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The *Hellraiser* Puzzle Box

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Abstract

This essay will focus on a case study, a particular fictional game that has given rise to variants across both literature and film: the *Hellraiser* puzzle box. We focus on Clive Barker's short story *The Hellbound Heart* and two films from the film franchise: the 1987 *Hellraiser* and its reboot, the 2022 *Hellraiser*, which fleshes out (pun intended) the mythos. In addition to discussing the overt horror genre framing and themes through the lenses of literary analysis and film studies, we also propose an analogy with the literary genre that most notably straddles the same nexus of body-puzzle-space, closely intertwining the three: that of detective fiction. Its similarities with and differences from the *Hellraiser* puzzle box will be used to elaborate the interpretation of its design, functioning, and (il?)logic.

Keywords

Horror; games; puzzle; body horror; labyrinths; detective fiction

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As a case study, this essay will focus on a particular fictional game that has given rise to variants across both literature and film: the *Hellraiser* puzzle box. We focus on Clive Barker's novella *The Hellbound Heart* and two films from the franchise: the 1987 *Hellraiser* and its reboot, the 2022 *Hellraiser*, which fleshes out (pun intended) the mythos. The reason for our choice is the central role that the box occupies in all three: as Ivy Kiernan (2023) notes, these are the two films out of the franchise that "adapt the novella's original source material and provide the closest similarities in thematic content without deviations found within the later sequels and comics" (2023, p .3). In addition to discussing the overt horror genre framing and themes through the lenses of literary analysis and film studies, we also propose an analogy with the literary genre that most notably straddles the same nexus of body-puzzle-space: that of detective fiction. Its similarities with and differences from the *Hellraiser* puzzle box will be used to elaborate the interpretation of the latter's design and functioning.

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Figure 1. The puzzle box in *Hellraiser* (1987). © Film Futures

The box and the body

Clive Barker's work is often associated with the emergence of the 'splatterpunk' variant of body horror, "envisioned as a culmination of the corporeal turn" in horror (Aldana Reyes, 2014, pp. 42–43). In Barker's story *The Hellbound Heart*, the box and space are linked to flesh and body through their respective (sometimes interwoven) descriptions: the "ever more elaborate system of sliding fragments" (1986, p. 43) in the room wherein Frank (a seeker after forbidden pleasures) is entrapped, which recalls the box itself, finds its fleshly counterpart in Frank's reconfigured body. This is foreshadowed by one of the opening lines, describing his reflection in the surface of the box as "distorted [and] fragmented"—dissecting mind and perception too, in the prising open of the self. Frank's body gets "ripped apart and sewn together again with most of its pieces either missing or twisted and blackened as if in a furnace" (Barker, 1986, p. 44). The body/flesh, space, and box all become interchangeable puzzles, with moving parts and shared attributes. The one who solves the puzzle box thus becomes a puzzle box in their turn.[1] Aldana Reyes notes:

1 A comparable 'puzzle' series can be found in the *Saw* films. This however is unplayable on different grounds (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 32), ethical and legal, rather than the radical impossibility of Lemarchand's box (which resembles a material game but acquires extraordinary dimensions only accessible through 'playful' interaction). The first *Saw* (dir. James Wan, 2004) takes place predominantly in a single room; the body's limitations and the restrictions on movement are thus foregrounded (unlike the vertiginously labyrinthine structure unleashed by the *Hellraiser* trap). In one *Saw* scenario, the key to unlock a torture device is

> This leads to a form of horror that is not annihilating or pessimistic, but which, instead, provides new ways to rethink the body beyond its 'normative' status. Barker's interest in destroying the body is countered by a marked preoccupation with reconfiguring it in liberating ways, often involving the grafting or coming together of unusual assemblages. (2017, p. 200)

Even as the Cenobites (angelic/demonic interdimensional "theologians" of the flesh) test the limits of the rational, and as they rework the malleable flesh—merging, melting, folding, unfolding, reconfiguring—they retain a coldly surgical and clinical precision. When Frank is inadvertently recalled to this 'plane' of reality, the floorboards buckle and leak fluid, like pulsating flesh, as Frank's partially reconstituted monstrous anatomy bursts out from beneath—the body and the room, flesh and space, merge in the transformation (transformation being a favourite theme of Barker's [Barker & Jones, 1997]). In the first movie, the body emerges from the floor, as if birthed.

In the 2022 reboot, the relation between the puzzle box and the body/flesh of the main characters is also explicit. In the playground scene, where the protagonist Riley plays with the box for the first time, a Cenobite appears, holding a replica box. The Cenobite soon starts playing with the replica: caressing and then pressing a circular button (which echoes the circular plates on Riley's box, previously shown in a detail shot). Simultaneously, a blood circle appears on Riley's chest, which immediately bursts as if pressed by an invisible force. The bond between the box and her body is evident: like a voodoo doll, the box functions as an alter-ego of Riley's body (or Riley's body becomes an extension or replica of the box), allowing the Cenobite to reconfigure the box and her flesh simultaneously. Other scenes reinforce the parallel between box, space, and flesh: towards the end of the movie, the villain Roland Voight stares up at the puzzle-box-shaped glass ceiling as a gigantic (divine?) chain drops from above, rupturing two boundaries: shattering metal and glass, as well as skin and flesh.

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embedded in a body's internal organs. As in *Hellraiser*, the body is both a component of the puzzle and a puzzle box in itself. In *Saw*'s primary narrative, the overlooked body that is centrally located on the ground, is—like Poe's "The Purloined Letter"—hidden in plain sight; it holds the ultimate solution, if only the 'players' would turn their full attention to it. In a way, Jigsaw provides the players with clues (pieces to the puzzle, as his moniker suggests), where they may become detectives and/or victims, bodies in a locked room.

Figure 2. Voight is skewered by a huge chain in *Hellraiser* (Bruckner, 2022).

Hellraiser's puzzle box is a fictional game that affects, transforms, and peels back layers of diegetic reality, as it acts upon bodies and spaces. But it is also a "nonhuman actor" (see Stern, 2012, pp. 11–14) that makes things happen, and which in general "effects change" upon the fictional world that surrounds it. It is a narrative device systematically leveraged to elicit horror in readers and viewers. The puzzle box in the *Hellraiser* franchise plays a pivotal role in "creating a sense of fictional threat" (Aldana Reyes, 2016, p. 99), a primary goal in horror fiction. Yet it is not only a mysterious and alluring object that portends a physical threat, but also a stand-in for the human bodies and flesh. The box offers up both masochistic and sadistic pleasures, extended to the viewer. Playing with the box serves as a kind of intensifying foreplay, stoking the kind of "fearful anticipation" that is, according to Stephen Shaviro (1993), inherently linked with cinematic masochistic pleasure. The box thereby facilitates viewers' "align[ing] [them]selves experientially, and exponentially, with the victim" (Aldana Reyes, 2016, p. 99). At the same time, by anticipating and mirroring the "body spectacle" (see Williams, 1991) of gore and mutilated bodies, it also invites voyeuristic identification with the villains who operate through it, putting the viewer into the position of a sadistic watcher.

As in Barker's story, in detective fiction the body often has to be reassembled or disassembled and dissected: it is a forensic puzzle to be solved. In a revealing difference however, the goal in detective fiction is to discover the coherence of the mystery. In *Hellraiser* on the other hand, while mystery is also implied, a coherent unified wholeness is denied to the seeker after forbidden secrets, both in terms of bodily coherence and in terms of achieving a satisfying solved end-state. Frank starts out from the desire for a more conventional kind of satisfaction in the 1987 film and in the story—implying an expectation of a traditional climax and closure: "'You can supply the pleasure.' … 'Not as you understand it,' came the reply" (Barker, 1986, p. 10). Instead, Frank is surprised by the relentless and endless openness he is forced to endure, which riddles his body with crevices and turns it inside-out. More in line with Frank's initial expectations, Michael Cook (2011) argues that detective fiction is

driven by desire for closure, which finds its teasing echo in the physical locked room enclosure (as discussed in the next section), and in the closed narrative itself.

The box and the space

In Barker's story (1986), as the box opens up, so does space correspondingly unfold, to the developing intricacies of melody bursting into cacophony. What starts out as sound is amplified to encompass all the senses, in a kind of synaesthetic explosion. Frank "saw the east wall flayed"—a suggestive word; "saw, in that same instant, the place beyond the room from which the bell's din was issuing" (1986, p. 6). As Aldana Reyes argues, the "negotiation and questioning of boundaries" is integral to Barker's relentless focus on the corporeal (2017, p. 196). These boundaries are spatial as well as bodily. The boundary of the self is easily punctured, as spatial distinctions (including that between inside/outside) are thrown into disarray. Frank is assailed alike by sights and sounds outside and within, as past memories vie or combine with present experience to overwhelm him: indeed, "there was more *inside* than out" (Barker, 1986, p. 14). Space and time are rearranged. A Cenobite explains: "The box is a means to break the surface of the real" (1986, p. 125). In Barker's vision, reality itself has its sliding panels and interlocking perceptual layers. Points of access (including the senses) are themselves rearranged, just like the box's mechanisms, and the body is spatially redistributed.

Barker leaves no doubt that the box is linked to the reconfiguration of space(s). The room where Frank is trapped at the threshold between realms is transformed. When Frank's lover Julia retreats to it, she is disorientated: "It was easy to miscalculate in the dark, and she reached the wall before she'd expected to" (1986, p. 43). This suggests a spatial puzzle akin to the box—moreover, Julia finds that:

> The wall seemed to be coming apart, segments of it shifting and dislocating like a magician's prop, oiled panels giving on to hidden boxes whose sides in turn collapsed to reveal some further hiding place. She watched fixedly, not daring to even blink for fear she miss some detail of this extraordinary sleight-of-hand, while pieces of the world came apart in front of her eyes. (1986, p. 43)

There is also something quite mechanical about the way the hospital walls open up, like a secret passageway, in the 1987 film. The nurse and doctor, who refuse to listen to Kirsty and who lock the door behind them, have an inscrutable authority and 'power' over the room in the hospital, where Kirsty is essentially confined. The institutional space is designed to facilitate the medical gaze (Foucault, 1963), and the clinical staff with their overseeing gaze thus acquire some association with the Cenobites through their control of space and their desire to penetrate into the body's innermost secrets.

In the novella, Barker positions Kirsty's fascination with the box as a direct consequence of her feeling trapped with no sensory stimulation in the sterile hospital room: "Had it not been for the white walls she might never have picked up the box" (1986, pp. 121–122). The box is the means of her 'escape' from one room into a labyrinth: first, in the 1987 film, an endless corridor or tunnel, the lair of a monstrous guardian (one may be reminded of another monstrous composite: the Minotaur); then, the house she returns to has itself been transformed, through its connection with the Cenobites' realm. In the reboot, a care home is a similarly institutional, somewhat clinical, space that becomes a node interconnected with the Cenobites' dimensions. The care home is *already* designed as a somewhat labyrinthine structure and thus interlinks readily and yet subtly with the Cenobites' labyrinths, as entrapment and enclosure take place in bewildering corridors and ascetic spaces. The locked room and the labyrinths emerge as closely intertwined spaces, functioning in analogous ways.

Kirsty, the heroine of the story, makes an agreement with the Cenobites to offer up Frank, who has escaped their clutches, in her stead. In both the novella and the film, the "principles of desire and satisfaction are represented through a labyrinthine structure, in which characters … discover that there is no beginning or end" (Allmer, 2008, p. 14), trapped in a circuit of exchange. According to Allmer, such principles are inherently capitalistic, linking *Hellraiser*'s "sado-masochistic and fetishistic tendencies" (2008, p. 16) to commodity fetishism, and the 1987 film is "entangled in the problematics and perverse relations of Thatcherite versions of capitalist principles of ownership" (2008, p. 14). She also notes that the "labyrinth-as-repetition allegorises the commodity's exchange and politics as an 'eternal-return-of-the-always-the-same'", which has accommodated divergent readings of the film as "reactionary" or "liberatory". The puzzle box is therefore both "at the centre of the story", and a threshold object that is "a gateway to hell" (Allmer, 2008, p. 15)—the key to the labyrinth, which is itself circulating within a labyrinth.

In the 2022 *Hellraiser*, many settings within the movie evoke the puzzle box. The second half of the movie revolves around the main characters being entrapped within the Voight mansion, which is modelled upon the puzzle box. The extravagant house is itself designed as a lure and a trap (for the Cenobites, as well as to enthrall Voight's underprivileged human player-sacrifices through its awe-inspiring opulence), wherein the trapped players move. From the very beginning of the movie, when we only see its interior, the mansion mirrors the puzzle box: the walls and floor are decorated with geometric patterns and motifs that resemble those of the game, and the ceiling is square, with golden bars forming another square at its centre, surrounded by quadrants and geometries reminiscent of the puzzle box. Later, when Riley arrives at the Voight mansion, it is revealed that the house is surrounded by a metal cage divided into squares and geometric patterns. In both scenes, the square motifs of the metal cage are a (not entirely stable) boundary that distinguishes between an 'inside' and an 'outside': Voight watches the sky through the glass ceiling, as if trapped within an architectonic double of the puzzle box. Riley

enters the villa only by crossing the metal cage and passing through an opening that leads to the cellar.

The 2022 *Hellraiser* presents the Voight mansion as an archetypal horror "closed space" (see Aguirre, 1990), such space being characterised, according to Barry Curtis, by:

> The uncanny animation of … its interiors; the flexing of margins and the refusal of objects to stay stored in place or within the limits of their customary significance. The structure itself is prone to metamorphosis and agitation, often in ways that threaten its own integrity as well as the lives of those who explore it. (2008, p. 11)

The Voight mansion soon becomes a puzzling labyrinth full of dangers, in which walls move, secret passageways appear and close, metal cages rise and shift, and so on: its architecture is both a trap to fall into and a labyrinth to solve, just like its handheld double. To reinforce this connection, at the end, when Riley refuses to play with the box and leaves it on the ground, long shots let us see the interior of the Voight mansion deserted and silent, as inert as the box abandoned by its player.

In the films, the box also establishes its direct relation with another kind of space: the cinematic space of the screen. In the 2022 *Hellraiser*, the first appearance of a Cenobite takes place in a children's playground, underlining the box's nature as a game. We see Riley sitting on a roundabout and playing with the box at the centre of a square motif painted on the ground that closely resembles that of the cube she is configuring. Her rotation of the puzzle is reproduced in the camera movements (clockwise camera roll). Riley is therefore at the centre of two intertwined spaces that mirror the puzzle box: the playground (with the roundabout being the circular plate at the centre of the box) and the cinematic frame (with the camera roll imitating its spinning movement). As an "object of desire" (Allmer, 2008, p. 15), the box is a moving centre—it moves within the frame, but also puts the frame in motion, and invites viewers to also take their turn, with their gaze mirroring its configurations.

Figure 3. Riley lies on the carousel in *Hellraiser* (Bruckner, 2022).

The box's invitation is likewise extended to the viewer in *Hellraiser* (1987), when in the lead-in to the epilogue, the box meta-textually wraps itself around the frame designed to contain it, aligning for a moment with the cinematic frame—as the centre-circle of the box expands, the scene and surviving protagonists are re-contained. This occurs just after the surviving protagonists have escaped and ostensibly found release from the house that has itself become a box, hell-trap, and labyrinth. The narrative then re-opens through an epilogue which relocates the box at the same seller who dealt with Frank, awaiting the next adventurer-consumer and, by implication, viewer. Allmer suggests that this containment reveals "that the characters were always already in the box … so that the box contains the house and the narrative in which, paradoxically, it is itself contained" (2008, pp. 21–22). The film (as a commodity) is thus enclosed in the box, yet (like the box) opened to further transactions—in fact, it is open to repackaging (even as a physical artefact—in a nice touch, one limited edition DVD-boxset of the franchise comes in a 'Hellraiser Box'), and indeed eventually to franchising and remaking. The 2022 remake begins with Voight presenting the puzzle box as having long languished in oblivion, to resurface only now: "the only one of its kind, forgotten until now" (approximately 00:05:00). This is, of course, a way to play teasingly with the audience, using the box to refer to the franchise itself, revived by the reboot—a quite straightforward way to make self-reflexive meta-commentary through a fictional game.[2]

In detective fiction, puzzling spaces are also crucial, in particular, the 'locked room' mystery is central to the genre (not just "a form", but "its very essence", in Cook's view [2011, p. 172]), as established by Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"—a declared influence on Barker (1991). The 'locked room' is essentially a puzzle box, concealing its point of access and egress. As Irwin (1991) observes, in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", the victim's decapitated head has its counterpart in the 'head' of the broken nail that failed to fasten the window, allowing entry and departure, and this is the key to the solution—as the detective Dupin discovers. Body parts and the room alike are elements of the puzzle. The locked room poses a challenge to rationality, offering the seemingly impossible: "seeming to present us with a physical embodiment, a concrete spatialization, of that very mechanism of logical inclusion/exclusion on which rational analysis is based, indeed, presents us with this as an apparent confounding of rational analysis" (Irwin, 1991, p. 47). The classic detective structure, however, admits only one correct solution, which results in the restoration of logical order once the mystery is solved (Auden, 1948). With detective fiction, we are still in the realm of the possible, if often highly improbable (Doyle, 1890).

Another lesson to be learned from detective fiction is that the 'locked room' is always liable to become a labyrinth. Borges vertiginously spins the 'locked room' structure,

2 For other examples of fictional games used as meta-commentary, see Gualeni & Fassone (2023, pp. 176–178).

opening it up in multiple directions. The trap takes a labyrinthine form, for example, in "Death and the Compass", where Lönnrot applies himself to deciphering a labyrinth of clues, starting out through a trail of books from the room that is the scene of a crime. This turns out to be an intricate trap, in which the labyrinth is a 'game' where the player is also the 'played' (Wilson, 1982). By making his detective an avid reader, Borges seems to suggest that readers too may be enticed to play and thus drawn into the trap, along with the detective: "The avid reader of mysteries wills himself into the very maze from which, during the course of the reading, he will try to escape" (Lehman, 1989, p. 198). Porter describes Borges' fiction as a "machine without exits", which functions like a "trap" for the reader in "place of the pleasure machine of popular fiction" that would restore readers to "safety … once the thrilling circuit is completed" (1981, p. 246). Similarly, the *Hellraiser* films play with the viewer/consumer, and the puzzle box delivers results that diverge from conventionally pleasurable climactic catharsis.

The Borgesian variant of the puzzle—the maze—is constructed upon the principles of a kind of order, but in Lehman's (1989) words, a "malevolent" one (rather than Auden's [1948] 'classic' "Edenic" one, where order is restored): "It can be solved over and over again but never definitively" (Lehman, 1989, p. 204). In *The Hellbound Heart* and *Hellraiser*, solving the puzzle box opens, rather than closes, the mystery—not ushering in disorder as such, but the "Order of the Gash"—the wound that cannot be closed once opened (or not without transformation or transaction). This "Order" has its own theological *mysterium* (the secrets of their trade/vocation) of pleasure and pain.

Irwin (1991) explains the spatiality involved, and the relation and difference between the locked room and the labyrinth, in similar terms:

> In contrast to the locked room, a labyrinth is always open from the outside but appears to be unopenable from within. It … subtly disrupt[s] the link between relative and absolute bearing … A labyrinth is in a sense a self-locking enclosure that uses the directionality of the human body as the bolt in the lock. (1991, p. 46)

Like the box, it is a trap, with the body becoming part of the device. Rationality (along with relationality) is revealed as being, in some manner of speaking, amenable to reversal, twisting and turning with the folding of space and the shifting orientation of the body—with the labyrinth's folds showing that "inner and outer are two opposing aspects of a single continuous surface" (Irwin, 1991, p. 50).

In *Hellraiser*, rather than folding inwards as enclosure, the trap turns outwards when manipulated, relentlessly exposing the user/victim to an outside. In the remake, a blade springs out to 'mark' the user or their victim (the box claiming its price/prize) as 'external' space is rearranged around them to entrap them in a labyrinthine space, of folds and openings, and passages without end. The additional dimensions

brought into play in *Hellraiser*'s labyrinths make them more mystifying and resistant to rational solution and increase the body's disorientation in relation to space.

The box and games

Poe's Dupin stories lay out the analogy between the detective's task and a game. Detective fiction has been likened to a game that is essentially a "mathematical problem" (Caillois, 1983, p. 10), which may remind us of the Rubik's cube (an analogy Cauthen also draws, noting that: "The locked room itself is like a Rubik's cube: there are only so many options for making the colors align on each side" [2023, p. 22]). Moreover, this detective game poses a challenge to the reader (Caillois, 1983; Suits, 1985), who attempts to compete with the detective (Rzepka, 2005, p. 31) with the expectation of a fair contest (Van Dine, 1928).

The *Hellraiser* box resembles both a Rubik's cube and a Japanese trick box as described by Slocum and van Grol (2002). Like a wooden trick box, the *Hellraiser* box is "beautifully veneered" and is opened by sliding and reconfiguring panels in a precise sequence (2002, p. 1). Moreover, like a Rubik's cube, the *Hellraiser* box may perhaps be solved via the use of mathematics (as hinted by the diagrams we see in the 2022 reboot), although it is often suggested that its logic is obscure and hard to grasp. Accordingly, its appearance and configurations are variable, as it maintains a mystique deriving from its nature as a portal and threshold—its location appears to be always partly outside 'our' space and time, or translocationally occupying multiple spaces at once. However, like a Rubik's cube and many other analogue puzzles, its 'solved' state can always lead to a subsequent 'unsolved' state, as the game has no exact beginning nor end.

The differences between Lemarchand's box on the one hand, and the Rubik's cube, traditional handheld puzzle boxes and classic detective fiction on the other, help to sketch out the characteristics of the *Hellraiser* puzzle box as a fictional game. To begin with, unlike the challenges posed by the others, the *Hellraiser* box seems relatively easy to solve. In *The Hellbound Heart*, the description of the puzzle box contraption offers little detail to latch onto—there are no obvious clues as to design, mechanisms, or trigger. Yet Kirsty manages it in the space of a bored evening. In the 1987 and 2022 movies, some characters also solve the puzzle almost accidentally, with barely any strategy, unaware of its real function, and end up meeting the Cenobites, releasing 'hell' (heaven to some) on Earth. Through this feature, the box once more mirrors the vulnerability of the flesh, which at any time can be violated, shattered or exposed to unimaginable pain. In the novella, like a body, it seems to respond to tactile "coaxing", a groping exploration of its "geography" (a word that pointedly hints at spatial dimensions): "Systematically, [Kirsty] began to feel her way over the sides" (1986, pp. 122–123) and their blood-drinking cracks, "testing her hypothesis by pushing and pulling once more" (1986, p.123). Frank likewise progressively unlocks it through "each new half twist or pull" (1986, p. 2). There nonetheless

seems to be a mysterious but inexorable logic to it, as it yields its secrets to prying and prodding fingers.

The box also differs from the Rubik's cube and classic detective fiction in that the rules and routes to its solution do not seem to be consistently stable, predictable, or rational (although Voight's diagrams in the remake suggest a greater degree of predictability, at least with regard to its solved state[s]). It appears to possess a sort of autonomous agency that can modulate its difficulty for different users and situations, for example, it seems more resistant to being closed, although it can autonomously reset itself. Some characters struggle to solve it, while others solve it in the course of idle engagement or a single encounter. While the Rubik's cube is often the object of speedrunning (which demonstrates how its use follows predictable logic and strategies), the *Hellraiser* box's solution is altogether more accessible (no one 'fails' to achieve some result).

Accordingly, another difference between the *Hellraiser* box and the above-mentioned puzzle boxes is how the two deal with the expectations of their players. Differently from the highly predictable logic (and therefore outcomes) of the Rubik's cube and the trick boxes, the *Hellraiser* puzzle box is characterised by a high degree of "ludic unreliability", which "occurs when a game signals certain possibilities and functionalities that diverge from how the game actually functions. In other words, a ludically unreliable game does not function in the way the player would reasonably expect" (Gualeni & Van de Mosselaer, 2021, p. 6). This also introduces a degree of unfairness into the game.

Interestingly, unlike in the story, the Cenobites in the 1987 film do not leave Kirsty alone once they have Frank—in contrast to the reboot film too, these Cenobites do not respect the 'game'; they also hunt down her partner Steve, who has not been in contact with the box, but has entered the house (which has become another box, honeycombed with new openings and sliding panels). The 'fairest' variant is the 2022 box. As a reboot, the 2022 movie "simultaneously extends and replays" (Verevis, 2022, p. 66) elements of the original to "reinvigorate interest in, and both renew and extend the value of, the world and mythos created by the source material" (Benson & Gray, 2022, p. 111), thereby deepening and augmenting the narrative world of *Hellraiser*. The remake therefore adds new configurations and mechanics to the puzzle box and is the film most concerned with elaborating its rules and possibilities within the franchise—which makes it particularly relevant and interesting here. The functioning of the box becomes more readable, understandable, and rule-based, to the point that the characters eventually use it (and the traps within the Voight mansion) to their advantage. Towards the end of the movie, the main characters use the puzzle box against the Cenobites themselves. In an unexpected twist (but one that demonstrates surprising consistency), it turns out that for the Cenobites any sacrifice is fair game, including their kin.

Unfairness also attaches to the 'reward', or lack thereof, as players' expectations are frustrated (in this, it resembles Borges' "Death and the Compass"). Unlike most games, Lemarchand's puzzle box grants no conventional rewards when solved ("So if I solve it, do I get a prize?" a player/victim asks in the reboot, and Voight answers "I do" (approximately 00:05:00). On the contrary, it turns its players into victims—players themselves become the reward obtained by the Cenobites or, in the 2022 film, also by the villain (Voight). Solving the 2022 box springs a blade, whereupon the box absorbs the spilled blood to seal an (often) unwanted pact with the winning player, who becomes the designated victim. In *Hellraiser* therefore, it is not the gameplay that is punishing, but its result ("keep going", says Voight in the 2022 reboot with a smile, suggesting that there is no doubt that his interlocutor would be able to solve the puzzle). It all comes back to the player's body—the body in parts, the body reorganised, the body as the Cenobites' prize/price—as plaything. Gualeni and Fassone note that: "If fatal games are ever called 'games' within works of fiction, it is by their game designers or the game masters rather than by their often-unwilling players" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 155). However, some ambiguity and ambivalence remain, in relation to the beyond-pleasure/pain of the 'reward'. In the *Hellraiser* 'game', it is hard to figure out who is 'playing' what/whom; perhaps the roles (player-avatar-game master) are interchangeable in a kind of hierarchy. The Cenobites "straddle the line between the torturer and the tortured" (Aldana Reyes, 2017, p. 196), as do the aspirants Frank and Voight, both seekers and players in their own ways. Lemarchand, the designer of the box, is hauntingly absent—though perhaps not entirely. The name means 'the merchant', perhaps represented by the shadowy figure who closes the deal and opens (and closes/reopens) the 1987 film. In line with Allmer's reading, we can note that he puts the box into circulation. Moreover, if the merchant (*le marchand*) is also the designer, this suggests that the market too is a labyrinth and a game, as well as a trap, where the consumer-negotiator is plaything as well as player. The box shares with games the defining feature of replayability: it resets (sometimes autonomously) to start over every time, awaiting the next 'player'.

Like some of the games Gualeni and Fassone (2023) discuss, Lemarchand's box seems to promise transformative transcendence (even, in the 2022 remake, ascendence) as a 'reward'—drawn out as an endless prolonging of the painful-play process. *Hellraiser* suggests the possibility of transcendence through (but not release from) pain. In *Hellraiser*, the body is not transcended to reach a 'beyond' the body which leaves the body behind, but rather the body may be seen *to* transcend—transcendence *in* the flesh (see also Aldana Reyes, 2014, pp. 42–51). The effect is not limited to the physical aspect of the body, yet it works upon the body: "We'll tear your soul apart". Soul, mind and body are rearranged in the process.

Conclusion

We have here analysed a specific fictional game, the *Hellraiser* puzzle box, across different media. We have seen how the puzzle box is used as a narrative device to intertwine many fundamental dimensions of the worldbuilding of the franchise (bodily, spatial, and political) and how it is used as a narrative and visual tool to elicit tension. We attempted to unpack the intertwining nexus of body-space-puzzle in *The Hellbound Heart* (1986) and *Hellraiser* (1987; 2022), across film, games, and literature, by 'unlocking' the puzzle box through horror studies and an analogy with detective fiction. Just as in detective fiction, body and space are shown to align in their propensity to become puzzles. We show how the player and space are dismantled and reconstituted together with the box, a puzzle that also functions as their double. In its genre affinities, *Hellraiser* sits at the intersection of detective fiction and horror, where the prohibition on impossibility (operative in detective fiction) is lifted.

The puzzle box has allowed us not only to delve into the *Hellraiser* franchise's focus on the horrific mutual interchange of body, game, and space but also to shed light on the implications of commodity fetishism, market-oriented ideologies' inherent sado-masochism, and the role that players/users/victims are made to occupy in this scheme. In line with the nature of the Cenobites as both 'heavenly' and 'hellish', the box's invitation can be framed in a way that is both cautionary and celebratory (as Allmer also notes, 2008). The box has very legitimately been read as liberating in its ability to reassemble and reconstruct the body and our perception of reality, as also implied by the emphasis on sexuality and queerness that comes from Barker's work (see, e.g., Campi, 2022); nonetheless, it seems simultaneously to deliver a critique of commodification as a series of traps. The puzzle box, like an updated Pandora's box, is an object of desire that provokes curiosity yet encloses unimaginable excesses without final satisfaction, and which targets individualised 'consumers' rather than collective humanity. More radically, Lemarchand's box modifies the space in which it is opened—showing its mutability, and our own. In the manner of a "pervasive game" (Montola, Stenros, & Waern, 2009), the box blurs the boundaries between realms, as spaces shift and bleed (sometimes literally) into each other.

At the end of the novella (Barker, 1986), Kirsty speculates on the possible existence of other such games (albeit implicitly more benign and conventionally rewarding ones): "A crossword maybe, whose solution would lift the latch of the paradise garden, or a jigsaw in the completion of which lay access to Wonderland" (1986, p. 152). A broader category of puzzle games is thus seen as potential portals to elsewheres, once the challenges (of varying degrees) that they present are overcome. In this sense, the puzzle box and its possible variants turn out to be tools to access other realities: an interpretation that reminds us of many digital games in which solving puzzles (sometimes with the use of specific technologies and tools) achieves the same result, such as *Myst* (Cyan Productions, 1993), *Viewfinder* (Sad Owl Studios, 2023), and *The Witness* (Thekla Inc., 2016). These games, just like the *Hellraiser* puzzle

box, associate solving puzzles with the chance to move between adjacent/interconnecting (fictional) realities. As we have seen, Lemarchand's puzzle adds to this by making it possible not only to step in/out of other realities, but also to witness those realities opening up in our own represented reality.

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