Mortal Koil: The Function of Pastimes in Kevin Wilson’s “mortal kombat”

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In Kevin Wilson’s *tunneling to the center of the earth*, many of the characters are secluding, having only a handful (if that) of acquaintances but a strong desire to have more and thus “fit in.” Faced with the unfortunate truth of being outcast from their peers, teenagers Scotty and Wynn rely on each other out of social necessity (and to stave off the boredom of a high school experience spent alone and friendless) in the short story “mortal kombat.” As they cannot relate to those around them, the boys turn to their specialties: run-of-the-mill trivia and Mortal Kombat, a violent video game that operates on several different levels within the story. They lead seemingly stereotypical ‘nerd’ lives until their friendship enters into uncharted territory and the possibility for romance is introduced after the two share a kiss. Trying to cope with the new strangeness of their relationship and the maddening frequency of the confusing sexual encounters they inexplicably keep having, Scotty and Wynn derive both comfort and control from the video game and trivia; Wilson, however, emphasizes that these pastimes cannot help them control the turmoil that arises as they try — unsuccessfully — to understand the nature of their new relationship. The hobbies the boys enjoy serve largely as mirrors and mediators of their turmoil.

Though it is both a source and a product of the boys’ isolation, trivia serves as one of the few elements Scotty and Wynn have total control over. Because of their involvement in the Quiz Bowl, “they are, of course, [even more] unpopular” and are considered strange even by the other members of their team; however, there is comfort in the simple nature of their ‘sport’ (73). After all, facts cannot mock, cannot exclude. They exist only for the one who uses them. It is also much easier to memorize the question-answer script of trivia than to try to prepare for the uncertainties of human interaction. There are not any unanswerable questions, and the answers are always easy. The boys are able to “spit questions and answers back and forth so quickly that it sounds like another language” (75). They know their enterprise better than they know them-
selves, “and what they don’t know, they will learn” (74). Certainly, there is no grey area surrounding trivia; there is no question of whether trivia is right or wrong, or whether it is something they could stop any time. They boys just continue on, even if they have gotten a wrong answer, because the very nature of their ‘sport’ is inconsequential and without substance - trivial.

When they feel uncomfortable or nervous, trivia serves as their security blanket. While it is commonly used as a cure-all for their trepidations, it is often used in an excluding way - Wynn uses trivia to prevent Scotty from discussing their relationship and to keep himself from contemplating the implications of their rendezvous. After their first kiss, he throws himself into their practice “with such attention, such focus, that it is almost as if Scotty is not in the room with him” (79). He also sets up a physical barrier of Encyclopedias to separate himself as far as possible from Scotty and from the potential of another incident. He studies while he’s alone at the table of soccer players, “[running] through battles of the Civil War until it is time to go back to class,” choosing the awkwardness of a lunch spent with near strangers over the awkwardness of a lunch spent with his best friend (86). When at last he does return to Scotty, he relies on the normalcy of trivia and the ease of their routine to keep from discussing the ramifications of their actions. Wilson says, “it is easy enough to ask these questions, just as easy to answer them, but Wynn knows that there are other things to talk about” and implies that Wynn is using trivia as a cover up for the confusion that arises from the kiss he and Scotty have shared (79).

While Wynn uses trivia to bar his friend and block out the new element of their relationship, Scotty uses it as a coping mechanism. He utilizes every opportunity with Wynn to discuss their relationship. After all, he has no one else; “What he has is Wynn” and he recognizes that, for now at least, his contact with Wynn may be the only intimate relationship he’ll have (77). The final time they kiss in the story, Wynn ends it with violence and leaves, conflicted. Scotty
“doesn’t know what else to do and so he studies, alone. He names every president. From George Washington on down the line. Then in alphabetical order. Then by number of terms. Then he breaks them down by party affiliations” (91-92). He reverts to this mechanical system to avoid processing what just transpired — the game, the kiss, and Wynn’s punch — and goes through the motions of this normal routine, all the while wondering “if Wynn will come back [that] night . . . [so] that he will finally have the answer” about their relationship (92).

Mortal Kombat, on the other hand, serves as an effective medium of communication and mode of expression for both Wynn and Scotty. Once the boys purchase the game, they “hunker down in their rooms, lights off, gripping controllers, intent” in a way that’s overtly sexual (87). The scene is meant to appear masturbatory, heightened by the design of the controller (an erect stick protruding from a clunky box) and the progression of the action (the intense gripping, sweat flying from the characters, and finally the “finish” of the game). The imagery of Wynn and Scotty playing the game serves not only as a sexual release for them; it also introduces irony. Wynn’s version of the game spews only sweat and is the censored version, while Scotty’s spews blood - an accurate representation of the intimate experiences they have had so far, since Scotty has bled or received some sort of injury each time their relationship ventured into romantic territory.

Although Wynn initiates the violence most often, Scotty’s actions and feelings also enhance the intense and painful nature of their relationship. Scotty pretends that Wynn is the character he fights in the game, performing multiple moves and eventually “FINISHING” him off. Not only is the reader shown how Scotty feels about his treatment from Wynn, the passage also suggests that Scotty is dissatisfied with the intimate contact he’s largely been initiating - he has not been “finished” sexually (even though Wynn was) and so defeats the character in the game as an unconscious way of gaining that which he did not before receive. Wynn, however, uses the
game to avoid thinking about Scotty or the particulars of their relationship. He remains separated from Scotty even though he knows that his friend has the better version of the game. Wynn “punches and kicks, sweat instead of blood flying off his opponents, and tells himself that this is just as good. He is happy enough” (87).

The game and its violence also act as mirrors for Scotty and Wynn’s encounters. The violence in Wynn’s game is watered down compared to Scotty’s (which is ironic, considering Wynn’s violent outbursts are much more intense than Scotty’s feeble fits). He still finishes off his opponents, just as he deals harsh emotional and physical blows to Scotty, but all are censored and lack the finality and closure achieved in Scotty’s uncensored version. While at Scotty’s house, the boys play for awhile and regain a little of their old relationship — the easy laughs, the mindless enjoyment of the video game. Wynn soon develops a strategy for winning: he jumps in, lands a few successful blows, and jumps back out before any harm is done to him (the same way he participates in this relationship with Scotty) but ends it before “crossing a line he does not know enough about to think that he can cross back” (82). He knows he is upsetting Scotty, but he “cannot stop. He wants to keep winning. He thinks that if he can beat Scotty into submission, that they can go back to how it was before if he can just make Scotty give up” (88). Scotty gets angrier each time but mostly takes his defeats in silence, until he throws the one word in the air he knows has been on Wynn’s mind - a word he know his friend fears. Scotty says, “that’s a fag-got way to fight” and rattles Wynn enough to eek out a victory (90). While Wynn deals harsh physical blows, Scotty delivers painful emotional punches that force Wynn to stop and think.

In the final match, neither Wynn nor Scotty back down, fighting face to face rather than employing other tactics. When Scotty wins and the voice of the game demands he “FINISH HIM!,” he “looks over at Wynn, who will not meet his eyes. . . . Finally he punches in the com-
bination and they both watch the screen as Scotty walks over to Wynn and reaches into his chest, pulls out his heart” (90). In a moment of triumph, Scotty pulls Wynn’s heart out, just as Wynn had emotionally done to him time and again in his refusal to acknowledge the changing nature of their relationship. The game expresses Scotty’s feelings much better than he could ever do himself and so, uplifted by his victory, Scotty kisses Wynn, who responds only a moment before punching Scotty hard in the mouth, spraying blood and saliva. Despite winning the battle for victory in the game and control over their chaotic relationship, Wynn still rejects him, solidifying Wynn’s inability to accept the feelings of his only friend. Scotty, after Wynn leaves, reverts to passivity, to a shocked inability to act, and as a result the computer screen takes over the characters, effectively ending the slight control over the game (and by extension their relationship) that Scotty briefly had. In the end, Scotty cannot define his relationship nor force Wynn to accept the possibility of a romance, and so he is forced to, once again, rely on the cold comfort of trivia.

While the two friends circle around and around in the cage match of love (or lust), only one thing remains constant - their desire for companionship. They forego the awkwardness after their first kiss because they have no one else and do not want to lose each other to something frightening and unknown. Just as many of the characters in Kevin Wilson’s tunneling to the center of the earth bear their discomfort due to their need for human contact, so did Wynn and Scotty push away their awkwardness to keep from being even more alone. Although they are ultimately unsuccessful in coming to terms with and defining the nature of their relationship, the utilization of trivia and Mortal Kombat in “mortal kombat” allows the boys greater freedom of expression and communication. Because of their pastimes, the boys end on a note of expectancy, giving the reader hope that eventually, Scotty and Wynn will find the answers they need.
Works Cited