Remediating Video Games in Contemporary Fiction: Literary Form and Intermedial Transfer

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Abstract

Game scholars have discussed both the ways in which video games structurally differ from literary fiction and the ways in which they remediate motifs and narrative strategies from it. In this article, I reverse the direction of that exchange, arguing that video games are disclosing new perspectives on both literary writing and literary interpretation. My focus is on how literature can integrate ludic strategies on a formal level, rather than by merely *thematizing* games (as genre fiction does extensively). I thus discuss three formal devices—multimodality, present-tense narration, and loop-like repetitions—that evince considerable literary interest in gaming culture. Through these formal experimentations, literature participates in a media environment that is significantly shaped by games. I argue that this intermedial transfer also offers an opportunity for literary scholarship to enrich its conceptual and interpretive toolbox through dialogue with both game studies and gaming culture.

Introduction

"The novel today is unquestionably being shaped by the cultural presence of video games," writes Eric Hayot (2021, p. 180). The idea that literature may have influenced at least certain

forms of (story-driven) digital entertainment is, of course, nothing new: it has been discussed

countless times under headings such as "remediation" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) and

"intermediality" (Fuchs & Thoss, 2019), including by a special issue of this journal (Hutton &

Barr, 2020). Video games don't exist in a cultural vacuum but build on forms and motifs handed

down by literary history, from mythological narratives (in games such as *Hades* or the *God of

War* franchise) to whole genres such as cyberpunk or postapocalyptic fiction. But Hayot's claim,

which focuses on the opposite direction of influence (from video games *to* literature), is certainly

more eye-catching. Genres such as fantasy, dystopian, or young adult fiction do look at video

games for inspiration, with Conor Kostick's *Epic* (2004) and Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*

(2011) being perhaps the most prominent examples of literature that thematizes and models itself

upon video games. Loose labels such as "LitRPG" and GameLit are frequently applied to this

strand of contemporary writing (see Miller, 2016). What these works have in common is that they

tell stories that are concerned, on the level of plot and theme, with digital technologies, thus

catering to readers who are familiar with and emotionally invested in this topic. Hence, we can

view *Ready Player One* as "primarily a delivery mechanism for geek nostalgia and geek

affirmation" (Grady, 2018)—an interesting but perhaps slightly unsurprising reading. The

influence of video games can also be detected in more philosophically oriented speculative

fiction, for instance Ted Chiang's short stories ("The Lifecycle of Software Objects" comes to

mind), but again here games are primarily part of the sf author's thematic repertoire.

Taking Hayot's claim seriously means understanding the way in which the contemporary

novel—and particularly what Amitav Ghosh (2016) would call "serious," literary fiction—is

game-like. Put otherwise, if Hayot is on the right track, we should be able to trace the cultural

presence of video games even in literary novels that do *not* engage (on the level of plot and target

audience) with video game culture per se. However, Hayot's essay ends up focusing on a

different question: namely, how video games can display ethical and imaginative complexity

reminiscent of literary works, with *The Last of Us* (2013) and *Undertale* (2015) as his primary

examples. In this article, I pursue Hayot's intuition by arguing that contemporary literature

increasingly participates in digital culture, on two interrelated levels: it experiments with formal

strategies that are remarkably game-like and it resonates with interpretive strategies influenced

by video game experiences.[1] The remediation of the video game results in a significant

expansion of the novel's formal and imaginative reach and testifies to literature's ability to adapt

to a constantly changing media environment.

To narrow down my discussion further, I will not be addressing literature that can only

exist as part of a computational environment, like interactive or digital fiction, which relies on

the reader's digitally mediated input (typically by presenting them with a multiplicity of

choices). Such literary forms have already been examined influentially by Espen Aarseth (1997)

and Nick Montfort (2003), among others: their relationship with—but also differences from—

both conventional literature and the video game medium are well established. Typically, this

relationship is cast in terms of "non-transferability" (Ciccoricco, 2012): digital literature cannot

be transferred to a print-based medium without losing much of its appeal; but, unlike video

games, it places a premium on verbal language and largely backgrounds strategic or gameplay

challenges. Rather, the contemporary novels I will explore call for linear, non-ergodic traversal,

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[1] Throughout this article, the terms "ludic" and "game-like" imply a specific reference to *video*

games.

just like their pre-digital counterparts.[2] But they nevertheless deploy formal strategies that can be traced back to, and illuminated by a comparison with, video games.

I am not claiming that the authors I will discuss necessarily had video games in mind when they were making certain formal choices—much less that these choices always involve a deliberate *reference* to the video game medium. To complicate this idea further, some of the game-like strategies I identify in contemporary fiction (for instance, present-tense narration) clearly predate video games as a technological and cultural medium. Yet, the increasing popularity of these strategies can be understood as a literary response to the rising significance of the video game medium, one that reflects a process of intermedial adaptation of the formal features of video games. We will also have to keep in mind that, to quote Irina Rajewsky, "a given media product cannot *use* or genuinely *reproduce* elements or structures of a different medial system through its own media-specific means; it can only *evoke* or *imitate* them" (2005, p. 55). Nevertheless, the stakes of this evocation are considerable: as literature enters a cultural landscape shaped by the video game, it revises and expands its formal repertoire to accommodate some perceived characteristics of the game medium, particularly its immediacy, its logic of choice and consequence, its emphasis on spatial structures. Crucially, these formal features can be pinpointed even in novels that do not, ostensibly, foreground digital technologies or entertainment; yet these forms reward interpretive strategies that are directly shaped by video game experience or familiarity with particular game genres. My own close readings in what follows help exemplify this claim about the potential of a video game-inspired approach to

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[2] The main exception here is Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, discussed below, whose structure does attempt to capture the ergodicity of digital media directly.

literary interpretation, how literary criticism may be enhanced by game studies concepts. Undoubtedly, there is a growing body of literary scholarship that already engages in this type of interpretation (including Jeffrey Clapp's [2020] article, discussed below). My goal here is to highlight the opportunities afforded by this approach more explicitly than has been done so far.

The dialogue between literary and game studies is being cautiously reopened (see again Hutton & Barr, 2020) after a period of relative distanciation between the two fields. Ian Bogost (2006) talks about "unit operations" to describe the way in which the formal properties of a certain artifact—such as prosody in poetry or mechanics in a video game—carry a certain ideological meaning. The "operation" denotes the link between form, function, and ideological import. For Bogost, the concept of unit operation discloses the critical relevance of games, how the close-reading techniques typical of literary studies can be extended to game criticism without giving short shrift to the specificity of games. My approach complements Bogost's account by showing how literary criticism itself can be enriched by engagement with gaming culture: in other words, it shows how familiarity with the game medium discloses unit operations in contemporary fiction that would not be available, or would not be apparent, without an intermedial interest in games. More than just literature registering the "cultural presence of video games," to lift again Hayot's words, this discussion seeks to show that games open up new ways of understanding and reading contemporary literature.

The ludic strategies I will discuss are multimodal devices, present-tense narration, and loop-like structures. They undoubtedly fall into a long history of literary experimentation, which includes avant-garde authors (from the Dada movement to the Oulipo) who frequently

conceptualized and practiced literature through an analogy with games.[3] Nevertheless, the ludic devices I am describing stop short of directly integrating the interactive, chance-driven logic of games. In that respect, they depart from earlier experimentations, such as Julio Cortázar's in *Hopscotch* (1963) or Italo Calvino's in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973), which are often seen as precursors of interactive fiction in that they allow readers to trace multiple paths through the text, or they foreground the way in which plot emerges from chance and coincidence. Instead of remediating the structural logic of ludic interactivity, the strategies I focus on in this article capture specific *dimensions* of the experience of gameplay—particularly its immediacy (present-tense narration), its emphasis on spatial organization (multimodal devices), and its inherently repetitive, trial-and-error structure (loop-like patterns). Instead of literature modeling itself on games in a straightforward manner, these forms allow for more flexible intermedial transfer: they serve as focal points in a dialogue between games and literature that does not collapse the latter into the former (or vice versa), but rather seeks to expand the scope and repertoire of the literary in a transformed cultural landscape, one marked by the pervasiveness of digital technologies. As such, the intermedial exchange between literary fiction and video games contributes to defining contemporary, "post-postmodernist" literature, which registers "an upheaval in the conditions that determine global culture" and attempts "to fashion a vocabulary with which to respond to it" (Boxall, 2013, p. 216).[4] Intermedial dialogue between literature and video games makes an important contribution to that vocabulary.

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[3] See the chapters collected in Bray et al. (2012) for an overview of these experimentations.

[4] For more on the term "post-postmodernist" and the tensions underlying contemporary literature, see McLaughlin (2004).

The inventory of ludic strategies I offer here is not meant to be exhaustive or univocal. My list could be extended, or a different genealogy could be traced for the same forms, one that doesn't involve a parallel with games. But the parallel I draw here does illuminate aspects of the production and reception of these forms, enabling us to understand how gaming culture may trickle down into literary production—and complicate literary meaning—even when there is no explicit, textual reference to video games.

Literary Form and the Ideology of Gaming: Existing Approaches

I am not the first scholar to suggest that contemporary literature is paying increasing attention to video games. In a reading of works by Jeff VanderMeer—a well-known contemporary author of speculative fiction in the "weird" mode—Jeffrey Clapp (2020) argues that VanderMeer's novels echo the aesthetics of open-world games.[5] Focusing on VanderMeer's "Southern Reach" trilogy (2014) as well as *Borne* (2017) and *Dead Astronauts* (2017), Clapp suggests that VanderMeer's works reject the plot-driven logic of mainstream fiction (including speculative fiction). Instead, they borrow from open-world games an emphasis on spatial structures, and particularly on puzzling or counterintuitive spatiality such as the underground "tower" that plays a central role in *Annihilation*, the first of the "Southern Reach" novels. Open-world games leave it up to the player to work out a narrative by following a network of quests and missions that are spatially distributed—a version of what Henry Jenkins (2004, p. 123) famously called "environmental

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[5] See Luckhurst (2017) for discussion of weird fiction, with a focus on the so-called "new weird," which VanderMeer himself helped establish as a significant strand of contemporary literature.

storytelling." Similarly, for Clapp, "in Southern Reach, spatial orientation replaces narrative development as the driver of the representational form" (2020, p. 420). While this reading arguably underestimates the relative linearity of storytelling in, especially, VanderMeer's earlier novels, it does begin to suggest how contemporary fiction may lift from games not just in thematic terms (digital technology is not a central concern in VanderMeer's oeuvre) but also on the level of narrative form.

I follow here Caroline Levine's definition of literary—and more generally artistic—form as "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" (2015, p. 3). Developed in the context of so-called New Formalism, this definition is broad enough to apply to both the mechanics of a video game—for instance, the mission structure of an open-world game such as *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018)—and the formal strategies implemented by literary fiction (e.g., the foregrounding of puzzling spatiality in VanderMeer's works). New Formalism advocates a "return to form" in literary studies and posits the affective and ideological significance of form as a site of negotiation of literary meaning (see also Levinson, 2007). In the context of the intermedial exchange between literature and video games that I am exploring here, the emergence of game-like structures on a formal level testifies to the depth and breadth of the video game medium's impact on contemporary literature, well beyond merely thematic influence. In this way, form realizes the full potential of the intermedial dialogue between literature and games.

Yet the ideological stakes of this formal dialogue are complex. Clapp's verdict is trenchant: "this kind of reverse remediation [from games to literature] has led to a curiously thin fiction" (2020, p. 425). The reason for this has to do with the ideology of contemporary gaming, which Clapp understands—drawing on Seb Franklin's (2015) work—as one of control. Games,

Clapp claims, are "control spaces" that display complicity in "contemporary forms of power" (2020, p. 420), with the video game algorithm becoming a sublimated form of state or corporate surveillance. By embracing the spatial form of open-world games, contemporary literature also inherits this logic of control, which greatly undercuts (according to Clapp) the novel's potential for ideological critique. In short, by borrowing a certain *form*, literature also takes on board the dominant *politics* of games—a link that resonates with the New Formalist focus on the ideological relevance of form.

Nevertheless, Clapp's understanding of the ideology of games—and therefore of its influence on literature—appears too negative and reductive. Certainly, games are implicated in practices of surveillance, as the debate on the "gamification" of society attests (e.g., O'Donnell, 2014). But they are also capable of metareflection on cultural tendencies including gamification itself; they can perform ideological critique (see, e.g., Caracciolo 2021b) or explore ethically tangled situations (Sicart, 2013). Whether VanderMeer's works exhibit this kind of complexity in their engagement with games is a question for VanderMeer criticism, but Clapp's conclusion does seem to clash with the growing consensus on the significance of weird fiction à la VanderMeer for discussions on literature and the ecological crisis (see Robertson, 2018). Beyond the specific case of VanderMeer, it seems overly pessimistic to argue that the intermedial dialogue between fiction and video games will necessarily result in "thinner" fiction. On the contrary, intermedial borrowings from games can destabilize the conventions of literary realism

and pursue fiction's critical engagement with social and political issues, including those surrounding surveillance and control.[6]

Ultimately, it is not possible to neatly map literary or artistic forms onto ideological *functions*, because the specific context in which a formal strategy appears is a key factor in shaping meaning—an idea known in narrative theory as the "Proteus principle" (Sternberg, 1982). The same form—for instance, a flashback in fiction or the quest structure of open-world games—may project profoundly different ideological or affective meanings depending on its interaction with *other* forms, with the thematic concerns foregrounded by the plot, and with the explicit evaluations that are embedded in a narrative artifact. Thus, my discussion in the following pages will reveal how game-like strategies in twenty-first-century literature may disclose possibilities for ideological critique directed (mainly) at the environmental crisis and the catastrophic fantasies it fosters in contemporary audiences.

The claim is not that such instances of "reverse remediation" (to use again Clapp's terminology) from games to literature will prove politically valuable under all circumstances. Even if Clapp's reading of VanderMeer is on the wrong track, he is right to argue that, in contemporary literature, strategies inspired by video games *may* reinforce existing (and dubious) ideological assumptions. My close readings showcase the opposite possibility, exploring the productivity of three formal strategies that remediate specific aspects of video game experiences. I will first introduce each strategy (multimodal devices, present-tense narration, and loop-like structures) and then turn to a case study that resonates with a particular video game genre—

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[6] See again McLaughlin (2004) on the return of social and political engagement as a hallmark of contemporary, "post-postmodernist" literature.

respectively, first-person shooters, adventure games, and simulation games. The parallel with these established genres will help tease out what is especially game-like about these formal devices.

Multimodal Devices and First-Person Shooters

Literary fiction is usually understood to be a verbal medium, yet non-verbal strategies can help shape literary meaning as well, as literary scholars are increasingly recognizing (see Ghosal, 2019; Gibbons, 2011). "Multimodality" is the umbrella term for these non-verbal devices, which include diagrams, illustrations, or unconventional typography that are featured alongside the text and help enrich or extend its meanings. While multimodal strategies are becoming more common in contemporary fiction, largely as a response to visual and digital culture (Hallet, 2009), they are at least as old as the novel itself. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) is frequently cited as a precursor of multimodal literature: in a famous passage, Sterne's narrator uses line art to visualize the meandering progression of his narrative.

As a more contemporary example, consider a chapter from Jennifer Egan's novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011, Chapter 12), which is entirely narrated through PowerPoint slides. The narrator (and author of the slides) is Alison, a twelve-year-old girl living in a dystopian version of America. In a slide titled "Desert Landscape" (see Figure 1), Alison uses simple text boxes to evoke the sparseness of the postapocalyptic desert she lives in. The first two boxes suggest a temporal rupture between "before" and the dystopian "now," in which grass has

become extremely expensive.[7] With the reference to the "house . . . next to the desert" in the third box, the emphasis shifts from temporality to spatiality: a few quick references to the deck, the picnic table, and the trash strewn across the titular "desert landscape" are able to capture the essential coordinates of the characters' postapocalyptic condition, in one which the "falling apart" of the world is just "part of the process." The simplified (visual) form of the PowerPoint presentation matches the barrenness of the postapocalyptic landscape, with the minimalist juxtaposition of text boxes suggesting a world in which "things" have been pared down to the essential. At the same time, the quaintness of the storytelling-by-PowerPoint conceit points to the child narrator's naiveté, representing an instance of what James Phelan (2007) would call "naïve defamiliarization." Here, the object of defamiliarization is the end of society as the readers (and Alison's parents) know it: Alison's voice filters out much of the affect that normally accompanies postapocalyptic visions, greatly simplifying (and therefore defamiliarizing) the affective landscape of everything "falling apart." In short, affective meaning and multimodal form go hand in hand, with the visual device of the PowerPoint slide both amplifying and extending the verbal significance of Alison's language.

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[7] For discussion of how the genre of postapocalyptic fiction foregrounds this kind of temporal discontinuity, see Caracciolo (2021a, Chapter 3).

Figure 1: Slide from Egan (2011, p. 250).

It is, of course, no coincidence that, through the slideshow, digital technology serves as an important reference point for Egan's storytelling in this chapter of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Wolfgang Hallet construes the multimodality of the contemporary novel as an oppositional *response* to the digital: "in the age of digitalization and immaterial electronic signs, the multimodal novel reinstalls the physicality and materiality of semiotic practices" (2009, p. 146). Clearly, though, Egan's operation is more sophisticated than the mere reclaiming of literary materiality in the face of the supposedly intangible culture of e-reading. Instead, arguably, Egan's device is conscious of the history of digital media, how PowerPoint slides are in themselves a remediation of the earlier, non-digital technology of the slide projector: even by the standards of 2011 (the publication year of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*), the slightly "retro" quality of PowerPoint slides—along with simplicity of presentation—contribute to what I have described as the quaintness of Alison's narrative voice. While, of course, the parallel between Egan's PowerPoint narration and video games can't be pushed too far, the (video) ludic is an

implicit presence here because of the shared design choices and guiding metaphors that brought together early productivity software and the video game medium.[8] In other words, through multimodality, literary and digital forms enter a nonlinear relation, one that remains intensely aware of the history of digital media: far from being cast as the antagonist of literary language, the digital is integrated into its workings by way of intermedial references to early computer technologies. These references are no mere embellishment or gimmick, but they contribute to literary signification by creating an affective atmosphere and defamiliarizing the reader's expectations.

If we turn to another contemporary multimodal novel, *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski (2000), video games become a much more prominent participant in literary (formal) experimentation. A series of nested narratives showing keen literary and medial self-awareness, *House of Leaves* has been widely discussed as the quintessential example of contemporary multimodal literature. The layered structure of *House of Leaves* does encourage nonlinear reading, to the point that the novel can be clearly regarded as an example of Aarseth's "ergodic literature." But my goal here is to show that, even when abstracting from the nonlinear structure of the text, *House of Leaves* is remarkably game-like in its rethinking of typographical conventions.

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[8] See, for instance, Rochelle Slovin's (2001, p. 139) comments on the "super-rational element" of early arcade games, "which [had] a spare, modernist feel" not unlike the PowerPoint aesthetics evoked here. Egan's later experiment with Twitter literature—through her short story "Black Box," which first appeared as a series of tweets in 2012—further demonstrates her familiarity with the affordances of the digital.

The basic premise of the plot is simple enough: the novel stages the exploration of a house that gives access to a mysterious underground labyrinth. But this exploration narrative is complicated by layers of commentary focusing on the technical features of a documentary filmed inside the labyrinth; another narrative level details the destabilizing effects that the description of this documentary has on the mind of one of the narrators. Mark Hansen frames his discussion of the novel as follows: "*House of Leaves* is obsessed with technical mediation and the new media ecology that has been introduced and expanded since the introduction of technical recording in the nineteenth century" (2004, p. 598). The titular house, according to Hansen, even becomes "a figure for the digital" (2004, p. 609): its puzzling spatiality challenges traditional, inscription-based media (such as the documentary shot inside the house), and instead points to the productivity of the digital as a mode of representation largely uncoupled from the real. What is missing, in Hansen's discussion and in most other accounts of Danielewski's novel, is a sense of how video games provide inspiration for the most haunting descriptions of the house. Here, unconventional typography is used to evoke the characters' attempts to negotiate the claustrophobic space of the house's maze-like interior. As the corridors become narrower and the characters are forced to crouch to advance through the labyrinth, the reader is presented with a handful of words at the center of blank pages: the shape of the text blocks is visually reminiscent of the corridors themselves (see Figure 2). The following sentences, for example, are spread over three pages (in my rendering, single slash marks represent a line break, double ones a page change): "Excep/t the furthe/r he goes, t/he smaller t/he hallway// gets, unti/l he has/to remove/his pack/and crou//ch. So/on he i/s on all/fours p//" (2000, pp. 445–447).

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Figure 2: Page from Danielewski (2000, p. 445).

The shifting typography of this section serves as a visual analogue for both the physical space of the house and the characters' movements as they navigate this labyrinth. The reader's puzzlement at the unconventional use of these mostly blank pages may also deepen their empathetic engagement with characters who are themselves undergoing a profoundly destabilizing experience: as the printed area shrinks or changes shape at each page turn, readers are afforded insight into the protagonists' confusion at the space they are exploring—but also

into their fear of the minotaur-like monster that, we are repeatedly reminded, may haunt these corridors.[9]

However, while the visual effect may be reminiscent of a print format like the flipbook, the horror of endless corridors experienced by the protagonist also evokes the distinctive aesthetics of first-person shooters in the wake of *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and *Doom* (1993). The maze-like hallways are perhaps the most memorable location of close-quarters combat in *Doom* and its many clones or sequels, and they are largely responsible for the genre's claustrophobic affect. Michael Nitsche has written about the maze as a prototype of video game spatiality, focusing on how "the visualization of the maze creates a disorienting effect that influences the perception of the space in it" (2008, p. 85). While mazes, of course, exist in other audiovisual media such as film, Danielewski's typographical presentation seems specifically geared towards the minimalist, repetitive aesthetics of early-day shooters. In these games, to quote again Nitsche, the "game world can become ambiguous" because "we lack necessary visual and spatial cues" (2008, p. 86). The simplified page layout of *House of Leaves* aims to remediate this ambiguity and the distinctive horror that results from it: words are used as visual building blocks to recreate the space the characters are experiencing, just as the limited textures and shapes of *Doom* give rise to its haunting spatiality. Put otherwise, as readers turn the pages in *House of Leaves*, they are presented with text blocks whose subtly shifting repetitions suggest the corridors of first-person shooters. Far from affirming the materiality of print *in opposition* to digital dematerialization (as posited by Hallet), the multimodal device of Danielewski's

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[9] For more on how typographical cues may play a role in representing characters' mental states, see Caracciolo (2014).

typography serves as an intermedial reference to video games. Grasping this reference enhances the reader's appreciation of Danielewski's literary experimentation, as well as their ability to imagine this space and project themselves into the characters' predicament.

Present-Tense Narration and Adventure Games

Many scholars have noted that, typically, narrative implies retrospective distance: *after* experiencing a certain event or situation, I can tell a story about it, and that retrospectivity is encapsulated by the preference for the past tense in narrative genres such as the epic or the novel (see Fludernik, 2005). This temporal structure is perhaps most evident in first-person narrative, which builds on a clear-cut distinction between the narrator's self at the time of the telling and their earlier self, while they were immersed in the events that are being related after the fact (see Stanzel, 1984, p. 210). While narrative theorists have productively questioned whether retrospectivity is *always* at work in narrative (see Currie, 2007), this association undoubtedly underlies narrative experience for most audiences. Particularly when it comes to written, literary narrative, the grammatical form of the past tense strongly evokes a post-hoc temporality. From that perspective, the contrast between literary and video game narrative is pronounced: while a few games *do* feature a retrospective narrative voice (*Bastion* comes to mind), in the vast majority of narrative-driven games the emphasis remains on the player's narrative-advancing actions and their repercussions on the game world.[10] In other words, the temporal stance embedded in video game narrative favors prospectivity over retrospectivity: much of the fascination exerted by digital narrative has to do with the *immediacy* of the narrative situation,

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[10] For a discussion of video game narrators, including *Bastion*, see Thon (2014).

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which is in some ways closer to performance than to written narrative, because the players'

decision-making shapes the future of the story in the here and now. Regardless of the verb tense

adopted by the narrator (if there is one), this sense of immediacy is closely related to what

Gordon Calleja (2011) refers to as "narrative involvement": the narrative pathways foreseen by

the developers—the "scripted narrative," in Calleja's (2011, pp. 121–122) terminology—are

mostly perceived as an extension of the player's actions in the present rather than a retrospective

projection from the future.

     Literature, however, has its own means of replicating the experiential immediacy typical

of the video game medium. Present-tense narration falls under this category. It involves, simply

enough, an adoption of the present as the primary tense of a story—either consistently or in a

more localized manner (when present-tense sections are interwoven with past-tense passages, for

instance). In written narrative, this strategy is paradoxical precisely because it challenges the

conventional separation between experiencing and narrating, with the narration unfolding in

parallel with the events that are being represented. While certainly not unique to contemporary

literature, present-tense narrative has become more widespread in recent years, as discussed by

Irmtraud Huber (2016) and Carolin Gebauer (2021). Both studies suggest that present-tense

narration serves a variety of functions, depending on context (according to Sternberg's already

mentioned Proteus principle) and on the interaction with other stylistic or narrative techniques. It

is not always possible, or useful, to link the present tense to a specific *effect*, such as increased

immersivity or literary self-consciousness. Yet, for Gebauer, despite its variety of uses present-

tense narrative "can be read as a direct response to current trends such as social acceleration or

the increasing digitization of contemporary culture" (2021, p. 313). In particular, many instances

of present-tense narration emulate the immediacy of storytelling in the video game medium,

evoking the importance of the player/protagonist's decisions in shaping a future that is still fundamentally uncertain (and therefore does not provide a foothold for the retrospective assessment of experience).

An excellent example of this use of the present-tense narrative can be found in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the first volume of the MaddAddam trilogy. As Gebauer herself puts it, in Atwood's work "the fictional present seems to be the only narrative tense that can—but need not necessarily—facilitate a temporal perspective that as of yet contests the existence of a diegetic future" (2021, p. 317). *Oryx and Crake* falls into a long history of postapocalyptic narrative building on the "last man" trope, in which a catastrophic event wipes out all of humanity, with the exception of a single survivor (see Langford, 2022). This trope can be traced back to Mary Shelley's 1826 *The Last Man* but also emerges in twentieth-century fiction by Richard Matheson (*I Am Legend*, 1954), as well as in a broad range of film, comics, and video games. But Atwood revisits the narrative situation of "last man" narratives by shifting both the mode of narration and its temporal profile: in Shelley's novel, the narrator is the survivor himself, who relates in the past tense how he came to be the last man on Earth; in *Oryx and Crake*, by contrast, a heterodiegetic narrator tells the story of the protagonist (a character named Snowman) in the present tense, with the past tense being used only for flashbacks reconstructing Snowman's preapocalyptic life.[11] Online games play an important role in Snowman's past, when he and a character named Crake—the architect of the postapocalyptic

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[11] "Heterodiegetic" is Gérard Genette's (1980) term for a narrative situation in which the narrator remains external to the diegesis and distinct from the characters, leading to what is more informally known as "third-person narrative."

world—devoted countless hours to online gaming. Among them is "Extinctathon, an interactive biofreak masterlore game [Crake had] found on the Web" (2003, p. 92).[12]

Beyond this thematic presence of games, though, it is the present-tense narrative that strongly evokes a video game-like situation, aided by the irony and stylistic focus of Atwood's prose. Consistently, Atwood captures a world of objects that are either reminders of Snowman's past before the end of society as we know it (and as he knew it) or tools enabling his precarious survival. One could call this style "object-oriented," in that the narrator's gaze is repeatedly drawn to physical things, foregrounding their material and emotional significance for the protagonist.[13] This is an example from the beginning of the novel:

> He's stashed some mangoes there, knotted in a plastic bag, and a can of
> Sveltana No-Meat Cocktail Sausages, and a precious half-bottle of Scotch—
> no, more like a third—and a chocolate-flavoured energy bar scrounged from a
> trailer park, limp and sticky inside its foil. He can't bring himself to eat it yet:
> it might be the last one he'll ever find. He keeps a can opener there too, and for

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[12] This fictional video game is at the center of Darshana Jayemanne's (2017, pp. 210-215) discussion of the novel, which offers another example of game-inspired literary interpretation. I would like to thank one of the journal's reviewers for bringing Jayemanne's work to my attention.

[13] "Object-oriented," of course, echoes the field of object-oriented ontology (see, e.g., Harman, 2002), which in turn drew inspiration from object-oriented programming. Here I'm only using the term in the sense of attention being trained on objects, without taking on the philosophical commitments of object-oriented ontology.

no particular reason an ice pick; and six empty beer bottles, for sentimental

reasons and for storing fresh water. Also his sunglasses; he puts them on.

(2003, p. 4)

The passage reads like a description of what in a video game would be the avatar's inventory.

The vibrantly concrete style brings to mind the object-oriented imagination of early point-and-

click adventure games, in which narrative progression is frequently tied to collecting and using

material objects from the avatar's surroundings (see Neitzel, 2014, sec. 3.4). In LucasArts games

such as *Day of the Tentacle* (1993) and the *Monkey Island* series (1990-1997), these interactions

involved a great deal of humor, with players having to combine or employ objects in highly

incongruous ways to advance the story: the "Rubber chicken with a pulley in the middle," which

helps the protagonist of the *Monkey Island* series solve a variety of puzzles, is perhaps the most

memorable example of this comical use of objects. This kind of object-oriented gameplay thus

defamiliarizes the audience's imagination of the material, breaking established patterns of

association (for instance, between a rubber chicken and a dog toy) and generating humor in the

process.[14]

The same kind of irony can be traced in Atwood's passage, and indeed throughout the

novel: if this was an adventure game, the "ice pick" carried "for no particular reason" would find

an entirely absurd use later on in the story. That doesn't happen in Atwood's novel, but the

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[14] In this respect, this object-oriented gameplay differs significantly from the more utilitarian

approach to objects cultivated by another popular game genre, survival games. In survival games

like *Rust* (2013), the function of game objects tends to be aligned with their everyday

associations, rather than being defamiliarized through humor.

possibility is still there, underscored by the light-hearted manner in which the narrator (and indirectly Snowman) takes in the world of objects: the exaggerated specificity of Atwood's references to, for example, the "chocolate-flavoured energy bar" gone "limp and sticky" clashes with the bare survivalism seemingly called for by Snowman's "last man" situation, creating a great deal of humor.[15]

The present-tense narrative amplifies this effect, suggesting that—if Atwood's style is so obsessively caught up in the here-and-now of the material world—it is also because the very possibility of this world having a *future* is in question. As the conventional retrospectivity of novelistic narrative is denied, the immediacy of the protagonist's predicament comes to the fore, highlighting (again, in an ironic vein) the mundane logic of his decision-making and the centrality of material things to his survival. In that way, the emphasis on the prospective (rather than retrospective) immediacy of decision-making, which is a hallmark of video game narrative, is brought to bear on the novel. That temporal setup plays into the postapocalyptic premise of Atwood's tale and heightens the sense of futurelessness experienced by the protagonist.

Loop-Like Structures and Simulation Games

While affording the possibility of immersion in narrative progression, games are also defined by gameplay structures that, potentially, interrupt or even disrupt that progression. This is a particular aspect of the tension between storytelling and gameplay challenges that shapes video game experiences (see Caracciolo 2015). Concretely, in games where it is possible to fail in a certain task (leading to a "game over" situation or, usually, to the avatar's death), players are

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[15] For more on objects and irony in Atwood's novel, see also Caracciolo (2021a, 147–150).

forced to restart from a previous save point or are even sent back to the game's beginning. For instance, in many role-playing games the story moves forward when the player-controlled character defeats certain enemies ("bosses"): if the character dies during the fight, the story comes to a standstill until players have the technical skills or the level required to beat the boss. These setbacks involve loss of progress, not just on the level of gameplay but also in narrative terms: they "freeze" the story and threaten to trap the player in a gameplay loop. There are exceptions, of course: a game like *Hades* (2018) builds death into narrative progression, requiring the player to fail and restart (almost) from scratch a number of times before the story can advance past a certain point. Whether it is deliberately part of the plot or not, death in games—or gameplay outcomes that are functionally analogous to death—complicate the linearity that we associate with narrative: instead of a step-by-step progression, we have a loop-like structure in which the player is returned to an earlier state and forced to repeat some of their earlier actions.

In other words, the *loop* becomes a spatial form or schema that is highly significant in video game experiences. Recent time loop games such as *Outer Wilds* (2019) or *Hades* itself are using this structure in increasingly self-conscious and sophisticated ways, exploiting the repetitiveness of the loop to create puzzles or tell stories that emphatically resist linear progression. Arguably, the popularity of time loop narratives in film (from *Groundhog Day* [1993] to *Edge of Tomorrow* [2014]) is a significant cultural manifestation of video games' trial-and-error loops.[16] Already in 2002, David Bordwell commented on the innovative form of films

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[16] For further discussion of the time loop as a form in both games and narrative fiction, see Lahdenperä (2018).

such as *Run Lola Run* (1998), which also involves a temporal repetition of sorts (though Bordwell classifies it as a "forking-path" narrative): the movie juxtaposes three variations on the same narrative sequence, with the protagonist attempting to save her boyfriend by delivering 100,000 Deutschmarks across town. While the varying outcomes of these sequences can be compared to forking paths, the basic principle of repetition (with the time rewinding to the beginning) is clearly loop-like. Bordwell adds: "I can only speculate on why the 1990s should see such a resurgence of forking-path narratives—though video games, cited explicitly in *Lola*, would seem a major inspiration" (2002, p. 102).

In contemporary literature, too, loops are playing an increasingly important role. In some instances, the loop involves verbal repetition. For example, Jeff VanderMeer's *Dead Astronauts* (one of the works examined by Clapp; see Clapp, 2020) features a chapter that consists entirely of iterations of the two sentences "They killed me. They brought me back" (2019, p. 189), spoken by a nonhuman animal (a fox). Only after four pages of this repetition a new sentence breaks the pattern: "One time I escaped" (2019, p. 194). With its focus on "being killed," this experimental technique echoes the way in which video game loops are mostly structured by the avatar's death. An experimental, postapocalyptic work concerned with the corporate and capitalist destruction of the nonhuman environment, VanderMeer uses this game-like strategy to hint at the ineluctability of ecological devastation—how human-nonhuman relations are, particularly in the context of advanced capitalist societies, subject to feedback loops of violence and exploitation.

In Jesse Kellerman's novella *Controller* (2018), the loop takes the form of an iteration of three alternative domestic scenarios taking place on the same day in January. These situations are identical in all but a seemingly minor detail: how severe global warming is in each scenario. The

protagonists are a man and his elderly mother: their relationship, already uneasy in the first

scenario (at 87.8° F), leads to violent conflict in the second narrative, which also has the highest

temperature (96.9° F). By contrast, the third scenario (78.7° F) results in much more peaceful

coexistence. In this way, Kellerman's loop narrative explores the psychological impact of the

climate crisis, how even in the absence of overtly catastrophic events anthropogenic climate

change can rend the fabric of everyday life. The novella does so through a structure of repetition

that shows how manipulating a single variable, the outside temperature, can have profound

implications for the lives of two characters, and for the narrative they fall into. This narrative

loop can be compared to a simulation game (for instance, *The Sims* [2000]), with the author

changing a single parameter of the simulation and displaying, for the reader's benefit, its

radically divergent outcomes. Of course, in a video game the player would be changing the

parameter *and* experiencing its consequences at the same time. In this loop narrative, the reader

is on the receiving end of the author's narrative design: but the simulative setup, together with

the domestic setting, is still highly reminiscent of video games.

Finally, a novel like Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2009) embraces the loop as a

fundamental premise for the very existence of the storyworld. According to David Herman

(2009), narrative as a practice builds on both "worldmaking" and "world disruption," with the

former involving the evocation of an imaginary or at least non-actual reality in which the

narrated events take place, the latter referring to "events introducing disequilibrium or

noncanonical situations into that world" (2009, p. 133).[17] Typical narratives include both

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[17] While "world disruption" is Herman's coinage, the term "worldmaking" comes from Nelson

Goodman's (2001) work.

worldmaking and world-disruptive elements, and of course there is no clearer example of world disruption than a planetary catastrophe. *The Stone Gods* imagines that the history of civilization—not just on Earth but across the universe—is caught in a never-ending loop: each advanced civilization is bound to cause its own demise by overexploiting a planet's resources. When intelligence emerges on a different planet, it eventually meets the same grim fate. As one of the characters puts it, referring to a "white planet," a "world like ours," it "was heating up anyway, but the humans, or whatever they were, massively miscalculated, and pumped so much CO_2 into the air that they caused irreversible warming. The rest is history" (2009, p. 56). This history, the novel shows, is fundamentally circular and loop-like rather than linear, a thematic suggestion that is enacted, on a narrative level, by a short anecdote that takes center stage in the novel: it is the story of a young man who is about to commit suicide after shooting another man, until an angel stops him and gives him another chance. A few years later, the sequence plays out again, in an endless loop: "Bullets, revolver, attic, angel, begin again. Bar, bullets, revolver, attic, angel, begin again ... angel, bar, ball, bullets..." (2009, p. 55). If this is a simulation, it is one that involves the whole of cosmic history in a repetitive loop of environmental destruction. The humble trial-and-error structure of video game experience is thus elevated, pessimistically and without any prospect of satisfying closure, to a principle of both worldmaking and -unmaking.

Yet the distinctive temporality of trial-and-error gameplay need not result in defeatism when remediated into literature. On the contrary, loop-like structures may well disclose new literary possibilities. As I discuss in Caracciolo (2021a, Chapter 1), circularity is a productive way of challenging the teleology of the narratives of Western modernity—a teleology that is closely bound up with the ideas of linear growth and progress that have, arguably, *led* to the current ecological crisis. Disrupting the linear teleology of literary narrative means putting

pressure on teleological thinking in general and exposing narrative's complicity in ideological structures of exploitation and mastery. Thus, drawing inspiration from the gameplay loop of video games doesn't only provide an opportunity for literary experimentation but enables literary narrative to refine and focus its ideological critique.

Conclusion

As a collection edited by Michael Fuchs and Jeff Thoss (2019) shows convincingly, the video game medium has frequently looked at non-digital media for inspiration, drawing themes, interface elements, and narrative strategies from cinema, comics, and literature. In this article, I have argued that the traffic between games and other media travels in both directions, and that it is a sign of the cultural significance of games that ludic devices appear where one might least expect them—namely, in the context of literary fiction. Of course, genres such as speculative or fantasy fiction, and particularly fiction geared towards younger audiences, have long engaged with games on the level of what might be loosely called "content"—their themes and plot (see, e.g., Reynolds, 2007, Chapter 8). But it is perhaps more surprising that even fiction that does *not* thematize games is increasingly adopting strategies that resonate with video games and remediate aspects of their experience. I have here identified multimodal devices, present-tense narration, and loop-like repetitions as ludic features that are becoming increasingly frequent in contemporary fiction, shaping literary meaning at a deep, formal level. My claim is not that these formal strategies necessarily contain an explicit or deliberate intermedial reference to games. Rather, I have suggested that these devices can be understood, in literary interpretation, as participating in and responding to gaming culture. Contemporary fiction integrates this culture to deepen its affective dimension (e.g., the immersive typography of Danielewski's *House of*

Leaves), but also to address present-day challenges: in many of my examples (for instance, Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* or Kellerman's *Controller*), the experiential immediacy and simulative setup of games enable literature to negotiate the uncertainty of a future marked by environmental devastation.[18]

On an even broader level, I have shown how literature's engagement with digital media cannot be shoehorned into the opposing templates of literature *becoming* digital (in digital or interactive fiction) or *resisting* digitization (by affirming the materiality of literary experience). Even conventional, non-ergodic fiction can model itself on aspects of gaming culture, using it for both formal experimentation and ideological critique (although, as I have shown, it is not always possible to map form onto critique in a linear way). More generally still, by reading literary texts through the lens of certain game genres, I have argued that literary scholarship can learn from both game studies and game experiences, expanding its conceptual toolbox to disclose the full gamut of intermedial exchanges between literature and digital culture.

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[18] For more on how fiction can negotiate uncertain futures through form, see Caracciolo (2022).

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