

Black and White in Color: Ludonarrative Deconstruction and (Anti-)Monomyth in *Pokémon Black* and *Pokémon White* (2010)

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Abstract

Since its inception in 1996, Pokémon has exemplified structured narrative gameplay; by the franchise's fifth generation, *Pokémon Black* and *Pokémon White* (Game Freak, 2010), fans came to expect the same narrative style. Scholarship surrounding Pokémon has thus emphasized structuralist approaches, examining how the series has abided by systems of storytelling such as Joseph Campbell's (1949/2004) heroic monomyth. However, with the rise of narrative approaches to digital media, a reconsideration of narrative in Pokémon is becoming increasingly necessary. The franchise's fifth generation installments, whose deconstructive themes stand in ironic opposition to its titles, are especially illuminated by a critical narrative interpretation against Pokémon's structuralist tendencies. By employing recent trends in narratological digital media criticism, in conjunction with Jacques Derrida's (1978/2001) understanding of the "absent origin," I assert that *Pokémon Black* and *White* emphasize a deconstructionist approach to intuitive gameplay and heroism, dismantling the traditional structure of Pokémon games and inviting a disruptive form of narrative play. Within this context, the interactions between players and *Pokémon Black* & *White* are significantly different from previous entries, undermining structuralist approaches to gameplay, heroism, and player positionality.

Keywords

Pokémon; binaries; deconstruction; heroism; invitations to play; ludology; monomyth; narratology; poststructuralism



Introduction

It is my lord N's thought that the two holders of the
legendary Pokémon should put their beliefs on the line
and strive to find which is the true hero.

—*Pokémon Black and White*, Game Freak, 2010

Throughout most of Pokémon's run, the narrative has been cut-and-dry, with the player going through the same calculated approach of capturing Pokémon, defeating gyms, and becoming the champion. In each installment, the player is exposed to the same game mechanics, making the story somewhat mundane in its play. In effect, the player follows the structure of Joseph Campbell's (1949/2004) heroic journey, making a structuralist interpretation of narrative interaction completely viable for the Pokémon series.

Campbell's notion of the monomyth explicitly outlines the hero's journey, detailing each challenge, trial, and obstacle the character must overcome to achieve a "heroic soul" (p. xlvi). Such stories see the soul "conveyed in so many ways" and represented in the "revelatory actions and lessons found in the oldest tales" which motivate the "efforts, detours, and inspirations that suddenly appear whilst in pursuit of the recovery of the greatest treasure" (p. xlv-xlvi). These stories are perpetuated by the "tribes, the groups, and the clans of the world [who] keep heroic mythos alive" (p. xlvi). In characterizing a heroic mythos, Campbell outlines a structure by which the heroism is attained, through "rites of passage: separation—initiation—return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth" (p. 28), where the hero returns to the ordinary world with a newfound mantle. Campbell's mono-heroic structure constructs a binary opposition between heroes and villains, protagonists and antagonists, good and evil. While narratives can play with this structure by introducing multiple heroes, Campbell's understanding appears to emphasize a homogeneous heroic character as opposed to heterogeneous heroes.

Campbell's approach is not merely integral to the structure of heroic stories; it is *pervasive*, with characters ranging from "Moses, Beowulf, and King Arthur" to "more modern incarnations including Superman, Luke Skywalker, and Harry Potter" (Pugh, 2018, p. 233) recapitulating his structured approach time and again. Video games especially take advantage of the Campbellian approach, with franchises like *The Legend of Zelda* stressing "Link's connection to the mythic hero tradition in various moments of his games" (Pugh, 2018, p. 234). As Tison Pugh (2018) aptly notes, characters in the *Zelda* series call attention to Link's heroism, referring to him as the hero of legend and pushing him to defeat that game's antagonist. Similarly, in each installment of *Pokémon*, the player leaves the ordinary world of the starting town, receives their starter Pokémon as a call to adventure, meets that region's professor (who serves as the mentor figure), enters the first

route filled with catchable monsters as the first threshold, encounters rivals and friends, captures or encounters the legendary Pokémon, faces the generation's villainous team leader,¹ becomes the champion, and returns to their familiar town with their newly acquired status. Each of these stages neatly maps onto Campbell's monomyth.

However, in a turn away from the franchise's stringent heroic structure, *Pokémon Black and White's* (Game Freak, 2010) villainous team leader, Ghetsis, invites the player-avatar to become the hero of legend alongside the secondary antagonist, Natural Harmonia Gropius (a.k.a. N). Moreover, N actively urges the player to "put their beliefs on the line" against his own to find which of them is "the true hero." While initially this invitation to play seems to follow the same rigidity of the other role-playing games (RPGs) in the franchise, there is a less stringent dichotomy between hero and villain here. The mere *possibility* of someone else becoming the hero (or the player-avatar having to become the hero rather than already being one) is altogether strange for a game series that has hitherto focused on the player's heroic exceptionality. N's invitation indicates the possibility of the player *not* being the hero, obstructing the guaranteed heroism which had been characteristic of the franchise. Even for the villain to overtly invite the player to challenge their own ideology is a step away from Pokémon conventions. Previously, the player inherently challenged their rival's ideology or the villainous team leader's master plan through intuitive gameplay and subtle gesturing. However, the subtleties of ideological struggle are dismantled when the villain challenges the player's typical heroic positionality.

Before Pokémon's fifth installment, convention dictated that only the player-avatar would come to wield the legendary Pokémon,² a symbol of the player's achievement and a sign of their heroism. Yet in a deviation from the typical monomythic heroic framework outlined by Campbell, *Pokémon Black and White* allow for more than one character to wield Excalibur, the legendary Pokémon, as a reward for their tribulations (cf. Campbell, 1949/2004, p. 227). Contrary to the Campbellian framework of heroism that the first four generations of Pokémon emphasized, and contrary to fan expectations, these games allow both the hero and the villain to wield the legendary Pokémon, Reshiram or Zekrom.

In so disrupting the structure that players are accustomed to, *Pokémon Black and White* direct players towards a *deconstructive* interpretation,

¹ "Generation" is the name given for every new release of a Pokémon game and refers to both released versions.

² For *Pokémon Black and White*, the legendary Pokémon are Reshiram and Zekrom respectively. The player will either capture Reshiram with N wielding Zekrom in the case of *Pokémon Black*, or the reverse in the case of *Pokémon White*.

where binary roles of heroism and villainy can be flipped on their head. In contrast to Campbell, Jacques Derrida (1978/2001) surmises that “there is no unity or absolute source of myth” (p. 362). Derrida’s argument is suspicious of the structuralist tradition, questioning the nature of binary oppositions between signs and signifiers, nature and culture, and other seemingly stable hierarchical systems. Rather than submitting or subjugating one dominant force to another in a binary structure, Derrida posits a “system of differences” (p. 354) whereby strict value hierarchies are arbitrary constructions. In deconstructing such antagonisms, Derrida pushes away from the structuralist approach and towards a poststructuralist one beyond binary oppositions. To use Derrida’s own language:

Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. (p. 369).

To the extent that mythic centering has been broken, Derrida invites a reconsideration of how the narrative structure itself has been formed. Derrida presents differing interpretations of the loss of origin. One, the structuralist or Rousseauistic view, laments the loss of a centralized orientation with form and function. In such a view, the role of the hero is completely lost. With concrete centering made arbitrary, interpretation that posits a structuralist heroic approach is rendered illegitimate. In opposition, Derrida invites a Nietzschean explanation: an affirmation of the absent origin where play is opened up, allowing for active textual reading and opportunities for development. When the center is absent, there is a wealth of play within the structure that allows for the possibility of *becoming*, similar to how the player is able to *become* the hero in Pokémon. Without centrality—and without a prescribed origin—play with the structure is affirmed, allowing for a multiplicity of centers, truths, faults, and interpretations of narrative.

Deconstruction as a critical framework for close reading allows for a different form of textual engagement that diverges from rigid binaries, genre tropes, and structured storytelling. In practice, it allows for a close reading that rejects a set narrative structure, suspending multiple narrative realities at once (Norris, 2002, p. 3). In the case of Pokémon, deconstruction opens new possibilities for engagement, especially in terms of the heroic structure. In a divergence from the franchise’s typical structure, both the player-avatar *and* the supposed villain are privy to the reward. This game *should* map perfectly onto Campbell’s (1949/2004) monomyth, as with previous entries in the franchise. However, *Pokémon Black* and *White* adopt a more narratively

deconstructive approach, decentering the player and placing their heroic journey in parallel with N's own. Hence, a deconstructive narrative analysis reveals much about what these games consider heroism and villainy (Lankoski & Björk, 2015, p. 24). While criticism surrounding the franchise has focused on ludology, as well as player response to gameplay, significantly less work has focused on the narratological strategies which shape these entries in the franchise (Bainbridge, 2014a; Ochsner & Saucerman, 2015; Grandinetti & Ecenbarger, 2018).

In effect, *Pokémon Black* and *White* provoke questions about the nature of heroism, player positionality within the text, and the stability of the structure that players are used to encountering. They oscillate between outwardly inciting the player to become the hero and deconstructing the typical narrative structures that fans of the franchise are accustomed to. In juxtaposing two narrative journeys, heroic centers lie in multiple places simultaneously. Such analysis results in multiple different truths or ideals acting in tandem within the confines of the game, two heroes who work towards achieving different aims.

Invitations to Play in the Pokémon Franchise (Re)considered

From the outset, calling a formulaically structured franchise like Pokémon deconstructionist, or even poststructuralist for that matter, seems impetuous. From its 1996 debut with *Pokémon Red and Blue* (Game Freak, 1996a) to the modern day, the series has remained tied to the same mechanics of capture and release that defined its inception, with the game's playable avatar serving as an everyman protagonist on a quest to collect all the gym badges, stop the villainous team, and perhaps most significantly, complete their "Pokédex" by catching every Pokémon. The franchise's very conception was based "around creator Satoshi Tajiri's love of insect collecting" and an imagined world where "wild creatures existed to be collected, trained and battle one another" (Bainbridge, 2014b, p. 402). This initial basis in a type of consumerism, as Anne Allison (2003) has concluded, has come to invariably define all forms of Pokémon-related media. Those who enjoy Pokémon find themselves participating in a fundamentally acquisitional activity which is "a central part of [Pokémon's] narrative" (Bainbridge, 2014b, p. 404). Whether it be owning the games, buying the merchandise, or watching the movies, the franchise has leaned heavily on its popular "Gotta catch 'em all" maxim.

Specifically, in the context of the games, fans begin each new installment with an acute understanding of their objectives as well as a basic understanding of the role they play in the virtual space. In *Playing at Narratology*, Daniel Punday (2019) summarises this theoretically structured understanding by noting that players "intuitively understand that in some games [their] main activity is shooting things, while in others much of [their] progress is made by navigating spaces" (p. 31). For Pokémon, the franchise's tagline, "Gotta catch 'em all," can be

associated with Punday's explication of intuitive play understanding. Here, the players are given a simple goal for their gameplay experience: to catch all of the Pokémon in the given region and complete their Pokédex. Even before entering the game world, the cover art sets a specified goal for the player. The original artwork for *Pokémon Red* (Figure 1) demands as much, with the "Gotta catch 'em all!" tagline patently displayed below the title. Such an active invitation to a specified form of play in the first games mirrors Punday's own understanding of intuitive play: through the tagline, the player comes to understand what exactly the games are asking of them. Moreover, the player comes to conceptualize their role within the game world via the cover art's paratextual rhetoric.



Figure 1. Original box artwork for *Pokémon Red Version* for the Game Boy console. (Pokémon Wiki, 2025).



Figure 2. Box artwork for *Pokémon Sapphire Version* for the Game Boy Advance console. (Pokémon Wiki, 2025).

However, as apparent from the cover art for *Pokémon Sapphire* (Game Freak, 2002) (Figure 2), the “Gotta catch ‘em all!” tagline has been removed³³ and replaced with a larger image of the featured legendary Pokémon and version title. Up until this point, the tagline had been characterized as a “first narrative story engine,” (Bainbridge 2014a, p. 72) coming to define the ensuing story of each game, and a characteristic of fans’ understanding of the franchise on the whole.

Here, the removal of the tagline indicates a shift in focus for the games: the gameplay impetus “catch ‘em all” begins to meld with larger narrative intentions. Building on the previous two generations, Pokémon’s third generation, *Pokémon Ruby and Sapphire* (Game Freak, 2002), emphasizes narrative development as opposed to the catching mechanics previously integral to gameplay. With a new evil team in play, a story revolving around a cataclysmic reawakening of a legendary Pokémon, as well as the player-avatar’s mission to become a champion, this iteration of the franchise clearly had more complex interests. Such a shift away from the older games’ original invitation to play is historically significant, demonstrating the franchise’s shifting focus towards heroic storytelling. But whereas the tagline was removed from covers beyond generation three, another key invitation to play remained in the games’ introductory sequence.

Though it may be obvious to assert that the player is aware of their role when playing a game, this basic concept is vital to understanding how

³³ Part of the reason for this change may be the inability to catch *all* of the Pokémon in these games. There was little backwards compatibility until the remakes of the first-generation games with *FireRed* and *LeafGreen* (Game Freak, 2004b).

Pokémon Black and *White* undermine player expectations. Just as players are primed to experience a certain mode of play through the tagline, which was destabilized with generation three, they are also primed to expect the same routine for the game's opening credits. Each game prior to the fifth generation began with a visually enticing sequence displaying that game's region and infrastructure, a collection of scenes featuring the generation's novel battle mechanics, a heroic depiction of the game's player-avatar, and a final shot of either the game's featured Pokémon (in the case of the early generation games) or an animation of that generation's legendary Pokémon (in the case of generations two through four).⁴⁴

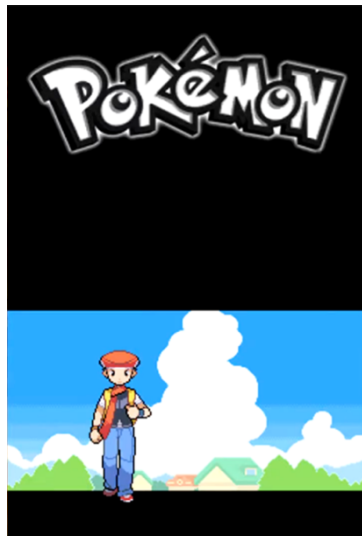


Figure 3. Selected shot from *Pokémon Diamond Version* opening cinematic sequence featuring the game's male avatar. Screenshot by the author (Dark Cloud, 2017).

Figure 3 shows generation four's male avatar walking towards the viewer and an early glimpse into the game world that they will soon explore. The Pokémon logo hangs above the avatar, suggesting the significance of this character. The audience understands that their player-avatar is central to the narrative, a vital piece of this story and an agent in the game world. With the soon-to-be hero so prominent in the opening cinematic, only outshone by the game's title, players can conclude that their avatar is key to narrative progression. This simple beat from the opening provides a salient interpretive lens by which

⁴⁴ In the opening cinematic for *Pokémon Red, Blue, Green, and Yellow* (Game Freak, 1996-1998) the final shot is of one of the starter Pokémon for that generation, while in *Pokémon Gold, Silver, Crystal* (Game Freak, 1999-2000) and onward, the final shot is of the box art legendary Pokémon for that generation.

positionality comes to be understood in these games: players and their avatars are central to the story world.



Figure 4. Selected screenshot from *Pokémon Emerald Version* introduction sequence featuring the male avatar and a collection of different Pokémon. Screenshot by the author (Pandamonium, 2013).

Similarly, Figure 4 depicts another heroic character shot. In the introduction sequence of *Pokémon Emerald* (Game Freak, 2004a), the male avatar is riding his bike alongside various Pokémon from the region. He is playing an active role in his environment, interacting with his world by travelling alongside the creatures that inhabit it. Depicted here are the two central thematic elements of “mastery and acquisition” (Jordan, 2004, p. 474) that define the games. The player-avatar is portrayed as a master of their surroundings, comfortably riding alongside different regional Pokémon. Simultaneously, their agency—a concept explored later in this paper—as shown through the various Pokémon moving with them, depicts a type of acquisition and control over the creatures. *Pokémon Emerald’s* opening cinematic is projective, providing a glimpse into the future prowess of the player upon completing their own mythic quest. In one shot, players are exposed to themes which define their positionality: they are masters of their worlds who come to acquire the diverse Pokémon inhabiting it. Such attainment of the games’ main objectives indicates success, completion, and a certain heroism wherein the player boldly takes command of the story world.

While the openings of earlier games would include a shot of the respective generation’s landscape, or various other non-player characters (NPCs), there was always a significant spotlight placed on the player-avatar as a central figure. This sequence structure became standard for the franchise, foreshadowing and organizing the adventure that the player was to embark on. In *Infrastructure in Video Games*, Daniel Punday (2024) explains that one of “the quintessential experiences of a video game based on a pre-existing franchise,” in this case Pokémon, “is wondering if a beloved character will show up in the game—a speculation based entirely on this kind of expansive experience of the franchise” (pp. 81-82). In effect, Punday indicates that players are equipped with an experience which defines their expectations. When

viewing the opening cinematic of a long-running franchise like Pokémon, players are outfitted to experience a certain structure, a type of centrality, in which their avatar is the narrative focus. As illustrated by previous entries in the franchise (see Figures 2 and 4), fans were primed to expect their avatar as a point of narrative concentration. Part of the fundamental structure of the Pokémon franchise is the experiential understanding that the player-avatar is the point of origination for the story; narrative events begin and end with them.

Pokémon's fifth generation, however, subverts preestablished conventions by opening neither with Pokémon nor with generational specialities, but with the coronation of the game's soon-to-be leader of Team Plasma: N. As seen in Figure 5, N occupies the space that the player-avatar usually did, centering himself on the screen and commanding the environment in a similar way to the player-avatar in Figure 4.



Figure 5. Selected screenshot from *Pokémon Black Version* (2010) introduction sequence featuring N's coronation. Screenshot by author from YouTube video (IGN, 2010).

Here, N occupies most of the screen space, bathed in gold hues and bright lights. As attendants follow him to his throne, N is in complete command of his environment. The color contrast between N and the rest of the attendants and environment sets him apart as a significant character. Here again is a sense of "mastery and acquisition" that defines the heroic character (Jordan, 2004). In a deviation from the usual formula, however, the central character is not the player-avatar, but N, the game's villain. Other shots from the opening cinematic show N surrounded by various Pokémon, crowned by Ghetsis, and various characters genuflecting. If generation three's opening is projective, generation five's is disconcertingly reflective, depicting an NPC already positioned as hero.

Afterwards, the same formula is followed, introducing players to the story world of Unova, but the opening cinematic of the game's supposed

villains rather than of the everyman player-avatar remains a significant move away from the franchise's formula—one which destabilizes the player's perception of their assumed role. Rather than being comforted by what, until that point, had been standard metatextual practice, the player is removed from their centralized position. The fan's intuitive understanding has been disrupted by the game's first digressive feature, or "background link" which gives "information that explains what is going on in the present of the story" (Punday, 2019, p. 30). Digressive features, as Punday illustrates, give the player a framework; a necessary contextualization that informs the story as well as their role in it. The story's preamble provides a necessary diegetic explanation for the player-avatar's positionality. It informs the intuitive understanding that drives the player's responses. In this sense, the introduction centers and orients the player as the focus.

In the case of *Pokémon Black* and *White*, however, the player is made into a spectator, watching as their soon-to-be rival is crowned king of the game's seemingly villainous Team Plasma. Derrida (1978/2001) would argue that in the face of this "absence of a center or origin" (p. 354) the player can only question what the aims of this new entry into the franchise are; where do they lie in the narrative scheme if not in the traditional role of the heroic protagonist? This fairly blatant rhetorical move away from the norm serves as a preamble to the rest of the game: the focus is not on you; it is on N.

How does this move away from focusing on the hero to the villain affect the game's structure? How is the audience supposed to interpret this adjustment? *Pokémon Black* and *White* opt to focus on the villain's progress and their origination within the story in their opening. Decentering the player-avatar in this way opens up a new "domain and the play of signification" (Derrida, 1978/2001, p. 353), allowing for different or even multiple centers—different or multiple heroes can occupy one space. N himself, crowned as the king of the villainous team in the opening cinematic, may even be the hero as well. The heroic itself is destabilized, no longer lying solely with the player-hero.

Structuralism and Pokémon's Monomyth

It is, of course, not uncommon to find themes of heroism in video games. The Campbellian frame of the heroic has been used countless times to propel game narratives and give players a structure, a set guideline through which to follow the story, becoming at times trope-ish in its execution. The heroic is almost "characteristic of the role-playing games and fantasy literature" (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003, p. 387) that many fans engage in. As such, Campbell's monomyth approach maps directly onto the structuralist approaches of representation that scholar Teun Dubbelman (2011) charts. In such frames, the reader takes on the role of "an implied author who guides the hero through his trials and tribulations" (p. 158), an applicable reading for the Pokémon franchise in how it employs narrative guardrails

to guide the player through the story. According to Dubbelman, within this framework the player is no more a part of the story than any other NPC, serving as a guide to the already predetermined path of the story-world's hero. This conception of "narrative as representational in nature" (p. 158) places the reader in a recollective role whereby the story has already happened and is now being dictated to them by someone else. Such an approach undermines the active role of the player by structurally situating them as an outsider to the narrative world, yet simultaneously captures the organized nature of Pokémon, where the story is a recollection built for the player.

Stage	Description
1. The ordinary world	The player first meets the hero and is introduced to the hero's background, typically via the back story
2. The call to adventure	A hint that the hero will be leaving the ordinary world to begin a new adventure. This stage acts as a catalyst that triggers off the main storyline
3. The refusal of the call	In the traditional structure of the monomyth, the hero will turn down the initial offer to leave the ordinary world to begin a quest, usually as a moment of doubt or uncertainty
4. The meeting with the mentor	When the hero decides to take on the quest, the mentor provides her with the information needed to choose what action to take. Mentors can be anything which provides information—a bearded old man, hub, robot, library, past experiences, and so on
5. Crossing the first threshold	The hero crosses from the safety of the ordinary world to a new, dangerous, and unknown world of the quest
6. Tests, allies, and enemies	This phase is usually the largest part of the game story, as the player is introduced to all the major characters
7. The approach to the innermost cave	This is where the hero finds the reward she seeks—such as gaining the essential skill, weapon, or mastery of everything she has come across up to this point. Typically, this is situated toward the end of the game. The main objective of this part of the story is to prepare the hero for the final battle
8. The ordeal	This is where the hero faces the final battle with her nemesis or "final boss." The nemesis can appear as either a physical (person or object) or nonphysical (time, intensity, or difficulty) entity
9. The reward	Many games end at this point, when the enemy is defeated and the reward is usually an ending cut scene detailing what happens to the hero after her triumph
10. The road back	Some games will allow the player to return to the ordinary world after the reward but it may not be possible for the hero to integrate successfully into the old world
11. The resurrection	This part of the story addresses any unanswered questions, such as the consequences from the quest, potential conflicts that may arise for future sequels, or any tests the hero must face before the end. It can also be in the form of a final plot twist, as something unexpected by the audience
12. The Return with the reward	This is the last stage of the story, where the hero finally returns to the ordinary world and sees the benefits of her reward. The hero can compare her life before and after the quest to see how things have changed

Figure 6. Twelve stages of the hero's journey (Ip, 2011, p. 112).

Figure 6 provides a clear view of structural heroism in video games, with each stage mirroring Campbell's approach in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2003) surmise that the "central narrative of the Pokémon game ... is essentially that of the hero's quest, with each game maintaining the same set structure" (p. 386). While there may have been occasional variations or deviations in the first four generations, monotony became characteristic. As such, Dubbelman's account of the structuralist approach showcases how narrative *transmission* becomes representational, where the player is not present

in the narrative per se, but rather takes on an assumed role of watching a re-presentation of a story that they are already keenly aware of.

In opposition to the player-centric structuralist-heroic journey, however, N takes on his own journey, even surpassing that of the player-avatar. While the "narrative-representation" model might be an effective theoretical approach for previous entries in the Pokémon franchise, the same methodology cannot so easily be applied to the fifth generation of Pokémon. From his youth, N was "provided ... with the education required to become the hero of legend." In being so reared by Ghetsis, the truly villainous leader of Team Plasma, N is primed to be the hero of *Pokémon Black* and *White's* story. He is crowned and referred to as royalty throughout the narrative. His ambitions even match those of the typical RPG protagonist. Whereas the aims of Team Plasma's Ghetsis are not to liberate Pokémon, but rather to give "Team Plasma more power," N argues that humans are oppressive captors of Pokémon. "My friends getting hurt," he laments, "That's what a Pokémon battle is." N maintains an altruistic regard for the lives of the pocket monsters that the player-avatar has been capturing. He sees battling as an unfortunate necessity more than an inherent part of living in the Pokémon world, placing his ideals in contention with his actions. As Dale Mitchell (2018) explains, N is "dedicated to liberating Pokémon" (p. 80). He and Team Plasma "believe 'Pokémon are creatures whose sheer potential is limited by humans,' with Team Plasma often resorting to stealing Pokémon from trainers as a means of 'setting them free'" (p. 80). Yet despite these somewhat crude tactics, N's is "a more complex character than his group's tactics suggest," taking Pokémon on as friends rather than tools (p. 80). N even refuses to keep a consistent team, always releasing the Pokémon that he catches back to the routes on which he befriended them. N thereby navigates the world of catch-and-release in a contrary manner to the player, sticking to moral principles and challenging the systems of play that are so inherent to the Pokémon franchise.

In the framework of the typical Pokémon game, N should be the villain, the leader of Team Plasma aiming to destroy the world of Pokémon; but subtleties muddy this stringent interpretation. N parallels an Arthurian hero, primed from his youth as royalty equipped to wield Excalibur. He seeks to liberate Pokémon from their system of enslavement in a world where justice and injustice are clearly delineated by black-and-white lines. Most intriguingly, however, is how each of these facets coalesce into a character that actively deconstructs, questions, and prods the structures of catch and battle that have been fundamental to the player's understanding of the franchise.

N, then, is a heroic character, with the player watching his journey towards becoming the hero of legend. His heroism is predicated on his strict and just ideology, which he maintains throughout the narrative. As per Mitchell (2018),

N is the first villain in the *Pokémon* series with no overtly nefarious aim. His goal is simple: free Pokémon from their trainers. Nonetheless, N is constructed as the anti-hero figure. Throughout the game the player-avatar clashes with Team Plasma, continuing the recurrent theme throughout the *Pokémon* franchise of the player-avatar foiling the exploits of a gang during their travels. (p. 80)

Mitchell (2018) points out another key feature of Pokémon games: the presence of the evil team and their aims. Every prior villainous team (Team Rocket, Team Magma, Team Aqua, and Team Galactic) all sought to capture Pokémon for use in their selfish goals.⁵⁵ Their ultimate intention was to take a formidable Pokémon and manipulate its powers to propel their goals. N, on the other hand, has no intention of controlling the Pokémon he sees as his friends.

The player, however, to the extent that they are participating in a system of capture and enslavement, takes on a malicious role. Again, the player is decentered as the hero, and in some ways placed in the role of the villain, as they are using Pokémon for their own goals of “catching them all” and becoming the champion of the region. Inasmuch as N’s criticism is sound, so too is the idea that the hero is not taking a standard hero’s journey. In fact, the player’s complacency⁶⁶ with the “Gotta catch ‘em all” mentality that the games have produced removes them from the position of hero and places them in the role of the typical villain.

With N serving as the hero of legend, the player’s role in the fifth generation of Pokémon is to watch as N defeats each gym, befriends the legendary Pokémon, and usurps the champion, finally liberating Pokémon from the oppressive hands of the people who confine them. Fans have noted that N, like Blue in the first-generation games, is always one step ahead of them, easily overcoming the champion before they have the chance to finish battling the Elite Four trainers of the Unova region.

⁵⁵ Typically, villainous team leaders up until this point took advantage of legendary Pokémon’s power to enact some cataclysmic world-ending event. The exception, Team Rocket, aimed to capture Pokémon to turn a profit.

⁶⁶ It is worth noting that in *Pokémon Black and White* the invocation to complete the Pokédex comes in the form of a question. Professor Juniper inquires whether or not the player-avatar will complete the Pokédex rather than informing them to do so, a bit of agency that makes the player-avatar more complicit in the capture and release mechanic (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 84-85).

N even follows the structure of the hero's journey (as detailed in Figure 6). Video game scholarship has applied the Campbellian structure to demonstrate how its stages play "significant and powerful roles in the evolution of interesting or compelling stories" (Ip, 2010, p. 111). N's coronation in the introduction serves as the "hint that the hero will leave the ordinary world" (Ip, 2010, p. 112) and begin his journey towards freeing Pokémon. Upon the player's first encounter with him, N has (1) already left the ordinary world and (2) accepted his call to become the champion by believing that he can rescue Pokémon from their current enslavement. N's journey as the hero *supersedes* the player's own journey, placing N in the position of centrality and displacing the player-avatar. In line with Derrida, N subverts value hierarchies that are inherent to Pokémon's narrative; thus, the player becomes a marginalized observer, but not in the same way that structuralist narratological approaches would assert. The player is watching as N completes *his* heroic journey towards becoming the champion, while simultaneously completing their own.

The Hero in Two Places

However, to say that this project of decentering ends with the shifting of the roles would be an overly reductive approach to *Pokémon Black* and *White*. For a game whose focus lies in ironically deconstructing the binaries of truth, ideals, justice, and injustice that it posits, it would be overly hasty to place the player into this observer role. Even if the games maintain the formulaic systems of role-playing, the player becomes an "embodied participant in the world of the story" (Dubbelman, 2011, p. 158), taking on the role of the hero in order to face the trials of the game. While in other RPGs this heroic role may take on world-saving quests, in the Pokémon franchise, the role of the hero is to collect the eight gym badges, become the region's champion, and defeat the evil team before their aims can be met. More than this, however, is the potential for the player to engage in diverse forms of play. Between the narrative, the capturing of Pokémon, and even the breeding mechanics, Pokémon "allows players a variety of ways to engage with the games, with the ability to shift seamlessly between them at will" (Ochsner & Saucerman, 2015, p. 34), which is an emergent and participatory approach to game narrative.

In contrast to structuralist approaches to storytelling, which take the player as an observer and implied author who helps to guide the avatar through their journey, *Pokémon Black* and *White* invite active engagement from the player that "anchors" (Dubbelman, 2011, p. 164) them within the textual world. While every game may require their player to perform an action, as seen with Punday's explication of intuitive understanding, the specific references to agency and becoming in *Black and White* underscore the game's incitement to active participation. The same game mechanics of capture, nurture, and command become more meaningful in these games where the 'other' hero and the villain actively invite play. They come to apply to a form of

"textuality that require[s] the user to *act*" (Punday, 2019, p. 31), in a more conscious and intentional manner than traditionally structured narratives that give the protagonist immediate narrative primacy.

N and Ghetsis' action-related dialogue highlights the player's dynamic role in the narrative's manifestation. They ask the player directly to "Discover whether [they] have what it takes to be a hero." Their sentiments lie in stark contrast to other ludonarratives which assume that the player has already taken the role of the hero by simply opening the game. Similarly, N goads the player, taunting that "to stop me, you must become a hero as well! ... Well, what will you do? ... Will you be the one who interferes with my formula for changing the world?" Inasmuch as the player holds an active role by deciding to take on the challenge of becoming the other hero of legend, the player becomes "physically anchored" in the story, becoming the "hero and [having] adventures of their own" (Dubbelman, 2011, p. 169). The use of the word "become" holds vital rhetorical significance. Unlike previous generations, here the player is not ordained or bred to be the hero; they are instead *asked* to attain heroism through gameplay. These bits of choice-centric dialogue are thematically weighty for a game whose use of options gives the player more agency than it may seem. In actuality, the player has been making choices throughout their journey, taking an active role in their *play* with the narrative structure to *become* the hero. Here, N and Ghetsis reveal the deconstructive mission of the entire game: How can there be two heroes in this game when N has already usurped the center?

Insofar as both N and Ghetsis are inviting play with the role of the hero, they are mirroring the poststructuralist language of Jacques Derrida (1978/2001) in his understanding of the absent origin. As previously discussed, without their traditional narrative centering, the player is "Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin," thus opening a "joyous affirmation of the play of the world ... without origin which is offered to an active interpretation" (p. 369). Applied here, the lack of center opens the possibility for multiple heroes to occupy the same narrative space.

Derrida's language is indicative of the project underway in *Pokémon Black and White*. Here, the absent origin for the player is the lack of traditional signs indicating their positionality from the outset of the narrative. To turn back to a narrative-representation approach would be erroneous insofar as it orients the player towards something that was never there, as seen in the opening cinematic. In the face of absence, the player must assume a more active position, analogous to the role that Ghetsis and N are inviting the player to undertake in becoming the hero of legend.

Indeed, the interactions between N and the player-avatar come to reaffirm the absence of a center, a deferral, and the deconstruction of

binary distinctions. This narrative framework represents the "constitution of the structure" (Derrida, 1978/2001, p. 353) in Pokémon games as the binary distinction between heroes and villains: the blackness and whiteness that acts as the game's central motif. Unlike with Pokémon games of the past, the player is not *already* a hero, but *takes on* the role of the hero, becoming the "hero of legend" through their journey rather than being destined for it upon the game's opening.

As N encounters his set of trials throughout the Unova region, the player-avatar also faces their own heroic journey in the classic Pokémon style, encountering friends and foes along the way to facing N in a final confrontation astutely described by N as "hero-to-hero." But rather than molding the player into the sole hero through an innate structure as with previous titles, or as N is in this title, *Pokémon Black and White* asks the player to consider whether there can be two heroes of legend who act towards opposing goals. Can both truly be heroes?

These deconstructive themes do not end with the player's subversive heroic journey. Even N's heroic positionality is questionable, muddled upon further analysis of his narrative arc. N follows a contrary path to the player, one that appears altogether more just than the player's own. N frees his Pokémon after he uses them, maintaining his altruistic ideals through-and-through. He achieves the mantle of champion through a begrudging necessity to battle rather than an innate desire to do so, insisting that Pokémon battling is a brutal sport. Indeed, N achieves heroism both by destiny *and* a certain self-actualization wherein his ideals come to define him, contrary to the player who maintains the status-quo by engaging with capture-and-battle mechanics to achieve their goals. Yet still, N's mentor Ghetsis is definitively villainous, planning to use Pokémon for his own gain by positing himself as an altruistic leader aiming to free them from their human captors. He sees Pokémon as "useful things," asking, "What's to be gained from letting go of [them]?" His role as mentor to the hero is also a farce; it serves as a means to his ultimately villainous end. One must wonder, however, whether Ghetsis' guidance is altogether different from that of the previous Pokémon professors. At the most basic level, both encourage the player or N to go out into the strange world, catch Pokémon, defeat opponents, and become the champion. While Ghetsis reveals himself as an undoubtedly dubious character, unlike the professor, it is impossible to ignore these budding narrative similarities which further displace heroism and villainy in the story.

What's more, N chooses to *leave* Unova with his newly acquired legendary Pokémon (the reward) rather than return to his place of origin like the Campbellian hero. In this, he simultaneously divorces himself from the unjust world to seek out a better one yet fails to complete the heroic return to the ordinary world. It could even be argued that N was never a part of the ordinary world to begin with due to his unique ability to talk to Pokémon, placing him in a realm outside of the human-

Pokémon dichotomy. N's journey as the hero is questionable, as he recounts in his final lines: "The longer my journey continued, the more unsure I became," a line indicative of the blurred binaries that the player has faced from the opening of the game. N, unlike the monomythic hero, acts upon these doubts by leaving Unova, thereby breaking the structure of the heroic journey entirely. The player, on the other hand, stays, at least for the time being,⁷⁷ thus completing the heroic arc. This is not to say that N completely loses his status as hero, or even that this acknowledgement undoes the deconstructive mission of the games. Rather, it indicates that his journey as a monomythic hero is *also* confused upon further reading, parallel to the other deconstructive motifs present in the game. It indicates that for the player to become the hero, they must also problematize their own journey, reflecting on what it means to attain heroism in a game that deconstructs it. Heroic attainment, then, is predicated on this reflection.

Conclusion

Whether it be ideals and truths, villainy and heroism, liberation and entrapment, *Pokémon Black and White* muddies binary oppositions entirely. It is therefore ironic for the game's title to be *Black and White*, when the game decenters the player entirely, forcing them out of their "locus," opening up a wealth of "play of the structure" (Derrida, 1978/2001, p. 352-356). Nowhere is this presented better than in N's defeat, where he longingly recounts: "Your ideals ... Your feelings ... They were stronger than mine, it seems ... Reshiram and Zekrom ... Each of them chose a different hero ... is that even possible? Two heroes living at the same time—one that pursues truth and one that pursues ideals. Could ... Could they both be right?" In the absence of one right answer to his inability to fully complete his own heroic journey, N resorts to a characteristically deconstructive conclusion: that there is no one center, but a "system of differences" (Derrida, 1978/2001, p. 353). There is a similarity in Derrida and N's rhetoric in that they both accept a multiplicity of truths or heroes. The player-avatar and N both become a hero—not *the* hero—indicating multiple possibilities for interpreting their positionality within the world of Unova. There is no longer one central locus of heroism, nor one set heroic structure, but rather a set of assorted truths and ideals that produce heroic signs and symbols. Yes, N may be a hero of legend, but so is the player-avatar.

At the close of the fifth generation, the player-avatar overcomes their challenges, defeats Ghetsis and Team Plasma, and becomes a hero of Unova. However, after the credits and a cutscene showing the illustrious fanfare at the player's success, there is a final scene where N rides his

⁷⁷ Interestingly, the player-avatar from these games would not return in the sequels, *Pokémon Black 2 & White 2* (Game Freak, 2012) whereas N does return to assist the new player-avatar in defeating Neo Team Plasma.

legendary Pokémon into the distance towards a new beginning. Similar to the opening scene, the final shot of this generation is not of the player, but of N. Both he and the player-avatar have set their ideologies against one another to find who the 'true' protagonist of Unova's story is, only to find that both of their stories can exist in tandem.

Pokémon Black and *White* appear as a response to, and a break from, the monotony and standardization that the other mainline games have brought. In *Pokémon Black* and *White*, heroism is not inherently derived from simply being the player-avatar. Good and evil are not as binary as they appear. Even the basic gameplay mechanics of Pokémon, catching and battling, become points of narrative contention as opposed to intrinsic aspects of play. Here, players must actualize themselves into a form of heroism, face their own villainy, and reconcile instinctual play with narrative invitations to it.

Pokémon Black and *White*, and similar titles, have the potential to open new and salient pathways for game studies, especially those concerned with Pokémon. Moreover, they illustrate the rich avenue that deconstruction opens for ludonarrative studies and present a foray into further deconstructive analyses. In response to Pokémon's narrative structuralism these games invite concerted analysis, asking players to assess their interpretations of such a traditionally structured franchise. In short, games like *Pokémon Black* and *White* defy their monochromatic titles, cascading with a peculiar narrative wit that begs further critical interpretation and the pursuit of new directions for game studies.

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