other forms in the series. Hierarchical binary, for one, is unavoidable in a discussion of war and games, both of which often rely on the conflict between two opposing groups. Both the Capitol and District Thirteen use their simulations to cultivate a distinct image of the enemy, a binary

critical to war and game alike. Even whole and network cannot truly be eliminated from the discussion. The network of relationships formed during decades of the Hunger Games gives the rebellion the power to rupture wholes like the arena dome and isolated districts. While the series is undoubtedly full of all four of the forms Levine's book covers, this thesis will focus on rhythmic forms like rituals and loops, with other forms in a secondary role.

Once rhythmic forms have been elaborated on through a discussion of the Hunger Games, the analysis will expand into unknown territory by integrating a discussion of the Block. While the Block has not yet been analyzed by critics, its portrayal of violence and government manipulation is thematically consistent with previous criticism of the *Hunger Games* trilogy. As with video games or military simulations, the rehearsal of violence in the Block is harmless on its own but destructive when put into practice elsewhere. For this reason, the behavior learned by soldiers such as Katniss in the Block will be compared with their actions during the war against the Capitol, thereby indicating the efficacy of their conditioning. Just as important as the actions of tributes and soldiers are their reactions to the potentially unethical behavior encouraged by their respective simulations, whether that be shock in the moment or trauma in the aftermath. Comparing the Block with descriptions of actual combat in the Hunger Games and Capitol reveals how blurring the boundary between war and games harms both victims and survivors.

Using scholarship on rituals in video games to analyze simulated violence in the trilogy is particularly productive since they rely on the duality between player and player character, a split also experienced by Katniss as she oscillates between powerlessness and competence. While people can assume another identity as part of an in-person simulation, shooter video games require an entity on-screen as well as off-screen to be played, whether that be a personified entity or a disembodied cursor. The clearer distinction between player and played, inside and outside, reflects both the physical divide of the arena between tribute and spectator as well as the muddier, internal divide between victim and performer. As a survival competition, the Hunger Games rewards Katniss's resourcefulness, yet punishes her when she begins to undermine the Capitol's authority. This delicate balance between agency and insubordination colors much of her experience within the arena and the Block.

Another way to compare rhythm in the media of the novel and video games is through their depiction of space. Many spaces in the trilogy such as the Block and sewers are formatted

similarly to levels in a video game. The different types of locations involved in each level, called patterns, can likewise affect pacing and tension. Unlike in typical games, however, these dramatic encounters lead to shifting, undefined binaries. Like the nebulous division between war and game, other binaries such as that between ally and enemy suffer and mutate alongside the heightening tension. In the end, the hunt for her true enemy that Katniss began in *Catching Fire* culminates in a world in which the hero finds herself with a dwindling number of allies. A closer analysis of the formal similarities between the trilogy and video games reveals how the clever manipulation of common trends, such as othering the enemy, offers a sharp political commentary on the excessive violence directed at noncombatants or surrendered hostiles.

Using the concept of ritual, this thesis expands upon the connection between the media of the novel and the video game as well as between video games and war. While the overlap between video games and war is at least partially explainable by the military-entertainment complex, the relationship between war and games pre-dates its digital counterpart and is even visible in the repetitious elements of their structure. Using claims by Michael Vlahos, and by Alison Gazzard and Alan Peacock, among others, a common trait is identifiable between the two: ritual. Religious ritual, the most widely recognized variant, is often repetitious, rhythmic, and even looped. Communion is repeated down the line and across weeks but also calls participants to remember and recreate the Last Supper. Similarly, the Hunger Games repeats yearly while also imitating its source event, the rebellion. By expanding the definition of ritual to include both secular practices and the behavior of video games and war, we can trace the crossover not only of form but of meaning between simulation and reality.

While the damaging effects of the Hunger Games and Block stem from tragic abuses of power, Katniss's empathy allows her to move against oppressive structures. By analyzing her rebellious actions as a tribute in the Games as rituals, the significance of her behavior as a combatant in the Capitol is made clearer in contrast. While her training in the Block clearly impacts her behavior during the final battle, the implications of her conditioning stretch beyond Katniss's tour in the Capitol. Like the Hunger Games, which manages the tributes for a few short weeks but maintains power over the populace year-round, the effects of training in the Block continue even after the Capitol is captured. During her two trips to the Hunger Games arena, Katniss leverages her knowledge of her superiors to serve her own goals. Each novel ends with

an act of rebellion: offering Peeta poisonous berries in *The Hunger Games*, shooting the arena forcefield in *Catching Fire*, or assassinating the leader of District Thirteen, President Coin, in *Mockingjay*. Similarly to how she mastered Snow and his Games, Katniss uses her awareness of her conditioning to rebel against Coin and unsettle her newly formed government. Applying Levine's formalist framework to the Block helps explain how war is gamified, and the subsequent battle in the Capitol shows how this ritualization produces serious ethical consequences for the characters. At the same time, the proficiency with ritual Katniss displays during the Hunger Games empowers her at the trilogy's conclusion. By removing a pertinent political threat, Katniss strives to end the cycle of violence.

In discussing such a broad media like video games, it is pertinent to define the field. This analysis does not specify a particular game or series as primary material for comparison with the *Hunger Games* trilogy, instead relying on critical surveys of the medium. Although a parallel analysis with critical and self-aware shooters such as *Spec Ops: The Line* would produce interesting results, this thesis is more interested in the broader features of the genre, even of video games in general. Shooter video games are certainly the focus of much criticism when it comes to the portrayal of war, but several issues critics identify in them, such as the degradation of life through repetitious death, are observable in a large variety of video game genres. For this reason, while critical speculation about shooters has been preferred, this thesis draws upon a variety of game studies scholarship, including references to 2D games and video games more generally. Of course, video games themselves are not a monolith, especially considering the wide variety of non-violent puzzle games available, so general statements on the nature of video games will always include some exceptions.

While this thesis explores all three novels in the *Hunger Games* trilogy, the prequel *A Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* is excluded. Since the focalizing character, Snow, is a Capitol rather than a district citizen, including the material could produce compelling comparisons concerning the view of warfare, violence, and the Hunger Games. But breaking down the nuance of a book with a different focalizing character is beyond the scope of this thesis. The four movies that depict the plot of the trilogy are also excluded save for a brief mention to keep the medial comparison between the novel and video games consistent, as well as to avoid conflict when the

events of the movies and novels differ. Expanding into the comparison of two on-screen media, film and video games, remains a fruitful possibility to eventually expand this research.

By defining ritual using video games and war, this thesis demonstrates the oppressive and subversive qualities of this rhythmic form. Both the Capitol and District Thirteen employ rituals to gamify war, whether that be as part of the Hunger Games or preparing for war in the Block. In both of these simulations, leaders use rituals to send ideological messages down the hierarchy to the general populace, but gamifying war also produces ethical consequences. Like in the Games, the Block encourages soldiers to act aggressively against surrendered hostiles, discourages assisting noncombatants such as children, and promotes an unsympathetic attitude towards death generally. As with other forms, however, ritual also has subversive political potential. Katniss uses rituals to repeatedly unsettle existing political dynamics and encourage the audience with revolutionary messages. Like a video game player, Katniss demonstrates unexpected agency within her world, using the seemingly static programming of her governmental system to create new possibilities.

Although not all evidence from the books is produced chronologically, the main sections of this thesis are named after major locations in the trilogy in order of appearance. “The Console” is a device used to process video games as well as manipulate the Hunger Games arena. Not only are the names of these tools the same, but the rituals they employ are also similar, bridging the gap between the two mediums. Because ritual is used for aggressive political purposes in the arena, “The Arena” delves into both the definition of ritual used by this thesis as well as how ritual can be used in war and games. After surviving two arenas, Katniss enters another simulation, “The Block,” where District Thirteen trains her to accept their view on combatants, noncombatants, and death. The militant values curated through the manipulative simulation are paralleled to soldier behavior in “The Capitol,” where soldiers apply the rules of simulation to reality. With Katniss’s subversive performance in the Games in mind, her struggles to overcome manipulation in *Mockingjay* are delved into in “The Sewer.” Similarly to level design in video games, this location demonstrates how the layout of a space can heighten both tension and pacing. Whether Katniss can slow down enough to perform a ritual is critical once we return to the site of the parachute massacre, “Snow’s Mansion,” where Katniss has her final confrontation with Presidents Coin and Snow. By assassinating the rebel leader, Katniss

demonstrates her improved ability to execute rituals and makes a final break from District Thirteen's conditioning. In the conclusion, I will reflect on the subversive potential of both characters and players as well as suggest potential areas for future study.

## 2 Programming the Console: Background

Instances of war in the three Hunger Games books, both in the arena and on the Capitol battlefield, have been likened by critics to video games through elements such as its plot, the binary between good and evil, realistic violence, and the use of simulations. In the final novel, *Mockingjay*, the districts, led by District Thirteen, wage war against the Capitol in what most critics readily identify as the trilogy's war. Katheryn Wright claims that in contrast to the first two novels, the plot in *Mockingjay* to traverse the battle-ridden Capitol and assassinate Snow likens a video game (106). Vivienne Muller agrees that "the video war game effect is also heightened in the final book" as tension swells between Katniss, who is also called the Mockingjay and heralded as a symbol of good, and Snow, the snake and evil representative of Capitol oppression (62). In both articles, the tension between Katniss and Snow as well as the wartime setting drives the comparison to video games, but as Muller implies, both of these elements are also prevalent, if not partially disguised, in the previous two books.

In the arena, Katniss is threatened by twenty-three other tributes who must die if she wishes to survive. Even if she manages this, a third party, neither victor nor tribute, is the true winner of the Hunger Games: the Capitol, helmed by President Snow and his Gamemakers (Zimmerman Jones 240, 246). Within each Games, the Gamemakers can manipulate the odds and set up a victor for success by determining tribute scores (241) and activating deadly traps for their competitors in the arena. Once said victor leaves the arena, the Capitol can maintain their iron grip by enslaving them as they did popular tribute Finnick Odair, furthering the regime's benefit from the entire system (240). Even this is minor when set against the big picture of Panem politics. By forcing district children to kill each other yearly, the Capitol continually demonstrates its "absolute power and authority" over the districts (Wezner 150). Under normal circumstances, even the winning District is required to lose at least one of its two tributes, making total victory impossible (Pharr 223). Not only does the Capitol manipulate the Games to produce the outcomes it wants and punish deviance when tributes stray, they use the Games to manipulate the districts into submission as virtual slaves of the regime. In other words, the

Capitol achieves political dominance through “a state of perpetual war” against both the individual tributes and, by proxy, the districts they hail from (Layfield 167). In this way, the Hunger Games is “a real war, disguised as a game” (Guanio-Uluru). Tributes suffer much of the violence of this war first-hand. In their analysis of the first novel, Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel identify a “gritty verisimilitude” similar to that in the popular military video game franchise *Call of Duty* (125). Referencing the power of the Gamemakers to recreate hyper realistic environments and even activate natural disasters against the tributes, Lykke Guanio-Uluru compares the arena to “an electronically controlled, holographic computer simulation” controlled by programmer Gamemakers. All three novels in the trilogy depict war in a way that has reminded a diverse group of critics of video games, a medium often criticized for its depiction of war and violence.

## 2.1 Capitol Players, Tribute Avatars: Game, War, and Loops

In response to the overlap between themes of gaming and war, critics have identified ethical difficulties for the characters in the series. In her analysis of books that depict video games as a form of ethical commentary on violence, Guanio-Uluru claims that while some of the characters in the *Hunger Games* trilogy “experience as an actual war, others perceive as a game, thus problematizing the relationship between the two.” For the residents of the Capitol, the Hunger Games are gamified as entertainment, but for the tributes, the violence could not be more real. One instance demonstrating the gap between the experiences of a tribute versus their Capitol audience is when Capitol sponsors send a District One tribute, Cato, a parachute holding body armor to protect him from Katniss’s arrows. What for Cato could be the fabric between life and death is for Capitol sponsors another way to both win money and improve their social standing, similar to the purchasing of upgraded armor for a player character. In their analysis of the monetary dark patterns in video games, José P. Zagal, Staffan Björk, and Chris Lewis term this “Monetized Rivalries,” a pattern in which players are incentivized to pay for in-game upgrades to increase their standing on a leaderboard (5). In the *Hunger Games* film, this is depicted by an odds board, but in the books, which rely on Katniss’s perspective, the reader is only aware of the fluctuating “betting odds” (*Hunger Games* [Ross] 00:41:00; Collins, *Hunger Games* 165). Sponsors of the winning tribute are invited to the Victory Banquet alongside Capitol officials, establishing publicly their success among high society (364–5). Since Capitol citizens rely on their social success as a meter for self-worth (Van Dyke 256), participation in betting and

sponsorships is incentivized by their culture. Because of their monetary influence, Capitol sponsors become like players hovering over a life-sized arcade rather than spectators of a gruesome fight to the death.

For a tribute, violence on the ground destroys any illusions one might have at a safe distance. In their analysis of the ethics of violence in media, Kirstine Moffat and Melody May argue that the disagreement between Capitol citizens and district tributes on whether or not the Games are truly games is comparable to video games not only for its depiction of “mediated violence” but also the ironic situation in which “death is both a lose state and a key component of game play” (444). For a tribute, the risk of this “lose state” is an irreversible loss of life, yet for Capitol citizens, it is an integral part of the stakes that makes the event so exciting. Analyses conducted on the forms prevalent in video games agree on the commonality of repetitious death, with Marco Caracciolo asserting that “video game loops are mostly structured by the avatar’s death” (677). Alejandro Lozano agrees that the requirement to replay a segment of a game after death, which he coins “repetition for incompetence,” is one of the most common forms of repetition in video games (64). This “penalty for failure” is often frustrating for video game players yet also evident in the fabric of the Hunger Games themselves (64). The Hunger Games are structured as a reminder of the districts’ failed rebellion (Pavlik 31), deterring them from initiating another by emphasizing the inescapability of tribute deaths year after year. Although the tributes themselves cannot resurrect and try again as a video game avatar might, their individual identities are so reduced to their District identities (Peña-Cervel and Rosca 233) that the event is generalized as a contest between districts rather than between individuals. If a tribute wins the Games, the entire district is rewarded with food rations for the year, and losing districts often resent the victor’s home district for winning the coveted prize (Collins, *Hunger Games* 19). Because the tributes act as district representatives, all twelve districts are trapped in a loop of death induced by the yearly Games. Through an analysis of loop-like structures, then, the deadly similarities between the Games and video games can be uncovered.

## 2.2 The Parachutes Are Falling: Ritual Learning

Another potential way to link the Hunger Games to video games is through an analysis of repetitive rituals. Critics have called the Hunger Games event as a whole “an annual ritual of revenge and control,” “rituals of torture,” “a Foucaultian ritual of punishment,” “ritualised

entertainment,” and “violent ritual” (Moffat and May 448; Wezner 150; Tan, “Burn with Us” 60; Muller 53; McEvoy-Levy 199). Specific elements such as the reaping in which tributes are selected for the Games have also been identified as rituals (Koenig 40; McEvoy-Levy 188). Critics use both the nature of the punishment dealt out and the repetitive incidence of the Games to connect it to ritual. Considering that this thesis is not exclusively interested in the Games, firstly, can these rituals also be identified in the war against the Capitol? Secondly, can both rituals be connected to video games?

Allison Layfield has bridged the gap between the ritual of the Games and the war against the Capitol by demonstrating the portability of the parachute as a symbol. In the Games, parachutes can be dropped on any tributes with sufficient sponsorship money. As was also elaborated upon by Guanio-Uluru and Moffat and May, the Capitol disguises the violent essence of the Games under a veneer of gamification. While the parachutes are meant to encourage participation in the Games, the Capitol’s efforts to popularize the event are so effective that the rebels weaponize it against them during the rebellion. During the final attack on the Capitol, a District Thirteen-controlled hovercraft drops bombs that are cleverly disguised as gift-giving parachutes. Since the learned positive association between parachutes and help is reinforced by their regular recurrence in the Games, instead of running screaming, the Capitol children reach up eagerly. Using Baudrillard as her theoretical basis, Allison Layfield argues that the Capitol children’s hopeful reaction to the parachutes exemplifies a “ritualized response from civilians who can no longer differentiate between actual war and its simulation,” implying that the Hunger Games is a simulation of war (170). The line between the “actual war and its simulation” is unclear, especially when contrasted to statements like Guanio-Uluru’s that the Hunger Games is an actual war. Perhaps the Hunger Games is an instance of both a game and a war, and the very liminality of the event is what makes it so dangerous.

Whereas the Hunger Games is a war in the sense that tributes are injured, the way in which it is presented is—like Layfield argues—heavily ritualized, reflecting in part the same structure employed by video games. In their article on “Repetition and Ritual Logic in Video Games,” Gazzard and Peacock also use Baudrillard to argue for the existence of a ritual logic in video games that combines “elements of game play and elements of ritual” (502). Before moving on, it is important to note the distinction they make between ritual logic and ritual. Gazzard and

Peacock claim ritual is exclusively religious, and therefore any ritualistic elements in gameplay are therefore only “*ritual like*” (502). In contrast, researchers like Platvoet argue that ritual is not only religious (1). As will be discussed later, since Levine does not distinguish between rituals in media and in real life, nor between religious and secular rituals, this essay will continue to treat ritual-like instances as rituals, beginning with that of collection.

The moment in which the Capitol children gather their parachutes is comparable to collection in a video game. One of the qualities of a successful ritual is that it leads to transformation (Gazzard and Peacock 501). In video games, the collection of objects can transform, such as when ingredients are assembled for a potion, or coins are gathered to purchase an extra in-game life (509). In the Hunger Games, the situation is more complicated, but in essence, managing to impress the audience through the several pre-Game events combined with survival in the arena can lead to payout in the form of parachute gifts. By transferring the symbol of the parachute from the arena to the Capitol, the rebels evoke two cultural responses: the positive understanding that parachutes are gifts and, more significantly, the implication that war is a game that can be ritually rewarded. By mimicking what Gazzard and Peacock call “the carefully precise handling of a fetish object” (504)—in this case, the reception of the parachutes—Capitol children demonstrate how, through repetition, they learn the rules of the rituals they consume in media and then enact their own practice of this art, one with unfortunately violent consequences. While the Hunger Games, with its arena structure and rule system, is obviously a game but contains both the intention and violence of war, the war against the Capitol, with its soldiers and chain of command, is obviously a war but contains game-like rituals and a dangerous irreverence for life. By borrowing the parachute ritual, the rebels impose the Hunger Games’ confusing and dangerous liminality between war and game onto the battlefield.

The Hunger Games embodies the coercion of the Capitol and serves as the battleground for its war. As a ritual, the Hunger Games teach Panem’s citizenry about the social realities of the all-encompassing presence of government control and punishment. Even when Katniss destroys the forcefield surrounding the arena, and with it, the physical vessel for these realities, the values imparted by the Capitol live on (Guanio-Uluru), demonstrating how deeply this violent ritual has impacted Panem’s populace. Because repetition is such a critical part of ritual learning, as was

demonstrated by the Capitol children, ritual also has the potential to be studied in terms of repetitious loops. Both the Capitol and the rebels use rituals reminiscent of those in video games to gamify a conflict and endanger children through the clever manipulation of loops.

### 3 Rhythm and Ritual in the Arena

While many critics agree that the Hunger Games is ritual, what ritual means varies widely from its religious and secular conceptions as well as between instances in reality or in media. In his analysis of the impact of video games on culture and subjectivity, Jonathan Dovey claims that “contemporary ludic culture,” now defined more by chance than by effort, “produces simulation as the ground of knowledge” (136). With this in mind, the theories and definitions important to this paper will be established in relationship to the perennial simulation of the Hunger Games. If the odds are in our favor, a definition for rhythm and ritual will be reached so that these forms can also be found in the threads of the rebellion, where another simulation, the Block, waits to be chanced upon for the main analysis.

#### 3.1 Loops: Past and Present, Digital and Literary

Rituals can utilize loops, but loops are also important for understanding the nature of ritual. Firstly, I identify a loop connecting games and reality that the Hunger Games complicates. Using Caracciolo, I then describe a loop between video games and the novel that connects to Levine’s definition of forms.

As was demonstrated by the way in which Capitol citizens responded to the parachutes, rituals developed as part of the Hunger Games are transferable to other conflicts. In contrast to Gazzard and Peacock’s claim that players recognize the ritual elements in video games because of their cultural understanding of ritual (501), the Capitol children’s reaction to the parachutes demonstrates that the Hunger Games acts as the source for understanding ritual in Panem. The linearity of Gazzard and Peacock’s argument is therefore complicated since the ritual origins that preceded the Hunger Games have now decreased in importance in comparison to the ritual of the Hunger Games themselves, a kind of loop in which reality influences games and games then influence reality. This can indicate an expansion of Gazzard and Peacock’s concept of ritual logic, as they also claim that

Ritual logic [...] directs our attention to the way that things work in the culture and how the interplay of actions and performances and objects and spaces and meanings consolidate the culture's view of the world (its reality) and recreates it for successive generations (501).

When video games represent a culture, they also “recreate” it. This creates not only distance from the original source as “the signs of signs of signs of ritual,” but it also becomes the most current version of ritual available to its audience (502). Like Levine's claim that ritual's “sites of origin reced[e] into ever more distant pasts,” every year the Games repeats draws it further from its origin (63). Even though they are only considered a distant copy, these new rituals, like those of old, create their own meaning to be further recreated and solidified. Using Michael Rogin's concept of political amnesia, Gretchen Koenig contends that the Capitol's purported history of the rebellion is used to justify the Games, which are then used to recreate this history as a part of its spectacle (42). Through its regular repetition, this fabrication is internalized by the audience and masks the potential for another, truer narrative (42). Like the coverage of modern wars, she argues, this “revisionist history affect[s] reality” (41–2), thereby allowing a ritual without real grounding to create a new reality for its spectators. Although the understanding of ritual in a video game is meant to be sourced in culture, the Games rely on a falsified image of cultural history that allows the Capitol to create a new understanding of ritual, unmooring the origin of truth through repetitious signs.

A similar affectatious loop has been identified by Eric Hayot between the media of video games and literature. Although video games as a media carry a lot of influence from the novel, they are starting to influence the novel in return (181). Marco Caracciolo expands upon Eric Hayot's claim that the novel is being shaped by video games by applying Caroline Levine's concept of form (664–8). Caracciolo identifies three forms present in the novel that have been popularized by a culture increasingly engaged with video games: “multimodal devices, present-tense narration, and loop-like structures,” which he discusses in terms of “first-person shooters, adventure games, and simulation games” respectively (669). These forms are not only present in novels that overtly discuss video games, nor do they originate in the video game medium (666–7). Critics like Tom Henthorne have connected Collins's statements about televised violence to a commentary on violence in video games (8), but Caracciolo's strategy does not require Collins's

intention nor direct references in the content to video games in order to perform “a video game–inspired approach to literary interpretation” (666). Regarding the origin of these forms, no one would argue that present-tense narration began with video games, but its prevalence rather points to the increasing popularity of a sense of immediacy also present in video games (666). This thesis expands upon Caracciolo’s argument by linking loop-like structures not only to a simulation within a novel, but also to criticism of the forms in first-person shooter video games, demonstrating the broader possibilities of his theory.

Two of the forms mentioned by Caracciolo—present-tense narration and loop-like structures—are identifiable in the trilogy. Although Katniss never plays on a computer, her experiences bear many formal similarities to that of a video game character. Because the series is delivered in the present tense, Katniss’s continued survival is never a certainty, increasing dramatic tension (Brewster 177). It also increases her unreliable narration since she lacks hindsight, rather interpreting each situation in her current traumatized state (Henthorne 10). As is already evident, the Hunger Games event also follows a loop-like structure. Levine does not mention loops in her book, indicating that Caracciolo took a liberty endorsed by Levine to identify new forms for his analysis. Nevertheless, the form of the loop resembles one of the forms she does discuss: rhythm. Rhythm is a cyclical temporal pattern that, like the other forms Levine discusses, has both positive and negative potential (51). It can both unite or subjugate and even act as a way for a community to identify outsiders (50). Levine names “religious ritual” as one of the “repetitive temporal patterns [that] impose constraints across social life,” enforcing social cohesion by alerting the community of members who fall out of rhythm (49–50). Her analysis of ritual is not exclusively religious, however, as she also names repetitive rituals like “clocking in and clocking out to final exams” as a part of the patterns of institutional time (61). Returning to the basics and analyzing Levine’s definition of form and rhythm can further establish the connection between loops and rituals.

### 3.2 Caroline Levine’s Forms

In her book, Caroline Levine defines form as “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” (3). While repetition is significant in this thesis, so is difference, as the binary contrast between District and Capitol identity spurs much of the conflict in the trilogy. Forms can travel between media and the real world, with ordering

forms like racism imposing themselves on both the social and literary world alike. In the current United States housing market, communities are often divided on both racial and economic lines (Kenn 67). In District Twelve, residents of the poor Seam live further from the economic center, the square, and have a darker complexion than the more privileged townspeople. Levine does not argue that a form like racism in the real world originates the racism within the novel or vice versa, but rather that “literary forms and social formations are equally real in their capacity to organize materials, and equally *unreal* in being artificial, contingent constraints” (14). Because of this, forms that occur in the literary and the social can be studied on equal terms. Forms are also portable between the literary and the social, so the racist hierarchy organizing American social reality is comparable to the racism organizing the literary Panem. According to Levine, whether or not an author intended this comparison is not the point of a formalist analysis. Although a form like racism is restrictive, as was clearly seen in the Segregation-era United States where locations were divided by race, Levine argues that all forms do not necessarily behave the same way. Forms also have transformative power, interrupting or clashing with other forms to produce potentially progressive effects. In his analysis of the Hunger Games using mathematical models, Zimmerman Jones notes that “models break down” when Katniss innovates as part of the Games, changing circumstances into her favor (247). In the next section, the Hunger Games will be analyzed as a ritual to demonstrate how Katniss uses her own rituals to innovate with progressive effects.

### 3.3 The Rituals of Panem

To maintain power over the districts, the Capitol manipulates rhythm and ritual both as a part of daily life and through the Hunger Games. Through ritual learning, the populace absorbs the Capitol’s intended messages, but their strict regime produces unintended effects. In order to survive Capitol oppression, Katniss develops forbidden skills that benefit her in the arena.

The Capitol relies heavily on the implementation of repetitious rhythm both in the daily lives of its citizens and the Hunger Games ritual. In her chapter on rhythm, Levine argues that “institutions persist and survive through repetition— through the citation of rules and the performance of practices” (62). In the case of Panem, rules and performance govern both district life and the Hunger Games. In the Hunger Games, the rule of law becomes the most public punishment imaginable, broadcast on every screen in the country. Similarly to several other

critics, like Kelley Wezner, Christina Van Dyke, and Don Latham and Jonathan M. Hollister, Koenig also uses Foucault to analyze power and punishment in the series. She compares the reaping to a public execution, but in this case the crime in question is not personally but historically committed. After hearing the Capitol's account of the rebellion read aloud, a kind of indictment against the districts, the tributes are assigned the guilt of the rebels as part of a public spectacle (40). As Snow informs Katniss in *Catching Fire*, Panem relies on the functioning of a delicate system that could fall apart due to her behavior in the arena (Collins 21). As the Capitol's representatives, the actions the Gamemakers take as the "third player" in the Games is about creating a meaningful ritual (Zimmerman Jones 246). In contrast to what they call simple "repetition," Gazzard and Peacock argue that ritual occurs "where there is a 'conscious awareness' of the repetition of actions, and a deliberate execution of them to make a special meaning" (506). The Capitol consciously employs the reaping as part of the Games to emphasize, among other messages yet to be discovered, district guilt.

While the Capitol uses the Hunger Games to enforce its dominance over the districts, the government also employs strict laws to monitor everyday life. According to Levine, the institution of the state "takes on its force and identity by enacting and enforcing laws," a process critical in the maintenance of the district system (62). Inside the districts, public punishment like executions and whippings are used to enforce strict laws, including a ban on poaching. Because alternative methods of survival are limited, state-sanctioned rhythms regulate the acquisition of food in District Twelve. Tesseræ grain and oil are distributed monthly in exchange for a slip in the reaping, and miners are locked into grueling twelve-hour daily shifts, six days a week (Collins, *Catching Fire* 5). Like most of her district, nearly Katniss's entire existence before the Games was focused on the acquisition of food, but unlike most, she risks illegal hunting to feed her family (5). Even though she comes from the poorest district (203), by risking a death sentence to hunt, Katniss arrives to training healthier than most of the other tributes (*Hunger Games* 94). Thanks to the Capitol's restriction of guns and her father's ingenious crafting of bows (5), Katniss also hones her skill with a bow and arrow, her main weapon in the arena. In a strange turn of events, the oppression of the Capitol enables Katniss to develop the very skills she needs to conquer their Games (Latham and Hollister 36). Because of her defiance, Katniss thrives physically, and once her resistance to conformity is broadcast to every citizen of Panem, she also poses a threat to Panem's political system.

Not only does Panem rely on the Hunger Games ritual, but the Hunger Games itself is also a larger umbrella for several smaller rituals to select, prepare, and dispense of the tributes. After the reaping, tributes are brought to the Capitol and prepared in several familiar steps: beauty treatment, the opening ceremony, group training, skills test, and interviews. All these elements train the tributes for a new social reality, transforming their bodies into sites of entertainment for the audience (Layfield 169). Gazzard and Peacock agree that ritual in video games is “transformative” as well as a way to initiate a player through “learning, acquiring skills and knowledge, practice, and repetition” (501). This produces an interesting overlap with Levine, who argues that forms clashing can also transform, positing the possibility that the clashing of two rituals can also transform. In Katniss’s case, she is trained intensely for the interviews to speak and walk a certain way (Collins, *Hunger Games* 115), and in the Training Center, she practices new skills for the arena like rigging snares (95). This, in turn, prepares the tributes for a similar militant exploitation as sacrificial bodies in the arena (Tan, “Burn with Us”), blurring once again the lines between that of entertainment and war (Layfield). Through these preparatory rituals, Katniss learns how the Capitol wishes her to behave, but her critical reflection on these pressures is what empowers her.

### 3.3.1 Learning the Rules of the Game

An unintended consequence of Katniss’s learning is that she can recognize the meaning written between the lines of the Capitol’s script. Katniss grows up under a totalitarian society in which “information and media are tightly controlled,” so her knowledge of the truth is limited (Latham and Hollister 35). Using Foucault’s argument that oppressive systems also produce resistance to those very systems, Don Latham and Jonathan M. Hollister argue that Katniss’s environment in District Twelve encourages her to develop not only her hunting abilities, but also information and media literacies as a matter of survival, skills both required and further developed by the Hunger Games (35). Successful tributes are the ones who use media literacy to play to the cameras during their interview and information literacy as they decide what skills to show in the Training Center. Although these tools help Katniss succeed at the Games in ways the Games themselves encourage, they also provide the tools Katniss needs to undermine her oppressors.

Because of their repetition, Katniss’s learning experiences are compared to those of a video game player. Latham and Hollister argue that like a video game player, Katniss develops

“intuitive or tacit knowledge built up in repeated practice and experience,” reflecting similar arguments about repetitive learning made by Gazzard and Peacock (Gee qtd. in 41). Tom Henthorne expands the argument by positing that like a player, both Katniss and the reader begin with limited knowledge of the setting and “rules” of the story, but they expand their understanding through an active, immersive, and exploratory experience (148). Jonathan Dovey agrees that video games are about “trying to work out its rule set,” beginning with basic rules and objectives but expanding into “what the game engine does, what it wants us to do, how far we can ‘get away’ with testing the limits of the game code” (139). The identification of the player as a significant and active participant complicates the view that games are a top-down experience in which developers determine the possibilities that a player can explore. By ‘testing the limits’ like a player, Katniss both recognizes the fact that the system has limits, but also that her active participation can produce results game designers did not predict.

Like the Gamemakers who control the arena, Katniss utilizes her conscious awareness of ritual in the Games to create unpredictable results. Since she has watched several iterations of the Games and recognizes their repetitive structure, Katniss is an active participant in the media-making process (Wright 102). Like a video game player, Katniss gains a “conscious awareness” of how the Games function, an “awareness of the significance of repeated actions [that] is either triggered when the player recognizes ritual in the game play, or [is] applied by the player as ritual in the game play” (Gazzard and Peacock 505–6). Katniss demonstrates her active role as well as her media literacy when she plays the entertainment angle to secure sponsorships. Both Koenig and Shannon R. Mortimore-Smith agree that Katniss’s ability to deceive her audience through the careful manipulation of her image determines her success in the Games (41; 158). Katniss is just as aware of how her appearance may be interpreted by potential sponsors in the arena as when she stood before her cheering audience during the interviews. She not only predicts when she is “guaranteed a close-up,” but changes her expression to project confidence and inspire intrigue (Collins, *Hunger Games* 163). Although Katniss’s performance plays in the Capitol’s favor, her growing ability to mold her own image allows her to control the camera’s perception. Through her behavior after Rue’s death and when she threatens suicide with Peeta, Katniss urges the audience to see the tributes as “pawns in a game of cruelty” rather than objects of entertainment (Koenig 43). In these moments, Katniss reveals the tributes’ perspective and undermines the Capitol’s intentions. Instead of supporting the Capitol audience’s belief that the

distant, televised Games are just that—games—she exposes the brutal war that the tributes are experiencing on the ground. By manipulating the camera, Katniss demonstrates both her media literacy and capacity to change the game as part of a reflective ritual. To show what impact these rituals have on the message spread by the Games, the next section investigates in detail the two significant rituals that Katniss initiates during her first Hunger Games.

### 3.3.2 Transformative Rituals in the First Arena

The first transformation Katniss enacts for the cameras is when she covers Rue in flowers. N. L. Carnagey and C. A. Anderson argue that direct and instant sound effects can be used in video games to positively reinforce acts of violence (6). In the arena, a cannon fires to confirm each tribute death, rewarding the progress of the surviving tributes. Another way games can encourage death is by erasing the aftermath. In some games, dead enemies disappear once the player looks away, changes location, or after an allotted period. This is usually for practical purposes, since dead enemies take up valuable memory space (Brown 85), but the effect of erasing the aftermath of combat still exists. When the tributes distance themselves from a dead tribute, a hovercraft reaches a claw down to scoop up the body and fly it out of the arena. When Katniss prepares to leave Rue's body, enacting the ritual as the Capitol would have it, she remembers that the cameras are watching. Katniss decides to change her course and rather "to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 236–7). Since Katniss is aware that the cameras will show Rue's body being removed, she has an opportunity to "show" on the screens across the country her own ritual, one that carries its own message: shame and accountability as well as tribute agency. She refuses to leave the body behind with enough distance, indicating her awareness of the death rituals used in the Hunger Games. Instead of allowing Rue to be diminished by the Capitol's design, which would interrupt the Mockingjay song with the descent of a hovercraft, Katniss gives her a "figurative burial" (Gant 92). Since she is also aware of how these rituals objectify tributes as sacrifices, Katniss "appropriates Rue's body" by covering it with flowers, transforming Rue from an object the Capitol uses to express its power into an object of art and a symbol of the Capitol's "brutality" (Wright 103–4). Both McDonald and Tammy L. Gant agree that Katniss's moral awareness comes after she sings a song for a dying Rue, evoking what Gant calls a "religious ritual" (91). Like the song she sings, which Gant argues points to Rue's innocence and the failure of the Capitol system to protect her (91), Rue's

figurative burial reframes her death. Through these two rituals, Katniss marks her defiance and paves the way for a culture that does not rely on the Capitol's oppressive schemes. Brian McDonald argues that here, Katniss puts Peeta's hopes "to show the Capitol they don't own me" into practice, demonstrating the "rare and powerful" collaboration of thought and action (Collins, *Hunger Games* 142; 79). While Katniss initially rejects Peeta's philosophic thoughts, her "action-oriented" personality later brings these reflections to life in a transformative manner that inspires others (79). Like a video game player, Katniss uses her actions to initiate a transformative ritual, but like a programmer, she also imbues these actions with meaning for her audience. In a moment that signifies both her personal mourning and political grievances, Katniss weaponizes her grieving ritual against the Capitol, gaining the favor and sympathy of District audiences.

Katniss's awareness of the presence of cameras also plays into the star-crossed lover strategy. By faking her romance with Peeta, Katniss capitalizes on Capitol citizens' romantic sensibilities. Despite Peeta's injury weakening their chances of victory, their romantic performance secures food in the form of Capitol sponsor parachutes. Unfortunately, their act reaches a dramatic peak when the Gamemakers pressure them to fight to the death. Although the Games allegedly have no rules, tributes are still regulated. They are unable to leave their circle before the sixty-second countdown, no weapons can be brought into the arena, and cannibalism is discouraged (Collins, *Hunger Games* 244). By offering to allow a rule change in which two tributes can survive, Katniss realizes that another rule has structured their experience all along: at least one tribute must become victor, otherwise the Games will have "failed the Capitol" (344). Since so many citizens sink their money into the Games by betting on the victor, declaring no victor would damage the Games' entertainment value. Since the Capitol intends to display the districts' inability to unite forces and rebel by pitting them against each other, refusing to fight also damages its political purpose. By threatening to eat the berries with Peeta, Katniss "forcefully appropriates the political narrative" (Koenig 44) and uses the Games' repetitious death in a way unexpected by the Capitol, defying their assumption that the desire to survive will trump all other values. Furthermore, she bets that the Capitol's intent to entertain, which would require the survival of tributes, has surpassed its historically significant political purpose to punish, and it pays off: both she and Peeta survive. By winning on a bet, the very power used by

Capitol sponsors to belittle and control the tributes, Katniss once again transcends from her position as tribute with a transformative ritual.

Similarly to the way Katniss understands that the Capitol uses the tesserae system to divide loyalties in her district, she is in a unique position to understand the motivation behind the Games. Katniss acts on her knowledge by threatening to enact a ritual sacrifice in her own right, that of suicide, taking agency over her method of death. By refusing to give a victor at the end of the Games, “Katniss forces all of the players into a new game, the ramifications of which reverberate through the second and third books” (Zimmerman Jones 246). Through her mourning ritual of Rue and threatening a double suicide with Peeta, Katniss unsettles the ritual critical in maintaining Snow’s grip on Panem and leaves the Capitol vulnerable to a rising power, District Thirteen. As is evident in the regime-shifting rebellion she inspires, “Katniss’s on-camera defiance shifts the balance of power because it shifts the arc of the cultural narrative” (Koenig 44). By creating ritual moments, Katniss creates new cultural meaning within the Hunger Games that contradicts the Capitol’s narrative, thereby questioning the validity of its historical grounding. If Katniss, a scapegoat and representative of violent district rebels, can express empathy for her fellow tributes, can this violent history have a basis in reality? In this critical moment, an opportunity arises for District Thirteen to start inscribing a new tale through the return to rebellion.

### 3.4 War and Games

Before the analysis moves to the war in *Mockingjay*, the concept of war within the trilogy should be more thoroughly established. Through an application of theories that claim war is ritual, the ritual purpose of the Hunger Games is unified with its violent reality. The Hunger Games has already been compared to actual conflicts. Due to the televised nature of both and the reaping’s similarity to the Vietnam draft, the Hunger Games has been compared to the Vietnam War, which Collins’s father fought in, and the Iraq War (Koenig 41). The following theories draw on a variety of modern conflicts, from the Iraq War to the Falklands War, as well as ancient conflicts from Caesar’s time, all of which grapple with the issue of media representation.

The way a conflict is communicated to its audience, whether that be in televised reports or books, has the power to alter public perception. Like the Hunger Games tapes, these representations become infinitely re-playable, even reenactable, as some hobbyists do. Unlike

wars from the Roman Empire, perhaps due to the lack of automatic rifles in that era, several “real and clearly identifiable conflicts,” including World War II, the Vietnam War, and the War on Terror have been remediated into first-person shooter games (Breuer et al. 223–4). In the case of Vietnam games, many of which were released after September Eleventh, Lee Jarvis and Nick Robinson observe that game narratives take a less critical attitude to the conflict than films from that era (21–2). Through the remediation of narrative, video games risk revising history, similarly to how even current wars can have their image manipulated to serve a ritualistic purpose.

### 3.4.1 The Winning Team

The claim that the Hunger Games are a ritual may seem to contrast with claims by Guanio-Uluru and Layfield that the Games are war, yet the practice of war and games, or even war and ritual, are more closely related than one might think. The claim that national sports competitions can replace war indicates a common function between war and games (Taylor). Gerald R. Gems argues that American colonizers in the Philippines used sports, in the guise of pure entertainment, as a “cheaper and more effective” method than war to infuse values into a populace (578). Like the smaller rituals that make up the Hunger Games, Graciela Susana Boruszko posits that rituals in sports, including the waving of flags, reflect war rituals. On a larger scale, identification with a team emphasizes an in-group’s collective identity and shared values and distinguishes them from the out-group (Boruszko 9). In the same way citizens root for their army to win, fans can be aggressive as they hope for their team to metaphorically slaughter another on the field. Like combatants in war, players represent their supporters, and victory is celebrated by entire nations as an indication of superior grit, athleticism, or other virtues.

In the Hunger Games, sponsors root for their tributes in a similar fashion but with the added consequence of real death present in war. Vlahos identifies that war’s primary purpose is “ritual and symbolic,” and through it, virtues such as nationalism are confirmed. Similarly, the Hunger Games bolster “national pride” for Capitol citizens (Koenig 45). Vlahos’s analysis of Rome’s self-image parallels interestingly with the series as many critics have already compared the Capitol to the ancient city (Frankel 55). The Hunger Games event has also been compared to the Colosseum’s gladiator games (Makins 282), which held “ritual and symbolic significance” in ancient Rome (Zaleski 594). Vlahos defends his claim by analyzing how, for one thing, Caesar used sieges as a ritual to demonstrate “superior Roman technology, discipline, and staying

power.” The Capitol uses advanced technology to crush district citizens (Guanio-Uluru), unarmed at home and provided with only the most rudimentary weapons like swords, bows, and clubs in the arena. The Hunger Games is an attack on individual tributes as well as the virtue of District citizens, demonstrating the Capitol’s superior might and justifying their right to rule through force. The Capitol’s strategy bears many similarities to the military-entertainment complex, which uses “the technologically mediated representation and execution of war” in video games and other media to perpetuate “a joint myth of the West’s technological and ethical superiority over a distanced enemy combatant reduced to a pixelated other” (Der Derian summarized in Keogh 2). Since the Capitol equates its technological capabilities with its ethical superiority, tributes are subsequently othered. Levine argues that this sort of hierarchical binary distinction “legitimizes war and violent punishments” (90). In this way, the Hunger Games is self-legitimizing: through the war, a binary between the Capitol and districts is created, and because of this binary, war can be waged.

Philip Smith also recognizes how war is a ritual waged with binary distinctions in support of national identity. For Smith, war is not wholly driven by rationality or economic interests, but is a ritual process interested in supporting a sacred:profane binary code that identifies one’s own nation with the sacred and the opposition with the profane (106). Analyzing the more modern Falklands War, Smith notes that the sacred:profane code is not necessarily religious in the traditional sense but is rather a kind of “civil religion” that supports nationalistic values (Bellah qtd. in Smith 114). The propagandistic and ritual purpose of war identified by both Vlahos and Smith is clearly evident in the opinions of Capitol citizens like Effie Trinket, who early on refers to District Twelve as barbaric (Collins, *Hunger Games* 74) and others the districts to the “profane” side of the binary. McDonald uses this same moment to argue that Effie’s participation in the terror of the Hunger Games is not intentional evil, but the result of an inability to think and a preference for the mores of polite society (76). By focusing the Hunger Games on identity politics, labelling districts as profane and the Capitol as sacred, the populace is distracted from more significant differences like those between right and wrong, innocence and evil. In both war and games, the presentation of national values and binary distinctions are key reasons why such events can be identified as ritual.

### 3.4.2 The Highest Ritual Purpose of All

Another method Vlahos identifies other than that of sieges by which Caesar ritualized the act of war was through its documentation. Vlahos argues that “Caesar waged remorseless war [...] for the highest ritual purpose of all: *Writing a book*.” Although they are set in the distant future, the novels contain the same incredible violence and obsession with record-making. On a metafictional level, the *Hunger Games* is a series of books about ritualized war, but within the text, the creation of video rather than text rules the day. The Hunger Games tapes created by the Capitol cement the narrative of each Games—for example, the 74<sup>th</sup> games are presented as a love story to minimize its rebellious political potential—but also of the Capitol’s eternal rule. In order to connect the practice of ritual to the practice of war, Jan G. Platvoet documents an extensive history of the ritual concept. He summarizes arguments given by Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff, who argue in *Secular Ritual* that ritual is

collective, repetitive, ordered, [...] traditionalizing and legitimizing: it dissembles innovation as tradition, and provides (the semblance of) permanence and legitimacy to what are actually contingent, and often quite recent, and always arbitrary, cultural constructs. (9)

As was discussed in section 3.1, the Hunger Games are used to recreate and cement “the government’s fabricated narrative” of the rebellion, dissembling a biased story that may very well be an innovation rather than a tradition (Koenig 43). By transforming past arenas into tourist destinations where Capitol citizens re-enact the Games, which are in themselves re-enactments of the district rebellion, the “foundational myth” disseminated by the Capitol is reified through performances of violence, both faked and real (Pavlik 31). Like Caesar’s book, the performances become “the living symbol of their very identity: Their virtue enshrined in living legend” (Vlahos). The sacred virtue of the Capitol, although it is but a cultural construct, is confirmed through the Games, and the legend of the rebellion is kept alive through its yearly performance. The historical narrative is re-experienced through the mayor reading the history of Panem during the reaping, but the performative aspects of the Games ensure that history lives and dies in the arena.

The Capitol uses a similar process to justify their eternal rule through the Hunger Games ritual. Even though the collective, repetitive, and ordered Hunger Games have only been enacted

for less than a century, the Capitol traditionalizes its rule as both preceding the Dark Days and as eternally justified to ensure peace thereafter (Collins, *Hunger Games* 18). While it is bad enough that there are no terms given to end the Hunger Games' yearly cycle, the Capitol also produces new justification each year for the continuation of the bloodbath by televising the violent behavior of District tributes trapped in the arena, creating in them the image of vicious rebels. The Capitol also recreates the narrative of itself as eternal victor by controlling the tributes' movements and demonstrating its power over them, while also maintaining its supreme distance by not directly engaging in acts of violence. Like drone strikes, which Lindsey Mantoan argues are used to communicate not only technological superiority, but a kind of "sanitized," precise warfare, the Capitol elite uses disasters in the arena to keep their hands clean by avoiding direct conflict (187–191). The assignment of the tributes and their Districts to violent losers and the Capitol as their supreme manager are both arbitrary cultural constructs created by the environment of the Games. Despite their argument that the Capitol ensures "peace and prosperity," the Capitol's only real justification for its rule is the ability to dominate its citizens, an ability amply demonstrated through the Hunger Games (Collins, *Hunger Games* 18). In this way, the Capitol's routine punishment is used to justify its own rule, something that is actually contingent and subject to change if the people are powerful enough to demand it.

### 3.4.3 Infowar on Both Sides

With the rebellion, District rebels and Capitol turncoats hope not only to incite a regime change but to transform the governmental system into a just one. While the districts may have just reasons to go to war, Louis Melançon argues that according to the just-war tradition, the way the war is waged does not uphold "right conduct within war," or *jus in bello* (225). Moffat and May agree that although the cause is just, the violent and destructive means the rebels take are condemned by the novel (449). The Capitol is the dominant fascist power for most of the series, but in *Mockingjay*, District Thirteen President Alma Coin demonstrates unforgiving violence to fuel her rise to power (Pavlik 34). Considering how the Capitol defends itself with pods and muttations, both commonly shown in the Hunger Games, they surely share some of the blame for how heavily the war is gamified, yet Coin's decision to mimic their strategy bodes ill for Panem's future. As part of the final assault on the Capitol, Coin orchestrates the parachute attack detailed in section 2.2 that also targets and kills Katniss's sister, a rebel medic (Collins, *Mockingjay* 346–7). When President Snow reveals to Katniss that the rebellion piloted the

hovercraft responsible for dropping the parachutes, Katniss discerns two motives for Coin to take such a vicious step: firstly, that District Thirteen targeted Capitol children to turn Capitol citizens against Snow, and secondly, that President Coin likely both organized and filmed the bombing of Katniss's sister to win her political support (361). The ruthlessness Snow would be seemingly guilty of for attacking noncombatants, including those from his side, pushes him further into the "profane" for both Capitol citizens and District alike. For Katniss, Coin's ruthless behavior only confirms she is cut of the same cloth as her tyrannical predecessor.

President Coin's political agenda could not have been achieved as quickly or efficiently without District Thirteen's infiltration of Panem's televised media systems. While Katniss saw the scene on-site, the bombing was also filmed by waiting cameras. District Thirteen then televised a false narrative to damage their enemy's public image in a way reminiscent of infowar, which James Der Derian calls "a weapon of destruction as well as persuasion and distraction" ("War as Game" 44). Since filming requires explosively attention-grabbing material, the combination of over-the-top attacks like those of Caesar in yesteryear combined with the modern capability for live media coverage creates the potent weapon of infowar, one utilized by both the Capitol's Games and District Thirteen's bomb. By focusing their brutal attacks on children, with the Capitol killing more than eight hundred children through seventy-five years of Games and District Thirteen killing dozens of children with the bombing, both groups create sensational violence that ignores any moral compass to achieve maximum emotional effect in their viewers.

The use of the media by both the Capitol and the rebels demonstrates the ritual purpose of their respective wars to send political messages to the public, using brute force to either inspire paralyzing fear or to persuade a change in loyalty. These are not the final products of this violence, as Vlahos asserts is the case in war in general, but ritual achieved "through the act itself." As the gong goes off in the arena or the bombs fall on the Capitol, a ritual of power lands on their heads and flashes onscreen. Recording live in a way never possible during Caesar's reign, the gap between the act of doing and recording becomes even more insignificant. Instead of in the aftermath, the recording of progress in war is used as a tool to influence the progression of the war itself, indicating a close relationship between war and the tools of destructive and recording technology.

### 3.4.4 Reproduction of Past Wrongs

Although Katniss at first buys into the official narrative of the bombing, she uncovers the violent truth of a nation under President Coin when she proposes to continue the Hunger Games using Capitol children as sacrifices. Instead of breaking the cycle and establishing lasting peace, District Thirteen plans to “reproduce and maintain” the militarism that marked Capitol oppression (Layfield 170). Not only does District Thirteen reproduce ideologies, but the new government also hopes to motivate literal reproduction to undo the damage of famine and war. When Katniss first arrives in Thirteen, a District Ten citizen, Dalton, reveals that the rebel district is so welcoming to refugees since they can serve as “[n]ew breeding stock” to restore the population after a devastating pandemic (Collins, *Mockingjay* 8). Sharon D. King says that compared to the Capitol’s regime, District Thirteen’s is even more monstrous in how it views people as “reproductive matter to renew humankind” (116). Thirteen values the children of the Capitol elite less than potential future children because fresh minds can be carefully indoctrinated as part of the new system. Snow argues that he could not have been the one to drop the parachute bombs because he kills “for very specific reasons” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 356). Coin is also pragmatic with her orders. Her only argument against the complete annihilation of Capitol citizens is not an ethical one, but rather that excessive killing would leave Panem without “a sustainable population” (368). That being said, Coin has no issue ordering as much death as she would like until that limit. Through an emphasis on reproduction, Thirteen betrays a flippant attitude towards life in which people are reduced to numbers and new generations can be used to replace those lost or murdered for political purposes.

By removing the value of individuals, human life becomes a mass that can be replaced, and a continuous loop of reproduction is redress enough for any death. By refusing to establish peace, District Thirteen violates *jus post bellum*, or “justice after war” (Melançon 232, 225) and traps Panem in a cycle of violence using the same ritual tools as their former oppressors. Although Coin’s plan to continue the Hunger Games serves as an example for this kind of political behavior, the military training methods deployed by District Thirteen earlier in the novel foreshadow their successful weaponization of rituals, loops, and simulations as they drill soldiers into accepting a particular social reality.

### 3.5 The Facets of Ritual

By analyzing the Hunger Games simulation, both through the lens of rhythm, video games, and war, the qualities of ritual are revealed. Like the influence that flows between video games and the novel, rituals are also influenced by a loop-like structure in which games can both recreate and alter the previous history, distancing itself further from its origin with slight adjustments to each iteration. Ritual in its many contexts is meant to communicate a message to its audience, especially when emphasizing hierarchies between in- and out-groups. Repetition can be part of the performance of ritual, but an entire ritual can also be repeated for maximum effect. Within the Hunger Games, loops both of death and loops created by reenactments and filmed materials produce an ethically unjust reality for district citizens. Ritual can be used to achieve political goals, such as in the case of war, and it also builds up a community of shared values through the othering of an enemy.

Although Panem's population as a whole contributes to the Hunger Games ritual, some participate more knowingly than others. In contrast to unthinking participators like Effie, Katniss demonstrates an ability to reflect that allows her to not only participate in but also alter ritual. Instead of remaining a marionette controlled by Capitol sponsors with the strings of parachutes, Katniss demonstrates her independence of thought and Gamemaker-like ability to alter the rules of the game. In the Games, the Block, and the Capitol, whether Katniss acts as a player with agency or a passive player character, a reflector or blind follower, determines whether she either transforms or simply participates in unjust structures.

## 4 Ideological Training in the Block

As part of training, District Thirteen soldiers drill combat exercises using a simulation called the Block. Currently, simulations also structure United States military training strategy. As of the release of Mark Prensky's book in 2001, the United States was the greatest investor in simulation games for training (Dovey 137). While a deep discussion of the different technologies currently used for military training is beyond the scope of this paper, Hill and Miller's 2017 conference paper agrees that computer simulations remain a critical part of United States military training (361). One of the issues Der Derian raises concerning these pervasive war training simulations is that as their realism increases, so too does the risk of confusing war with game ("War as Game" 39). He exemplifies this with a quote from a United States military general who denies treating

war like a game, yet then uses the phrase “at this stage of the game,” a sentiment that one of the rebel leaders, Plutarch Heavensbee, echoes almost exactly when discussing military strategy (42; *Mockingjay* 107). As technological capabilities have advanced rapidly in the two decades since the release of Der Derian’s article, it is safe to say that the verisimilitude of military simulations has risen to meet it, increasing in turn the potency of this ethical dilemma. The simultaneous increase in popularity of both military simulations and video games is due in part to the military-entertainment complex, which Corey Mead defines as “the relentless exchange of technologies, personnel, and money that defines the bond between the military and the video game industry” (23). Like the shared influence between video games and the novel, interaction between the video game industry and the military is a loop that “flows in two directions and takes several forms” (Clarke et al. 718). Since the United States military publishes their own shooter video games as recruitment tools (718), the conflation between war and game is part of a soldier’s first contact with battle. Whether it be through the Hunger Games or the Block, the first encounter many in Panem have with war is similarly gamified and equally dangerous. An analysis of District Thirteen’s training simulations proves both the potency of the messages communicated to soldiers and the resulting ethical issues that arise when one plays at war.

#### 4.1 District Thirteen: An Army of Citizens

Before breaking down how the Block simulation trains soldiers, the militaristic environment of District Thirteen serves as important context for the way the characters relate to training. Citizens above fourteen are given ranks in the military and are respectfully referred to as “Soldier” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 18), forming what Pavlik calls “an army of citizens” (33). Even before children begin military training, the structured way of life in Thirteen molds them for that future. One of the ways discussed previously in which the Capitol managed rhythms in District Twelve is through the withholding of food. Unlike in District Twelve, where citizens often starve, citizens of Thirteen are given exactly the portion they need, calculated according to various factors like their physique and the intensity of their schedule (Collins, *Mockingjay* 35). In both systems, however, food intake is strictly regulated, and transgressions are violently punished. In Thirteen, citizens cannot take more than their exact portions. Katniss’s prep team, used to the abundance of the Capitol, is isolated and tortured for stealing bread (48). Thirteen also strictly manages mealtimes, providing a precise window to attend through a schedule printed on one’s arm each morning (18). The schedule details every other moment of a citizen’s day, from the

time they wake up to lights out. In this way, both quotidian rhythms as well as significant coming-of-age moments like joining the military are dictated by superiors.

The uncompromising regulation of rhythms, such as those surrounding food, is also reflected in the values held by natives of Thirteen. As an underground colony, Thirteen values efficiency and the reduction of waste to survive. This produces tension between locals and new immigrants like the former Capitol citizen Fulvia Cardew, who is heavily judged for wasting paper (Collins, *Mockingjay* 18). While the management of food is strictly regulated, the military budget is seemingly endless and at times wastefully excessive. Military leadership grants Beetee a lush garden full of hummingbirds so he can study their movement patterns and develop new military technology, but it is kept in a high-security area inaccessible to the public (65). Considering how Katniss has to bargain with her media image so her sister could keep the family cat (38), it is unfathomable that a District Thirteen citizen would ever be allowed to keep a bird for recreational purposes. For citizens to accept this reality, all sacrifices of personal freedoms are made with survival in mind. Defense from the enemy is made equivalent to survival in both the Capitol and District Thirteen, so despite their many differences, both societies funnel large amounts of resources into their defense budget. Bill Clemente argues that the justification of intense and unsustainable military spending on both sides of the conflict resembles that of Cold War-era powers (26). Instead of thriving, natives of Thirteen are characterized by a vigilant and stiff attitude which outsiders grate against. Despite their polar opposite upbringings as Capitol and District citizens respectively, both Plutarch Heavensbee and Katniss are appalled by the treatment of Katniss's prep team. In contrast, a guard from Thirteen is confused by their reaction, believing that the punishment fits the crime (Collins, *Mockingjay* 48). Katniss's mother is also dismayed by their cruel punishment since it proves that Thirteen is no different from the Capitol (49). Although District Thirteen's strict regulations contrast with the Capitol's lush indulgence, the harsh punishments dealt out when rhythms are broken prove that the two societies are equally unforgiving.

While both President Snow and Coin use a democratic title, they elevate themselves through luxury. Although Coin also "has a schedule to adhere to," Katniss believes her luxurious imprisonment of Snow is meant to set a precedent that no matter what crimes she may commit, a president deserves more respect than the likes of Katniss's prep team (Collins, *Mockingjay* 42,

356). Compared to the many bells and whistles that decorate Capitol citizen higher-ups, leadership in District Thirteen are only distinguished in their dress by a wrist communicator called a communicuff (20), but the ability to control the flow of military information enriches them. Luxury in District Thirteen, albeit not of a personal kind, is hidden in the extensive labyrinth of their underground base. Katniss is stunned to see “[r]ow after row of different kinds of hovercraft,” an awesome display of Thirteen’s might that mirrors the “[r]ow after row of sumptuous blooms” adorning President Snow’s lush prison (80, 354). Although Snow’s flowers cannot take down enemy forces, they represent the power of beauty and social status in the Capitol. In Thirteen, where honor is derived from one’s military rank, the display of firepower is a point of pride. Both use the virtues of their wealth to distract from foul intentions. Snow uses the roses’ scent to hide the reek of his damaged throat, developed from poisoning his many enemies (172). Similarly, Coin uses the intoxicating promise of Thirteen’s military strength to distract the districts from her plot to replace the Capitol as their new oppressor (357). The inconsistencies in District Thirteen’s values of exactitude and equality are apparent through its militarized excess, ironically paralleling the gluttony touted by the Capitol.

#### 4.2 Militant Values

Like daily life in District Thirteen, the soldier training regimen is distinctly routinized. As a part of her training, Katniss begins to “[e]at, live, and breathe the workouts, drills, weapons practice, lectures on tactics” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 246). Several of these activities rely on repetition: running around on the track until physically fit, taking apart and reassembling guns until perfected, studying chapters on tactics until the facts stick, and, eventually, running several permutations of a training simulation. Simulated Street Combat, or the Block for short, is the most advanced stage of training. The simulation gains its nickname because of its resemblance to “an artificial Capitol city street” (246). In the Block, trainees are put into groups of eight and put through rigorous attack scenarios. Like the Hunger Games arenas, which simulate nature almost perfectly at first glance, but reveal the control of Gamemakers in its traps and weather patterns, the Block is an imperfect simulation of reality. Katniss recognizes that while “[p]art of you knows it’s fake and that they’re not going to kill you [...] in other ways, it feels pretty real in there” (276). Like the arena, the Block is “rigged so that everything that can go wrong for you does,” thereby amplifying the drama (275). Although the Block simulation is not filmed for entertainment, the final test is created according to a soldier’s weaknesses, implying that training

sessions are watched and analyzed by superiors. Like the Training Center, the Block is ostensibly created for militaristic and pedagogical purposes. Through the intense training and scrutiny of superiors, both simulations intend to increase the skills of the participants and give superiors time to plan a strategy for the main event, whether that be the Hunger Games or the war. What distinguishes a simulation from the other training activities is that simulations have variable situations and methods to progress. Perfection is not about just mastering the motions or completing the lap, what Gazzard and Peacock call “repetition.” Instead, it is learning a way of being as a soldier, a mindset, which gives the simulation the quality of ritual. Ironically, much of what constitutes a soldier is revealed to be unthinking, repetitive actions, shooting enemies and obeying without question, so although the simulation itself has the quality of ritual, like in the Hunger Games, the player is not meant to enact their own rituals in response. Since rituals can reinforce and inform cultural values, the type of repetitious learning acquired through District Thirteen’s training simulation provides further insight into the militant values they hold. In the following three subsections, I will focus on the treatment of combatants, noncombatants with a focus on children, and death in the Block simulation. Subsequently, in section five, a parallel analysis of the reactions soldiers have to combatants, noncombatants, and death during the attack on the Capitol demonstrates the impact of their ideological training in the Block.

#### 4.2.1 Faceless Enemies: Combatants in the Block

Since the Block, like the arena, is an imperfect simulation of reality, the kind of world it trains its soldiers for reflects a very particular perspective on violence. As they attempt to complete a mission in the Block, soldiers are constantly met with obstacles to their progress, including enemy attacks (Collins, *Mockingjay* 246). During Katniss’s assessment, “Peacekeepers appear almost instantly” and she describes how she eliminates them as she moves through the Block (278). The immediate materialization of a threat mimics entering an arena in a first-person shooter video game, described by Kenneth Hullet and Jim Whitehead as “an open area or wide corridor where the player encounters some form of heavy resistance” in the form of “waves of enem[ies]” but also help in the form of cover or items (82). The Block’s Capitol streets are one example of these wide pathways where enemy attacks persist. To defeat a wave of enemies, Katniss steps out from cover to blow up a drum of oil, a conveniently placed item (Collins, *Mockingjay* 249). In his analysis of the third-person shooter *Spec Ops: The Line*, Holger Pötzsch notes that enemies are othered by their lack of “identity or clear affiliation but pose a constant

potential threat that can actualize any time from virtually anywhere” (162). Besides being portrayed as a pure threat, the Peacekeepers are not described with any individual characteristics, nor is there a reference to the faces of the people in costume, limiting the possibility for Katniss to identify with them. This is especially ironic when you consider Katniss’s friendly relationship with Darius, a Peacekeeper in Twelve who was made into an Avox, or tongueless, servant by Snow as a personal punishment for her (Collins, *Catching Fire* 218). Unlike Darius, the Peacekeepers in the Block are characterized by both their single-minded commitment to destruction and their anonymous appearance, lacking the nuance of real fighters.

Once within a video game arena, enemies will persistently attack the main player until they are defeated or leave the zone of combat, so the death of either the enemy or the player is often the only way to stop the endless loop of attacks. Although some games integrate enemy surrender or the use of non-lethal violence, Ben Clarke, Christian Rouffaer, and François Sénéchaud agree that most of the games in their study further reinforce the blanket necessity of lethal force (733). The simulation is successfully completed when all the Peacekeepers are dead, indicating that Katniss’s constant killing is demanded by the game’s structure (Collins, *Mockingjay* 249). The Peacekeepers’ single-minded aggression simplifies them by making the death of enemy soldiers the center of their entire existence. By omitting the possibility of surrender, the Peacekeepers are portrayed as ruthless and static while the soldiers are depicted as diverse individuals with the potential to learn and change.

#### 4.2.2 It’s a Trap: Noncombatants in the Block

Although the Block is created to represent a Capitol street, it neglects to accurately represent the resident population. When Katniss’s squad is presented with a map of the Capitol, dotted with pods that can activate deadly traps like in the arena, Katniss calls it “the Seventy-sixth Hunger Games” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 251). Unlike the arena, which is isolated from spectators, the Capitol is an urban environment full of residential homes and noncombatants. In the Block, there is only one mention of a civilian presence: when “a crying child leads you into an ambush” (246). On the one hand, Snow later uses children as human shields to protect his mansion, proving that he is not beyond risking children’s lives for his own safety. On the other hand, the Block does not portray any children that are uninvolved in the conflict, so soldiers are trained to recognize children primarily as a military threat. Keogh criticizes military-themed video games

for being “devoid of civilians” (4). Clarke, Rouffaer, and Sénéchaud agree that this trend encourages the perception that “anything alive is a foe and killing is the only option - there are no limits to the use of force,” a problematic assumption which is also implied when civilians are used as military threats (721). The Block does not argue that civilians do not exist, but rather that noncombatants do not, mirroring Layfield’s claim that as the boundary between war and simulation blurs, so does the distinction between civilian and military (161). When children are sent to the arena, they are both militarized and stripped of their right to life. By militarizing Capitol children, the rebels threaten their right to life, a move that has serious consequences during the final battle in the Capitol. As a result of omitting a noncombatant civilian presence, the Block trains soldiers to react to both civilians and military as combatants and to assume compassion is a tool of the enemy.

#### 4.2.3 Play Dead: Death in the Block

Despite the emphasis placed on killing, the Block causes little pain. Der Derian criticizes the use of simulations for war training at Fort Irwin since “one learns how to kill but not to take responsibility for it, one experiences ‘death’ but not the tragic consequences of it” (*Virtuous War* 10). In the Block, those who are killed are expected to “pretend to fall over dead,” removing in part the real stakes of war (Collins, *Mockingjay* 246). Like when Capitol citizens watch numbered tributes fall on the screens of Panem, death is made both distant and impersonal. Unlike in the Games, where death is a real threat, both the soldiers-in-training and Peacekeepers survive the Block. Because trainees feel neither the threat of their mortality nor the impact of their violence on others, it is not too surprising when Katniss goes through the simulation as a task. Although she frequently has nightmares about the deaths she caused in the Games, Katniss does not struggle while “taking out” Peacekeepers to complete the simulation (249). By using the euphemism “taking out,” her repetitive attacks are reduced to a chore. When Katniss then sees a group of six Peacekeepers advancing, she realizes with a similarly practical attitude that blowing them up using a drum of gasoline “will be the only way to achieve my mission” (249). Firstly, the phrasing “only” indicates that she has not been taught any other ways to manage conflict. Secondly, there is no consideration for how terrible such a death would be. Instead, it is considered a necessary step for progress. While it is expected for a soldier to attack enemy combatants, whether that be with shots or explosions, the simulation does not remind Katniss at all of her traumatic experiences with death, despite the fact she still struggles with “recurring

nightmares” (Gant 95). If such a traumatized and empathetic individual, one who still dreams that she is the dying Peacekeeper in a hoverplane crash she caused, is wholly unaffected by the Block’s depiction of death, the war simulation must be entirely inaccurate (Collins, *Mockingjay* 111). Video games can both trap their protagonists in a loop of death through fail-states as well as require the constant killing of faceless enemies. One man’s uniformed Peacekeeper is another’s tribute, reduced to their number and sacrificed by the dozen. Although Peacekeepers, unlike tributes, are assumedly adults and voluntary combatants, both simulations attempt to other them through their generalization and constant death. The same can even be said of District Thirteen’s soldiers-in-training, who are as young as fourteen when they rehearse the death of themselves and of their comrades. In this way, suffering is both disguised and necessitated by simulation.

## 5 Chaotic Combat in the Capitol

By creating a simulation out of the Capitol environment, the skills soldiers acquire in the Block are easily transferred to its city streets. When she goes on her first mission into the Capitol to film propaganda material, Katniss remarks that her squad, also known as the Star Squad, moves just as they did while training in the Block (Collins, *Mockingjay* 275). Obviously, any military situation would recall some level of military training, but since the Block mirrors the Capitol’s layout, the squad’s behavior is also mirrored to a greater extent. Because the Block prepares soldiers for a variety of situations, the variable cover, items, and pods do not break immersion. The transferability of action and attitude between the Block and the Capitol is demonstrated through the soldiers’ treatment of Peacekeepers, their reaction towards death in their ranks, suspicion towards civilians, and indiscriminate killing. In contrast to her previously rebellious history, Wright argues that during the attack on the Capitol, Katniss acts more like “the playable character of this game rather than the gamer who controls the action onscreen” (106). Katniss’s behavior reveals the extent to which the Block’s training has reduced her agency, but at the same time, she experiences thoughtful moments that strain against her programming.

### 5.1 Speedy Replacements: Combatants in the Capitol

When Gale is whipped nearly to death, Peacekeeper Darius is enslaved for trying to intervene. Despite Darius’s behavior proving that a Peacekeeper can be more than his uniform, during the final battle in the Capitol, when a “wounded Peacekeeper” asks Gale and Katniss for help, “Gale

knees him in the side of the head and takes his gun,” then kills another Peacekeeper to provide Katniss with one (Collins, *Mockingjay* 340). Although Gale might have been partial towards a Peacekeeper he knew as well as Darius, this scene juxtaposes the behavior of these two characters under duress. Darius had everything to gain from staying silent during Gale’s whipping, but he intervened because he recognized Gale’s humanity. Willing to joke around with Katniss in the black market, Darius understands that the difference between a Peacekeeper and citizens of Twelve is not as great as propaganda would have one believe (*Catching Fire* 11). In many video games, players are rewarded for killing enemies with items like in-game currency, health boosters, weapons, or ammunition. By killing Peacekeepers to loot them of their weapons, Gale uses the Peacekeepers’ lives for his own ends, disregarding the humanity of a surrendered and injured combatant.

While one might suspect Peacekeepers to be generalized by their enemy, so, too, are Thirteen’s soldiers. Citizens of Thirteen reflect the Peacekeepers’ ubiquitous white uniforms by dressing “uniformly gray in color” (Pavlik 33). Two of the soldiers on the Star Squad from District Thirteen, called Leeg 1 and Leeg 2, “are so similar in uniform, I can’t tell them apart until I notice Leeg 1 has weird yellow flecks in her eyes” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 256). Katniss searches for a sign of individuality among the twins, which contrasts with the treatment Leeg 2 receives when she dies in the Capitol and “Plutarch promises a speedy replacement” (261). The idea that Leeg 2 can be replaced, and speedily at that, shows that in the eyes of Command, lost soldiers do not deserve to be mourned. Even Leeg 1 only cries for her sister once she has gone to bed for the night, respecting the schedule by delaying her mourning until personal time (269). On the other hand, by mourning at all, Leeg 1 shows she has maintained her humanity. In contrast to Homes, who considers Capitol news mistakenly claiming that Katniss and her squad has died “a bit of luck” to aid their covert mission, the foremost thought in Leeg 1’s mind is for her father (288). By holding onto her grief and thinking of the grief of others, Leeg 1 defies her training.

Another instance that contrasts reactions to death is when Katniss and Gale learn of the torture of two people they both knew, Darius and a Capitol girl. While Katniss assumes responsibility for their deaths, “[Gale’s] expression says that there are not enough mountains to crush, enough cities to destroy. It promises death” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 274). While Gale tends to react violently, Katniss often assumes guilt when others die, even when it is outside of her

control. This both unfairly plagues her but also keeps her grounded and aware of the consequences of her actions. By turning to memory before violence, Katniss demonstrates she still has the capacity for thoughtfulness that led to transformative rituals in the arena.

## 5.2 A Lemon Yellow Coat: Noncombatants in the Capitol

The deeper the Star Squad travels into the Capitol, the greater the civilian presence grows. Like in the Block, civilians present a significant threat to the rebels. After the Capitol releases images of a wanted list, a group of Capitol citizens beats a man to death because of his slight resemblance to Peeta (Collins, *Mockingjay* 334). The report is toned down on the official news, calling the group “a crowd” instead of a mob, but the squad understands the threat (334). They make their plan to approach Snow’s mansion with this in mind, donning heavy disguises to throw off any recognizing eyes among the stream of refugees. Even so, Katniss is fearful when she makes eye contact with a little girl in a lemon-yellow coat, but the girl and her mother don’t get the chance to fulfill Katniss’s fears. Instead, both are gunned down by rebels from the rooftops who seem to be aiming for Peacekeepers, “staining [her yellow coat] with red” (339). Instead of becoming a tool for the enemy, the girl is a victim of the invasion that made her a refugee and the violence that surrounds her. In contrast to her satisfaction when successful shots on Peacekeeper dummies leave them “soaked in red,” Katniss is unable to celebrate even if it means her allies are there to support her (256, 340). Because of her history as both tribute, protector, and refugee in Thirteen, Katniss is far more likely to sympathize with a young, victimized refugee. Torn between her loyalty as a soldier and her fundamental values, Katniss is unable to look away. When she first notices the girl, Katniss “slow[s her] pace” to distance herself from the threat (339). According to Gazzard and Peacock, slowing down is one of the characteristics of ritual (501). As she slows, Katniss begins to calculate the different ways she can proceed. Despite entering a reflective, thoughtful mode, she remains unable to extricate herself from the coming chaos or prevent the deaths of any other children. At the same time, this moment emphasizes Katniss’s uncertain belonging, planting seeds of doubt as her allies transgress against the most vulnerable.

Katniss’s uncertain belonging is further articulated through her clothes. In her article on monstrous hybridity, King argues that the binaries of “man and beast, hunter and hunted” are obscured when the fleeing squad members sleep in animal pelts (111). As part of their refugee

disguise, Tigris “[c]overs our military boots with some sort of furry slippers” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 337). Both the military boots and fur designate Katniss as a hunter, yet the strange combination of her ensemble irritates another binary. She is dressed like a Capitol refugee, armed with a Peacekeeper gun, but allegedly fights for the rebels. Her hybrid state allows her to sympathize with others as part of the Capitol crowd, yet she is constantly aware of the threat of recognition, pulling up her scarf over her face to avoid “[a] pattern of sweaty palms and gaping faces [that] presses against the glass” (340). The threatening, disembodied image is horrific as people reach out towards the violence exploding in the street in awe. Like when they watched the Hunger Games, the audience is a spectator, yearning to come closer through vicarious participation yet too afraid to partake. Instead of deepening her understanding of others, Katniss’s hybrid state only contributes to increased violence as she loses track of who the enemy truly is.

### 5.3 Screaming, Bleeding, Dead: Death in the Capitol

The human cost of their arrival and the terrible consequences it has for civilians only escalates as the scene continues. Capitol-placed pods kill large groups of people, many fleeing refugees, in terribly gruesome ways. Peacekeepers seem equally disinterested in the refugees, “barely glancing at the whimpering Capitol girl huddled in a doorway” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 344). The distinction between Capitol and District is not only lost by those attacking, but Katniss herself begins to shoot indiscriminately in the chaos. In the low visibility and panic, “[t]here’s nothing to do but move forward, killing whoever comes into our path” (341). Like in the Block, Katniss takes constant killing as her only recourse. Acting with the thoughtlessness of pure repetition, Katniss “shoot[s] reflexively,” but now instead of actors pretending to drop dead, her shots are accompanied by “[s]creaming people, bleeding people, dead people everywhere” (341). The human cost of Katniss’s actions is both immediate and overwhelming, and Katniss struggles to keep herself and Gale alive at any cost.

Not only is she both hunter and hunted, but Katniss also sympathizes with the dead. Reacting to “the sound of another wave of boots,” one of the typical sound cues from the Block, Katniss and Gale “play dead” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 341–2). They employ a skill taught by the Block in an unexpected way, using a false surrender to gain a strategic position. Pain follows as the passing soldiers trample her (342). Although she has killed many, the action finally slows

enough during this break for Katniss to feel the pain suffered by the disregarded dead. By engaging in a mock version of the death-and-resurrection loop employed by the Block, Katniss gains access to the pain disguised in simulation. Through the copious description of the refugee's suffering in the text, the progress of Katniss's mission towards Snow's mansion is put against a backdrop of intense human cost, the opposite of the Block's sterile representation.

#### 5.4 Player or Played? Katniss's Agency in the Capitol

In contrast to the Block, the war against the Capitol is marred by a drastic human cost. The insignificance of life created by the Games' loop of death and reiterated in the Block's portrayal spreads throughout the Capitol. The once-privileged Capitol audience and replaceable rebel soldiers become tributes in a spectacle of gruesome death watched by those in Command. When the war causes "the same physical, emotional, and ethical deterioration seen in the Games," (Pharr 225) the imaginary boundary, the "magic circle" drawn around the play zone dissipates, revealing that the conditions set aside for the Games now rule everywhere (Guanio-Uluru). Both Capitol pods and the indiscriminately attacking rebel army contribute to the mayhem that is the final battle. While the Capitol certainly shares some blame for using a weapon often used in the Hunger Games, rebel soldiers who follow the rules of the simulation do their part to wage an unjust, gamified war.

In all three instances, soldiers respond with their training in the Block, whether that be by attacking Peacekeepers relentlessly, suspecting young children are a threat, or shooting reflexively with confronted with stress. On the other hand, the battle reaches Katniss emotionally in a way the simulation had not. She struggles with the deaths of her comrades, is horrified by the brutal slaughter of a child, loses a firm sense of loyalty to the rebels, is disorientated by the chaotic violence, and empathizes with the pain of the dead. On occasion, she uses her training in ingenious ways, such as when she plays dead to fool an enemy. It is in these pauses where she cannot tear her eyes away from the slumped, dead girl or when she fights to remain still as boots grind into her that Katniss can reflect and experience the empathy denied by the simulation.

#### 6 Rhythmic Tension in the Sewer

The impact rhythm has on reflection and ritual is also evident earlier in the novel when the Star Squad traverses through the Capitol blocks and sewers. Similarly to video games, the pacing of

the action is dictated by external cues such as sound and the layout of the spaces they enter. Some of these elements are implemented in the Block. Like other aspects of training, exposure to these stimuli drills the soldiers' automatic reactions. For example, intense or fast sounds as well as arena spaces push forward, whereas quiet and safely enclosed spaces encourage rest. Comparing the environments in the Capitol and the Block to video games reveals how the speed of soldiers can be manipulated, thereby changing Katniss's ability to reflect.

The increased rhythm demanded by battle is one way to explain Katniss's inability to inspire through ritual. When mourning Rue and trying to save Peeta, Katniss has time to contemplate her next move, but when the Star Squad goes underground into the sewers, they are pushed forward by the threat of Capitol pursuers. In their analysis of the design patterns used in first-person shooters, Hullett and Whitehead argue that level design can be used to guide players to the correct path as well as manage the pacing (80). In other words, these patterns can manipulate the rhythm at which a game is played. Like Levine, who emphasizes "patterns and structures" and their affordances, Hullett and Whitehead examine the "common structures" of a game and use affordances to explore the possible variations of a given pattern (6; 79–80). The different structures the authors identify, such as the arena, and the different tempo it affords, can be analyzed as forms: one spatial, the other rhythmic. An analysis of these different elements in the sewers can show how the stress experienced by the squad escalates throughout this two-chapter section of *Mockingjay*.

### 6.1 Beat the Level: Space and Tension in the Sewers

Like how the Block copies the Capitol, the sewers are a dark, underground mirror of the city. Although the main sewer streets, called the Transfer, are paved with the same "pastel-colored tiles" and follow the exact layout of the Capitol streets above, the copy is eerie in its emptiness (Collins, *Mockingjay* 299). The walls where homes should stand are just "white brick," and only entrapped service personnel traverse the sewer (299). Although they move along the same paths as the citizens they serve, these personnel live a bleak, impoverished copy of those aboveground. The layout also has the addition of small passageways that "form a multilevel maze" (300). As the novels intended, levels designate various elevations, but in terms of video games, the sewers also contain a variety of level patterns from open arenas to small hidden areas. Since the sewer copies the Capitol, same as the Block, some of these spaces are naturally included in both, and

others are possibly left unmentioned since the Block occupies a smaller portion of the novel. Other parts, while comparable, are even more monstrous. For example, the enemies in the sewer exaggerate the enemy behavior shared by both the Block and video games. The similarity between the layout and enemies triggers the squad members' training. While this helps a small number of them to survive the sewers, Katniss demonstrates the consequences of using repetitive learning to condition reactions to moments of stress by ending the encounter with one of the worst automatic impulses from the Block.

The Star Squad begins by travelling through small passageways off the Transfer to avoid surveillance cameras and detonating pods. Hullett and Whitehead call the video game equivalent of these passageways "flanking routes," pathways in which "the pace of the game is reduced as a difficult section is bypassed" (84). The squad moves carefully and intentionally but is relatively sure of their safety thanks to Pollux's expertise. Both their anxiety and tempo slow for this portion until it reaches a low and they enter "a small, warm room" (Collins, *Mockingjay* 300). Much like a "hidden area" where the player, once off the main path, can relax, raise their health, and gather ammunition, the squad rests, eats, and redistributes their weapons (Hullett and Whitehead 84). Following a recovery period, the tension has nowhere to go but up.

Unfortunately for the group, their rest is interrupted by oncoming mutations, mutated Capitol monsters that force them to progress through the sewers. Like the old Dungeons and Dragons trope, never rest in a dungeon, the group is punished for sleeping in enemy territory. The squad moves frantically, alerting their enemies to their whereabouts. Eventually, they are pushed onto the Transfer. Like the streets above and the Block, the Transfer is an arena, and their entry into combat is marked by an onslaught of violence. Pods erupt and attack the team, and, as if on schedule, a "squad of Peacekeepers pound[s] down the Transfer toward us" (Collins, *Mockingjay* 309). The materialization of enemies mirrors the Block, but the dynamic between attacker and victim is also compared to combat in District Eight. In District Eight, Katniss is trapped in an open street as bombs rain down, the aim as easy as "shooting fish in a barrel" (93). With no path to escape the bombing, Katniss was stuck in a "choke point," an area where the "player or enemy [...] are exposed to attack" (Hullett and Whitehead 84). In the Transfer, which is itself a dark mirror of the Capitol above, the same simile is used to present a reversal between the Capitol and rebels. Since the squad has the advantage in reference to the choke point and a

higher skill level, they attack the Peacekeepers confidently and with precision, picking away at the oncoming bodies like “[f]ish in a barrel” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 309). Similarly to the moment when the Peacekeepers were blown up in the Block simulation, a smaller number of rebels takes on the wave of enemies. Like the dummies dressed in Peacekeeper suits they trained on in firing practice, which “reward” good shots “with a burst of fake blood” (256), “blossoms of red stain [the] white uniforms” of the attacking Peacekeepers (309). Something about their success is rewarding, even beautiful when it blossoms on the chest of their enemies. Although this is a combat section, tension falls for the Star Squad during this moment of temporary advantage, one that disappears when the muttations catch up.

Unlike the predictable Peacekeepers in the Block and the motionless dummies in the firing range, the muttations are chaotic. Ignorant that they are on the same side as Capitol forces, they decapitate the Peacekeepers, both “living and dead” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 309). Their death drive is even worse than the Block’s Peacekeepers because, as hybrids, the muttations make no binary distinctions, whether it be between life and death or ally and enemy. Instead, like Katniss, they are driven by a singular goal. Like she is driven to kill Snow, so are they driven to kill her, portraying a monstrous hybridity that breeds no empathy. The muttations’ attack destroys the Star Squad’s plan and forces them to flee. To slow the progress of the muttations, Gale destroys a bridge, creating a “stronghold” (Hullett and Whitehead 82). Although a stronghold gives the player a positional advantage, a high number of attacking enemies increases tension and challenge (82). The “endless supply” of muttations tries to cross the gap, and most die falling into the poisonous sewage (Collins, *Mockingjay* 311). Their overwhelming numbers and unflinching aggression match the mindless enemies of a shooter video game, rightfully heightening the tension of this encounter. Combat ends after the squad climbs the ladder and drops the Holo down on the squirming mass of muttations to detonate it, utilizing their higher position to throw special weapons like in a gallery (Hullett and Whitehead 81). The tension has become so great that Peeta, still suffering from mind-altering Capitol torture, risks losing control over himself, but he is not the only one. Just after escaping the sewer, Katniss shoots a civilian woman “[w]ithout hesitation” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 314). Because of the intense manipulation of stress throughout the chaotic last section, Katniss automatically responds with aggression. Through the game-like escalation of stakes produced by the different areas, enemies, and pods, the training to recognize citizens as enemy overwhelms Katniss’s power of reason. Considering

the squad's superior numbers and training, they could likely have subdued, reasoned with, or restrained the civilian instead, especially when it is revealed the woman was alone. Instead, Katniss's immediate and violent response demonstrates how repetitious training has conditioned her to act quickly, removing the thoughtful deliberation she needs to enact ritual.

## 6.2 Pause and Reflect: Time for Ethical Decisions

Katniss's reactions in the sewer and final battle are particularly strange when one considers her thoughtful use of ritual in the arena, but she is also no stranger to instantaneous violence. Katniss kills Rue's attacker, Marvel, "before he can pull out the spear" from Rue's body, but she eventually recognizes that Marvel is not to blame for Rue's death (Collins, *Hunger Games* 233). Once she realizes that the Capitol is at fault for forcing them all into this deadly situation, Katniss performs her mourning ritual for Rue. The critical difference between Katniss's moments of violence and of regret is time. When Katniss, who is defined by her need "to feed and protect" others (Gant 93), sees herself and her ally in danger, she moves first to protect. After her father's death, Katniss steps up as both provider and protector (Lem and Hassel 123), assuming a masculine role both in her family and in the arena (Mitchell 130–1). Her father taught her to hunt, but he is also her first great loss. When she compares killing Marvel to hunting, Katniss recognizes how murder is distinguished by emotional trauma (Collins, *Hunger Games* 243). Although murder uses the same hunting skills her father taught her, she cannot help thinking of how Marvel's family will mourn him, as she still does her father. Because of her memory of loss, Katniss empathizes with even those she hurts out of necessity.

After Katniss shoots the woman in her apartment, her attitude remains largely practical. Lamenting that they cannot afford to rest in her "classy" apartment, the squad takes a moment "to stuff pockets with food and first-aid supplies" before sneaking to their next location (Collins, *Mockingjay* 315, 317). Like when Gale loots the Peacekeepers, the Star Squad plunders the woman's apartment. Katniss "can feel the clock ticking away" and acts accordingly, using precious moments to loot rather than lament her kill (317). Once they reach Tigris's shop, they rest, heal, and eat like they did in the hidden area in the sewers. During Katniss's first Hunger Games, a secluded cave also gives Katniss some much-needed time in relative safety to reflect on the past, updating Peeta on events that she "wasn't ready to relive" before, like "the boy from District 1" (*Hunger Games* 292). She avoids assigning a verb to Marvel's murder, implying she

still hesitates to confront her actions. The conversation turns emotional, and Katniss cries, releasing the stress she had pent up thus far in the arena. In both hidden areas, Katniss reflects and expresses emotions she usually avoids while acting as a protector and survivor.

In Tigris's basement, Katniss experiences another moment of reflection. While recounting the many people that died as part of her mission, she realizes that, by shooting the woman, she has resorted to "taking out unarmed citizens now" (Collins, *Mockingjay* 323). Like in the Block, she uses the phrase "taking out," but unlike in the Block, her next move is to admit to her squad that the mission was fabricated, releasing the mythos of her heroism. The war Katniss wages between District Thirteen's training and her own conscience is also played out between the two halves of her personality. On the one hand, Katniss has held on so long to the hunter in her, "obsessed with putting an arrow in Snow," but now "the increasingly reflective side of Katniss" is gaining strength (McDonald 82). Now that she has a moment of quiet, Katniss struggles to reconcile the many deaths that have resulted from her quest for revenge. She intends to give up the mission, but when the group encourages her heroism and her impulse to kill Snow, Katniss decides to continue and opens her "paper map" to plan their next steps (Collins, *Mockingjay* 325). By returning to her map, Katniss not only demonstrates that she is holding on to her quest for revenge, but that she is also still doing so under the influence of District Thirteen.

Whether or not Katniss is under the dictates of District Thirteen's Command at this point is debatable. On the one hand, she is not receiving orders and is deliberately avoiding Coin, but on the other hand, the commander of her squad explicitly ordered the mission before transferring his position to her. Beyond these semantics, Katniss upholds District Thirteen's hierarchical values by continuing to act as commander, as is demonstrated by her possessing the map. In District Thirteen's command structure, a commander has the privilege of controlling the Holo, a holographic, hand-held map. Since Katniss detonated their Holo in the sewers, this paper map is a substitute that marks Katniss's role as leader (Collins, *Mockingjay* 260). A video game level can also be referred to as a "map," as Pötzsch does in his article (161), but the medium also makes use of pause-menu or mini-maps. Like a paper map in-hand, mini-maps usually sit in the corner of the screen and indicate the player's position, available paths, and points of interest. Khan and Rahman's research criticizes mini-maps for focusing players' attention on "symbolic landmarks" developers deem important rather than letting them develop spatial knowledge of

their environment (1145). Developers use mini-maps to direct attention away from the environment itself and towards routes, objectives, and marked objects instead. In *Mockingjay*, most of the environmental setup is achieved through the top-down messaging of the Holo which summarizes each block as a military target (260). Like Baudrillard's maps, the Holo's representation "precedes the territory," replacing a civilian space with the signification of war enforced by Command (Baudrillard 1). By returning to the map, Katniss views the Capitol once again as a battlefield rather than a graveyard and uses militarism as the solution to her grief.

Both the map and the level design in the sewers show how Katniss accepts her role as a soldier and commander. When placed into situations similar to the Block, Katniss responds with her training. This functions well for a time until the waves of enemies reach monstrous proportions, overwhelming the squad and pushing them through the sewers. As a result of this increased tempo, Katniss shoots a civilian woman with the same reflexivity as a Peacekeeper or mutation. To bring Katniss's reflection back to light, she has to learn to manage her own tempo, or otherwise to conduct ritual in split-second situations. Before and during the Block final test, Katniss demonstrates her developing aptitude for both creating moments of peace and reflecting on the fly.

### 6.3 Conquering the Block

In contrast to her soldierly role, Katniss's reaction to strictly managed rhythms in District Thirteen highlights her independence. Although Command fashions Katniss into a symbol for the rebellion, they struggle to manage her rebellious streak. Before she gains interest in training, Katniss intentionally flaunts many of Thirteen's rhythms, mostly due to her traumatized state. With Peeta captured by the Capitol, Katniss is left worrying constantly for his life and well-being. She is given a "mentally disoriented" bracelet which excuses her when she ignores her daily schedule and hides in closets. Flaunting her schedule like this is frowned upon in Thirteen, but either because of her political usefulness, mental incapacity, or both, Katniss is left for the most part to her own devices. Recognizing how "horribly familiar" her role as Mockingjay would be to her experience manipulating the districts for Snow during the Victory Tour, Katniss ignores commands to act the part (Collins, *Mockingjay* 11). By refusing to bend to District Thirteen's manipulation as she did to Snow's, Katniss asserts her independence.

Although she struggles to take care of herself, Katniss demonstrates a remarkable strength of will in these mundane moments that extends onto the battlefield. Like in the arena, Katniss ignores powerful hierarchical forces to do what she thinks is right. While visiting a hospital in District Eight, Katniss ignores orders and fights Capitol hoverplanes bombing a hospital. In Thirteen, where a guard unquestioningly defends torture for small crimes, as well as in the Capitol, where tongues are cut out of dissenters, Katniss's independence is hard to come by and turns out to be her greatest asset as the Mockingjay. In a strategy meeting helmed by Haymitch, Gale says Katniss's most inspiring moments are those when "[n]o one told her what to do or say," to which Beetee shouts "[u]nscripted, yes!", as if Gale referenced Katniss's spontaneity (Collins, *Mockingjay* 75). While her ability to think quickly on her feet is part of it, Gale knew Katniss when she was at her freest, hunting illegally in the woods. Quick reaction times take down the squirrel, but Katniss's willingness to break the law got her into those woods in the first place. Katniss is at her best when she does not listen to those in control, a personality trait that District Thirteen wants to harness in her as a media symbol yet squash as a soldier.

In contrast to the way the environment affects her in the Capitol, Katniss can also use her environment to manage her stress. Before the final test in the Block begins, Katniss hears a rumor that the test targets the taker's weaknesses, so she moves to "a quiet spot" to brainstorm what hers might be (Collins, *Mockingjay* 248). Although she cannot leave the room to find a hidden area, Katniss seeks a "Safe Zone," or a space where players of 2D games can rest out of reach of gunfire or hazards to "analyze the surroundings and safely plan their next actions" (Khalifa et al. 4). Ahmed Khalifa, Fernando de Mesentier Silva, and Julian Togelius claim that Safe Zones afford "Pace Breaking", or an opportunity to change the level of tension (6). Like a hidden area, a Safe Zone gives the player time to plan, especially ahead of a new challenge (4). Because Safe Zones are integrated into a larger area, they afford similar protection and pause as cover does in a first-person shooter arena. Since the final test is meant to be taken blind, it evaluates a soldier's training rather than planning skills. By creating a Safe Zone, Katniss ignores the original intention of the waiting space as well as the parameters of the test to achieve an advantage. Like a modder, Katniss innovates to shape the space she needs. Although none of the weaknesses Katniss thinks of come into play in the Block, she does realize her "standout status as the Mockingjay" is a weakness, the very issue she struggles with as she tries to stealth through

the Capitol (Collins, *Mockingjay* 248). Before entering a conflict, Katniss prepares by seeking solitude, slowing her pace and planning her strategy moving forward.

While reflection often comes in hidden areas where the body as well as the mind are given space to recuperate, Katniss thinks under pressure during her final test in the Block. At first, “a certain amount of training does kick in” and Katniss behaves reflexively, confidently killing Peacekeepers (Collins, *Mockingjay* 248). While a soldier is encouraged to kill, they are also expected to follow orders. When the voice of her squadron leader orders her to drop instead of shooting the conveniently placed oil barrel, Katniss struggles to control her screaming instinct to shoot (249). In this moment, her strong urge to attack is due to both the depth of her training to spot, analyze, and take out, but also her history as an independent hunter. As ever, Katniss considers what her audience, whether that be the Gamemakers or the military, thinks about her. When she realizes that from their perspective, her greatest weakness is that she “cannot take orders,” Katniss complies, successfully completing her mission and earning herself a spot on a squad (249). Like in the arena, Katniss analyzes what her audience wants to see and achieves her reward, whether that be sponsorships or a ride with the District Thirteen military to the Capitol. Even as she behaves like a perfect soldier prowling through the Block, Katniss has an agenda: get to the Capitol as a soldier, find a way to desert her squad, and kill Snow. She assumes that those testing her, like Coin, are frustrated with her independence (59). By reacting intentionally to the test of obedience, Katniss both fulfills and breaks the image of the perfect soldier since a soldier who obeys when it is convenient for them is not truly obedient at all. By considering her audience’s perspective and analyzing it with the intentionality of ritual, Katniss turns the immediate, repetitive reaction expected of her into a means to achieve her own goals.

#### 6.4 Free Will or Set in the Paving Stones?

Level design, whether it is described in maps or laid out in a network of patterns, guides the action in a video game. In *Mockingjay*, the Star Squad responds to different locations in the sewers similarly to patterns in video games. While less detail is given about the formatting of the Block, the skills the soldiers learn there transfer easily to the Capitol. Like the Block, the sewers are another underground copy, and the overlaps between the two are gruesome. Monsters that prioritize killing above all else pursue the squad, and their superior strength puts the soldiers’ clean runs of the simulation to shame. In the sewers, the Star Squad and their camera crew are

put under more pressure than ever before, and half of the group is killed as a result. The heightened tempo also pushes Katniss into killing a civilian woman, a moment she later regrets. Despite her attempts to move on, Katniss continues in her revenge quest and returns to her militaristic mindset, symbolized by her paper map. Overall, a lower tempo seems necessary for performing a ritual, but Katniss once again surprises when she creates her own spaces, both physical and mental, of calm and contemplation. Her reaction to the test in the Block demonstrates that she remains both creative and dedicated, even if she still needs to do some work to free herself from her training.

## 7 Facing Down Tyrants at Snow's Mansion

If the Block influences Katniss because of its connection to District Thirteen's ideology, no character embodies said ideology better than President Coin. Strict, authoritarian, and loyal to the schedule, Coin is deeply suspicious of Katniss's scrappy independence. Most of *Mockingjay* is focused on traversing the Capitol to assassinate Snow, a fact that critics previously compared to video games, but the underlying influence Coin has over Katniss is also reminiscent of the medium. Whereas Snow may be the antagonist the player character pursues, Coin is closer to a programmer in how she manipulates the entire war, Snow included, from behind the scenes. In order to create a new game, Katniss first has to gain the skills to beat both Snow and Coin.

By developing skills that mirror the hallmarks of Panem's tyrants, Katniss gains the upper hand over both. Although they come from wildly different class backgrounds, both Katniss and Snow are survivors. Susan S. M. Tan calls Katniss the consummate survivor, the same words Katniss uses to describe Snow ("Worse Games" 36; Collins, *Mockingjay* 368). Katniss uses her survival skills to outwit his Games and literally outlives him. In a world where being a child is one of the most unstable and vulnerable states, Katniss represents the resilience of the younger generation. In contrast, Snow's plastic surgery is a typical, but empty attempt by Capitol adults to maintain eternal youth by artificial means (Tan, "Burn with Us" 56, 61). Although he embraces his white hair, in all other ways, Snow continually fights death. Snow outlives many of his poisoning victims, but not without injury. He attempts to cover the blood in his mouth, a sign of internal decay, with the scent of roses, and assumes youthful innocence through surgically enlarged lips. Because of her age, it seems obvious that Katniss will outlive Snow, but in a society in which children are targeted and with her low social status, the odds do not begin in her

favor. Snow levies the youth of the tributes to increase the potency of the Games, but Katniss's adolescence is what gives her the "ability to defy the violence of binary codification" and makes her such a strong revolutionary (Tan, "Worse Games" 39). In the end, Snow dies while Katniss lives, crowning her as the consummate survivor.

While Coin, having outlived the near destruction of her district and a pox epidemic, is a survivor in her own right, she proves her discernment and intelligence by successfully dominating the war. In contrast to Katniss's relationship with Snow, which despite all the hate Katniss harbors for him, is defined by a promise "not to lie to each other," Katniss and Coin are both deeply suspicious, especially when it concerns one another (Collins, *Catching Fire* 19). Coin is not as expressive as Snow, who uses his charm to reassure Katniss's mother in *Catching Fire*. Instead, she guards her emotions as carefully as her interests. Like Katniss, who was ready to kill her new ally Finnick despite Haymitch's endorsement, Coin quickly realizes Katniss is untrustworthy and plots for her to be eliminated. Because Coin doubts that Katniss's "immediate answer" as to who should run Panem isn't Coin, Katniss is "a threat," and Coin arranges for her to be killed by Peeta (*Mockingjay* 266). As a leader, Coin expects immediate responses and unquestioning obedience both inside and outside the Block. Katniss herself believes District Thirteen citizens are beyond suspicion. She is incredulous when she sees the intense security citizens must pass to enter Special Weaponry, failing to realize that this is the hallmark of Coin's leadership style (67). Even after curating absolute loyalty, Coin fiercely protects the center of her power.

During Snow's execution, Katniss manages to defeat both of her enemies. To beat Snow, Katniss only has to outlive him, and as the prisoner of the rebels, he is sure to die regardless of her efforts. To defeat Coin, Katniss must surpass Coin's ability to guard her emotions, intent, and interests, something she has of yet failed to do. After an entire novel of struggling to identify and subvert Coin's game, Katniss delves deep into reflection then action to defeat Coin, proving herself to be both the consummate survivor and player.

### 7.1 Know Thy Enemy: Defeating the Presidents at Their Own Game

No matter how much Katniss analyzes it, she fails to identify that her plan to kill Snow is not so far off from Coin's own. When Katniss asks for permission to kill Snow at the end of the war, she sees for the first time "the hint of a smile on the president's lips" indicating her assent, a

sharp contrast to Snow's puffy-lipped smiles (Collins, *Mockingjay* 42). After defecting, Katniss continues to behave with Coin's perspective in mind, hoping to avoid her and thus avoid death, yet she fails to understand that not only is Coin aware of where she is travelling, but that she certainly approves of Katniss's objective. When Katniss notices that the rebels have not announced anything on television recently, she suspects that Coin is struggling to come up with a new media strategy, but when she finally arrives in front of Snow's mansion, Coin unleashes her carefully planned bombing. Katniss's greatest mistake is misunderstanding Coin's silence as inaction and confusion. While Katniss barter her media image, Coin remains "impassive" and "unimpressed" as she watches her (38). Although her expression is blank and she speaks sparingly, Coin's mind is active, and her silence is a sign of careful planning.

After Coin is declared president of the known world, Katniss cannot afford to misread her again. McDonald argues that Katniss moves against Coin because she "comes to *understand* the nature, motives, and mechanisms of the evil in which she herself is caught" (65). In the arena, Katniss could undermine the Gamemaker's rituals because she understood the purpose of the Games. Although she has spent much of *Mockingjay* shocked at how brutally both sides wage war, losing her sister is an evil that impacts her in a deeply personal way. From the first book, Katniss was willing to die for Prim's safety. While she imagined that her assassination mission would lead to her own death, Katniss never considered that Prim was in danger. By focusing on Coin's motivations for power, calculating nature, and repetitive mechanisms, Katniss comes to a higher awareness than before. Katniss then uses her newly developed awareness to interject in the crucial moment, interrupting Coin's ritual with a shot of her own.

## 7.2 Coin's Hunger Games: Vote Yes to Kill

Before the execution, Coin shows her hand to Katniss in a big way by unveiling her plan for a new Hunger Games. Similarly to her reflection before the final test, Katniss secludes herself in a wardrobe to reflect on whether or not Coin could be responsible for Prim's death (Collins, *Mockingjay* 363). Although Katniss has not yet confirmed what she truly believes, she enters the public vote armed with her suspicions. The manner in which Katniss guards her intentions from both Coin and the reader demonstrates how far she has come. Not only does Katniss understand the way Coin had previously manipulated her, but she also uses that knowledge moving forward.

To top it all off, Katniss outwits Coin by reflecting her trademark calm stoicism and surpasses the strategist at her own game.

Despite the many promises of freedom made by the rebellion, conditions seem unlikely to improve under Coin's government. One of the most blatant examples of this is when Coin assembles the remaining victors to vote on a "a final, symbolic Hunger Games" (Collins, *Mockingjay* 369). By alluding to the Hunger Games as symbolic, Coin implies that this Hunger Games will be less painful than previous, actual Hunger Games, but she very much intends to continue slaughtering children. The only difference is that these are Capitol children, and they will not be selected by lottery, but instead from a pool of "children directly related to those who held the most power" (369). As a ritual, the Hunger Games always had a symbolic quality, but neither of these Hunger Games differs in their symbolism nor actuality. The only difference is that it is called the "final" Hunger Games, ending the loop, but once filmed, any Hunger Games becomes a loop of itself. Considering, too, that the violence characteristic of the Hunger Games has spread across Panem, the legacy of the event could live on eternally, regardless of whether another arena is erected or not. If any loop is meant to be ended by this Hunger Games, it is that of reproduction. By killing children connected to the most affluent families, Coin destroys the lineage of powerful Capitol dynasties. What at first appears as retribution for the many dead District children is instead another way for Coin, like Snow before her, to prune the family tree of her competition.

Despite her suggestion to end the loop of the Hunger Games, by assuming the weapons of her predecessors, Coin continues the repetition of history as well as the cycle of violence. Similarly to how Capitol authorities sacrificed district children as retribution for the first rebellion, Coin proposes more death to atone for "the suffering in the districts" (Collins, *Mockingjay* 368). While the identities of perpetrator and victim are now reversed, the principles remain the same. Coin also wisely passes the blame to the victors by offering them a vote, appealing to their authority to justify such a move. Katniss speculates how similar this meeting might be to the one preceding the first Hunger Games, and more importantly, whether anyone challenged the loop of vengeance upon vengeance in the past (370). By comparing this meeting to the Capitol's, the rebellion is shown to be a reproduction rather than a revolution. Dispirited by the inhumane behavior she has witnessed so far, an indignance that eventually leads her to

deny “any allegiance to these monsters called human beings,” Katniss looks for any sign of humanity in the group (377). In a hopeful moment, Peeta, whom Lem and Hassel call “the book’s moral center,” is “furious” and argues vehemently against “the atrocity” (123; Collins, *Mockingjay* 370). Peeta’s dissent is the first sign that real change may soon come. Katniss and Haymitch have the deciding vote, and Katniss is given the power to change the course of history.

Although the meeting asks the victors to voice their opinions, Katniss has learned to avoid open disagreement with Coin. While Katniss originally judges Boggs as “a muscular robot that does Coin’s bidding,” she has since learned the importance of compliance to avoid Coin’s wrath (Collins, *Mockingjay* 75). Like when she throws herself down to obey her squadron leader in the Block, Katniss must project robotic agreement to avoid Coin’s suspicion. Like Coin, Katniss chooses to “weigh my options carefully” in silence, hiding her intentions from the other characters (370). Even the reader is not made aware of Katniss’s true decision until she fires on Coin later in the novel. By voting “yes... for Prim,” Katniss implies that she wants revenge against Snow for allegedly bombing her sister, yet her words are duplicitous (370). Since Katniss is aware that Coin was her true killer, voting yes allows Katniss to earn Coin’s trust, thereby giving her the opportunity to shoot Coin. If Katniss only sought to take an eye for an eye, she seems just as unlikely to end the cycle of death, but Lindsey Issow Averill asserts that Katniss kills Coin primarily out of care for others (175). Since the greatest threat to Prim’s life was the institutions that oppressed her, ending those systems ensures that other vulnerable children like Prim will be protected, ultimately avenging her. After divulging her deepest thoughts with the reader for hundreds of pages, Katniss omits her thought process in the critical moment, providing suspense whilst simultaneously proving that she has learned to guard her true intentions to gain the upper hand.

By coding her rationale with revenge, whether against Coin or Snow, Katniss also shows that she understands how Coin manipulated her in the past. Coin smiles for the first time when Katniss demands to kill Snow not only because they share a common enemy, but because it also gives Katniss an element of predictability. After Katniss confesses to deceiving her squad, the few who remain reveal that they suspected she wanted to kill Snow for personal reasons all along. Gale reiterates how clear it was since Katniss told everyone in Command as much, a meeting Coin attended (Collins, *Mockingjay* 324). When Coin kills Prim, she shows her hand.

Firstly, Coin's plan to stage an attack in front of Snow's mansion reveals she understood Katniss's end goal to find and kill Snow. Secondly, Coin believes in the efficacy of her plan because she knows that when Katniss is given a cause to take revenge, she will take it. In this case, by killing Prim in Snow's name, Coin strengthens Katniss's already rabid need for revenge. This much is true in the hospital, where Katniss admits that "[a]ll that keeps me going is Coin's promise. That I can kill Snow" (351). By using hate and vengeance as the motivation for her vote to approve of the Hunger Games, Katniss reaffirms for Coin what Coin already knows to be true about her. This kernel of truth reassures Coin that her plan has worked and gives her a reason to buy Katniss's sudden decision to follow her lead. During the Hunger Games, Katniss lures her audience through her actions and facial expressions. By assuming her cover internally as well, Katniss wrings another, fuller "smile" out of a seemingly victorious Coin (371). Confident that she has manipulated Katniss, Coin prepares the execution, using Katniss as the violent hand to end Snow's regime and endorse her own.

### 7.3 The Last Shot of the War: Breaking the Loop of Tyranny

Although Coin promises a radically altered government, her use of familiar symbols from the era of Capitol domination demonstrates that she is unwilling to break from the past. Using visual motifs from previous Hunger Games ceremonies, Coin stages Snow's execution to symbolize the transfer of power. Like when Caesar paraded a defeated enemy leader through Rome, Coin makes a spectacle of Snow's defeat (Vlahos). Caesar's ritual, a Triumph, reaffirmed the identity of both the Romans as champions and Caesar himself as a "mythic hero" (Vlahos). Like Ceasar's triumph, Coin's ritual affirms, but like the rituals in video games, it also transforms. By executing Snow, Coin overtakes his seat of power and transforms Panem by reversing the Capitol-district hierarchy. Now, district citizens observe while a Capitol citizen is slaughtered, representing a new world order where district citizens will dominate over their former oppressors. At the same time, by using familiar symbols from the Hunger Games, Coin reaffirms ruthless hierarchies. While the sides have changed, Coin's system remains, in essence, the same: a hierarchy where one social group, and more importantly, one leader dominates absolutely. Unlike the rest of the audience, Katniss recognizes the echoes of the Hunger Games in Coin's presentation, but unlike in the Block and Capitol, she fully resists the ritual's influence.

By reusing the signs of previous Hunger Games rituals for Snow's execution, Coin reveals both the identity she hopes to create for Panem and the leadership role she intends to occupy. As was demonstrated by her use of the parachutes, Coin weaponizes repetition. Standing on the balcony of his mansion, Coin mirrors Snow, who stood in that same location to welcome the tributes during the opening ceremonies, and the Gamemakers who sat on a balcony during the interviews (Collins, *Hunger Games* 71, 129). Her elevated position implies that like Snow and the Gamemakers, Coin intends to act as an omniscient power. Similarly to how honored guests are invited to the Victory Banquet to reward their sponsorship of the Games, Coin now assembles in positions of honor "Guards. Officials. Rebel leaders. Victors" to reward those who followed her directives (*Mockingjay* 371). Both governments reward loyalty, but dissidents are cruelly punished. Instead of a parade of tributes in chariots, Snow is tied to a post below her, a sacrificial offering for the audience. Coin even selects Katniss as her executioner, armed with a single arrow to fire the "symbolic [...] last shot of the war" (366). Like Coin's Hunger Games proposal, this shot is also called "symbolic," although it becomes as real as any shot once it hits its target. The emphasis on symbolism over actual pain reflects the previous Hunger Games, disguising pain with the pomp of symbolic gestures. With this so-called final shot, Coin artificially declares an end to the war and attempts to split the past and future. Firstly, she rejects that violence under her future regime could be a continuation of the past, whether that be of the first rebellion or the Hunger Games. Secondly, Coin follows her predecessors by denying that her Hunger Games is another act of war. If she follows through with her plan, the war will not end until the new Hunger Games does. By putting the bow in Katniss's hand rather than her own, Coin distances herself from violence like the Gamemakers before her, and like Snow, she legitimizes her rule through Katniss's endorsement. Through the implementation of these familiar symbols, Coin both establishes her credibility and communicates her wish to not only replace but also replicate Snow's style of government.

The rebel audience's reaction to these familiar signs also mirrors that of their Capitol predecessors during the Hunger Games. The rebel crowd's building enthusiasm is a beat-for-beat replication of the Capitol audience's reaction during a post-Hunger Games ceremony. Their "cheers" for Coin rise to a "deafening roar" for Katniss, and when Snow is brought out, they become "insane" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 360–1, *Mockingjay* 371). Similarly to the experiences she had during her military tour of the Capitol, the noise is meant to raise the tempo and increase

Katniss's stress. During the opening ceremonies of her first Hunger Games, Katniss is excited by "[t]he pounding music, the cheers, the admiration," but now, worn down by experience and confronted with the parallels to the Games, Katniss is set apart from the crowd by her ability to calmly "wait" and "watch" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 70; *Mockingjay* 271). Even during the opening ceremonies in *Catching Fire*, when both she and Peeta are instructed to have a superior air, Katniss revels in how "beautiful" they look (212). Now, Katniss is truly above it all, and she eerily reflects Coin's calm, watchful demeanor. She remains conscious of the crowd's perspective when she observes they will see her "in profile," but otherwise does not adjust her behavior for their benefit, nor does she pay attention to any on-screen image (*Mockingjay* 371). Instead of exciting her, the familiar symbols of previous Hunger Games awaken dread. Just like when she reflected during the meeting to approve the Hunger Games that "[n]othing has changed. Nothing will ever change now," the invocations of the past only illustrate the bleakness of a future under Coin (370). In contrast to the rest of the public, Katniss's memories of the past dull the celebration of Panem's future.

When making major decisions, Katniss often recalls others' words. Before decorating Rue with flowers, Katniss remembers Peeta's lament, and Boggs's warning pushes her to realize the truth about Coin. While Katniss trusts the opinions of both characters, the words of her archenemy, not Boggs, ultimately stops her from shooting him. Despite their history, Katniss recalls and believes Snow's promise not to lie. After vengefully hunting Snow down, Katniss decides to put her personal grievances aside, a list which, even if it does not contain Prim, includes both the annihilation of District Twelve and Peeta's torture. As Snow does not survive the afternoon, Katniss did not give up his death nor his punishment, but rather the need to control the means of his demise. Instead, she redirects her aim towards Coin. Unlike her many reflexive shots, this one comes with careful deliberation reminiscent of when she demolished the arena. Guided by Haymitch's advice to "remember who the enemy is," Katniss uses her bow and "a knot picked up in training" to shoot an electric current into the force field (Collins, *Catching Fire* 378). When Katniss aims at Coin, she once again heeds Haymitch's call to shoot her true enemy, but now she is not being kept ignorant to help her disguise her intent. Instead, she demonstrates her mastery by not only using the skills the Capitol fostered in her, but also the interpretive skills she learned from Coin herself. Katniss's ability to read others, if not occasionally bordering on paranoia, helps her to read the nuances in Snow's eyes, and her ability to guard her emotions

keeps her steady during the tense discussion among the victors as well as the assassination. Finally, the most important complement to her analytical skill, the ability to not only reflect, but act on that reflection, prevents her from loosing the arrow a moment too soon into Snow's heart.

Unfortunately for Coin, copying the Capitol's aggressive tactics also leads her to repeat their fatal flaw. By pitting Katniss and Snow against each other, Coin creates a miniature arena. Like in the Games, only one of them is meant to survive, and the outcome is rigged. Katniss is practically guaranteed to win, but like the Capitol before her, Coin plans to emerge as the true victor. Like the Gamemakers overseeing the tribute assessment that Katniss fired at, both unprotected by any screen and distracted by a fresh meal, Coin's proximity to the proceedings reveals her hubris. Coin's presence is vital to show her victory over Snow and establish the intended ritual meaning, but she makes herself physically vulnerable as well. Perched on a balcony like the Capitol elite that preceded her, Coin forgets that even from her high position both socially and physically, she is a player, too. As with her threat with the berries and shot on the forcefield, Katniss changes the ruleset entirely by drawing distant powers into the torture of their creation (Zimmerman-Jones 247). Katniss's shot on Coin is yet another reminder to those in power that they are not excluded from the games they stage. By killing Coin, Katniss eliminates the safe distance Coin felt from her station in Command and demonstrates that none are safe from the lawless violence staged during the Games and made ubiquitous during the war.

As she did when filming the parachutes, Coin once again borrows from the Hunger Games and films Snow's execution. During the Hunger Games, Katniss worked the cameras to the Gamemaker's disadvantage. Knowing that they will film removing the body, and just as certain they would not cut away when she pulled out the berries, Katniss used the presence of her audience and the pressure of live television to secure the results she wanted. Like the Gamemakers who had to improvise during the suicide threat, Coin is also caught in the middle of the action. Because of the live television format, there is an element of unpredictability that works in Katniss's favor. When Katniss successfully kills Coin, her death is disseminated by the very cameras she assembled there. If the size of the crowds and Panem's history with the Hunger Games are any indication, most of the country was surely glued to their screens awaiting the death of the hated tyrant Snow. Instead of reaffirming the structures borrowed from the Hunger Games and the previous government, Katniss reiterates her strength as a revolutionary figure by

shooting Coin, establishing in retrospect a parallel between the two leaders when they are killed as part of the same spectacle. In the end, Coin's use of infowar backfires by placing her in a vulnerable position and assembling an audience for Katniss's declaration. As a result of mimicking the Hunger Games, Coin sets the stage and preps the audience for the spectacle of her own death and a true act of revolution.

By refusing to shoot Snow, Katniss flips the script on Coin's ritual. Snow's execution, which is meant to bring justice for his crimes, becomes Coin's execution for those same crimes. Like those killed in the Capitol, Coin becomes a victim of the violence she encourages. After Katniss sends a warning shot on the Gamemakers, they erect a forcefield for their next meeting, but Coin gets no second chances. The only barrier she erects between her and Katniss is her foolhardy confidence in her own strategizing and manipulation, and underestimating Katniss's ability to analyze and reflect is the nail in the coffin. Nailing the shot does more than show off Katniss's flawless skills with a bow. Over the course of the novel, Katniss masters the symbolic and mental agility of her previous rituals. When she shot the arena forcefield in *Catching Fire*, Katniss did not have to guard her expression because she was kept intentionally ignorant by the rebels who feared she would reveal the truth (Collins 386). By successfully deceiving Coin, Katniss proves that she has mastered this skill. Time and time again, Katniss has shown the boundary between the inside and outside of the arena is only imaginary. In a world where identity is crumbling and violence is becoming universal, by shooting Coin, Katniss once again reiterates the instability of power. In this new world order where children and noncombatants are killed mercilessly, Coin is no safer, no more sacred. Like a statue raised in tribute to a horrific past, Coin is toppled "over the side of the balcony" and brought down from a place of prestige (*Mockingjay* 372). By unseating Coin from power, Katniss kills the illusion of security experienced by Panem's elite whilst giving Panem a second chance to determine its future.

By mastering Coin's own game, Katniss flips the meaning of her carefully staged execution, leaving her and Snow, like her and Peeta, the two remaining survivors. Although Snow does not last long after this moment, his "laughter" indicates that through his conversation with Katniss, he, too, has out-thought, out-convicted Coin, but it does not save him from his imminent death (Collins, *Mockingjay* 373). It is not revealed whether Snow dies choking on his own blood or being crushed by the crowds, but in both cases, Snow is killed by his past crimes.

Either he choked on the bloody throat he acquired from years of poisonings, or the citizens of Panem finally overcame him. With both Snow and Coin dead, Katniss is left the true victor.

More so than District Thirteen's campaign in the Capitol, Katniss's rituals are the true rebellion of the trilogy. By using ritual to break from rather than perpetuate history, Katniss's shot fulfills Coin's prophecy in an unexpected way. After dozens of shots during the Hunger Games, the Block, and the attack on the Capitol, Katniss uses her last shot of the trilogy to end the war. With both its tyrannical leaders dead, Panem enters an era of peace where a new government can be decided not in retribution for the injustices of others, but rather to create justice for the future.

## 8 Conclusion

Much more than just part of religious practice, rituals are critical to the execution of war in the *Hunger Games* trilogy. The Hunger Games is both a ritual in itself and a framework for various smaller rituals. Similarly to video games that revise history or stratify opposing armies into strict binaries, the Capitol uses state-sanctioned violence to legitimize its regime, reinforce a biased narrative of history, and promote Capitol citizens at the expense of the districts. Rather than a game with warlike elements, the Hunger Games is a war thoroughly disguised by gamification. By combining war with game, the Capitol arms itself with an arsenal of both physical and ideological attacks which it then levies to ensure its continued dominance.

Considering that the Hunger Games are so prominent in Panem, it is unsurprising that District Thirteen uses the same playbook to build up its army and dominate the battlefield. While the underground district does manage to take over the Capitol, reusing the rituals of their predecessors brings the same ethical issues as well as weaknesses. As part of their training in the Block, soldiers are pushed to disregard the lives of others, whether they are injured combatants or children. Once in the Capitol, this unforgiving attitude combined with a cruel parachute attack demonstrates anew the potency of using rituals to gamify war. At the very ceremony that officiates her reign, President Coin's hubris brings her newly established government to a swift end. Both the Capitol and District Thirteen use ritual to push their political agendas, yet ritual is not only the tool of the oppressor.

To end the cycle of tyranny, opposition must rise from within. Because she has observed and participated in the atrocities of both regimes—the Hunger Games and the final battle in the Capitol—Katniss is uniquely suited to rebel against them. Due to a lifetime of compulsory viewing, Katniss understands the sentimentality of her Capitol audience, so she plays at romance to save Peeta's life. As a resident and soldier of District Thirteen, Katniss is acutely aware of their militant values, so she mimics unwavering loyalty both in the Block and during the vote on Coin's Hunger Games to blindside her audience. Finally, because she realizes the power that Hunger Games imagery and the manipulation of stress have on her reactions, Katniss internalizes the calm necessary to depose Coin. Because she is familiar with the rules that govern each ritual and the values they support, Katniss can innovate her own, altering the game in the process.

While Katniss's insider knowledge empowers her in the face of her oppressors, her empathy is what leads her to action. Although Katniss is raised with the same cultural understanding as the rest of her nation and at times takes part in the same violent practices, she ultimately refuses to let these experiences limit her. In both the Hunger Games arena and the Capitol, Katniss kills repeatedly and gruesomely. Like so many others, she could have let her guilt solidify into grim acceptance, shifting culpability to her environment instead of assuming it herself. While it is far less likely that Katniss would ever have killed as mercilessly as she did in a kinder environment, this attitude is ultimately unproductive if she hopes to protect those she cares about. Prim was at risk both under the Capitol's regime and in the service of District Thirteen, and many more children like her risk terrible deaths if Katniss remains impassive. Ultimately, Katniss's rituals alter the political landscape so fundamentally not because of their form but her selfless motive.

Because she begins with the same ritual tools and has the same ritual understanding formed by years of Hunger Games, Katniss seems ill-equipped to lead a rebellion, but her upbringing empowers as much as it encumbers. To create lasting change, Katniss needs to accept two truths. First, she needs to deeply understand the system she lives in rather than ignore it. How does it employ ritual in the service of leaders? What part is Katniss expected to play? Secondly, she must accept her role in this system. Whether or not Katniss performs as higher forces demand is ultimately her prerogative. While her oppressors can use suffering to force her hand, suffering comes for her regardless. Her father dies while dutifully on shift in the mines,

leaving her family to starve, and her efforts to quash a second rebellion get her sent back into the Hunger Games. If suffering is inevitable, she may as well suffer for the right cause.

Combining the incredible forces of her deep empathy and wisdom, Katniss treats the walls erected by her life experience like a sandbox rather than a prison. Instead of letting the walls of her culture lock her in, she works with the same materials and within the same boundaries but with a unique purpose: to apply ritual in support of empathy. Katniss's rituals acknowledge the inherent worth of individuals such as Rue, Peeta, and Prim. In doing so, she actively counteracts the objectification that is otherwise rampant in the cycles of death perpetuated by the Capitol and District Thirteen. By introducing new values with her rituals, Katniss broadens Panem's cultural framework. While she does not seek to do the political work herself, Katniss provides new tools so that others can establish a fair government that serves the people. Through her efforts, Katniss shares a love for family that has survived the death of her father, sister, and district, an enduring, sacrificial love that leads her into danger in service of others.

While oppressive forces in the trilogy treat the cycle of death similarly to its counterpart in video games, Katniss demonstrates the transformative ability of a player through her rituals. All those who program rituals in the series, the Gamemakers and the presidents, believe that their position at the top of the hierarchy makes them immune to those who play their games. This does not mean they do not fear the power of the masses. If anything, their fear is what leads them to perfect their manipulative games, and once this is complete, enjoy them at a safe distance. Both Snow and Coin fight ruthlessly to maintain their position, but aggressive policies breed the rebellion they seek to quash. Like a player, Katniss is beneath the dictates of those who program the system of her country, but within the Hunger Games and the Block, she is also given the ludic possibility to participate in ritual. Despite coming from the poorest district, Katniss uses her seemingly powerless position to drag tyrants down into the games they stage. Only Katniss, who has experienced the most at the hands of the different regimes, is equipped with the skills and freedom to kill President Coin. Having lost nearly all that she cares about, Katniss no longer fears death and can dedicate herself fully to enacting this final ritual. The very cycles of death that empower the two leaders push Katniss to the desperation necessary to depose them. If neither Coin nor the Gamemakers are outside of the games they stage, can a programmer really

be outside of the games they produce? In the face of Katniss's transformative rebellion, how much ought we underestimate players and their ability to influence the games they play?

While this thesis covers a wide variety of media and topics, future research could add yet another by investigating the *Hunger Games* films. In contrast to the books, which are exclusively from Katniss's perspective, the films change the audience's position from sympathizer to omniscient observer, a perspective far closer to that of a Capitol citizen. Given the extent to which Capitol citizens shape the Games, the films may still offer a level of participation that enhances the experience, much like the novel series and video games. Besides changing the audience's relationship, scenes from the films that show the Gamemakers' perspective at critical moments—when they arrange rituals like firing a cannon, for example—also provide insight inaccessible in the first-person perspective novel. The films' depiction of the holographic image in the Control Room also has visual parallels to the images projected by the Holo or in Command, presenting the possibility to compare the different maps more easily. Alternatively, including forms such as the whole could present a new perspective on the dissolution of binary divisions. For example, one could study in greater detail how the different districts are transgressed by the Games and emancipated through the rebellion. Overall, the rich presence of forms in this series both in the novel and film media would give depth to an already complex study.

Another possible avenue to expand this research is through investigating rhythm, ritual, and loops in terms of hermeneutics. This functions on several levels. In essence, the hermeneutic circle is a cycle, much like the cycles that already populate the trilogy: death, tyranny, and violence. Returning to an earlier example, the way a reader slowly expands their knowledge of the novel world as they would a video game can be compared to the widening of horizons. Similarly, Katniss expands the cultural understanding of her nation through her actions, but not all change is progress. While the Hunger Games becomes a more defined event each year with the inclusion of new practices and their increasing cultural importance, it functions because of a cycle that erodes rather than improves upon the understanding of history. Through hermeneutics, the way that understanding is formed for the novel's characters can also be compared to the experience of both readers and video game players. One of the most impactful parts of such a study would be that it could investigate in even more depth how war is understood, and how

powerful figures can shape this understanding for others through ritual. Through a formalist lens, the image of the cycle and that of a circle could also lead into discussions of space, such as the magic circle or arena. While the combination of formalist aesthetics with hermeneutics would require a robust background and careful negotiation beyond the scope of this essay, it could use the observations from this work to broaden the understanding of both.

From the ashes of their former government, a new nation arises, but the threat of tyranny still hangs over Katniss's world. While the cycle has ended for now, no nation understands better than Panem the risk of returning to its former ways. To keep the cycle of life alive, characters must continuously reach for empathy instead of destruction, and reality rather than its mirrors. More than a game of moves and countermoves, Panem is governed by rituals and counter-rituals, and sometimes, whether these rituals continue to serve life or death rests on the strong, loving shoulders of a teenage girl.

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