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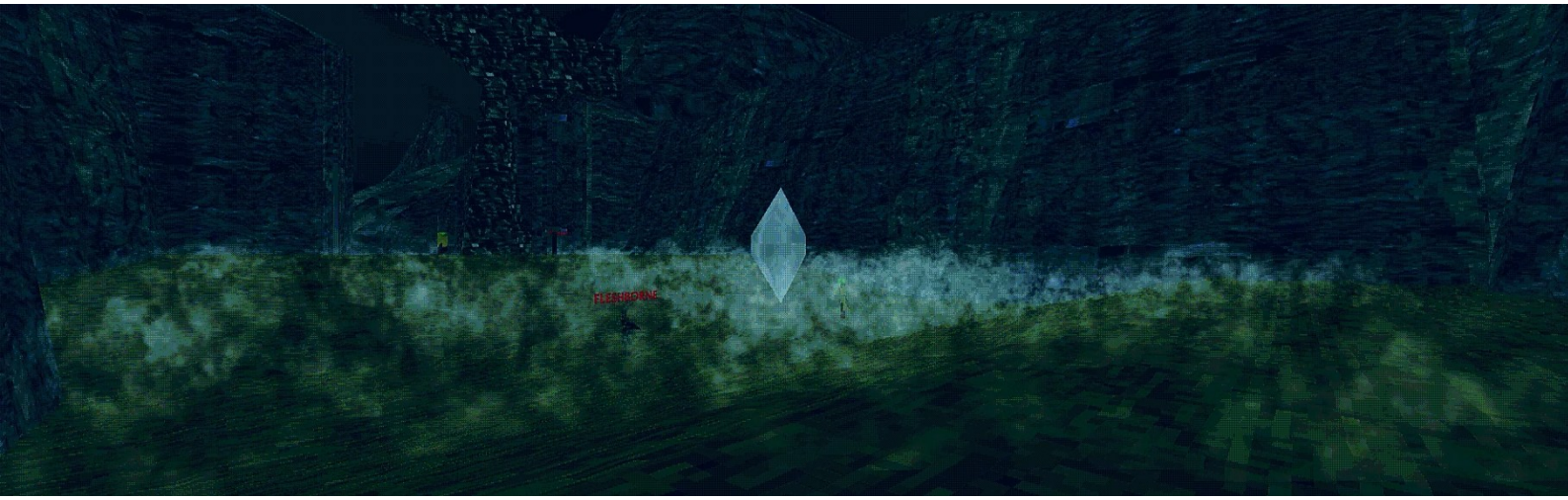

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Fictional Games *edited by Stefano Gualeni, Riccardo Fassone and Dom Ford*

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On Fictional Games and Fictional Game Studies

Stefano Gualeni, Riccardo Fassone and Dom Ford

Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture
Volume 16, issue 1 (Fictional Games), pp. 1–5

On Fictional Games and Fictional Game Studies

STEFANO GUALENI, RICCARDO FASSONE AND DOM FORD

Abstract

We explain the concept of *fictional games* and the theoretical and disciplinary progression that this special issue represents. We summarise the issue and the contributions within it.

Keywords

Fictional games; fictional game studies; game studies; fiction; narrative

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The term *fictional games* indicates playful activities and ludic artefacts devised as part of fictional worlds (Gualeni, 2021; Gualeni & Fassone, 2022, p. 2). In our initial academic efforts to map and understand games that exist exclusively as fictions (our 2022 book titled *Fictional Games*), we—Stefano Gualeni and Riccardo Fassone—specifically emphasized the qualities of inaccessibility and unplayability of those pseudo-games. What we argued there was that fictional games can only be understood as games in an oblique, indirect fashion, as they are experienced as playable artefacts only by characters within a fictional world. In other words, these are games that exist solely as fictions and—for various reasons—cannot be played in the actual world (Gualeni & Fassone, 2022).

Fictional games can be encountered in books, movies, radio shows, TV series, theater plays, videogame worlds, and so on. Within those works of fiction, they serve aesthetic and narrative purposes rather than ludic ones. In our 2022 book, we focused on a few of these purposes that we considered crucial for understanding their narrative roles and broader social significance. We examined fictional games as devices that add detail and depth to fictional characters and as elements that make works of fiction feel richer and more vibrant. Fictional games, we noted, can also serve as opportunities for comedic relief and political subversion. In our book, we

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also analyzed how fictional games serve cultural functions—such as working as ideological mirrors, utopian tools, evolutionary aids, and as meta-commentary on how we currently develop, discuss, play, and attribute social meanings to actual games.

From the outset, we knew that no single book could comprehensively cover all possible uses and meanings of imaginary games as fictions (and within fictions). Similarly, we were aware that the 92 fictional games cited and discussed in *Fictional Games* constituted only a fraction of a vast, culturally pervasive phenomenon. With that in mind, a couple of years after the release of our book, we issued a call for papers for a special issue of *Eludamos: Journal of Computer Game Culture* titled 'On Fictional Games and Fictional Game Studies'.

Gualeni and Fassone were joined at this stage by our third editor, Dom Ford, whose prior work in myth and meaning-making (Ford 2024, 2025) brought his interest to this special issue's focus. This reflects the expanding disciplinary and theoretical boundaries of the concept of fictional games.

As editors of this special issue, we invited scholars from various disciplines—primarily game studies, media studies, and literary criticism—to expand, refine, and critique our initial efforts to understand the pseudo-games we encounter in fiction. The results of this endeavor can be found in the following pages, which feature nine academic articles on aspects of fictional games that go beyond our book in several ways.

For example, in their study of *Vermis* (Plastiboo, 2023), a strategy guide for a roleplaying game that does not exist, Tim Timvig, Carl-Erik Engqvist and Karin Danielsson posit that fictional games do not necessarily need to be placed within a work of fiction, but can exist as stand-alone speculative artifacts. Their contribution titled 'Bridging Fictional Game Guides and Imaginary Games' challenges our original notion of what a fictional game is by extricating it from the confines of a fictional world.

Anh-Thu Nguyen's piece focuses, instead, on the ideological and utopian functions that we recognized as central in many works of fiction to discuss the role of space and spatiality in game shows (and in *The Hunger Games* in particular). Relying on Michael Nitsche's (2008) analysis of videogame spaces, in 'Cheating Against the Machine' Nguyen talks about gameshow arenas both as physical manifestations of hegemonic power as well as having the potential to cradle resistance and insubordination.

Instead of concentrating on fictional games as the playground for power struggle like in the previously mentioned article, Jaqueline Moran's 'This is the Best Game!' homes in on the theme of resentment. Moran examines *The Best Game*—a fictional arcade game from the YouTube show *Bee and PuppyCat*—as a critique of the masculine, competition-driven reputation of arcade spaces in North America. Drawing on game studies, the history of video games, and theories on dance, she highlights how the game challenges conventional, capitalistic design principles, pushing back

against the idea of *striving play* (see Nguyen 2020) and common game-related practices like the training and performance evaluation of players.

Like *The Best Game* in Moran's analysis, Antranig Sarian's article questions dominant game design assumptions, but in the direction of transformation of traditional power structure (and emphasizing their fragility), rather than their rejection. His piece titled '*Despot*: The Game that Looks Back' examines *Despot*, the fictional game in Iain Banks' *Complicity* (1993). Instead of mirroring the protagonist's violence, *Despot* distorts it through procedural logic, offering an early critique of the quantified self in games.

Matthew Leggatt's thought-provoking piece examines the holodeck in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, particularly in the episode 'Hollow Pursuits' (Bole, 1990), where the addiction to virtual leisure of one of the Enterprise's engineers (Reginald Barclay) unsettles the rest of the crew. While past analyses in fiction studies focused on the holodeck as a narrative device, Leggatt's article 'Desire, Therapy, and "Play" on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s Holodeck' links it instead to modern virtual reality gaming, highlighting its role in blurring reality, shaping desire, and exposing cracks in the TV show's utopian vision.

Much like *The Best Game* in Moran's analysis, Rory Summerley reflects on a fictional game that appears in a YouTube series. His piece 'Fictional Games as Parody' focuses on the use of fictional games for satirizing actual gaming conventions with an emphasis on humor and nostalgia. Summerley analyses the game played in the series, *Box Peek*, as a parody of transmedial gaming franchises, particularly *Pokémon*, using its fictional game to expose their inconsistencies.

In 'Fictional Videogames as Framing Devices', Julián Gutiérrez Carrera offers a close analysis of *Agony of a Dying MMO* (Hughes, 2021), a playable demo for a nonexistent PlayStation title which depicts the final moments of an (again, fictional) MMO game. According to the author, this fictional game frames actual MMOs as ruled playful spaces where different forms of social communication can take place.

Stefano Caselli and Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone offer an analysis of a fictional game that appears to mirror the labyrinthine nature of the fictional world it exists in. In their article 'Pandora's Labyrinth', they draw a comparison between the puzzle box and the literary genre of the detective novel, using this specific fictional game as a probe of the internal functioning and tropes of the genre.

Last but not least, Daniel Vella's piece examines the film *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072* (Fulci, 1984) through its deadly televised game show, the *Battle of the Damned*. His article 'The Greatest Extravaganza of Mortal Combat Ever Staged' articulates an understanding of the movie and its fictional game within Italy's historical and political landscape, emphasizing how the film ties imperial Rome to fascist ideology and critiques 1980s neoliberal media consolidation. Similarly to Nguyen's analysis of *The*

Hunger Games' arena, Vella examines the colosseum-set *Battle of the Damned* as a manifestation and extension of authoritarian control.

The selection of articles presented in this special issue thus belongs to a larger research pathway opened by our book. Both *Fictional Games* and this issue stand as proof that fictional games are a new and fruitful area of inquiry for disciplines game studies, literary theory, and the philosophy of fiction. That said, we are aware that a great amount of scholarly work still needs to be done in this area. While restricting the notion of fictional games to describe games found in works of fiction proved useful for setting the scope of our original inquiry, we believe it would also be beneficial to consider speculative, theoretical, nonexistent games that are not strictly embedded within fictional worlds. What we envisage, in other words, is a further broadening of our inquiry to encompass those made-up games that do not possess the status of proper fiction but instead circulate more informally as 'lore' in communities of fans or players.

A related consideration concerns the methodological aspects of analyzing fictional games. Is a game design analysis even possible for games that are unplayable and largely underspecified? Or is it rather the case that the researcher is somewhat compelled to 'complete' a fictional game in order to be able to analyze it? These questions were also addressed in a workshop titled 'Fictional, Fake, Nonexistent, Nonactual, Imaginary, Impossible, and Unplayable Games', which was held at the DiGRA 2025 conference in Valletta, Malta. The workshop tasked participants with discussing the nature and status of games that exist only in fiction or are otherwise unplayable, and with assessing the methodological challenges posed by these games.

To conclude, this special issue was conceived as a follow-up to our initial exploration of what remains a largely uncharted scholarly theme. By responding to—and expanding upon—the perspectives introduced in *Fictional Games*, the articles collected in this volume contribute meaningfully to our understanding of the cultural value and social meanings of games, regardless of their imaginary, fictional, or fake constitution.

We believe that the ideas and analytical tools presented here will be relevant to a broad range of scholars and practitioners interested in how game design contributes to the construction of fictional worlds, as well as to those exploring the role of narrative imagination in game development and analysis. Have fun!

Conflicts of interest

Dom Ford is an editor for *Eludamos* as well as a named editor for this special issue and co-author of the introduction.

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Bridging Fictional Game Guides and Imaginary Games

The Strange Case of *Vermis* by Plastiboo

Tim Timvig, Carl-Erik Engqvist and Karin Danielsson

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Bridging Fictional Game Guides and Imaginary Games

The Strange Case of *Vermis* by Plastiboo

TIM TIMVIG, CARL-ERIK ENGQVIST AND KARIN DANIELSSON

Abstract

This article proposes a widened view of fictional games by considering the game guidebook *Vermis I – Lost Dungeons and Forbidden Woods* (2023) by Plastiboo. Through a kaleidoscope of theoretical concepts hailing from playfulness, aesthetics, design, narratology, and literary reception, the authors engage with the issues of literary play and imaginary games. This conclusion is drawn: *Vermis* exemplifies a fictional game existing both parallel to a secondary world and within its own secondary world created by a factual book. Its format invites a literary play activity showcasing the playful power inherent in fictional games.

Keywords

Fictional games; *Vermis*; Plastiboo; aesthetics; play; reading; guidebook

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A corpse kneels beside a well.

Mesmerized by the reflection of
its living flesh: it wonders what
could have been done and could
have been.

And for as long as the moon
shines, the feeble illusion
will prevail.

Plastiboo, *Vermis I – Lost Dungeons and Forbidden Woods* (2023)

Thus begins the book *Vermis I – Lost Dungeons and Forbidden Woods* (2023) by the artist Plastiboo and the Italian publishing house Hollow Press. It is an unpaginated, pocket-sized book, no more than A5, and its size and cover art pay homage

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to the cherished aesthetics presently adored by fans of retro video games and aficionados of independent tabletop Role Playing Games (RPG). On the cover, a dark pixelated knight, poised in a presumed dungeon, prepares to engage some undead skeletons in close combat (see Image 1). The image is framed to resemble the cover of a rare video game from the golden era of pixels, complete with a patina of scratches and marks to create an illusion of age and mystery. Below the image, a text declares it as an "Official Guide". However, it does not specify what it is a guide to. The back of the book gives no further explanation of the above statement, just a pixelated image of a forest and a discarded sword. Above this image is one line of text asking, "Which flesh is your flesh?". A relevant question—but nothing that clarifies the book's guideship. The book is clearly a guide to a work of fiction, but what sort of fiction is it a guide to?

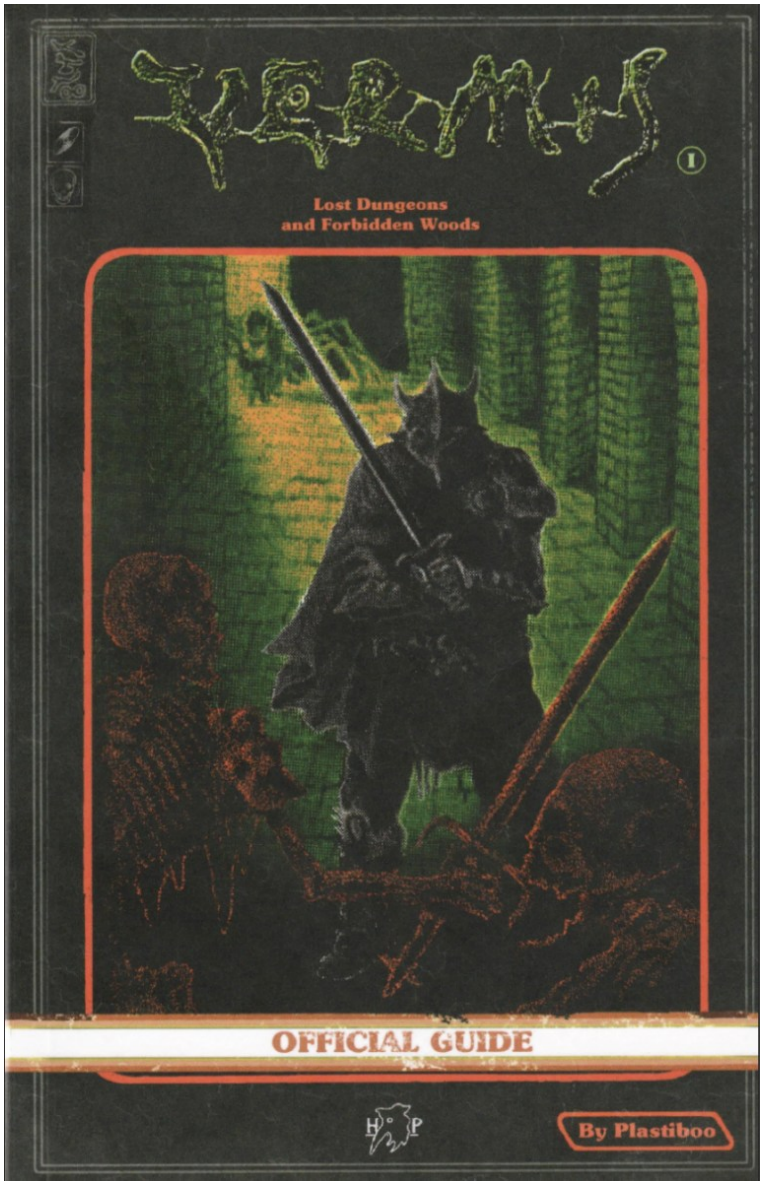

Image 1. Front cover of *Vermis I – Lost Dungeons and Forbidden Woods* (Plastiboo, 2023).

As a book, *Vermis* is described as a guide to a game that does not exist (Fiorilli, 2023); hence, it appears to be a fictional game, that is, a product of pure imagination. According to Gualeni & Fassone (2023), fictional games are "playful activities and ludic artifacts conceptualized as part of fictional worlds", meant to "trigger the imagination of the appreciator of a work of fiction and cannot actually be – or at least were not originally meant to be – played" (p. 2). Furthermore, in recognised definitions of fictional games, a fictional game is part of a fictional world (Gualeni, 2021; Gualeni & Fassone, 2023; Seiwald, 2019). The only medium containing *Vermis* is a guidebook; therefore, the game is not yet part of a fictional world. Instead, *Vermis* uses the idea of a fictional game to create a fictional world around it; hence, it would not fit the existing frame of fictional games. Nevertheless, *Vermis* contains traits pointing towards a fictional game; for example, the characters and creatures in the book are presented with numerical attributes similar to RPGs (see Image 2). Moreover, fans have begun exploring whether *Vermis* can be developed into a (real) game (Duehring, in development).

Can *Vermis* be a bridge to another perspective of fictional games, much like its namesake, the median lobe vermis of the cerebellum, which connects the two lateral hemispheres of the brain ('Cerebellum', 2024)? Against this background, we posit the research question: How can *Vermis* be understood as a *fictional* game? We seek to explore the definition of 'fictional games' by revisiting and broadening the concept through the case of *Vermis*.

Vermis: A short description

Returning to the guidebook, a quick flip-through reveals a plethora of descriptions of playable characters, environments, encounters, creatures, status effects, and items (of which some come with stats indicating their abilities and weaknesses). All in the same style of dark fantasy art hinting back to pixel games like *Moonstone: A Hard Days Knight* (Anderson, 1991), but also newer vector-based 3D games in the style of *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) and *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022), or analogue tabletop roleplaying games like *Mörk Borg* (Nilsson & Nohr, 2020). Despite the art style, this is not just a collection of concept art. Rather, the publication follows a narrative path, depicting the protagonist's illustrated journey from one encounter to the next, accompanied by sombre, poetic reflections. The linear narrative direction, with its lack of choices, also excludes another alternative, the choose-your-own-adventure novel, even though it certainly recalls the *Lone Wolf* gamebooks (Dever, Dever, & Lazzari, 1984–current) with their gloomy aesthetics and framing of language or solo-journaling games popular today, for example, *Thousand Year Old Vampire (*Hutchings, 2020). Hence, the book *Vermis I – Lost Dungeons and Forbidden Woods* speaks to the generations of players who grew up during the 1990s to the early 2010s with its art, language, and references.

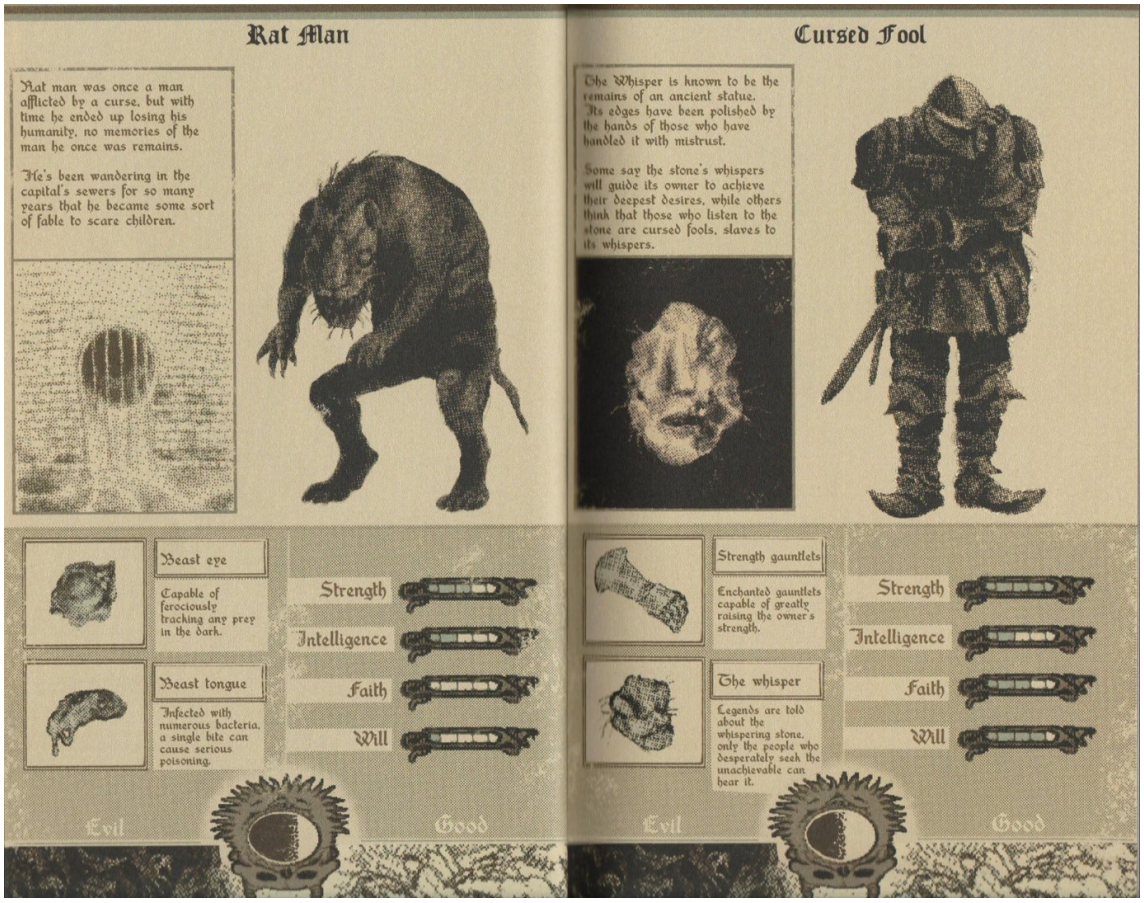

Image 2. A selection of character choices with different allocations of attributes in *Vermis I – Lost Dungeons and Forbidden Woods* (Plastiboo, 2023). © Michele Nitri & Plastiboo.

Many stumble upon this book when shuffling through online communities dedicated to tabletop old-school roleplaying games. For example, large YouTube channels like *Questing Beast* reviewed the book in 2023 when it was first published. Its publisher, Hollow Press (an independent Italian publishing house specialising in alternative and experimental comics), officially presents *Vermis* as a guidebook to a Dungeon Crawler video game that does not exist. The pseudonymous artist Plastiboo, the main creator, has, with the help of the editor Michele Nitri and graphical designer Marco Cirillo Pedri, used the traditional game guidebook format as an artistic and worldbuilding method. The reason for using the game guide as a medium for *Vermis* eludes the reader, as not much is found on the artist Plastiboo and their intention beyond statements such as "I like drawing on my computer" (Plastiboo, n.d.) and their being inspired by old Dungeon Crawler games.

For those unfamiliar with the format of game strategy guides, this was a phenomenon predating the Internet, when the key to solving a tricky video game was left to word-of-mouth, game magazines, or official guidebooks. These guides also became a way to interact with games for those unable to play them, either because they had not yet been released or for the lack of material means. *Vermis'* method of presenting itself as a guidebook to a videogame also distinguishes it from publications which

could be considered pure worldbuilding, i.e., presenting just a fictional world—similarly to books like *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastical World Around You* by Holly Black and Tony DiTerlizzi (2005). Still, *Vermis* both follows and differs from traditional game guides in its narrative method of fluctuating objectivity or vacillation between command and description. For example, in the official strategy guide for *Riven: The Sequel to Myst* (Prima Games, 1997), most of the book is written as a journal from the first-person point of a narrator who explores the world of *Riven*. In contrast, the game guide for *Arcanum: Of Steamworks & Magick Obscure* (Prima Games, 2004) lacks a narrator and addresses the player directly with descriptions and commands. However, the choice of wording and fluctuating objectivity may also be a consequence of a translation from Italian to English or an artistic choice alluding to the often stodgy translations of Japanese guides to English, such as *The Shadowgate Hint Book* (Kemco/Seika, 1989).

Understanding fictional games: A kaleidoscopic analytical approach

In this article, we engage with the understanding of games and play by applying a pallet of various concepts from playfulness, aesthetics, design, narratology, and literary reception, to discern how *Vermis* can be understood as a fictional game.

Our analytical approach uses the kaleidoscope as a metaphor, similar to how Kanter (1986) applies it to explain creative thinking as a process wherein a rearrangement of ideas leads to the formation of new ideas as novel and flexible patterns emerge. Hence, to guide the readers through our analytical kaleidoscopic exploration of how *Vermis* can be understood as a fictional game, we combine theory and analysis in one section. For clarity, we provide a definition of the terms used in the analysis (see Table 1).

Field of origin	Concept	Meaning
Playfulness	*Play*	A free but rule-bound activity characterised by playfulness, i.e., an engagement surpassing external consequence, realness, or convention (Huizinga, 1949/2016; Masek & Stenros, 2021), categorisable into different forms, such as competitive *agon* or imaginative *mimicry* (Caillois, 1958/2001).
	Lusory attitude	The attitude required by a player entering into the play of a game, wherein the player accepts the arbitrary rules of the game in order to sustain gameplay (Suits, 1978/2005).
Aesthetics	*Aesthetic striving play*	A form of play in which a player experiments with their temporary agency in relation to the game played; the player engages with a game on their own aesthetic terms in which stakes do not matter and where the playful activity constitutes its own reason for being (Nguyen, 2020).

Design	*Diegetic prototype*	An object which exists in a fictional world, created by dialogue, plot, character interactions, and narrative structure (Kirby, 2010).
Narratology	*Narrator*	The voice dictating the narrative—as an omniscient storyteller absent from the story told but with unlimited knowledge of the story world, or an unreliable narrator who filters their narration through their own subjective perspective (cf. Genette, 1980).
Literary reception	*Mind's eye*	The notion that a literary work is not a material artefact, but rather, a unique story which comes to exist in the individual head of each reader (Jauß, 1974).

Table 1. Definition of the concepts used in the analysis.

Playfulness: *What is at play in* Vermis?

In revisiting the concept of play for this study, we return to the foundational game scholar Johan Huizinga's interwar period writings, given the ubiquitous nature of play and games in culture—as per *Homo ludens*. According to Huizinga's (1949/2016, p. 7) nearly centennial statement, "all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be a forcible imitation of it". Since there is no order in *Vermis*, and since the reader (upon signing the reader's contract by engaging with the guidebook) enters a ludic session where the lack of gameplay offers a limitless set of possibilities wherein only one's imagination sets the boundaries, reading *Vermis* as a guidebook might be conceived as a literary form of play, wherein the reader engages in a game of worldbuilding by the help of the guidebook. As Ortoleva (2012, p. 14) notes, "play is discovery and invention at the same time", and the guidebook to *Vermis* invites a simultaneous exploratory reading and an act of mental worldbuilding. Echoing Huizinga's further definitions of the characteristics of play and taking his definition at face value, that is, that play is free, unreal, and limited and secluded (1949/2016, pp. 8–9), *Vermis* tics all the boxes.

Play is free—and so is *Vermis*. As De Kesel (2024, p. 3) explains in his revisiting of the Huizingian concept of the magic circle, play "defies, disturbs, and transgresses the rational", and playing is not a teleological endeavour—that is, it lacks a purpose. Moreover, play "raises man above the blind, deterministic logic of nature and society" (De Kesel, 2024, p. 3). *Vermis* embraces these notions, in its defying of the typical genre conventions of a guidebook, in its transgression of a rational reading experience, and its unspoken in-world teleology. The reader of *Vermis* is left completely unaware of their mission, as their chosen flesh "will be temporary", their "decision only has the weight [they] choose to give it", and the only deterministic logic which limits the gameplay is the imagination of the individual reader. Thus, *Vermis* demands that the reader adopts a lusory attitude (cf. Suits, 1978/2005) wherein everything is free and arbitrary. Initially, the reader of the guidebook believes that the choosing of flesh will constitute a choice which will dictate the rest of the reading

experience (much like the Choose Your Own Adventure genre of gamebooks), but the reader soon realises that the lusory attitude required in fact stipulates that the reader will only be confronted with pseudo-choices throughout their reading.

Play is unreal—and so is *Vermis*. In Caillois's (2001/1958) four forms of play, the *fictional game* of *Vermis* would take on the nature of *agon* (in the sense that characters would be created with different stats, and by defeating monsters, the characters would grow in power—and the players would be engaged in competition). The *actual game* of *Vermis* (the guidebook), on the other hand, exhibits the nature of *mimicry*, in the sense that the play-element at work is that of make-believe: the reader of the guidebook is engaged in imagining the ludic scenarios made possible by reading the book and possibly simulating the choices of a tabletop role-player. Moreover, in alignment with the definition of 'playfulness' suggested by Masek and Stenros (2021) as something which prioritises engagement over external consequence, realness, or convention, *Vermis* does indeed invite the reader to engage with the most unconventional, the most unreal, and the most internal—namely, one's own imagination, which, as Ortoleva (2012, p. 15) reminds us, is "a close relative of play".

Play is limited and secluded—and so is *Vermis*. Boluk & LeMieux (2017, p. 8) claim that videogames do not have rules (only game mechanics), as rules are "voluntary constraints and social contracts" between the players. Similarly, the printed guidebook to the fictional game of *Vermis* presents the reader with an ontological gap which the reader is invited to fill in. *Vermis*, thus, functions like "*equipment* for making metagames" (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017, p. 9), in that it invites the reader to play that they are playing a game. The factual guidebook to the fictional game thus becomes a reading game about a roleplaying game. Moreover, in line with Boluk and LeMieux's (2017, p. 29) notion of indie games, *Vermis*—as a metagame—represents and references the style and gameplay of other games, thus becoming a game about games, or a reading toy functioning as a portal to the imaginary world in which the fictional world of *Vermis* exists. This notion aligns with Huizinga's (1949/2016) seclusion criterion, as the fictional game of *Vermis* only exists in the minds of the readers, which ought to be understood as seclusion par excellence—comparable to the mind game *The Game*, where the whole objective of the game is to refrain from thinking about the game in question. Huizinga even concludes that in acknowledging play, one acknowledges mind, "for whatever else play is, it is not matter" (1949/2016, p. 3). Thus, play—in essence—only truly exists in the mind, as play, even in the animal world, "bursts the bounds of the physically existent" (Huizinga, 1949/2016, p. 3).

Aesthetics: What constitutes the reader of Vermis?

Games can be considered to possess their own aesthetic genres (cf. Mosselaer, 2018; Sommerseth, 2009). As Nguyen (2020, p. 115) notes: "To have aesthetic experiences, it has been suggested, we must be disinterested in practical outcomes, or we must be contemplative, or we must maintain a particular unfocused quality of

attention". Moreover, aesthetic experiences are only readily available to the *spectators* and the *designers* of games—as these do not require "any form of instrumental goal-oriented thinking on the part of the audience" (2020, p. 117); the *players*, on the other hand, are "in tension with the disinterest requirement for aesthetic experience" (2020, p. 117). The solution, proposed by Nguyen, is an 'aesthetic striving play' constitutive of a 'disinterested interestedness' or an 'impractical practicality' where players only play for the sake of the aesthetic experience. There, the players set up their temporary agency and submerge themselves in a game where the stakes do not matter—but, rather, where the activity constitutes its own *raison d'être.*

In a sense, what Nguyen (2020) suggests is a subversion of play, in the sense that the aesthetic striving player plays the game on their own aesthetic terms. Applying this idea to a reading of *Vermis* yields the following notion: as the guidebook does not provide any clear goals of the nonexistent game, nor indeed any clear goals of how to engage with the guidebook to the nonexistent game, and since the reader is oblivious of the means to any goal, the only reasonable goal—and only reasonable means to said goal—would be aesthetic striving play, wherein the means constitute the goal, and vice versa. Thus, the reader must interact with the guidebook in such a way that they are playing a reading game if the guidebook is to make any sense—as the book, given its narratological and ludological gaps (its unreadability and unplayability) would not make sense to be read in any straightforward fashion. In a sense, *Vermis* invites (or even summons) an aesthetic striving player on being read.

Diegetic prototypes: *What is the game of* Vermis?

Another perspective we apply to the book is the concept of diegetic prototypes. According to Kirby (2010, p. 41), a diegetic prototype is a design existing in the fictional world created through "dialogue, plot rationalizations, character interactions, and narrative structure". However, most diegetic prototypes in Kirby's definition refer to (future) technologies that only exist in a fictional world, for example, within science fiction movies. At the core of the idea are the two activities of prototyping and storytelling, something *Vermis* succeeds with, as it is 1) a factual book from the primary world that retells the story from 2) a secondary world which in turn is an artifact of another secondary world: one where *Vermis* is 3) a playable game (cf. Tolkien, 1947, p. 18, on the concept of primary and secondary worlds; see Figure 1).

Sicart (2014) reminds us that games are formal manifestations of play, existing as portable tools to inspire us to play—through play, we are not separated from reality but rather made a part of it. Though the guidebook is an analogue object, it plays with a secondary world where the game *Vermis* existed, and based on the reception, it begs for its existence to be manifested in this primary world, almost like a grimoire conjuring a demon. *Vermis* has inspired an unofficial soundtrack and lo-fi mixes featuring the artwork from the book as a backdrop. Meanwhile, many dedicated fans have attempted to decipher the lore behind the first book or jokingly commented

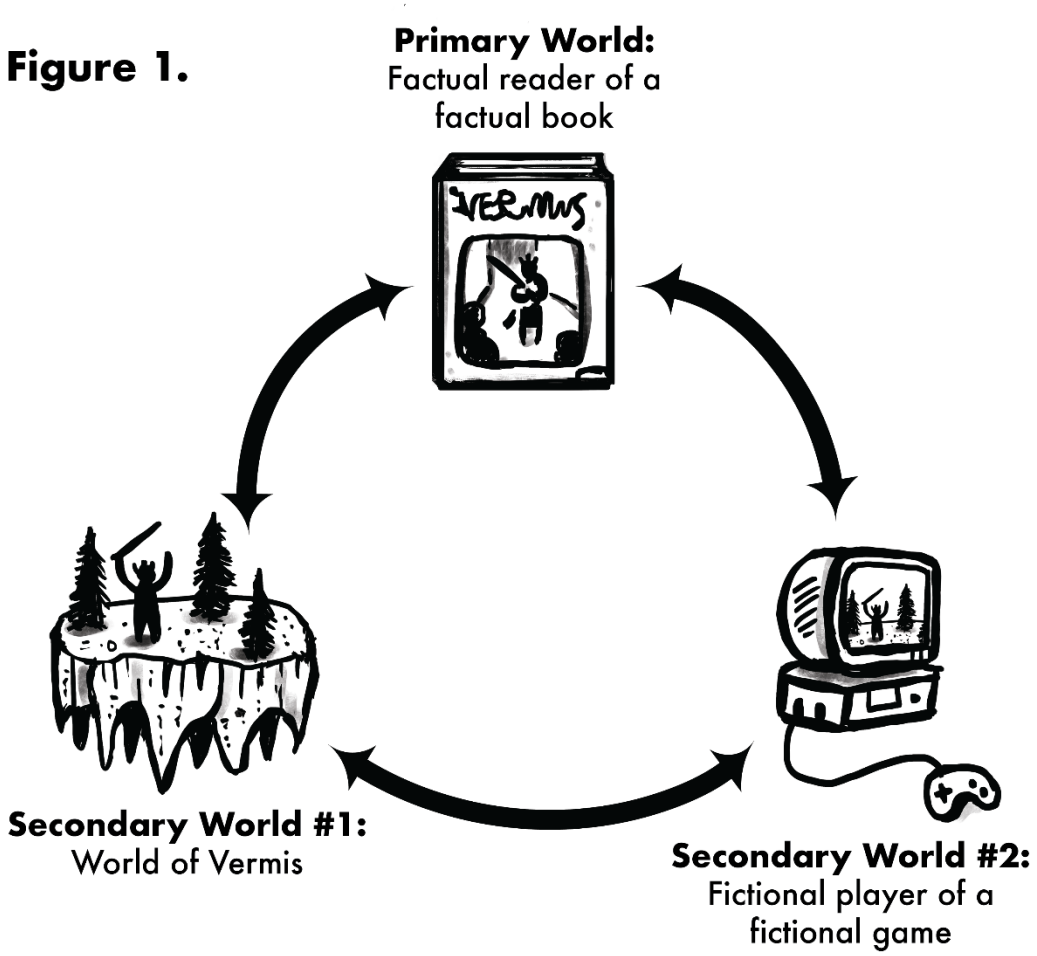

Figure 1. The relationship between the book of *Vermis* (existing in our world), the world of *Vermis* (existing in the book), and the fictional game of *Vermis* (existing in the reader's mind).

on social media about playing the game *Vermis* "back in the day", with their independent fandom playfully engaging with *Vermis's* non-existence. Committed fans have even taken it upon themselves to create fan-based games inspired by the book. The fanbase's dedication to making the diegesis of the game *Vermis* into reality turns the book into what Kirby (2010) defines as a "performative artifact" (p. 43), an object that demonstrates a possible future scenario through its existence. It would not be surprising if an official *Vermis* game would one day reach "actuality" (cf. Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 13), though it was never intended to happen. It would be mysteriously shrouded in a narrative of being a game from the earlier days of digital entertainment, lost for a time but now resurrected.

Bateman (2011), engaging in Walton's (1990) definition of official and unofficial games, claims that "we can say that if one plays along with the spirit of an artwork, story and so forth, one is playing an authorized or normal game (as opposed to an *unofficial game*, which may be perfectly licit, but is not what is usually expected or intended)" (p. 139). The spirit of *Vermis officially* invites the factual reader to be both

a player and a protagonist, each in their secondary worlds. However, as the game does not exist in the primary world, the variety of conceptualisations of the game of *Vermis* will naturally constitute a plethora of *unofficial* games.

Narratological analysis: Who is *the narrator in* Vermis?

The guidebook presents different selves of the narrator, which complicates the relationship with the reader (cf. Genette, 1980). In the chapter 'A House Without Windows', the address mimics the style of a guidebook: "After some time walking, hidden in the forest you will find what appears to be the perfect place to rest" (Plastiboo, 2023). This is a fairly objective instruction as a how-to manual to beat the game. On the following page, however, it says: "You soon notice how the exterior doesn't show any windows … You don't perceive any sounds of lights coming from the inside" (Plastiboo, 2023). This way of deciding for the readers what they do and do not notice more resembles gamemaster-jargon than objective instructions to the player on how to progress. In the chapter 'The Goblin's last breath', the tone of the narrator becomes clearly objective, and the narrator states what one can and cannot do: "You can't take his armor or his axes with you because they are extremely heavy" (Plastiboo, 2023).

The guidebook even ad-libs objective facts (displaying the narrator's lack of omniscience), which becomes clear in the description of the Ring of the Singing Fire: "The effect only lasts about five minutes" (Plastiboo, 2023). In the chapter 'The Alluring Shine', it says: "You look at the chest wondering what wonders could be hidden within it". This call refers to two different worlds: partly a description of what happens in the game, partly a description of the reader who there and then reads the sentence (oblivious to what happens in the fictional game). *Vermis* is thus always experienced in two different layers at the same time: in the moment of reading and in the imagination where the game is played (see Figure 1).

The chapter 'Goblin Knight' employs a suggestive and gradually clarifying style:

> A threatening presence stands in the middle of the room; their odd looking armor presents the main traits of a goblin, but it doesn't match his imposing stature, he carries a pair of wavy war axes. As soon as he notices your presence he starts walking towards you. (Plastiboo, 2023)

We thus move from a "threatening presence" to a genderless "their" to a gendered "his". The narrator's omniscience returns in the chapter 'The Princess's Chamber', where the narrator states what a corpse is dreaming about: "The princess remembers better times … she thinks of the goblins and her father" (Plastiboo, 2023). Verily, since the guidebook does not present a clear narrator, the reader ends up in a state of ontological uncertainty, resulting in a playful reading where nothing is granted.

Literary reception: What is the work of fiction of Vermis?

In the definition of a literary work put forth by Jauß (1974, p. 14), an essential and material approach to the text should be forgone, as the literary work does not constitute an actual object providing the same meaning in each of its readers—as though it were a physical artefact or a "monument", as Jauß calls it. Rather, a literary work is to be understood as something which takes shape in the idiosyncratic imagination of each individual during the act of reading. Echoing the notions in Barthes' (1967/1997) text 'Death of the Author', in which the meaning of a work of fiction is dependent on the impressions of the individual readers rather than the inconceivable intents of the author, the claim can once again be made that fictions, much like meaning, exist outside of the written narrative and inside the minds of the readers.

As Fiorilli (2023) notes in his review, *Vermis* "builds the speculative world of its own existence", and the book is "less a narrative than a narrative of a narrative: a guide to a more complete story that exists nowhere else but, in the player/reader's own head". However, despite the attempt at creating a world in which the game exists, *Vermis* does not provide enough information for the game to be fully playable—thus, the game remains a fragmented mystery, which becomes evident when comparing the game to more rigorously detailed RPG books. This setup hints that the reader possesses an agency in their reading activity. In *Vermis*, however, the agency of the reader is strictly reduced to choosing one's flesh and engaging with acts that either end the journey or keep the journey going. *Vermis* might thus be regarded as an incremental game, from the idea that the guidebook lacks enough information regarding gameplay to present the reader with a comprehensive reading experience. Ironically, the only one of the five attributes ever explicitly tried in the guidebook is *will*. In the chapter 'The Silent Keeper – Two Coins', the reader is instructed to measure their level of will correctly and place a pair of coins in the correct hands, otherwise, they will be inflicted with a curse (see Image 3).

In the chapter 'The Deepening', the following is stated: "You may enter into this lengthy hallway without really knowing since the position on the map is provisional, the hallway is constantly moving and changing locations". This works in both ways: the hallway in-game is supposedly constantly moving, and the same is true of the imaginary setting hazily existing in the reader's head. This irreplicability of the game is seen in how *Vermis* plays with the idea of the reader leaving the narrative upon finishing the guidebook (or completing the game). In the final chapter, "A Room with a Well", the following is stated: "A feeble illusion shatters in silence. The void swaddles you gently, welcoming you back; a life has been lived and the Dream is no longer" (Plastiboo, 2023). As the illusion falters, the reader is brought back to the surface and the portal to the game is shut—never to be accessed again. This irreplicability is also suggested by the final phrase of the guidebook, "Which flesh is your

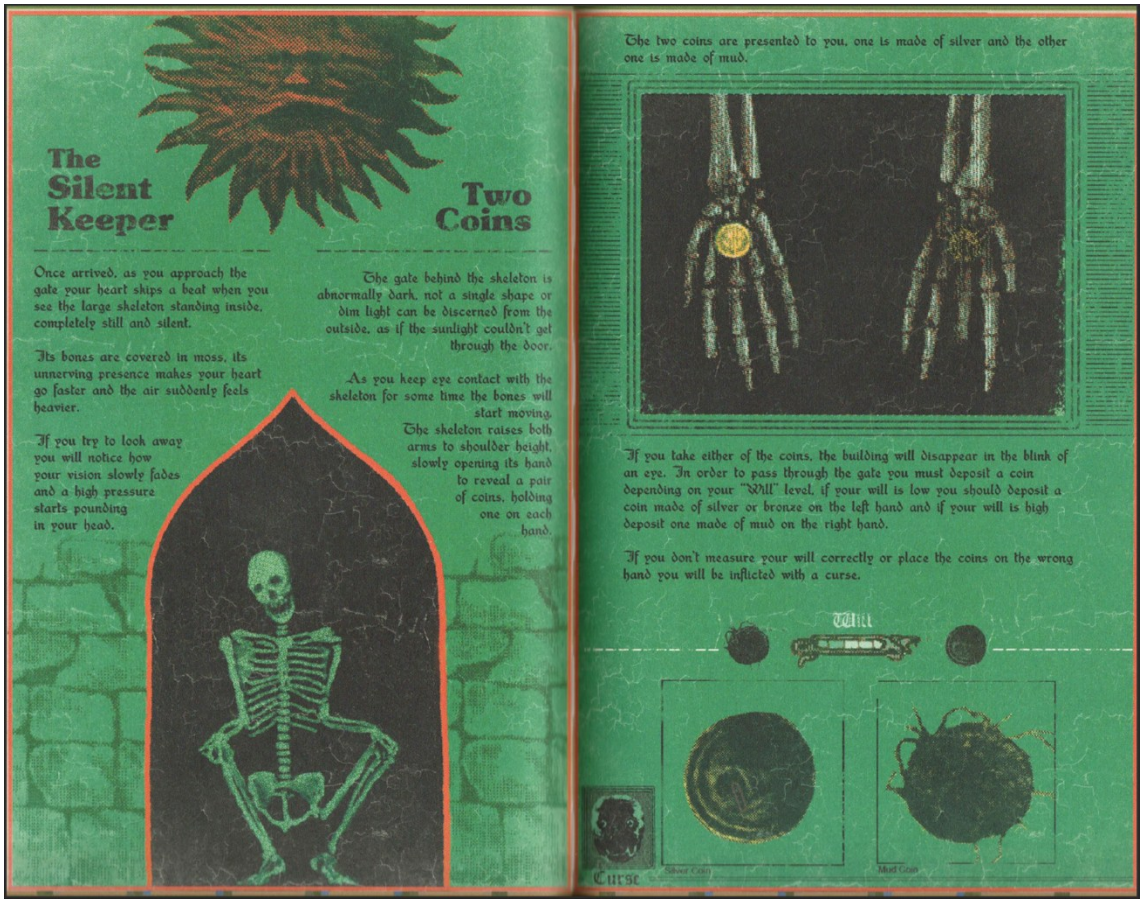

Image 3. The attribute "Will" is tested in the chapter 'The Silent Keeper – Two Coins' in *Vermis I – Lost Dungeons and Forbidden Woods* (Plastiboo, 2023). © Michele Nitri & Plastiboo.

flesh?", which prompts the reader to engage with the ludic guidebook a second time—hence, every reading experience is inherently unique.

Vermis, thus, is presented to the reader as a game in which the buttons push themselves. There is no real player. Instead, *Vermis* is a self-playing game in its current format—a linear narrative photo-developed in the individual minds of each reader.

Bateman (2011, p. 50) notes that uncertainty is central to stories, and this is "common to all well-regarded stories" (p. 50). Moreover, in following Malaby (2009), Bateman stipulates that "games can be understood as processes that utilize uncertainty in particular ways to create compelling and engaging experiences, while play is best understood as a willingness to improvise in the face of uncertainty" (2011, p. 53). Applied to *Vermis*, this yields the following conclusion: the fictional game of *Vermis* would likely make use of uncertain processes to engage the players (much like any roleplaying game), whereas the factual guidebook of *Vermis* compels the reader to willingly improvise a hypothetical scenario wherein the reader would in fact be a player.

Conclusion

Broadening the concept of fictional games by blending fictional games and imaginary play, we argue that *Vermis* invites the reader to reconsider play from a meta-perspective, wherein the reader is inhabiting multiple secondary worlds during the same reading.

Using the concepts diegetic prototypes and performative artefacts, we have illustrated how the guidebook *Vermis* plays with a secondary world where the actual game *Vermis* exists. In comparison to other fictional games, created as part of a secondary world, *Vermis*, the fictional game itself, exists on a meta-level first, and demands the creation of a secondary world which can harbour it. Thus, a fictional game does not necessarily need to be part of an (existing) secondary world—it can be the object that creates and enforces a secondary world.

Narratologically, the guidebook does not present a clear narrator—putting the reader in a state of ontological uncertainty. The reader, thus, is played by the guidebook, where the toying with the reader leads to an increasingly playful reading; the playfulness, thus, is aggregated. Moreover, *Vermis* creates its own player. The guidebook, having functioned as a blueprint for the game, contains the cogs necessary to make the narrative machine work in the head of the reader but framed in such a way that the reader becomes a player in their own idiosyncratic imagination. At its most rudimentary stage, then, *Vermis* functions like a meta-game: a game in which the reader, in their illusion, plays that they are in another illusion (Figure 1); they pretend that they are pretending (cf. Boluk & LeMieux, 2017).

In this article, we have discussed if *Vermis* can be understood as a fictional game. Indeed, *Vermis* lacks some of the traits associated with fictional games, since it does not exist in a fictional narrative. However, *Vermis* still brings to the table significant traits of 'fictional games', since it functions like a reading toy which inspires the reader to imagine a world where the fictional and hitherto unplayable game of *Vermis* is a factual and playable game. This suggests that the present definition of 'fiction' in fictional games is disrupted, and within such disruption lies a potentiality to widen the concept. Much like its namesake, the median lobe vermis—connecting the two hemispheres of the cerebellum—the guidebook *Vermis* functions like a bridge to a fictional reality wherein the game presented in the guidebook exists. Thus, *Vermis* shows the power inherent in fictional game guidebooks to conjure up imaginary games which demand their unique form of lusory attitude in order to be enjoyed.

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Cheating Against the Machine
Reclaiming (Game) Space in *The Hunger Games*

ANH-THU NGUYEN

Abstract

This paper explores the arena of *The Hunger Games* series (2008–2010) as game space, focusing on power dynamics between the Capitol and the tributes. The Hunger Games, as a televised deathmatch, exemplifies a battle royale setting orchestrated by a totalitarian regime to maintain control over subjugated districts through a brutal spectacle. This analysis examines the Capitol's oppressive control, reflected in the meticulously designed arena—a setting where tributes are subjected to constant surveillance and manipulated by the Gamemakers to maximize entertainment value. Using Michael Nitsche's framework of videogame spaces, the analysis dissects the arena as rule-based, mediated, fictional, social, and play space, each aspect reinforcing the Capitol's authority. In spite of this, tributes like Katniss Everdeen reclaim limited agency through acts of defiance and exploitation of the arena's inherent flaws, allowing resistance from within the game system through cheating and deception.

Keywords

The Hunger Games; battle royale; game space; cheating

Before battle royale games would become a mainstream phenomenon in the videogames industry, popularized by titles such as *H1Z1* (Daybreak Game Company, 2015), *PUBG: Battlegrounds* (Krafton, 2017), *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017), or *Apex Legends* (Respawn Entertainment, 2019), it was first a literary phenomenon. Pitting contestants, usually teenagers, against one another until only one survivor remains is a concept most prominently attributed to *Battle Royale* by Kōushun Takami (1999), a dystopian horror novel set in an alternative post-war Japan that had emerged victorious from World War II. Although a commercial hit with a movie adaptation in Japan, a sequel, and a planned-but-scrapped attempt at an international television adaptation, it would be the *The Hunger Games* series to bring battle royales to global success. In this regard, battle royales have their roots as fictional games—games not

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meant to be played, existing only in works of fiction (Gualeni, 2021, p. 188). Different to battle royale games, battle royale novels seem to have an inherent political disposition: while both *The Hunger Games* and *Battle Royale* imagine an alternative society with authoritarian and fascist governments who operate on systemic oppression, the battle royale genre for videogames largely abstracts these political contexts, focusing instead on competitive gameplay mechanics. The battle royale, as a fictional game, is consequently a narrative device to explore themes of power, control, and ultimately resistance.

The young adult dystopian series *The Hunger Games* is set in Panem, a state that reigns over the remains of what was once North America. In this totalitarian society, Panem is divided into various districts, each subservient to the Capitol, the nation's central governing power. As a tool to maintain control, the games are an annual event in which contestants from the ages twelve to eighteen are put against one another until one survivor remains. Fashioned to be a grand media spectacle, the Hunger Games are broadcasted across Panem for entertainment. In the first book, *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), protagonist Katniss, from poverty-stricken District 12, volunteers in place of her younger sister, Prim, who was chosen by chance as the female 'tribute'—the official term used by the Capitol for the contestants. Through her show of determination, survival skills as a hunter, marketability as a heroine, and on-camera romance with fellow District 12 tribute Peeta Mellark, she and Peeta become the Capitol's darlings after winning the games. Yet her show of kindness to District 11's tribute Rue, despite being enemies, inevitably forces the Gamemakers to let both Katniss and Peeta win the games. In resisting the Capitol's rules and, ultimately, President Snow, Katniss is incidentally elevated to a symbol of resistance. In *Catching Fire* (Collins, 2009), the second book, to curb growing revolts in the districts, President Snow puts Katniss in yet another year of the Hunger Games in an attempt to eliminate her. This eventually leads to a rebel faction invading the game's arena, saving her, and putting a larger military revolt against the Capitol in motion, ultimately leading to the Capitol's downfall with Katniss acting as the symbol for resistance and revolution in the final book, *Mockingjay* (Collins, 2010).

As the name suggests, the Hunger Games frame themselves as games and serve as the narrative centre pieces across the trilogy. As a fictional game, the Hunger Games embody the "ideological paradigms that circulate in a certain fictional culture" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 65), namely the reign of an affluent, wealthy elite in the Capitol over the 12 districts subservient to them. Drawing on Louis Althusser, Stefano Gualeni and Ricardo Fassone (2023, p. 63) observe that "games, at least in their commodified versions, can thus be said to participate in the functioning and perpetuation of the ideological state apparatus". The Capitol as state is consequently keen on maintaining power structures in Panem, and the Hunger Games serve as an oppressive tool to ensure the districts remain subservient. As Gualeni and Fassone write on fictional games, those that serve as social instruments are "designed to be persuasive and pervasive, and they often work on the basis of the coercion of players" (2023, p. 50). Because oppressive structures are so deeply engrained into

Panem and the games act as a tool to maintain it, examining the Hunger Games in terms of their game rules reveal how exactly games and play are used to keep a fictional society in check.

This paper suggests exploring the Hunger Games, particularly its arena, through the lens of game studies. In this case, this paper begins with Johan Huizinga's (1951) position that "all play has its rules", which gives games "a stable and identifiable structure" (Suter 2018, p. 19). As the Hunger Games occupy a concrete, actual space within its fictional universe in which they take place, "game spaces represent a spatial expression of the set of rules" (Götz, 2018, p. 261). By using Michael Nitsche's (2008) analytical planes for videogame spaces in the first part of this paper as a close-reading approach, I will address the symbiotic relationship between game space and its rules. Examining the Hunger Games as if they were videogames is not in judgement of its playability, in which, as a fictional game, its unplayability is an intrinsic feature (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 24). Rather, beyond analysing how power structures are embodied as game rules, using this lens also aims to reveal certain assumption about videogames in comparison to fictional games. The second part concerns how its contestants, or tributes, can nevertheless challenge the game's rules through cheating, or rather, through exploits. This not only allows for individual agency but also literally allows them to reclaim (game) space that is otherwise in the hands of the Capitol.

To explore these arguments, the following will examine the arena from the first two novels, as well as corresponding scenes from its film adaptations. As the novels are written from Katniss' perspective, the adaptations have scenes that provide further context to the game's arena, its rules, and particularly how Gamemakers are allowed to manipulate them at will. The analysis will not include the third novel, *Mockingjay*, in which the games do not exist in the same shape or form as in the preceding titles, although this does not mean the following analysis does not relate to the novel in any way. However, the rebellion seizes control of the Capitol in which its last lines of defence is the Capitol city itself that has turned into an arena in an attempt to fend off the rebels. At this point, the Hunger Games loses much of its character that had been customary for the games, such as the selection of tributes and the media spectacle before, during, and after the games. It certainly raises other interesting questions, such as the gamified dimension of a battlefield, or the nature in which Katniss navigates this arena as a propaganda tool for the rebellion—however, these questions far exceed the scope of the intended analysis for this paper.

War as spectacle, games as war

To analyse the Hunger Games as games, promptly connects the novels' main themes of violence and war for entertainment to the often-violent spectacle of videogames. Having young contestants slaughter each other in a game as a "means of social control" as part of the Capitol's apparatus of "propaganda, fear, and force" (McEvoy-Levi

2018, p. 187) brings forth discussions on the close relationship of the military and entertainment. Author Suzanne Collins herself recounts the idea for *The Hunger Games* being incepted from channel surfing, with some channels running reality TV show programs, others showing footage of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Collins, 2008). As the origin of Western videogames themselves are found in the U.S. military-industrial complex (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. xxix), militainment about games is a natural extension. They place "virtual games within a system of global ownership, privatized property, coercive class relations, military operations, and radical struggle" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. xxix). At its core, the Hunger Games are fictional games in which such a system is expressed, namely through a deeply totalitarian, oppressive and Orwellian regime. Treating the Hunger Games from a game studies perspective then, fits within the greater framework of militainment, or as Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) put it, games as empire. Collins' novels can certainly be read as a critique of such systems, and further, they can be interpreted on how to resist these. It should be noted that although this paper primarily focuses on the arena, a major point of the novels is how the games never end and how the means of keeping the districts and its citizens in check are pervasive. Focusing on the arena itself should not suggest that the Capitol only expresses its power through it, rather, it should be understood as a crucial tool to maintain control, alongside its many other arms of power, such as through surveillance and military enforcement. These powers should not be isolated from the arena or vice versa, rather, it is the arena where the Capitol can exhibit its prowess.

Viewed through a game studies lens, the arena poses the following questions: How does a regime like the Capitol express itself through a game and how does it attempt to maintain its power through game rules? The following analysis will consider the arena in its representational and spatial dimensions of the Hunger Games as a (fictional) game by using Michael Nitsche's five analytical planes of game spaces.

Space(s) of control

> The flames that bear down on me have an unnatural height, a uniformity that marks them as human-made, machine-made, Gamemaker-made. Things have been too quiet today. No deaths, perhaps no fights at all. The audience in the Capitol will be getting bored, claiming that these Games are verging on dullness. This is the one thing the Games must not do. (Katniss in *The Hunger Games,* Collins, 2008, p. 209)

The main spectacle of the Hunger Games takes place in an exclusively built arena created by the Capitol. Fitted with various forms of technology, it allows Gamemakers, a team with administrative access spearheaded by a Head Gamemaker, to manipulate the arena at will and keep track of the tributes. As the trilogy draws on themes of "state oppression and popular resistance", the arena is "designed to demoralize the districts and deter further revolts" (McEvoy-Levy, 2018, p. 187). Indeed,

the existence of the Hunger Games leads backs to a failed rebellion by the districts and the games were consequently installed by the victorious Capitol as a reminder of their failed rebellion and continued subservience. It is in this sense that no part of the games nor the arena can be described as fair, rather, the tributes' fates lie in the hands of the Capitol's whims and the efforts of the Gamemakers, whose job is to make the games entertaining for the affluent elite of the Capitol yet cruel enough for the district citizens to remain subservient.

To understand how this control is reflected within the arena, I will examine it as a game space by applying Michael Nitsche's (2008) analytical planes for videogame spaces: rule-based, mediated, fictional, play, and social space. Each of these planes help to dissect the various forces active in maintaining the arena as a tool of social control. These planes should not be understood as isolated from one another, but rather, must "work in combination" to deliver a "fluent gaming experience" (Nitsche, 2008, p. 16). In the context of the Hunger Games, the planes can dissect in detail how the Capitol expresses its power through the arena's space, restricting the actions of tributes and controlling them if necessary.

Rule-based and mediated space

From the first seconds of the games, the arena is guided by rules that define the Hunger Games: tributes are launched into the arena from underground catacombs that run beneath it. Once inside the arena, they must stay on the platform for sixty seconds until the ring of a gong signals the start of the games; leaving the platform earlier risks triggering landmines. A rule-based space, according to Nitsche, refers to the "mathematical rules based on physics, sounds, AI, and game-level architecture" (2008, p. 15). In other words, these may refer to algorithmic structures not immediately visible to the player in videogame spaces, it is "defined by the code, the data, and hardware restrictions" (Nitsche, 2008, p. 16). The arena expresses this through automated processes running within its embedded technologies, be it cameras, sensors, day and nighttime simulations as well as weather simulations. These technologies are not purely algorithmic in nature as the real-physical components of the arena remain ontologically different from a digital space, such as a videogame space, e.g. the hybrid forms of technology in the shape of genetically modified animals, 'muttations'. However, a rule-based space speaks to the inherent artificial quality of its space, created through technology and ensures the surveillance apparatus by the Capitol, a power that runs both within and outside of the Games (Ann, 2020, p. 21). This in turn gives rise to what audiences and tributes see: the mediated space that "consists of all the output of the system can provide in order to present the rule-based game universe to the player" (Ann, 2020, p. 16). The dome-shaped limits of the arena's ceiling are the arena's skybox, a videogame's cube or sphere to simulate a "seemingly undefinable vastness by the players' point of view within the game world" (Bonner, 2021, p. 67). The weather simulations also suggest a "worldliness" (Bonner, 2021, p. 68) within its space, the make-believe of freedom and infinite

space. The first arena of the trilogy presents itself as a forest with open skies, complete with streams, lakes, and rivers, and with varying degrees of topography befitting for such a biome, such as muddy banks or rocky terrains. For Katniss, this arena gives her an unintended advantage, being a skilled hunter with foraging knowledge, as she was regularly hunting for extra food in the forest beyond District 12's borders. The direct dangers she encounters are consequently human made, both by fellow tributes and the Gamemakers.

Fictional and social space

The false sky as skybox and its promise of infinite space is not an illusion Katniss actually falls for, yet she attempts to escape the danger by removing herself from other tributes as far as possible. Promptly at the beginning of the game, Katniss runs away into the forest as opposed to the large metal structure at its center, the Cornucopia. Situated in an open plain, the structure is easy to spot and littered with valuable items and weapons essential for survival and combat. Despite this, Katniss is aware that the Cornucopia is a provocation by the Gamemakers to lure in as many tributes as possible for an immediate bloodbath just as the games commence. Running away from the structure and into the forest, Katniss treks for several days before ultimately becoming exhausted. Finding safety by climbing up a tree then falling asleep in exhaustion, she is woken by a wall of fire descending onto her. Immediately, she knows that this fire is not natural, not one that could have been laid by fellow tributes. Rather its unnatural look and height is only possible through technological manipulation at the hands of the Gamemakers. The film provides additional context to this scene by showing the Gamemakers' control room. As it turns out, Katniss had nearly reached the edge of the arena and was too far from other tributes. The Gamemakers thus force her to run back into the arena again, into others. A holographic map at the center of the room shows the full access Gamemakers have over the arena, full control over cameras as well as being able to manipulate the arena at will. Gamemakers fulfill a dual role of managing the arena, but also being a production team to create the spectacle that are the Hunger Games.

The team of Gamemakers in their control room create a fictional space: "the space 'imagined' by players from their comprehension of the available images" (Nitsche, 2008, p. 16). Different to the rule-based space, Nitsche refers to the sum of information arising from the arrangement of different sources and planes, in this case, the sky box, the arena's topography, audiovisual effects, and so forth. According to Nitsche (2008, p. 16), decisions made by players are based on their comprehension of the fictional world. With the Hunger Games however, fictional space is twofold, depending on who is seen as the player. At first glance, tributes might be considered players as they are participants. The crude reality of the Hunger Games suggests, however, as Katniss herself observes, that tributes are being manipulated into fighting each other at the whims and control of the Gamemakers, and consequently, the Capitol. Katniss is hesitant in actively participating in this, avoiding confronta-

tions whenever possible—both because she is unable to face more combat-experienced contestants but also because she is aware of her status as a tool for entertainment. Katniss, reluctantly playing along with the Capitol's machine, is constrained and careful with her actions knowing that cameras are pointed at her. Drawing on Michel Foucault and surveillance power, Kayla Ann notes the panoptic power of the Capitol's surveillance even during the training stages preceding the Games, noting that the "prevalent fear of surveillance immobilizes all tributes from even considering escape or suicide even though they are often left to their own devices in their rooms at night" (2020, p. 22).

Calling Katniss a *player* from a game studies perspective seems erroneous, as being a player and taking part in play is usually associated with a voluntary act, the free choice of doing so. Roger Caillois (1958/2001, p. 26) considers basic freedom essential to play, while Huizinga (1951) associates play with leisure, not a necessity (p. 8). To participate in play requires a form of agency to do so. For Janet Murray (2016, p. 125), practicing one's agency in videogames is most obviously expressed through spatial navigation. Yet in the case of Katniss, her spatial navigation towards the edge of the arena and away from tributes warrants punishment from the Gamemakers. As Murray comments, actions alone do not give rise to agency: "The players' actions have effect, but the actions are not chosen and the effects are not related to the players' intentions" (2016, p. 125). In a system in which freedoms are restricted, nearly no agency is held by citizens of the districts, in which children are made participant in these games. From a game studies perspective that grounds itself in Huizinga, the tributes may be regarded as no players at all, only pawns. Yet, in a fictional game, they are still players. This contradiction is a necessary transgression of games as fictional games, in particular, dystopian fictional games. Alberto Boschi (2017, p. 279) notes the following characteristics for the dystopian fictional game: players are part of a forced competition, the game does not provide equal opportunities for all its players, rules are subject to change, and the game is only partially isolated from the 'real' world. As he poignantly concludes, "the imaginary competitions described … constitute the perversion, or if one prefers the sinister parody, of the Huizingan and Cailloisian concept of play" (2017, p. 279).[1]

Instead, agency and freedom are held by wealthy and influential Citizens of the Capitol. Beyond being the audience, the Capitol citizens are able to influence the games' outcome by sponsoring tributes, e.g. by sending much-needed items. After Katniss is severely injured by the man-made fire, she receives medicine from a sponsor to

[1] Translated from original: "le immaginarie competizioni descritte in queste pagine costituiscono la perversione, o se si preferisce la sinistra parodia, del concetto huizinghiano e cailloisiano di gioco" (Boschi, 2017, p. 279).

treat her wound. This plane is Nitsche's (2008) social space, "defined by the interaction with others, meaning the game space of other players affected" (p. 14), that is, if one were to consider Capitol citizens as part of the game. Although Nitsche refers to multi-player games, the nature of the Hunger Games and how citizens 'interact' with the games and players through sponsorships affects its players directly. Katniss attempts to be 'likable' in front of cameras, to play a role assigned to her to garner sympathy, which is to be a girl from District 12 who is falling in love with her fellow tribute from the same district, Peeta. Because the Hunger Games' media spectacle begins way before the actual games but is in truth a whole array of different media appearances for the tributes, "Capitol viewers develop fanlike identifications with different tributes" (McEvoy-Levy, 2018, p. 190). Collins' portrayal of games is a "spectacle and virtual, interactive war: the Capitol viewers of the Games think they are involved and are emotionally invested, from a position of voyeuristic safety" (McEvoy-Levy, 2018, p. 190). It is through this plane of fictional and social space that Katniss performs her role to appeal to the Capitol audience.

The crucial role the Capitol audience inhabits as not just passive viewers but, at times, active participants, which makes them both complicit and necessary for when the Hunger Games takes a sharp turn. Their participation is suddenly fuel against the Capitol: As both Katniss and Peeta are thrown into the Hunger Games again in the following year after their victory, the two feign a pregnancy in an interview leading to the new Hunger Games, causing dismay among the Capitol audience. As a last-minute attempt to stop the Hunger Games, they appeal to the audience through the story they had crafted on-camera. As the Capitol's darlings through their on-screen romance, playing the roles of star-crossed lovers, the Capitol audience also seem to be slowly revolting against having their beloved celebrities thrown into the arena once more. Despite this, the Hunger Games proceed. While the Capitol audience may hold a degree of agency and freedom, certainly more than the actual tributes, their influence is indirect at best and therefore insufficient to truly rattle at the pillars of the Games themselves. They are tolerated by the system as long as they play within the rules, not against them, as the power they wield is conditional and merely tolerated. The porous nature of the game space is therefore not only asymmetrical but also highly hierarchical, speaking to the inequality of all parties involved: the tributes, Gamemakers, and the Capitol audience are all within a system upheld by President Snow. Consequently, President Snow emerges as one of the central antagonists throughout the trilogy, as he is seen to forcefully implement and enforce rules according to his political motivations—perhaps the only character who can be regarded consistently as a player throughout much of the trilogy.

Play space

The question of who really is the *player* brings forth the next plane of videogame space: the play space, "meaning the space of the play, which includes the player and the videogame hardware" (Nitsche, 2008, p. 14). As shown earlier, it is not the tributes who have access to any of the hardware but rather, the Gamemakers. In their

dual role of game administrators and production team, they control ways of interaction in a system that only allows one-way communication. As far as videogames are concerned, the term interactivity or interaction has often been used vaguely, resulting in a "too-broad application that conflates interaction with any action causing an outcome" (Landay, 2014, p. 174). Even if this were the case however, the form in which interaction is seen in the Hunger Games is limited. Assuming that a game's system is a system of communication, the Hunger Game's arena is one of closed interactivity, to borrow Lev Manovich's (2001, p. 40) distinction of open and closed systems, the latter using fixed elements within a fixed branching structure. Consequently, this system is the opposite of what many videogames attempt to do, "in which interaction is like a conversation built up through an exchange of information" (Landay, 2014, p. 175). For the Gamemakers, there is only one goal: to kill off tributes until one remains. In the film, the Gamemakers are shown to almost exhibit a playful joy when sending tributes into deathly situations through traps. This alone encapsulates that the play space—the space that includes the player and the hardware—does not (only) refer to the tributes, but also the Gamemakers in their control room.

In these considerations of game space, each plane is directly controlled by the Gamemakers through the logics of the Capitol's totalitarian rule. In the arena, this is characterised by the overpowering control the Gamemakers have over the tributes, their ability to manipulate the arena at will and a surveillance system that leaves no angle uncovered. Despite death being the likely outcome, the rules must be obeyed. As Collins shows however, every (game) system has its flaws that may be exploited. By the end of the first games, Katniss and Peeta are the only tributes left. Having played the roles of star-crossed lovers from District 12, Katniss takes out Nightlock berries—a fruit with deadly consequences when consumed. After falling in love on-screen for the audiences, it seems that the couple has resolved to die together in the ultimate turn of romantic tragedy. After both take the berries into their mouths, the games are stopped, or rather, Head Gamemaker Seneca Crane declares both Katniss and Peeta as the winners of the 74th Hunger Games. Against all odds, both Katniss and Peeta survive, sparking the flame that would eventually lead to the Capitol's downfall. A direct violation of the Hunger Games' most important rule of only crowning one winner forces the Capitol to accept two and shows that the game can indeed be played on the tributes' terms. President Snow is keenly aware of how this victory can be perceived as weakness and punishes Seneca Crane with his life. Despite the power Gamemakers yield over the tributes, even Gamemakers must obey rules to sustain the state apparatus of the Capitol. However, it is also Katniss who reclaims agency and is not merely a pawn to the Games, as Ann observes: "Katniss Everdeen does not lose agency due to the power the government exerts of her body, but rather she first establishes agency through the power she exerts through her own body" (2020, p. 22).

Reclaiming space: Agency and exploits

Katniss' threat of a double suicide is not her first act of defiance against the Capitol. During training sessions in which tributes are ranked in front of a jury before entering the actual arena, Katniss shoots an arrow into an apple displayed on a roasted pig platter for the Gamemakers. This is perhaps one of Katniss' more significant acts of defiance early on, an impulsive moment that happens out of frustration and anger with the Gamemakers seemingly valuing food more than her. It is a show of how little Gamemakers care for the lives of tributes, as performance scores may attract sponsorship deals essential to survival, contrasted with the Capitol's opulent lifestyle. In the following year, Katniss and Peeta are thrown into the games once more—an attempt by President Snow to eliminate the root of growing uprisings across districts. During this training, a force field barrier has been set up between the tributes and the Gamemakers. Katniss comments that she is likely responsible for it, remembering her outburst from the previous year. Unwittingly, she had exposed a potential weakness of the Capitol. With the same force field that separates the arena's space with the beyond, the Gamemakers attempt to draw the spatial borders again to separate the tributes from themselves, but this time out of fear for their own safety.

The force field is detrimental to the Capitol's powers and its survival, acting as dividers of space between those subjugated and the ones in control. Returning to the idea of a game's skybox, Markus Rautzenberg (2015, p. 250) argues that no videogame space can truly escape its inherent cave structure, in which the impenetrable skybox ends all attempts of exploration of the beyond eventually—at least in theory. Although Marc Bonner (2021, p. 73) disagrees with Rautzenberg in his analogy to the cave, both make a case for never needing to leave the cave and seek beyond its borders as staying within is a necessary condition of experiencing the world. This, of course, is not the case for the tributes. In the 75th Hunger Games, it is Katniss who once more unwittingly breaks the force field from within, allowing rebel forces to enter the arena. Katniss' repeatedly attempts to reclaim agency, usually challenging the Capitol itself whenever she does so, even if she is not always aware of the full scope in which she acts. This act then, is about breaking the borders and limits of the arena, through an exploit that makes use of the force field's weakness, levelling the playing field and reclaiming space from the hands of the Capitol. When framing the arena and its rules as a game space, Katniss is making use of exploits. In other words, in order to fight against the Capitol, the tributes must cheat. Cheating itself becomes an act of resistance, the only way to reshape an oppressive system. As Gualeni and Fassone point out in reference to dystopian fictional games, they carry the potential to "function as utopian devices" (2023, p. 50). Their observation on the possibility of transgression is particularly applicable:

> Games, understood as rigid and inescapable systems of control and inderdiction, can nevertheless be transgressed, broken away from and re-

> vealed to be not only arbitrary but also imperfect and unjust. This revelation can then apply, as synecdoche, to the social structure and the system of power in which the games are played, typically leading to revolutionary acts and the eventual collapse of the established power in the fictional world. (2023, p. 94)

The force field, it turns out, has been a point of weakness before, allowing itself to be exploited by a tribute to help him achieve his victory. Haymitch Abernathy, mentor of Katniss and Peeta in the 74th and 75th Hunger Games, became a victor of the 50th Hunger Games through exploiting the force field to his own advantage. Similar to Katniss, Haymitch treks the arena until he reaches the edge. When he reaches the cliffs and drops a pebble, it comes back to him. In a confrontation shortly after, Haymitch lures his opponent to the edges of the arena. When his enemy throws an axe at him, Haymitch dodges it, with the axe falling off the cliff. Obvious to him but not to his attacker, the axe returns, lodging itself into Haymitch's attacker and killing her in the process. With only Haymitch left, he is declared the winner of the 50th Hunger Games.

Even if Haymitch was not intentionally using the force field as an exploit, the Capitol's punishment following his victory evidently illustrates that this use was not intended. The bounce-back effect of the force field was instead designed to bring tributes back into the arena in case of attempted suicides. By manipulating the arena in ways not intended by the Gamemakers, he demonstrates "the intelligence and personal agency of a nobody-tribute from nowhere—District 12—granting himself too much power and autonomy" (Ann, 2020, p. 112). Consequently, in the aftermath of Haymitch's victory, his family, closest friends and partner are killed as his actions were seen as ridiculing the Capitol's power. As Katniss comments: "You know they didn't expect that to happen. It wasn't meant to be part of the arena. They never planned on anyone using it as a weapon. It made them look stupid that he figured it out" (Collins, 2009, p. 228). Katniss' remark is twofold: not only is individual agency a threat to the Capitol, but Haymitch was exploiting an unintended feature. As Grant Tavinor describes:

> In computer science, an *exploit* is a use or manipulation of a piece of computer technology that creates an unanticipated effect, usually at odds with its intended use. In gaming, exploits are behaviours performed by gamers that take advantage of the bugs or vulnerabilities in a game, and again which are at odds with the intended use; as such, they form a way in which gamers can breach the norms of gaming practice. (2009, p. 107)

Katniss and Peeta indirectly threaten the Gamemakers with Nightlock berries that are meant to be accidentally consumed; the berries were not meant to be used for suicide, nor for a double suicide for that matter. Individual agency challenges the Capitol's power and therefore its legitimacy. For videogames, while most players might accept a game's formal rules, "some players do not engage in gameplay, but

instead play against the rules" (Tavinor, 2009, p. 103). From Tavinor's point of view, cheating is "breaking the rules of the game" (2009, p. 107), and therefore a disruption of the formal frameworks laid out by the designers.[2] Cheats, then, are means of gaining an "unfair advantage" (Tavinor, 2009, p. 107).

Ironically then, despite being built from the ground by the Capitol, the arena's in-built flaws allow for individual agency to challenge the capitol, through means of exploits and cheating. As all game systems, the Hunger Games are determined by rules. With information on the arena being withheld from tributes until they are inside, these rules are "often are not known in advance and must be discovered through play" (Tavinor, 2009, pp. 96–97), in the same way Haymitch walks to the edges of the arena in hopes of finding anything he can use. Due to game systems being "encoded in a computer … the game cannot be manipulated except through the means encoded in its affordances" (Tavinor, 2009, p. 107). In other words, tributes engage with the arena's rules through (deadly) play and, at times, figure out ways to use these affordances against the Gamemakers' intentions.

Perhaps rather than cheating, Haymitch, Katniss and Peeta take part in deceptions. Deriving from J. Barton Bowyer, Mia Consalvo notes "cheating in virtual worlds is to view it as a form of lying or deception. If practices are about gaining unfair advantage, they often involve some level of deception" (2007, p. 170). To play against the Capitol's rules, to exploit the arena, to deceive both the Capitol and its audiences are major motifs across the trilogy. From the on-camera romance of Katniss and Peeta, to their act of consuming Nightlock berries, to Katniss' forced performance of femininity in the roles of either a protective older sister or the girl in love (Miller, 2012, p. 146), deception is part of the forces working with, but also, for the Capitol.

To take one step further, by the second book, *Catching Fire*, Katniss is no longer just cheating or deceiving. To borrow Huizinga's (1951, p. 11) term, she is now a spoilsport: "The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game … the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself". Huizinga describes the spoilsport as a threat to the play-community as a whole and therefore must be "cast out" (1951, p. 11). It is in this same way in which Katniss, as the heroine of trilogy, first exploited the Games to win them together with Peeta, but was still acknowledging the overall power structures of the Capitol that dominated the Games as well as her life. It is not until the crucial moment in *Catching Fire*

[2] It should be noted that others have argued for the use of videogame errors to be part of the play experience as opposed to breaking gaming practice, see: *I AM ERROR. Störungen des Computerspiels* (Beil at al., 2012). Similarly, others have discussed intentional glitches and other malfunctions in videogames as ways of the game system referencing its own materiality becoming visible (Janik, 2017). Rather than a disturbance, these types of glitches carry a transformative potential for the relationship between player and virtual world, offering alternatives of engaging with its assumed affordances (Gualeni, 2019).

when she shatters the arena, rearranging the conditions of the Games. Huizinga includes revolutionaries, of which Katniss ascends to as a symbol of the resistance, as spoilsports who can create a new community with rules of its own (Huizinga, 1951, p. 11). It is within these frameworks that speak against play and games that Katniss can act on her own accord, with her own agency to pave way for drastic sociopolitical change.

Conclusion

As Andrew Zimmermann Jones concludes in his analysis of the Hunger Games through mathematical models of game theory, "from a game-theory standpoint, that makes them very poorly defined games, but it makes for an interesting world and a great trilogy of novels" (2012, pp. 247–248). From the perspective of game studies as understood in relation to video games, it is difficult to conceive of the Hunger Games as games, as they are conducted as a series of involuntary, coercive, and deadly media spectacle with children for the amusement of an elite class, posing an inherent ethical issue. Even leaving this aside, the Games' own rules and spatial boundaries are neither consistently reinforced nor are they without inherent flaws, being contested not only by its own tributes, but also by the Capitol's elite and the Gamemakers. Jones' sentiment expresses the unstable, and even unpredictable nature of the Hunger Games.

As a fictional game however, the answer to the questions of who the player is and who is being played is a dynamic one, always in tension and in motion with one another as the events of the trilogy unfold and several parties fight for their right to wield power to bring down the same system it produces. As a fictional game, the Hunger Games serve as a rigid state apparatus meant to sustain it, yet as the trilogy unfolds, the Games become the showplace for a struggle between those who seek to use the same rules to turn it against itself. The question of who plays is therefore not only directly related to the Hunger Games, but affects the hierarchical oppressive system of who has the ability to distribute power, how they wield it, and how it is perceived by tributes, citizens, Gamemakers, and later, by both the resistance and its oppressors. The inherently unethical, coercive, and oppressive nature of the Hunger Games are far from what games conventionally ought to be; as the already high stakes escalate, the challenge to its rules transforms into revolutionary war. As a fictional game, the Hunger Games allow readers to explore a radically alternative idea of what a game is, perhaps only to arrive at the conclusion that the Hunger Games are games in their name only.

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"This is the Best Game!"

Rejecting and Redefining Arcade Norms in *Bee and PuppyCat*

Jacqueline Moran

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“This is the Best Game!”
Rejecting and Redefining Arcade Norms in *Bee and PuppyCat*

JACQUELINE MORAN

Abstract

This article analyses *The Best Game*, a fictional arcade game encountered in the YouTube animated series *Bee and PuppyCat*. Although arcade games in North America have long been conceptualised as sites of masculine skill-based competition and mastery, this reputation obfuscates the diverse history of arcade games and reinforces capitalist design conventions. *The Best Game* offers a critique of these assumptions. By examining this fictional game through arcade history, masculinity, capitalism, and dance, this article explores how *The Best Game* eschews design conventions to align with the show’s *mahō shōjo*-inspired themes and leverages its fictionality to suggest a game that neither trains nor evaluates its players, although the result expresses resentment more than it incites resistance.

Keywords

Bee and PuppyCat; fictional games; work; capitalism; sports; arcades; masculinity; dance

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Games in works of fiction may be unplayable for a variety of reasons, ranging from incompleteness to illegality. However, these fictional games are uniquely expressive. They can reflect the fictional society’s ideologies, represent the narrative’s themes, or deepen the fictional world (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023). This article examines a fictional game encountered in season 1 of the animated series *Bee and PuppyCat* (Seibret, 2013–2018). *Bee and PuppyCat* is a comedy drama created by Natasha Allegri, inspired by the *shōjo* and *mahō shōjo* genres and targeting an adult audience. The series stars Bee, a precariously employed young woman, and her friend PuppyCat, an intergalactic temp worker. Mihailova (2019, p. 1017) summarises *Bee and PuppyCat* as the story of “a young woman incapable of holding a steady job … Perpetually almost-broke, Bee splits her time between lounging on the couch and accompanying PuppyCat on intergalactic temporary work assignments”.

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This essay examines Bee's favourite game, which she only calls "*The Best Game*". *The Best Game* is located in a prototypical arcade parlour called Glitch Gorge (a maze of closely spaced cabinets with bright art, blinking lights, and overlapping music in a dark room) and follows a montage of prototypical arcade games (joysticks and buttons, points, competition, winners and losers). Amidst this familiar gaming canon, *The Best Game* is a dancing game without scores, competition, goals, or tangible controls. Since "it is difficult for us to imagine games … that are not characterised by activities related to an attitude of instrumental rationality" (Gualeni, 2021, p. 191), *The Best Game* is particularly difficult to decipher. In contrast to the familiar conventions of sports, work, and standardised controls, *The Best Game* is better understood as an unchoreographed, unmeasured expression of lights, sound, and movement. Through its inherent ambiguity and unplayability (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023), *The Best Game* problematises arcade and videogame conventions, draws attention to designs that neither train nor evaluate players, and offers a ludic representation of the *shōjo*-inspired fictional world of *Bee and PuppyCat*. However, as underspecified and incomplete fictions, *The Best Game*'s resistance to capitalist, masculine conventions and Bee's resistance to labour and steady employment both remain indulgent fantasies.

Welcome to Glitch Gorge

The Best Game and the arcade parlour Glitch Gorge appear in episodes 5 'Birthday' (Abrams & Allegri, 2016) and episode 6 'Game' (Allegri, Winter, & Farias, 2016) of season 1.[1] In these episodes, it is Bee's birthday. We learn that, although she used to celebrate with her dad at Glitch Gorge, her dad is no longer around and she has not been to Glitch Gorge in some time. Bee has been celebrating her birthday by doing what she typically does any other day: "I find something in the couch to eat, then I take a nap until I get a headache". PuppyCat encourages her to go to Glitch Gorge. They trudge through the rain and forest to find Glitch Gorge overgrown and abandoned. They break in, Bee restarts the generator with a kiss, and they play.

In the montage that follows, the games appear for only a few seconds each, but it is clear how they work. We see Bee and PuppyCat side-by-side, staring at a screen and rocking joysticks and rapidly pressing buttons. One machine has buttons labelled "BITE", "EAT", and "KICK". Audio from another machine asks, "Which hamster can kiss the best?" while a "+1" appears above two kissing hamsters. A machine labelled "Bad

[1] This essay will only analyse *The Best Game* and Glitch Gorge as they appear in season 1 of *Bee and PuppyCat*. Both appeared again in season 2, which reboots season 1, but significant changes were made, including Bee's absence from Glitch Gorge, the other arcade games, and Bee's behaviour in the arcade. For these reasons, only season 1 will be considered in this analysis.

Baby" has baby bottles embedded in its interface and another machine labelled "Water Man" has life-sized watercooler bottles for Bee and PuppyCat to handle. At almost every game, Bee engages in trash talk, the sports and videogame practice of taunting competitors to improve one's own performance or harm another's (Irwin et al. 2023; Johnson & Taylor, 2020). "I'm gonna kiss that hamster so hard you're not gonna know what—", "I'm gonna fill up so many workspace watercoolers, you're not gonna know what—". The games throughout this absurdist parody of arcade culture conform to our expectations of arcade games in particular and videogames in general: competitive, two player, equal controls, quantified performance, point accumulation, wins and losses. Players can "BITE", a kiss is awarded with a point, Bee wants to win against PuppyCat.

In contrast, *The Best Game* is shown on screen for much longer but is far more ambiguous. According to Bee, "this is the best game! My dad came up with it when I got sick.[2] It used to be in our apartment. I played it non-stop". When we first see *The Best Game* in episode 5, it looks much the same as the other machines (see Figure 1): an upright cabinet, two joysticks each surrounded by an equal number of buttons, and a screen depicting a serene anthropomorphic white bunny who invites potential players to "Help me fill my dark heart with stars". If *The Best Game* adhered to the established pattern, Bee and PuppyCat would stand at the tangible controls, face

Figure 1. Screenshot of Bee standing at *The Best Game*'s cabinet in episode 5 'Birthday' (Abrams & Allegri, 2016) of *Bee and PuppyCat* season 1. © Frederator Studios

[2] Bee says her dad made "some of these games" in Glitch Gorge but *The Best Game* is the only one she specifically confirms was made by her dad.

Figure 2. Screenshot of Bee and PuppyCat playing The Best Game in episode 6 'Game' (Allegri, Winter, & Farias, 2016) of *Bee and PuppyCat* season 1. © Frederator Studios

the screen, and compete to, perhaps, collect more stars than the other, while Bee proclaims, "I'm gonna get so many stars, you won't know what—".

However, at the end of episode 6, when Bee and PuppyCat return to Glitch Gorge with the coins needed to play *The Best Game*,[3] we see Bee and PuppyCat standing side-by-side in the dark away from the cabinet. No cabinet silhouettes, no blinking lights, no beeping music. Bee stamps her foot. Pink stars illuminate on them, the walls, and the floor. 'Insert Coin' plays, a downtempo[4] song composed by electronic musician Will Wiesenfeld (a.k.a. Baths), who composed all the music for seasons 1 and 2 of *Bee and PuppyCat*. The stars hang for a moment before slowly drifting across the walls like a disco ball's reflections. Bee and PuppyCat turn to face one another, hold hands, and dance, turning in a small circle with little hopping steps (see Figure 2). This is all we see of the game. This scene lasts 13 seconds. We see Bee and PuppyCat dancing for 10 of these seconds. This game is shown on screen for longer than any other arcade game, and yet this game and its mechanics are far less clear.

[3] When Bee finds *The Best Game*, she has no more money to play. The majority of episode 6 takes place during the temp job they accept to earn more money. In further contrast with *The Best Game*, the temp job is a role-playing game parodying many role-playing conventions such as tedious side-quests, levelling up, and a 'chosen one' hero who saves a helpless populous from a threat that will wait patiently until the hero is ready. The show's commentary on role-playing game conventions is amusing but straightforward and any further theorizing will be no different from existing discussions of non-fictional role-playing games, and thus, will not be discussed further in this paper.

[4] As tagged on RateYourMusic.com.

The *shōjo* flair

Bee and PuppyCat is one of many animated series inspired by the *shōjo* and *mahō shōjo* genres. The Japanese word *shōjo* describes a young woman between preadolescence and social adulthood and the *shōjo* genre is about the independence and agency experienced by Japanese women when they are outside the parental and marital spheres (Darley, 2023). In the *mahō shōjo*, or 'magical girl', genre a young woman with magical powers of transformation triumphs over adversity (Darley, 2023; Saito, 2014). Although magical girls face supernatural dangers, the real conflicts centre on their personal and domestic lives and they use empathy and compassion to save the people and relationships they treasure most. According to Darley (2023), *shōjo* and *mahō shōjo* anime were popular among Western audiences in the 1990s for showing that, in a media landscape dominated by boys, it was okay to be a girl. North Americans who grew up watching *Fruits Basket* and *Sailor Moon* went on to create shows like *Adventure Time*, *Steven Universe*, and *Bee and PuppyCat* "with a *shōjo* flair" (Hemmann, 2020, p. 149). Consequently, these shows appeal to "young women (and young-at-heart women) who may have felt excluded from traditional male-centred genres" (Hemmann, 2020, p. 154).

On one hand, the *shōjo* genre's increased prevalence and the manga industry's tradition of adopting fan talent are economically driven and often exploitative. *Shōjo* manga and anime in the 1960s and 1970s were essentially toy commercials (Saito, 2014) and they became more prolific in the 1980s and 1990s in Japan when more young women were entering the workforce and had the disposable income to become a profitable audience (Darley, 2023). And, as Woodcock (2019) explains, the convention of co-opting fan talent into official projects converts fan works from anti-establishment to pro-establishment and normalises industry exploitation of fan playbour. On the other hand, the *shōjo* and *mahō shōjo* genres were empowering escapes from heteroromantic and patriarchal social structures (Darley, 2023). The blurred boundary between fan and professional, common in *shōjo* publishing in Japan but rarer in North America, allows fans like Allegri to tell stories from perspectives historically excluded from corporate settings and traditional pathways (Hemmann, 2020). Allegri accrued a fan following on social media through her gender-swapped redesigns of *Adventure Time*'s protagonists (Hemmann, 2020; Hobbs, 2022), which led to Pendleton Ward, *Adventure Time*'s director, giving Allegri the opportunity to create a short animation for Cartoon Hangover (Hobbs, 2022; Mihailova, 2019). This pilot episode became the first episode of *Bee and PuppyCat*.

As in the *shōjo* and *mahō shōjo* genres, *Bee and PuppyCat* values compassion and relationships more than conflict and achievement. Bee's "utterly unremarkable" (Darley, 2023, p. 70) life is more important than her magical powers. This makes Bee a relatively uncommon and thus interesting protagonist. For similar reasons, *The Best Game* is an uncommon and interesting arcade game.

Rethinking the arcade

The 1970s and 1980s were the "golden age" of arcade parlours in the West (Imai & Woite, 2024). As Kocurek (2015) and Skolnik and Conway (2019) explain, the North American arcade industry, journalists, and popular culture positioned arcade games as socially acceptable, rather than a waste of time and cause of delinquency, by connecting them with activities and qualities socially expected of young men. They presented arcade games as sports-like, skill-based activities that developed mastery and promoted digital literacy, the defining characteristics of "middle-class masculinity" (Kocurek, 2015, p. 99) and the "postindustrial economy of the 1980s" (Skolnik & Conway, 2019, p. 747). These social and cultural factors around arcade games, more than the design or technologies of the games themselves, naturalised an association between arcade games and youthful masculinities characterised by "entrepreneurship, technological development, and success" (Kocurek, 2015, p. 125).

This persistent image of arcade games as elite and masculine festered into the concept of "hardcore games" (Kocurek, 2015). Videogames are considered hardcore if they are "expensive, difficult to learn and master, and time consuming" and are associated with masculinity (Chess, 2017, p. 13). Anything falling outside those bounds tends to be marginalised as "casual" and associated with being cheap, easy to learn, and played by dilettantes: those who are feminine, elderly, unknowledgeable, unskilled, or uncommitted to games (Chess, 2017).

The hardcore-casual dichotomy is political, not theoretical. It is often deployed to legitimise games that fit dominant industry standards while dismissing nonconforming games as fringe and unimportant (Chess & Paul, 2019). Juul (2010) argues games are labelled "casual" when they are more flexible in how, when, and by whom they are played, and Vanderhoef (2013) points out these judgements are frequently gendered. Hardcore games seem more official because they receive more industry, journalistic, and academic attention (Chess & Paul, 2019), but non-hardcore games are not necessarily less popular or less played (Coavoux et al., 2017). If the "casual" label encompasses games that, as Juul (2010) concludes, appeal to people who were previously ignored by an industry that prioritised young male players with the time and money to play long, difficult videogames and learn its obscure conventions, then *The Best Game* is casual. However, this alone does not reveal much.

It could perhaps be considered a "cozy" game, but the term "cozy" has many "overlapping descriptors and design elements" with "no absolute" definition (Boudreau et al., 2025, p. 2648). Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020) characterise cozy games by "the emotional reaction it causes in players" (2020, p. 226), specifically by offering "safer, emotional, heart-warming experiences" (2020, p. 228). While Andiloro (2024) and Bódi (2024) both argue cozy games replicate the same capitalist and consumerist values typical of other videogames and the daily life from which cozy games supposedly offer a reprieve, *The Best Game* seems to lack the progress, accumulation, and evaluation characteristic of capitalist coziness. However, if, as Boudreau et al. (2025,

p. 2648) argue, coziness is a culturally determined "feeling" or "vibe" of warmth, comfort, and safety, then *The Best Game* could be cozy to Bee simply by reminding her of her dad and her childhood.

The Best Game may also be what Navarro-Remesal (2016) calls a Zen game. Unlike "mindful" games, which present undemanding activities to "reduce stress and produce a calm state of mind" (Navarro-Remesal, 2016, p. 7), Zen philosophy encourages "a deep, non-personal knowledge" (Navarro-Remesal, 2016, p. 3) not for the sake of achieving relaxation but to encourage an awareness of the body as historically situated. This practice allows us to better understand our actions as they arise from our context. Navarro-Remesal argues Zen play, or more specifically play-prajna, occurs spontaneously during immediate engagement with the particulars of one's context and historical moment, such as playing *Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami, 1998) in an arcade, which involves the whole body, the whole machine, and the audience. A Zen game would be one that "has no goals, not even relaxing", where we "notice everything, every process in the present moment" (Navarro-Remesal, 2016, p. 7), where importance is placed on "the encounter with the particular before the abstraction, of the body as situated in the world and time" (Navarro-Remesal, 2016, p. 8). *The Best Game* is certainly not a relaxing game. It demands more bodily action and effort than the other games in Glitch Gorge. Rather than standing in place and moving their hands and eyes and focusing on a single screen, Bee and PuppyCat are in constant motion, moving with the lights, music, and one another. They focus on the present moment, not a goal in the future. And, without knowing the goals or rules, we as an audience also focus on the present moment.

This difficulty in understanding and classifying *The Best Game* is not entirely due to its fictionality or on-screen brevity. The other games in Glitch Gorge are just as fictional and fleeting, but they are more easily understood because they fit our cultural image of arcade games. With the decline of arcade parlours, the ones that remain become "'secret' places of desire" for the past, where patrons can "remember certain moments and re-encounter places of their childhood" (Imai & Woite, 2024, p. 15). This "nostalgic arcade" is "a constellation of stereotypes, fragments of facts and historical realities mixed seamlessly with the values and desires of the present moment" (Kocurek, 2015, p. 187). Certain arcade games have survived in public consciousness through films, TV shows, merchandise, and documentaries, inflating the perceived importance of a supposed arcade canon and obfuscating the diverse range of arcade games that existed. *The Best Game* disrupts what we have learned to expect of arcades and videogames. It may be fictional, but it could have existed.

Unproductive, unregulated, unevaluated

According to Henricks (2015, p. 11), societies "dominated by individualistic, middle-class mythologies" that "endorse commitments to self-control, the future, social mo-

bility, material and cultural acquisition, procedural fairness, and education as pathways to success" tend to value play for its functional purpose. Play develops skills. Play has value when it betters the players and play betters players when it is "formally organised with established (adult) leaders, timetables, supervised competitions, and measurable outputs" (Henricks, 2015, p. 13).

By regimenting, evaluating, and measuring behaviour and rewarding progress, arcade games, like sports, "ideologically reproduce the world of work" and "defend the capitalist order and bourgeois rule" (Brohm, 1978, pp. 69–70). Glitch Gorge's arcade games reduce mundane and innocuous tasks (babysitting, refilling watercoolers, kissing hamsters) to standardised actions that can be systematically measured and compared. Their systems constrain the body to stereotyped movements, removing bodily spontaneity and maximising efficiency. Bee is treated as a machine, trained to "sustain prolonged effort and maintain the necessary regularity of pace" (Brohm, 1978, pp. 55–56) to maximise output in the form of scores: kiss hamsters better, fill more watercoolers. Bee is only concerned with progress and success when playing these arcade games. While Bee is lackadaisical and laidback throughout the series, in Glitch Gorge she is aggressive towards PuppyCat and obedient to each game's rules. She insists she will win against PuppyCat (who must lose). It is as though these games raise anxieties around success and production that are absent across the rest of the series. Bee may not efficiently use her time or maximise her output in any other part of her life, but she will try in Glitch Gorge.

Arcade games were promoted as the forefront of technological advancement, training boys and young men for their future work (Kocurek, 2015; Skolnik & Conway, 2017). *The Best Game* seems far from technologically advanced. The machine provides music and light, but without clear indications of any points or evaluation system, *The Best Game* could potentially be played with a nightlight and music box. Specialised equipment, such as the joysticks and buttons of arcade games, require holding one's body in a specific position and learning intricate and precise movements through repetition (Chess, 2017; Keogh, 2018). Such standardised equipment reproduces standardised dominant ways to play (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017). As Keogh (2018, p. 93) explains, standardised controls "demand a preexisting habitualised knowledge of the gamepad", which, due to socially and culturally gendered circumstances and expectations, are more likely to be possessed by young men and boys. Consequently, controller standardisation privileges a young, male audience.

The Best Game's lack of evaluation and standard controls makes it incongruous with the rest of Glitch Gorge, but those other arcade games are incongruous with the rest of *Bee and PuppyCat*. Much of Bee's identity is tied up with work or, more specifically, her dislike of work and her lack of a stable job. According to Mihailova (2019, pp. 1017–1018), portraying Bee's predicament in a "sympathetic, non-judgemental way" is a key source of the show's appeal, particularly for young adult women. *Bee and PuppyCat* appears to express the Japanese concept of *iyasareru*, or a desire "to relax

and escape from an alienating, exhausting work environment" (Dale et al., 2017, p. 5).

According to Kagen (2022), the ambivalence and guilt around leisure time under late capitalism lead to games increasingly resembling labour. Giddings (2018) argues computer games are microcosms of capitalism, simulating economies and reifying the worker's body under capitalist conditions. While most of Glitch Gorge's games reproduce capitalist systems that would consider Bee a failure for her precarious work and insufficient income, *The Best Game* aligns with the show's *shōjo*-like preference for empathy, compassion, and relationships over conflict, domination, and success.

While standardised controls privilege a masculine audience, *The Best Game* appears to use a mimetic interface where players engage with the game through familiar bodily movements learned through the player's everyday existence (Keogh, 2018). Rather than standing side-by-side facing a shared screen while operating joysticks and buttons, Bee and PuppyCat stand facing one another, not touching any tangible controls nor watching any screen. This interface seems unnatural for an arcade because standardised controllers have produced and reinforced dominant modes of input, marginalising alternative modes such as dance (Keogh, 2018, p. 87).

Dance like nothing is watching

Keogh (2018) argues videogames are primarily about movement with audiovisuals. Goals provide a context for performing particular actions, but the resultant "sights and sounds *is* the point" (Keogh, 2018, p. 120 emphasis in original). Rather than focusing on goal-driven activities, Keogh argues we should consider "videogames as a more open-ended form of expression" (2018, p. 121). Similarly, Miller describes dance as a multisensory experience where dancers "bring techniques of listening, moving, watching, and touching into powerful alignment" (2017, p. 95). Dance games match bodily movements with sounds and visuals "capturing the *sensation* of music in the player-dancer's gestures" (Keogh, 2018, p. 122 emphasis in original). For example, "to play a song in *Audiosurf* [Invisible Handlebar, 2008] is to experience that song's form through sensorial fields other than hearing" (Keogh, 2018, p. 125). While interactivity is usually discussed in terms of a machine adapting to a player's actions, we can instead talk about "proprioceptive interaction" (Miller, 2017, p. 101), where the user's bodily movements change their perception of the machine's audiovisuals. "In this form of interactive audio, the perceptible effects play out through players' bodies … a machine provides the input in the form of musical sound, and a human carries out the kinesthetic translation of this material to create a danced output" (Miller, 2017, pp. 102, 107). *The Best Game* allows Bee to experience the song through not just sound, but also movement, space, and lights.

Dance videogames challenge Western gameplay conventions. Kirkpatrick (2011) argues all videogames can be understood as dances, but he privileges hardcore conventions of complexity, manual skills, mastery, and winning. Players must figure out the "right" manoeuvres in the dance "puzzle" and perform perfectly (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 134) and the player's role is "to follow [the game's] instructions" (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 137). As Snowdon (2019) explains, the precise and complex dance Kirkpatrick describes is more like masculine-coded choreography than feminine-coded dance. Similarly, Smith (2006) argues *Dance Dance Revolution* tournaments and "tech play" (playing to get a high score) are attempts to athleticize and masculinize what is perceived in North America as threatening feminine gameplay. Even dance criticism tends to assume that technical, powerful, and masterful choreography is more important than the precognitive body, individual dancers, and the labour, knowledge, and emotion situated in the act of dancing (Snowdon, 2019).

Miller (2017) explains that console dance videogames *Just Dance* (Ubisoft Paris Studios, 2009) and *Dance Central* (Harmonix Music Systems, 2010) were treated with suspicion by Western reviewers for their graphical and technological simplicity and humiliating gameplay. Standardised controls require training and literacy but, once learned, are consistent and precise. By eschewing these habituated bodily techniques, dance videogames lead to "uncoordinated, disorderly, reactive, and excessive movements" (Miller, 2017, p. 35). Their more naturalised mimetic interfaces allow "different kinds of bodies to be comfortable with gaming" (Chess, 2017, p. 161): bodies that do not already have the technical literacies and skills required for specialised equipment (Jacob et al., 2008), bodies that are likely non-masculine (Chess, 2017; Keogh, 2018).

Miller (2017) argues dance games found popularity in shamelessness. One may dance badly but the gaming context makes it safe and shared. Skilled and unskilled dancers alike perform awkwardly. Everyone is brought low and thus allowed to explore and feel bodily movements neglected by standardised gaming interfaces. However, even these dance games involve choreography (Snowdon, 2019) and train players through ongoing dressage (Keogh, 2018). The game system is always watching and responding to the player's performance, even when playing in private (Miller, 2017). Although dance games embolden gamers to dance badly, it is always in contrast with the cultural values and practices perpetuated in each game's dance routines. Revelling in failure may be a rejection of mastery, but it does not reject the evaluative system that defines failure and mastery.

In contrast to these routines that equally train and shame players, let us consider the moments in these dance and music games where players are not evaluated. In *Rock Band* (Harmonix Music Systems, 2007) and *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix Music Systems, 2005) there are breaks in the precise button-based routine for players to perform their own unevaluated solos (Keogh, 2018). In *Audiosurf*, choosing the mono

character[5] generates a racetrack of mostly obstacles to avoid rather than coloured blocks to collect, "allowing for a more relaxed surf focused less on scoring or optimal play and more on simply moving through the music" (Keogh, 2018, p. 125). *Dance Central* has freestyle breaks during routines where players are encouraged to do whatever they want in reaction to the music (Miller, 2017). Even *Dance Dance Revolution*'s announcer's vague commentary, such as "I see tomorrow in your dance" and "Are you a monkey?" (Smith, 2006, p. 199), obscures what is being praised or criticised.

The context in and with which one plays shapes the play forms that emerge by making it easier (or possible) to "carry on" in one way or another (Henricks, 2015, p. 32). There is more to a dance game's context than just its hardware, software, and evaluations. *Dance Dance Revolution*'s floor pads only detect the dancer's foot placement. A dancer can express "creativity, virtuosity, and authenticity" by performing "acrobatic moves and feats of agility" undetectable by the machine (Miller, 2017, pp. 8–9). If *Just Dance* can be played and even won by sitting on a couch and waving the Wii Remote (Miller, 2017, p. 41), then moving the rest of one's body is an interpretive choice by the player. Players value movements that game system either do not evaluate or cannot measure.

The Best Game's context comprises lights, music, the floor, the room, Bee's and PuppyCat's own bodies, and (seemingly) no evaluation, no tangible interface, and no screen. These absences are important. *The Best Game* is entirely freestyle solo. By constraining the body and treating it as a machine, sports deny the body "playful or aesthetic pleasure" (Brohm, 1978, p. 74). Even the dance and music videogames discussed above enforce standardised postures through their choreography and evaluative systems. In contrast, *The Best Game* embraces feminine-coded dance and allows Bee and PuppyCat to explore and revel in bodily movement, to carry on in ways that do not involve perfecting standardised movements or competing against each other.

Resentment without resistance

Although *The Best Game* eschews capitalistic and masculine videogame conventions, it is a reprieve more than a revolution. Much like the *shōjo* and *mahō shōjo* genres that inspired *Bee and PuppyCat*, *The Best Game* is an escapist fantasy that neither subverts nor offers an alternative to capitalist structures. Darley (2023, p. 77) argues the *shōjo* and *mahō shōjo* genres offer a "safe form of resistance" and ultimately maintain more than resist "patriarchal power structures". Saito (2014, p. 145) argues

[5] In *Audiosurf*, the player must select a character before generating a racetrack for a song. The chosen character determines the nature of the racetrack.

mahō shōjo manga and anime send "mixed messages". The protagonist's magical transformation and powers are presented as empowerment and womanhood, especially when the magical transformation involves bodily changes. However, if the central message of *mahō shōjo* is the strengths of *shōjo*-hood and the undermining of this magic, then *mahō shōjo* also rejects that empowerment. Rather than empowering women, many *mahō shōjo* instead depict a prolonged childhood of being cute and carefree without the responsibilities of motherhood and subservience that their audiences cannot avoid without being considered a failure.

Bee's dislike of work and preference for sleep also aligns her with the Sanrio character Gudetama. Gudetama is a lazy egg that resents its job of being food, rejects the glorification of labour, and only wants to sleep. He has become popular among workers whose jobs make them feel useless, unwanted, and unrewarded, first in Japan and then across the Western world (de Vries, 2017). Much like Gudetama, Bee's resentment towards labour and consumption is "an indulgent fantasy" of resistance, a safe expression of dissatisfaction that "will never change the inequitable situation that workers face today" (de Vries, 2017, p. 269). Bee's *mahō shōjo* characteristics in particular compromise her portrayal. According to Darley (2023), *mahō shōjo* heroines are often uniquely powerful and display symbols of financial opulence to emphasise their agency and importance. Although Bee is a temp worker, she, much like her *mahō shōjo* inspiration, is powerful and does not appear to suffer from financial struggles beyond occasional embarrassment. She lives in her own comfortably furnished apartment, has an amicable relationship with her landlord, always has enough to eat, and, although temp work is by definition precarious, she always has work when she needs it.[6] Bee and Gudetama embody lethargic pleasure that their audiences cannot afford.

Just as Bee avoids work without suffering any consequences, *The Best Game* is itself a superficial rejection of capitalism. Its mechanics may eschew capitalist and industrialist conventions, but Bee must still pay money to play it. Additionally, the episodes disconnect Glitch Gorge, *The Best Game*, and Bee's game designer dad from capitalist systems and global infrastructure. The show implies Bee's dad is the only person who made these games, omitting all other vital roles from marketing to the material labour of mining and producing metals and plastics (Woodcock, 2019). This romanticises the self-employed indie developer who creates videogames from nothing without worrying about the job insecurity, competition, or exploitation rife in videogame production (Woodcock, 2019). Even Glitch Gorge is glamourised as a wonderland hidden in the forest without need for electricity or e-waste disposal.

[6] Throughout the series, when Bee needs money there is always a temp job conveniently available.

The Best Game, and *Bee and PuppyCat* overall, are what Page (2017, p. 79) calls "cruel relief", a practice that offers a respite from the stresses of precarity, low wages, and surveillance and thus "normalises neoliberal capital and work". Page calls it "cruel" because the relief helps the subjugated worker further endure exploitation, thus bolstering capitalism.

Conclusion

A fictional game's "underspecification" can be used for "expressive purposes" to surprise audiences with "unexpected in-game situations, devious strategies, and the revelation of latent in-game possibilities" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 25). Through its inherent incompleteness and unplayability, *The Best Game* is ambiguous to the audience and even the writers and animators and thus can eschew capitalist ideologies and masculine posturing without fully explaining how. *The Best Game* seemingly has no goals nor points, requires no skills, has no means of evaluation, lacks a tangible interface, and involves little if any punishment for mistakes and failure—if concepts like mistakes and failure are even meaningful. This presents a videogame that is more dance than sport. Designers often associate these features with games for women, but these are simply good design features that would appeal to any non-experienced player (Chess, 2017, pp. 46–47). "Playing dance games offers constant reminders that the human body is not a mass-produced technical interface like a traditional game controller, nor a playback device that repeats the same material the same way again and again" (Miller, 2017, p. 111).

The Best Game is distinctive for being the only arcade game in Glitch Gorge to not resemble work or reproduce capitalist ideologies and masculine posturing. Bee works when playing games in Glitch Gorge, when selecting a job, and when earning money. The work stops with *The Best Game*. Here, Bee is not concerned with skilful performance, maximising output, or competition. She is neither motivated to succeed nor worried about failure. However, much like its *shōjo* and *mahō shōjo* inspirations, *The Best Game* and *Bee and PuppyCat* are safe forms of resentment that do not offer actionable resistance. While *The Best Game* seems to offer an alternative to the competitive, masculine, work-like games of the "nostalgic arcade" (Kocurek, 2015, p. 187), its depiction in these episodes and Bee's depiction across the series ignores work without resisting the capitalist structures in which they are embedded. Bee and *The Best Game* are both powerful and unproductive, but also remain underspecified and fictional.

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The Game That Looks Back

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Despot
The Game That Looks Back

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Abstract

Iain Banks' *Complicity* (1993) features a fictional 'world-builder' game called *Despot* that actively watches and emulates the player. This fictional game emerges as part of the Scottish Fantastic, a literary tradition that explores split selves and divided identities. *Despot* plays into this literary tradition as it creates a violent ludic other for the otherwise passive protagonist that plays it. Yet as a closer examination of *Despot* reveals, the game does not 'uncover' or 'mirror' the protagonist's latent violence so much as it refracts it through its procedural logic. *Despot* prophetically predicts and critiques the rise of the quantified self within games, as features like morality meters, achievements, reputation systems and Elo ratings all 'watch' and create ludic versions of the player. Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist leaves *Despot* running and returns to find a radically altered version of the game. Without the protagonist's interference, his empire has crumbled and been reclaimed by nature. Through this, Banks also provides a lens through which the quantified self can be subverted and repurposed in ways not limited by the cultural logics that produced it.

Keywords

Quantified self; Scottish fantastic; *Despot*; *Complicity*; Iain Banks; interactive narrative

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Players of contemporary games are surrounded by doubles. Morality meters, reputation systems, matchmaking ranks and achievements are all different ways of taking player data and recreating what Barry Atkins calls a "textual self" (Atkins, 2003, p. 147). While players of these games are enmeshed in a cacophony of ludic others, it would be a mistake to treat this as unique to games. These doubled selves are a larger extension of a broader cultural logic known as the *quantified self*, which promises "self-knowledge through numbers" (Wolf & Kelly, 2009).

The connection between these mechanics and the quantified self has been observed in past game studies scholarship (Egliston, 2020; Kou & Gui, 2018; Sarian, 2024). The rise of these games (and their cultural implications) is prophetically outlined decades prior in Iain Banks' 1993 novel *Complicity.* Here the passive, supposedly peaceful and

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reform minded protagonist Cameron Colley discovers a dark double, a violent ludic self that emerges through a 'world-builder' game called *Despot*.

Despot is what Gualeni and Fassone would describe as a fictional game, or an imaginary game as part of a fictional world. Because they are not real, fictional games are "underspecified" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 21) and can use their inherent vagueness for literary effect. These literary effects include their ability to "reflect (and influence)" characters and to also "infiltrate their reality" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 8). This can be seen in *Despot,* which does not merely *reflect* Colley's dark tendencies but instead *refracts* his repressed anger at a post-Thatcher United Kingdom. By doing this, *Despot* distorts his anger into a dark ludic double that amplifies this latent authoritarian violence. Through this, *Despot* contains a critique for an emerging gaming landscape replete with ludic doubles. Yet it also displays a way that such games can be subverted, when Colley accidentally turns himself from a 'despot' within the game to a mere participant. *Despot* represents a rich metaphor, critiquing gaming trends while also displaying a way that games like *Despot* can be creatively subverted and repurposed. Banks writes as part of the Scottish Fantastic, a literary genre that focuses on divided selves, fractured egos and doubled others. A good example of the Scottish fantastic's focus on fractured identities can be found in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). Kincaid (2013) argues that this genre serves as a uniting theme for Banks' literary work (pp. 23–24). The fictional game *Despot* generates its own double for Cameron Colley, a double which helps to generate the political violence that later instigates much of the action within *Complicity*.

Past research

Both the novel *Complicity* and its fictional game *Despot* have been discussed primarily in relationship with the book's discussion of neoliberalism. This is particularly the case in Hutchinson's discussion of the novel, which takes place as part of a broader discussion of post-Thatcher and Reagan fiction in his book *Reaganism, Thatcherism, and the Social Novel* (2008). *Complicity* is set in post-Thatcher United Kingdom where collective action has been defeated. In the wake of this political landscape, left-wing individuals are caught in a malaise. The novel explores the conflict between a pacifistic but ineffective peaceful reformism, and a philosophy of retributive individual violence. The novel does not take a stance on which approach is superior, with Braidwood (2011, p. 52) arguing that this reflects a conflict within the author's own mind. *Despot* reflects this conflict within the protagonist's mind, as the otherwise passive reformer creates a despotic double through his gameplay.

The book's protagonist, Cameron Colley, finds himself in a state of passive compliance. He is a left-wing journalist who occasionally publishes incendiary pieces against the British establishment. Despite this Colley does little to resist capitalism in his daily life, with Cairns (2002, p. 46) arguing that Colley's socialist philosophy is

"a cynical stance that allows him to stand outside of the values of his friends but makes no real demands on the way he lives". Colley deals with this environment by engaging in consumerist excess, redirecting his energy into alcohol, cigarettes, and videogames. Indeed, much of the literary analysis of *Despot* views it as an extension of Colley's addictive vices, which along with his other vices represents his passive compliance with consumer capitalism (Hutchinson, 2008, pp. 43-47; Cairns, 2002, pp. 46–49). Hutchinson (2008, p. 45) argues that *Despot* allows Colley to "abandon the role of the passive liberal" and that the game reveals a "desire to wield power irresponsibly". Cairns (2002, pp. 46-49) goes further, arguing that *Despot* effectively trains Colley into accepting the logic of the system he exists within. This article builds upon this observation, examining how *Despot* effectively foreshadows an emerging gaming landscape which uses the quantified self to refract, rather than reflect, their players.

Barry Atkins extensively discusses *Despot* in his book titled *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form* (2003). He argues that *Despot* represents an archetype for a kind of game that can "disturb in our age of increasing technological surveillance" which renders the player into a "textual subject" (2003, pp. 146–147). He invokes the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in his discussion, arguing that *Despot* represents an 'object gazing back' (2003, p. 146). Here he is subtly referring to Lacan's discussion of Hans Holbein the Younger's painting titled *The Ambassador*, where an anamorphic skull looks back at a viewer as they walk past the painting up (or down) a staircase. Lacan (1973/1977, p. 88) argues that the phenomenon of an object "looking back" generates a drive for a more holistic view of the self. It is this disruption of the self that Atkins believes that games like *Despot* represents.

A closer examination of *Despot* unsettles Atkins' reading of the fictional game. Rather than disturbing surveillance, *Despot* reinforces authoritarian modes of engagement. Outlining this requires an understanding of games like *Despot* as fundamentally refractory.

Refractory games

Games like *Despot* are best understood as part of a subset of games that create what Atkins (2003, p. 147) calls a "textual self". Elo ratings, scores, kill/death ratios, morality meters and reputation systems are all different methods of using player data to create a ludic other. Elsewhere, I have argued that these mechanics are intrinsically tied into the quantified self, and that the very act of translating player input into a quantified self alters the way players can retroactively interpret their data (Sarian, 2024).

The metaphor of water refracting light helps to illustrate this point. Water refracts light passing through it, such that what we see below the surface is askew. This re-

fraction is a two-way process, where what is seen from below the water is also distorted. Any media that quantifies user data engages in this two-way refraction; *Despot* and its relationship with Colley is no different. Not only does the under-water world looks askew from above water, the reverse is true as well. Colley's view of himself within *Despot* is distorted, and the game 'sees' him distortedly simultaneously.

This is best understood through Brock and Shepherd's (2016) notion of the *procedural enthymeme*. Enthymemes are unstated assumptions. For example, the sentence "Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal" carries the enthymeme that "All men are mortal". They argue that this is integral to how code persuades, as accepting the 'conclusion' of a code operation implicitly involves accepting the 'enthymemes' underpinning the code's processes. Because all attempts at quantifying data carry cultural and ideological assumptions regarding how data should be classified, and what it means, this means that any attempt to 'quantify' the self has a refractory element to it. This is something that Crawford, Lingel and Karppi (2015) explore in their paper on fitness trackers and weight measurements, as any attempt to quantify 'fitness' or 'health' requires ideological assumptions about what constitutes 'fitness' and 'health'. These assumptions are all hidden within the procedural 'enthymeme' of code, and it is through this enthymeme that code refracts user input into a quantified double.

Understood through this lens, *Despot* is a game that does not mirror Colley, but instead refracts his violent latencies. While Colley appears peaceful, his underlying propensity for violence is foreshadowed throughout the novel, such as his 'consensual non-consent' rape scene with a married woman (Banks, 1993, pp. 125–129). Elements of the game, such as the 'Despotic Power Level' (Banks, 1993, 134) all act to encourage a particular mode of engagement, only to then present his data and output as a mirroring of his character. This reflects a tendency for fictional games to "*play their players*" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 141), it is this playing of Colley that becomes clearer through a deeper understanding of *Despot*.

Despot

Despot is a "world-builder" (Banks, 1993, p. 53) game that "looks back" at the player and attempts to emulate them. The game is like *Crusader Kings II* (Paradox, 2012), *Sid Meier's Civilization* (Meier, 1991) and the 4X genre more generally. Players move in civilisational stages and epochs as they expand their territory while governing their internal state. Gualeni and Fassone (2023,p. 81) have noted a tendency for fictional games that act as a "synecdoche" of their society to often "resemble real games", a trend that can be seen in *Despot*'s resemblance to the 4X genre. Yet in contrast to those games, *Despot* has a special quality that similar real games argua-

bly can also do, but that the fictional game exaggerates through its "underspecification" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 23). Here is how the game is described within the book by Colley:

> *Despot* is interactive, *Despot* will go on building your world for you even if you leave it alone because it actually *watches* you; it learns from your playing style, it *knows* you, it will actually try its little damnedest to *become* you. (Banks, 1993, p. 53)

The implication, outlined in this quote, is that whatever society the player creates reflects who they are. While other games in this genre could be interpreted as also doing this, the fictional "underspecification" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 23) of *Despot* allows it to exacerbate this element of the relationship that players have with world-builder games. While Colley expresses a political philosophy of peaceful reformism, within *Despot* Colley becomes an authoritarian despot. If Colley's description of *Despot*—as a ludic mirror—is to be taken at face value, then by implication Colley also believes that the society and person he generates within *Despot* is also who he 'truly' is. Colley's relationship with *Despot* then reflects a fracturing, between his peaceful persona and the authoritarian violence he embraces within the game.

In practice, no game can fully 'mirror' a player as the very act of playing a game involves a compromise with the procedural logic of its system. Most people who play videogames would never fire a gun at another human, but do so routinely within the procedural logic of first-person shooters. This is something Mukherjee (2015, p. 156) observes within the game of *Doom* (id Software, 1993), arguing that "the player in *Doom* does not have the choice not to kill the monsters that appear in the game". Mukherjee goes on to argue that player interaction with games generates a process of "becoming" that comprises a distinct identity from both the player and the game (2015, pp. 168–172). Here too Colley has no choice but to play as an authoritarian ruler in *Despot*, with the Colley–*Despot* interaction generating a ludic double—one that is comfortable with authoritarian violence.

Examining *Despot* as a game undermines Colley's belief that it genuinely reflects who he is. Instead, it is better to describe what *Despot* does as a refraction of the player. All of the gameplay described within the book points to a game that encourages authoritarian modes of engagement, reflecting a tendency for fictional games to act as an embodiment of the dominant values of their setting (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, pp. 59–68). The game tracks a statistic called the 'Despotic Power Level' (Banks, 1993, p. 134), and success is measured by how high a player can make that number. Colley describes how he fights off barbarians, weakens the nobility and the church by tempting them into hedonistic excess to encourage a rising 'merchant class', and sending 'secret police' to bust drug dealers before using those drug dealers to control his subordinates (Banks, 1993, p. 55). Much like Mukherjee's (2015) analysis of *Doom*, Colley has no choice but to become a dictator in *Despot*. The difference is that Colley genuinely believes that this fictional game 'mirrors' who he truly is, allowing

the game to present the despotic dictator he becomes in the game as a 'mirror' of the player.

Cairns (2002), in his analysis of *Despot*, argues that the game effectively trains Colley to accept the dominant logic of the society he exists within. He argues that "Colley becomes dominator of society, his strategies mirroring those that he objects to in the real world around him while revealing how much he is shaped by them" (2002, p. 49). He goes on to argue that *Despot* effectively serves to subtly indoctrinate Colley into accepting the reality of the society he exists within (2002, p. 50). Within the text, Colley is depicted as someone consumed by vice and excess, partaking in activities like adultery, drinking and smoking. Here within *Despot,* he employs those same tools as a form of authoritarian control.

The actual gameplay described is one where the player chooses a point of view, then rules a society from that perspective. The player can, for example, become a tribal chieftain and then build their way up to become an emperor. At any time they can 'shift' perspectives, although they effectively lose whatever progress they made with their current ruler.

Later in the novel Colley accidentally leaves *Despot* running. *Despot* continues to run as a real-time game when left turned on, even if the player is not engaging with it. Because the game supposedly 'mirrors' the player, a game left running in the absence of a player presents a representational ego-death. In Colley's absence, a new society emerges. Colley's civilisation has collapsed. The countryside has "either become desert or marsh or returned to forest" and "all the temples – all *my* temples – are ruined, dark and abandoned" (Banks, 1993, p. 261). Colley goes on to remark that:

> The worst of it is there's no head man, no Despot, no me. I can look at all this but I can't *do* anything about it, not on this scale. To start playing again I'd have to trade this omniscient but omni-potent view for that of…God knows, some tribal warrior, village elder, a mayor or a bandit chief. (Banks, 1993, p. 262)

He goes on to observe that "I guess a radical Green or Deep Ecologist would think it's a pretty cool result" (Banks, 1993, p. 262).

The resulting society is neither good nor bad. Problems are observed, such as the rise of bandits, but nature has reclaimed the wasteland and many of the barbarians that likely fed off the profits of his civilisation have retreated. The greatest threat for Colley is the erosion of the 'textual self' that the game had constructed for him, the despotic ruler who had temples erected in his honour. Instead, Colley must contend with the possibility that he instead will be a mere participant, an equal co-player in a simulation that he cannot fully dominate.

Despite all this, Colley does not 'grow' as a person from this interaction. Instead of Colley engaging in what Meades (2015) would call "counterplay", it is more accurate to say that the author is the one engineering the plot to subvert *Despot*. This strategy, of counterplay through 'accidental' means in the plot, is a possibility that Gualeni and Fassone (2023) observe in portrayals of fictional games. The message of the 'Deep Ecology' outcome is for the reader, rather than the fictional player.

Hutchinson (2008, p. 46) argues that this Deep Ecology outcome "demands of Colley the responsibility of a participant rather than the irresponsibility of a spectator (or a fantasist or despot)". Hutchinson goes on to argue that Colley's despair in the face of playing as a mere 'village elder' or 'mayor' reflects a deeper abandonment of a politics requiring "collective participation and responsibility" (2008, p. 46). More than anything, Colley's response reflects an internalisation of the overriding individualist logic of the neoliberal society he otherwise rails against, something that *Despot* had partially ingrained into him.

A prophetic critique, and an alternative approach

Despot effectively predicts and critiques an incoming gaming landscape replete with what Jenning's (2022) calls the "authoritarian Hero's Journey", and the rise of quantified self tools—achievements, matchmaking rankings, morality meters—that allow players to self-regulate according to a logic that Han (2017, p. 5) disparagingly describes as "auto-exploitation". While the use of a quantified self in games existed at the time of *Complicity*'s publication, such as in *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (Garriott, 1985) and *Alter Ego* (Activision, 1986), the novel also prophesises the increasing use of ludic 'doubles' in the form of Elo matchmaking ratings, kill/death ratios, morality meters and achievements.

Jennings' (2022) "authoritarian Hero's Journey" refers to a trend in games like the *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012) to present the protagonist as a single elite hero, charged with saving the world and making big choices that determine the outcome of entire nations and even galaxies. She argues that this trend tends to highlight the unique, meritocratic importance of the protagonist at the expense of incompetent bureaucracies (2022, pp. 329–332). She argues that these games carry an authoritarian message and connects it to the rise of the 'NPC' meme, where people on social media depict their political opponents as nonplayer characters who are incapable of independent thought (2022, pp. 337–338). Similarly, Han (2017, p. 5) criticises the quantified self for encouraging individuals to internalise the logic of neoliberal capitalism, arguing that it creates a relationship of "auto-exploitation" to an arbitrary external number.

A good point of comparison here is the similarly named computer roleplaying game *Tyranny* (Obsidian, 2016). Like *Despot*, *Tyranny* puts the player in the role of a 'Fatebinder', a travelling judge who wields the authority of a tyrannical figure named

Kyros. The aesthetics here are similar. The player has despotic/tyrannical authority and the power to make rulings and adjudicate conflicts however they wish. Like *Despot*, *Tyranny* also constructs a 'textual self' of the player by collecting their data. A quantified self profile of the player is created which numerically tracks how the player is viewed by the different characters and organisations within the game. Because *Despot* is a fictional game, it does not need to function. This means that *Despot* can leverage its "underspecification" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 23) to highlight trends within *Tyranny* that might not otherwise be clear.

Both *Despot* and *Tyranny* train the player to think in a way that reflects hegemonic discourses. Both the fictional game *Despot* and the real game *Tyranny* give the player authoritarian, fate of the world agency while tracking them using quantified self tools. Yet both games also carry the potential for ways of playing them that undermine both the way they are supposed to be played and which counter-act the dominant discourses contained within them.

This is seen in the 'Deep Ecology' outcome that Colley receives in *Despot.* A different approach exists within *Tyranny*. Towards the end of the game, the player is evaluated by their authoritarian boss and mentor, Tunon the Adjudicator. Tunon is depicted within the game as authoritarian, and as frequently making decisions that are politically expedient rather than just. If the player's reputation meter with Tunon is high enough, Tunon will conclude that the player is not only a good judge, but is worthy even of his service. While a dominant (Hall, 1973) decoding of this event situates this event as a 'reward' for correctly raising the right meter to a game winning position, a more negotiated decoding can reframe it as an attack on the player's authority. If the player receives the approval of a person diegetically depicted as tyrannical, then the player can potentially take that as a criticism of their own authoritarian 'fate of the world' agency.

What both the 'Tunon approves of the player' outcome in *Tyranny* and the 'Deep Ecology' outcome of *Despot* represent are what Schulzke (2020, pp. 124-126) calls a "Multiple Voices" approach to morality meters in videogames. In *Tyranny* the player's data is represented by a contradictory mix of conflicting viewpoints and opinions, as different characters approve, disapprove, or have mixed responses to the player-character. In *Despot* the player is reduced to the level of participant rather than ruler, forced to contend and negotiate with alternative perspectives. Schulzke argues that this 'Multiple Voices' approach to videogame morality represents a form of moral engagement that more accurately represents the level of agency that most people experience in real life, as people are primarily judge through the way they interact horizontally with different people and institutions (2020, pp. 124-126). Because of its fictional nature, *Despot*'s 'Deep Ecology' outcome effectively works as an exaggeration of this latent discourse found deep within *Tyranny*, highlighting it in a way that may not otherwise be clear.

Conclusion

Iain Banks' book *Complicity* was published in 1993, its fictional game *Despot* foreshadowing the landscape of games that would gradually develop over the coming decades. These are games which heavily rely on the cultural metaphor of the quantified self, employing morality meters, reputation systems and matchmaking rankings to create what Atkins (2003) calls "textual selves" of the player. It both critiques these systems, while also pointing to an alternative way they can be employed to break with dominant modes of discourse.

Colley believes the game to be a mirror, reflecting who he is as a person. Yet a closer analysis of the game reveals that it does not mirror the player, but it instead *refracts* them. This reflects the broader procedural logic of games with similar mechanics, as they train players to use their data to engage in a mode of 'auto-exploitation' that Han (2017) considers intrinsic to the quantified self. It also reflects what Jennings (2022) calls the "authoritarian Hero's Journey", as a 'fate of the world' level of agency reflects a broader authoritarian ideology. All of this is internalised by Colley as he in turn adopts the violence and individualistic framework that *Despot* requires to maximise his 'Despotic Power Level' (Banks, 1993, p. 134).

Yet the 'Deep Ecology' outcome of the game also represents a way that the same ludic mechanics can be reoriented against the cultural logic that spawned *Despot*. By rejecting the politics of authoritarianism and instead encouraging a playstyle that would make Colley an equal participant in a world comprised of what Schulzke (2020) calls 'Multiple Voices', games that follow in *Despot*'s footsteps can reorient the quantified self away from the cultural logic that spawned it. Colley falls into a trap that leaves him caught between passive compliance and authoritarian violence. But an alternative exists, and similar games with a 'Deep Ecology' philosophy can reintroduce collective participation as a mode of political engagement. The fictional nature of *Despot* allows it to present exaggerated 'Deep Ecology' outcomes that can be read, and potentially designed, into real games that otherwise still need to function and acquire capital and customers in a commodified games industry. Through this the 'textual selves' of games can encourage players to potentially view themselves as equals, rather than as despots.

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Hollow Pursuits

Desire, Therapy, and 'Play' on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s Holodeck

MATTHEW LEGGATT

Abstract

In so many ways the vision of the future imagined in the *Star Trek* universe seems painfully distant. Perhaps, the closest the show has come to anticipating the world as it is today, however, can be found in its depiction of the holodeck as the crew's primary space for leisure. This article focuses on episode 21, season 3 of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, 'Hollow Pursuits', in which we meet Reginald Barclay, a nervous engineer who becomes addicted to the ship's virtual reality simulator. Taking its cue from Janet Murray's book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, writing on the Enterprise's leisure technology has tended to explore the holodeck's role as a theatrical story-telling device. However, in 'Hollow Pursuits', I argue, Barclay's use of the software resonates far more with its closest comparator today: virtual reality videogaming. For Barclay the holodeck blurs the line between the virtual world and reality in ways that make other crew members uncomfortable. In doing so, as this paper demonstrates, it also reveals flaws in *The Next Generation*'s utopia particularly in relation to desire, addiction, therapy, and 'play'.

Keywords

Holodeck; virtual reality; *Star Trek*; *The Next Generation*; AI; videogames; deepfakes; utopia

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Although there are other 'games' seen across the *Star Trek* franchise—such as three-dimensional chess, poker, and various wargame exercises—most frequently when the crew of the Enterprise play together it is on the virtual reality simulator known as the holodeck. Considering that *The Next Generation* (TNG) first aired in 1987 as home computing was just starting to become more affordable—to put that into context, the first PlayStation console wasn't on the market until 1991—its liberal use of a highly sophisticated AI VR software to provide a regular source of distraction and entertainment for the crew is striking. Similar software had appeared earlier, most famously in the 1982 movie *Tron,* starring Jeff Bridges and directed by Steven Lisberger, and even in a 1974 episode of the *Star Trek* animated series called 'The

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Practical Joker' (Reed, 1974), but TNG made the holodeck seem like a natural part of its world, rather than a scientific marvel. While the holodeck has become a staple of the *Star Trek* universe and has appeared as an object of study in several works of criticism spanning the franchise (cf. Murray, 2017, and Tallon & Walls, 2008, in particular), for reasons of scope, in this short article I explore its depiction in TNG only, focused through one episode in particular—season 3, episode 21, 'Hollow Pursuits' (written by Gene Roddenberry, Sally Caves, and Ronald D. Moore, and directed by Cliff Bole, 1990)—which I argue raises a number of questions about the technology and its use, both in *Star Trek*'s futuristic utopia and in our society today.

In her influential book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, first published in 1997 and then updated twenty years later, Janet Murray describes the holodeck as "a utopian technology applied to the age-old art of storytelling" (2017, p. 17). Essentially an entertainment facility aboard the Enterprise (and seen in later series across other Federation ships and stations), the holodeck is part living narrative, part game: "a universal fantasy machine, open to individual programming" (Murray, 2017, p. 17). In TNG the holodeck is viewed as a leisure activity. Crew members 'take a trip' to, rather than 'play' in/on, the holodeck. This helps to explain why, even though from today's perspective the holodeck's closest comparator would be virtual reality videogaming, in Murray's time (as, indeed, with those creating TNG) what takes place on the holodeck reads as a kind of literary text. What is more, Murray sees the holodeck as offering a particular vision of the future of literary or narrative texts, one that is distinctly utopian and optimistic when seen against wider concerns regarding entertainment technologies. She asks what seems an important question: "Will the literature of Cyberspace be continuous with the literary traditions of the *Beowulf* poet, Shakespeare, and Charlotte Brontë as the *Star Trek* producers portray it, or will it be the dehumanizing and addictive sensation machine predicted by the dystopians?" (2017, p. 26). For the most part, Murray is right to see the holodeck as a kind of narrative machine. In TNG, most holodeck episodes—so called because the episode revolves around some sort of period escapade on the holodeck—seem to spring from literary, or faux-literary, resources. For example, Captain Picard (Patrick Stewart) plays out his fantasies of being a private investigator in the fictitious noir novels of 'Dixon Hill' across several episodes (season 1 episode 11, 'The Big Goodbye', Scanlan & Tormé 1988; season 2 episode 19, 'Manhunt', Bowman & Devereaux, 1989; season 4 episode 14, 'Clues', Landau & Arthurs, 1991; and the 1996 movie *First Contact*, Frakes, 1996), while Data (Brent Spiner) plays as Sherlock Holmes (season 2 episode 3, 'Elementary, Dear Data', Bowman & Lane; season 6 episode 12, 'Ship in a Bottle', Singer & Echevarria, 1993). But there are instances where the holodeck becomes a site for more interesting, albeit dubious, 'play' and where Murray's literary comparison breaks down. In the episode I focus on in this paper, for instance, the holodeck appears much closer to that "addictive sensation machine" she associates with the dystopian imagination, although I argue that the holodeck's use in 'Hollow Pursuits' *also* takes us closer to a utopian vision of the technology than other episodes generally manage.

In a piece in *Educational Technology* in the early 1990s, M. D. Roblyer (1993, p. 35) complained that despite the "phenomenal education and training possibilities" offered by *Star Trek*'s holodeck, the crew of the Enterprise use the technology primarily to take "a break". As TNG continued, however, this changed and the holodeck was increasingly used for training purposes: Lieutenant Worf, in particular, can be seen using the holodeck to run combat simulations across many episodes, and Geordi LaForge (LeVar Burton), the Enterprise's chief engineer, variously uses the technology to work through theoretical ideas. But in *Play in Utopian and Dystopian Fiction* (2025), I argue that, for the creators of TNG, the holodeck had another purpose entirely. The holodeck, as I see it, is often used as a vehicle for the show to humanize the utopians of the Enterprise and to let the audience see the crew act against more familiar backdrops. Building on Bernard Suits' famous philosophical designation of gaming in his 1978 book *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia,* in which he lays out what qualifies as the 'lusory spirit' required for play to be *genuine*, I note that the holodeck, "is rarely conceived of as a space of genuine play for the characters. Instead, it offers the creators a chance to *play with* familiar settings" (2025, p. 161). The crew of the Enterprise are clearly the hard-working utopians of myth and stereotype. Play and respite are often threatened with many episodes either beginning (or ending) with the promise of shore-leave, but this is always interrupted by the novum that prompts the episode (cf. season 3 episode 13, 'Captain's Holiday', Chalmers & Behr 1990, and season 4 episode 24, 'The Mind's Eye', Livingston & Echevarria, 1991, both of which involve characters in a trip to the pleasure planet Risa). Indeed, play is rarely directly visualized on screen for any great length of time. As Lwaxana Troi (Majel Barrett), Deanna's (Marina Sirtis) free-spirited mother, tells her daughter in episode 24 of season 3, 'Ménage à Troi' (Legato, Bronson & Sackett, 1990), life on board the Enterprise is "all business and no play". Instead of providing play, then, the holodeck provides contrast. Where in regular episodes we see 'familiar' characters in 'unfamiliar' settings, these same characters become 'defamiliarized' when we see them acting on the holodeck's periodized stage. This means that these attempts by the creators to humanize the crew members often fail. The members of the crew come across as even more alien in these familiar settings than they do onboard the Enterprise. This has the effect of making their utopia more concrete, but also of distancing it from the audience.

One exception to this, however, might be found in the 'Hollow Pursuits' episode, which sees its central character, Reginald Barclay (Dwight Schultz), using the holodeck in ways that conflict with the moderate 'utopian' values followed by the rest of the crew. To this extent, while Barclay is marginalized onboard the Enterprise, he is also genuinely humanized by the holodeck in ways that the other crew members are not. He experiences and uses the technology in ways that anticipate our own struggles with the use of virtual reality gaming today: particularly those which involve virtual reality as an expression of desire, a means of escape, that highlights therapeutic uses of the technology and, more troubling, that see it as a site of addiction and exploitation.

Hollow Pursuits

In 'Hollow Pursuits', we meet, for the first time, Lieutenant Reginald Barclay, a reoccurring character who goes on to appear in five episodes of TNG, the movie *Star Trek: First Contact* (Frakes, 1996), and six episodes of *Star Trek: Voyager* (Berman, Piller, & Taylor, 1995–2001). In the episode, Barclay exhibits some *unusual* behavior—at least, unusual by the standards set by the crew of the Enterprise. The very name 'Hollow Pursuits', speaks to *Star Trek*'s more general attitude toward play. In their chapter, 'Why Not Live in the Holodeck?', Philip Tallon and Jerry Walls write: "Imagine how dull an episode would be where the crew simply has an enjoyable time playing in the holodeck with no real conflict or difficulty" (2008, p. 256). This somewhat cynical take on the value of holodeck play draws on wider criticisms of utopias that seem to suggest that without 'conflict' life would be boring. The critics continue: "Might a safe world be similarly dull? If nothing serious was ever ultimately at stake, if we could *never* suffer, wouldn't our actions all seem a bit trivial?" (2008, p. 256). To justify this, they point to our interest in "holodeck gone bad" episodes, where the lives of the crew are on the line (2008, p. 256). But the need for such episodes might also point to one of the fundamental flaws of TNG's utopia: the lack of genuine play for those onboard. That when we find a crew member like Barclay who truly indulges in free play and the enacting of his private fantasies on the holodeck, he is shamed for it, to my mind at least, represents the limits of the Federation's utopia rather than its rightness.

'Hollow Pursuits' opens with Barclay causing a ruckus in Ten Forward, the Enterprise's bar and 'real-world' social venue. What is truly incredible about this scene is just how jarring it is for the audience who, given their familiarity with the general temperament of the crew, are likely to be startled by Barclay's outburst. First, in response to a reprimand from Geordi for Barclay's abandoning his post, Barclay pushes his superior officer over telling him to take his "holier-than-thou attitude and get out of [his] life" (Roddenberry & Bole, 1990, 00:30). Next, confronted by an onlooking Commander Riker (Jonathan Frakes), who accuses him of "insubordination", (00:44) Barclay drinks to the charge before putting the First Officer in a grapple: "Riker, you're nothing but a pretty mannequin in a fancy uniform" he says through gritted teeth. "If Picard has a problem with me, you tell him to come and talk to me himself" (00:59). Afterward, we see Barclay's real interest: A seductively dressed Deanna, who claims to be excited by his "confidence" and "arrogant resolve" (01:33). If we didn't know something was off from the outset, we certainly do now. Finally, a message comes through asking Barclay to report to one of the Cargo Bays. That's where the encounter ends with this intriguing new character telling the computer to "save program", making it clear that this was some kind of holodeck fantasy all along (02:02).

While Sebastian Stoppe asserts that "Barclay seems like a stranger in utopian space" (2022, p. 70), Tallon and Walls (2008, p. 250) suggest that "nearly anyone—especially Star Trek fans—can sympathize with Barclay's obsession with a fictional world". They

note a contrast between 'Hollow Pursuits' and a later episode, season 6 episode 12, 'Ship in a Bottle' (Singer & Tormé, 1988), which sees Picard, Data, and Barclay trapped on the holodeck as a frustrated simulation of Professor Moriarty (Daniel Davis) is rebooted and tries to engineer his escape from the holodeck. Whereas in 'Hollow Pursuits' we find Barclay doing everything he can to spend time there, so much so that he neglects his real-world duties to indulge his holodeck fantasies, in 'Ship in a Bottle', characters seek only to escape the holodeck. Tallon and Walls ask, "which is the more reasonable desire", to dream of escape from the "illusion" or to be "caught up in it" (2008, p. 250).

'Hollow Pursuits' relies on a general mischaracterization of virtual reality gaming that is embedded in the technology's very name. In practice, when we play using VR, we do so to escape reality altogether. Jenna Ng writes that,

> The dream of the Holodeck's "total immersion" thus modulates through the post-screen's alternative lens – a different order of immersion in the indiscernibility of the screen via fluid shifts in dimensions from the physical to the virtual, and vice versa. In this sense, the re-ordering of the virtual against the actual in such contextual terms also adjusts virtuality as escape and the overcoming of human limitations: not only might we need to re-think how we are escaping, but perhaps also from what are we doing so. (2021, p. 145)

The reality that we escape from invariably also includes us: in VR we escape from ourselves. This is exactly what Barclay does. On the holodeck he's assured, assertive, and dynamic. As a member of the crew, he's the opposite: uncertain, nervous, and passive. In some other respects, then, virtual reality gaming shares some similarities with various role-playing games, where the purpose isn't to play oneself, but often to play as all the things we'd like to be but are not. Even when one does play a version of oneself in such games, it is nearly always a heroic version of that self. In short, there is really nothing unusual, at least for us, in Barclay's power fantasies, so why then must the episode shame him for them?

Barclay, we're told by Riker, has a history of "seclusive tendencies" (07:42). Where both Geordi and Riker seek to have Barclay transferred as a result of his general poor performance—primarily his tardiness and, it would appear, his timid demeanor—Picard admonishes Geordi for not doing enough to integrate and support the struggling engineer. Like Picard, during a conversation with Geordi in Ten Forward, Guinan (Whoopi Goldberg), the ship's bartender, defends Barclay referring to him as "imaginative", clearly indicating that she has some knowledge of his illicit holodeck use. It's interesting, however, that Geordi, in response, tells her that "maybe he's in the wrong line of work". "You engineering types don't appreciate imagination?" Guinan asks. Geordi rejects this, falling back on an easy escape clause… "he just doesn't fit in here" (18:14). But like Picard, Guinan knows best. When Geordi, in his floundering attempts to explain his dislike for the man, reaches for the excuse

that "he's always late, the man's nervous, nobody wants to be around this guy", Guinan says that "if I felt that nobody wanted to be around me, I'd probably be late and nervous too" (19:18). Barclay is clearly a loner who struggles with general social interactions. As Geordi tries to get to know him better over a drink, he dismisses the Lieutenant's struggles as indicative that Barclay is "just shy", but Barclay's admission that "I am the guy who writes down things to remember to say when there's a party and then when he finally gets there he winds up alone, in the corner trying to look comfortable examining a potted plant", evocatively denotes that shyness is not an adequate description (23:59). Barclay, in fact, suffers from a form of social anxiety and awkwardness, for which the holodeck provides a therapeutic release.

It is, perhaps, the distinctly erotic nature of Barclay's fantasies, however, that make for uncomfortable viewing. Where seeing him upend the power dynamics on board the ship might have, in fact, made him a kind of anti-hero, seeing his use of Deanna's image to fulfil his sexual fantasies is a different matter. In the second holodeck scene, we witness what appears to be a counselling session between Barclay and Deanna but it soon becomes clear that it is another one of the lieutenant's fantasies. Deanna supports Barclay asking, "why [he's] so hard on himself", but soon after the pair embrace and kiss (12:02). In other holodeck episodes we see frontline characters engage in holographic romances. For example, Geordi falls for a holodeck recreation of warp theoretician Dr. Leah Brahms (Susan Gibney) in season 3 episode 6, 'Booby Trap' (Beaumont, Wagner & Roman, 1989)—which is also indirectly referenced in 'Hollow Pursuits'—as does Riker with Minuet (Carolyn McCormick) in season 1 episode 14, '1001001' (Lynch, Hurley & Lewin, 1988). But, crucially, these romances don't involve the recreation of individuals that the crew members know (in fact, Geordi is actually shamed for his use of the holodeck when he comes to meet the real Leah Brahms in season 4 episode 16 'Galaxy's Child' [Kolbe & Kartozian, 1991] and she rebuffs his clumsy advances). There is, thus, an issue of consent that is rendered particularly problematic in Barclay's use of the holodeck in 'Hollow Pursuits'.

'Hollow Pursuits' shows us the double-standards at work. Upon initially seeing copies of Picard, Geordi, and Data (i.e., the ship's senior brass) dressed as the three musketeers in another one of Barclay's holodeck fantasies, Riker is deeply troubled. He wants to shut the program down, but Deanna insists that the fantasy might give the group a better insight into what makes Barclay tick as they try to hunt him down to help resolve a technical problem with the ship's warp drive. Next, a belittling version of Riker appears to challenge the group, and the Commander is even more upset. To some extent, these versions of the crew are harmless. They allow Barclay to, as he puts it to Geordi, "blow off some steam" (22:59). But they are also subversive since they indirectly challenge the status and hierarchy onboard the Enterprise, even if they do so in a private capacity only. Given Riker is disturbed by the program *before* the replica of his own image appears, we can only assume that it is this challenge which he views as the cardinal sin of Barclay's holodeck fantasies—to some extent it is merely the dream that Barclay might, in fact, be superior in some sense to his

more senior colleagues that seems to draw Riker's ire. Such a dream might, in essence, be seen as utopian. For example, we might regard it as another version of Saturnalia, the Roman festival where, for a brief period only, hierarchies were upended with masters waiting on slaves. Next, however, as the group continue, they run into a recreation of Deanna as "the Goddess of Empathy". Although not sexually explicit, this image offers up more than a hint at the seductive potential of these representations. We've already seen Barclay passionately kissing another representation of Deanna and here she is dressed in a toga asking them to "cast off their inhibitions and embrace love…" (32:36). The 'real' Deanna goes from telling Riker that what they've seen shows a "healthy fantasy life" to immediately wanting to shut down this image (32:22). The show positions this as about *her* double-standards. Just as she had cancelled Riker's attempts to shut down the earlier images of the crew as the musketeers, here *he* cancels *her* order with a smile before turning to Geordi: "Quite a healthy fantasy life, wouldn't you say…" (33:00). Thus, for Riker, these images (one that belittles the structure of male authority and command and threatens the established hierarchy, and one that non-consensually eroticizes a female member of the crew) are not only comparable, but, in fact, the former is the more serious infringement and the latter something to smirk about. The double-standards are surely *his*.

Lynne Joyrich argues that, in "'Hollow Pursuits', the specific contradictions that technofictional texts (holographic or televisual) may pose for women are suggested" (1996, p. 77). Focusing particularly on the representation of the ship's counsellor, she writes that,

> Reduced from a qualified professional into merely a muse of sexual healing (an even more exaggerated feminine stereotype than that of empath), Deanna Troi is portrayed in this diegetic fantasy as a mythical but nonetheless reassuring erotic object—precisely the kind of comforting emotional/sexual image that she may be for many of TNG's own viewers. (1996, p. 78)

In this scene we seem to have the deepfake conundrum exposed. Although AI deepfakes have gained more traction in the media of late, in large part because of fakes of politicians, deepfakes have been commonplace in pornography for considerably longer with fake celebrity videos forming their own 'genre'. That so little concern has been paid to their use in pornography, and so much to their potential use to replicate images of politicians, speaks to the inherent hierarchies of power embedded even here in what might otherwise be regarded as a democratic sort of technology. To this extent, the 'harmless' play of 'Hollow Pursuits', proves to offer a powerful commentary on one of the most serious technological concerns of our present moment. Elizabeth Caldera writes that, "as deepfakes become more popular, the ability to distinguish between which videos are authentic and which are doctored will begin to diminish, causing the potential for social, legal, and political harms in a variety of areas in our daily lives" (2019, p. 178). These concerns move from the political realm

(with discourse about Russian interference in 'Western' elections) to the everyday domestic realm, with the potential for deepfake versions of revenge porn, as noted by Caldera who asserts that the origin for deepfakes is "closely tied to pornography" (2019, p. 179). Functioning on the higher level, Barclay's actions are indicative of the connection, often noted in videogames, between violence and masculine sexual prowess. Aaron Toscano, for instance, notes that "many violent video games have sexual content, creating a virtual world where the gamer can wield the phallus for sexual conquest" (2020, p. 102).

Upon discovering his fantasies, Riker talks of Barclay's holodeck use as a "violation of protocol". Apparently, "crew members should not be simulated in the holodeck". Geordi responds that he doesn't think there's any regulation against it, but Riker insists that "there ought to be" (30:03). And perhaps he's right. Sebastian Stoppe (2022, p. 54) refers to Barclay's fantasies in this episode as a 'misuse' of the holodeck. But he also notes that the episode seems to indicate that "The *Star Trek* utopia does not allow deviators in their society" (2022, p. 71). What makes Barclay 'deviant' is worth considering. He clearly doesn't prescribe to the unwritten, and somewhat odd, Enterprise rule that your fantasies can't be about real crew members, but even this might have been acceptable to his senior colleagues had the engineer managed to prevent these fantasies from interfering with his work. In the early part of the episode, we see Geordi reluctantly try to understand Barclay's troubles and it is clear that he is prepared to overlook the holodeck indiscretions if Barclay is able to be fully present to discharge his duties. At the end of the episode, as Barclay does indeed manage to solve the conundrum affecting the ship's systems, saving the Enterprise from catastrophe, Geordi congratulates him saying, "glad you were with us out here in the real world today, Mr. Barclay" (42:49). It's a message we see across other texts about virtual reality, even those which celebrate the technology (cf., for example, Ernest Cline's novel *Ready Player One*, 2012, which sets its action in a world where energy, climate, and social crises have resulted in the majority of the population escaping into a virtual reality simulation called the *OASIS*). What the text really deals with, then, is not Barclay's fantasies, but, rather, his addiction. Once more, it is Geordi who diagnoses the problem when he admonishes the engineer: "You're going to be able to write the book on holodiction" (35:07).

Conclusion: Holodiction or holotherapy?

In TNG, addiction to gaming seems to have been a concern for the creators, given that *Star Trek*'s utopia is, broadly speaking, one of moderation rather than indulgence. We might note, for instance, that in another episode—season 5 episode 6, 'The Game' (Allen, Sackett, Bronson & Braga, 1991)—Riker returns from his holiday on Risa with an addictive videogame that threatens to enslave the entire crew. Ironically, the Enterprise is saved by the returning Wesley Crusher (Will Weaton) and his young love interest Robin Lefler (Ashley Judd) who, despite being young adults and thus the primary target market for videogames, are the only ones able to resist the

game's alure. Ljubisa Bojic (2022, p. 9) notes that in 2021, "60 million individuals were addicted to videogaming", a total of just over 3% of players. More problematic, however, is that "recent research has discovered that virtual reality gaming is more addictive than other forms of gaming" (Ljubisa, 2022, p. 4). In 'Hollow Pursuits', we see the double edge. Where Barclay's crewmates undoubtedly regard him an addict—with all the nasty associations that accompany such a label—Barclay himself treats the holodeck as a form of therapy. Indeed, it seems just as likely that such virtual escapes can offer a welcome break as they can endanger our wellbeing. Marijam Did notes that "although the mainstream associates videogames with mental health issues for their tendency to cause addiction or induce isolation, research has shown that games can also work as a form of therapy" (2024, p. 96). What is Barclay to do, after all, when his 'real life' therapist is also a part of his fantasy?

For Dooley Murphy (2023, p. 67), "the *Star Trek* holodeck … predominantly pays tribute to mainstream Anglophone genres: cowboy movies, murder mysteries, police procedurals, and stories involving historic swordplay". This is, in part, true of Barclay's use of the holodeck in 'Hollow Pursuits' since, beside locations which are recreations of areas of the ship (Ten Forward, Counsellor Troi's therapy lounge, and the Bridge) he also chooses to recreate the lush gardens of some Edenic paradise, populated by crew members dressed as musketeers—the creators of TNG loved any excuse to dress the cast up in period costume. But this does Barclay's imagination a disservice. His holodeck fantasies are not narratively driven, or even narratively inspired, as are, say, Picard's or Data's. Barclay eschews narrative in favour of experiential free play. Murphy has noted that the future of VR "needn't be narrative at all" (2023, p. 65). He blames *Star Trek*'s holodeck for misdirecting the industry and expectant users. For Murphy, the holodeck is "the dream of an omniresponsive AI storyteller, a subservient cyberbard" (2023, p. 65). Thus, literature about VR, he argues, has tended to assume that "computer-mediated storytelling has a seemingly singular destiny", with "all efforts that fall short of a holodeck risk[ing] being viewed as noble but inevitable failures on the path to perfection. (That is, unconstrained agency.)" (2023, p. 66). Barclay's use of the holodeck, however, points to the availability of other types of VR play and experience. For these, his utopia shames him, and, perhaps, rightly so, since they also point to the dangers of VR 'play' when it comes to erotic fantasy. But, in other ways, Barclay's play is more relatable and takes us back to the term virtual reality itself. Where Riker is keen for the holodeck to be a place entirely divorced from the 'real' world, Barclay shows how any such attempts at 'virtual reality' are also bound up with the 'real'. The episode shows the complex consequences of these technological forms of play where the fantastical interacts with the local and corporeal. In defending what Geordi and others seem to see as a childish fantasy world, Barclay asserts: "the people I create in there are more real to me than anyone I meet out here" (35:18).

So, is Barclay just a loner or deviant, or does the episode make him sympathetic and more like us? Probably, the answer is both. Ultimately, we might see Barclay's fantasies as childish. He dreams of having the confidence to seduce the women in his life

and of besting his rivals on board the ship in sword fights. When he is finally confronted about his actions by Geordi, who walks in during one of his holodeck simulations—don't these doors have locks on them?!—it is clearly reality that assumes control. He immediately offers to resign his post and leave the Enterprise. But Barclay is also the only member of the crew who really understands the potential of the holodeck: its potential to provide therapeutic release and to be more than just fantasy… to connect the real and the virtual. Sebastian Stoppe's line that, "the escape route from utopia for the individual is the holodeck" (2022, p. 72), raises this very tension. If the Enterprise is already a utopia, why do individuals need the holodeck as a form of escape? In one last simulation, we see Barclay having saved the day, stepping on to the Bridge to declare his intention to leave the Enterprise. He is offered good wishes from prominent members of the crew. Once more, however, the scene is a simulation. Rather than leaving the Enterprise the engineer is in fact saying a different sort of goodbye. As he ends the program, he proceeds to ask the computer to erase all his saved holodeck programs. Ironically, then, it is by this therapeutic use of the holodeck that he comes to end his own addiction to the technology itself: a neat encapsulation of the potential and the dangers of the holodeck wrapped up in one final scene.

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Fictional Games as Parody

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Fictional Games as Parody

Analysing the Fictional Game of Box Peek as Parody of the Animated Series of Transmedial Gaming Franchises

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Abstract

This paper conducts a textual analysis of the animated comedic web miniseries *Box Peek*, analysing it as a general parody of transmedial gaming franchises, particularly the *Pokémon* TV series. The show features the fictional game of Box Peek, which is used as a device to not only provide drama and motivation for the show's characters, but also to parody the games and associated conceits that are central to these franchises, often for the sake of humour. This discussion makes use of theories of fiction and parody, cultural analyses of *Pokémon* and children's media, as well as *Box Peek*'s creator's own commentary to understand how fictional[ised] games create meaning for an audience. It concludes having discussed two major threads of analysis. The first concerning the rules of the game, which implies questions of strategy and technology, which eventually concerns fictional world-building, exploiting the fictional and ludic inconsistencies that exist in transmedial game franchises for humour. The second is the way in which Box Peek, after formally parodying shows like *Pokémon*, then extends this parody by answering the questions it raises. In so doing it is argued that Box Peek is simultaneously imitating the childlike tone of *Pokémon* before progressing to a more reflective, adult perspective on the enjoyment of these series by the audience themselves. This leads the (presumed millennial) audience to a retrospective self-assessment of how, now in adulthood, they regard transmedial gaming franchises of their childhood in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Keywords

Parody; *Pokémon*; Fictional Game; *Box Peek*; Game Adaptation; Transmedia

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In 2018, the crowd-funded games journalism collective EasyAllies released the first episode of the 10-episode web miniseries *Box Peek*[1] (Bosman, 2018–2019) on YouTube, created by then EasyAllies member Kyle Bosman. The show follows a young boy, Jordy Defective, as he travels to a new city and learns about the highly popular game Box Peek from his new friend C. D. Romanasello. The show's production was carried out primarily by Bosman with assistance only for voice acting and occasional script feedback from other members of the EasyAllies, as well as some voice actors outside of the group. The show uses a unique form of paper puppet animation to meet the limitations of a small crowdfunding budget via the EasyAllies' Patreon and YouTube community.

The present article will analyse Box Peek as a fictional game, with a particular focus on its nature as a parody of fictionalisations of popular game franchises such as *Pokémon* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. To do this, it will initially present an overview of existing theory on parody, fiction, and fictional games before engaging with textual analysis of *Box Peek* itself and the cultural impact of the texts it parodies. Finally, I will outline the conclusions of what the analysis reveals about fictional games that function as parodies and what they say about their targets.

Box Peek is an example of a "fictional game". Gualeni and Fassone (2023) have previously worked to define and discuss fictional games broadly, understanding fictional games "to be a game by virtue of [their] being literally understood as a game or a sport by the characters inhabiting a fictional world — and thus being potentially available for them to play" (p. 5). Though this definition keeps the discussion open to a wide range of case studies, I would add that 'fictional games' can also refer to real games that are fictionalised by process of adaptation, some of which are discussed below. Although Box Peek is not played and is impractical to play for real players, its similarities to fictionalised adaptations of games like *Pokémon* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* will be discussed. This latter aspect of fictional games is highlighted by Gualeni and Fassone, namely that they can be "tools for meta-reflexivity" regarding the real world that extend beyond simply aids for fleshing out an imagined fictional world (p. 6).

Fictionally, Box Peek is a game that maintains the excited focus of all members and institutions of society with many of the show's characters only interested in discussing or playing Box Peek. Although the show *Box Peek* is not uniquely popular in terms of views or widespread cultural impact, it is a unique case study for being a series (as opposed to a skit, gag, or one-off episode) about a fictional game that formally parodies other fictionalised serial adaptations of games, such as *Pokémon the Series*—the cultural impact of the latter being undeniable and which Box Peek seeks to

[1] *Box Peek* the show will be referred to in italics from this point on to distinguish it from Box Peek the fictional game.

interrogate. The show can be read as a parody of similar shows that were part of large transmedial gaming franchises aimed at millennial children in the late 1990s and early 2000s that tie-in with a real-life gaming product and extended media franchise. Sports, hobbies, and other competitive interests make up entire genres and subgenres of manga and, by extension, anime, such as those exported around this time (Bryce and Davis, 2010, p. 48). Although many are based on sports, there is the subgenre of adventure *shōnen* stories that focus on a pre-existing game or toy, fictionalised inside of a fantasy world.

Episodes in these shows tend to focus on the activity of training, learning about and playing a game or similar activity for the purpose of building interest in the real game or toy products associated with the franchise. Examples include *Pokémon the Series, Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *Beyblade*, *Digimon*, *Medabots*, or *Monster Rancher*. Box Peek, however, stands alone with no supporting game to promote, and thus, it is argued here, that it acts to parody these source texts for the sake of comedy and reflection on what they mean for their ageing millennial audiences.

Literature review and method

Some have noted parody's reflexive power to look back on what has come before and reinterpret the meanings of its referents in a new context or period, thus giving it a double character: that of the original and that of the parody (Greene et al., 2012). Parody has been variously defined by many academics, with a commonly recurring element being the formal emulation of a source text, or target, but with key differences that aim to reframe that text and create a new parodic text (Archer, 2016, p.148; Dentith, 2000, p. 157; Gehring, 1999, p. 198; Genette, 1997, p. 12; Gray, 2012; Harries, 2000; Hutcheon, 2000, p. 22). This is done usually for the purposes of comedy, or to provide the audience with a "pop culture literacy experience" (Gehring, 1999, pp.199–198) but parody can also function to critique or reframe the source text (or a political issue as in satire) (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 62). In this way, parody can be usefully put to work to critically analyse the past and nostalgic attitudes towards it, as well as revisit cultural monoliths to interrogate them. It is also important to remember that the parodied text(s) aren't necessarily the one(s) under attack. As Hutcheon (2000) states: "It is often respected and used as a model" (p. 103) and that parody can be formally summarised as "repetition [of a source text] with a difference" (p. 107), a key definition for this paper's analysis.

However it is defined, the question arises: what type of parody is a given text? Parody is not a monolith, and one could follow the format of a source text very closely or use it to mock a completely different target (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 58). It can be critical, playful, satirical, an exercise in media literacy, or a mixture of all (Gray, 2012; Hutcheon, 2000). In the present case study of *Box Peek*, it will be argued that it is a general parody, in Dentith's (2000) sense, that it has no one target text (p. 7), rather the target is the genre of animated series based on transmedial game franchises.

Box Peek works well as this type of parody since it is also interrogating what Armbruster (2016) might term a "collective" or "cultural" memory of its target texts, such that even if one does not have direct experience of these texts, they may have osmosed them through shared cultural influence. This osmosis is even more likely owing to their transmedial nature, such as Pokémon fans variably beginning with the show then the game and vice versa (Assunção et al., 2017).

Parody as a form of humour is also often linked to games and play (Rutter Giappone et al., 2022). Some case studies discuss games being parodied generally elsewhere, such as Zarzycka's (2022) readings of various YouTube series (e.g., *Epic NPC Man*) that parody general premises of games and their mechanics as compared to reality. Others concern games that are parodies of games, such as Möring's (2022) discussion of *Tetris* parodies. Yet more discuss cases where fictional games are created as pranks (Saarikoski et al., 2022) or constitute playable parodies of real games (Summerley, 2022). Gualeni and Fassone (2023) have even highlighted the use of fictional games for various purposes, specifically highlighting three examples of their meta-referential functions: reflection on their instrumental use to improve humanity, e.g. exercise, therapy, or training; to anticipate trends in society and technology that use games in the traditional vein of science fiction; and, naturally enough, their potential to satirise 'how actual games are made, played, used and shared socially' (pp.174–178).

The examples provided by Gualeni and Fassone (2023) and in Rutter-Giappone et al. (2022) either constitute pranks, or one-off gags and skits, that target specific or general texts (fictional games found in scenes from *The Simpsons*; others mentioned above), or are more extensive parodies of game development and the problems and stresses it can cause (e.g., 'Wirrâl Untethered' in *Disco Elysium*; the TV show *Mythic Quest*). So far, the literature has not extensively discussed longform serial parodies of fictionalised game adaptations via a fictional game. *Box Peek* is a unique case study of such a fictional game as it is a parody that closely aligns to the formal devices, worldbuilding goals, and personal memories of specific transmedial game projects like Pokémon or *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. Gualeni and Fassone correctly observe:

> Even when a fictional game does not explicitly reference an existing game, its very existence within a fictional world invites appreciators to reflect upon the games they play in their everyday lives and on the various roles and forms that play adopts in the actual world. (p. 178)

Given the continuing influence and dominance of *Box Peek*'s targets amongst adults and children alike, it seems a useful case study for analysis of the broader culture they impact.

Although *Box Peek* is a general parody, for the sake of limiting examples to a useful anchor, specific aspects of *Box Peek* will be framed through the television show *Pokémon the Series* (Yuyama, 1998-2006)[2] and its respective franchise (though others may be briefly mentioned to demonstrate particular points). Again, it should be noted that while many parodies of Pokémon do exist, almost all of these are one-off episodes, jokes, or skits lampooning the gameplay and premise of Pokémon, e.g. "Chinpokomon" in *South Park* (Parker and Stough, 1999) or "Peekimon Get" in *The Simpsons* (Omine and Polcino, 2017). Again, *Box Peek* is a unique example of parody in this space in that it is a serial episodic show that formally parodies other serial shows that fictionalise a game and explores the ludic, narrative, and metafictional questions such a longform project must deal with through worldbuilding.

Pokémon promotes the Pokémon video games and collectible card games, however it fictionalises the games with the goal of transmedial promotion of the franchise. In the series, a young boy, Ash Ketchum, sets out on an adventure with his friends to become a Pokémon trainer, learning about Pokémon and how to train and battle them in the process. In adapting their core game products to fictional versions of such, *Pokémon* arguably struggles to make the internal rules of the game consistent with the extended fiction of the franchise as it progressively represents a concrete fictional universe.

Likewise, the representation of many aspects of the world of *Pokémon* suggest or imply various questions that its worldbuilding does not really address, such as the coexistence of Pokémon and other real-world flora and fauna, or the technology required to capture and store Pokémon in the form of energy. In *Pokémon*, the Pokémon themselves and the complex technologies that facilitate their capture and battling must be grounded, to an extent, in the framework of a long-form narrative series and must confront some of the abstractions the game source texts negotiate differently. It should also be noted that this study is limited from a cultural standpoint of interpreting *Pokémon the Series* (originally a Japanese media product exported to the West) as the target of *Box Peek's* parody (the product of American/Western millennial creators and consumers).

Parody is linked to the logic of late capitalism and postmodernism, which coincides appropriately with the target texts of *Box Peek* (Dentith, 2000, p. 155; Hutcheon, 2000, p. xiv). *Pokémon* has, over the last three decades, been repeatedly criticised, or at least examined, through the lenses of power, capitalism, and consumerism and the implied effects on a child audience (Allison, 2006; Bainbridge, 2014; Elza, 2009, p. 63; Gibson, 2002; Heckman, 2019). Jordan (2004) summarises it as a "globally obsessive brand for children" (p. 462) and although Pokémon (and similar franchises)

[2] Hereafter the TV series is referred to in italics (i.e. *Pokémon*) as opposed to the games, larger franchise, and Pokémon themselves

are ripe for critical parody along these lines, *Box Peek* takes several routes into parody that adopt both a more complex reflexive stance from its millennial creators and the formal device of a fictional game to foreground this discussion. Although there is no representative data of the audience demographics of *Box Peek*, the show was made and released between 2018–2019, approximately 20 years after Pokémon first released in the West in 1998, when many players would be around a target age of 13 or younger, i.e. millennials. Though viewers do not necessarily need to be familiar with the target text of a parody to enjoy it, for those that recognise the link it provides potentially deeper interpretation with this experience in mind.

It should be noted that the reader of a parody should always take responsibility for such assessments as the interpretation of parody is "one half of the process" (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 22), but specific instances will be used to argue this perspective. Thus, this paper seeks to conduct a textual analysis of *Box Peek* with the focus of reading it as a work of formal parody from the perspective of a millennial audience familiar with *Pokémon*. It will analyse not only the common tropes and formal conventions of its target texts but examine how the design of the game Box Peek is intimately related to its approach to parody. Two research questions arise:

> RQ1: How does the fictional game of Box Peek parody large transmedial game franchises that fictionalise their own games?
>
> RQ2: What messages are present through this approach to parody?

How to play Box Peek

The lead character of *Box Peek*, Jordy Defective, is a clear audience surrogate in the same way many shows of the same genre follow a hero new to the game or just starting on an adventure. Jordy comes from Fairboat Island, a place where Box Peek is not played or known about. These lead characters are usually shown to be either learning about the game (and its attendant world) with great determination, genius savants with great talent, or both. Box Peek's rules are explained to us through Jordy's friend C. D. trying to improve Jordy's complete lack of knowledge.

In Box Peek, players can summon a box in which they sit inside during play and can peek out of at their opponent's box. There are two ways to win Box Peek: peeking at an opponent's box for 4 seconds (a complete peek) or catching an opponent peeking (a counter-peek). In addition to this there are 3 core rules:

1. If a player peeks, they must peek for at least 2 seconds
2. If a player retreats from a peek they must wait 6 seconds before peeking again
3. A player can put anything in their box that fits in their box

In a parallel Q&A series about the show, creator Kyle Bosman explains that the rules were engineered as a means of providing drama and suspense: "Rules came from necessity, like how you add drama around that … The idea of somebody peeking and there being suspense of the person's peeking and that's why [to win] you have to peek for at least 4 seconds" (Easy Allies Plays, 2018, 32:26). He goes on to explain the three core rules are there to make it so that the game has sporting conditions and can't simply be gamed by players peeking and retreating very quickly. Rules 1 and 2 ensure that characters, especially Jordy, are put in positions of vulnerability and suspense at what might happen during the time of an attempted peek. Meanwhile rule 3 allows for variety later in the show, since the game has little depth otherwise. The rules by themselves do not constitute a very playable game and this is humorously incongruent with most character's devotional love of the game.

Like other fictional games, such as 'Azad' in *The Player of Games* (Banks, 2003) or 'Gungi' in *Hunter X Hunter (*Togashi, 2005), the full rules and history of the game's development are kept vague so that the focus can remain on storytelling, avoiding the distraction of ironing out complex inconsistencies or edge case rules. Bosman had even considered the real-life playability of the game when creating the series:

> I don't think this game is possible in real life … I don't think it'd be fun in real life … It's not meant to be a fun game to play … The absurdity is that everyone loves this game so much, it's the most popular game in the world. (Easy Allies Plays, 2018, 34:53)

Two major threads are discussed in this paper. First regards the naturally absurd nature of the content of *Box Peek* raising several questions, fictionally asked by its characters as well as ones left to the audience, often for the sake of comedy. In this manner it echoes the questions that the content of series like *Pokémon* sometimes fails to address. Second, is the reconciling of the love of *Box Peek* with external contexts, something *Pokémon* and other series' ageing, millennial audiences also grapple with in terms of how they relate to and understand it as fans of the real games.

Silly questions about Box Peek: Rules, technology, and consistency

> So *Box Peek's* world is comedic right? I just wanted to explore the world of a Beyblade or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* where everyone loves a stupid game. But what's fun about that to me is that everyone's not crazy, right? It's not like a bunch of crazy people who are shallow. It is really considering how and why everyone in this world, only loves this thing… Like how everyone in the world of Pokémon loves Pokémon and it's like 'why don't you love other things' you know? (Kyle Bosman, creator of *Box Peek*, in Easy Allies Play, 2018, 56:41)

Jordy himself, shortly after learning the game, asks the reasonable question: ”What happens if nobody peeks?” (Easy Allies, 2018a, 7:01), to which the absurd dismissal from his new friend, and Box Peek expert, C.D. is “Jordy, you have the craziest questions, that has literally never happened!”. However, these questions can also be leveraged at many other fictional games that either do not explore edge cases, where real-life competitive games and sports must account for rulings on very niche occurrences within a game, or suggest strategies that cannot be fully imagined unless the fiction they are a part of chooses to depict them. To do this the game design of Box Peek is deliberately absurd in a way that is incongruous with how beloved it is. A match of Box Peek almost never lasts more than a single minute and frequently lasts shorter than 10 seconds. The potential depth of the game is extremely limited and the basic strategies, as they are enacted on the show, would be exhausted over a relatively small number of play sessions. In short, it would not sustain a stable metagame for very long. While this would be a flaw in most other media, it is a strength of *Box Peek* as a work of comedic parody.

The game’s rules and their implications about the world and the technology used to play it are also a source of much of the series’ jokes, but also a parodic mechanism for imitating its source texts. Because of the peeking rule’s requirement of precise counting of specific units of times (2, 4, and 6 second increments exactly), Box Peek requires referees that can measure time by milliseconds to resolve disputes. Coupled with the fact that players can challenge each other to a match at almost any time and in any location, the world of *Box Peek* features flying, near-sentient, robotic drones that can talk and think, that work as game referees (known as ‘Peek Refs’). This technology is extremely impressive and initially causes Jordy to be more interested in the robotic Peek Ref than playing Box Peek:

> Jordy: You have floating robots here!?
>
> C. D.: Just for Box Peek (Easy Allies, 2018a, 3:38)

The extremely complex technology that powers these robots even becomes a major focus of episodes 6 and 9, which, respectively, introduce the issue of black markets for Box Peek technology, and explore the self-awareness of the Peek Refs.

The boxes used to play Box Peek are remotely stored in a special storage warehouse (“the basement fortress”) from which the boxes can be teleported to their user’s current location via a ”boxporter”. Like the referees, this incredible technology is not used for any purpose other than playing Box Peek. Even the boxes themselves are incredible technology as they are indestructible, being made of “double plastic”. In episode 5, a character ominously explains to Jordy that “[the] boxes are complicated volatile mechanisms, in truth we barely understand how they work” (Easy Allies, 2018b, 4:42). Thus, the world is suggested to be so wholly consumed by Box Peek that its most cutting-edge technology (robots, space-age materials, teleportation)

work in service of a game as opposed to other applications never explored in the fiction e.g., healthcare, transportation, military, housing, communications, etc.

These forms of technology are analogous to *Pokémon's* Pokéballs and PC storage devices, which can convert Pokémon into energy, which can be sent or recalled in the same way a digital file might be. This reductive and subordinate commodification of the Pokémon themselves is a criticism often levelled at the series (Allison, 2006, p. 220). The Pokéballs can also store Pokémon many times the size of a Pokéball using this method. Similar examples exist in other media where the central game-playing technology raises further questions about its implications for the rest of the fictional world. For example, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* features gigantic platforms capable of generating complex holograms in real-time so that a card game may be played. The applications of these technologies to non-games contexts are not fully explored, such that it can seem absurd, which *Box Peek* exploits for humour.

Naturally, fictional media aimed at younger viewers are not always working to flesh out their fictional worlds in great or realistic detail, let alone resolve major fictional inconsistencies. Walton's (1990) concept of "silly questions" (pp.174-175) has some currency here to help account for the fact that fictional world building involves answering these types of questions up to a point of acceptability. Walton gives examples of representational fictions where conceits of the fiction mean that unrealistic things may happen. For example, Shakespearean characters, of any background or eloquence, speaking with great poetic ability, or Leonardo's Last Supper having all its participants lined up on one side of the table (for the sake of the viewer) rather than around it (as a group naturally would). Walton points out that silly questions that highlight these conceits of the medium have no place in serious critique. One must consider whether the aesthetic impact of the work is seriously called into question by such "silly questions".

Silly questions arguably gain value by being integrated into parody rather than mere pedantic critique. Bosman even highlights a question originating from comedic improv that guided the initial concept for *Box Peek*: "If this then what?" (Easy Allies Plays, 2018, 1:00:04); if Pokéballs exist then what else happens? In a parody these questions are raised and answered whenever it is appropriately dramatic or humorous to do so and often in cases where its source texts simply do not. Jordy's innocent curiosity about the rules and origins of Box Peek and its accompanying technologies are similarly treated as silly questions. In doing so the questions become a rich source of humour as every other character in the show sincerely ignores these questions due to their love of Box Peek, much like we, the audience, might do when enjoying *Pokémon* or similar texts. Thus, silly questions are valuable currency for parody.

Fictional games also offer the extended possibility to interrogate questions of ludic (in)consistency, given that shows like *Pokémon* aim to fictionalise real games with concrete and objective rulesets. In the Pokémon games, different Pokémon possess

elemental affinities, which work as counters to each other in a manner akin to rock-paper-scissors (Water beats Fire beats Grass beats Water etc.). In the *Pokémon* episode *Showdown in Pewter City* (Takegami and Itani, 1998; Yuyama, 1998-2006), Ash arrives at a gym where the gym leader Brock primarily uses rock and ground type Pokémon. Ash defeats Brock's Geodude (rock/ground type) with his Pikachu's (electric type) attacks, despite ground-type Pokémon being immune to electric-type attacks in the games. There are other, myriad inconsistencies, which can make the transmedial experience of Pokémon incongruent. Some Pokémon can use moves in the show, which they cannot learn in the games, and vice versa. In many cases these problems arise from the fact that the different media will make use of different storytelling/representational conveniences that are either appropriate to game balance or drama. Despite these problems, Pokémon fights are otherwise narratively satisfying in the absence of a defined rules list.

If the *Pokémon* franchise is silly because of ludic inconsistencies in the rules of Pokémon across its transmedia portfolio, Box Peek, by contrast, is silly because it is ludically *consistent,* that is, its rules are consistent but reveal the game as inherently ludicrous. Rule 3 (a player can put anything in their box that fits in their box) pushes the acceptability of the game and gets exploited by Box Peek players to absurd degrees, mainly for the sake of narrative variety in an otherwise simplistic game. In episode 5, Jordy learns about box mods, different attachments and gadgets that can be used to disrupt the game. Mods include robotic arms to hold the opponent's box lid shut or shining an intensely bright light at the opponent, preventing the opponent from peeking. Players often have no way of countering them and box mods are usually extremely expensive, framing them as an economic disadvantage. This could be read as a commentary on ”pay-to-win” elements of, and the intense consumer demand for, popular non-digital games such as *Magic the Gathering* or indeed the *Pokémon Trading Card Game* (Brougère, 2004); something Maisenhölder (2018) argues the game balance of which are ”corrupted” by “game-external capital” for “game-internal” chances to win. Although any mod that fits in a box is legal, many push the limits of acceptable sporting behaviour. Thus, the spirit of the rules, not their ludic consistency, is called into question for humorous effect.

Putting away childish things: Parody for the youth who became adults

Box Peek incidentally parodies elements of *shōnen* manga and anime, a Japanese media classification used to identify media primarily aimed at young boys (Bryce and Davis, 2010; Drummond-Mathews, 2010). It is a loose genre which the targets of *Box Peek* fall into and a type of show Bosman themselves has acknowledged as an influence and inspiration (Easy Allies Plays, 2018). Drummond-Mathews (2010) summarises the themes of *shōnen* manga contemporary to the 1990s (when Pokémon and other transmedial game franchises launched) as being characterised by ”concepts

of friendship, perseverance, and success". Furthermore, these narratives, although fitting the broad outline of Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey", are distinguished by a hero that spends much of their time in the "initiation phase", learning, growing, failing, and ultimately changing before overcoming their struggles towards the end of a narrative (Drummon-Mathews, 2010, p. 73). This also happens in *Box Peek,* but subversive elements in the latter half of the show reframe these tropes in ways that relate more to the real world of the ageing millennials that are, and were, the target of such franchises.

In *Pokémon*, the lead protagonist, Ash Ketchum, is shown to be a plucky but inexperienced Pokémon trainer, similar to Jordy learning about Box Peek. They are both supported by a cast of friends, as well as campy villains, that round out the relationships they explore through the game as a motivational device (Bainbridge, 2014; Jordan, 2004, p. 469). As they progress, Ash and Jordy learn about their respective game's strategies along the way. In Ash's case he even fails and loses important matches from time to time, which is where *Box Peek* differs again. Jordy demonstrates a freakishly good record playing Box Peek since he never loses a single match, somehow managing to devise a winning strategy in every situation, even when he has only recently learnt of a new rule or element of the game. It is later revealed to the audience, in episode 8 that his success and destiny as a champion is due to a mixture of luck and talent, but also shadowy manipulation of Jordy and his adventure by the Box Peek Organisation (BPO), at one point comically designating him a "mythical, chosen peeker" (Easy Allies, 2018c, 5:03). As established earlier, Jordy's home, Fairboat Island, is the last region unfamiliar with Box Peek and so engineering a champion from Fairboat is a profit-driven, corporate ploy to ensure the remainder of the world is caught up by a global gaming phenomenon in an eerily comparable manner to *Pokémon* in our own world.

Although *Box Peek* is only ten episodes long, its initial release schedule split it into two 'seasons' of five episodes each, released in 2018 and 2019 respectively (Internet Movie Database, n.d.). The second season shifts its focus more frequently to the behind the scenes of Box Peek and features a more tragic tone, less frequently showing Jordy's matches (or almost any Box Peek matches) on screen, instead humorously describing them later in end-of-episode conversation. Thus, the game itself recedes into the background in favour of exploring the cultural and political motivations of people and organisations who are involved in Box Peek. This mid-series perspective reframe can be thought of as the other, 'adult' side of *Box Peek*.

In this way, the first five episodes can be seen as more *formal* parody of Pokémon, following a small cast of minors learning about and playing a game in the form of a serial adventure. The last five are much more of an *extended* parody that presents a more subversive, adult side of the world and consequences of the existence of Box Peek that is much darker in tone. The events less formally resemble a given episode of Pokémon and are more like *extended* worldbuilding that naturally arise from the questions mentioned earlier. Both seasons have these formal and extended parodic

elements, but the series can be seen as a parody with the goal of replicating the childlike experience of a show like *Pokémon* before pivoting, in its latter episodes, to a deeper exploration of the more adult questions and implications of the existence of its central game activity. The child and adult perspectives and their respective formal and extended parodic elements can further be seen as an appeal for the target demographic of *Box Peek*, namely ageing millennials who grew up on the shows it imitates.

Throughout the show there is a mostly uncritical acceptance of Box Peek as naturally the most fun thing anyone could do, until the final episode, where the depth and interest in Box Peek has been fully explored, not only by Jordy but also by the show itself. In episode 10, Jordy has become such a celebrated player that he is finally invited to an exhibition match against the current world champion, which is broadcast worldwide. In typical fashion, he defeats the champion by countering their strategy. The champion, Takia Chill, has a magical mind-reading dragon that can tell what the opponent is intending to do, but Jordy defeats this strategy by somehow not demonstrating any will or intent and simply counter-peeking Takia in her panic. Jordy is crowned the champion.

The *shōnen* protagonist's arc is spent primarily learning and growing through an extended initiation in the world, "often the entire series" after which they will have "grown, matured, and learned something that not only enriches herself but also the world around her" (Drummond-Mathews, 2010, p. 73). Jordy has certainly done this, but his apparent mastery of Box Peek leads him to an anti-climax. Jordan (2004) has noted that the Pokémon games promise the possibility of "mastery and acquisition" whilst also making sure these end goals are forever denied keeping players hooked, and so Jordy's attainment of mastery comes as a major blow (p. 468). In his post-match interview, although he has no ill will toward Box Peek, he ultimately considers the game "kinda stupid", in front of a worldwide audience: "I don't wanna do it any more… I'm sorry…If you all wanna keep playing Box Peek, that's cool! … It's just not for me" (Easy Allies, 2018d, 6:41). With that, Jordy retires from playing it forever. Everyone who had become so invested in Jordy and the game (emotionally or financially) is shown to reap the bittersweet end of their friendships with Jordy, their careers, and, in some cases, their own lives. What is to be made of this apparent rejection of a game everyone's world revolved around?

An adult millennial audience must now consider what Hutcheon (2000) refers to as the 'text's situation in the world' (p. 103). Jordy has changed and 'grown up', leaving both the hobby and world behind forcing everyone into their own personal crisis about what Box Peek meant, if anything. Though that is not to conclude that there aren't positive qualities to what Box Peek fictionally, or Pokémon really, is. Giving up a fun game or pastime is a depressing thought in the initial context of *Box Peek's* ending, but it touches upon a more culturally universal nerve of the transition into adulthood and, with it, the negotiation of loss, something Bosman discusses regarding the finale:

> If in Pokémon … if Ash Ketchum ever said, 'I don't like Pokémon' the show would end. And I thought that's really interesting, if one person shows disinterest, that this whole thing could collapse […]. There's that feeling with friends where like you both love a thing; you love a thing together and suddenly your friend doesn't anymore and that's such a unique pain. (Easy Allies Plays, 2019, 3:57)

Adult fans of Pokémon are likely familiar with the feeling of having lost something along the way, unable to freely play games or share interests as they once did on the playground.

Pokémon is a source of joy, childhood memories, and cultural and mental development for entire generations (Jordan, 2004, pp. 469, 474); Elza (2009) describes it as a utopian fantasy of independence for children (p. 56). Through the games and show, lessons of friendship (Drummond-Mathews, 2010; Bainbridge, 2014), sporting behaviour (Gervasoni, 2018), and familial love (Jordan, 2004, p. 474) can be learnt. Even when these values are self-subverted by the franchise. The core of Pokémon was intended, by Pokémon creator Satoshi Tajiri, to appeal to children and offer them something positive in a post-industrial society (Allison, 2006, p. 200). Specifically, it was the collective childhood memory of bug-hunting, analogous to any number of frivolous childhood activities that are intensely formative. The fictional game at the heart of *Box Peek's* parody can transport us back in time to be a child (repetition) with the knowledge of an adult (difference) to reflect on our own situation and admit, without malice, that the games we play[ed] can be "kinda stupid" and lose our interest, even though we might have greatly enjoyed them.

Conclusion

It is easy to read the end of *Box Peek* as cynically pointing out that the hobbies of (particularly millennial) childhood may only be commercial fads and that our interest in them is as fickle as the childlike wonder that sustains them. *Box Peek* is an examination of the inner child's enjoyment of games and their accompanying media, coupled with the interrogative questions and retrospective sobriety of adult reflection. Though the implied evaluation of shows like *Pokémon* is that they are absurd, inconsistent, and unnaturally inward-looking toward their fictional game, they are still works capable of sincerity and growth despite apparent flaws. If anything, the flaws lead to richer and more fully featured opportunities for humour and asking questions about what we really get out of these fictions and games.

This article has combined a close textual analysis of a rare example of a fictional game that is a parody of other fictionalised games (that is, the TV adaptation of Pokémon and other similar shows) with theoretical reflection and situated this in the perspective of the modern millennial audience of both *Box Peek* and *Pokémon*. It is

timely, given the impact of *Pokémon* on a now middle-aged adult population of millennials, who look back, reflect, and gain critical insight into both negative and commodified aspects of such products (games and their fictionalisations) through the lens of the very media that endeared so many to the franchise, but without demonising their collective childhood memories and culture.

The game of Box Peek, like many fictional games, is used to explore how drama and intrigue unfolds, in this case around a site of cultural importance, that is, competitive games or playground trends that are faddish or silly out of context. Fictional games are usually fictional because they are impossible or impractical to realise in the real world and possess advantages for fleshing out the worlds of which they are part. Their rules create drama and opportunities for characters to grow and develop. However, *Box Peek* being a work of parody means that it takes the framework of a fictional game to explore fictionalised games themselves; how they develop fictional inconsistencies, imply larger world-building questions that are ripe for comedic potential, or confront us with our own need to grow and negotiate our relationship with games that once consumed us. Thus, the conceits of their rules and premises, the central nature of these games to the appeal of certain children's shows, are both interrogated and celebrated.

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Fictional Videogames as Framing Devices

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Julián Gutiérrez Carrera

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Fictional Videogames as Framing Devices

Suicide Communication in MMOs

JULIÁN GUTIÉRREZ CARRERA

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the use of fictional massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) as framing devices serves as a reflexive narrative tool that suggests an understanding of MMOs as spaces with their own internal rules of communication. To do this, I conduct a close reading of *Agony of a Dying MMO*, a singleplayer demo game that depicts the final hours of service of a fictional MMO through a series of semi-explorable vignettes showing the activities of fictional players. In order to analyse how MMOs are represented as spaces with internal rules of communication, I focus my analysis on three instances of direct suicide communication—communicative acts directly referring to past, present, or future suicidal intent. As suicide communication is often indirect, I focus on how the social logic and rules of MMOs enable direct suicide communication. Through the close readings, I found that MMOs alter, enable, and restrict specific types of communication through a combination of their game design features, their user interfaces, and their existence as (and contiguity with) online spaces. In particular, I found that written communication through an MMO's chat box can provide an alibi by turning seemingly serious statements into jokes; that acts embedded in the process of engaging with MMOs, like logging out and the consequent disappearance of a character, can serve as a communicative tool denoting finality; and that game design features meant to bring players together, like guilds and factions, can enable player authenticity and openness by attracting like-minded players, for better or for worse. As the use of videogames as framing devices presents a meta-referential commentary on videogames in the real world, these represented social affordances suggest that virtual online spaces provide unique opportunities and alibis for direct suicide communication.

Keywords

Fictional games; games within games; massively multiplayer online games; framing devices; suicide; suicide communication

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In this paper, I argue that the use of fictional massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) as framing devices serves as a reflexive narrative tool that suggests an understanding of MMOs as spaces with their own internal rules of communication, social affordances, and social restrictions. I will argue this point through a close reading of the demo game *Agony of a Dying MMO* (Hughes, 2021). The game depicts the final hours of the fictional MMO *Garden of Widows*, an online first-person shooter (FPS), from the perspective of five different fictional players through a collection of semi-explorable vignettes. The vignettes are often brief, containing snippets of conversations, random encounters with a fictional player, or, in some cases, open areas to explore.

In particular, I focus on three scenes that represent direct suicide communication, which is a "[reference] to thoughts about the act [of suicide] and plans to commit it" that refers directly to past or present suicidal intent, and which may be verbal or non-verbal (Wasserman, 2016, p. 31). Since suicide communication is stigmatised (Fulginiti et al., 2015; Latakienė et al., 2015; Owen et al., 2012) and often relies on indirectness, ambiguity, and euphemism (Owen et al., 2012), direct suicide communication events offer the potential to analyse how their social context—in this case, the framing device of the fictional MMO—enable their directness. The three scenes in question consist of an exaggerated suicide threat written down in the fictional game's chat box; a statement of suicidal intent spoken through the fictional game's voice chat, immediately followed by the fictional player who uttered it logging off; and an extended conversation that starts with a confession of a past suicide attempt. As the direct suicide communication events in these three scenes appear in different forms and across different social contexts, they offer a window into the communicative rules, social affordances, and social limits imposed by the MMO framing device. Through my analyses, I found that the use of the MMO as a framing device is a meta-referential tool that suggests an understanding of MMOs as primarily social spaces with their own set of communicative rules and affordances that can either turn serious statements into jokes, provide implicit communicative tools, or create safe spaces for self-expression through their game design and user interfaces. These affordances combine to suggest that virtual online spaces provide unique alibis for uttering suicide communications directly.

In the following sections, I will explain the literary concept of the framing device and how it applies to videogames and to *Agony of a Dying MMO* in particular. I will use this concept to explain how *Garden of Widows* might be considered a fictional game despite being playable in some form, and to explain how this representation of an MMO suggests a specific understanding of real MMOs as social spaces with unique communicative affordances. Then, I move on to analyse how suicide communication is represented in *Agony of a Dying MMO*. I preface my analyses by looking at previous research on suicide in MMOs and on suicide related to MMOs. I do this in order to contextualise the representation of suicide communication as an outlier to previous research within Game Studies and as a continuation of existing discourses on online gaming addiction. Then, I do a close reading of the three scenes mentioned above,

focusing on how direct suicide communication is enabled through exaggerated communication, through implicit features of MMOs, like logging out, and through game design meant to create groups of players through shared interests and styles of play. Then, I conclude by noting that fictional videogames used as semi-playable framing devices are meta-referential; that MMOs should be understood as primarily social spaces where troubled individuals, people with fringe opinions or identities, outsiders, and other misfits can find solace; and that their social affordances provide unique alibis for suicide communication.

Framing devices and fictional videogames

I define a *framing device* as the application of a metaphorical *frame* within fiction: a narrative device used to delineate different ontological and fictional levels. *Frames*, in turn, are limits that separate the 'real' from the 'unreal'. In doing so, they prefigure horizons of expectations that alter the way the 'unreal' is interpreted: because the 'unreal' is an incomplete representation, it becomes a synecdoche that imposes a total—or primary—meaning of what is represented.

Within literary studies, frames have been understood as a device separating the real from the fictional. In 'The Literary Frame', John Frow (1982) argues that frames serve as a boundary between aesthetic objects and the world around them; they separate 'reality' from 'fiction'. They can take on many forms, be they material—like the frame of a painting or the covers of a book—or figurative—like the start and end of a narrative or discourses about the object. Because they surround an aesthetic object and the fiction within it, they also serve to establish horizons of expectations (Jauss, 1967/1970) that change how the aesthetic objects and their fictions are experienced and understood.

Frames also establish a representational relationship between the space inside them and the space outside them: the 'fictional' represents the 'real', and the 'real' is represented in the 'fictional'. Since fiction is not—cannot be—exhaustive, these representations are incomplete (Heintz, 1979; Sorensen, 1991; Walton, 1990; for an examination of this incompleteness in videogames, see Van de Mosselaer & Gualeni, 2022; Wildman & Woodward, 2018). This fictional incompleteness makes these representations work through the metaphor of synecdoche: a whole reduced to one of its parts, which becomes symbolic of the omitted whole (Burke, 1941). The frame imposes a concentration of meaning on this synecdochal representation: the 'fictional' can only represent a part of the 'real', but that partial representation takes on a totality of meaning. This totality of meaning suggests that the complete 'real' should be understood and conceptualised through its partial representation. In other words, the 'fictional' representation—an incomplete description of something 'real'—prescribes how the 'real' should be understood (Frow, 1982).

When they appear within fiction, these frames—as framing devices—often take the form of fictional aesthetic objects or contained narratives. Stefano Gualeni and Riccardo Fassone examined a similar device in their *Fictional Games* (2023), an exploration on what games do and how they behave when they appear in fiction. Gualeni and Fassone focus on games that are unplayable, as their incompleteness and unplayability relegates them to be imagined and understood more freely than if they had interactive or playable layers of meaning. These fictional games have a variety of narrative uses, but Gualeni and Fassone identify two broad functions:

1. as background elements of a fictional setting, and

2. as central narrative devices.

Gualeni and Fassone suggest that fictional games serve a 'revealing' or 'explanatory' function: they show something about the fiction around them—like fictional ideologies or additional information about characters—and about the world outside the fiction that contains them. By representing games, these aesthetic objects suggest new critical or satirical ways to understand real games, be it their design, their players, their marketing, or their place in culture (Gualeni and Fassone, 2023, p. 173). They do this by concentrating meaning within the fictional games being represented, which serve as a synecdoche of real games.

Framing devices and fictional games in Agony of a Dying MMO

Having clarified both framing devices and fictional games, there is now a sizable problem to tackle: *Agony of a Dying MMO* and its fictional game, *Garden of Widows*, do not map on neatly to the phenomena described by Gualeni and Fassone (2023) above. Their argument on the power of fictional games hinges on the games in question being unplayable, and *Garden of Widows* is very much playable. However, this playability is highly limited. *Garden of Widows* is a player-versus-player (PVP), faction-based FPSMMO, but the player never gets to engage with any of these gameplay systems. Throughout the game, the player can only make a character look around, move, jump, and shoot their gun (a purely audiovisual effect, as the fictional players and fictional non-player characters do not respond to the player's shots). The player does not get to play the game as an MMO, nor as an FPS; the player is an observer.

While *Garden of Widows* is a fictional MMOFPS, *Agony of a Dying MMO* is, ostensibly, a walking simulator. As Melissa Kagen (2022) points out in *Wandering Games*, a walking simulator is "a game that takes the shape of a familiar genre and removes something crucial: a gun, a mechanic, a certain kind of interactivity, an ineffable quality of fun" (p. 24). This 'lack' is at the core of walking simulators (Consalvo & Paul, 2019, p. 110). *Agony of a Dying MMO* puts the other players and the combat back into the walking simulator, but it does so through a fictional game. While *Garden of Widows* is playable in a limited form, it retains the incompleteness necessary to be evocative and ontologically fluid (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 29). *Agony of a Dying MMO* is also

a demo with no full release: it is incomplete by design, meant to simultaneously evoke the 'complete' fictional game *Garden of Widows* and the 'complete', unreleased version of itself.

It is worth noting that the fictional world outside *Garden of Widows* is never visible to the player. The parts of it that bleed through the frame hint at the surrounding world being a fictional version of the real world. *Garden of Widows* is a framing device: it is both the backdrop where the events of the story take place, and the central driving force behind the game's plot. This absence of referentiality to a fictional world outside the fictional game displaces the fictional game's analytic

Suicide in *Agony of a Dying* MMO

Within MMOs and other virtual online spaces, suicide has been researched primarily through player-driven behaviours, like testing the boundaries of a game's physics simulation by jumping off high places, using death mechanics as exploits (Klastrup, 2008), using suicide to work around system limitations (Lin & Sun, 2003), telling other players to kill themselves (Karhulahti, 2020; Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023; Saleous & Gergely, 2023), or staging virtual suicides consisting of short quitting texts and videos showing a character being deleted when players stop playing the game (Dutton, 2007; Lau, 2017; Nagenborg & Hoffstadt, 2009; Webber, 2020). While this research is a valuable framework for depictions and simulations of suicide in online games, it is worth noting that none of these—or other similar—behaviours are represented in *Agony of a Dying MMO*. There are no explicit suicides in this game, only suicide communication events. The overall effect of these direct suicide communication events is to prompt the player to imagine the (fictional) person outside the (fictional) game.

Research on the connection between suicide and online games outside the virtual space of the game has noted an explicit link between excessive play of online games and suicidality, whether through correlation or complex causality[1] (see Ballard & Welch, 2017; Chen et al., 2018; Cole & Hooley, 2013; Erevik et al., 2022; Koga et al., 2025; Owen et al., 2012; Spain & Vega, 2005; Zhengchuan et al., 2012). This discourse is prevalent in research as a result of wider, older discourses on videogame addiction (see e.g. Egli & Meyers, 1984; McCutcheon & Campbell, 1986; Soper & Miller, 1983) and its recognition as a diagnosable disease by the World Health Organization in the form of Gaming Disorder (WHO, n.d.). *Agony of a Dying MMO* absorbs this dis-

[1] This causality is twofold: excessive play of MMOs is associated with being suicidal, and being suicidal might make excessive play of online games more likely, as suicidal individuals seem to spend more time in online social spaces (Harris et al., 2014).

course through its suicidal characters: the three examples of direct suicide communications I analyse below all feature players who either explicitly or implicitly note that they have played the game too much.

I analyse three scenes where direct suicide communication appears in *Agony of a Dying MMO* to explore how the framing device of the fictional MMO is used as an alibi for direct suicide communication. I organise my close readings of the three scenes representing direct suicide communications based on a progression from text-based messages, to spoken utterances, to extended conversations. These analyses will reveal how the framing device is used as an alibi for jokes, as an implicit communicative tool, and as an enabler of player authenticity. While there is a fourth suicide scene where a fictional player spouts an apocalyptic prophecy that requires their own death, I will not analyse it to avoid repetition: the ambiguity of whether the utterance is earnest or not is explored in the first scene (Exaggerated Communication in MMOs), and that scene has the benefit of using a different mode of communication than the other examples.

Exaggerated communication in MMOs

The first scene appears close to the start of the game. Fictional player CRIMSONTEMPLAR sends a message in the fictional game's chat log, where they state: "I'M GOING TO KILL MYSELF WHEN THIS GAME SHUTS DOWN" and, after other fictional players try to calm them down, they continue with: "SOMEONE DESERVES TO DIE". "THAT'S MY OPINION". While the literal text of their messages suggests both suicidal and murderous intent, the expression seems to be a way to vent frustration, rather than to express real suicidality or a real desire to kill someone.

Discerning whether CRIMSONTEMPLAR's message is sincere or not is complicated. In online contexts, reading suicidal ideation in a text, even one that expresses it literally, is already difficult because of the prevalence of hyperbole (Ali et al., 2024; Cash et al., 2013; Smith & Linker, 2021; Spates, Ye, & Johnson, 2018). Even the other fictional players interpret CRIMSONTEMPLAR's message as a serious statement of suicidal intent at first. The fact that the message only appears in the chat log contributes to that ambiguity: since CRIMSONTEMPLAR never speaks through the fictional game's voice chat, the additional information available through the spoken word (Jones, 1948; Nolan, 2020, pp. 391-397) is never conveyed. The absence of this layer of information grants CRIMSONTEMPLAR deniability over whether their message is serious or not.

This moment reveals a playful, if antagonistic, possibility for text-based communication in MMOs. By occurring in the final hours of service—a context where players would be upset—the suicide threat loses its power and becomes an exaggerated, even humorous, expression of frustration. Even if it were honest, this context provides plausible deniability (Ask & Abidin, 2018; Owen et al., 2012). That it is expressed

as text contributes to its lack of seriousness, as the implied loudness by being in uppercase letters (Heath, 2021) serves to further exaggerate the statement.

CRIMSONTEMPLAR appears in the chat log at a later point in the game, bragging about being level 99 and having played *Garden of Widows* for over ten thousand hours. Within the fiction of the game, this behaviour is associated with a 'curse', where the cursed player loses their social connections outside the game. Of course, there is no curse: the loss of social connections outside the game is a result of dedicating too much time to the game to the detriment of everything else. It is fitting that CRIMSONTEMPLAR, a fictional player who has likely undergone the 'curse', would make an exaggerated suicide and murder joke: they are a player who might lack social connections outside *Garden of Widows*, and the imminent loss of the game is likely the loss of one of their most important social spaces.

The communicative semiotics of MMOs

The second scene is an optional encounter in an open area. In an otherwise empty corner, a fictional player, Judger77, is standing alone. As the player approaches them, they speak through the fictional game's voice chat, "I'm going to go kill myself. I wish I never played this game". Shortly after saying that, they log out, and their character disappears.

Their statement is comprised of three parts: the suicidal statement, the expression of regret at playing the game, and their disappearance. This spoken "quitting text" (Webber, 2020) seems straightforward. While the expression of regret at playing the game hints at a self-destructive relationship with the fictional game, the first part is more ambiguous. The phrase "I'm going to kill myself" is a direct suicide communication, but it is unclear whether it is serious, or an exaggerated response to the fictional game's end of service, like CRIMSONTEMPLAR's statement above. It becomes less ambiguous and more concerning when Judger77 logs out. Unlike CRIMSONTEMPLAR, whose name is ever present in the game's chat log, Judger77 does not reappear at any point of the game. The immediate act of logging out lends weight to their suicidal statement.

Within the semiotics of MMOs, logging out—and the associated disappearance of a player character—signal that a player has disconnected from the game and ended their play session. The dead air that follows Judger77's statement prompts the player to imagine what is happening behind the fictional screen, to wonder whether the threat should be taken seriously or as an exaggerated expression of frustration. Thus, *Agony of a Dying MMO* uses an intrinsic feature of MMOs to highlight their implicit communicative potential: a suicide threat becomes more serious than just a spoken utterance by using an implicit part of communication in MMOs.

Player authenticity and toxicity in MMOs

The third scene appears halfway through the game. In it, FlowerPower—a trans woman who serves as the perspective character for this section of the game—and her friend, Vivianis, are going on a virtual road trip through the world of the game. The scene starts with FlowerPower opening up to Vivianis about a past suicide attempt,

> It was… uh… New Years Eve and… um… I was really high. And… uh… When I hung myself in the bathroom something came in the room. Um… it sounded like at first the emergency alert signal in the other room. And then some horrible crying like a dying animal. I passed out from choking on the rope attached to the shower curtain bar. But, that broke. And when I woke up I could still hear the crying and I tried to hang myself on the… um… towel rack. But, that didn't work. So, I opened the door to the hotel room. And as soon as I did the noise went away. I don't know what it was. (Hughes, 2021)

This confession is significant because of the implied social backstory that enables it. A confession like this could only occur between friends, and the framing device of the fictional game lays bare the conditions that led to this moment. MMOs enable social connections and friendship between their players through a combination of user interfaces and game design (Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016; Eklund & Ask, 2013), both of which play a role in FlowerPower and Vivianis' friendship in *Garden of Widows*.

On a game design level, *Garden of Widows* is a faction-based game, and these factions are presumably the main enablers of the game's PVP systems. FlowerPower and Vivianis are both members of the same faction, which places them on a gameplay system where they have to play together against others. A faction, however, seems to be too large to enable meaningful connections; rather, it seems that FlowerPower and Vivianis' friendship formed on a guild—a social network of players (see Taylor, 2006) likely smaller than factions. This friendship was maintained despite the guild's functional dissolution (see Poor & Skoric, 2016), as FlowerPower notes that it has been years since most guild members were online. It seems likely, then, that FlowerPower and Vivianis became friends through their shared positionality within these two gameplay systems.

The moment they share at the end of the game takes place because of user interfaces. The fictional user interface of *Garden of Widows* is split in horizontal thirds: the bottom third of the screen is reserved for the chat log, the middle third is for seeing the game world, and the top third is for other game tools, like options, player information, inventory, etc. One of the tools is a friend list, which includes the names of other fictional players that the perspective fictional player has added as friends. Like friends lists in real MMOs, the friends list in *Garden of Widows* has markers that say whether a specific fictional player is online. In the case of FlowerPower, her only

friend online during the events of the game is Vivianis. *Garden of Widows*, again like other MMOs, also has a private messaging system through which fictional players can talk to each other without broadcasting their conversations to the fictional players around them, and which can enable communication independent of the fictional players' location in the fictional game. FlowerPower, at the time the player gets to see her perspective, only has one message, and it is from Vivianis: "Hey, I know it's been awhile [sic], but I was wondering if you want to get together and hang out a bit?" This message is the catalyst for them meeting up. FlowerPower feels free to talk about her past suicide attempt with Vivianis because the game's design and interface create the social affordances necessary for her confession. The framing device of the MMO signals that these design and interface choices contribute to the creation of safe spaces for trans people like FlowerPower (Cabiria, 2008; McKenna & Chughtai, 2020).

However, the same design choices that create a safe space for FlowerPower break that safe space. As she notes, "This game really was a lot better before they added Nazis as a playable faction. It was a really welcoming community. It was… uh… a safe space". So, at some point in the fictional history of *Garden of Widows*, Nazis were added in as one of the factions available to players. This is noteworthy, as games often sidestep the ethical and moral implication of playable Nazis by omitting the word 'Nazi', the imagery of the swastika, or mentions of Hitler. Giving players the agency to control Nazis and act as them is seen as problematic, because it either trivialises them or flips the moral implications of Nazis from archetypal villains to heroic protagonists (Chapman & Linderoth, 2015). That worry is realised within *Garden of Widows*, as the inclusion of Nazis as an explicitly-named faction attracted right-wing extremists into an online space that they had previously ignored. While the presence of right-wing extremists in both videogame spaces and online spaces is not a new phenomenon (see Conway et al., 2019; Massanari, 2024; Wells et al., 2024), *Agony of a Dying MMO* suggests that the same aspects of game design that create communities for marginalised players can also create community for extremists. Likewise, it suggests that explicit representations of various identities can serve as factors that attract people who identify with them.

In other words, the use of *Garden of Widows* as a framing device suggests that representational features, aspects of game design, and user interfaces in MMOs all come together to create social affordances for their players. In particular, they allow like-minded players to find each other, form community, and make friendships, which results in the creation of safe spaces for some and unsafe spaces for others, as hate groups and minority groups share the same social affordances the game offers. This conflict, however, highlights a metacommentary on the types of people who play MMOs through the use of *Garden of Widows* as a framing device: MMOs are online social spaces that provide solace to people who might be marginalised for their identities or fringe opinions, where they can find others they can open up to, for better or for worse.

Conclusion

The suicides depicted in *Agony of a Dying MMO* emphasise the connections between suicide and excessive play of MMOs described in previous research. *Agony of a Dying MMO* absorbs the discourses surrounding the risks of Gaming Disorder and turns them into aesthetic discourse through its explicitly, implicitly, and jokingly suicidal characters. Despite representing suicide communication events, rather than actual suicides, *Agony of a Dying MMO*'s suicidal characters seem to serve the function of the "suicidal other", characters that are not part of a cultural hegemony and who are differentiated by their suicidal actions as mad, irrational, deviant, or aberrant (Kosonen, 2015). *Agony of a Dying MMO*'s representation of suicide further stigmatises Gaming Disorder as a form of madness or irrationality, and yet it seems to serve as a cautionary tale against excessive play.

Despite seemingly stigmatising Gaming Disorder, the game is compassionate about why someone might find solace in MMOs: the actual loss at the heart of *Agony of a Dying MMO* is not the loss of *Garden of Widows* as a game; it is the loss of *Garden of Widows* as a social space and of the social connections it enabled. This loss becomes evident through the framing device of the final hours of an MMO and the player's agency within it. While the game is closing down, the player never gets to engage with *Garden of Widows* as a game, only as an observer to various players socialising. The model of MMOs presented in *Agony of a Dying MMO* is highly social. This conception of MMOs as social spaces is not particularly new (Eklund & Johansson, 2010; Lehdonvirta, 2010; Ramirez, 2018; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Taylor, 2006), but *Agony of a Dying MMO*'s use of a fictional MMO as a framing device reveals social affordances and limitations on communication within MMOs. In particular, the three scenes I analysed revealed:

1. that the chat boxes of MMOs, in conjunction with the frame of the game, can turn seemingly serious statements into jokes;

2. that MMOs have a set of communicative tools that are not always presented as such, like the act of logging out, which serves to punctuate the finality of a statement; and

3. that MMOs enable player authenticity by enabling connection through multiple social forms imposed as part of the game's design—guilds, factions, friend lists.

These communicative affordances are changed through their framing: the final hours of service of an MMO are presented both as a space for loss and as a space of communicative possibility. In particular, the quasi-apocalyptic framing of the game is used as an enabler for direct suicide communication. The suicide communication events are also complicated by the different communicative tools used to utter them and the contexts they manifest in: they are either presented as jokes,

imbued with a worrying sense of finality, or enabled through a complex interplay of social forms created by game design choices. This representation suggests that virtual online spaces—including but not limited to MMOs—provide unique opportunities and alibis for uttering suicide communications directly. The face-threatening aspect of direct suicide communications (cf. Owen et al., 2012) is overridden by the imminent dissolution of the social network of the game. Further research into how suicide communication events typically manifest in online games is necessary to assess the real-life validity of this representation.

Similarly, fictional videogames as framing devices within videogames present a similar meta-referential commentary on videogames in the real world as other types of fictional games, as Gualeni & Fassone (2023) suggested. This meta-referentiality is still present when fictional videogames are used as framing devices, despite their semi-playable nature (cf. Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, pp. 28–29), because they still retain a sense of fictional incompleteness (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 28). Future research should test the limits of this approach with videogames that use more complete fictional videogames as framing devices.

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Pandora's Labyrinth
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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I guerrieri dell'anno 2072, Classicism, Fascism, and Media Consolidation in 1980s Italy

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“The Greatest Extravaganza of Mortal Combat Ever Staged”

I guerrieri dell’anno 2072, Classicism, Fascism, and Media Consolidation in 1980s Italy

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Abstract

This paper examines the dystopian Italian science-fiction film *I guerrieri dell’anno 2072* (Fulci, 1984), with a particular focus on the Battle of the Damned, a deadly televised contest in which condemned prisoners fight to the death in the reconstructed Colosseum in Rome. A consideration of this fictional game within the film’s dystopian future Rome will open onto three intertwined lines of analysis: the classicist impulse to conceive of a continuity between imperial Rome and contemporary Italy, the adoption of this classicism in fascist Italy, and media consolidation in the context of neoliberalism and political corruption in the 1980s. By pursuing these lines of analysis, the paper will argue that Fulci’s film functions as a critique of the national cultural moment from which it looks towards both Italy’s past and future as a continuity of authoritarianism and oppression.

Keywords

Lucio Fulci; Classicism; Rome; fascism; neoliberalism; dystopia

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Under the bright glare of stadium lights, twenty men roar around the dirt of the arena on armoured motorbikes. They wield swords, flails, maces, lances, flamethrowers—any and all instruments of death are fair game.

We are in the New Colosseum of Rome in the year 2072, and we are watching the Battle of the Damned, a major event televised “live on all five continents in Globalvision” by the media conglomerate World Broadcasting Services (WBS) in a bid for global media domination over its rival, Seven Seas Intertelevision. The twenty contestants—all condemned criminals facing death sentences—are fighting for a

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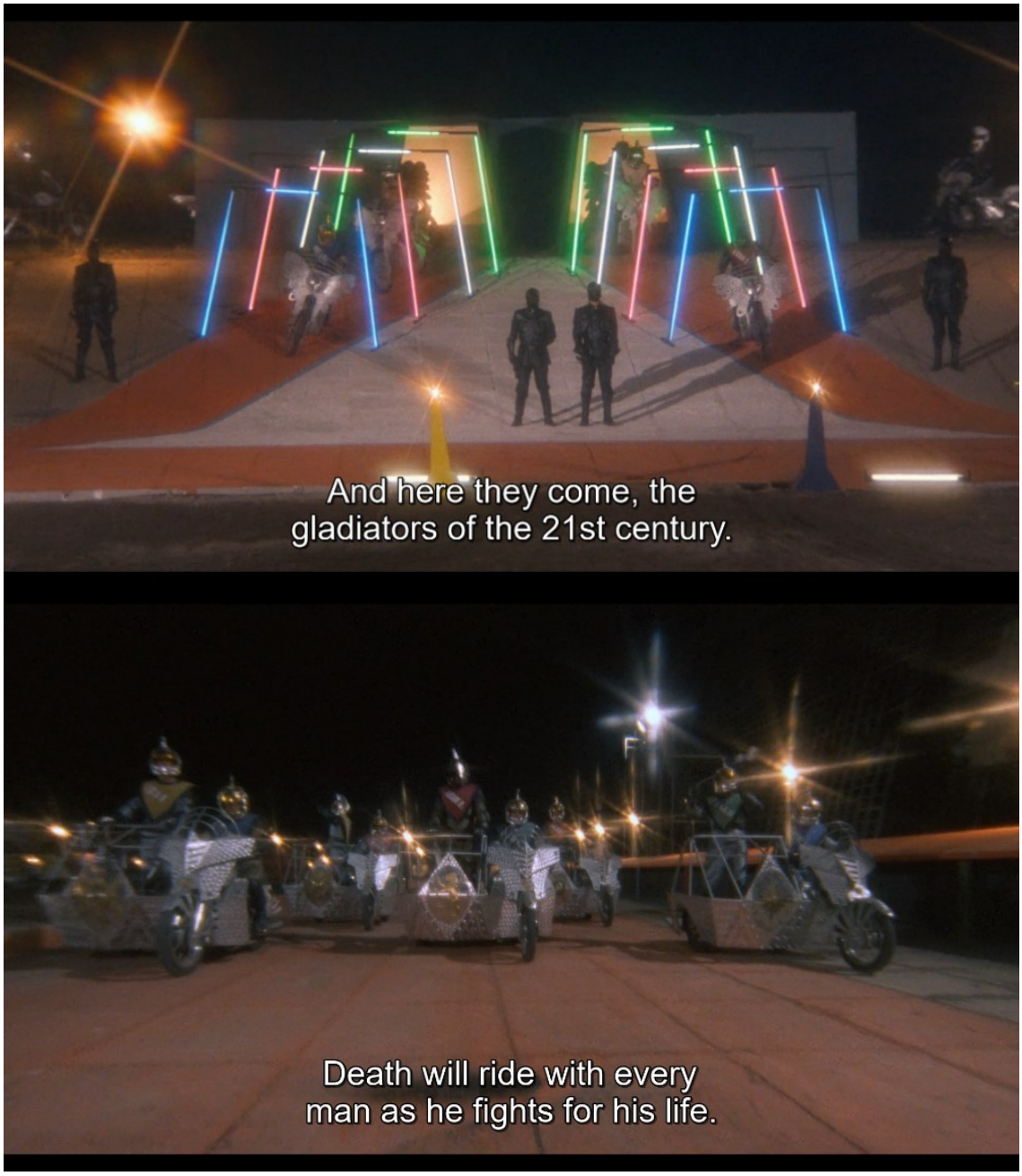
chance to earn their life back, but there can only be one survivor: the Battle of the Damned is a fight to the death, with the game only ending when one contestant is the last man standing (see figures 1 and 2).

The game is played in two rounds. In the first round, each gladiator is on their own bike, and has to ride laps around the arena, staying within the lane and using any available means at their disposal—weapons, environmental features, their own bikes and bodies—to eliminate other gladiators. Once half of the contestants have



Figures 1 and 2. Scenes from the Battle of the Damned in *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072.*
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been killed, the game moves on to the second round. The remaining ten gladiators are paired up on mechanized chariot-bikes—one driver, one rider wielding a weapon—and, again, attempt to take out other contestants in the effort to be the last man standing.

The scene, from Lucio Fulci's 1984 film *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072* (*Warriors of the Year 2072*), is a familiar one. From big Hollywood studio productions like *Ben-Hur* (Wyler, 1959) to the *peplum* cycle of swords-and-sandals B-movies in the Italian film industry in the 1950s and 60s, the sight of dusty, blood-soaked contests in the circus or the gladiatorial arena was an established cinematic staple. Besides, the American films *Rollerball* (Jewison, 1975) and *Death Race 2000* (Bartel, 1975) had already provided cinematic visions of dystopian future societies of the spectacle in which technologically aided blood sports performed the function of *panem et circenses.* In this way, Fulci's film is typical of the cinematic landscape of Italian genre cinema in the 1970s and 80s, which, as Dana Renga points out, was largely based on the near-plagiaristic imitation of popular international films (2011, p. 246).

I guerrieri dell'anno 2072 takes its place in a cycle of dystopian or post-apocalyptic films produced in Italy in the early 1980s. Renga lists eighteen titles in this short-lived cycle, from *I nuovi barbari* (Castellari, 1982) to *Vendetta dal futuro* (Martino, 1985), which almost immediately followed the international success of *The Road Warrior* (Miller, 1981) and *Escape from New York* (Carpenter, 1981).

The films in this cycle, Renga argues, tend to be "critical of several factors that brought about other apocalypses of the twentieth century such as greed, authoritarianism, governmental corruption and industrial and scientific progress at the expense of human rights" (2011, p. 250). In the mode of popular entertainment, they reflect the anxieties of the Cold War and the Reagan years as well as the recent memory of fascism, the Second World War and post-war political turmoil in Italy. The sequence in *2019: Dopo la caduta di New York* (Martino, 1983) which features a scene of mass incarceration that explicitly recalls the concentration camps is a case in point.

I guerrieri dell'anno 2072 is no different, but, in key ways, it also stands apart from the other films in the cycle. Its dystopia does not take off from the premise of an impending nuclear war and civilizational collapse. Instead, it extrapolates the neoliberal West of the Reagan years some decades into the future, with their defining anxieties—unchecked corporate hegemonies, authoritarianism, economic deregulation, rampant consumerism, wealth inequality, and technological development in the service of all of these—taken to extremes. Just as significantly, while most of the other films in the cycle take place in a dystopian future United States—presumably with an eye to the international market—*I guerrieri dell'anno 2072* is the only film in the cycle to specifically depict a future Italy (Mendik, 2015, p. 215), a fact which invites a reading of it in a national context.

In this paper, then, I will venture forth from precisely this premise, and read the Battle of the Damned, and *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072*, as a comment upon Italy in the early 1980s. I shall argue that Fulci's film maps out the concerns of a cultural moment when the memory and lingering traces of fascism intertwined with the neoliberal hegemony of a globalised media landscape, against the background of an enduring classicism by which contemporary Italy is understood and the heir and torchbearer of the imagined glory of imperial Rome.

Classicism and the face of dystopian Rome

The date in the film's title—2072—is a pointed one: the Battle of the Damned in the New Colosseum happens precisely two thousand years after construction of the Colosseum began under the reign of Vespasian in 72 CE.

The film insists on this direct line of connection between imperial Rome and the Battle of the Damned, a couple of millennia later. Hank Martinez, WBS announcer, introduces the televised broadcast with these words:

> ...the greatest extravaganza of mortal combat ever staged—the Battle of the Damned, an authentic reconstruction, with a few updated details, of the great gladiatorial combats of ancient Rome. Thrill as the Caesars did at the sight of condemned warriors fighting for their lives.

The idea of continuity between classical Rome and contemporary Italy is hardly a new one, or particular to the present moment—in fact, it has been put into the service of different political projects at just about every stage of Italy's history from the Middle Ages onwards. The Austrian art historian Alois Riegl noted the centrality of this idea in constituting a cultural and popular identity in the Italian Renaissance:

> The idea that the Italians, after surviving the barbarian invasions, recovered their true identity, and with it an ancient art which had always been integral to them and which they continued, was undoubtedly a historical one. It assumes a notion of development which attributes to the Renaissance Italians, thanks to their very nationality, a kind of necessary and natural destiny which obliged them to assume the heritage of related cultures of antiquity. (1982, p. 28)

In both its republican and imperial manifestations, Rome has meant different things to different socio-historical moments. It has been valued as a model of martial strength, of imperial ambition, of monumentality, of political organization, of leadership, oratory and statecraft, and of scholarly and artistic achievement. Accordingly, this idea that the Italy, and Italians, of the present moment (whatever the present moment happens to be) are the rightful heirs of a classical legacy to be (re)claimed and borne as a torch into a bright promised future took on new shapes in the years of the *Risorgimento* in the late nineteenth century, when it was pressed

into the service of structuring an identity for a newly unified Italy—and the term *Risorgimento* is already indicative, framing the new Italian state as a resurgence of the lost classical glory that is its birthright. In the city of Rome, this idea took the shape of an architectural and urban planning project intended to remake the city as the secular capital of a nation that was new and forward-looking, but also founded upon its classical heritage.

This 'third Rome'—following the Rome of the Caesars and the Rome of the popes, and incorporating both of them in its fabric—gained its most prominent architectural image in the form of the *Altare della Patria* (Altar of the Fatherland), the Monument to King Vittorio Emanuele II, first ruler of unified Italy. Constructed between 1885 and 1934, the monument's position on the north slope of the Capitoline Hill and its neoclassical aspect, with its sweep of Corinthian columns and its invocation of the Forum Romanum, are both significant. It sets, in white Botticino limestone, the glory of the new Rome as the successor and heir of the classical Rome: "ancient imperial glory and the continual revival of Italian culture, first in the Renaissance and now in the Risorgimento, are compounded in every element of this work in service of the state" (Kirk, 2008, p. 44).

In *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072,* Fulci introduces his dystopian Rome with a remarkable aerial night-time tracking shot. Amidst a cityscape of glimmering neon skyscrapers, the camera finds first St. Peter's Basilica and Piazza San Pietro, then the *Altare della Patria*, and, finally, the Colosseum itself (see figures 3–5). The three Romes—the Augustan Rome of the emperors, the Papal Rome as the seat of ecclesiastical authority, and the Rome of the *Risorgimento,* secular capital of a new Italy—are connected in the fluid continuity of the camera travelling across the cityscape. Yet they are all subsumed within the matrix of a fourth Rome, isolated monuments in the sprawl of a city of bright lights, flying cars and dense, high-rise construction: the neoliberal Rome of globalised corporate power and its attendant media hegemony. It is this Rome for which the Nuovo Colosseo, and the Battle of the Damned, serves as the crowning glory.

Figures 3–5. Images from the tracking shot introducing the Rome of 2072, showing, respectively, St. Peter's Basilica, the *Altare della Patria,* and the Colosseum. © Titanus

Imperial Rome and fascism

This third Rome would take a darker turn between the 1920s and the 1940s, with the rise to power of Benito Mussolini and the *Partito Nazionale Fascista.* In these years, the project of forging a modern imperial identity for Italy according to the model of Augustan Rome grew ever more prominent (Salvatori, 2014).

As the classicist and historian Luciano Canfora writes, "what is set in motion by fascism is the latest attempt to once again position classicism (in its Roman variant) *at the centre of a cultural politics* and even to make of it a mass ideology" (1976, p. 16). Among the characteristics of European classicism that Canfora argues were firmly established as "non-secondary" elements of fascism is "the *idea* of Rome (with its corollaries of 'primacy,' of 'continuity,' and of the 'imperial mission')" (1976, p. 19).[1] What is contained in the identification of the new Italy with imperial Rome, then, is the implication of the new Italy's primacy over other nations by birthright, its status as a continuation of its classical heritage, and the duty of imperialism this places upon it.

Anna Notaro observes that, just as the *Risorgimento* sought to build the new Italy upon the foundation of its glorious Roman heritage, "the strong symbolic link between Fascism and Rome's imperial past" was incorporated into Fascist architectural projects in the capital, with the aim being to elevate the forward-looking Fascist modernity of the new Italian empire by association with the Augustan heritage of which it was the heir: "as antiquity and modernity were celebrated alongside one another, in the same capital city spaces, Rome's imperial identity came to be refracted onto the modern Italian state" (Notaro, 2000, p. 16; see also Cornell and Hjertman, 2014).

I guerrieri dell'anno 2072 establishes a number of visual parallels between the imagery of imperial Rome and the iconography of twentieth-century fascism. Most notable is its depiction of the Praetorian Guard, a squad of heavily armed enforcers tasked with ensuring, through the liberal exercise of torture and other forms of violence, that the contestants in the Battle of the Damned stay in line and do not attempt to escape in the run-up to the Battle, as well as making sure the rules of the game are followed once it starts.

Taking their name, of course, from the Roman emperors' elite unit of bodyguards and spies, the Praetorian Guard in Fulci's film are introduced riding their motorbikes through the deserted night-time streets of Rome, against the backdrop of some of the city's most recognizable monuments—including, pointedly, the Mausoleum of

[1] "Quello messo in atto dal fascismo è l' ultimo tentativo di collocare ancora una volta il classicismo (nella sua variante romanolatrica) *al centro di una political culturale* e di farne addirittura una ideologia di massa"; "l' *idea* di Roma (coi corollari del 'primato,' della 'continuità,' della 'missione imperiale." Translated from the Italian by the author.

Hadrian, or, as it was styled in the Papal Rome, Castell Sant' Angelo. At the same time, they wear thinly-veiled Nazi SS uniforms, complete with the silver death's head insignia on their service caps—an echo of the horrors of the twentieth century as clear as the invocation of the concentration camps in *2019—Dopo la Caduta di New York* (see figures 6 and 7).

Rather than the attempt to forge a connection between the imperial glory of Augustan Rome and the glory to come of a fascist Italy, Fulci's film implies a continuity of authoritarian violence and oppressive power: just as it was in the Roman Empire, so it will be in the dystopian future of 2072, marked by media hegemony and corporate control.

Figures 6 and 7. The Praetorian Guard, clad in Nazi iconography, and arriving in Rome against the backdrop of the Mausoleum of Hadrian. © Titanus

Media consolidation in the Berlusconi years

Between Mussolini's Rome and WBS's Rome of 2072, though, is the Rome of 1984, in which *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072* was made, and to whose citizens the film is presumably addressed.

In the Italian context, the early 1980s were the years which saw the consolidation of most of the nation's media landscape in the hands of the tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, later Prime Minister. As Letitia Badan Palhares Knauer de Campos writes, Fulci's depiction of a dystopian future in which vast, globalised corporate conglomerates hold sway over a hegemonized—and distinctly Americanised—media landscape of spectacular distraction and violent titillation would have looked familiar to a contemporary Italian audience, and the film can hardly be read as anything other than a rebuke:

> [WBS'] initial monopoly over the international television circuit … resonates with the Italian experience of seeing [Berlusconi] assume massive control over television, initially founded on the distribution of North American series and productions. The desire for success with the *Nuovo Colosseo,* in an attempt to completely transform the entertainment rules of dystopian Rome, equally retrace the steps of Berlusconi in his ample dominion over the production and distribution of cinema in the country. (2022, p. 31)[2]

Fulci was a lifelong, self-identified leftist. His genre films often contained scathing condemnations of the power structures of Italian society, from his exposés of the crimes of the Catholic church in *Beatrice Cenci* (1969) and *Non si sevizia un paperino* (1971) to his satire of the clandestine cabals and conspiracies that would later come to light in the Propaganda Due scandal in *All'onorevole piacciono le donne* (1972). Indeed, *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072* was produced and released in the years following the exposure of Propaganda Due, a Masonic lodge and secret society working towards a reactionary "Plan for Democratic Reform" of Italy whose aims included media consolidation, and whose members included not only Berlusconi and popular TV presenter Maurizio Costanzo, but also the owner and editor of the *Corriere della Sera,* Italy's most-read newspaper.

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[2] "Seu inicial monopólio do circuito internacional de televisão, com a Kill-Bike, reforça a experiência italiana em ver a Reteitalia assumindo massivamente o controle televisivo, que no princípio se fundava na divulgação de séries e produções norte-americanas. A gana por sucesso com o Nuovo Colosseo, numa tentativa de transformar por completo as diretrizes de entretenimento da Roma distópica, igualmente retraça os passos de Berlusconi em seu amplo domínio da produção e distribuição de cinema no país." Translated from the Portuguese by the author.

It is unsurprising, then, that Fulci would be critical of the mass media and their consolidation in the hands of one of the country's richest and most powerful men. In an interview with Michele Romagnoli, he said:

> And we do not know it, but we find ourselves constantly in front of the Orwellian Big Brother: which is *Beautiful* and all the soap operas in general, the football championship (I can't do without it), and everything else that gets chewed up and moulded by the networks (by now even state TV is one), most of all the films broken up with advertising. And after the honey of familiar transmissions, they hit us in the face with a televised news story as a real and proper spectacle of the suffering of others. (Fulci quoted in Romagnoli, 2014, p. 34)[3]

It is hard to miss this cynicism regarding the consolidated and hegemonized mass media in *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072*. A recurring visual trope in the film, explicable only as a typically Fulci piece of on-the-nose symbolism—and perhaps a slyly self-referential one for the so-called Godfather of Gore—sees TV broadcasts fading in with a spill of scarlet blood down a white screen (see figure 8). Indeed, televised violence appears pervasive. In the film's opening sequences, we witness something of a metagame to balance the scales of power: a ratings battle between two competing TV game shows of gruesome violence, Seven Seas Intertelevision's Kill-Bike and WBS' The Danger Game. The Battle of the Damned is introduced precisely as a strategic move within this metagame: a play by WBS to counter Seven Seas Intertelevision's ratings dominance, steal away Drake (Jared Martin), the reigning Kill-Bike champion, and assert dominance over the global media landscape.

Of course, this also constitutes another form of continuity between the Battle of the Damned in the *Nuovo Colosseo* and the bloody spectacles the Flavian Amphitheatre was erected to host: that of *panem et circenses.* Mary Beard has pointed out that the funding of gladiatorial games and other lavish mass entertainments was a key element of Augustus' imperial largesse, a demonstration of his wealth and generosity to the people of Rome (2015, p. 365)—or, as Johan Huizinga puts it, in his perfunctory dismissal of the play element in the gladiatorial games of Rome, these games represented "mere alms-giving on a gigantic scale to a miserable proletariat" (1950, p. 177).

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[3] "E noi non lo sappiamo, ma ci troviamo costantemente di fronte al Grande Fratello orwelliano: che è *Beautiful* e tutte le soap opera in genere, il campionato di calcio (non riesco a farne senza) e tutto il resto che viene triturato (e plasmato) dai net- work (oramai anche la TV di stato lo è), per primi i film spac- cati dalla pubblicità. E dopo il miele delle trasmissioni familiari, ci sbattono in faccia un concetto telegiornale come un vero e proprio spetta- colo sulle sofferenze altrui." Translated from the Italian by the author.

Figure 8. The spill of blood introducing TV broadcasts. © Titanus

Resistance in (and through) the game

And yet, within the dystopian milieu of *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072*, Fulci also locates a faint note of hope in the possibility of resistance.

In their book on fictional games, Stefano Gualeni and Riccardo Fassone describe an established narrative pattern: in the context of a dystopian society organised around the spectacle of a life-or-death game, we encounter "a resolute protagonist who imagines or creates a better future for themselves and others by rebelling against the inhumane rules of a game" (2023, p. 104). The arc the protagonist, Drake, goes through is nearly identical to the one Gualeni and Fassone describe for the protagonist of Stephen King's 1982 novel *The Running Man* and its film adaptation (Glaser, 1987), mapping a "transition from aiming to be competent players—and thus to potentially defeat the state—to stepping outside the game completely, symbolically denying its (and the state's) authority" (Gualeni and Fassone 2023, p. 105). It is also a plot that anticipates that of more recent, popular fictional games in dystopian fiction, with *The Hunger Games* franchise as arguably the most prominent example of the trope.

Drake begins the film as a Kill-Bike champion. Whether his participation in the deadly game is enthusiastic or dutiful, his prowess and his success have brought him material rewards and status: he is a globally known media celebrity, with a beautiful wife and an expensive house. However, following his being framed for the killing of the apparent home invaders who murder his wife, and his unwilling co-option as a contestant in the Battle of the Damned, Drake appears to show no desire to kill.

During his training in the runup to the Battle, Drake proves immune to the psychological manipulation and indoctrination aimed at unlocking his violent tendencies. Again and again, when pitted against his fellow gladiators-in-training, he chooses mercy, non-violence, and covert cooperation against the rules policed by the Praetorian Guard.

This finds its ultimate manifestation during the Battle of the Damned itself. Though Drake plays along with the rules at first, surviving long enough to proceed to the second round, he deviates at the first opportunity. When Abdul (Fred Williamson) is thrown off his chariot after his driving partner is killed, Drake, rather than going for an easy kill, pulls up and invites him onto his own chariot. Convincing the other gladiators to join him in his rebellion, they abandon the game and turn instead on the Praetorian Guard, chasing down and killing their commander, Raven (Howard Ross) before storming WBS corporate headquarters (see figures 9 and 10).

Figures 9 and 10. Drake showing Abdul a gesture of mercy, and the gladiators cooperating to turn on the Praetorian Guard. © Titanus

It is not just this turning of the tables, though, that constitutes a radical act of resistance within, and against, the game and the power it symbolizes. Instead, the true element of counterplay (Meades, 2015) or transgressive play (Mortensen and Jørgensen, 2020) that undermines the Battle of the Damned is the eventual refusal, by the contestants, of the imperative to compete against each other. As Drake tells the WBS executive Sarah (Eleonora Brigliadori) during his attempted induction, "you're in the hate business, Sarah, and I don't understand why you don't let anyone show mercy on worldwide TV". It's not just that the televised spectacle needs the contestants to fight in order for the show to go on. What is at stake is the mediated image of a particular model of citizenship: one which intertwines the valorisation of martial strength, normatively-gendered masculine aggression and competitive impulse distinctive of fascism[4] with the neoliberal mobilization of a simplistic picture of *homo economicus* motivated only by calculated and uncaring self-interest (Urbina and Ruiz-Villaverde, 2014). During the broadcast of the Battle of the Damned, the ideology of strength and competition is reiterated, couched in a familiar Darwinian discourse of biological essentialism. As gladiators die at the hands of their fellow contestants, the announcer intones: "The weakest fall to the strongest as the relentless process of natural selection takes its course".

Drake's actions undermine the mass-mediated projection of this Fascist-neoliberal subjectivity, initially through an act of mercy, and, in the next step, through active cooperation of the oppressed against the oppressor. The idea that everyone is in it for themselves is abandoned, and the realization of their shared plight becomes apparent.

Given the overt and extended parallel the film draws between its dystopian blood sport and the gladiatorial games of ancient Rome, it is perhaps unsurprising that a thread of Christian imagery runs through the film, associated with this resistance towards this imperative of violence, strength and competition.

The association of the Colosseum with Christian martyrdom is almost as old as its invocation as a monument to the enduring glory of Augustan Rome. Indeed, in the Papal Rome, the Colosseum was a site of pilgrimage. Pope Benedict XVI's intervention in the late eighteenth century substantially established a cult of the supposed Christian martyrs of the gladiatorial games, and his installation of the twelve Stations of the Cross around the circumference of the ruined arena enshrined it as a site of devotional significance to Christian visitors to the Eternal City.

[4] It is indicative—and representative of another vein of classicism in the fascist project—that Mussolini sought to bring the Olympics to Rome.

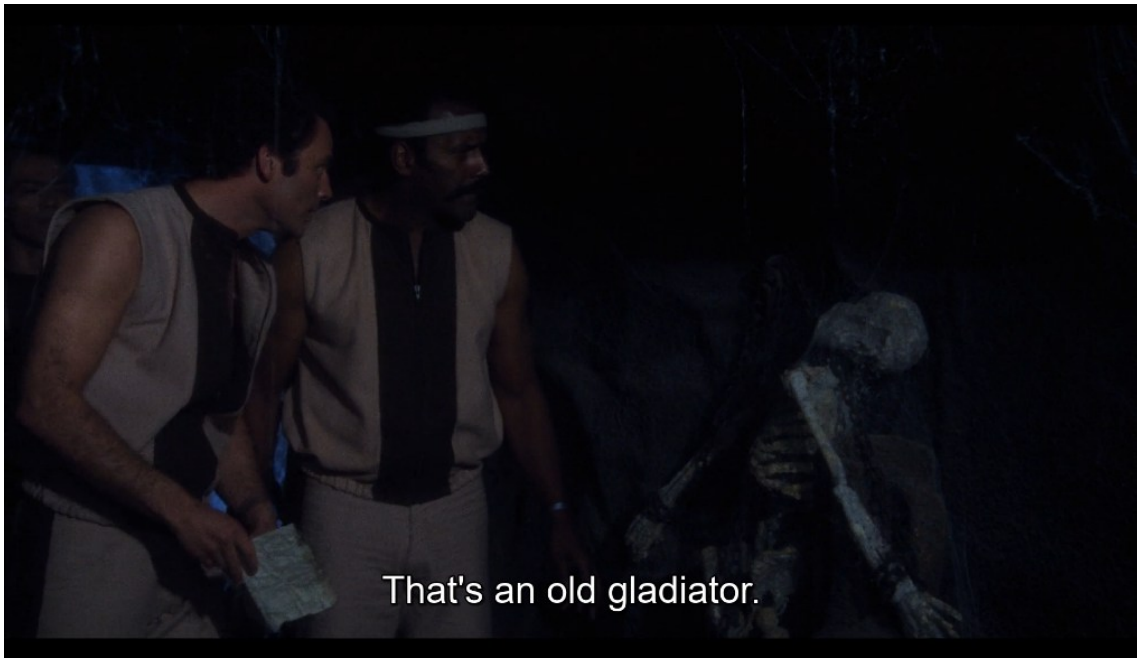

Figure 11. The gladiators of the twenty-first century meeting the gladiators of the first century. © Titanus

In a subtle but sustained manner, *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072* weaves this thread through its depiction of the dystopian game. At the film's midpoint, the gladiators-in-training attempt to escape their cells through the catacombs beneath the streets of Rome. Coming upon the interred remains of ancient bodies left to rest in that subterranean darkness, they experience a moment of recognition. The new gladiators have come face-to-face with the old, establishing an identity between the martyrs of Rome and the sacrificial victims of the corporate regime of 2072 (see figure 11). Later in the film when Sarah, who has begun to have doubts about WBS's ethics, seeks insight into the corporation's true aims, it is into the shadowy depths of a seemingly abandoned church that she ventures, on the trail of a figure whose doubts had similarly led him to leave the corporate fold.

Yet the most striking Christian image occurs when, following the failure of their escape attempt, the gladiators are punished by being forced to hang by their arms from metal bars over an electrified floor for twelve minutes. The framing of Drake in between two of his condemned adversaries as they all hang from the bars already visually and thematically recalls the crucifixion of Christ. This gains an additional dimension after one of the gladiators, Kirk (Al Cliver), unable to hold on any longer, falls to the floor. As he writhes in pain on the floor, Drake and Abdul exhort him to reach up to them. Together, they support his weight (see figure 12).

Figure 12. Drake and Abdul supporting Kirk as they hang over the electrified floor. © Titanus

This thread of Christian imagery might be surprising in the light of the anti-clericalism Fulci had displayed in earlier films; however, it can also be interpreted as being of a part with the more spiritually hopeful turn of his late-career films (Rogerson, 2025)—or, alternatively, to Fulci identifying an image of political and existential resistance in early, pre-institutionalised Christianity as an oppositional force within imperial Rome, before its co-option within the ideological apparatus of imperialism.

Conclusions

The Battle of the Damned in *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072*, then, functions as a playground upon which an intricately intermeshed set of concerns is set in motion—the classicism and the "idea of Rome" that is a persistent element in Italian national identity, fascism, media consolidation, and neoliberalism, all coalescing as a critique of the Italian media landscape—and broader cultural moment—of the early 1980s.

In the framing of this globally televised, corporate-controlled spectacle of violence as a dystopian future continuation of the legacy of Augustan Rome, Fulci projects a satirical vision of the continuity that has, in different historical moments, so often been vaunted as a pillar of Italian national identity. It's true, Fulci's film seems to say: Italy has always been Augustan Rome, and will continue to be so in the future—a society of cruel spectacle, authoritarian oppression, political conspiracy, corruption, and wealth inequality. Pointedly, it paints a picture of the Italy of 1984—and, more broadly, of the West with which the country was politically and culturally aligned—as a globalised system of power which, through its manipulation of the media, could make playthings of its citizens—even if, in the end, there emerges the possibility of

resistance through the refusal to play by the rules of the game, and the imagining of a different future.

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Book Review

Not All Fun and Games: Videogame Labour, Project-Based Workplaces, and the New Citizenship at Work by Johanna Weststar and Marie-Josée Legault (Concordia University Press, 2024)

Jan Houška

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Book Review

Not All Fun and Games: Videogame Labour, Project-Based Workplaces, and the New Citizenship at Work by Johanna Weststar and Marie-Josée Legault (Concordia University Press, 2024)

JAN HOUŠKA

Abstract

A review of Johanna Weststar's and Marie-Josée Legault's book *Not All Fun and Games: Videogame Labour, Project-based Workplaces, and the New Citizenship at Work*. Published by Concordia University Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-98811-149-0, 408 pages.

Keywords

Game production; game labour; game developers; project-based workplaces; work regulation; industrial citizenship

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Video game developers (VGDs) are highly skilled and passion-driven workers who might enjoy workplaces full of creativity and playfulness, but their careers are also precarious and uncertain. It is estimated that about 25,000 people lost their jobs in game development due to the 2023 and 2024 wave of layoffs *(*Game Industry Layoffs, n.d.). VGDs further experience burnout and health problems due to unpaid overtime and are lacking in gender and ethnic diversity—those who do not fit the stereotypical game worker group of young White males (Ozimek, 2021) are often ostracised and harassed at workplaces. In a book poignantly called *Not All Fun and Games*, Marie-Josée Legault and Johanna Weststar address the abovementioned issues by asking: Can game workers even be regulating and democratising actors of their workplaces given the job instability and precarity? And given the diversity in their job roles and gender and ethnic homogeneity, are some of them second-class citizens, bereft of the benefits of regulating their workplaces?

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To answer these questions, the authors use their insider status as administrators of International Game Developers Association (IGDA) surveys and as Canadian academics. They draw from IGDA surveys from 2004 to 2019, and two series of qualitative, in-depth interviews conducted with over a hundred game workers in Canada in 2008 and 2013–2014. Since the book focuses on employment relationships, it speaks mostly to the experiences of employees in bigger studios, excluding usually self-employed indies and hobbyists. The book is thus a useful addition to previous publications that were preoccupied with the experiences of the latter (Keogh, 2023).

Ten book chapters are divided into theoretical, contextual, and analytical parts. The book's theoretical framework needs explanation as it drives its structure and is based on North American literature. To study work regulation in game development, the authors use the concept of *industrial citizenship* distilled from the works of Marshall (1950) and Arthurs (1967) to describe workers' means of regulating or governing their workplaces. While Legault and Weststar previously used the framework of industrial citizenship, they did so in IGDA survey reports (e.g., Tô et al., 2016) rather than academic articles.

Born out of the 1950s and 1960s labour reforms applied to mass production in the United States, industrial citizenship provided many workers with four main gains: (1) protection against economic insecurity or the risks of lost income (in events of unemployment, the birth of a child or layoffs), (2) recourse against arbitrary decisions at work (i.e., remedies against certain managerial decisions), (3) workers' participation in the local regulation of labour regarding critical issues (such as overtime compensation or sexism and discrimination at workplaces), and (4) broader social regulation of work, industry, or sector (through supporting or opposing certain laws, forming collective bodies such as unions). That said, industrial citizenship takes two forms: *passive citizenship* as a stand-in before the universal laws provided by the state (as per Marshall, 1950) and *active citizenship* as workers' means to regulate labour in their workplaces through unionization (as per Arthurs,1967).

Applying solely these four gains to analyse the experiences of game workers who resist "monotonous jobs in industrial plants and offices" (2024, p. xii) would be insufficient, and authors are well aware of that based on their long-standing experience in analysing other project-based workplaces such as IT companies. In Chapter 1, Legault and Weststar thus extend their analysis of four gains of industrial citizenship by paying attention to their subject, object and domain. Subjects are essentially individual participating actors; objects are the scope and range of participatory activities and domains are regulatory spaces. This is an important update to the industrial citizenship framework due to the "unequal status of citizens" (2024, p. 17) in game development. Take for example the experiences of BIPOC[1] expatriate game

[1] A commonly used abbreviation of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour.

workers. As *subjects*, they are unequal just by standing out from the homogenous White majority, are less likely to be high-profile developers (having fewer *objects* at their disposal in the regulation of their workplaces), and as expatriates, they are disadvantaged before the common law in the *domain* of nation states compared to local workers. Not to mention that the domain that game workers are subjected to is inherently international due to the demands of mobility and transnational networking. Existing means of work regulation are thus no longer satisfactory as national laws are not always applicable to mobile VGDs who are further largely non-unionised since enterprise-based unionization is not suitable for intermittent workers. Employment risks are transferred to employees themselves, who are left to the discretion of managers and publishers as important actors who decide on distribution of compensations or working time among workers. Game development thus undermines all four gains of citizenship and authors use it "as a case study to reassess the four democratic benefits of industrial citizenship" (2024, p. 20) by reframing four gains as the substance of citizenship.

The book is thus structured deductively as the authors first unwrap their theoretical framework and bring it closer to the contemporary era in Chapter 1, outline general features of project-based workplaces that game development share in Chapter 2, and then present more specific features and employment risks of game labour in Chapter 3 and 4, respectively. The updated notion of four main gains of industrial citizenship is precisely the *normative lenses* that Chapters 5 to 8 apply to the analysis of the actual work practices and experiences of VGDs. Chapter 9 presents unpaid overtime or the so-called crunch as an employment risk that undermines all four employment gains. Chapter 10 addresses the experiences of female workers and ethnically othered workers who have minority status compared to white masculinity of majority VGDs.

Legault and Weststar frame the book as of interest to many fields, including "sociology, law, labour studies, industrial and employment relations, HRM, political economy, game studies, and communication and cultural studies" (2024, p. xv). While this is indeed a diverse interdisciplinary spread, such a wide theoretical stance is not a detriment to readers' understanding, especially since authors made sure to properly contextualise and explain game production for non-game scholars or audiences. Readers who are unfamiliar with game production thus should not be lost, given that they plough through the first theoretical chapters and data-rich analytical chapters. In the latter parts, they might also learn about many issues of game labour.

Chapter 5 focuses on the limited protections of game workers against employment risks such as income loss or skill obsolescence. Efforts to mitigate such risks are transferred to employees, who must rely on networking, personal savings, and self-funded training. While networking "was seen as the surest protection against the risk of losing one's job" (2024, p. 110) by game workers involved in the study, even bigger studios do not fund conference travels. While the game workers' populace

grows older, there is an increasing need for parental leave and retirement plans and policies—that are scant across smaller and bigger studios. Most vulnerable VGDs such as female and older workers thus face additional challenges regarding their employment protection. Although Legault and Weststar briefly mention a lack of protection against employment risks even in remote work (see 2024, pp. 113–114), opinions on the matter differ. Jason Schreier (2021), for example, wrote that remote work can mitigate the impacts of layoffs on VGDs, while issues such as crunch might still prevail when working from home. Nevertheless, remote work still remains the topic of only a few academic contributions (e.g., Park et al., 2022).

Chapter 6 explores how decision processes in game development are "strongly biased in favour of efficiency over equity and voice" (2024, p. 166). This means that producer and publisher decisions regarding issues such as disciplinary action, crediting, evaluation, and compensation are individualised and follow informal practices rather than formal procedures or policies. Disputing arbitrary decisions in court can seriously tarnish a person's reputation in such an interconnected industry. While the lack of direct engagement with the voices of HR personnel or executives is acknowledged by the authors as a book limitation, Chapter 6 perhaps misses the most their voices, containing one-sided perspectives of employees on HR management and disciplinary processes.

Chapter 7 discusses the challenges of VGDs in individual and collective workplace regulation. Various individual actions like exit (leaving the job), voice (expressing concerns), and neglect (withdrawing effort), are explored. Authors note, however, that these individual actions are not conducive to achieving meaningful workers' participation or improving working conditions, especially on the collective scale. Collective actions through social media or unionisation efforts do exist in game development and have borne fruit in the formation of worker groups and legal actions. But issues remain with fragmentation into different unions or integration of game workers into existing ones. Ideally, unionisation should be sectoral and international—we are yet to see such a framework, however.

Chapter 8 explores the role of VGDs in the broader social regulation of work, through influencing the state regulation and also through self-regulation. The authors demonstrate a lack of employees' voice regarding state lobbying, industry funding, or participation in industry associations. These areas and institutional actors are "driven by market interests or by corporate value-systems and in this, they might not be the ones that VGDs wish for" (2024, pp. 208–209). However, more informal actions through unionisation or informal organising shape and blur the boundaries between social and local regulation of work and thus "shape the actions of employers and regulators" (2024, p. 226). Nowadays, the chapter would be perhaps complemented by the discussion of distribution platforms or development platforms such as game engines that have a similar transnational influence on game content as content regulations that are discussed by authors (see 2024, pp. 205–209). Critique of platforms is on the rise both in game production studies and in

studies of creative workplaces in general (Poell et al., 2024), representing the current state of research that authors understandably did not have the opportunity and space to include.

Chapter 9 addresses unpaid overtime. Although extreme cases of crunch are becoming less common, the lack of compensation and formal regulations for overtime remain key issues. Regarding the former, bonuses for overtime are given in arbitrary ways, and are individualised. Regarding the latter, game workers might be exempt from overtime laws—and indeed are in the analysed case of Canada. The chapter also problematises the discursive label of self-imposed *good crunch* (cf. Cote & Harris, 2023). The authors show that overtime is often driven by peer pressure, being similarly externally imposed as conditions conducive to overtime, set by publishers. This is the idea that I particularly liked because peer pressure demonstrates to researchers involved in game production studies how problematic it is to think of overtime as an individually driven phenomenon in bigger studios with hundreds of employees anyway. Highlighting structural and collective reasons for overtime might also prevent judgmental views on individual game workers and show the barriers that they face in self-regulating their working time.

Chapter 10 thematises the lack of diversity and inclusion in game development and uses the framework of Diversity, Inclusivity, and Belonging (DIB) to assess the experiences of marginalized workers (i.e. racial minorities and women). Key issues discussed include pay inequity, workplace discrimination, sexism, and the impact of crunch on women and workers with caregiving responsibilities. Minority workers are less likely to feel like they belong to their companies or to the products they create, due to those being 'White male fantasies'. While insightful, the chapter could have included education among the actions to ensure diverse workplaces that are proposed by the authors (2024, p. 290), since initiatives towards diversity in education were already discussed by previous research in game studies (Harvey, 2019).

Although Legault and Weststar address this wide array of issues, for game production studies scholars (especially those who are already aware of both authors' work on project-based workplaces or IGDA survey data), the book might not offer a lot of new insights. But with its textbook-style writing and lots of visual materials such as tables and graphs, the book can easily work as a teaching material for video game production courses. The book is thus a great and needed addition to more diversely spread chapter anthologies on game production in different national contexts and across indie and AAA spheres (Sotamaa & Švelch, 2021), more popular style books presenting case-focused studio ethnographies (O'Donnell, 2014) and more critical works based on Marxist thought (Bulut, 2020; Keogh, 2023). *Not All Fun and Games* is a normative critique of the gaming industry. Rather than following established critical theory frameworks and showing how inherently skewed working conditions of VGDs are towards dominant capitalistic arrangements or patriarchy, Legault and Weststar address how things in game development should be but are not. While the

book deals with similar issues raised by critical theory, it mostly approaches them from a normative, and less speculative, standpoint.

Nevertheless, the normative approach has inherent loopholes. Normative critique is at risk of presenting the real state of the gaming industry as deficient and framing the norm from which this real state deviates as unproblematic, and even desirable, ruling out any form of critique of the norm. As outlined above, this is not the case of the authors' approach since the first pages. They show how the applied industrial citizenship framework is problematic, so they update it to fit the current working conditions of VGDs. Further, normative critique is too often just that—critique that does not offer any actionable solutions. Since a 'normative state' is apparently without flaws and worth striving for, the actions to attain this state should be crystal clear. Once again, the authors propose several solutions to attain better working conditions for VGDs. And even then, they are careful to frame existing means of industrial citizenship such as unionisation as a miracle cure to every issue in game development. They show how game workers are still trying to find the types of unions that would serve their needs the best. Also, as shown with the example of peer pressure in overtime above, authors are careful to pass quick judgments about individual game workers, trying to highlight structural reasons or barriers impacting their behaviour or contextualise their actions in a rich array of theoretical literature. While this approach might be hard to swallow for some readers, I see it as a particularly strong feature of the book.

What *Not All Fun and Games* misses in speculation, it makes up for in systematicity and compactness. Based on the great amount of qualitative data from Canadian-based game workers, it offers detailed insights into their local experiences. While hailing from, once again, the central context of game production (that the authors acknowledge several times as the book's limitation), the book is still a great addition to studies on local game productions that are emerging also on the periphery. As the authors acknowledge, what is local seems to matter less for intermittent workers than industrial and wider sectoral factors. It is therefore very plausible that scholars involved in game production research might find a lot of overlaps with their data in the book, especially regarding the grounded, everyday work experiences of VGDs that emerge from the authors' interview data.

Still, *Not All Fun and Games* leaves game scholars and wider audiences in an uneasy situation. Being mixed-methods research using qualitative and quantitative data, it represents a study that has been called for in game production studies circles (Sotamaa, 2021). However, it is not plausible that other game scholars will reuse the framework of industrial citizenship with all its features because of the scope of topics covered and, therefore, the scope of data needed. Because of its dense academic style, the book might not be very accessible to wider audiences, including game workers whose labour conditions it captures. At the same time, it is an ambitious interdisciplinary study that presents a lot of data in one condensed space

about many issues that affect game production and other project-based and creative industries. After all, Legault and Weststar delivered precisely what they promised—a detailed and analytically rich probe into labour relations and regulations in the video game industry to make future comparisons with studies on other creative fields possible. Legault and Weststar's work is not a detached academic critique. By stripping away the illusion that making games is all 'fun and games', it serves as a wake-up call not just for the game scholars and game workers, but for anyone who is invested in the future of labour in creative fields.

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