This work explores the importance of narrative storytelling through interactive media, such as video games. I am interested in the effects that video games have on their players, particularly through choices offered within the game's world that may rely upon the player's sense of morality. On a personal level, the idea of creating an interactive story is compelling because it's a field that I could see myself working within in the future. I challenged myself to create a world that gives the same sense of connection as other interactive digital stories.

In this game, the player navigates through a unique narrative determined by their choices. The program is built in Twine, a web-based format that uses a mixture of Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), Cascading Stylesheets (CSS), and its own language to create digital, text-heavy video games that primarily display passages of text, audio, images, or video which can then be linked to other passages. I chose to write this story in Twine because of its ease of use and simple, elegant formatting options, as well as its digital format. It's a form of modern technology in artmaking, despite the practice it's based on ("Choose Your Own Adventure" stories) existing for long before Twine was developed. I used both text and a limited number of images to convey the entire story, though it relies most heavily on text.

I want to convey a sense of exploration through my project, hence the second-person perspective used throughout the story. Entertainment, particularly stories, is just as strong and important a way to connect with people as any other style of artwork-making, and it's what intrigues me the most. This project is significant because it is a story I want to tell as an artist, and this is the medium I am exploring it through. Even if it matters only to me, this story now exists in the world (instead of just inside my head). I plan to work with larger-scale stories through different mediums in the future.

Molly V.
New Mexico

Storytelling and Interactive Media
(or: A Series of Tangentially Connected Ramblings and Fun Facts)

Molly V.

My name is Molly Veesart, and I am, as of writing this, a senior attending the Oxbow School. In this paper, I plan to question and connect the history and role of storytelling in human culture to video games, different means of conveying narrative, and, eventually, what unique solutions and results arise from that combination.

You stare at the paper in front of you, holding the writing in front of you in one hand while you adjust your glasses or hold your mug of coffee in the other. You adjust your seating, perhaps propping a leg up on the paper-strewn desk you sit at. The paper in your hand is the final report of a modest-yet-not-insignificant student of Oxbow. As you read this passage, you wonder what's to come, maybe half-regretting allowing so much freedom to your students. Or, maybe, you're intrigued by this writing style and wonder what sort of new dimension this style of prose will bring.

I largely don't care for work with some kind of deep philosophy to tell in any aspects aside from aesthetic quality. Such an opinion has led to many internal debates about whether I could truly consider myself an artist if I all I care for are the surface qualities of art. However, narratives have always inspired me, especially those of a fictional variety. From TV shows to movies to video games to songs, narratives have always been important to me as a person, and I've created dozens of my own stories. As is evidenced in my many "archival" sketchbooks, I've created characters and story arcs for as long as I've been able to draw. Though I can't remember now what they could possibly have been about, the appearance and reappearance of specific characters clue me into the fact that, at one point, there *was* a story there. Since discovering Google Drive in late 2013, however, I've begun to keep a record of my various story arcs, characters, and worlds. The oldest document I have in those archives is a multiple-page narrative about the adventures of a young alien named Ashes and the various friends and foes she meets after accidentally causing a meltdown at a power plant. The document immediately after that tells the story of a small group of teenagers wandering a post-apocalyptic wasteland, avoiding mutated monsters and staying just out of the clutches of Project Hope, a fanatical religious sect. Shortly after that is the very first draft of the main story I've had rattling around in my head since then--the adventures of a robotic law-enforcement team in the futuristic and robot-filled Viarane City. This story has by far the largest cast of characters, focusing most centrally on Icarus, a young, free-spirited rookie to the force looking for answers to the many blank years of her past, Senshi, an older, more serious warrior heir to a far-off country searching for her parents in Viarane, and Ventus, the force's previous leader and role model to Icarus, trying to keep her city safe for many years ahead, while coping with the losses she faced when the force was under her command.

With all this creative storytelling in mind, I have to wonder where it all came from. Why do we tell stories? What makes us connect with stories the way we do? How about the characters? How does storytelling affect reality? How, and in what ways, has storytelling changed with the introduction of digital media?

I am of the opinion that the increase of narrative-based interactive media--in essence, video games that allow choice-- allows for a deeper connection to the player. I want to know what is the best way to tell an original story so that people are as invested in the plot and characters as I am.

What can be defined as a "story"? Writers like American poet Randall Jarrell and writer Mark Twain agree that stories are sequences of events told using or through one or more

characters, eventually arriving at a conclusion of some variety, whatever the story demands. As stated by author Philip Martin in his book *How to Write Your Best Story*, "If the string of events is fairly neutral and straight-forward, we might call it a narrative. A narrative might not be more than a sequence of things that happened, one after the next… If a narrative is basically what happened, a story takes it to the next level. It creates a structure to seek and hold far more significance." A story is a narrative that has weight can be used as a vehicle to communicate ideas or lessons. While a narrative explains a sequence of events, a story injects meaning into and exposes meaning behind those narratives. For longer than people have had written language, we've told stories. The first human-made records come in the form of cave paintings and Egyptian inscriptions, and the first recorded stories found include the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. These, however, are reasoned to not even be close to the first examples of storytelling in human history, as verbal communication is known to have existed long before any written records did. Oral tradition in pre-writing-era culture was the way ideas, traditions, and entertainment were communicated, and the optimization of oral storytelling was advanced enough to allow storytellers to recall poems over 1500 lines in length, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica. To give an example, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are thought not to be original works by Homer so much as transcriptions of oral poetry that had already existed for eras prior, and that Homer was the transcriptor, rather than the author, of these epics. Though the tradition has now largely faded due to written language's ability to persist for longer eras and stay close to their source story, there are efforts to preserve oral tradition through the use of video/audio recording, preserving both the word and performance of the art of oration.

In *The Cultural Evolution of Storytelling and Fairy Tales: Human Communication and Memetics* by Jack Zipes, he argues that fairy tales serve as something of a power fantasy for people, expressing their desire to shape the world as they see fit:

> *Fairy tales are informed by a human disposition to action—to transform the world and make it more adaptable to human needs, while we also try to change and make ourselves fit for the world. Therefore, the focus of fairy tales... has always been on finding magical instruments, extraordinary technologies, or powerful people and animals that will enable protagonists to transform themselves along with their environment, making it more suitable for living in peace and contentment. (Via assets.press.princeton.edu)*

In this manner, fairy tales are viewed as a way of expressing one's desires through fiction, giving ordinary men great power that they don't have in the real world as a way to tame the world. For as long as they've been told, stories were used as a means to explain things within the inhabited world, provide instructions, and justify things that seemed inexplicable. Creation myths are an example of one such explanation, providing a narrative behind why the world we live in even began to exist in the first place. Another example of a myth used to justify a natural event is the Greek myth of Persephone and Hades, explaining that the reason cold and warm seasons exist is because of Persephone's timeshare in the Underworld with Hades for half of the year. Her being away makes her mother, the harvest goddess Demeter, upset to the point of neglecting the

world's temperature, which results in the cooling of the fall and winter months. Then, when Persephone returns to the surface, Demeter's happiness at her daughter's return brings back the spring and summer warmth. Myths and stories have also always been used as a form of pure entertainment, detailing adventures of gods and men doing extraordinary things. In a way, modern society reflects this, with modern organized religion and the teeming entertainment industry--though the fictions we create are different because of our more nuanced understanding of the world given to us as we discovered the scientific reasoning for what would previously be explained by a human-made myth, the existence of stories is the exact same.

Stories often follow recognizable cycles, as noted by intellectual Joseph Campbell. One that is often found in new and old stories alike is the hero cycle, also known as "the hero's journey." The hero's journey follows the hero as they find and follow a call to adventure, meet a mentor along the way, face challenges leading up to a climax, and then find their reward and head back to the ordinary world. A notable example of a relatively modern story following the hero's journey is *Star Wars*-- with George Lucas readily admitting that had it not been for Joseph Campbell's observations about the hero's journey, he might have been writing the story for a lot longer. Though the general arc is fundamentally the same, there are certain categories that stories employing the hero's journey often fit into. For example, the objective the hero has to complete could be either physical, where the character does an act of heroism, like slaying a dragon, or spiritual, where the character learns or experiences something beyond what normal humans do and brings it back, like discovering a new belief system and imparting it on their family or community it back home. This is an important thing to bring up because, with this knowledge, I can begin with some kind of basis to create a story around, following it in some aspects and breaking it in others. Other stories that follow the hero's journey are *Harry Potter*, *The Matrix*, and *The Lord of The Rings*-- all are unique stories that are driven, from an underlying standpoint, by the same stages in the story. This thought can even be translated into certain aspects of real life. When one thinks of a hero's journey in simplest terms, it often comes up as a departure, a fulfillment, and a return. In *The Power of Myth*, a transcribed interview between Campbell and Bill Moyers, an American journalist, Campbell compares the act of a woman becoming a mother as a version of a hero's journey:

> CAMPBELL: You have to be transformed from a maiden to a mother. That's a
> big change, involving many dangers.
> MOYERS: And when you've come back from your journey, with the child,
> you've brought something for the world.

I think this is an important point to bring up because it brings to light how human the hero's journey is. Though the characters involved may have some superhuman qualities, or may not even be human, their experience of this journey allows us to relate to them and their struggles, because it's something that we, as humans, experience overall.

At this point, after reading an explanation of stories, your mind flits back to the introduction of the paper and you wonder what the reason was for that second-person opening. Second-person-perspective is such a widely underused format for storytelling, after all, falling

far behind the general third-person standard and even the growing popularity of the first-person narrative. Why is second-person-perspective so rare, anyway? Some believe that second-person narratives convey a sense of unease and a lack of control, as the narrator, an unnamed entity, speaks *to* the listener, speaking in terms of what the listener sees and does. As is mentioned in the report *Understanding Second-Person Point of View in Fiction* by Anastasia L Hawke, "Second-person narrative becomes problematic to categorize because current models of narration center on the voice of the narrator, whereas second-person narration 'is defined not by who is speaking but by who is listening (the narratee)'". Unlike first- and third-person narrative where the focus is on the narrator, second-person narration focuses wholly on the subject of the narration. Personally, I believe that second-person narration allows a more personal connection between the subject and reader because of this increased focus. Whereas first- and third-person perspective allows a disconnect between the reader and subject- in third-person, the reader is reading about the subject from an outside perspective: they aren't involved in the narrative at all, other than the investment they have in these characters. In first-person, the effect is that of being *told* the story, as if they're sitting across from the subject of the narrative, who is telling them the events that happened. While this is more personal than third-person (and makes me wonder if the level of personal connection is linked to the popularity of the style), there is still a disconnect between the reader and the subject. Second-person perspective does away with this disconnect and states that the reader *is* the subject. I think this adds an interesting element of immersion, especially with an interactive element, as the reader is forced into situations that the story claims they're in, and the choices (or lack thereof) offered may not represent what the reader would actually do in these situations, leading to the sense of lacking control. For example-- if "you" (the second-person lead in a book or video game) are in a room with two levers, and your options are to pull the left lever or pull the right lever, you can only continue the story by choosing one of those options. While in real life, you may choose to inspect the room further, pull both levers, pull neither, and a plethora of other solutions that I would fail to acknowledge if I were in the same situation. While I understand someone may be frustrated with the lack of interactivity, I think that, when used in a way that reflects the environment or themes of the story, this creates a unique sense of drive and forces the reader/player to make a definite choice that may or may not agree with their morals. Several mediums do make use of this writing style, most prominently being the *Choose Your Own Adventure* book series. Some video games currently in existence also follow a similar perspective, the two I'll focus on here being *ZORK* and *UnderTale*.

ZORK began development in 1977 by four MIT students and followed the player, an adventurer in search of gold and glory, eventually hearing about and later confronting a thief who had inconvenienced the player throughout the story. It was praised for its writing and humor, as well as overall being a versatile piece of software; having no visual graphics, it was a naturally small program and could be ported to many computer and game systems. It creates a satisfying story through a general hero's journey structure: the journey really begins only when the player enters a trapdoor inside the house that the game begins outside of. When they eventually do enter the house and subsequently the trap door, they hear it click shut, and then the

real journey begins, leading up the emotional climax of confronting the thief, and then winds down as the player collects treasures scattered around the world and is led into the sequel, *ZORK II*. Its second-person perspective is used to promote immersion and inspire curiosity in the player, creating a drive to explore and learn about the game's world. *UnderTale*, released in 2015, has its player name a child who fell into the world of monsters, then follows them as they search for a way out, meeting a cast of strange and lovable characters along the way. One of the main selling points of the game was the versatility of its story; it advertised itself as "an RPG (role-playing game) where you don't have to kill anything." Depending on what actions the player takes, certain events within will change, resulting in twelve possible endings and numerous different interactions with other characters. Unlike *ZORK*, which used its perspective choice to immerse the player into the world, *UnderTale* uses this perspective to alienate the player; at the end of the game, it's revealed that the character you named is *not* who you were playing as (specifically, the character is revealed to be named Frisk, as opposed to whatever you named the fallen child), and, through the language used throughout the game, it's heavily implied that the child you named possesses the main character and forces them into whichever route you, the player, choose to take. Audience reaction to the game was immense, with people quickly loving the characters in the game and having intense emotional reactions to their potential deaths--the most common example is through Toriel, the game's first boss. She guides you through the game's first area, essentially adopting the player character (a common nickname for Toriel, in fact, is "Goatmom"). However, when you try to leave, she stops you, saying that the outside area is too dangerous for such a young child, before beginning her battle. Many players accidentally kill Toriel, not knowing how to deal with her battle. One reviewer, Nathan Grayson of *Steamed*, said this in relation to her battle:

> Toriel had been so kind and caring, the best demon dog mom I've ever had in a video game. She reminded me a lot of my own mom, honestly. It broke my heart to hurt her, but I also didn't want to quit the game forever after playing for 45 minutes… Could I have tried talking to her again when she was weakened? Did she have to die? I don't know. Part of me wants to go back and find out; the other part thinks games are more interesting when you make mistakes and accept them, live with the guilt.

The extent of this goes so far as to having players not even want to reset their game, for fear it would ruin these fictional characters' happy ending (which I'm not making fun of--I'm one such player). As I mentioned, *UnderTale* uses its written point of view as a large part of its plot and structure, and I believe using a first-person perspective wouldn't be as conducive to this. *UnderTale* takes the idea of lack of control and flips it on its head- the character you're playing as has *no* agency in the story, and the player, *you,* hold all the cards. Though this results in a much darker reality (reality being in terms of the game world) than it seemed from the outset, many players and reviewers alike view this stark departure from the status quo as an uncomfortable but well-written story arc (which, notably, *also* uses some elements of the hero's journey in its storytelling-- in a literal sense, you fall into the "other world" at the very beginning

and leave at the very end, shortly after meeting the emotional climax and claiming your reward). Digital mediums aren't the only media to use this formula, either. Though ZORK took its unique, prototypical perspective in the sense of a game, literature has experimented with telling narrative in this style for much longer (The Hobbit is one such example- intended to be a children's book it sometimes refers to the reader as *you*, though the story is generally told though third-person omniscient with smatterings of first-person), though it wouldn't be until after ZORK's release that the idea of literary-based game would be realized, in the form of a decade-long fad of interactive adventure stories.

Choose Your Own Adventure books became well-known only after a long stretch of development, from 1968 to 1979, but then became an immediate hit. Stories where the reader would choose which path they want to take, with as many as 40 potential endings spanning many genres, popular with children and adults alike in their prime. The books would follow a certain idea or location and then offer the player choices about what to do after the inciting event happens. Though the series began to lose popularity in the late 80s, with the brand closing its doors in 1999, the style had cemented itself in popular culture all the same. Though the books aren't the trend they used to be, the "player-directed" narrative style is still used in many formats- one of the latest in the video gaming market being 2015's *Until Dawn*, in which, while the general story arc remains the same, the player's choices, willing or no, determine which characters live to see the end of it. I think this is important to include because it also ties into how people connect with characters in terms of story--when they control the life or death of a character, people are often inspired to care about them more. When someone is inspired to care for a fictional character, and see things through their perspective, it may help them begin to relate between to people outside of the story who have similar perspectives that the reader hadn't thought of or respected before- in essence, fiction can be used as a vehicle to teach empathy.

So I've talked on and on about methods to make people like characters, but I haven't yet talked about what major aspects make these characters likable, other than the medium the story operates within. I want to investigate why people become invested in the stories, and more specifically, the characters. To learn more about this, I interviewed some of my peers about what characters they enjoy in whichever medium they chose (television, film, books, video games). The general conclusion is that my peers seem to enjoy characters that they feel either embody their own values, embody values that they wish to have, behave in a way that they enjoy seeing happen within a context where other people react to them (deadpan characters, for example, would be boring in a vacuum, but their interactions with other/differently-behaving characters within their world makes the contrast funny). For example, one person I interviewed said that they liked Obi-Wan Kenobi of *Star Wars* because he's charming, powerful, and eloquent, as well as a good, charismatic guy. Plus, the fact that he was played by Ewan McGregor in the majority of his appearances was certainly part of his liking of the character. A few others also seemed to have some level of attraction to the character whether because of their appearance, personality, or a desire the viewer has to protect them.

I also researched why people have the preferences they do in general, but this was mainly in relation to favorites in terms of food and music. The general conclusion I found, from an NPR interview with Yale psychology professor Paul Bloom, is that people will like things that they can attribute value to. For example, people involved in a thought experiment listed what price they would pay for a sweater that had previously been owned by George Clooney, versus a functionally and visually identical one. People always listed much greater prices for the previously-owned sweater, even though the item was essentially the exact same. In addition to this, he posits that people enjoy seeing tragedy in the media they consume because it allows people to experience the pain of it in a safe environment, in preparation for negative feelings we may experience later on, sort of like how flu vaccines are dying viruses that our body uses as practice to fight off more serious infections later on. As he says in the article:

> You know, that's a huge puzzle. It's- I have two chapters on the imagination, and one chapter says, look, a lot of the reason why we enjoy films and movies is because they mimic real life. They're reality-light. If you like something in the real world, you'll like it when somebody shows it to you on a screen… I think this falls under a general category of what Paul Rozin has described as benign masochism. We enjoy a little bit of pain, a little bit of suffering. And the reason for that, or one reason for that, is that we want to practice. We want to be able to deal with, to prepare ourselves for worst-case scenarios.

This is an important insight because it provides some personal insight as to why people enjoy the characters they enjoy, and what a creator can do to create such characters. Of course, everyone's tastes will be different--some people will find a character who is exactly like them to be appealing, while another person goes for a polar opposite. However, there are some general traits that make for a well-rounded, interesting character. Chuck Wendig, a writer, encourages his readers to create characters that feel as if they could exist, including traits that make characters vulnerable--or, at the very least, not immune to everything--which make them more relatable to viewers. Qualities like fear, conflicts in morality, genuine emotions, and connections to other characters are essential. He also advises writers to create self-advocating, motivated characters, who pursue the story instead of being pushed by it. In relation to this, he says, "The character makes decisions and is attempting to control her own destiny as an independent operator within the story. She is not a leaf in the stream but rather the rock that breaks the river." Having characters that self-advocate and, by extension, have a solid reason to be within the story, tend to be much more enjoyable to follow than characters that are extraneous in this sense. Does this conflict with the idea of second-person perspective? Should someone be able to relate to and enjoy character traits in what is supposed to be their in-story surrogate? Should they be more attached to the side characters instead, and have that be motivation enough to continue on with the story? Personally, I lean more toward the second opinion, with more emphasis put on the side characters' relationships with the main characters, which depends upon how the main character acts throughout the game.

Another reason someone may become invested in a particular character is that they see themselves in the character, which leads naturally to the idea of representation in media. "Politicizing" a story has been a contrasting point in many new stories and modern adaptations of older stories alike, with the fear that building these stories around and including marginalized groups will cause a loss in profits because of lesser interest in said story. In some cases, unfortunately, this is true. For example, the 2016 *Ghostbusters* reboot trailer is one of the most disliked videos on Youtube (30th overall, according to Wikipedia, with 1.1 million dislikes compared to its 350,000 likes, despite having a RottenTomatoes score of 74%), and the movie didn't make enough money to justify further investment in the series. However, other examples seem to indicate the opposite. *Black Panther,* released in early 2018, was a complete success, making $202 million on opening weekend and grossing over $1 billion worldwide (with a 97% on RottenTomatoes to boot!), and overall being hailed as an excellent source of representation, especially for young black boys and girls. This is important because the media we consume unconsciously affects our perception of the outside world a lot more than most of us would like. As such, negative impressions of certain races spawned from inaccurate and/or racist viewpoints become the template by which we judge all people within that race. Tropes such as violent black men and unintelligent black women become not only how white viewers begin to perceive real black people, but how young and impressionable black children begin to view themselves. People influenced by these racist views are at risk of adopting them if they don't take a deep look at the media they consume, which leads to more people having biased and unfair views toward black people, which then leads to them going on to spread these views even further, continuing the violent cycle. In an experiment conducted in 2006 by university professors Travis L. Dixon and Keith B. Maddox, statistics of perpetrators and victims of crime on news programs were compared to actual arrest records, saying:

> *Blacks were overrepresented as perpetrators on television news (37%) compared to arrest records (21%). Similarly, Blacks were underrepresented as victims on television news (23%) compared to crime reports (28%)... Whites were underrepresented as perpetrators on television news (21%) compared to crime reports (28%) and were overrepresented as victims in news stories (43%) compared to crime reports (13%).*

The experiment goes on, saying that, when presented with a situation wherein the participants are asked to describe a boyfriend's reaction to his unfaithful girlfriend, and then describe the boyfriend as white, black, or unknown, tend more towards violent reactions when the boyfriend is black. The effect of stereotypes of marginalized people is certainly prevalent in modern day stories, and even dangerous in the case of the results of the news experiment.

Contrasting this perception is why representation in media is so important, as Black Panther actress Dania Gurira states in an interview with IndieWire, "Even if it's a mindset of hers being shifted or a realization of how to experience and express her own ferocity and femininity… Those sort of things, that sort of impact, if little girls have that and have images now to refer to that are cool and empowered and hip, that they can say, 'Listen, I don't have to

fall into anyone else's ideology of what I can be,' that's everything. That's just everything." By rewriting the script that minorities have been provided with by predominantly white, Western media, one can hope that at the latest and upcoming generations will be willing to break this paradigm. With more positive racial representation, the cycle of racism and ignorance perpetrating more racism and ignorance will begin to break. Those raised on inclusive media where they are encouraged to think about the ramifications of excluding or misrepresenting a certain people will go on to create media that communicates those ideas instead.

Representation, and, in a larger sense, stories altogether have already been shown to have a large effect on how people perceive the world and other people within it, but what about mediums that aren't as large as multimillion dollar movies? An example of representation through a smaller medium--specifically, comics--is the increase of queer representation, one such example being within the 2012-2016 comic *Transformers: More Than Meets The Eye*, headed by writer James Roberts. Overall, the comic explores a lot of themes that, to many, are unexpected for a nearly 40-year-old franchise based upon transforming toys. Some of the themes have been questioned by fans, such as the choice to depict the alien civilization of Cybertron as a violently hierarchical society (complete with classic villain Megatron portrayed as a radical looking to change society who turns to violence as a last resort). But one choice by the writers, in particular, hasn't met much resistance at all--the inclusion of canonically queer characters. This could be considered another risky decision, when taking the longevity of the series into account, but the positive reaction from fans of the comic shows that queer characters have become more and more frequent in modern pop culture and are able to stand and be widely accepted into a franchise that already has a wide, dedicated fanbase. Though at times it may not seem it, mainstream popular culture has been gradually moving toward a more accepting and well-represented field.

In the end, what does all this information that I've gathered say? What do I plan to do with this data? Why does any of this matter? You may wonder. In the future, I want to create narratively-driven stories that will make people feel emotions through its characters and overall plot, instead of relying on symbology and references to the artist's raw emotions. I want to create stories that have characters and plots that my viewers will see themselves in, either in an aspect of their personality or what groups they intrinsically belong to. I know it's nigh-impossible (if not impossible) to make something *everyone* will enjoy, but if even one person likes the stories that I create, is invested in something that comes entirely from me, then I will consider this entire research endeavor to be a success. I suppose what I'm saying is that I want to create stories that will entertain both myself and other people.

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Skybound Icarus
The possibly-to-be-deleted addendum

In the far-distant year of 3106, the already large, technically advanced Viarane City had just experienced a breakthrough, courtesy of their top scientists: true, learning artificial intelligence. Soon after, the first successful experiment integrating this newfound technology into a mobile, human-like robot, named Ito, is completed and released into the world under heavy observation. Ito soon finds friendship in a group of young kids and, under their guidance, is able to mature into an emotionally positive and sound being. Seeing this success, the city demands another eight robots to be created with this technology, in order to serve as a prototypical robotic police force. However, they failed to account how delicate and easily manipulated this young AI can be in the wrong hands, and after only a few months of serving the city, the eight robots begin to defect. Most enthusiastic about this is Icestorm, their de facto leader, who believed that they were the first step in securing humanity's "next generation". Though the level of agreement with his ideas was varied, they eventually all agreed to launch an attack on the city, which had no means of defending itself from the threat it had created. After the initial attacks, a group of people--mostly scientists and civilians, with the occasional civilian-level robots that had been created since the introduction of the eight--banded together to try and combat Icestorm's group and protect the city. This ragtag group eventually managed to drive them off, but many were lost in the process, including Ito. In their honor, the remaining members founded an organized city defense force--which would come to be called the Viarane City Defense Force (or VCDF)--and the robotics manufacturing companies that survived the bad press promised to instill the hope and bravery of the fallen defenders into their robots.

Meanwhile, Icestorm's troupe was battered, but not entirely beaten. Taking temporary residence in an abandoned military base, he planned to regroup and attack again when the city would least expect it, but one of the group had seconds thoughts. Skydart, one of the youngest (in terms of mental function) of the group, had been uncomfortable with Icestorm's ideas from the very beginning, and after the events of their first strike, had seen the diligence and care of the human citizens of Viarane City and was turned entirely to their side. One night, while the other seven rested, Skydart lined the room with explosives and detonated them while fleeing. Over the next several years, while Viarane was still experimenting further with its robotics, Skydart systematically changed herself into a completely new robot, one who, she hoped, would join a better organization to help defend her home city. Finally, Archaeus Max emerged and joined the force. At the beginning, people were suspicious of him--for good reason, he understood. A military-class robot who had no history within the city? However, despite these suspicions, he did the best he could for the force, and was soon promoted, eventually even taking the original founder's place as leader. Overseeing the force also meant he would be the one in charge of reviewing, accepting, and training hopeful cadets.

Could these robots be trusted again, after what happened seven years beforehand? Though Archaeus did his best to curb them, tense relations between the force and some human

organizations grew, due both in part to the fact Archaeus, a robot, was leading the force, and the fact that the first generation of robotic recruits were about to be accepted into the force. He accepted those who displayed the best traits he thought a civilian would have, over what a soldier would. Two recruits in particular impressed him- Ventus and Acer, two prototypical aerial robots whose development spanned to back before the attack, but had been halted for many years afterward, but under the skillful hand of one of Viarane's best scientists, Dr. Michael Hunter, were finally brought to light. Both were accepted into the program and performed well, though Acer's more reckless style gave him the edge on physical tests and Ventus's careful nature made her more suited for leadership. Ventus and Archaeus began bonding, forming an eventual parent-and-child dynamic. Ventus's special attention made Acer, whose superior test results had gone to his head, jealous. He began to train more rigorously and act out more, which while it did indeed bring more attention to himself, eventually wound up forcing him to resign. Afterwards, he disappeared entirely. Archaeus was worried about what Acer alone might do, and began to train Ventus as his protege, resolving himself to try and find Acer once the force was in Ventus's hands. Ventus took the training with grace, but before she could be officially promoted and replace Archaeus, two of the survivors of Icestorm's group, Shatter and Sandblaze, snuck into the base, ambushing and fatally wounding Archaeus. Ventus found his body later, and, because of rank, was promoted to head commander of the force. This was the first time she'd ever actually gotten to know her colleagues, since beforehand she had only focused on training with Archaeus. After a few rough months, though, Ventus finally got used to her position, and over the next fourteen years, led a wholly operative version of the VCDF, in what would later be called the force's golden years. She even declared the officer who would eventually replace her, carrying on the tradition Archaeus had started. Her last year as commander, though, was riddled with turmoil.

During his time away, Acer had stumbled upon a destroyed military base and decided to use it as a hideout, where he could lay low for as long time as he would need to plan for his eventual revenge. He eventually investigated the underground areas of the base, where the damage was worst. There, he found the remains of seven ancient robots, which he recognized as Icestorm's group. He managed to repair two- Shatter and Sandblaze, who demanded the location of their eighth member. Seeing an opportunity to get revenge without getting the "blood" on his hands, Acer gave the location of the VCDF's commander, unaware that he was actually giving them the correct information. After seeing the result of this action--the one who'd been chosen above him, who'd always been better despite not deserving it--was now the leader of the force, he decided taking her down would be worth getting involved with himself, though not without help. Over the next fourteen years, he pieced together the salvageable remains of the other five robots, building another robot named Onyx, who was based upon Ventus's design. After the chimera robot, Shatter, Sandblaze, Onyx, Acer himself were ready, they waited for the best time to strike- and decided upon the day where Ventus's protege, a much younger robotic speedster named Parsecc, was to take Ventus's position of leader of the VCDF. During the ceremony, the five struck suddenly, plunging them into what would become a year-long struggle, the chimera

robot being much stronger than any of its original component robots. Viarane City was on evacuation for months while the two forces collided. Many humans and robots, civilians and VCDF members alike, were killed during the battle, which would eventually come to be called the Viarane War. The main item preventing a victory was the chimera robot, whose attacks were too powerful to stop. However, since it was cobbled from the parts of five other robots, it's programming had no hope of being perfect, and after a year of constant battling with no time for maintenance, glitches and processing errors finally overcame the behemoth, leading to its easy defeat and dismantling. With the chimera robot out of the picture, Ventus and the VCDF soon picked off the remaining members, save for Onyx, who surrendered as soon as Acer fell.

The VCDF gradually repaired the city, soon getting help from returning construction crews. Viarane was slowly rebuilt, though due to the city's previous track record of robot attacks, many of its older residents moved to neighboring places like Krando City and Exofend Port. What VCDF members survived were often hospitalized for months at a time. Worst of all survivors was Ventus, whose great overexertion during the war had taxed her to the point of irreversible damage to some of her systems, many of which had to be replaced or upgraded. Before being released, she was warned that the original parts that remained within her were around twenty years old and if she tried anything like that again, it would destroy her.

One of the robotics companies that was based in Viarane City at the time of the war, Labrynthos, revealed their two newest robots, part of a project titled "The Omega Contingency". The TOC robots were two 15-foot, heavily-armed and -armored robots. They, unlike many previous robots, weren't installed with a true artificial intelligence and were instead commanded by human pilots at a safe base within the main Labrynthos facility. With the introduction of these two emergency robots, people began to feel a bit more at ease with returning to Viarane again.

However, the war had instilled something of a consistent paranoia in her, and despite finally passing on her leadership to Parsecc (who had, during the war, nearly been killed, but survived with the sacrifice of his best friend) remained with the force as a mentor instead of retiring. One of her last commands as leader was to change the force's protocols on accepting members: only robots would be accepted from then on out to prevent human losses, prompting the renaming of the VCDF to the VCRDF, the Viarane City Robotic Defense Force.

At this point, the entire force was in danger of dissolving from the city's council, since the presence of robots had already caused two city-wide disasters within the forty-someodd years of its existence. Ventus was able to argue for the VCRDF's survival and won, but with the caveat that any robot entered into the force would be deactivated and hard-reset (if not destroyed) at the first signs of defection, which was a policy Ventus deeply hated. However, in the years the followed, the production of robots improved, and robots with human-hating Machiavellian tendencies began to appear less and less (though some argue that this modification curbs on robots' rights as sapient beings; these criticisms go largely ignored).

Deep within the bowels of Labrynthos, a new project was beginning. A new line of war robots, based upon the TOC robots, that would only be used in wartime conditions, or sold to the highest bidder. The first of these robots was Daedalus, a hugely powerful 13-foot-tall robot that

integrated entirely new solar-based weaponry, even coming with a built-in personality, unlike the TOC robots, to better bond with whomever would wield it. Daedalus, however, was gentle by nature, and the idea of his abilities being used for destruction disgusted him. He was regularly visited by Dr. Suzanne Chen, a Labrynthos scientist who shared his ideas and taught him the most she could about the world far above him. When he found out about the idea of children, he was absolutely delighted. A smaller living being he could raise as his own, who would eventually become like him? That sounded right up his alley. He begged Chen to help and eventually she relented, finding a basic winged body from an abandoned project from years before, based upon Ito's design. Over the next few months, Daedalus and Chen pieced together the robot, finishing up with Daedalus delicately carving simple markings into the robot's faceplate. Before activating the robot for the first time, Chen asked Daedalus what he wanted to name his child. When he had trouble coming up with a name, Chen jokingly suggested Icarus, knowing Daedalus had no knowledge of his namesake. To her surprise, he loved the name. Finally, after one last check for any glitches or obvious design flaws, Icarus was activated for the first time.

Icarus, who wound up identifying as female after a few months, bonded well with her "parents", especially Daedalus. When Daedalus was needed for testing or outfitting, Icarus would generally be deactivated or sent off to do something out of sight. For a little over two years, their existence continued like this, relatively peacefully. Unfortunately, as Chen was fearing, Daedalus and Icarus began to get sloppy, and Icarus was discovered. The plan was to keep the fact Labrynthos knew about Icarus's existence secret until they she and Daedalus were separated, then take in Icarus for study and reset Daedalus's AI. However, Chen let Daedalus know what the plan was before it could be enacted, which soon led to her firing. In what was an act of pure desperation, Daedalus broke out of his chamber with Icarus in tow, hoping to get his daughter to safety before Labrynthos officials came to take her. He, not knowing his way around the city at all, dropped her off in an alleyway near the VCRDF's main headquarters, before telling her goodbye and erasing her memory with a transmitted processor wipe while she begged to come with him. While Icarus was in the dazed state post-erasure, Daedalus left to cause a disturbance in another location, misleading the Labrynthos officials into thinking Icarus had been destroyed in the junkyard, preferring death to capture. Daedalus himself, only partially pretending to be deeply in grief, allowed himself to be captured. Instead of resetting him, however, the higher-ups decided to scrap the program because of the breach and placed Daedalus into deactivated storage.

Icarus, confused and with no history to go upon, stumbled to the doorstep of the VCRDF building before running out of power and collapsing in a heap. Later when Ventus was trying to head out, she noticed Icarus and took her inside for a recharge. Once she saw that Icarus had no idea where she was, where she came from, or even what her name was, Ventus's heart went out to her and she took her in, teaching her about the world and Viarane and training her in basic combat. They quickly discovered perhaps Icarus's most interesting trait- the ability to project a bird's wings and tail made out of pure energy from the wing- and tail- shaped conduits in her

back. Not only that, these semisolid appendages have all the abilities of the real thing, allowing Icarus to fly. Within a few months, Icarus's quick-tongued, excitable, yet sweet personality began to emerge, and she soon began formal training to join the VCRDF, already seeing Ventus as her biggest role model and continually asking for stories of adventures from when Ventus commanded the force. Within another two years, Icarus was ready, and joined the force as its newest and (supposedly) youngest member, under Parsecc's steady leadership.

Far away, a civil war was happening within the country of Lumara. The country had gone to war because of new economic policies, but since world-threatening weapons had been outlawed a century prior, the death toll remained largely robotic, and as such, the main political dangers were to the robots in power, particularly the ones on the losing side. Two such robots, General Hakuro and subcommander Ken, heavy advocates for peace between the two sides, had fallen in love prior to the war and agreed to raise two children together. The children were Senshi and Genji, female and male respectively, and were forced to grow up quickly in order to survive. After the end of the war, Hakuro, Ken, and Senshi were to find a new life elsewhere, Genji volunteering to stay in the country's capital, Albia City and report back on the political situation, but were separated while taking a sea transport to Ethil, Viarane's country, and gave no word on where they would meet. Senshi arrived later than her parents and was unable to find them. She settled, telling herself that she'd look for them as soon as she could, and soon was working a few odd jobs within the city, her brother keeping her updated on things back in Lumara. Eventually, she began working as a sort of vigilante, attracting the attention of the VCRDF. During a confrontation with a robotic criminal, Senshi appears in a cloak and knocks them out, and Icarus finally tracks her down after the battle. Instead of being upset, Icarus is impress and enamored, asking Senshi to come to the VCRDF headquarters to join. Senshi is doubtful but Icarus is persistent and takes her down, and Senshi's too nervous about potentially breaking Icarus that she follows along. Parsecc was suspicious of this vigilante but was willing to take her in, and after only a few months of additional training, Senshi becomes a full member of the force and fast friend of Icarus.

By this point, Labrynthos had taken notice of the VCRDF's latest flier, recognizing her to be the one who was supposedly destroyed over a year prior. Instead of asking the VCRDF where this new upstart came from, knowing that any communication between them could be made public, higher-ups at the company order a new robot to be built- one without the typical Labrynthos markings, to hunt down and capture Icarus, returning what they consider to be stolen property, for investigation. They copied what data from Icarus's creation that they could from Daedalus, and filled in the rest with disguised Labrynthos tech, naming their creation Sharpe. Sharpe relentlessly pursued Icarus, stopping only when he couldn't fight any longer or was called back, both happened a few times. While the other members of the VCRDF attempted to destroy Sharpe, Icarus was glad to have someone who matched her speed and ability, and genuinely wanted to try and get him on their side, as she got the impression he wouldn't be doing this if he weren't forced to. The others, especially Senshi, thought she was crazy, but Icarus insisted, and eventually, Sharpe was safely captured, restrained, and placed in a holding cell.

Icarus, seeing no better way to try and get Sharpe to switch sides, talked to him every day. It took months, but Sharpe eventually began to see that Icarus genuinely wanted to help and was offering a better life than what he had at Labrynthos, and slowly warms up to her. Eventually, they begin allowing him out, so long as he was accompanied by Icarus and someone else (generally Senshi), and eventually, finds things more comfortable at the force than any time at Labrynthos, and decides to stay for good. Icarus is endlessly happy to have a new brother.

One day, Senshi notices something strange about the similarities between Sharpe and Icarus, and asks Icarus during a routine diagnostic about how long she's been around, to which Icarus happily replies that she's four years old, physically. Senshi investigates and finds that none of Icarus's parts come from four or even five years before, the models only matching up with parts six years or older. Contrasting this, Sharpe's components were manufactured less than half a year before he was released. When pursued further, Icarus admits that she doesn't know who actually created her, creating even more questions. Who built Icarus? Why? Why does the company that built Sharpe (which he happily confesses is Labrynthos, now that an inhibitor chip he had installed was removed) want to capture Icarus? Why are their designs so similar? Sharpe tells them that he was told to bring Icarus back, implying that Labrynthos somehow had her in the first place. With her past suddenly thrown into question, Icarus is driven to begin investigating Labrynthos. Within the next week and without approval from Parsecc, Senshi breaks into the company alone, eventually finding a folder full of documents referencing something called Project Daedalus and takes them, sneaking back out without alerting any security systems. Meanwhile, Sharpe and Icarus ask Parsecc to conduct an investigation into Labrynthos, which he agrees to.

Senshi notices the papers are co-signed by several people- in particular, a Dr. Chen, who appears to no longer be working at the company. Curiosity building, Senshi finds Chen and takes her to the VCRDF, hoping she might be able to help with the investigation. Chen strongly resists the urge to hug Icarus as soon as she sees her, and helps along with the investigation, confronting the company. They deny involvement, saying that Sharpe was probably programmed by another company to slander them. Senshi, however, pulls out the documents she grabbed and asks the company about their involvement in the Daedalus Project. Eventually, they relent and explain everything, but Icarus largely feels bad for not remembering anything of these events that she was apparently part of. Parsecc pursues legal action, and Labrynthos's main board members are taken into custody. The investigation into the building doesn't find the passageway into the lower levels of the company, which had been remodeled and moved since Chen was fired, so the underground portion of Labrynthos remains untouched, and Icarus's mysteries unsolved.