

Joachim Friedmann (ed.)  
Narratives Crossing Boundaries

The series is edited by Gundolf S. Freyermuth and Lisa Gotto.

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Joachim Friedmann (ed.)

## **Narratives Crossing Boundaries**

Storytelling in a Transmedial and Transdisciplinary Context

**[transcript]**

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# Crossing Boundaries? Defining Boundaries!

## An Introduction

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JOACHIM FRIEDMANN

### 1 INTRODUCTION OF AN INTRODUCTION

Frodo, who must cross the border into Mordor to destroy the Ring of Power.<sup>1</sup> Little Red Riding Hood, who sets out from her cozy home to cross the dark forest where her grandmother lives.<sup>2</sup> Lara Croft, who must pass through the gate to the mythical ruined city of Vilcabamba in search of the Scion.<sup>3</sup> Heroines and heroes who cross borders to follow their destiny.

Important narrative scholars, such as the semiotician Juri Lotman,<sup>4</sup> have described this movement. He formulates a minimal definition of a narrative. For him, this consists of two spaces separated by a border and a protagonist, whom he calls “hero.”<sup>5</sup> The most important and defining step in the plot is the hero-agent’s crossing of a border. The anthropologist Joseph Campbell also sees the crossing of the

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- 1 Frodo is the protagonist in J.R.R. Tolkien’s novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, hereafter referred to as J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Lord of the Rings*. The novel was originally published as three separate volumes between 1954 and 1955: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2012 [\*1954]; *The Two Towers*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2012 [\*1954]; *The Return of the King*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2012 [\*1955].
  - 2 Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm: *Little Red Riding Hood*, Bell, Anthea (trans.), New York: Penguin Random House 2020 [\*1967].
  - 3 TOMB RAIDER (UK, 1996, O: Core Design/Eidos Interactive).
  - 4 Lotman, Jurij Michajlovic: *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Department of Slavic Languages and Literature 1977, p.240.
  - 5 Ibid.

border by the hero from the mundane world of everyday life into the magical world of adventure as a defining moment of the narrative.<sup>6</sup> In his research on the monomyth, also known as the Hero's Journey, Campbell demonstrates this defining moment of crossing borders—among other stages of the Hero's Journey—in myths, fairy tales, and legends from all over the world. One can therefore assume that the crossing of boundaries is a transculturally effective motif. It is associated with breaking taboos and dangers, but also with setting out into new spaces of experience, with the potential for growth, transformation, and gaining knowledge.

The latter hopefully also applies to the border crossings addressed in this anthology, even if these refer to phenomena of border crossing other than spatial. First, I'll refer to interdisciplinary approaches in narrative research, which have opened up new spaces of thought by crossing borders between academic disciplines, enriching the examination of the narrative form to a high degree. This phenomenon has been observed since the turn of the millennium at the latest and is summarized by Kreiswirth under the term "Narrative Turn."<sup>7</sup> In the context of this anthology, however, 'interdisciplinarity' does not only refer to scholarly discourse. Both renowned scholars as well as innovative practicing storytellers—game designers, animation artists, and screenwriters—will have a platform to demonstrate how scholarly findings can fruitfully impact practical applications and vice versa.

In addition, transmedial phenomena are to be considered—since the days of antiquity, in which stories were primarily conveyed orally, a variety of media have developed that act as carriers of a narrative and can significantly influence the shaping of the story. Above all, the computer game should be mentioned here, which enables completely new narrative experiences through its interactivity. In addition, the theoretical examination of this relatively new medium has significantly influenced academic discourse and enriched narrative studies. It is true that certain distinctive forms of narrative were already realized in antiquity, which are still valid and understood today. Epics such as the *Iliad*<sup>8</sup> or the *Odyssey*<sup>9</sup> are also received today through a wide variety of media, so one can identify a multitude of

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6 Campbell, Joseph: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press 2004 [\*1949].

7 Kreiswirth, Martin: "Narrative Turn in the Humanities," in: Herman, David/Jahn, Manfred/Ryan, Marie-Laure (eds.), Routledge *Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, London: Routledge 2008, pp. 377-382.

8 Homer: *The Iliad*, Fagles, Robert (trans.), New York: Penguin Classics 1998.

9 Homer: *The Odyssey*, Wilson, Emily (trans.), New York: W.W. Norton & Company 2018.



transmedial and transhistorical features of a narrative text form.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, stories in literature, comics, film, and games are realized in media-specific ways so that the effects of a border crossing between the different media are deserving of attention.

And yet another boundary is to be considered: The ontological border that separates the storyworld of the narrative and the world of the recipient. By means of this boundary crossing, we explore the potential of stories to significantly influence human behavior and social discourse.

In the following, I will describe these three areas in more detail in order to classify not only the topic but also the individual contributions to the anthology. First, however, I will give a brief outline of the history of narrative research because it is precisely in the development of this discipline that many of the boundaries we are discussing have been defined, transgressed, or even dissolved.

## 2 A BRIEF HISTORY OF STORYTELLING RESEARCH

### 2.1 From Narrative Research to Narratology

In the beginning, there was the Word, and soon after, the Drama followed, and with the Drama came Aristotle and his *Poetics*,<sup>11</sup> the work that in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC marked the beginning of the theoretical examination of narratives in the Western tradition. Aristotle's reflections were further developed in Germany in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in a collection of essays published as *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* in 1769.<sup>12</sup> At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, narrative research increasingly emancipated itself from drama theory and began to take

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- 10 Friedmann, Joachim: *Storytelling for Media*, München: 2021. Here, I do not only refer to literary-verbally mediated communicates as text, but to all media texts in the inter-medial sense, which is defined by Kindt and Köppe as semiotic productions that deal with something narrated, i.e., also visual or audiovisual media texts such as films, comics, or even computer games in their article: Kindt, Thomas/Tobias Köppe: *Basic Problems of Contemporary Narrative Theory*, Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG 2014.
  - 11 It is not known when exactly Aristotle's *Poetics* was originally conceived or published. One of the first documented versions of it dates back to 1498. See: Aristotle: *Poetics*, Malcolm Heath (trans.), London: Penguin Classics 1996[\*1498].
  - 12 Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim: *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, Lange, Victor (trans.), New York, Dover Publications 1962[\*1796], reprint of Helen Zimmern's 1890 translation.

other literary forms into account.<sup>13</sup> In Russia, Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, published in 1928,<sup>14</sup> was the first systematic study of a narrative genre. Since the 1950s, these considerations have been further developed above all by French structuralism—which takes up approaches of Russian formalism—on the one hand from literary studies<sup>15</sup> and on the other hand from linguistic and semiotic perspectives.<sup>16</sup> From this interdisciplinary approach, Todorov coined the term “narratology” for this discipline.<sup>17</sup>

The vast majority of structuralist researchers at this time refer to narratives mediated by literature. Todorov examines *The Decameron*,<sup>18</sup> the myth of the Holy Grail, and, with reference to Propp, Russian folktales.<sup>19</sup> Genette develops his narratological terms primarily on Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*.<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes analyses texts from the *Bible* as well as stories by Edgar Allen Poe.<sup>21</sup> However, theorists such as Barthes and Bremond emphasized as early as the 1960s that narrative is, in principle, an intermedial phenomenon:

“Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drame [suspense drama],

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- 13 Spielhagen, Friedrich: *Beiträge zur Theorie und Technik des Romans*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1967 [\*1883].
  - 14 Propp, Vladimir: *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Scott, Laurence (trans.), Austin: University of Texas Press 1996[\*1928].
  - 15 Cf. e.g., Genette, Gerard: *Figures of Literary Discourse*, Sheridan, Alan/Logan, Marie-Rose (trans.), New York, NY: Columbia University Press 2082 [\*1966-1972].
  - 16 Cf. e.g., Greimas, Algirdas Julien: *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, McDowell, Daniele/Schleifer, Ronald/Velie, Alan (trans.), Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press 1983.
  - 17 Todorov, Tzvetan: *Grammaire du Decameron*, Den Haag: Mouton 1969, and: Todorov, Tzvetan: “The two principles of narrative,” in: *Diacritics* 1, 1971, pp. 37—44, here p. 44.
  - 18 Ibid.
  - 19 Ibid.
  - 20 G. Genette: *Figures of Literary Discourse*; Proust, Marcel: *In Search of Lost Time*, Davis, Lydia (trans.), New York: Penguin Classics 2021[\*1913-1927].
  - 21 Barthes, Roland: *The Semiotic Challenge*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1994[\*1985]; Bremond, Claude: *Logique du Récit*, Paris: 1973.

comedy, pantomime, paintings (in *Santa Ursula* by Carpaccio, for instance), stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversations.”<sup>22</sup>

Barthes, for example, in his *Mythologies* [\*1957],<sup>23</sup> examines phenomena of mass culture such as advertising, comics, or television series at an early stage, and Umberto Eco also takes comics and the JAMES BOND (1962-1964)<sup>24</sup> films into account in his semiotic research.<sup>25</sup> But despite these approaches, there was initially no systematic, transmedial narratological research.

This has been changing since the turn of the millennium when narratology experienced a methodical and thematic expansion. This becomes particularly clear in the example of interactive narration or, using a term by Aarseth, “ergodic literature.”<sup>26</sup> A larger number of scholarly works on this topic have only emerged in recent years, as before the development and especially the popularization of computer technology, the text corpus of interactive narrative remained too limited. Exceptions are early examples of interactively narrated literature, such as *Composition No. 1* by Marc Saporta,<sup>27</sup> which were certainly noticed by researchers. The genre of pen-and-paper role-playing games or tabletop role-playing games such as DUNGEONS&DRAGONS,<sup>28</sup> which emerged from the mid-1970s onwards, did not find resonance in academia for a long time, despite their commercial success. The

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- 22 Barthes, Roland/Duisit, Lionel: “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” in: *New Literary History* vol.6. no.2 (Winter 1975), John Hopkins University Press 1975, pp. 237-272, here p. 237, <https://doi.org/10.2307/468419>, accessed 20 Jan. 2023.
- 23 Barthes, Roland: *Mythologies*, Howard, Richard (trans.), New York: Hill and Wang 2012 [\*1957].
- 24 Although the James Bond films are still in production, Eco would not have access to more than the first three. Those titles are: DR. NO (GB 1962, D: Terence Young), FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE (GB 1963, D: Terence Young), and GOLDFINGER (GB 1964, D: Guy Hamilton).
- 25 Eco, Umberto: “Narrative Structures in Fleming,” in: Irons, Glenwood (ed.), *Gender, Language, and Myth: Essays on Popular Narrative*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1992, pp. 157-182.
- 26 Aarseth, Espen: *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore/London: 1997.
- 27 Saporta, Marc. *Composition No. 1*. London: Verso 2018[\*1963].
- 28 DUNGEONS & DRAGONS (US 1974, O: Gary Gyax and Dave Arneson—Tactical Studies Rules, Inc.).

so-called text adventures<sup>29</sup> such as ADVENTURE<sup>30</sup> or ZORK,<sup>31</sup> which were created in the seventies, also found little academic resonance, although they were mainly created and distributed at universities in the beginning. It was not until the advent of audiovisual computer games that scholarly debate began on a broader basis in the 1990s.

The question of whether or how computer games or interactive media tell stories and in which form this can be analyzed practically and theoretically has been the subject of a controversial discussion within the scholarly community for many years. Since this dispute raises and develops important questions of narrative theory and is also important for the development of transmedial narrative research, I will briefly describe the debate below.

## 2.2 Narrative Computer Games

Do computer games tell stories? Has a new narrative medium emerged here; has the media boundary been overcome? Intuitively, one would probably be inclined to answer these questions with ‘yes.’ Computer game protagonists such as Lara Croft or Super Mario have become pop culture icons. The numerous successful film adaptations of computer games, e.g., LARA CROFT: TOMB RAIDER (1996-

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29 Text adventures, also known as interactive fiction, are a type of computer game that primarily relies on text. The players are guided through a story presented in written form and navigate through the plot by entering commands in natural language to advance the story and solve puzzles.

30 ADVENTURE was originally written in 1975 by Will Crowther. The first official release was under the name COLOSSAL CAVE ADVENTURE in 1976: COLOSSAL CAVE ADVENTURE (US 1976, O: Will Crowther and Don Woods). See: Consalvo, Mia: *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2016.

31 It is commonly known that ZORK (US 1980, O: Tim Anderson, Marc Blank, Dave Lebling, and Bruce Daniels—Infocom) was originally released among students within MIT in 1977, then published in 1980. Many articles, interviews, and books cover this. One such source: Loguidice, Bill/Barton, Matt: *Vintage Games: An Insider Look at the History of Grand Theft Auto, Super Mario, and the Most Influential Games of All Time*, Amsterdam: Focal Press 2009.

2018),<sup>32</sup> SONIC THE HEDGEHOG (1991),<sup>33</sup> or the RESIDENT EVIL (1996-2021)<sup>34</sup> series, point to a high narrative potential. Above all, adventure games and the so-called MMORPGs<sup>35</sup> such as EVERQUEST (1999)<sup>36</sup> or WORLD OF WARCRAFT (2004)<sup>37</sup> repeatedly draw on narrative sources in their settings. Themes include the motif of the quest, mythological conflicts, or magical worlds that draw their inspiration from classics of fantasy literature such as *The Lord of the Rings* (2014[\*1954]).<sup>38</sup>

Game designers also repeatedly emphasize the important role of narrative in the creation of a computer game. For example, Dan Houser, the developer of the successful GRAND THEFT AUTO (1997-2013)<sup>39</sup> series, in an interview with Carsten Görig for *Spiegel Netzwelt*, says: “We just have to manage to establish Games as a fluid narrative medium.”<sup>40</sup> Game designer Chris Klug states, “Game developers also need to be expert storytellers because we are telling stories even if we think

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32 The LARA CROFT: TOMB RAIDER series presently encompasses fifteen titles, from: TOMB RAIDER (UK, 1996, O: Core Design/Eidos Interactive) to: SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER (USA 2018, O: Eidos Montreal). See “Gameography” at the end of this article for the full list.

33 SONIC THE HEDGEHOG (JPN, 1991, O: Sega).

34 The RESIDENT EVIL series presently encompasses fifteen titles, from: RESIDENT EVIL (JPN 1996, O: Tokuro Fujiwara—Capcom) to: RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE (JP 2021, O: Morimosa Sato—Capcom). See “Gameography” at the end of this article for the full list.

35 MMORPG is the abbreviation for Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game. Here, a large number of players play together in a shared storyworld, which they can access via servers. Players can act alone or organize themselves into groups with other players.

36 EVERQUEST (US, 1999, O: Verant Interactive/Sony Online Entertainment).

37 WORLD OF WARCRAFT (US, 2004, O: Blizzard Entertainment/Activision Blizzard).

38 J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Lord of the Rings*.

39 The GRAND THEFT AUTO series presently encompasses five titles, from: GRAND THEFT AUTO (UK, 1997, O: DMA Design/BMG Interactive) to: GRAND THEFT AUTO V (US, 2013, O: Rockstar North/Rockstar Games). See the section “Gameography” at the end of this article for the full list.

40 Houser, Dan/Görig, Carsten: “GTA-Macher Dan Houser: Weil wir Männer sind,” *Spiegel Netzwelt*, 2008, <https://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/spielzeug/gta-macher-dan-houser-weil-wir-maenner-sind-a-550474.html>, accessed 24.04.2023. My translation.

we aren't.”<sup>41</sup> Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, who wrote *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, devote more than forty pages to the topic of “Games as Narrative Play.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, at least from the perspective of the authors and designers of games, there seems to be no doubt that computer games do indeed tell stories, even if the term ‘story’ is used rather intuitively by creative minds and is not defined further.

In this respect, it is not surprising that in the course of a scholarly examination of computer games, the level of storytelling in this new medium is also explored. Initially, this takes place within the framework of a classical narratological perspective. Thus, the theoretical discussion from a scholarly standpoint concentrates on the possibilities of interactive narration in hypertext in digital media.<sup>43</sup> One of the objects of study of these approaches is the early adventure games. These computer games, for example, ZORK, were often conveyed exclusively in the written-verbal form. Thus, an investigation of these games from a literary perspective is entirely appropriate. However, in the course of further technical development, computer games became more and more graphically sophisticated and thus developed greater proximity to audiovisual media texts. GRAND THEFT AUTO I—V or the LARA CROFT: TOMB RAIDER series are examples of this. Nevertheless, even these more complex, audiovisual games were initially described by means of narratological literary studies and drama theory, for example, in 1997 and 2004 by Janet Murray<sup>44</sup>—which was soon to lead to vociferous criticism and a drawing of boundaries.

### 2.3 Ludology vs. Narratology

This criticism is formulated by a circle of scholars around Gonzalo Frasca and Espen Aarseth, who have been researching computer games since the late 1990s.

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41 Klug, Chris: “Implementing Stories in Massively Multiplayer Games,” *Gamasutra*, 16.09.02, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/implementing-stories-in-massively-multiplayer-games>, accessed 24.04.2023

42 Salen, Katie/Zimmermann, Eric: *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2003.

43 Cf., Landow, George P. (ed.), *Hyper/Text/Theory*, Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1994; E. Aarseth: *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*.

44 Murray, Janet: *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997; Murray, Janet: “From Game-story to Cyberdrama,” in: Wardrip-Fruin, Noah/Harrigan, Pat (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2004.

They demand that computer games be perceived and taken seriously as a medium in their own right, which, in their view, precludes an adaptation of the existing theory of scholarly research. In addition to Aarseth's work, Frasca's studies—in particular, his essay “Ludology meets Narratology: Similitude and differences between (video)games and narrative”<sup>45</sup>—must be seen as the igniting spark for independent computer game research.

Frasca also points out structural similarities between stories and games: “The fact is that these computer programs share many elements with stories: characters, chained actions, endings, settings.” But for him, this is only another reason to find an independent approach to his object of study: “However, there is another dimension that has usually been almost ignored when studying this kind of computer software: to analyze them as games.” For this, Frasca proposes the creation of a new discipline: “We will propose the term ludology (from *ludus*, the Latin word for ‘game’), to refer to the yet non-existent ‘discipline that studies game and play activities.’”<sup>46</sup>

While Frasca still sees structural similarities to narrative and later relativizes his distinction from narratology,<sup>47</sup> for a group of mainly Scandinavian scholars around Aarseth, Jesper Juul, and Markku Eskelinen, the term ‘ludologists’ becomes a battle term with which they want to distinguish themselves from narratology. In so doing, they not only postulate the independence of the game but, in some cases, even negate any relevance of narrative in computer games. Eskelinen writes: “Stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy.”<sup>48</sup> Three years later, he reiterates his position polemically: “Luckily, outside theory, people are usually excellent at distinguishing between

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45 Frasca, Gonzalo: “Ludology meets Narratology: Similitude and differences between (video)games and narrative,” 1999, <http://www.ludology.org/articles/ludology.htm>, accessed 05.06.2014.

46 Ibid.

47 Frasca, Gonzalo: “Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place,” 2003, [http://www.ludology.org/articles/Frasca\\_LevelUp2003.pdf](http://www.ludology.org/articles/Frasca_LevelUp2003.pdf), accessed 24.10.14.

48 Eskelinen, Markku: “The Gaming Situation,” *Game Studies* Volume 1, Issue 1, 2001, <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>, accessed 25.04.23.

narrative situations and gaming situations: If I throw a ball at you, I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories."<sup>49</sup>

Aarseth's point of view is more differentiated but similarly radical. For him—in contrast to narrative representation—simulation is the defining mode of a computer game, a simulation in which the recipient participates: "Simulation is the hermeneutic other of narratives; the alternative mode of discourse, bottom-up and emergent where stories are top-down and pre-planned. In simulations, knowledge and experience is [sic] created by the player's actions and strategies, rather than recreated by a writer or moviemaker."<sup>50</sup> However, Aarseth's argument undercuts the fact that the recipients constantly interact with the representative parts of the simulation, which are not created by them, but by an author or game designer. It is the author or game designer who creates, as a narrator, if you will, the preconditions and conditions under which the simulated actions and events can take place. Thus, the reception of a computer game could also be interpreted as a transgression of boundaries—as the dissolution of the boundary between author and recipient in the creation of the story.

Jesper Juul distinguishes computer games from narratives on another level. With reference to Chatman<sup>51</sup> and Brooks,<sup>52</sup> he assigns narratives a fundamental independence of media and, with it, the possibility of translating a narrative from one medium into another.<sup>53</sup> However, Juul denies this possibility when translating a film or book into a computer game. As an example, he cites the inaugural STAR WARS game from 1983,<sup>54</sup> which is based on the 1977 film of the same name by

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49 Eskelinen, Markku: "Towards Computer Game Studies," in: Harrigan, Pat/Wardrip-Fruin, Noah (eds.) *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*, Cambridge, MA: 2004, pp. 36-44, here p. 36.

50 Aarseth, Espen: "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation," in: Harrigan, Pat/Wardrip-Fruin, Noah (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*, Cambridge, MA: 2004, pp. 45-55, here p. 52.

51 Chatman, Seymour: "Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film," in: Heath, Stephen (ed.), *Narrative Reader*, London: Methuen 1985, pp. 202-217.

52 Brooks, Peter: *Reading for the Plot*, Cambridge: 1992.

53 Juul, Jesper: "Games telling stories?," in: *Game Studies*, Vol. 1, issue 1 (2001), <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/>, accessed 24.04.23. However, the fact that a narrative can cross a boundary without loss or unchanged and be transferred from one medium to another is also strongly doubted in transmedial narratology, for example by Ryan in her works from 2004 and 2014.

54 STAR WARS (US, 1983, O: Atari).



George Lucas.<sup>55</sup> He shows that the game only covers a small part of the film plot and that some scenes in the game do not correspond at all with the film. Moreover, according to Juul, the game has no narrative coherence because, after the final destruction of the Death Star, a new Death Star appears, making the game potentially infinite. Thus, there can be no question of translating the film into a game because: “Most characters from the movie are missing, and the few events that are included in the game have become simulations where the player can either win or fail.”<sup>56</sup>

Even if Juul’s description is accurate, he does not provide any evidence to support why the inadequate translation of the film into the game in this individual case can be generalized. Juul also ignores the fact that in 1983, for technical reasons alone, it was not possible to reproduce the film *STAR WARS* comprehensively in a game. With today’s possibilities of digital media, however, such a scenario is quite conceivable. It is ultimately the game designers’ decision which characters and scenarios they consider appropriate in a game. Games like *THE LAST OF US* (2013)<sup>57</sup> or *HEAVY RAIN* (2010)<sup>58</sup> show that complex plots and interactive features are not mutually exclusive. *THE LAST OF US* was released in 2023 as a streaming series on HBO. Neil Druckmann, who also wrote the script for the game, is one of the creators of the series. Especially at the beginning, the series closely follows the storyline in the computer game, and some scenes are even staged in an identical way. This also shows that crossing the border from medium to medium is entirely possible—albeit, in this case, in the opposite way.

Nevertheless, the arguments of the ludologists do carry weight on a scholarly level—the interactive reception of a computer game and the possibilities of intervention by the players stand in the way of some typical narrative design strategies: for example, a linear conveyance of information and the associated generation of subtext. Depending on the degree of interactive intervention, a consistent transformation of the characters or a coherence of the narrative can be prevented. Furthermore, the clear demarcation between literary and narrative studies also emphasizes the media-specificity of the computer game—an important point that positions the computer game as an independent medium with specific artistic possibilities of expression in the scholarly and cultural debate. In this respect, this

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55 *STAR WARS* (USA 1977, D: George Lucas).

56 *Ibid.*

57 *LAST OF US, THE* (US, 2013, O: Naughty Dog/Sony Computer Entertainment); *RESIDENT EVIL* (JPN, 1996-2012, O: Capcom).

58 *HEAVY RAIN* (FR, 2010, O: Sony Computer Entertainment).

demarcation becomes fruitful—precisely because it calls the apologists of narrative studies to the scene.

## 2.4 Game Studies and Transmedial Narratology

In this context, the work of Marie-Laure Ryan is particularly noteworthy. Ryan, an accomplished scholar who has also worked in the software industry, became interested early on in the possibilities and structures of computer-generated narrative, which she explores in her foundational work *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory* (1991).<sup>59</sup> The emphasis is not mainly on computer games, which were still in the early stages of development in the 1990s, but rather on computer-generated prose narratives that are conveyed verbally. Ryan attempts to systematize the possibilities of creating meaning and plotting in computer-generated narratives, developing models for describing fictionality, as well as for generating narrative conflicts, which in turn lead to narrative plots. Even though the examples presented by Ryan originate primarily from verbally mediated narration—entirely in the tradition of narrative scholarship—she later develops a media-independent concept of narrative in the sense of transmedial narratology.

In 2001, together with Aarseth, she founded *Game Studies*, an online journal dedicated to the academic study of computer games. The title of this publication also becomes the generic term for the academic study of computer games and displaces the term ‘ludology.’ In contrast to ludology, the exploration of the narrative potential of computer games is one of the central concerns of game studies, as can be seen in the first issue of the magazine, which is entirely devoted to the question of the narrativity of computer games.

Ryan posits that narratives have a foundational independence from media, which allows them to transcend boundaries between different forms of media. She explicitly applies this idea to computer games, where she identifies several different manifestations of narrative that distinguish her position from that of the ludologists:

- the narrative script that is designed into the game
- the actualization of this narrative through the interactive reception of the player
- cut scenes that lure the players into the game or reward them after the successful completion of a mission

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59 Ryan, Marie-Laure: *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, Bloomington 2004.

- micro stories told by non-player characters
- the narratives that players produce with the recordings of their games as ‘Let’s Play.’<sup>60</sup>

Concurrently, Ryan arrives at the conclusion that certain media are better suited than others to convey narrative content and that, in McLuhan’s sense, the medium also always shapes the content: “A core meaning may travel across media, but its narrative potential will be filled out, actualized differently when it reaches a new medium. When it comes to narrative abilities, media are not equally gifted; some are born storytellers, and others suffer from serious handicaps.”<sup>61</sup> In this respect, it is only consistent that she later introduces the concept of “media-conscious narratology,”<sup>62</sup> with which she emphasizes the elemental potential of narratives to transcend media boundaries, but also keeps the media specificity of narrative in mind.

The synthesis of these two aspects is becoming increasingly important in the following research after the media specificity of narratives was initially the focus of the research interest. For example, Jan-Noël Thon shows how certain forms and elements of narration are realized transmedially when he examines the role of the narrator<sup>63</sup> or strategies of subjectivity representation<sup>64</sup> in different media. The

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60 *Let’s Plays* are documentations of the gameplay of a computer game, often involving editing and narration, in the sense of a demonstration of the gaming experience of a specific player, uploaded in audio-visual form on video platforms. Ryan, Marie-Laure: *Avatars of Story*, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press 2006, p. 201.

61 McLuhan, Marshall: *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*, Routledge 1964; Ryan, Marie-Laure: “On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology,” in: Meister, Jan Christoph (ed.), *Narratology beyond Literary Criticism*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2005, p. 1.

62 Cf. Ryan, Marie-Laure: “Story/Worlds/Media: Tuning the Instrument of a Media-Conscious Narratology,” in: Ryan, Marie-Laure/Thon, Jan-Noël (eds.), *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press 2014, pp. 25-50.

63 Thon, Jan-Noël: “Toward a Transmedial Narratology. On Narrators in Contemporary Graphic Novels, Feature Films, and Computer Games,” in: Alber, Jan/Hansen, Per Krogh (eds.), *Beyond Classical Narration. Transmedial and Unnatural Challenges*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2014, pp. 25-56.

64 Thon, Jan-Noël: “Subjectivity Across Media: On Transmedial Strategies of Subjective Representation in Contemporary Feature Films, Graphic Novels, and Computer

conception of characters in film and computer games,<sup>65</sup> transmedial fictionality models,<sup>66</sup> or multimodal narratives,<sup>67</sup> are also explored.

### 3 CROSSING THE TRANSDISCIPLINARY BORDER

The development of specific research interests on selected elements of narrative design also reveals a fundamental insight into transmedial narratology—that the definition of a given media text as a narrative depends on the design of certain elements on a semantic level. Many of the arguments used by ludologists against analyzing computer games from a narratological perspective were based on inadequate definitions of narrative or on media-specific features.

In his attempt at delimitation, Eskelinen cites definitions of narrativity by Genette and Prince, in which a narrative situation is required for narrative texts, i.e., at least the existence of a narrator and a recipient. Eskelinen concludes from this that games do not tell stories because: “I think we can safely say we can’t find

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Games,” in: M.-L. Ryan/J.-N. Thon, (eds.), *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, pp. 67-102.

- 65 Schröter, Felix: “Don’t show it, play it! Filmische und nicht-filmische Figurenkonzeption im Computerspiel,” in: *Rabbit Eye—Zeitschrift für Filmforschung*. no. 5, 2013, pp. 22-39; Schröter, Felix/Thon, Jan-Noël: “Video Game Characters. Theory and Analysis,” in: *DIEGESIS. Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung*, Vol. 3, no. 1, 2014, pp.40-77, <https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/view/151>, accessed 24.04.23.
- 66 Zipfel, Frank: “5. Fiktionssignale,” in: Klauk, Tobias/Köppe, Tilmann (eds.), *Fiktionalität: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter 2014, pp. 97-124.
- 67 Hallet, Wolfgang/Neumann, Birgit: “Raum und Bewegung in der Literatur. Zur Einführung,” in: Hallet, Wolfgang/Neumann, Birgit (eds.), *Raum und Bewegung in der Literatur*, Bielefeld: 2009, pp. 11-32. For Ryan and Thon, a narrative is multimodal if it is bound to a singular media object, but uses different semiotic or technical channels, e.g., children’s books, with sound effects or computer games, that imitate other media—for example, if a yellowed treasure map or literary-verbally mediated written documents appear in the course of the narrative. Another example is so-called multimedia reportage. Ryan and Thon point out that the term multimodal is replacing the term multimedia in Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon: “Introduction,” in: M.-L. Ryan/J.-N. Thon, (eds.), *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press 2014, pp. 1 -21.

narrative situations within games.”<sup>68</sup> However, the necessity of a narrator or a narrating instance—as classical narratology with its focus on literary or verbally mediated narratives often demands<sup>69</sup>—is more than controversial. Bordwell already points out that a narrator does not necessarily have to be present in the film.<sup>70</sup> The same position is taken by narratologists who emphasize the media independence of narrative and thus see no need for a narrating instance.<sup>71</sup>

As an author who writes stories for television, comics, and interactive media, I can strongly agree with this view, not only from the perspective of the practitioner but also from an academic standpoint. The preoccupation with intermedial forms of narration has become one of the central fields of research since the turn of the millennium at the latest, and thus one of the first interdisciplinary boundaries to be crossed. One can go even further: Only the transgression or questioning of the traditional boundaries of narrative research with a view to new narrative media emancipates narrative theory from the corset of literary mediation and allows a new, more detailed, and above all, more precise form of determining the narrative text.

This is not least due to the fact that a large number of scholars from various disciplines are developing an interest in a theoretical examination of the narrative form.<sup>72</sup> These different perspectives generate different interests that go far beyond a focus on literary form. In recent years, narratology, which was originally oriented towards structuralism and literary studies, has thus experienced a

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68 M. Eskelinen: “Towards Computer Game Studies,” p. 36. However, Seibel and Thon, in 2002 and 2014 respectively, show a variety of examples in which computer games also establish narrators and narrative situations. As early as 2002, Klaudia Seibel points out that narrativisation through a framing narrator can be found not only in the classic narrative area of role-playing and adventure games, but also in action and strategy games. See: Seibel, Klaudia: “Cyberage-Narratologie: Erzähltheorie und Hyperfiktion,” in: Nünning, Ansgar/Nünning, Vera (eds.), *Erzähltheorie transgenerisch, intermedial, interdisziplinär*, Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2002, pp. 217-236; J. N. Thon: “Toward a Transmedial Narratology. On Narrators in Contemporary Graphic Novels, Feature Films, and Computer Games,” pp. 25-56.

69 Cf. G. Genette: *Figures of Literary Discourse*; Prince, Gerald: *Narratology: The Form and Function of Narrative*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter 1982.

70 Bordwell, David: *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press 1985.

71 M.-L. Ryan: *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*.

72 M. Kreiswirth: “Narrative Turn in the Humanities,” pp. 377-382.

considerable expansion, both methodologically and in terms of content. Two currents, in particular, can be distinguished here.

On one side, narratological concepts are being transferred to other disciplines in interdisciplinary border crossings, and narrative-theoretical insights from other scholarly disciplines are finding their way into narratological works. Examples of this can be found in Hayden White's history studies, in Richard Gerrig's and Jürgen Straub's works on cognitive psychology in 1993 and 1998, respectively,<sup>73</sup> and in the cultural-anthropological perspectives expressed by Walter Ong in 1987.<sup>74</sup> This list could be continued and supplemented by approaches from jurisprudence, economics, or philosophy.<sup>75</sup>

On the other side, narratology, which has so far focused primarily on literary studies, is broadening its perspective and describing manifestations of narrative in other media. While the narrativity of film was examined relatively early on,<sup>76</sup> since the turn of the century, there has been an increased examination of the storytelling

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73 White, Hayden: *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1987; Gerrig, Richard: *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*, New Haven: 1993; Straub, Jürgen: "Geschichten erzählen, Geschichten bilden: Grundzüge einer narrativen Psychologie historischer Sinnbildung," in: Straub, Jürgen (ed.), *Erzählung, Identität und historisches Bewusstsein: Die psychologische Konstruktion von Zeit und Geschichte*, Vol. 1. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1998, pp. 81-169.

74 Ong, Walter: *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, New York, NY: Routledge 2002.

75 Herman, Luc/Vervaeck, Bart: "Postclassical Narratology," in: Herman, David /Jahn, Manfred/Ryan, Marie-Laure (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, London/New York: 2008, pp. 450-451.

76 Cf. Metz, Christian: *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1974; S. Chatman: "Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film," pp. 202-217; D. Bordwell: *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 1985.

potential of other media, such as comics,<sup>77</sup> poetry,<sup>78</sup> or music.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, as already outlined, with the dynamic development of digital media, the possibilities of interactive narrative are also being explored.

David Herman encapsulates these interdisciplinary approaches to narratology as ‘Postclassical Narratology.’<sup>80</sup> He uses this term to distinguish his position from structuralist narratology, since this “has been reproached for its scientificity, anthropomorphism, disregard for con-text and gender-blindness,”<sup>81</sup> as summarized by Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck.

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- 77 See: Schüwer, Martin: “Erzählen in Comics: Bausteine einer plurimedialen Erzähltheorie,” in: Nünning, Ansgar/Nünning, Vera (eds.), *Erzähltheorie transgenerisch, intermedial, interdisziplinär*, Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier 2002, pp. 185-217; Ewert, Jeanne: “Art Spiegelman’s Maus and the Graphic Narrative,” in: Ryan, Marie-Laure (ed.), *Narrative Across Media. The Languages of Storytelling*, Lincoln/London: 2004, pp. 178-194; Stein, Daniel (ed.), *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*, Berlin: de Gruyter 2013; Kukkonen, Karin: *Contemporary Comics Storytelling*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2013; Klein, Christian/Martínez, Matías/Wolff, Lynn L.: “Introduction. Narrating Reality in Comics,” in: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research/Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 8.1 (2019), pp. 1-5, URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20190607-090345-4, <http://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/344/548>; accessed 24.04.23.
- 78 E.g., Müller-Zettelmann, Eva: “Lyrik und Narratologie,” in: Nünning, Ansgar/Nünning, Vera (eds.), *Erzähltheorie transgenerisch, intermedial, interdisziplinär*, Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier 2002, pp. 129-154.
- 79 Despite the attribution of narrative qualities to music, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its narrativity remains highly controversial among scholars. Additionally, Werner Wolf points this out in his 2002 article, where he examines the narrative potential of music. See: Wolf, Werner: “Das Problem der Narrativität in Literatur, bildender Kunst und Musik: Ein Beitrag zu einer intermedialen Erzähltheorie,” in: Nünning, Ansgar/Nünning, Vera (eds.), *Erzähltheorie transgenerisch, intermedial, interdisziplinär*, Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier 2002, p. 76ff; Tarasti, Eero: “Music as Narrative Art,” in: Ryan, Marie-Laure (ed.), *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press 2004, pp. 283-304.
- 80 Herman, David: *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, Ohio: Ohio State University Press 1999.
- 81 L. Herman/B. Vervaeck: “Postclassical Narratology,” pp. 450-451, here p. 450.

The dichotomization between classical and post-classical narratology postulated by Herman, however, remains to be critically questioned. Even before the “renaissance” of narratology proclaimed by Nünning,<sup>82</sup> interdisciplinary approaches existed in narrative research. In this sense, the emergence of narratology could already be seen as the first interdisciplinary border crossing between semiotics and literary studies. Furthermore, there were earlier, important reflections on narrative research in other scholarly disciplines that fertilized classical narratology, for example, the cognitive-psychological work of William Brewer, the reflections on methodological problems in the historical sciences by Arthur C. Danto, and the influential sociolinguistic studies on oral narratives by Labov and Waletzky.<sup>83</sup> In addition, there are important narrative-theoretical findings from other disciplines that have also received little attention from post-classical narratology, for example, the studies of mythological narrative structures by the anthropologist Joseph Campbell.<sup>84</sup> His concept of the monomyth and the Hero’s Journey is of significant practical relevance today and had a great influence on the development of Hollywood cinema and, thus, on narrative structures in cinema worldwide, especially through the adaptation by Christopher Vogler in 1998.<sup>85</sup>

In order to do justice to these different approaches, it is necessary to take a look at the narrative form, which also includes the consideration of other storytelling media. The focus here should therefore be on the definition of narrative on a semantic level, independent of the used narrative medium. Following this, I will give an overview of the history of the definition and the solutions offered, as it is

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82 Herman, David: *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*, Lincoln: 2002.; Nünning, Ansgar/Nünning, Vera: “Produktive Grenzüberschreitungen: Transgenerische, intermediale und interdisziplinäre Ansätze in der Erzähltheorie,” in: Nünning, Ansgar/Nünning, Vera (eds.), *Erzähltheorie transgenerisch, intermedial, interdisziplinär*, Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier 2002, pp. 1—23., here p.i.

83 See Brewer, William: “The Nature of Narrative Suspense and the Problem of Reading,” in: Wulff, Hans J./Friedrichsen, Mike (eds.), *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations*, Mahwah: 1996, pp. 107—128; Danto, Arthur: *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1965; Labov, William/Waletzky, Joshua: “Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience,” in: Helm, June (ed.), *Essays on Verbal and Visual Arts*, Seattle: 1967, pp. 12-44.

84 J. Campbell: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

85 Vogler, Christopher: *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, California: Michael Wiese Productions 1992.



the determination of boundaries that makes the description of boundary crossings possible and meaningful.

Despite the long tradition of narrative studies, it has not been possible for a long time to establish a consistent definition of narrative. Meir Sternberg, for example, laments “the absence of anything like an accepted definition of narrative.”<sup>86</sup> Although this statement is more than thirty years old, the expansion of the research field of narratology in that same period to include transmedial forms as well as other scholarly disciplines has rather exacerbated the problem.

First, there is the attempt at a minimal definition, such as that offered by Barbara Herrnstein Smith: “We might conceive of narrative discourse most minimally and most generally as verbal acts consisting of someone telling someone else that something happened.”<sup>87</sup> But this is likely to apply to any conversational situation, which is not satisfactory as a definition. Gerald Prince is more specific when he describes narrative as follows: “Narrative is the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails each other.”<sup>88</sup> Even this definition is still rather vague; it would apply just as well to a cooking recipe. In a similar definition, the film scholar David Bordwell also promotes the criteria of causality and spatial location when he writes: “The fabula embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field.”<sup>89</sup> Even though this definition already contains more elements, it also applies to media texts to which one at first glance would not necessarily attribute narrative potential—for example, instructive texts such as manuals. In contrast, narratologist Wolf Schmid calls for even greater openness of definition: In any case, causality and other forms of motivation need not be included in a minimal definition of narrativity.<sup>90</sup> A text is already a narrative if it contains only temporal connections, in his opinion.

Taking into account the mentioned criteria, practically every media text that depicts events or happenings becomes a narrative. But is this really the case with a sports report, a weather forecast, instruction manuals, etc.? As early as 1992, Marie-Laure Ryan attempted to define narrativity by identifying certain elements

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86 Sternberg, Meir: “Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity,” in: *Poetics Today*, Vol. 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1992), Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1992, pp. 463-541, here p. 464.

87 Smith, Barbara Herrnstein: “Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories,” in: Mitchel, William John Thomas (ed.), *On Narrative*, Chicago: 1981, pp. 209-232, here p. 228.

88 G. Prince: *Narratology: The Form and Function of Narrative*, here p. 4.

89 D. Bordwell: *Narration in the Fiction Film*, here p. 49.

90 Schmid, Wolf: *Elemente der Narratologie*, Berlin: de Gruyter 2008, here p. 6.

on a semantic level, which she calls “Building Blocks” of narrativity and which, for her, represent “basic conditions of narrativity.”<sup>91</sup> She starts with three categories. First, there is a narrative world populated with characters and containing objects. Second, this world must have a temporal dimension in which—usually through the actions of the characters—a change in the world takes place. Third, the narrative text must allow interpretive inferences about goals, plans, and causal links. Ryan expands on this approach until she arrives at an eight-part definition of “Building Blocks,” which in turn are grouped under four categories:

“Spatial Dimension

1. Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existences.

Temporal Dimension

2. This world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations.
3. The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events.

Mental Dimension

4. Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world.
5. Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents, motivated by identifiable goals and plans.

Formal and Pragmatic Dimension

6. The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure.
7. The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the story world.
8. The story must communicate something meaningful to the recipient.”<sup>92</sup>

In fact, this comprehensive definition helps to make it much easier to distinguish stories from non-narrative texts. However, Ryan’s definition would also apply to texts that one would not intuitively classify as narrative, such as certain historical chronicles or descriptions of sporting events. In this respect, from an application-oriented perspective and as a writer of narrative content, I have supplemented her

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91 Ryan, Marie-Laure: “The modes of narrativity and their visual metaphors,” in: *Style*, Vol. 26, no. 3 (1992), p. 371.

92 M.-L., Ryan: *Avatars of Story*, p. 8.

definition with further distinguishing features, building on Ryan's categories, in order to determine the specificity of narrative more precisely.<sup>93</sup>

In my view, the narrative text is characterized by the following specific design strategies:

- 1 *The semanticization of narrative space*: Space in a narrative is not only the mere setting but also the bearer of meaning. Little Red Riding Hood must leave her safe home for the dark, dangerous forest. In *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo has to leave the idyllic, green Shire for the dark Mordor. In DEATH IN VENICE (1971),<sup>94</sup> Gustav von Aschenbach travels from the orderly, Apollinian Munich to Dionysian, sensual Venice. The crossing of boundaries between these semantic spaces by the protagonists is also a characteristic of narrative.
- 2 *The design of narrative figures in a mimetic, synthetic, thematic, and intertextual dimension*: Narrative figures not only represent humans or (e.g., in the case of fables) humanized beings (mimetic) in a naturalistic way but also shape them as functionaries (synthetic) within the framework of the plot, just as the hero, Frodo, in *Lord of the Rings* is supported by his helpers Sam or Aragorn and advised by his mentor Gandalf. Antagonists such as Sauron or Saruman want to prevent him from fulfilling his goal. In *Pride and Prejudice*,<sup>95</sup> protagonist Elizabeth Bennet finds in Mr. Darcy both her antagonist and an object of love. In addition, many characters in a narrative have a dimension of meaning (thematically), such as in *The Magic Mountain*,<sup>96</sup> where Hans Castorp is confronted with different concepts of life and the world via different personalities: the soldierly, disciplined Joachim, sensual Clawdia Chauchat, humanistic Settembrini or vigorous, immoderate Mynheer Peeperkorn.
- 3 *The setting of binary narrative oppositions that thematically structure the text*: The plot of a story develops from a conflict between two opposed semantic principles, the binary narrative oppositions. In some cases, these are already

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93 J. Friedmann: *Storytelling for Media*; Friedmann, Joachim: *Transmediales Erzählen*, Konstanz: UVK Verlag 2016.

94 DEATH IN VENICE (IT/FR 1971, D: Luchino Visconti).

95 Austen, Jane: *Pride and Prejudice*, Stephen Arkin (eds.), Barnes & Noble Classics 2019[\*1813].

96 Mann, Thomas. *The Magic Mountain*, Woods, John E. (trans.), Vintage International 1996[\*1924].

recognizable from the title of the story, as in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*.<sup>97</sup>

- 4 *The goal-orientation and the triggering of actions and events through conflict:* The protagonists of a story act in a goal-orientated way, which means that at the beginning of the story, a goal is communicated, which the character wants to achieve in the course of the story. Little Red Riding Hood wants to bring her grandmother wine and cake, Frodo is supposed to destroy the Ring of Power, Lara Croft is on a mission to find the Scion. However, achieving this goal never goes smoothly; the characters are prevented from reaching their goal by external circumstances or antagonists, which creates a conflict that the character must resolve in the course of the narrative and which triggers their actions.
- 5 *The coherence of the text through the transformation of binary narrative oppositions:* Every book, every film, every narrative has an end. But the impression of closure only arises when the question of whether the hero or heroine has reached their goal has been answered, and the binary narrative oppositions have been completely transformed: Frodo destroys the Ring of Power and thus ends the tyranny of Sauron. Elinor Dashwood marries Edward in *Sense and Sensibility*, emotion ultimately triumphing over calculation and class conceit. Joel is able to save Ellie in the end in *THE LAST OF US*—albeit at the cost of sacrificing the future of humanity.
- 6 *The setting of semantic turns, in the terminology of film dramaturgy: the placement of turning points:* Again and again, there are surprising turns in the plot of narratives, mostly related to the binary narrative oppositions. When Luke fights his supposed arch-enemy Darth Vader in the *STAR WARS* film from 1977, the latter reveals to him that they are father and son. Elinor, in *Sense and Sensibility*, is surprised to learn that Edward's fiancée left him when he was disinherited, so he is available again. Dr. Crowe, who in *THE SIXTH SENSE*<sup>98</sup> tries to help young Cole, is plagued by ghostly apparitions—and finds out that he himself is a ghost.
- 7 *The emotionalization of the narrative:* In legal texts, such as police reports, instructive texts, or instruction manuals, actions and events are presented as factually as possible. However, in a narrative, the aim is always to evoke

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97 Tolstoy, Leo: *War and Peace*, Pevear, Richard/Volokhonsky, Larissa (trans.), New York: Vintage 2007[\*1869]; Dostoyevsky, Fyodor: *Crime and Punishment*, Ready, Oliver (trans.), New York: Penguin Classics 2014[\*1866]; Austen, Jane: *Sense and Sensibility*, Ballaster, Ros (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019[\*1811].

98 *SIXTH SENSE, THE* (USA 1999, D: M. Night Shyamalan).

emotions. On the one hand, the emotions of the protagonists should be described and experienced, on the other hand, certain feelings should be triggered in the recipients. The importance of the dimension of emotional experience in the reception of stories is shown by the fact that many narrative genres are defined by the feelings they are supposed to evoke, e.g., the romance novel, the horror comic, the erotic film.

- 8 *Causal relationships that condition the linking of the actions and events of the narrative*: The actions and events do not follow one another at random but are causally linked, forming a chain of impulses, and thus establishing the context of meaning: Romeo and Juliet cannot marry because their families are enemies. Therefore, Juliet is to be married to another man. To avoid marriage, she takes a drink which puts her into a death-like sleep. Because Romeo then believes she has died, he chooses suicide. Juliet does not want to go on living without her lover and stabs herself.<sup>99</sup> One action follows the next and would be inconceivable without the previous one.
- 9 *A prototypical narrative structuring of the story*: The actions and events are usually organized in a certain structure, which can be seen, for example, in the three or five-act structure of classical drama or in the so-called Hero's Journey or the monomyth, the pattern of which can be found in a multitude of myths and fairy tales from all over the world. Verbally mediated everyday narratives also tend to organize themselves in comparable structures, as sociolinguists Labov and Waletzky show.<sup>100</sup>
- 10 *The participation of recipients in the production of meaning through so-called gapping*: In contrast to academic or instructive texts, narrative texts deliberately leave informational gaps in order to involve recipients in the production of meaning through conjecture and assumption. This is particularly evident in the crime genre, for example, where information is deliberately withheld or false leads motivate recipients to speculate about the further course of the story.
- 11 *Semantic Object in the center of the narrative*: In many narratives, certain objects are at the center of the action or serve as a goal of the narrative figure,

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99 Shakespeare, William: *Romeo and Juliet*, London: Penguin Classics, 2000 [\*1597].

100 W. Labov [J. Waletzky]: "Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience," pp. 12-44.

such as the sword Excalibur,<sup>101</sup> the Holy Grail,<sup>102</sup> or the Ring of Power. In narratives, objects are semanticized to varying degrees—non-functional objects, plot-relevant objects, plot-driving objects, and semantic objects, the latter binding the binary narrative oppositions and symbolizing and reifying certain core themes of the narrative. In everyday life, we encounter this strategy in the form of marketing campaigns or in social rituals such as sports tournaments, where a semanticized cup stands for triumph and victory.

The provision in question is notably comprehensive, surpassing a simple lexical definition by incorporating perspectives from various scholarly disciplines. By doing so, it enables a thorough exploration of narrative design both in practical applications and in analytical contexts, all within a single framework. With the help of this system, it is possible to clarify the extent to which narrative strategies or narrative design elements are realized in different media. Not by posing the dichotomous and binary question of whether a given text is a narrative or not—but by examining the extent to which certain narrative elements have been used in the design of the text. In other words, does the media text have a low narrative potential, like the computer game TETRIS (1984),<sup>103</sup> for example, where of all the features of narrative text design, only the binary narrative opposition ‘order vs. chaos’ can be found? Or does it have a high narrative potential, like the computer game THE LAST OF US, for example, in which all the described text design elements are used? Thus, it also becomes clear that it would be far too limited to present computer games sweepingly as narrative media or to deny them their potential as narrative media altogether. Computer games, like other media, are highly diverse in their design strategies and therefore require a differentiated approach to which the described system can contribute.

Accordingly, many of the contributions in this volume refer implicitly or explicitly to individual design elements of narrative with an interdisciplinary approach. Clara Fernández-Vara shows the extent to which the basic conflict of the crime genre and the corresponding information management and gapping integrate the recipients of an investigative computer game into the production of meaning. Florian Nieser integrates insights from Medieval Studies into game

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101 Malory, Thomas: *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Baines, Keith (trans.), New York: Oxford University Press, 1976 [\*1485].

102 von Eschenbach, Wolfram: *Parzival*, Hatto, A. T. (trans.), London: Penguin Classics, 1980 [\*13<sup>th</sup> century].

103 Original release: TETRIS (USSR [now Russia], 1984, O: Alexey Pajitnov—Soviet Academy of Sciences).

studies to show in which way heroic figures and semantic objects are represented both in medieval literature and in computer games. In a short cultural history of the ‘Mad Scientist,’ Eugen Pfister describes how this character archetype crosses the boundary from literature to film and finally to computer games.

Particularly with the complex definition of narrative and the transmedial focus of the above-mentioned contributions, it is noticeable that the concept of medium is not yet adequately defined in the context of this anthology. Again, the following applies: the description of a medial border crossing only makes sense if we have defined an understanding of the concept of ‘medium.’

## 4 CROSSING THE TRANSMEDIAL BORDER

This is not a trivial undertaking, as the lack of a uniform and enforced definition is also repeatedly lamented in literature.<sup>104</sup> For example, it could be asked whether an illustrated novel and a graphic novel are to be regarded as different media when they both use the linguistic as well as the visual channel and continue to use the same material carrier, namely paper and printing ink. And can one really speak of the medium of the computer game, as I have done so far, when it is accessed and received on such different platforms as a game console, a desktop computer, or a smartphone?

In fact, the term medium is used ambiguously. It can be used to describe specific communication channels: one speaks of a newspaper, the radio, or the internet as a medium. At the same time, however, the technical side of communication can be referenced when one refers to television, photography, or the computer as a medium. If one considers the computer, one can also speak of media in connection with its applications, for example, the computer game, e-mail, or a blog. Furthermore, the term has a semiotic dimension when one calls language or images a medium. In addition, certain artistic or creative forms of expression are called media, such as literature, music, or dance. Likewise, the material in which meaning-bearing signs are presented can be considered a medium: the oil with which one paints pictures, the clay from which one forms sculptures, and the paper on which one composes written works.

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104 Cf. Kloock, Daniela/Spahr, Andrea: *Medientheorien*, Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2012; M.-L. Ryan: *Story/Worlds/Media: Tuning the Instrument of a Media-Conscious Narratology*, pp. 25-50; Schmidt, Hanns Christian: “Transmedialität,” in: Beil, Benjamin/Hensel, Thomas/Rauscher, Andreas (eds.), *Game Studies*, Wiesbaden: Springer 2018, pp. 251-263.

It is again Ryan who attempts to grasp and systematize the various dimensions of the term.<sup>105</sup> In doing so, she distinguishes between three dimensions of the concept of media:

- The semiotic dimension, which categorizes the underlying sign system, such as language or the image. For Ryan, typical examples of semiotically constructed media are the various art forms such as music, painting, or sculpture.
- The technical dimension, which describes the technical characteristics of media, be it photography, film, or radio. This category also includes the material nature of the message conveyed on a screen or a page of paper. Several levels of technical production can also be combined here; in the case of the book, this would be the creation of the text on a typewriter or a computer and the reproduction of the text by means of technical printing processes.
- The cultural dimension, which includes the culturally shaped perception of media as a means of communication, be it theatre, comics, or the press. These are media that are regarded as such in public discourse, without it being possible to make a clear semiotic or technical classification because the production of a comic is subject to technically comparable processes as that of a book and, as shown, also uses the same channels on a semiotic level as an illustrated book; the comic is however regarded as an independent medium.<sup>106</sup>

Ryan also points out that in most cases, all three dimensions must be taken into account when determining a medium. For example, the computer game semiotically uses the visual, the auditory, and in some cases also the literary-verbal communication channel. In the technical dimension, it is communicated via screen as well as via loudspeakers, similar to sound film. Moreover, unlike film, it is still characterized in the technical dimension by the interactive intervention possibilities. The computer game would share all these characteristics with an interactive multimedia reportage, for example. In this respect, the cultural dimension must be considered here, which has a distinctive effect.<sup>107</sup>

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105 M.-L. Ryan: *Story/Worlds/Media: Tuning the Instrument of a Media-Conscious Narratology*, p. 29 f.

106 Cf. McCloud, Scott: *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, New York: Harper Perennial 1994[\*1993]; K. Kukkonen: *Contemporary Comics Storytelling*; C. Klein/M. Martínez/L.L. Wolff: "Introduction. Narrating Reality in Comics," pp. 1-5.

107 However, there are scholars who do not regard computer games as a medium. In his contribution to this volume, Gundolf S. Freyermuth determines computer games—introducing a hypernym to Christian Metz's concept of "super-genre"—as a "meta-



Werner Wolf argues in a similar way when he states, regarding intermedia narrative, that in contrast to some media theoretical terminology, ‘medium,’ in intermediality research, does not primarily mean a merely technically-materially defined transmission channel of information (such as writing, printing, broadcasting, CD, etc.), but a dispositive of communication conventionally regarded as distinct. This is primarily characterized by a specific (e.g., symbolic or iconic) use of a semiotic system (language, image), in some cases also by the combination of several sign systems (as in the case of sound film as a composite medium of language, image and music/sounds) for the transmission of cultural contents, and only secondarily by specific technical media or communication channels.<sup>108</sup>

Wolf continues to say that in light of this explanation, we can also speak of a medium novel, or a medium of narrative literature.<sup>109</sup> He thus also links the technical, semiotic, and cultural dimensions in his concept of media. What seems important here is his emphasis on the cultural dimension when he speaks of a conventional concept of distinction, which also allows us to call comics or literature a medium, for example. In a purely technical or semiotic view, these would hardly be distinguishable as media, but in the cultural practice of production and reception, they differ considerably.

So how is the concept of transmediality and, thus, the question of transgressing media boundaries to be understood in the context of this anthology? Jenkins, who introduced the term “transmedial storytelling” in 2006, defines it as follows: “[a] transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole.”<sup>110</sup> The term “transmedial storytelling” thus refers to a singular narrative that is realized in different media. In this anthology, the term transmedial storytelling can refer to a singular story that spans several media platforms, as well as to adaptations of the same story in different media, or to certain elements of narrative design, such as

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genre” within the software medium. Nevertheless, this differentiation is not decisive for the main argument in the present chapter and the context of the anthology, because even within the framework of such terminology, the general process of crossing borders would still be present—not from medium to medium, but e.g., from the meta-genre film to the meta-genre computer game: Cf. Freyermuth, G. S.: “Towards the Ludic Cyborg,” Chapter VII.1.

108 W. Wolf: “Das Problem der Narrativität in Literatur, bildender Kunst und Musik: Ein Beitrag zu einer intermedialen Erzähltheorie,” p. 39.

109 Ibid.

110 Jenkins, Henry: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New media Collide*, New York: New York University Press 2006, p. 95f.

character archetypes<sup>111</sup> that appear in different media. In addition, this term can also include the phenomenon of ‘transmedial storyworlds,’<sup>112</sup> i.e., narrative worlds, such as in *The Lord of the Rings*, *GAME OF THRONES*<sup>113</sup>, or the Marvel superhero universe, in which a multitude of stories is told in different media such as comics, games or films, that are all set in the same narrative world.<sup>114</sup>

Sven Grampp refers to these media boundaries in his contribution to this anthology. He describes the ways in which TV series overcome the media boundary to the computer game—and develops a new systematics of serial narration from the description of this boundary crossing. Vanessa Ossa and Hanns-Christian Schmidt explain how the figure of Batman changes by crossing borders into different media—and how it is still possible to speak of a consistent figure.

## 5 CROSSING THE ONTOLOGICAL BORDER

Regardless of the medium we use, we organize much of our communication narratively. Stories are apparently the most suitable form for the human brain to communicate and process information, as many studies by both scientists and practitioners suggest.<sup>115</sup>

One might assume that there are more logical or efficient ways to organize, structure, and communicate information. Some of the narrative design principles described even seem to stand in the way of the consistent transmission of information. In the case of gapping, for example, the narrative text purposefully leaves empty spaces and often deliberately does not reveal certain information at first. A

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111 C. Vogler: *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*; J. Friedmann: *Storytelling for Media*.

112 Cf. M. L. Ryan: “Story/Worlds/Media: Tuning the Instrument of a Media-Conscious Narratology,” pp. 25-50.

113 *GAME OF THRONES* (US 2011-2019, C: David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, the TV series, is based on the series of books entitled *A Song of Fire and Ice* by George R.R. Martin. See the section “Literature” at the end of this article for a complete list of titles.

114 However, in the case of the Marvel storyworld, the comic books differ so much from the film and VOD versions that in the case of the latter storyworld, one now speaks of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in order to distinguish between the two storyworlds.

115 Cf. Gottschall, Jonathan: *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, Boston: 2013; Storr, Will: *The Science of Storytelling*, London: William Collins 2019; Breithaupt, Fritz: *Das narrative Gehirn*, Berlin: 2022.

scholarly text, on the other hand, often presents its essential findings in the form of an abstract before the actual essay. What leads to a quick overview and efficiency in scholarly practice would be a ‘spoiler’ in a narrative mode and considered as breaking the rules. Many fictional texts also fail to meet criteria such as credibility or consistency at first glance. Thus, in narratives such as Aesop’s fables, we can encounter talking and thinking animals. They can even be acting household appliances, as in the 1987 Disney film *THE BRAVE LITTLE TOASTER*,<sup>116</sup> or ghosts and supernatural beings, as in the 2020 Pixar film *SOUL*.<sup>117</sup> It is perfectly clear to the recipients that the plot could not happen in this way and that a toaster and an electric blanket would not cultivate a loving friendship. These creative choices even seem to emphasize the fictionality of the text. Nevertheless, the recipients can still find the narrative believable on an emotional and spiritual level. Indeed, even fictional stories are highly capable of shaping human worldview and behavior. Be it early, ancient societies that first find a common identity through myths or religious texts<sup>118</sup> or very contemporary examples, which show that narratives have a great influence on human behavior and social discourse—regardless of whether they are considered ‘credible’ or ‘authentic’ from a social or scholarly perspective. Thus, even a science fiction thriller like *THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW* (2004)<sup>119</sup> can trigger significant changes in ecological priorities and have an impact on the political voting behavior of its recipients.<sup>120</sup> A sitcom like *LITTLE MOSQUE ON A PRAIRIE* (2007-2012)<sup>121</sup> can contribute to the level of tolerance and empathy shown towards religious minorities—more so than proven psychological methods.<sup>122</sup>

The so-called CSI effect has also been well-researched. The crime series *CSI*, which was broadcast from 2000 to 2015<sup>123</sup> and from which three spin-offs were

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116 *BRAVE LITTLE TOASTER, THE* (USA 1987, D: Jerry Rees).

117 *SOUL* (USA 2020, D: Pete Docter).

118 Lévi-Strauss, Claude: *The Raw and the Cooked*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1964.

119 *THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW* (USA 2004, D: Roland Emmerich).

120 Leiserowitz, Anthony: “The Day After Tomorrow: Study of Climate Change Risk Perception,” in: *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 46, no. 9, 2004, pp. 22-38, doi: 10.1080/00139150409603663

121 *LITTLE MOSQUE ON THE PRAIRIE* (Canada 2007-2012, D: Various Directors).

122 Brauer, Markus/Sohad Murrar: “Entertainment-education effectively reduces prejudice,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* Vol. 21(7) (2018), Madison, pp. 1053–1077.

123 *CSI: CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATION* (USA 2000—2015, D: Various).

produced, is considered one of the most successful television productions in the world. For the first time, it brought the criminal investigation work of male and female scientists into focus. Another special feature was the fact that the two forensic scientists on the team, Catherine Willows and Sara Sidle, were female characters. This was unusual in the television landscape and did not correspond to the realities of the profession at the time, where these positions were predominantly held by men. Since the series aired, the forensic sciences in the USA have seen an unusually high increase in female applicants—an effect that is attributed to the portrayal of corresponding role models in the successful series.<sup>124</sup> At the same time, the portrayal of forensic investigation methods in CSI has also produced results that are seen as negative. For example, in court proceedings in the USA today, it is apparently more difficult to convey to jurors as well as crime victims and their relatives that forensic analyses and expert opinions can require days or even months, instead of being available within a few hours or days, as depicted in the series.<sup>125</sup>

While it is understandable that such effects of narratives are not always controllable, the measurement and proof of corresponding effects are also not always unproblematic. But it is evident that the representation of new role models or the breaking of gender or racial stereotypes and, thus, the promotion of socio-political discourses and social change can be an important field of storytelling. This also becomes clear when one considers certain genre designations of narratives, which indicate that they have been conceived to influence the behavior of the recipient: Entertainment Education in the field of TV series and Serious Games in the field of game design. These narratives work by crossing the ontological boundary between the storyworld and the world of the recipient. This is one of the other border crossings addressed in this anthology. Dirk Hoyer describes which kinds of stories are present and which are needed to envision a different and better future for society and humankind. J. Martin examines the conditions under which personal gaming experience has an impact on social transformations, as is the case with other narrative media such as books or films. Jörg Friedrich presents, from the practical perspective of a game designer, how his game THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES<sup>126</sup> can be used to create awareness of the National Socialist era in

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124 Marrinan, Corinne: “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation—Science and Gender in a Fictional Crime Series Format,” in: *STEM and Equal Opportunities in TV Drama Formats*, Bonn/Berlin: Berlin University Press 2011, pp. 44-49.

125 Podlas, Kimberlianne: “The CSI Effect,” in: *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.40>, accessed 24.04.23.

126 THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES (DE 2020, O: Paintbucket Games).

Germany and the dangers that emanate from totalitarian, authoritarian thinking. Ezinne Ezepeue shows how the patriarchal structures of the colonizers were transitioned in Africa in the post-colonial period in order to oppress women. This is also evident in the representation of women in African film narratives of the time. But Ezepeue also shows how this image of women can be changed through new forms of female representation in order to promote social progress. With a similar objective, Zimbabwean animation artist and game designer Eugene Mapondera shows, from a practical perspective, how indigenous southern African mythology and folklore can be represented and preserved in modern media to reverse the destructive effects of colonization on African culture. Alexander Preisinger and Andreas Endl describe how the representation and simulation of climate and extreme weather phenomena in games can make the real phenomenon of climate change tangible for recipients.

Even more consistent is the transgression of boundaries that Robin Curtis describes—in immersive narrative texts, the boundary between recipient and narrative is not only transgressed but also dissolved, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between (media-) technology and the human body while living in a time where the borders between physical space, material space, and the space of information became blurred. Gundolf S. Freyermuth, in his media-historical text, hence points to a further dissolution of boundaries—that between author and artificial intelligence, resulting in a completely new concept of authorship.

So, follow us as cartographers of narrative as we measure, chart, and transgress the boundaries of our physical and narrated world.

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## **Disciplinary Boundaries**





# Designing The Mystery

## Elision and Exegesis in Games

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CLARA FERNÁNDEZ-VARA

### Abstract

Through the study of mystery and detective stories across media, this article aims at finding general principles to understand the nature of narrative in games. The detective genre is playful by nature, by teasing the audience to figure out the solution before getting to the end. In order to construct a mystery, these stories use artful gaps, which involve the reader/audience/players in order to decode them. Therefore, the use of informational gaps becomes essential to the practice of narrative design in games. Elision, exegesis, and metonymy are narrative devices that are basic both in mystery construction as well as in game design narrative. From these devices derives the concept of indexical storytelling, the use of indices to tell stories through the environment, which invites players to play exegetically, that is, interpreting the environment in order to understand the events that have happened in the space of the game.

The relationship between games and narrative has been explored and contested since the beginning of the field of game studies. It is often tackled from a top-down approach, using taxonomies or abstract concepts being developed and then applied to the wide corpus of games, mostly in their digital format. The goal of this article is to use a specific case study to make generalizations that allow us to understand the nature of narrative in games, and to carry out this exploration using a comparative media approach—we will discuss literature, film, and television alongside digital games. By focusing on mysteries in both fiction and digital games, we can break down how stories can be playful and games can also be a form of narrative. In particular, this article studies how informational gaps—

elisions and metonymy—encourage *exegetic play*, i.e., encouraging the reader/player to interpret information as a playful activity. My approach is that of a theorist-practitioner, so my insights derive both from the study and analysis of texts and my own practice as a game designer.

The core premise of this article is to realize that mystery stories are playful—they tease the reader to figure out the solution to a crime before they get to the end of the story.<sup>1</sup> A mystery is a puzzle in story form—the literary and filmic genre of the *whodunit* has also been referred to as the *clue-puzzle* genre.<sup>2</sup> In a mystery story, the detective has to put together the information that can be gathered through evidence, cross-questioning, and the detective’s own experience, in order to solve the case. Rather than being a systemic challenge, detective stories pose an *epistemic* challenge—the mystery challenges the knowledge and understanding of our players.

The process of devising a mystery for an audience is often conceived as needing artful plotting, coming up with a series of intricate events which come together at the end when the solution is revealed. After examining a variety of texts, ranging from novels, films, television, and games, I argue that mysteries are really sets of gaps that have been artfully devised in order to play with the reader/audience/player. Leaving gaps invites the reader of the mystery, as well as the game player, to think of ways to fill them, thus activating the participatory qualities of the digital medium including videogames.<sup>3</sup> *Elision* can therefore be a powerful tool in narrative game design by omitting information so the player can find it or infer it. By extension, *exegesis* (i.e., interpretation of a text) can be another key game design tool by requiring players to interpret and explain a story that is presented in fragments, ambiguously, or from diverging points of view.

This article thus focuses on how the art of leaving gaps is an essential aspect of game design practice, particularly in relation to storytelling, and how interpretation and making sense of the space, objects, situations, and actions are also a type of gameplay

In order to understand the role of elision and exegesis as part of designing and playing a game, I would like to address first a persistent myth in understanding narrative, which is the supposed dichotomy between *passive* and *interactive*

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- 1 Suits, Bernard: “The Detective Story: A Case Study of Games in Literature,” in: *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 12, no. 2 (1985); pp. 200–219.
  - 2 Knight, Stephen Thomas: *Crime Fiction since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity*, Basingstoke [England]/New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010.
  - 3 Murray, Janet H: *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2001.

media. This presumed division of media assumes that when we are reading a novel or watching a movie, we understand everything intuitively because we are not making any effort, we just absorb the information. Traditional media like novels, films, and television are considered to lack the participatory properties that Murray describes as defining digital media.

A quick look at the foundations of semiotics disproves this myth—part of the process of communication involves the receiver decoding the message, and therefore being familiar with the codes used to compose it.<sup>4</sup> Solving a cipher requires figuring out the code used to obfuscate the message, for example. But we do not need intricate puzzles to show how we are constantly decoding the messages in the world around us—those who have learned a second language know that decoding a text that is not written in one’s mother tongue can be challenging; the challenge is even more pronounced when one is listening to someone speak a language that one does not speak every day. Connecting signifiers with their signified requires an additional effort when we are not decoding our first language. Even if it is not a physical effort, it is a type of mental exertion—anyone who has been in a country where they do not speak one’s first language for an extended period of time probably knows how spending a whole day listening and speaking a second language can be very tiring to one’s brain

Reading can also require a mental effort even if we read in our first language or in a language in which we are fluent, as students of contemporary literature may be familiar with—the works of James Joyce, for example, can be very challenging both in terms of understanding the language, and how the events are interconnected.

In the realm of narrative comprehension, there are stories whose quality is associated with how they challenge the audience to understand them. David Lynch’s *oeuvre* consists of works that often take place in unstable worlds, ruled by doubles, dreams, and nightmares, as exemplified by the TV show *TWIN PEAKS* (1990-1991) or the film *LOST HIGHWAY* (1997).<sup>5</sup> Lynch thrives in challenging the audience to understand his stories, and make them come to terms with the fact that they may

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4 Fiske, John: *Introduction to Communication Studies*, Florence, U.S.A: Taylor & Francis Group 2010; pp. 62-79.

5 Incidentally, these two works have also been inspirations for games—*TWIN PEAKS* (USA 1990-1991, D: David Lynch) has been the referent for games such as *DEADLY PREMONITION* (USA 2010, O: Access Games) and *NELSON TETHERS PUZZLE AGENT* (USA 2010, O: Telltale), whereas the story and imagery of *SILENT HILL 2* (USA 2001, O: Team Silent/Konami of America) echo Lynch’s *LOST HIGHWAY* (USA 1997, D: David Lynch).

not understand everything they see; he famously refuses to explain his works in interviews. His stories are fascinating, strange, and compelling, but the number of gaps left as well as the dream-like qualities of some characters and situations can be confusing—and that is the point.

There are media that precisely thrive in leaving gaps for the audience to fill. Comic book artist Scott McCloud explains that comic book readers understand that the actions happening from panel to panel are events that are connected, rather than separate images and ideas—readers provide closure to the images and panels.<sup>6</sup> McCloud also argues that when representing characters, the more abstract a representation of a character is, the more it invites the reader to amplify its meaning, to interpret it, and flesh out an abstract representation through their own reflection.<sup>7</sup> The more detail a visual representation of a character has, the less room the viewer has to interpret how they look, whereas more cartoonish, stylized, or abstract representations of characters have readers imagining those details themselves; having to fill these gaps thus helps readers identify and connect with the characters. It is no surprise that McCloud's book has been popular amongst game designers for years, precisely because it proposes a folk theory of how the reader is involved in interpreting a text. McCloud's theory also calls attention to how encouraging exegesis of a text, and leaving room to the reader, can also be an inextricable part of its creation.

Another example of a medium that is founded on the creation of gaps for the audience is theatre. The theatrical stage may be empty, while it is the actions of the actors, the dialogue, and some props that can help the audience imagine the locations where the action takes place. Thus, it is the actions of the actors, as well as the audience watching, that can transform any space into a theatrical stage.<sup>8</sup> Theatre is a metonymical medium, where the stage only presents one part of the world and its events, and the audience has to imagine the rest.

Metonymy is also essential in digital media, which is particularly obvious in early digital works. Most video games from the 1980s were text-only or had very pixelated graphics. Whereas text games required players to read and visualize the spaces described in text, similarly to a short story or a novel, the heavily pixelated graphics and limited color palette had players imagining that the colored blocks on the screen were an adventurous miner, a mining mole, or a flying bat. The

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6 McCloud, Scott: *Understanding Comics*, Harper Collins 1994; here pp. 60-74.

7 Ibid., pp. 28-53.

8 See for example how Peter Brook discusses the emptiness of the stage as a key creative element in theatre to involve the audience: Brook, Peter: *The Empty Space*, New York: Atheneum 1984.

contemporary worship of hyperrealism and visual fidelity in computer graphics often misses that the viewer still has to make sense of the images in front of them, no matter how high the screen resolution is—there are always gaps to fill.

Elision, exegesis, and metonymy are processes that involve the audience into the text in a variety of media, thus undermining the idea that many of these are ‘passive’. The capability to involve the audience is not exclusive to games, and neither is the property of being playful. Playful stories are also pervading across media, creating a fertile space in which games and narrative coexist and interlace. Many TV shows thrive in playing with their audience, teasing them to figure out what is going on and what will happen next—see for example shows from the last few years such as MR. ROBOT (2015-2019), LEGION (2017-2019), or WESTWORLD (2016-present), which play with different points of view and timelines in order to intrigue the audience and keep them watching.<sup>9</sup> Online forums and wikis have become spaces for fans to share their interpretations and try to anticipate where the events will lead, something pioneered by TWIN PEAKS back in the 90s, which presented a deliberately baffling world that early online communities were trying to decode.<sup>10</sup> All these examples involve the audience, who tries to make sense of what is going on in the show, into the story—part of what keeps audiences engaged is the conversations sparked by the stories, sharing their interpretations, and trying to solve the mysteries of the story with others before the solution is revealed in a later episode.

These shows also demonstrate how part of the pleasure of stories lies precisely in that they do not have to explain everything that happens because the reader/audience/player has a natural tendency to fill in the gaps mentally. Marcel Danesi points out that at times, gaps and mysteries are irresistible, a compulsion that he calls “the puzzle instinct” and which drives us to resolve the tension created by an obvious lack of information.<sup>11</sup> Puzzles and mysteries, according to Danesi, “generate a feeling of suspense that calls out for relief.”<sup>12</sup> Game designers should therefore trust that their players are willing to fill those gaps as part of gameplay,

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9 MR. ROBOT (USA 2015-2019, D: Sam Esmail); LEGION (USA 2017-2019, D: Noah Hawley); WESTWORLD (USA 2016-present, D: Various).

10 Jenkins, Henry: “Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?: Alt.Tv.Twinpeaks, the Trickster Author, and Viewer Mastery,” in: Lavery, David (eds.): *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*, Contemporary Film and Television Series, Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1995, pp. 51-69.

11 Danesi, Marcel: *The Puzzle Instinct*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2002; pp. 35-36.

12 Ibid., p. 2.

similarly to how theatre audiences understand that a throne on a stage indicates that we are in a palace court, or how readers of Agatha Christie's novels try to solve the mystery in their head while they are reading. Mysteries are a prompt, an attractor, something that we cannot resist and need to resolve.

Part of the job of a game designer is therefore to understand their players and the different ways in which they are driven to interpret the story of the game and bring closure, at times even coming up with stories that the creators of the game had not anticipated. In the same way that theatre takes place the moment someone watches someone else act, as Peter Brook argued, games are complete the moment players participate in the game, not only as interactors but also as interpreters of the game that they are playing.<sup>13</sup>

Mysteries and puzzles also thrive in ambiguity—according to Helene Hovanec, the allure of puzzles is their ambiguous nature, because they conceal the answer at the same time that they demand it, spurring the player to measure their wits against whoever created the puzzle.<sup>14</sup> This ambiguity derives from the interdependence between the person who creates the mystery and the person who has to solve it. Bernard Suits explains that a detective story and its mystery are a game both for its author and the person trying to solve it—rather than being at odds, the author challenges the reader to find the solution, but the author does not “win” if the reader does not solve the mystery.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, a puzzle is not necessarily a tug-of-war—if the player is stumped by a puzzle, it may be a failure on the part of the designer if the design was not fair, i.e. the player was not provided with enough information and opportunity to solve the puzzle. Even when the solution is revealed to the player, the logic of the puzzle should make sense to them, otherwise, the player will feel cheated. That moment of revelation is what Danesi calls the “moment of insight”, where the puzzle solver makes the connection between the pieces of information that are part of the puzzle, and the ambiguity is resolved.<sup>16</sup> The same happens with mystery stories—in order for the story to remain playful,

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13 Fernández-Vara, Clara: “Play’s the Thing: A Framework to Study Videogames as Performance,” in: *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*: International Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) Conference. Brunel University, West London, 2009, <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/plays-the-thing-a-framework-to-study-videogames-as-performance/>

14 Hovanec, Helene. *The Puzzler’s Paradise—From the Garden of Eden to the Computer Age*, Paddington Press Ltd. 1978; here p. 10.

15 B. Suits: “The Detective Story: A Case Study of Games in Literature,” pp. 201–204.

16 M. Danesi: *The Puzzle Instinct*, pp. 27–35.

the reader/player must feel they have all the information necessary to come up with the solution on their own before reading the end, otherwise, they feel cheated.

This all leads to one of the key ideas in this article—one of the issues in discussing stories in games is that they are referred to in terms of *telling*, as if the process of storytelling was univocal and where the content is communicated one-way. As we have already seen in the examples from other media, storytelling does not only consist of an author connecting a series of events that are then transmitted and automatically understood by the audience. I prefer to invoke the term *story-building* in the context of games because it refers to both the craft of creating the pieces of the story on the part of the creator and the process of reconstruction that players have to carry out. As Peter Turchi discusses, creating a narrative starts by creating a world where those events will take place, then giving the cues to the reader/audience/players and trust that they can interpret the information the author is crafting.<sup>17</sup>

In the case of a mystery, the story for the audience/reader/player is like assembling pre-cut furniture, but without having all the pieces or the instruction manual. A mystery is a type of puzzle that the reader/audience/player puts together, and that they get better at reconstructing as they become familiar with similar stories. Instead of conceiving stories as a structure we fill out, such as the over-invoked three-act structure, in the context of game design and analysis, we should be thinking of stories and their components, how they may interconnect, and then how they are passed on to the audience/readers/players, who will assemble the story according to their own understanding.

I am not going to write about how to craft a mystery story, for which there is plenty of literature already.<sup>18</sup> In spite of what some of some fiction writing manuals may imply, it is an almost impossible task to come up with unmovable principles to design mysteries. Most of the guidelines out there tell you what *not* to do because the key to a compelling mystery is surprising the audience. For example, if we look at Ronald Knox's "Ten Commandments for Detective Novelists" from 1928, most of these commandments refer to things a mystery writer should avoid because it is either trite or because it conceals information in a way that may be

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17 Turchi, Peter: *A Muse and a Maze: Writing as Puzzle, Mystery, and Magic*, Trinity University Press 2014.

18 Turchi's work is a good referent to understand the nature of plotting a mystery story. Mystery writers have also written their own writing manuals, such as Grafton, Sue, (ed.): *Writing Mysteries*, Penguin 2002 and Frey, James N.: *How to Write a Damn Good Mystery: A Practical Step-by-Step Guide from Inspiration to Finished Manuscript*, St. Martin's Press 2007.

unfair to the reader.<sup>19</sup> Knox's commandments dictate, for example, having the murderer be someone who has been introduced early in the story, and whose behavior and thoughts could be followed by the reader, thus appealing to having fair access to the information; some of the rest of the commandments appeal to the reader being given a chance to figure out the mystery on their own. Another command advises avoiding preternatural agents or not having more than one secret room or passage per story. These were all elements that had already been used in the time Knox wrote his commandments, therefore repeating them would mean that the reader could predict what the solution was because they had read another story, rather than by analyzing the information provided. Using predictable elements also robs the reader of the delight of being surprised when the solution is revealed. Using a better-known example, having the butler be the murderer is trite and predictable, so it is not much of a mystery and there is no excitement in the revelation. Of course, some of the most interesting mysteries come from presumably breaking these rules—the murderers in some of Agatha Christie's most famous novels have been the narrator, the whole cast of suspects, or one of the supposedly dead victims.

While I cannot come up with a series of commandments like Reverend Knox, game design can help me devise some guidelines on what makes a compelling mystery and how to create artful gaps, even if it is at an abstract level. The first set of guidelines comes from basic puzzle design, specifically narrative puzzle design, like the ones that we find in adventure games.<sup>20</sup> Once a designer knows what the mystery, they are posing to the player is, and its solution, they should step back and ask themselves what the player needs to know in order to solve it. For example, a puzzle may require reading the numbers in an electronic resistor, which are color-coded—this is specialized knowledge that only people familiar with electrical circuit design may know. If the designer does not expect their players to be electrical engineers or appliance repair persons, the key that connects the colors to a number should be information that the game has to provide to the player. The gap should not be the information itself, but rather the connection between the information and the solution to the puzzle.

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19 Dove, George N.: "The Rules of the Game," in: *Studies in Popular Culture* 4 (1981): 67–72, p. 69.

20 For a more detailed breakdown of the process of narrative puzzle design, see Fernández-Vara, Clara, and Scot Osterweil: "The Key to Adventure Game Design: Insight and Sense-Making," *MITWebDomain*, October 2010. <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/100238>



Another key aspect in crafting mystery stories is how part of the mystery may be embedded in the space. Spatial storytelling is a particularly apt form of telling stories in digital media—while computers are not yet great at creating believable artificial characters that players can interact with naturally, they can create spaces and objects that players can explore and manipulate. Environmental storytelling is the use of spaces to tell stories, and it is a rather popular term in game development. Many games create locations to invite the player to explore them and figure out what happened within them—Jenkins, for example, talks about *evocative spaces*, which recreate spaces that the player may be familiar with, but which they can now inhabit and explore while they recall stories that they have read or seen in other media.<sup>21</sup>

One clear example of games that thrive on environmental storytelling is the walking simulator genre, where the player traverses the space while gathering information that allows them to learn the stories of the people who lived in those spaces. *DEAR ESTHER* (2010) and *WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH* (2017) both make excellent use of guiding the player through their landscapes and buildings, telling the stories of the spaces where the story takes place through the items left behind, as well as through the recorded voices of the past.<sup>22</sup>

From environmental storytelling, the concept I propose focuses on a specific strategy that allows players to interpret a narrative space, which I call *indexical storytelling*.<sup>23</sup> Indexical storytelling is the practice of using indexes to construct a story. *Index* in this context is used in the Peircean sense—an index is a type of sign where the sign itself (the signifier) has a physical relationship with what it signifies (the signified).<sup>24</sup> For example, a signpost is oriented towards the place it signifies, while smoke in a forest signifies that there is a fire even if we cannot see the flames. Indexes allow us to tell stories visually and invite the player to close the gap. A set of events that takes place in a space will leave traces that we can interpret to figure out what has happened in that space—this is evident in the case

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21 Jenkins, Henry: “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” in: Wardrip-Fruin, Noah/Harrigan, Pat (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2004, pp. 118–130.

22 *DEAR ESTHER* (UK 2012, O: The Chinese Room); *WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH* (USA 2017, O: Giant Sparrow/Annapurna Interactive).

23 Fernández-Vara, Clara: “Game Spaces Speak Volumes: Indexical Storytelling,” in: *Proceedings of Think Design Play: Digital Games Research Association Conference 2011*, Utrecht, 2011.

24 Peirce, Charles: *Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vol. 2, Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press 1998; pp. 8-9.

of crime scenes. The events of the crime have left traces in the space, which the player has to interpret as clues. The game *L.A. NOIRE* (2011)<sup>25</sup> for example, starts each mission by having the detective visit the crime scene and gather evidence from it, which usually consists of indexes such as murder weapons, shell casings, or footprints. Interestingly, the visual indexes are complemented with text—even high-definition graphics have limitations to communicate certain pieces of information, such as texture, temperature, smell, or taste, as well as calling attention to very small details. Thus, indexes are not exclusively visual—as mentioned before, even high-resolution graphics can lead to gaps. In the case of *L.A. NOIRE*, as well as many other detective games, the indexes can only be interpreted one way in order to solve the case. The game does not allow the player to come up with alternate solutions and possibilities, but rather they work like a puzzle with one correct answer.

Players do not need to be literal detectives to read the spaces in interesting ways, however—environments can also reward players by showing them a space that has been lived in, and they can try to figure out what previous inhabitants have done. The goal is not to find a solution but learn the story by examining the spaces. This is obvious in the case of *PORTAL* (2007),<sup>26</sup> where we can see the traces left in the test facilities of Aperture Science by previous experimental subjects, who tried to find every nook and cranny to escape the test that they were an involuntary part of.

Another example of how detective-like work can be part of gameplay without necessarily asking the player to provide a ‘correct’ interpretation of the space is walking simulators, which have already been mentioned. These games thrive on ambiguity because they invite the player to explore, but there is no score or assessment on whether they are decoding the events that happened in the space in the right way. *DEAR ESTHER* in particular goes all the way in creating that ambiguity, because each walkthrough of the game is different. The player explores an island where they can see shadows and hear the memories of a character who does not seem to be there—it is an island of ghosts. The locations where some of the shadows appear, where voice recordings and music cues are triggered, is determined in each playthrough at random. This makes the text unstable and therefore more dependent on the player’s interpretation.

Another of The Chinese Room’s games, *EVERYBODY’S GONE TO THE RAPTURE* (2015), also introduces the idea of spiritual traces, where the spirits of people have

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25 L.A. NOIRE (USA 2011, O: Team Bondi/Rockstar Games).

26 PORTAL (USA 2007, O: Valve).

left an imprint on the space.<sup>27</sup> In *RAPTURE*, the apocalypse has happened, and the events that led to it are a mystery—it is up to the player to figure out what happened by looking for the sparkling souls of the inhabitants that still float around a quaint English village.

The ghostly imprints have also been used beyond the walking simulator genre—see, for example, how in *DEMON'S SOULS* (2009) the ghosts of other players show us the last few seconds of their actions before they died.<sup>28</sup> The glimpses of these ghosts' function both as a clue and as a warning of what dangers may lie ahead.

*DEMON'S SOULS* also demonstrates that allowing players to leave traces in the world for other players to interpret can open up a lot of interesting storytelling possibilities—it is also the players who can build the stories for each other. Players can leave messages for other players embedded in the space. Each message is a mystery—they come from preset words and phrases, rather than letting players write their own, so the messages tend to be rather laconic. But players cannot be sure whether a message is meant to help them or hurt them—a dilemma arises, which is itself a mystery. Letting players create their own mysteries can thus open the gates to new storytelling possibilities in games.

The last point I would like to make is a warning—the way that I have been talking about mysteries is somewhat high-level, and I have not gone into specific mystery design techniques because I wanted to get across how mysteries are an essential way of understanding game narratives, and how they can create compelling gaps for players to fill. Detective stories and games have been an important referent to understand how elision, exegesis, and metonymy can be used as part of storytelling, but they are only the starting point to access ways to design games that encourage exegetic play.

I must also point out the difficulties of trying to instrumentalize mysteries, that is, evaluating whether a player solves the mysteries right or wrong, whether the player wins or loses. The moment when the player has to solve the case to 'win' the game, the design closes the door to a world of expressive possibilities. *L.A. NOIRE* has great ideas and intentions, but it can also be a frustrating game on many levels, many of them having to do with how awkward the system is, which evaluates whether you have solved the case or not—when the player does not get the solution right, they are told they have failed the mission and cannot tell what they

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27 *EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE* (USA 2015, O: The Chinese Room/Sony Computer Entertainment America).

28 *DEMON'S SOULS* (Japan 2009, O: From Software/Sony Computer Entertainment Japan).

missed and get no insight, while the game was telegraphing that it had to be played like a puzzle. Conversely, a game like *LAMPLIGHT CITY* (2018)<sup>29</sup> is designed precisely to let players fail to solve a case without telling them whether they got it wrong or not, so they can continue playing with the sense that they are understanding the story without feeling penalized.

There is a lot of room for games that encourage exegesis without sanctioning or rewarding a specific interpretation—*HER STORY* (2015)<sup>30</sup> is another example of a murder mystery where it is up to the player to figure out the solution to the case, but the game has no system to indicate whether the player's interpretation is right or wrong. And that is okay. Perhaps games should not always have trophies and medals for players; rather, the players should get used to uncertainty.

Instead of making games operate like skinner boxes that constantly reward and reinforce specific values, players should seek the gaps that they can fill, and seek the challenge in interpretation. Game design should seek to shake players and their pre-conceived ideas, making them used to the idea that winning may not always be possible, and that uncertainty is also an essential part of the game.

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29 LAMPLIGHT CITY (Germany 2018, O: Grundislaw Games/Application Systems).

30 HER STORY (USA 2015, O: Sam Barlow).

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# I Am Your Monster No Longer

## Reflections on the Humanization of a Heroic Figure and the Role of Semantic Items in GOD OF WAR IV

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FLORIAN NIESER

### Abstract

The latest installment in the GOD OF WAR series seems to reinvent the figure of Kratos, the archaic, heroic Spartan who, driven by unbridled vengeance, excels at excessive violence. The monster is apparently replaced in the new GOD OF WAR by the figure of the self-controlled, reflective father who does not want to repeat the mistakes of his past for the sake of his son. In contrast, this paper explores the question of the extent to which the heroic figure can actually modify its role, or whether it is not rather designed from the outset to be more complex than the “humanization” of the hero established in GOD OF WAR IV suggests.

### INTRODUCTION

The latest installment of the GOD OF WAR series from Santa Monica Studios—the eighth by now, taking into account all gaming platforms—significantly lacks a consecutive numbering system or title suffix.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the 2018 title GOD OF WAR (GOW IV), which was used for the second time for Playstation 4 after the first game on Playstation 2, already nominally points to an intended new beginning of

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1 The God of War series presently encompasses seven titles, from: GOD OF WAR (USA 2005, Santa Monica Studios), to: GOD OF WAR (USA 2018, Santa Monica Studios). See “Gameography” for a full list.

the game series. This can be seen above all in the change of the mythological setting, the new (companion) character of the protagonist Kratos—his son Atreus—and in the new portrayal of Kratos, who was previously perceived as a “vengeful barbarian,” which was often praised by game journalists.<sup>2</sup>

The Kratos of the previous game titles is already a commander of the Spartans at a young age and a favorite of the Greek god of war Ares. He slashes his way equally ruthlessly through opposing armies and innocent townspeople under the protection of Athena, and eventually, through being deceived by the god of war, ends up killing his own family in a battle frenzy. Driven by revenge, Kratos first kills Ares, takes his place, and through further warfare comes into conflict with the gods of Olympus—first and foremost his father Zeus. In the end, he kills all the gods of Olympus in a second Titanomachy and brings about the downfall of Greece.

Different voices that mingle with the prevailing praise of a reinvention of the Spartan, draw attention to the fact that the portrayal of the Kratos figure is not reduced to the excessively violent depiction of a one-dimensional, blind-minded and purely egoistic conqueror of Olympus. The discussion that was sparked by the latest spin-off of the GOW series around the (anti-)hero Kratos is rather aligned in its disagreement with the extremes of its protagonist. In addition to more circumspect observations that the revenge-filled Spartan in GOW IV<sup>3</sup> now gains depth of character in his role as a father and is much more than an “angry lump of muscle.”<sup>4</sup> there are clearly negative judgments about the character’s lack of coherence:

“The story’s biggest problem is that it attempts something that can’t really be done. It tries to rehabilitate that which cannot be rehabilitated. This Kratos is the same Kratos who was pure animal lust for a half-dozen games, driven solely to kill or sleep with every living creature he came across.”<sup>5</sup>

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2 Eadicicco, Lisa: “The New ‘God of War’ Game Is Different, Bold and Demands Your Attention,” in: *Time*, 18.04.2018, <http://time.com/5245517/god-of-war-review/>

3 GOD OF WAR IV (USA 2018, Santa Monica Studios).

4 MacDonald, Keza: “God of War’s Kratos was an angry lump of muscle. I made him a struggling father,” in: *The Guardian*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/apr/26/god-of-war-sony-kratos-father-son-cory-barlog>

5 Martin, Garrett: “God of War Doesn’t Entirely Solve the Kratos Problem,” in: *Paste Magazine*, April 23, 2018, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2018/04/god-of-war-doesnt-entirely-solve-the-kratos-proble.html>



But there are also objections to such a reduction of the figure:

“Whether you connected to the GOD OF WAR games or not, there is no denying that Kratos has always had an emotional pull with the audience, even if they never realized it.”<sup>6</sup>

Many other appraisals of the new part of the GoW series move between these two extremes. It should also be noted that there is disagreement about which conceptual lines<sup>7</sup> can and may be attributed to the character Kratos as constant character traits. There seems to be an agreement, however, that with the new mode of character representation in GOW IV, the perception of the character also changes. This is reason enough to once again raise the issue of portrayal of the character and how it might be evaluated.

## KRATOS—A HEROIC FIGURE?

Figures that are not clearly characterizable as heroic, but show clear features of a hero when they perform exorbitant<sup>8</sup> and morally questionable deeds<sup>9</sup> inspired by revenge, are also a prominent object of research in medieval literary studies, which will be the starting point and analytical focus of this paper. Hero types such as those described below have been known since antiquity and are also included through pictorial portrayal in various media. This can also be found in GOW IV,

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6 Kriska, Mark: “God of War: You Were Wrong About Kratos,” in: *Mammothgamers*, 04.05.2018, <http://mammothgamers.com/2018/05/god-of-war-wrong-about-kratos/>

7 Where not explicitly mentioned otherwise, with reference to Kratos this is understood as the principle of a narrative figure defined by Jürgen Sorg, whose conception refers to models from the literary tradition. Cf. Schröter, Felix: “Don’t show it, play it. Filmische und nicht-filmische Figurenkonzeption im Computerspiel.,” in: *Rabbit Eye – Zeitschrift für Filmforschung*, no. 5, 2013, pp. 22-39.

8 Cf. fundamentally von See, Klaus: “Was ist Heldendichtung?,” in: Klaus von See (ed.), *Europäische Heldendichtung. Wege der Forschung* 500, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1978, pp. 1-38, as well himself: von See, Klaus: “Held und Kollektiv,” in: *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, vol. 122, 1993, pp. 1-35, cited from Lienert, Elisabeth: “Aspekte der Figurenkonstitution in mittelhochdeutscher Heldene-  
pik,” in: *PBB* 138/1, 2016, pp. 51-75, here p. 68.

9 Cf. Lienert, Elisabeth: *Mittelhochdeutsche Heldenepik. Eine Einführung. Grundlagen der Germanistik* 5, Berlin, Erich Schmidt 2015, p. 9.

where the image of Kratos is depicted on an amphora.<sup>10</sup> Written testimonies from middle age heroic epic are, in turn, included in the analysis. This approach is, of course, only one of many possible modes of portrayal and is not to be seen as a form of valuation against ancient written testimonies and hero types. With regard to the digital medium, the inclusion of literary as well as pictorial patterns lends itself, since it is above all a medium of showing and representing<sup>11</sup> and thus portrays a cross-media connection of text and image.

Middle High German heroic epic contains a plethora of multilayered heroic and anti-heroic figures—one might think here, for example, of Hagen and Kriemhild of the *Nibelungenlied*, or of the portrayal of Dietrich of the *aventurehafte Dietrichepik*, who is hesitating and simultaneously driven by retaliatory thoughts.<sup>12</sup> Different aspects of the characters do not have to be coherently arranged, but can, similar to what Fuchs-Jolie has pointed out for Wolfram's texts, be an essential stylistic element that juxtaposes “ambiguities of signifiers” and aims at making different things visible at the same time.<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Lienert summarizes the observations on medieval heroic figures in this one sentence: For (Middle High German) heroic epic, contradictions and gaps in attributions, especially to the figures, are known to be particularly characteristic.<sup>14</sup> Figures with the

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10 Kratos finds an amphora in the course of the game upon which he himself is depicted as a Heros with bloody blades. Obviously, this depiction captures the Heros, who in *GOW IV* seems to take a back seat to a ‘humanized’ version of the hero. This reading of the amphora is supported by the fact that it is used for a kind of initiation rite by Atreus. He drinks a sip of wine from the amphora with his father Kratos, contrasting the image on the amphora—the birth of the Ghost of Sparta, who killed his family in the furor depicted—with a scene in which the genealogical relationship is staged as intact and strengthened. The motif of the pictorial representation of heroes on ancient carrier media thus seems to be used retrospectively in a meta-reflexive way on the series of games and thus also finds its way into this contribution.

11 Cf. On a fundamental level: Fahlenbrach, Kathrin: *Medien, Geschichte und Wahrnehmung. Eine Einführung in die Mediengeschichte*, Wiesbaden: Springer 2018, p. 121-178.

12 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-56; pp. 117-141.

13 Fuchs-Jolie, Stephan: “Metonymie und Metapher bei Wolfram,” in: Andersen, Elizabeth et al. (eds.), *Literarischer Stil. Mittelalterliche Dichtung zwischen Konvention und Innovation 22*, Anglo-German Colloquium Düsseldorf, Berlin: De Gruyter 2015, pp. 413-425.

14 Lienert, Elizabeth: “Aspekte der Figurenkonstitution in mittelhochdeutscher Heldene-  
pik,” in: *PBB* 138/1, 2016, pp. 51-75, here p. 52.

furor of a Kratos are no strangers to Middle High German and even to Old French heroic poetry (*chansons-de-geste*). A prominent example from the *chansons* would be Rainouart from the *Bataille d'Aliscans*,<sup>15</sup> who, out of an uncontrollable will to convert, slays almost his entire kin along with thousands of his former compatriots with a fir tree turned into a weapon. In the Middle High German adaptation of this text, in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Willehalm*, the motif of revenge for the death of a young relative of the protagonist Willehalm is given as justification for the beheading of a defenseless enemy pleading for help.<sup>16</sup>

Such exaggerated and questionable acts of violence do not remain an exclusive feature of medieval heroic figures, but at first glance also seem to be the central characteristics of the Kratos figure, who is responsible for the killing of his own family through treachery and fighting furor. The drive for excessive retribution seems to be a characteristic of heroic as well as 'modern' heroes; valid moral boundaries and social conventions, which recipients of Middle High German literature as well as players of digital games bring into the consumed medium as prior knowledge and a foil for comparison, are exceeded. At least one aspect from a literary-scientific-medievalist perspective, however, raises doubt that Kratos, on the basis of the narration unfolded in the entire game series, can be entirely put on par with the notion of a blind hero: the remarkable observation of a 'humanization' of the hero Kratos in *GOW IV*.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, it will first be determined whether this is an achievement of the current part of the *GOW* series or whether such a tendency has been part of the character conception from the very beginning. It will be necessary to pursue the question of how it can be possible at all to speak of a 'humanization' and thus also of 'empathy' with a heroic hero figure like Kratos. For this purpose, the aspects of the figure's biography that contribute to the so-called inconsistencies in the portrayal of the figure will first be traced. Then, the fundamental question of whether it is a matter of a completely new conception in *GOW IV*, i.e., whether the 'humanization' of one and the same heroic figure only becomes clearly

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15 Holtus, Günter: "La versione franco-italiana della 'Bataille d'Aliscans,' Codex Marcianus fr. VIII [=252]," in: Holtus, Günter (ed.): *Beihefte zur ZfrPh* 205, Tübingen 1985.

16 Cf. for details: Nieser, Florian: *Die Lesbarkeit von Helden. Uneindeutige Zeichen in der 'Bataille d'Aliscans' und dem 'Willehalm' Wolframs von Eschenbach*, Stuttgart: Metzler 2018, pp. 45-65.

17 Gamwell, Chase: "Humanizing Kratos," in: *Imperium News*, 08.06.2018, <https://imperium.news/humanizing-kratos/>

apparent with the digital medium or is already found in pictorial representations of ancient heroic figures and Middle High German Literature will be pursued.

## **KRATOS' CHARACTER BIOGRAPHY: BETRAYAL-LOSS-GUILT-REVENGE-HOPE**

Even the Spartan's childhood, which is part of the narration in *GHOST OF SPARTA*,<sup>18</sup> hints at genealogical structures behind the ostensibly revenge-driven character, which could be a not to be underestimated driving factor for Kratos' progressively more aggressive deeds. In this regard, it is striking that in the games set in Greece, the nexus of divine intervention, betrayal, genealogical loss, and guilt is closely linked to the character conception of the Spartan.<sup>19</sup> Thus, according to a prophecy, Zeus, the father of the gods, fears his own downfall at the hands of one of his sons. The only thing he knows about the identity of this son is that he bears a certain mark on his body. As a result, he sends Ares and Athena to kidnap the brother of Kratos—Deimos—as he carries an extraordinary birthmark. The still young Spartan fails to rescue his brother and in memory of him and as a memorial of his own failure, he has the birthmark of Deimos tattooed on his body. Moreover, in the battle with Ares, he sustained a scar over his right eye. Thus, from a semiotic perspective, the readability of Kratos already testifies at an early point in the character's biography to the loss of his brother, to Kratos' self-attributed guilt for this, and to the destructive intervention of the gods in the *vita* of the still young Spartan.

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18 *GOD OF WAR: GHOST OF SPARTA* (USA 2010, Santa Monica Studios).

19 This connection of betrayal, loss and guilt can be found in Middle High German literature in more complex heroine figures. Dietrich's (tragic) heroic *vita* from the "Fluchtepen" is based on the betrayal of his confidant Witege and the resulting loss of his brother Diether, but he is repeatedly denied revenge against Witege, which constitutes the tragic fate of poor Dietrich. (E. Lienert: *Mittelhochdeutsche Heldenepik. Eine Einführung. Grundlagen der Germanistik*, p. 104). Here, unfinished revenge becomes a flaw of the heroic figure, whereas excessive revenge, which, as in the case of Kratos, is fueled by a consciousness of guilt for the death of relatives and one's own family, has a maximally destructive potential in the example of the Kriemhild figure in the *Nibelungenlied*. In addition, a tendency to demonize the figure can be identified, which can even be found in Kriemhild's text when she is referred to as *valandine* (e.g., NL 2371,4).

Because of his ruthlessness and extraordinary successes as a Spartan commander, Kratos rises in the ranks and in the process meets Lysandra, who becomes his wife—their daughter Calliope is born shortly thereafter. She is visibly ill from birth, according to Spartan law, meaning that she should die. Faced with the threat of further family loss, he defies the applicable law and, as a minion of the war god Ares, fights for the cure for his daughter against chosen warriors of other gods in order to save her from death. However, the role as commander and proof in battle—similar to, for example, Iwein's urge as an Arthurian knight for tournament travel—remains a central element of the character. Therefore, Kratos often leaves his family behind to fight further battles for his own family until, eventually, he is defeated by a numerically far superior army. Their commander, Alrik, has a vendetta against Kratos. He also fought for the cure Calliope received to save his dying father. Since being defeated by the Spartan in battle, Alrik, also driven by genealogical loss, is bent on revenge, which can only be prevented by divine intervention: Kratos calls upon Ares for help and swears allegiance to him if he kills Alrik and his army. The god of war agrees and as a sign of his new *vassal status* Kratos receives the so-called Chaos Blades; these two swords are attached to his arms with glowing hot chains.<sup>20</sup> However, this desire to fight and prove himself in battle leads to the killing of his own family when Ares, in one of the countless battles and village plunderings of Kratos, his most important vassal mingles Lysandra and Calliope with the villagers. Kratos kills them in a warlike frenzy and realizes the betrayal of the god of war only after the death of his family. Instead of thus creating—as intended—the absolute warrior vassal, detached from family ties, Ares thus creates his most determined adversary.

Cursed to wear his family's ashes on his ski, Kratos becomes the icon of a broken hero whose distinguishing characteristic of war-madness is turned against him, leading to a genealogical loss for which he himself is responsible—engineered by divine treachery.

Kratos seeks revenge, renounces his oath of allegiance to Ares and sets out to kill him. The consequence of the breach of the oath, as described in *GOD OF WAR: ASCENSION*,<sup>21</sup> is that his deeds haunt him as visions and nightmares. In the prequel

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20 The rescue of a hero by divine intervention (cf. *deus ex machina*) is a frequently used element in Old French heroic epic poetry such as the *Bataille d'Aliscans* (*BdA*), when the fight against the Saracens is also about the struggle for the claim to *truthfulness* of the religions that are in conflict with each other. Thus, for example, Guillaume—a Christian fighter—is saved from death several times in the battle because it does not please God (*BdA* 1387.92, 1424.33).

21 *GOD OF WAR: ASCENSION* (USA 2013, Santa Monica Studios).

CHAINS OF OLYMPUS,<sup>22</sup> Kratos is briefly given the opportunity to be reunited with his daughter Calliope in the form of a stay in an afterlife. But once again divine betrayal follows, in this case emanating from Persephone and the Titan Atlas. Kratos is again forced to separate from his daughter, since he can only save Calliope if he separates from her. Especially in this scene, in which the player himself has to actively tear father and daughter apart by repeatedly pressing the button, the repeatedly experienced loss highlights the protagonist's denied chance to overcome his own guilt.

The loss of his family reactualized as the protagonist's characteristic act through the successful swearing break at the end of Ascension, is once again center stage at the end of GOD OF WAR I.<sup>23</sup> Before Kratos succeeds in killing the God of War, he is confronted with the mirage of his family, threatened by several doubles who took on his form. The player's or character's task is to protect Lysandra and Calliope from being killed repeatedly by the Spartan's doppelgangers, which can be accomplished by, among other things, allowing Kratos to embrace his family to give them life energy that, in turn, is subtracted from his own. Eventually, however, Kratos must once again witness his family being killed by him and the Chaos Blades, bringing the protagonist's own share of genealogical loss home to him once again. Thus, confronted with the betrayal of the god of war as well as his own guilt, he kills the god of war—his guilt, however, remains unresolved.

In GOW II<sup>24</sup> and GOW III,<sup>25</sup> Kratos ultimately blames the gods for their betrayal and his resulting genealogical losses, and embarks on a progressively excessive and violent campaign of revenge against Olympus, ending with the fall of Greece and the death of his father Zeus. While the thematic complex of revenge and especially the killing of his family has been dealt with in various ways so far as a reactualization of the brittleness of the hero Kratos, it hardly plays a role in GOW II and until the end of GOW III. It is only near the conclusion of GOW III that Kratos is again confronted with the death of his family. However, this time he manages to accept the killing and the guilt it entails. He literally draws hope, which in GOW, according to legend, was left in Pandora's Box when the plagues inside it afflicted humanity. After Kratos opened the box in GOW I, he received the power of hope, but it remained behind "layers of guilt"<sup>26</sup> until that moment. As a result, he kills Zeus and (supposedly) himself in order to sell the power of his

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22 GOD OF WAR: CHAINS OF OLYMPUS (USA 2008, Santa Monica Studios).

23 GOD OF WAR (USA 2005, Santa Monica Studios).

24 GOD OF WAR II (USA 2007, Santa Monica Studios).

25 GOD OF WAR III (USA 2010, Santa Monica Studios).

26 <https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/Hope> , from 04.06.2022.

newfound hope as a gift to mankind, instead of claiming the—now sole remaining—power for himself as the last god or ceding it to the spirit of Athena. Kratos thus dies at the end of GOW III, less a “classical” death for his own memoria and apotheosis, but the death of a “modern hero” who “selflessly sacrifices himself for a good deed.”<sup>27</sup>

Looking at the current offshoot of the GOW series and the new role of Kratos as the father figure<sup>28</sup> of Atreus depicted therein, it can be said that this role in a familial structure is by no means a novelty in the character make-up of the protagonist. Rather, the aspect of genealogy, along with the pursuit of Fama, is the tragic foundation on which the multi-faceted figure is built. It cannot be denied that the extent of revenge and the associated use of violence make Kratos appear as a “merciless, rage-filled genocide machine,”<sup>29</sup> however, the dimension of the (anti-) hero struggling for forgiveness for genealogical losses is also an essential part of the character even before GOW IV.

Before focusing on the heroic character’s portrayal of the figure in the following, the role of the prominent thing that is directly connected to his character depiction should be brought to the fore in preparation for this: the Chaos Blades. The presence or absence of the semantically highly charged weapon plays a central role, especially with the progressive shift of perspective to the heroic figure. At the same time, the bond between character depiction and central things is not a unique feature of the digital medium, nor is the connection of a hero figure to his weapon an exclusive specific, as will be briefly demonstrated by the duplicated Ring of Power in SHADOW OF MORDOR and the function of the ring in Hartmann’s von Aue *Iwein*.

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27 R uth, Antonia: “Wenn Helden sterben.  ber die Bedeutung des Todes f ur den griechischen Heros und seine Wiedergabe in Vasenbildern aus Athen,” in: *helden.heroes.heros*4.2(2016),pp.23-31,herep.25, DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2016/02/03.

28 Kratos, in the role of father is already thematized in GOW III in connection with the character of Pandora, when he frees her from her captivity and hesitates when it turns out that he must sacrifice her to the flames of Olympus. While Pandora wants to sacrifice herself for Kratos, Kratos initially holds her back until the prospect of revenge, seemingly only to be realized through the girl’s death, dominates: “Ultimately, Kratos’ hatred towards Zeus proved greater than his desire to safeguard Pandora. Kratos lashed out at Zeus, while Pandora disappeared into the flames”: <https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/Pandora> [25 Mar. 2019]. For this reference I thank Robert Baumgartner.

29 G. Martin: “God of War Doesn’t Entirely Solve the Kratos Problem.”

## SEMANTICS OF ITEMS AND THEIR FUNCTION— CHAOS BLADES AND RINGS OF POWER

As has already been shown in the course of events so far, the Chaos Blades are far more than mere instruments for combat, and are highly semantically charged. With Joachim Friedmann, one can speak of a “plot-functional object,” because it not only drives the plot forward as would be the case with a “McGuffin,”<sup>30</sup> but also contains, at the latest with *GOW IV*, the semantic-narrative opposition of the loss-laden past of an archaic hero vs. a broken father figure. The game director of *GOW II* and *GOW IV*, Cory Barlog, therefore summarizes Kratos’ initial change of arms in the latest spin-off of the game series as follows:

“I think we wanted to create an identity, because to me the blades represent a very dark time in [Kratos’] life. They are not just a weapon to him. They are his scarlet letter. They are the marking that somebody tricked him, that he made a bad deal, that he made a mistake. Powerful, but I think also powerfully charged in its emotion. [...] I think [a] part of him wanting to move forward is being able to [leave the blades behind].”<sup>31</sup>

With regard to the semiotics of the Spartan, the legibility of the body indicates the genealogical loss of his family, which the chaos blades represent—they testify to the unconditional will to preserve and increase one’s own *fama*, which is nothing unusual for a heroic figure, because “combative superiority and victoriousness [...] [are] heroic qualities,” as they can already be found in the depictions on Greek neck amphorae and drinking bowls of the 5th and 6th centuries BC.<sup>32</sup> After the killing of his family, this urge to fight gives way to an absolute vendetta against Olympus and ends (at first) in the laying down of his blades. In *GOW IV*, he uses an axe as a weapon in large parts, but it still has the function of a tool at the beginning of the plot and only becomes a weapon along the way. It is only when another genealogical loss threatens in the form of his son’s illness that he must once again use his blades associated with the element of fire for his walk through frozen Helheim. Riley Little summarizes this moment as follows: “It’s a full-circle moment for the story of *GOD OF WAR IV* as Kratos is forced to wield the same

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30 Friedmann, Joachim: *Storytelling for Media. Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Narrative Design*, Stuttgart: UVK Verlag 2021, p. 143.

31 <https://www.gamesradar.com/god-of-war-director-explains-why-kratos-lost-his-blades-and-got-an-axe-its-kinda-deep/> [04.06.2022]

32 A. Rüh: “Wenn Helden sterben. Über die Bedeutung des Todes für den griechischen Heros und seine Wiedergabe in Vasenbildern aus Athen,” p. 26.



weapon that took everything away from him in the original trilogy to save the one thing he has left—his son.”<sup>33</sup> At this moment, the portrayal of the hero as a hybrid figure itself enters into reflection via the weapon, and with it the character’s past, along with the negatively connoted dimensions associated with it, break into the narrative. The character’s multidimensionality is addressed from this point on until the end of the narrated story in his confrontation with his son and himself. While he wants to save Atreus from repeating the “cycle of patricide,”<sup>34</sup> in a sense he must now accept the hybridity of his own transtextual character make-up in continuation of the acceptance and forgiveness of his own guilt in GOW III. The schema of the exorbitant hero becomes the object of narrative reflection, making Kratos legible as he loosens the bandages over the arms scarred by the chains of the chaos blades to give them visibility.

As an integrated component of the game world, the character simultaneously reflects its tension of an aggressively ruthless and broken hero figure, which was established from the beginning of the GOW series. The hero, alien in the new space, copes with Bernd Bastert’s reflections on alien heroes “the saga memory”<sup>35</sup> of the saga world of the predecessors on which he is based and thus enables ludic recipients with prior knowledge of this substrate to readjust their perspective on the hero. This pre-eye-viewing of this more than archaic hero on both ludic and narrative levels seems to be the starting point for the widely shared perception of a ‘humanized’ hero that Kratos is supposed to represent in GOW IV.

From a transmedial point of view, this close connection between a semantically charged item and its expressiveness via the figure(s) that carries or possesses it is a prominent concept, which will be briefly demonstrated in the following by means of another example.

Without too much elaboration of the creation and contextual variables,<sup>36</sup> in SHADOW OF MORDOR, which is set in the Tolkien universe, a new ring of power is forged by the two protagonists Celebrimbor and Talion in ‘personal union.’ With

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33 <https://screenrant.com/god-of-war-4-blades-of-chaos/>, from 04.06.2022.

34 [https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/The\\_Cycle\\_of\\_Patricide](https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/The_Cycle_of_Patricide), from 04.06.2022.

35 Bastert, Bernd: “Fremde Helden? Narrative Transcodierung und Konnexion des ‘Nibelungenlieds’ im mittelniederländischen ‘Nevelingenlied,’” in: Sahn, Heike/ Millet, Victor (eds.), *Narration and Hero, Ergänzungsbande zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 87, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2014, pp. 385-402, here p. 394.

36 Cf. for further details: Nieser, Florian: “Die Macht Helden zu brechen,” <https://www.paidia.de/two-rings-to-break-them-all-zur-agency-des-neuen-rings-der-macht-in-shadow-of-war-und-der-zwei-ringe-im-mittelalterlichen-iwein/> [04.06.2022]

the final hammer blow, the spirit of the elf Celebrimbor separates from the human ranger Talion for a short time. As the ranger's injuries successively return to life-threatening levels previously experienced during his execution at the Black Gate, the elf stands at the anvil. With the completion of the Ring as a manifestation of the spirit of vengeance, it is now apparently possible for this spirit to take physical form for a short time. The ring is thus more than a (symbolic) representation of the owner.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the separation of the previously fused figures exposes the fragility of Talion, who is kept alive only by Celebrimbor's magic—either in 'personal union' or by wearing the ring as a "repository"<sup>38</sup> of the ring smith's power. This first indicator of an ominously close bond between Talion and the Ring foreshadows the Ranger's inevitable fate as Celebrimbor's tool.

Over several stages of the story, the tension between the power-hungry elf and Talion, who is bound to the magic of the ring, grows, and Talion becomes aware of the growing lust for power of the ring smith who takes possession of him.<sup>39</sup> The turning point of this fateful bond is Talion's first independent and, at the same

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37 Fürbeth, Frank: "rinc und vingerfin in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Guldein vingerlein des Mönchs von Salzburg und Heinrich Wittenweilers Ring," in: Anna Mühlherr et al. (eds.), *Dingkulturen. Objekte in Literatur, Kunst und Gesellschaft der Vormoderne. Literatur-Theorie-Geschichte*. 9, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2016, pp. 406-442, here p. 427. This also parallels the One Ring of Sauron and its physical presence tied to the ring.

38 McGregor, Jamie: "Two rings to rule them all. A comparative study of Tolkien and Wagner," in: Friedrich, Michael/Velten, HansRudolf(eds.), *Technikender Sympathiesteuerung in Erzähltexten der Vormoderne*, Heidelberg: Winter 2016, pp. 125-143, here p. 138.

39 In addition to game mechanic enhancements of the predecessor, the power of mind control is the central feature of the new ring. It allows Celebrimbor and Talion to instrumentalize even high-ranking fighters in Sauron's army and recruit their own army in this way. With the growth of his own army and the conquered fortresses, the elf's hunger for power grows. The topic of game mechanics is discussed in its reflexive function as an essential element of game influence and agency in "The Ludic Recipient as Ringbearer;" a comparison of the greatly expanded skill tree of the character Talion in *SoW* in conjunction with the game mechanic anchoring of the new ring as another slot of the inventory cannot be done here. On the subject of game mechanics, we refer to Philipp Bojahr's and Michelle Hertes' recent contribution: Bojahr, Philipp/Herte, Michelle: "Spielmechanik," in: Beil, Benjamin/ Hensel, Thomas/ Rauscher, Andreas (eds.), *Game Studies. Film, Fernsehen, Neue Medien*. Wiesbaden: Springer 2018, pp. 235-250, here pp. 235-249.

time, last decision. He decides against Celebrimbor's intended subjugation of a Ringwraith and former king of men by killing him before he succumbs to the Elf's will; he should not become a 'slave' of Celebrimbor.<sup>40</sup> Enraged, Celebrimbor clarifies what the player has long suspected: this decision is not Talion's to make. The Ranger is nothing more than a 'vessel' of his will—a physical extension of his ring. He then leaves Talion's body, who immediately collapses and succumbs to his injuries, as he did at the beginning of Mount Doom.

These events lead to the following conclusion: With the binding of Talion to the magic of the Ring—the manifestation of Celebrimbor's will—the progressive 'erosion' of the Ranger begins. Although the Ring has two bearers at the same time, the principle of the influence of the One Ring of Power in the Tolkien universe continues to apply: the Ring allows only one true bearer, while it crushes the will of all other owners and binds them to the owner of the One Ring. Talion meets just this fate, because in *SHADOW OF WAR (SOW)*<sup>41</sup> he is nothing more than the physical shell of the ring smith, whose fingers hold the ring.<sup>42</sup>

Talion in *SOW* is a broken hero in the sense of a tool whose last autonomous act is the crafting of that thing whose magical 'agency' gradually takes over the Ranger's ability to act. The close bond with the Ring wears down Talion's identity as a fighter of Gondor and pushes him into the role of the Ringwraith of Celebrimbor. A release from the Ring and its magic, in turn, means the hero's (temporary) death.<sup>43</sup> Both Rings of Power in *SHADOW OF MORDOR (SOM)*<sup>44</sup> and *SOW* show parallels in the relationship between 'auxiliary blacksmith' and magic ring: While

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40 This Ringwraith is Isildur, who, in a sense, succumbed to Sauron's will after the fact, despite the loss of the Ring. Besides Helm Hammerhand, Isildur is the second newly introduced Ringwraith, which represents a deviation from the Ringwraiths in Tolkien's stories. It can be assumed that it is the encounter of Talion (fighter of Gondor) with Isildur (king of Gondor) as Ringwraith, which is the trigger for the open resistance of Talion against Celebrimbor.

41 *SHADOW OF WAR* (USA 2017, Monolith; Warner Bros. Entertainment).

42 Talion's moment of realization probably does not coincidentally coincide with the moment when another fighter of Gondor is to be forced under the will of the Ringwraith. Within the narrative, the Ringwraith Isildur functions, as it were, as a figure-conceptual mirror image, reflecting Talion's own broken agency as Celebrimbor's tool.

43 Talion puts on the ring of Isildur shortly before his death and changes from the ring spirit of Celebrimbor to the ring spirit of Sauron—in the end he does not succeed in saving his ability to act and finally becomes the servant of Sauron.

44 *SHADOW OF MORDOR* (USA 2014, Monolith; Warner Bros. Entertainment).

Celebrimbor in SOM binds part of his power to Sauron's ring and cannot assert his ability to act against him, Talion forfeits his ability to act with the creation of the new ring and can only choose between his own death and existence as a Ringwraith.

## IWEIN, TALION AND KRATOS—CONNECTION OF SEMANTIC ITEMS AND THE CONSTITUTION OF IDENTITY

Continuing to look at the comparison with rings from the Tolkien universe, it seems obvious to include Iwein as the protagonist in Hartmann's von Aue text of the same name in the comparison, since he is also a ring bearer. He is even in possession of a ring that makes him invisible like the ringbearers in the *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR). But with regard to SOW, this remains the only commonality.

Iwein receives the 'invisibility ring' from Lunete, the chambermaid of Queen Laudine. Since Iwein is responsible for the death of Laudine's husband Ascalon, he is wanted at court as a murderer, where Iwein is only staying because he desperately wanted to wrest a trophy from the king.<sup>45</sup> In this precarious situation, Lunete hands him the ring with the words:

*"Ir sult vor schaden sicher sîn:  
Herre Iwein, nemt hin diz vingerlîn.  
Ez ist umbe den stein alsô gewant:  
Swer in hât in blôzer hant,  
den mac niemen, al die vrist  
unz er in blôzer hant ist,  
gesehn noch vinden."*

(vv. 1204-1207)<sup>46</sup>

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45 Mühlherr, Anna: "Die 'Macht der Ringe.' Ein Beitrag zur Frage, wie sympathisch man Iwein finden darf," in: Friedrich, Michael/ Velten, Hans Rudolf (eds.), *Techniken der Sympathiesteuerung in Erzähltexten der Vormoderne*, Heidelberg: Winter 2016, pp. 125-143, here p. 131.

46 "You will be safe from harm: / Lord Iwein, take this ring. / With its stone it behaves thus: / whoever turns it inward in the bare hand, / no one can / see or discover." My translation.

Thus, Iwein manages to escape the men of Ascalon who are looking for him, but it is not his own achievement. He owes it to Lunete and especially to the magic ring, that he escapes alive.<sup>47</sup>

Iwein's integrity is closely linked to the magic of the ring, which is provided to him by another character. This dependency was triggered by his pursuit of Ascalon, whom he wanted to defeat once and for all. Looking at SOW, Lunete's ring protects Iwein's integrity and preserves his ability to act while Talion's physical integrity no longer does and can only be preserved by the magic of the Elvish ring. The obvious parallel between Iwein as the bearer of the Invisibility Ring and Talion is that both rings provide for the survival of their bearers; however, only Celebrimbor's ring has a binding effect: in contrast to the Invisibility Ring, the magical effect of the Elvish ring requires the renunciation of agency for the protection of Talion.

However, Iwein receives a second ring.<sup>48</sup> It comes from Laudine, who in the meantime has become Iwein's wife through the mediation of Lunete. Iwein wants to go on a tournament journey shortly after the wedding, whereupon Laudine gives him her consent, but in this context entrusts Iwein with a second ring, which in its function as a "pledge of loyalty"<sup>49</sup> has a binding character:

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47 Lunete's motivation for giving the ring to Iwein in return for an earlier achievement of the knight at Arthur's court, where she alone received recognition from Iwein, is presented in detail in Mühlherr's essay: A. Mühlherr: "Die 'Macht der Ringe,' Ein Beitrag zur Frage, wie sympathisch man Iwein finden darf," p. 131.

48 It should be pointed out that the research also represents the position that it is not a second ring but the same ring Cf. Bertau, Karl: "Der Ritter auf dem halben Pferd oder die Wahrheit der Hyperbel," in: *PBB* 116 (1994), pp. 285-301. Thereby he assumes that both rings as well as their owners are "structural doubles": *Ibid.*, p. 290f. Due to the strongly varying mechanisms of action of both rings, as shown in this paper, such an assumption cannot be accepted.

49 A. Mühlherr: "Die 'Macht der Ringe,' Ein Beitrag zur Frage, wie sympathisch man Iwein finden darf," p. 140.

*“Hiute ist der ahte tac  
Nâch sunwenden:  
Der sol diu jârzal enden.  
So kumt benamen ode ê,  
ode ichn warte iu niht mê.  
Unde lât ditz vingerlîn  
Einen geziuc der rede sîn.”*  
(vv. 2940-2946)<sup>50</sup>

In this case, it is less a matter of Iwein’s physical integrity than of his reputation as guardian of the ‘well kingdom’ and minneritter<sup>51</sup> of Laudine. The magical effect of this ‘Minnering’<sup>52</sup> consists above all in giving the wearer continual luck and well-being (*senften muot*; v. 2954) including on a tournament travel.<sup>53</sup> Iwein—apparently still inspired by the same impulse that made him chase after Ascalon—goes to numerous tournaments and achieves a high degree of prestige (*êre*) at Arthur’s court. He fails to meet the deadline set by Laudine, whereupon it is Lunete who, as Laudine’s messenger, accuses Iwein of being a traitor before Arthurian society. She reminds him of the gift of the first ring that saved his life and emphasizes how much she regrets this gift (vv. 3143-3150). She then insults him as a faithless man, banishes him from his kingdom in the name of Laudine, cancels the bond with his wife (vv. 3160-3196) and pulls the ring from Iwein’s finger.

This time the loss of Laudine’s ring has fatal consequences: Iwein falls into madness in the face of the reproaches and the breaking of all *êre*-generating ties symbolically realized in the removal of the ring (vv. 3201-3233). He tears off his clothes and runs into the wilderness (vv. 3234-3238).

Iwein’s second ring exhibits familiar structures: An unconditional attachment to the ring becomes clear, which at the same time can be understood as a manifestation of the original owner. In Iwein, the loss of the ring is also tied to the expiration of a time limit. The ring is only temporarily a gift of *minne* that reminds of loyalty; with the missing of the deadline and the loss of the ring, the destructive effect of the unmagical binding to this thing unfolds: the threat to the identity of

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50 “Today is the eighth day / after the solstice, / at this time the annual period shall end. / So come by then or before, / or I will wait for you no more. / And let this ring / be witness to the bargain.” My translation.

51 This translates generously as ‘a courting knight.’

52 A ring as a ding-like proxy for the bond between the two figures.

53 A. Mühlherr: “Die ‘Macht der Ringe,’ Ein Beitrag zur Frage, wie sympathisch man Iwein finden darf,” speaks on p. 139 of the second ring making Iwein “literally shine.”

the knight Iwein. Based on the knight's self-image as part of a community from which he is now torn, Iwein's "social death"<sup>54</sup> is, in the context of the medium in question, a fate just as devastating as Talion's physical death.

Although Iwein and Talion can only be related to each other to a limited extent as figures in their respective medial and action-related contexts, both agree on one point: Talion and Iwein are broken heroic figures whose ability to act is decisively tied to the rings of which they are the bearers.

Neither succeeds in asserting their character conception against the power of the rings they wear: Talion wants to use the new Ring of Power as an *equally* magical thing against Sauron, but the magic of the Ring appropriates Talion and he ends up as the Ringwraith of Celebrimbor. The Minnering exerts a similar negative influence on Iwein, for his tournament aspirations are indirectly carried along by the Minnering's magical effect, causing him to miss the deadline. Only after the deadline has passed does the carefreeness of the tournament journey promoted by the ring (*dô wâren sie beide* [Iwein and Gawein, F.N.] / *mit vreuden sunder leide / von einem turnei komen*; vv. 3059f.)<sup>55</sup> give way to the horrified awareness that he has forgotten Laudine (*nû kom mîn her Iwein / in einem seneden gedanc: / er gedâhte, daz twelen waere ze lanc, / daz er von sînem wibe tete*; vv. 3082).<sup>56</sup>

Talion is thus broken *from within*, as it were, for he forfeits a large part of his ability to act for his survival in his binding to the magic of the Ring of Power, which makes him continually the executing hand of Celebrimbor's lust for power. Iwein's attachment to the ring, in turn, is generated primarily by Laudine's setting of a deadline associated with it; the magic of the ring, however, promotes the missing of the deadline and plunges Iwein into madness with the loss of the ring of mines. With Lunete's taking of the ring, Iwein is broken *from the outside*, in contrast to Talion.

The loss of the ring has fatal consequences in both cases: Talion realizes his powerlessness, slips Isildur's ring over his finger, and surrenders to a fate he had vehemently tried to prevent a short time before. Iwein falls into madness and flees from society. Both ring bearers share the same fate, but under different omens: Talion loses his identity through the accession of the new Ring of Power, Iwein suffers the loss of identity through the loss of his second ring.

The strong bond of the respective identity constitution is shared by the bearers of the respective rings and by the bearer of the Chaos Blades, Kratos. The latter

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54 Ibid., p. 141: Iwein is "socially finished."

55 "Now they had both come / in unalloyed joy / from a tournament." My translation.

56 "Suddenly my lord Iwein / was overcome by longing thoughts: / it occurred to him that he had extended the absence / from his wife too long." My translation.

continues to carry the scars of the weapons previously chained to his arms even after the (temporary) discarding of his weapons. At the same time, this reveals another dimension of meaning of semantically charged items, for they can here exemplarily not only contain pure narrative oppositions such as powerful vs. powerless or preservation vs. loss of formative identity characteristics, but they also stand out clearly in the readability of the respective figures. Iwein loses his social status along with his clothing, Talon again suffers his deep and mortal wounds, which, like the scars of the Spartan, are directly linked to genealogical loss. Items of power, or powerful items, are thus not only formative for the identity of their wearers, but also, in a very real sense, for the legibility of their owners beyond their loss or absence.

Having thus shown, on the basis of the dimensions of effect of semantic items, that they can be transmedial markers of character constitution and can highlight essential aspects of character formation, it is now to be noted again, with a focus on Kratos, that behind the rampant violence of the Spartan and new god of war, there is above all genealogical loss and guilt. Following on from this, the question of the character conception of Kratos as a *humanized* hero figure in GOW IV will now be addressed. For this purpose, the figure of the Spartan will be examined in more detail from a structuralist and semiotic perspective.

## **COMPLEXITY OR HUMANIZATION OF A HEROIC FIGURE? AN APPROACH TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE KRATOS FIGURE**

From GOW I-IV, the central hero figure exhibits characteristics for the recipient with anticipated prior knowledge<sup>57</sup>—that is, with the knowledge of the previously described events that place an aloof, brutal demigod blinded by vengefulness on the one hand next to a “father, a broken man, and a betrayed man”<sup>58</sup> on the other.

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57 On the role of expected prior knowledge in character conception cf. a.o. F. Nieser: *Die Lesbarkeit von Helden. Uneindeutige Zeichen in der 'Bataille d'Aliscans' und dem 'Willehalm' Wolframs von Eschenbach*, pp. 2-23; E. Lienert: “Aspekte der Figurenkonstitution in mittelhochdeutscher Heldenepik,” p. 51, with reference to Jannidis, Fotis: *Figur und Person. Beitrag zu einer historischen Narratologie*, 2. Auflage, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2017, and Schulz, Armin: *Erzähltheorie in mediävistischer Perspektive*, De Gruyter 2012, p. 330.

58 M. Kriska: “God of War: You Were Wrong About Kratos,” n.p.



Looking at older depictions of heroic figures, for instance from Middle High German heroic epic, such a possibly irritating complexity of seemingly one-dimensional heroic figures is nothing unusual. Elisabeth Lienert lists as essential characteristics of heroes in pre-modern narrative, among others, the “name, [...], characteristics and expressions of affect [and] their history, occasionally their fama and/or traditional role specifications.”<sup>59</sup> With regard to Kratos, it is of particular interest that a “severely limited inner world representation, contradictory valuations, lack of coherence” are essential components of a heroic figure’s actions.<sup>60</sup> Whereas in GOW I-III the Spartan’s inner world is only hinted at through the passages depicted or described in a heroic epic manner by a narrator’s voice, in GOW IV Kratos’ son Atreus takes over this function. He functions as a gauge of Kratos’ inner state—for example, when Kratos tries to conceal his past from his son, which manifests itself physically in his son’s illness, can only be cured completely by Kratos through acceptance of his deeds and identity vis-à-vis Atreus. Moreover, with the move from the mythical space of Greece to the mythical space of Scandinavia, the hero figure acquires a transtextual character.<sup>61</sup> This means, above all, that she becomes a ‘hybrid figure’ composed of at least two layers—that of the single text and that of the saga.<sup>62</sup> Prior knowledge of GOW IV’s predecessors becomes the saga of the embittered god of war from Greece, which at the same time opens up the possibility of now reweighing the character’s narrative. A prominent example from Middle High German heroic epic would be Siegfried, whose mythical past as dragon slayer and conqueror of the Nibelungen hoard plays only a

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59 E. Lienert: “Aspekte der Figurenkonstitution in mittelhochdeutscher Heldenepik,” p. 52.

60 Ibid., p. 52f.

61 Moreover, from a literary perspective, she moves into a space whose 9th-11th century skaldic poetry focuses on anger, revenge, and fear of the adversaries as central characteristics of the heroic Viking leaders. According to Diana Whaley, a tendency of a ‘naturalization’ of violence can be seen, for example, in that the element of fire deponentiates human agency in the form of ruthless violence against families (Whaley, Diana: “The Fury of the Northmen and the Poetics of Violence,” in Heike Sahn/Victor Millet (eds.), *Narration and Hero, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 87, De Gruyter 2014, pp. 71-94, here p. 81). In any case, this aspect of the change of space, together with the circumstances of the killing of Kratos’ family and their burning in the context of a village plundering, fits very well into the new accentuation of the protagonist and his coming to terms with the past.

62 E. Lienert: “Aspekte der Figurenkonstitution in mittelhochdeutscher Heldenepi,” p. 55.

subordinate role in the *Nibelungenlied*. His identity as knight and courtly wooer of Kriemhild takes center stage.<sup>63</sup> Both aspects are part of Siegfried's character make-up, but the emphasis is initially on the hero's knightly identity. This mythical substrate does find its way back into the plot, which becomes particularly clear in the hero's exorbitance in (competitive) battle.

The re-staging of the GOD OF WAR in GOW IV seems to work in a similar way. From the very beginning, the current installment of the game series focuses on an element that was only partially introduced in the predecessors and reminds us of the hero's broken side: the hero's mourning—now for his dead/killed second wife Faye. In contrast to the opening of GOW I-III, there is no confrontation at the beginning with overpowering and mythical adversaries like the Hydra in GOW I or the sea god Poseidon; instead, he buries Faye along with Atreus. While the legibility of the now transtextual hero figure as an "epic substrate"<sup>64</sup> reminds the player of the hero's past in the previous games and is able to reactualize it at the moment of the burning body, this time Faye's ashes become the object of *memoria*, of her. At the same time, her mortal remains take on a central motivating function for the further course of the game, since the goal of GOW IV is to scatter her ashes on the highest mountain of the *Nine Realms*. For the first time, it's not primarily about a revenge plot and overcoming guilt—it's about traveling to an exposed point of the new space together with a companion character.<sup>65</sup> From the

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63 Ibid., p. 56.

64 B. Bastert: "Fremde Helden? Narrative Transcodierung und Konnexion des 'Nibelungenlieds' im mittelniederländischen 'Nevelingenlied'," p. 394. By this he understands allusions in Middle High German texts to earlier or parallel saga traditions, which can only be inferred by recipients who have knowledge from these traditions.

65 References to John Campbell's Hero's Journey as its updating adaptation by Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey* are obvious here, especially in the form presented by Robert Cassar in his narrative analysis of the first three GOW parts. He divides the individual stages of the hero's journey into three acts: "Act 1—By this he understands allusions in Middle High German texts to earlier or parallel saga traditions, which can only be inferred by recipients who have knowledge from these traditions. Departure/Separation," "Act 2—Descent Initiation, Penetration" and "Act 3—Return" (Cassar, Robert: "God of War: A Narrative Analysis," in: *Eludamos. Journal for Computer GameCulture*, H.7/1(2013), pp.81-99, <http://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/viewArticle/vol7no1-5/7-1-5-html> ). These are precisely the stages through which Kratos passes, not only in GOW I-III, as Cassar points out, but also in a very clear form in GOW IV, when, after setting out, the father and son team face multiple challenges and battles with mythical

very beginning, a new emphasis is placed: The initial staging of the Spartan succeeds via mourning (for his deceased wife), remorse, and atonement (symbolized by the inferred discarding of the iconic Chaos Blades).<sup>66</sup> In *GoW IV*, the tragic facet of the Spartan's character make-up is central.

However, these first semiotic and dramaturgical indicators of a new focus from a heroic perspective do not yet clarify the question as to what extent it is possible to make a heroic, yet broken, hero 'approachable.' To answer this question, ancient and Middle High German heroic representations and heroic schemes will first be examined according to their meaning and function, in order to be able to establish references to the figure conception of the Spartan on this basis.

## THE HERO AS AN IDENTIFICATION FIGURE

In the following, it will primarily be shown that heroes were not only understood as outstanding and unattainable figures, but have offered a form of reception-side identification potential since antiquity. Ralf van den Hoff, referring to pictorial representations of heroes on the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, on vases, and on other media, points out that "[P]ersonal identification with the figures depicted in architectural sculpture must have been another important factor in their reception."<sup>67</sup> From a narrative as well as a ludic perspective, *GoW IV* understands how to mobilize this identification potential anew in comparison to the anti-hero structure of its predecessors, while the fundamentally complex structure of the figure remains unchanged even against the background of ancient and medieval concepts of heroes.

In very general terms, heroic figures in antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages function as 'repositories' of an identity-forming past of the cultural collective that tells itself their stories.<sup>68</sup> They exhibit special characteristics such as the hero's

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creatures such as trolls and dragons before returning to the starting point of their journey after completing their task.

66 In addition, the axe is not introduced as a weapon, but as a tool that only becomes a weapon in the course of the game.

67 van den Hoff: *Media for Theseus*, 2010, p. 163.

68 Cf. e.g., van den Hoff, Ralf: "Media for Theseus. Or: the different images of the Athenian polis-hero," in: Linn Foxhall et al. (eds.), *Intentional History. Spinning Time in Ancient Greece*, Franz Steiner, 2010, pp. 161-188, here p. 161; E. Lienert: *Mittelhochdeutsche Heldenepik. Eine Einführung*, p. 9-23.

closeness to the gods<sup>69</sup> or divine[ ] parent[s]<sup>70</sup> and are, at their core, a man[s] of extraordinary ability and extraordinary commitment, surpassing the measure of the ordinary.<sup>71</sup> They spend most of their lives in combat with adversaries of a human or superhuman nature.<sup>72</sup> Elisabeth Lienert emphasizes, however, that “Morally exemplary his [i.e., the hero’s, F.N.] actions are often not; cruelty and ruthlessness, betrayal and murder are [...] also the order of the day.”<sup>73</sup> RÜth speaks of the fact that heroes can also be “morally corrupt.”<sup>74</sup> All these characteristics, that can also be found in Kratos, initially serve less an (intended) identification of the recipient with the heroic hero figure, but rather the manifestation of “incommensurable exorbitance.”<sup>75</sup> At the same time, however, structures can be discerned in the pictorial representation of heroes in antiquity that, for example, allow heroes to become the alter ego of the common foot soldier. Marion Meyer distinguishes between “non-narrative and narrative images”<sup>76</sup> using the example of the representation of warrior salvage in the period between the 7th and 5th century BC on neck amphorae, a volute crater, a small master bowl and on eye bowls, among others. Narrative images thus refer to traditional heroic narratives and thus traditional scenes—in the context of the Aithiopsis and the Lesser Iliad, the image represents the warrior recovery of Aias, who carries the body of Achilles from the battlefield.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, however, Meyer is able to deduce that this explicit

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69 A. RÜth: “Wenn Helden sterben. Über die Bedeutung des Todes für den griechischen Heros und seine Wiedergabe in Vasenbildern aus Athen,” p. 26; also Cf. Centner, Jasmin: “Rückkehr eines Helden? Odysseus als mythische Identifikationsfigur in Primo Levis ‘Die Atempause’,” in: *helden.heroes.héros* 5.1 (2017), pp. 59-69. DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2017/01/07, p. 61.

70 Meyer, Marion: “Der Heros als alter ego des Kriegers in archaischer und klassischer Zeit. Bilder im Wandel,” in: *Antike Kunst* 55 (2012), pp. 25-51, here p. 25.

71 E Lienert: *Mittelhochdeutsche Heldenepik. Eine Einführung*, p. 9.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., p. 9f.

74 A. RÜth: “Wenn Helden sterben. Über die Bedeutung des Todes für den griechischen Heros und seine Wiedergabe in Vasenbildern aus Athen,” p. 28.

75 Friedrich, Udo: “Held und Narrativ. Zur narrativen Funktion des Heros in der mittelalterlichen Literatur,” in: Heike Sahn/Victor Millet (eds.), *Narration and Hero. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 87, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2014, p. 61.

76 M. Meyer: “Der Heros als alter ego des Kriegers in archaischer und klassischer Zeit. Bilder im Wandel,” p. 26.

77 Ibid., p. 26.

horizon of reference changes in non-narrative representations, as lifeworld references are added to the “classical pictorial composition” of the warrior retrieval. Achilles and Aias are replaced by “anonymous figures” such as athletes or warriors, as well as the *oikos* of the anonymous warrior in the form of female figures who bid farewell to the fighter or mournfully receive his corpse.<sup>78</sup> She concludes, “With the presence of non-combatants, the focus of the images shifts. Viewers are reminded that the fallen warrior is received and mourned by his *oikos*.”<sup>79</sup> By linking the representation of heroes back to the context of societal values and realities of individuals’ lives, heroic figures are already multidimensional in this classical pictorial dimension. They possess narrative potential on a scene potentially familiar to the classical recipient, illustrating the outstanding martial qualities of the two figures depicted. At the same time, they point beyond themselves and possess (archaic) social identification potential through their reference to the *oikos*—they are to a certain extent ‘approachable.’ Meyer pointedly formulates, every image of Achilles is necessarily also that of a man.<sup>80</sup>

However, not only ancient heroes, regardless of their exorbitance, can become *approachable* in the representation as social reference figures, but also heroic figures of Middle High German heroic epic. In the narration of these figures, political aspects or the adequate representation of their historical models play less of a role; rather, complex historical events of the Germanic *heroic age* are reduced to human affects, motives and conflicts.<sup>81</sup> Udo Friedrich points out that heroic epic addresses the “intrusion of contingency above any subject theme”.<sup>82</sup> He agrees with Lienert that heroic narratives primarily contain, discuss, and reflect certain “narrative cores”; these include, among others, genealogy, finding identity, love.<sup>83</sup> The central feature of heroic narratives is thus the “disruption of normality,” which can be brought on by “betrayal and revenge.”<sup>84</sup> The assignment of the narrated events of the *GOW* series to heroic epic with its focus on such narrative cores is obvious—with consequences for the readability of Kratos. Epic hero figures serve as exaggerated guiding figures unaffected by everyday contingency. They serve as the foundation of a collectively handed-down memory of a particular cultural social

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78 Ibid., p. 31.

79 Ibid., p. 33.

80 Ibid., p. 36.

81 E. Lienert: *Mittelhochdeutsche Heldenepik. Eine Einführung*, p. 9f., citation: p. 10.

82 U. Friedrich: “Held und Narrativ. Zur narrativen Funktion des Heros in der mittelalterlichen Literatur,” p. 176.

83 Ibid., p. 178.

84 Ibid., p. 181.

formation, and thus function as an uncapturable guiding image in their entire figure system. The exorbitant hero is thus “an imaginary double of man.”<sup>85</sup> It is precisely with such an exaggerated representation of heroic figures that the negotiation of narrative cores in contingency situations is made possible—a form of identification is thus a necessary component of the portrayal of a heroic figure in order to come to terms with the characteristics and events it represents.

For an archaic hero to be ‘humanized,’ as is done by the media landscape for Kratos in the new *GoW IV*, the recipient’s empathy with the character in addition to identification with it is necessary. From the perspective of literary studies, and Verena Barthel, it can be stated that the value horizons opened up in the text and in the narrative of the digital game are equally as important for directing the empathy of the recipient as their knowledge of the inner world of the character, gained through (narrated or depicted) facial expressions and gestures or through an inner view granted by the narrator.<sup>86</sup> It is a characteristic of epic heroes, however, that an insight into the inner world is granted only in exceptional cases.<sup>87</sup> The situation is similar with Kratos, whose emotions in *GoW I-III* are primarily driven by anger and revenge. Guilt and shame are only inferred by the brief sequences in which he is confronted with the loss of his family. Together with the “primacy effect”<sup>88</sup> in *GoW I*, in whose first scene Kratos is introduced as a broken hero trying to end his life, he is a complex character from the beginning despite his violent, misogynistic and morally questionable acts of violence.<sup>89</sup> The re-actualization of the

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85 Ibid., p. 183 with reference to Müller-Funk, Wolfgang: *Die Kultur und ihre Narrative. Eine Einführung*, Wien/New York: Springer 2008, p. 119.

86 Barthel, Verena: “Empathie, Mitleid, Sympathie. Rezeptionslenkende Strukturen mittelalterlicher Texte am Beispiel des Willehalm-Stoffs,” in: *Quellen und Forschungen zur Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte* 50 (284), Berlin: De Gruyter 2008, p. 31-54.

87 E. Lienert: *Figurenkonstitution*. 2016, p. 52.

88 V. Barthel: “Empathie, Mitleid, Sympathie. Rezeptionslenkende Strukturen mittelalterlicher Texte am Beispiel des Willehalm-Stoffs,” p. 67, understands by this the special weight of the first impression of a figure, which is based on its first conception and is later difficult to revise.

89 Cf. on sexism in games also in relation to *GoW*, see: Batchelor, James: “Games need to tell better stories that don’t oversimplify oppression,” Interview mit Anita Sarkeesian, in: *gamesindustry.biz*. 19.05.2017; Gertz, Nolan: “#GamerGate. Is It About Misogyny or Ethical Journalism? Why Not Both?,” in: *abc*, 21.11.2014, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/gamergate---is-it-about-misogyny-or-ethical-journalism-why-not-b/10098830>; Neurkar, Martin: “In Defense of a violent, misogynistic serial killer,” in: *Game Architecture*, 14.10.2012,

genealogical loss which, as an empathy-directing structure, blends the one raving with vengeance with the one mourning can be seen as a stylistic feature of the GoW series.

## THE GOD OF WAR IN AN ALIEN WORLD— LIMITED AUTOMACY AS EMPATHY FACTOR

In the mythical setting of Greek antiquity, which is no stranger to narratives of betrayal, revenge, and guilt, no historically complex pasts are negotiated, but culture-specific narrative cores are. While GoW I-III focus on questions about the extent of vigilante justice, how to deal with and cope with guilt, and the (divine) egocentrism of acts of revenge, GoW IV addresses and stages the opposite. From the very beginning, the question of avoiding guilt and appropriately coping with grief is being discussed, along with the (modern) question of the autonomy of the exorbitant hero. Thus, the negotiated horizon of values and the “axiology of values”<sup>90</sup> represented by the hero figure moves into the horizon of meaning of contemporary recipients. Predecessor games, on the other hand, did not strive for integrability into a current horizon of values, and rather focused on a pre-modern archaic heroic epic with a clearly staged anti-hero position.<sup>91</sup> For the ludic recipient, this is especially true if the fictionalization of game logic as [hero] characters translates into additional forms of emotional participation in the game events.<sup>92</sup> Empathy-generating structures of the text medium can thus also be thought of in the digital medium through the interactive aspect with the represented world using the game character.

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20151001070630/http://www.gamearch.com/2012/10/14/in-defense-of-a-violent-misogynistic-serial-killer>; Joho, Jess: “‘God of War’ depicts the disease and destruction of toxic masculinity,” in: *Mashable*, 26.04.2018, <https://mashable.com/article/god-of-war-fatherhood-patriarchy-destruction-male-power-fantasy>

- 90 U. Friedrich: “Held und Narrativ. Zur narrativen Funktion des Heros in der mittelalterlichen Literatur,” p. 179.
- 91 On a ludic level, the distinction from this antihero position is conditioned by the fact that in ‘player character,’ as the “interface of the player’s interaction with the game world, game goals become personal goals of fictional beings.” Schröter, Felix: “Figur,” in: Benjamin Beil et al. (ed.), *Game Studies. Film, Fernsehen, Neue Medien*, Springer 2018, pp. 109.
- 92 F. Schröter: “Figur,” p. 110.

The aspect of limited autonomy, which stands in stark contrast to the Spartan's unstoppable *rise* to the status of GOD OF WAR until the destruction of Olympus in GOW I-III, is staged on several levels in terms of game mechanics. Kratos is still a stranger to the new environment of Scandinavia, which is especially evident in that he needs his son to translate all the runes and saga tablets of Norse mythology. Kratos is unfamiliar with the composition and the partly confrontational approach of the Norse world of gods, which is why Baldur, who repeatedly seeks to confront the Spartan as a stranger in his own world, is referred to as "the Stranger" for a very long duration of the play. There is no explanatory narrative voice; recipient and character knowledge are internally focalized. By foregoing an authorial narrator and replacing it with Atreus and then another NPC—similar to an authorial narrator—named Mimir, Kratos gradually gains knowledge about the world he is concurrently in with the player. In addition, "character-related information [and] information carriers integrated into the game world" can only be deciphered by Atreus and the later companion Mimir.<sup>93</sup> The (game) character Kratos cannot see through and classify the game world<sup>94</sup> on his own; therefore, it is opened up by the player and the game character together. The narrative and the ludic modes of reception move closer together through this limited autonomy of world exploration.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, the narrative and ludic emotions evoked in the receptive process are joined. According to Felix Schröter, ludic emotions arise through the "players' own actions in the game and [the] confrontation with its rule system"—a typical emotion here is "curiosity (for example, when exploring the game world)."<sup>96</sup> Narrative emotions, on the other hand, arise from the dramaturgical staging of the game world as well as the "short-circuiting" of character and player goals, in which the assumption of an active action role as well as an audiovisual or ideological character perspective plays a central role.<sup>97</sup> Through this new emphasis in GOW IV, compared to its predecessors, a game goal that enables the

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93 F. Schröter: "Figur," p. 114.

94 Cf. Rauscher, Andreas. "Raum," in: Beil, Benjamin et al. (ed.), *Game Studies. Film, Fernsehen, Neue Medien*, Springer 2018, pp. 3-26.

95 Cf. on modes of reception Fahlenbrach, Kathrin/ Schröter, Felix: "Game Studies und Rezeptionsästhetik," in: Sachs-Hombach, Klaus/ Thon, Jan-Noel (eds.), *Game Studies. Aktuelle Ansätze der Computerspielforschung*, Köln: von Halem 2015, pp. 165-208.

96 F. Schröter: "Figur," p. 118.

97 Ibid., p. 117f.



aforementioned ‘short circuit’ based on “empathetic perspective-taking” is formulated.<sup>98</sup>

With C. Klimmt et. al. the “counterempathy”<sup>99</sup> of the recipient evoked in GOW I-III is turned into its opposite. At the same time, autonomy in the fulfillment of the task in GOW IV is complicated by an alien world, making the ludic element of curiosity in spatial exploration a basic requirement for the fulfillment of the game’s goal which is based on narrative emotions. However, this becomes possible only as a function of the companion character Atreus, highlighting the threat of another loss of a family member for Kratos in GOW IV, implied in the narrative, and constituting a threat to the actual progress of the game. In a sense, the restaged tragedy of the broken hero figure catches up with the ludic recipient in this way, moving into the center the tragedy of the hero figure at both the narrative and ludic levels. It is not for nothing that the impending death of his son causes the proverbial walk through Helheim. In this episode, it is exclusively the past of Kratos that is reactualized. Above all, the threat of a limited autonomy of the (Greek) gods, who are unable to break out of the “circle of patricide,”<sup>100</sup> is addressed.<sup>101</sup> This threat catches up with Kratos once again at the end of GOW IV, when he discovers the image of himself lying lifeless in his son’s lap on a wall along with a prophecy that is consistent with previous events.

GOW shows itself here exemplarily for digital games “as a highly self-reflexive medium,”<sup>102</sup> which on a narrative and ludic level brings together the action spectrum of player and game character through the aspect of limited autonomy. This means that despite third-person perspective, through strong linkage of

98 Ibid., p. 117.

99 Hefner, Dorothée/ Klimmt, Christoph/ Vorderer, Peter: “The Video Game Experience as ‘True’ Identification: A Theory of Enjoyable Alterations of Players’ Self-Perception,” in: *Communication Theory* 19 (2009), pp. 351-373.

100 [https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/The\\_Cycle\\_of\\_Patricide](https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/The_Cycle_of_Patricide) [04.06.2022].

101 This coven is mirrored by Baldur’s relationship with his mother Freya in GOW IV, for after Baldur is freed from his “curse” by the arrowhead of mistletoe on Atreus’ jacket, he wants to kill his mother Freya. Confronted with this impending parricide, Kratos intervenes and kills Baldur, pointing out that Kratos and Atreus, as gods, must now be better—must therefore free themselves from this circle of genealogical killing in which Kratos found himself in GOW I-III and with which he is confronted again in Helheim in GOW IV: “Quoting his father, Kratos claims that the cycle must end and that they all should be better, as he snaps Baldur’s neck a second time, killing him once and for all”: <https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/Baldur> [04.06.2022].

102 H. Bojahr: *Spielmechanik*, p. 240.

narrative and interactive levels and complexly staged perspectival coming together of player and game character, what C. Klimmt et al. already observed regarding identification processes in interactive media is to be achieved:

“Due to the direct link between players and characters that video game interactivity facilitates; it is reasonable to assume that very quick and profound alterations of players’ self-perception happen through identification.”<sup>103</sup>

This temporary change of the recipient’s point of view is the basis for empathy with the Spartan reenacted in GOW IV.

In conclusion, it should be noted that identification with heroic figures and their underlying narrative cores and schemes has been possible and intended since antiquity, even before the digital medium. The reduction to human affects is a dominant stylistic feature, that characterizes heroic figures and is able to bring complex historical events, as well as cultural horizons of meaning, into the recipient’s reflection in an exemplary way. An “*advance towards* a heroic figure as well as an absolute distancing from it can thus be achieved. With regard to GOW IV, it is not so much possible to speak of a sudden *humanization* of the hero or even to establish a new conception. “Trauma, as *the other* of heroic narrative”<sup>104</sup> is present from the beginning of the game series. Kratos is and remains the tragic heroic figure that he has been since GOW I; the difference with GOW IV lies primarily in the way GOW IV purposefully leads ludic recipients to play out and experience in it the multidimensionality of the figure through its reenactment, its limited ludic autonomy, and the narrative presentation of the complex heroic schema.

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103 Ibid., p. 358.

104 Assmann, Aleida: *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Gedächtnispolitik*, München: Beck 2006.

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# When Mad Science Found its Way in Digital Games<sup>1</sup>

On the Ludification of a Cultural Myth

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EUGEN PFISTER

## Abstract

As part of popular culture, digital games are always a media of collective identity construction. Thus, politically, socially and culturally relevant issues are also communicated, constructed and discussed here. This also includes the question of the freedoms and limits of science. A historical analysis of the figure of the Mad Scientist in digital games thus allows us insight into its changing history of ideas, specifically the history of discourse on science.

## INTRODUCTION

We are socialized in digital games to the same extent as we are in other media, with the important difference that values and boundaries of our culture and society are communicated here through play. This means that games also construct, communicate, and perpetuate collective identities. These are established by focusing

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1 This is my expanded and revised translation of my original German article: Pfister, Eugen: "'Doctor nod mad. Doctor insane.' Eine kurze Kulturgeschichte der Figur des mad scientist im digitalin Spiel," in: *Paidia-Zeitschrift.de*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.paidia.de/doctor-nod-mad-doctor-insane-eine-kurze-kulturgeschichte-der-figur-des-mad-scientist-im-digitalen-spiel/>

on the boundaries to the “other,” to the foreign, often with startling clarity.<sup>2</sup> Digital games are therefore also an expression of contemporary fears and desires and thus communicate—regardless of their intentions—political statements.

For this reason, the recurring tropes of mad scientists and inhumane medical experiments in digital games are always more than just a convenient means to quickly unfold a story. They function because they continue to address and communicate our collective fears and taboos. If you scratch on the surface of seemingly interchangeable game characters like Dr. Suchong in BIOSHOCK, Dr. Stanislaus Braun in FALLOUT 3 or Dr. Fred Edison in THE DAY OF THE TENTACLE<sup>3</sup>, you will easily recognize their models in our everyday world. But more still the figure of the mad scientist can be traced far back into our cultural history, to the stories of Dr. Jekyll, Dr. Frankenstein or Dr. Faustus. The question at the heart of all these stories is a deeply political one, namely: Where should the limits be on scientific research in our society?

Seasoned players know what to expect when they enter the grim corridors of an abandoned hospital or the eerily deserted labs of a secret research institute in a digital game. Flickering neon lights, broken instruments, fragmentary records, and bizarrely deformed skeletons tell a gruesome story of unethical experiments and their terrible consequences. It would appear that man has—again, alas—played God in these places and now must pay the price for his arrogance. Whether it is a foolhardy attempt to open the portal to another dimension, as in BEYOND TWO SOULS<sup>4</sup> and HALF-LIFE, or the genetic manipulation of the human genome, as in BIOSHOCK and the RESIDENT EVIL, the result is the same: a world on the brink of destruction with a single figure at the origin of the chaos, the archetypal mad scientist, most often a white middle-aged male.

Apart from his doctor title, his lab coat, and his notoriously manic laugh, what defines the mad scientist is his disregard for any ethical or moral principles in the pursuit of his research—although the reasons for embarking upon it appear initially to be rationally motivated. He shows no understanding of legal prohibitions or constraints, as he is convinced that his research and its outcome will justify any such transgression. He even accepts collateral damage to human life either in the short or even long-term once he has set his mind on his goal. In this way, he

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2 Pfister, Eugen/Görgen, Arno, “Politische Transferprozesse in digitalen Spielen. Eine Begriffsgeschichte,” in: Arno Görgen/Stefan Simond (eds.), *Krankheit in Digitalen Spielen*, Bielefeld: transcript 2020.

3 DAY OF THE TENTACLE (US 1993, O: Tim Schafer, Dave Grossman, and Ron Gilbert—LucasArts).

4 BEYOND TWO SOULS (FR 2013, O: Quantic Dream).



willingly violates countless norms and taboos, until finally and irrevocably transgressing the set of values, that make up our society. His motives vary: some acts are motivated by an attempt to save a loved one, others by a thirst for power or by hurt pride. Still others are driven by a pathological love of science. The results, however, are the same: morally dubious experiments that inevitably lead to an unfortunate series of horrific events.

The mad scientist as the extreme example of social deviance, that represents an unfettered science that no longer has to adhere to moral and ethical boundaries; he stands for the ambivalence between the belief in technological progress and the fear of technological uncontrollability.<sup>5</sup> His portrayal insinuates, *pars pro toto*, that there is a secret longing for liberation from the corset of petty morality among scientists.<sup>6</sup> It is significant that almost only men are believed by game developers to possess such a cold unethical but supposedly scientific rationale.<sup>7</sup>

The question is where the limits of scientific freedom should be set. This socio-political question is not something that has just cropped up in recent years or decades. This has been a concern for a long time and the mad scientist can look back on a long historical tradition. Today it is stem cell research and genetic engineering that are at the center of the debate, in the 1950s it was nuclear research, before that it was electricity and still earlier medicine in general. These examples already show that it is not fundamentally about restricting science. Rather, it is about anticipating possible dangers and, above all, about averting harm. This is particularly evident in the fiction that works through worst case scenarios. The digital mad scientist draws more or less directly on his analogue predecessors Dr. Moreau, Dr. Jekyll, Dr. Frankenstein, and Dr. Faustus.<sup>8</sup> The question that arises, however, is

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5 Flicker, Eva: "Wissenschaftlerinnen im Spiefilm. Zur Marginalisierung und Sexualisierung wissenschaftlicher Kompetenz," in: Junge, Torsten/Ohlhoff, Dörthe (eds.), *Wahnsinnig genial. Der Mad Scientist Reader*, Aschaffenburg: Alibri Verlag 2004, pp. 63-76, here p. 64.

6 Görgen, Arno/Kirschel, Matthis: "Dystopien von Medizin und Wissenschaft: Retro-Science-Fiction und die Kritik an der Technikgläubigkeit der Moderne im Computerspiel BioShock," in: Frauenholz, Uwe/Woschek, Anke (eds.), *Technology Fiction. Technische Visionen und Utopien in der Moderne*, Bielefeld: transcript 2012, pp. 271-288.

7 Weingart, Peter/ Muhl. Claudia/Pansegrau, Petra: "Of Power Maniacs and Unethical Geniuses: Science and Scientists in Fiction Film," in: *Public Understanding of Science* 12/3 (2003), pp. 279-287.

8 Wells, H.G.: *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, London: William Heinemann 1896; Stevenson, Robert Louis: *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, London: Longmans,

whether the figure of the mad scientist we find in digital games is just another translation of an otherwise unchanging (perpetual) myth into a new medium, its essence adapted to current research questions, or whether the medium of the game has changed the message itself.

## A BRIEF CULTURAL HISTORY OF MAD SCIENTISTS

The figure of the mad scientist has been recounted so often in literature, film and games that it has become a stereotype, a cliché, a myth. Precisely because we have already encountered him so many times, we immediately understand these narratives. We know at once what to expect and can identify ‘evil’ at first glance. At the same time, however, we have forgotten to consciously perceive the myth as a political message. Normally, we do not question it. We are not surprised when educated researchers suddenly throw all moral considerations overboard. The figure has already become too much a ‘natural’ component of horror and science fiction, and we no longer look for motivation or justification for the figure’s behavior.

In a study of the mad scientist in literature, the cultural scientist Eva Horn noted that this figure is much more than just a cautionary tale, warning us about the dangers of human hubris and the unknown consequences of technology. She argues that more generally the mad scientist helps to communicate and process an increasingly complex scientific world and functions as a visualization of the utterly incomprehensible.<sup>9</sup> Horn here refers to an essay by the historian Philipp Sarasin, who explains that in the figure of the mad scientist, the role of scientists in society in general is negotiated.<sup>10</sup> The mad scientist is thus not just a fictional motif with the intention to entertain, but an attempt to understand an increasingly over-

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Green & Co. 1886; Shelley, Mary: *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*, London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones 1818; Marlowe, Christopher: *Doctor Faustus*, London: Printed by I.R. for Thomas Bushell 1588.

- 9 Horn, Eva: “Abwege der Forschung. Zur literarischen Archäologie der wissenschaftlichen Neugierde (Frankenstein, Faust, Moreau),” in: Horn, Eva/ Menke, Bettine/Menke, Christoph (eds.), *Literatur als Philosophie—Philosophie als Literatur*, München: Fink 2006, pp. 153-172, here p. 157.
- 10 Sarasin, Philipp: “Das obszöne Genießen der Wissenschaft. Über Populärwissenschaft und mad scientists,” in: Sarasin, Philipp, *Geschichtswissenschaft und Diskursanalyse*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2003, p. 248.

complex scientific discourse in a public political sphere from a decidedly non-scientific perspective.

In 1989, the American literary scholar Faye Ringel showed the various possible transfer processes between fiction and politics in a short history of the mad scientist in (Western) literature and film. Ringel refers, for example, to an “[anti-]genetic engineering” campaign initiated by the American sociologist and political activist Jeremy Rifkin in 1984<sup>11</sup>, in which Rifkin regularly invoked the archetype of the mad scientist.<sup>12</sup> The Japanologist Sari Kawana went one step further in his analysis. He considered the figure of the mad scientist in Japanese crime novels of the interwar period as a reaction to the Japanese Empire’s aggressive and increasingly eugenic-driven scientific policies with parallels to the NS regime.<sup>13</sup> This demonstrates that the figure of the mad scientist is not just a stereotype, but has become a language itself. Depending on the semantic environment, it can be used to communicate different statements.

In his research on the mad scientist in feature films, the British film scholar Andrew Tudor claimed to have observed a remarkable qualitative transformation of the mad scientist towards the end of the 20th century.<sup>14</sup> While the figure in the films of the 1930s still stood for “knowledge and its dangers,” in the 1980s, according to Tudor, he increasingly became a marginal figure devoid of content: “just one repressive tool among many.”<sup>15</sup> In 2005, the British historian Christopher Frayling in his monograph *Mad, Bad and Dangerous? The Scientist and the Cinema* meticulously traced the depiction of the scientist over nearly a century of film history. For Frayling, the fictional figure was no longer merely a symptom of a contemporary skepticism about science, but also a contributing cause of this growing skepticism. The American cultural anthropologist Christopher Toumey sees the reason for the increasingly negative portrayal of the scientist in a

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11 Boffey, Philip: *Working Profile: Jeremy Rifkin; an activist takes on genetic engineering*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/04/11/us/working-profile-jeremy-rifkin-an-activist-takes-on-genetic-engineering.html>

12 Ringel, Faye J.: “Genetic Experiments: Mad Scientists and The Beast,” in: *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 1/5 (1989), pp. 64-75.

13 Kawana, Sari: “Mad Scientists and Their Prey: Bioethics, Murder, and Fiction in Interwar Japan,” in: *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 31/1 (2005), pp. 89-120.

14 Tudor, Andrew: *Monsters and Mad Scientists: Cultural History of the Horror Movie*. Hoboken, Jon Wiley & Sons 1989.

15 Tudor, Andrew: “Seeing the worst side of Science,” in: *Nature* 340 (1989), pp. 589-592, here p. 592.

persisting tradition of anti-rationalism.<sup>16</sup> He also blames the translation of the character from novel to film for an increased amorality of the characters portrayed.<sup>17</sup> The German cultural critic Georg Seeßlen also claims to have noticed a qualitative change here from an “Epoche der Wissenschaft” (epoch of science) to an “Epoche der Mystik” (epoch of mysticism).<sup>18</sup>

Apart from a monograph by Rudolf Inderst on the representation of science in digital games<sup>19</sup> and recently an anthology edited by Arno Görgen and Rudolf Inderst<sup>20</sup> on the same topic there is an essay by Arno Görgen and Matthis Krischel on dystopias of medicine and science using the concrete example of the first-person shooter BIOSHOCK.<sup>21</sup> In their essay, the two historians point out that games, like all other popular cultural media, often develop the potential for social critique and can thus, for example, alert us to present-day currents critical of progress and technology.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, an essay by Lucy Atkinson, Vincent Cichirillo, Anthony Dudo and Samantha Marx should be mentioned, which, based on an online survey, examined the representation of scientists in games with a so-called technoscience setting.<sup>23</sup> Like the above-mentioned studies in literature and film studies, Görgen and Krischel also assume a—still undefined—potential interaction

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16 Toumey, Christopher: “The Moral Character of Mad Scientists: A Cultural Critique of Science,” in: *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 17/4 (1992), pp. 411-437.

17 Ibid, p. 419.

18 Seeßlen, Georg: “Mad Scientist. Repräsentation des Wissenschaftlers im Film,” in: *Gegenworte* 3/1999, pp. 44-45, here p. 44f.

19 Inderst, Rudolf: *Die Darstellung von Wissenschaft im digitalen Spiel*, Glückstadt: Verlag Werner Hülsbusch 2018.

20 Görgen, Arno/Inderst, Rudolf (eds.): *Wissenschaft und Technologie in digitalen Spielen*, Marburg: Büchner Verlag 2020.

21 BIOSHOCK (US 2007, O: 2K Boston); A. Görgen/M. Kirschel: “Dystopien von Medizin und Wissenschaft: Retro-Science-Fiction und die Kritik an der Technikgläubigkeit der Moderne im Computerspiel BioShock,” pp. 271-288.

22 Görgen, Arno/Kirschel, Matthis: “Dystopien von Medizin und Wissenschaft. Retro-Science-Fiction und die Kritik an der Technikgläubigkeit der Moderne im Computerspiel Bioshock,” in: Frauenholz, Uwe/Woschek, Anke (eds.), *Technology Fiction. Technische Visionen und Utopien in der Moderne*, Bielefeld: transcript 2012, pp. 271-288.

23 Dudo, Athony/Cichirillo, Vincent/Atkinson, Lucy/ Marx, Samantha: “Portrayals of Technoscience in Video Games: A Potential Avenue for Informal Science Learning,” in: *Science Communication* 36/2 (2004), pp. 219–247.

between popular cultural discourse and a political public sphere, i.e. that attitudes towards science can be adopted here, for example.

It is not my intention to investigate how authentic popular cultural depictions of scientists are. Comparing Dr. Robotnik (aka Dr. Eggman) from the SONIC game series<sup>24</sup> with the robotics specialists from Boston Dynamics is rather pointless. Fictional mad scientists are inauthentic in that they do not mirror an extra-medial reality, but instead construct an intra-medial reality. According to Aleida Assmann:

“Media [...] are far more than the basis for worldwide human communication. They also mediate between man and the world and between man and the mind, or imagination. Because of their constructive character, they are productive instruments of world-making and world-shaping.”<sup>25</sup>

The aim of a cultural-historical investigation must therefore be to deconstruct these ideas present in mass media and popular culture and to uncover the underlying debates on values and norms.

## THE MYTH OF THE MAD SCIENTIST

In digital games, and in popular culture in general, political statements are often ‘hidden’ in plain sight. They appear stereotypical and are therefore not questioned by either the developers or the players. In this way, they congeal into a myth in the reading of Roland Barthes. Between 1954 and 1956, Barthes analyzed so-called ‘Mythologies’ in 53 texts, a collection of eclectic cultural semiotic reflections on detergents, Charlie Chaplin, the world of catching, and so on. In each text, Barthes revealed ideological ‘myths’ hidden in supposedly apolitical artefacts and narratives, ideological messages that are not immediately recognizable as such.

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- 24 The mainline SONIC series presently encompasses 13 titles, from: SONIC THE HEDGEHOG (JP 1991, O: Sega—Sonic Team), to: SONIC FORTRESS (JP 2017, O: Sega—Sonic Team). See: “Gameography” for a full list.
- 25 Originally: “Medien sind weit mehr als die Grundlage für weltweite menschliche Kommunikation. Sie vermitteln auch zwischen Mensch und Welt sowie zwischen Mensch und Geist, bzw. Imagination. Aufgrund ihres konstruktiven Charakters sind sie produktive Instrumente der Welthervorbringung und -gestaltung.” Assmann, Aleida: *Einführung in die Kulturwissenschaft*, Berlin: Erich Schmid Verlag 2008, p. 89, my translation.

Naturally, Barthes had not yet thought of digital games. However, from the very beginning, the concept of myth was not bound to any particular medium, but was designed to be so open that it could potentially be found in any communication process.

In this sense the political myth in the digital game refers to a political or ideological statement (with implicit instructions for action) that has taken on the appearance of naturalness and is therefore (often) not understood as such by either game developers or players. Accordingly, the myth is reproduced unconsciously and can also change its quality—just as unnoticed—in the process of medial change.

The political myth is characterized by the following four features. 1. the political myth is never a single sign (a clichéd figure, a motif, a symbol, etc.), but a political statement composed of a system of mutually reinforcing signs. 2. The political myth is a seemingly immediately obvious political statement. That is why it is often repeated in several places, i.e., in several games or media forms. Through its repetition, the myth reinforces the appearance of so-called naturalness and is thus henceforth unconsciously reproduced. 3. A Political myth disguises history in its argumentation. It quotes well-known aesthetic models and transfers them to current phenomena without becoming historically specific. This means that it references not so much “real” historical phenomena themselves, but above all their (no less real) aesthetic shell. It gains its persuasiveness from this reference to its supposed predecessors, which in turn reinforces an appearance of naturalness. 4. Despite its superficially historical argumentation, every political myth is clearly locatable in its topicality and can only be understood in a concrete contemporary historical context.<sup>26</sup>

In this logic the myth of the mad scientist does not consist of the game character alone, but is composed of the narrative of destruction and hubris, a specific language and aesthetics in interaction with—most often—conflict-based game mechanics. The message conveyed through the myth is, according to Barthes, not hidden per se, on the contrary it appears in the open: in our case the dangers of uncontrolled scientific research. This message however is usually not questioned since it immediately enters the collective subconscious, it appears to be “natural”.<sup>27</sup>

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26 Pfister, Eugen: “Der Politische Mythos als diskursive Aussage im digitalen Spiel. Ein Beitrag aus der Perspektive der Politikgeschichte,” in: Junge, Thorsten/Schumacher, Claudia (eds.), *Digitale Spiele im Diskurs*, Hagen, 2018, <http://www.medien-im-diskurs.de>

27 Cf. Ibid.

The question remains whether the myth of the mad scientist in digital games is merely a reinterpretation of a cultural motif that is otherwise unchanged (i.e., in terms of content and function). If so, an analysis of its role in digital games would be nothing more than an interesting addition to a field that has already been well researched. However, as a result of its translation into a new medium, we must assume that the myth of the mad scientist has also fundamentally changed in quality, that the medium of the game has in a certain sense become part of the message—to use Marshall McLuhan’s term loosely. In the following, I would therefore like to explore the question of whether the image of the mad scientist in digital games does not, in fact, satisfy both assumptions. On the one hand, the myth is self-referential and suggests an apparent historical continuity through repeated references to previous literary and cinematic examples, but at the same time it has undergone a significant qualitative change due to the requirements of the medium, especially in terms of game mechanics and rules.

### **“WHY WOULDN’T I END UP IN THE CREEPIEST PLACE ON PLANET EARTH?”<sup>28</sup>—A TOPOLOGY OF THE MAD SCIENTIST**

Before we focus on the figure of the mad scientist in digital games, it is worth taking a closer look at his environment. It is no coincidence that the setting of the game’s action is often an architectural ruin. First of all, these signs of destruction and abandonment are indications of what has happened. We see direct references to the havoc caused by unbridled research: abandoned sanatoriums in *UNTIL DAWN* and *OUTLAST*, destroyed laboratories in *HALF-LIFE* AND *BEYOND: TWO SOULS*, or entire cities laid waste in the *RESIDENT EVIL* series, in *THE EVIL WITHIN* or *F.E.A.R. 2: PROJECT ORIGIN*.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the image of the ruin is more than just evidence of destruction: In 1907, George Simmel wrote along these lines in an essay on the aesthetics of ruins:

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28 Mike in *UNTIL DAWN* (UK 2015, O: Supermassive Games).

29 *UNTIL DAWN*; *OUTLAST* (CA 2013, O: Red Barrels); *HALF-LIFE* (US 1998, O: Valve); *RESIDENT EVIL 1* (JP 1996, O: Capcom); *RESIDENT EVIL 2* (JP 1998, O: Capcom); *RESIDENT EVIL 5* (JP 2009, O: Capcom); *RESIDENT EVIL: CODE VERONICA* (JP 2000, O: Capcom); *EVIL WITHIN*; *The* (JP 2014, O: Tango Gameworks); *F.E.A.R. 2: PROJECT ORIGIN* (US 2009, O: Monolith Productions).

“This shift becomes a cosmic tragedy which, so we feel, makes every ruin an object infused with our nostalgia; for now, the decay appears as nature’s revenge for the spirit’s having violated it by making a form of its own image.”<sup>30</sup>

Here a partial message of the mad scientist myth is revealed: the violation of the natural order.

This moment of horror also works so well because many of these ludic spaces appear familiar. They resonate with our everyday lives: Waiting rooms, examination rooms, corridors and offices, toilets, office kitchens, and so on. A familiar environment is alienated through the game, it unsettles us. An “environmental estrangement” takes place, which forces us to view familiar spaces from a different, usually unpleasant perspective.<sup>31</sup>

The aim of this estrangement is to call into question our trust in medicine and science. In a way, the ruins are like a stage in a play, they support the main performer who, in the game, is the figure of the mad scientist, and at the same time they serve as a commentary. In contrast to the traditional stage, however, they are not a space set apart from the audience, but are spaces to be actively explored and uncovered by the player. Thus, the players themselves become part of the figure of the mad scientist, an extension of his body. After all, he is at the heart of the destruction, and is its catalyst.

But the stage metaphor falls short. In fact, space also functions as a language, especially in digital games. Joachim Friedmann, referring to Juri Lotman’s concept of the “semantic field,” has shown that space is never a “neutral container” but rather semantically charged actions.<sup>32</sup> According to Lotman, the setting of the border in particular takes on a central semantic role. Here, in turn, resonances with the theory of “collective identities” are apparent, for here, too, borders are of central importance in the definition of the “us” and the “others.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, the

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30 “Diese Verschiebung schlägt in eine kosmische Tragik aus, die für unser Empfinden jede Ruine in den Schatten der Wehmut rückt, denn jetzt erscheint der Verfall als die Rache der Natur für die Vergewaltigung, die der Geist ihr durch die Formung nach seinem Bilde angetan hat: Simmel, Georg: “Die Ruine. Ein ästhetischer Versuch,” in: socio.ch <http://socio.ch/sim/verschiedenes/1907/ruine.htm>, from 20.05.2017. My translation.

31 A. Görden/M. Kirschel: “Dystopien von Medizin und Wissenschaft: Retro-Science-Fiction und die Kritik an der Technikgläubigkeit der Moderne im Computerspiel BioShock,” pp. 271-288.

32 Friedmann, Joachim: *Transmediales Erzählen*, Konstanz: 2016, p.29.

33 Ibid, p. 31.



devastated spaces in digital games are to be read as signs of a transgressed border. The space of science is visibly separated from other spaces, but the devastation quickly threatens to spread to non-scientific space as well.

**“IT IS THE WAY OF MAN TO MAKE MONSTERS.  
AND IT IS THE WAY OF MONSTERS TO  
DESTROY THEIR MAKERS”<sup>34</sup>**

In order to examine the figure of the mad scientist in digital games, it makes sense to ascribe it two different functions: The instigator and the antagonist. There are also other functions to be discerned. In addition to the types A (instigator) and B (antagonist) which will be outlined below, we can also identify types C (supporter) and D (comic relief) in digital games, though the scope of this essay is limited to the first two.

**TYPE A: THE MAD SCIENTIST AS  
THE LEGITIMIZATION OF THE GAME'S ACTION**

Let us begin with type A: The mad scientist as the instigator of horror. In the horror-survival game UNTIL DAWN, we only meet the unethical scientists through narrative references, the existence of an abandoned sanatorium and the monsters they have created. Players can piece together a coherent story if they are careful enough to find the clues scattered throughout the game: hospital admittance forms, doctor's reports, and old video recordings. Thus, they learn the story from several survivors buried in a mining accident who were admitted to a nearby hospital half a century ago. These miners fell victim to an ancient Native American curse, and transformed into hideous monsters before the very eyes of the doctors treating them. Instead of helping the victims as they underwent this transformation, they were observed and experimented upon. The doctors, in keeping with the nature of the genre, were the first to fall victim to their unethical curiosity, as their patients, now mutating into so-called *Wendigos*, developed super-human reflexes and

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34 Dr. Harlan Wade in F.E.A.R.

strength and killed them. In the present-day action of the game, however, the sanatorium staff has been dead for over sixty years.<sup>35</sup>

It is a similar story with the character Yi Suchong, a medical researcher in the story of the first-person shooter game BIOSHOCK. In the game's narrative, he and geneticist Brigid Tenenbaum were responsible for genetic and neuropsychological modifications of prisoners into monstrous "Big Daddies." In the service of venture capitalist Frank Fontaine, Suchong had no scruples about his research, in contrast to Tenenbaum. We witness an example of his almost sadistic cold-bloodedness in an "audio-diary," a tape-recording in which we hear Dr. Suchong compelling a boy (this is a childhood experience of the protagonist Jack) to kill his puppy as part of a "mind control" experiment. By the time of the game's action, however, Suchong has already died at the hands of his creation. A similar "ironic death" also befalls the character of Dr. Harlan Wade in F.E.A.R. For several years he had supervised the increasingly unethical experiments on his own daughter Alma, who had developed psychic telekinetic powers in her early childhood. Released by her father, the daughter turns on her creator and brutally murders him.

In these games, the scientists themselves do not take an active role in the game insofar as the player cannot directly interact with them. The players are not given the opportunity to stop the researchers in time before the damage is done. Instead, it is through their creations that the players interact with the mad scientist. Without Yi Suchong, there would be no monstrously deformed Splicers and Big Daddies for the player to fight in BIOSHOCK. Without the nameless scientist of the Black Mesa Research Centre, an invasion of alien monsters would never have been possible in HALF-LIFE.

One fundamental difference to film and literature is that players of digital games usually need to actively work out the background story. Whereas in the past, the plot of a game was told through the classic use of cinematic cutscenes, more recent games rely on immersive and environmental storytelling as a narrative device. The gameplay then is no longer interrupted by the above-mentioned film sequences. In BIOSHOCK, for example, the background story is told through strategically placed audio-diary entries which the players must first find and then choose to listen to. However, it is possible to complete the game without having even heard the voice of Dr Yi Suchong.

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35 Pfister, Eugen "Teenie-Slasher-Horror-Klischees vom 'Psychopathen' zum 'Indi-  
anerfluch' (Fallstudie 55: Until Dawn)," in: *Horror-Game-Politics*, <http://hgp.hypotheses.org/1352>, from 11.05.2021.

## “SURE, I AM NOT HUMAN ANYMORE BUT JUST LOOK AT THE POWER I HAVE GAINED”:<sup>36</sup>

### TYPE B: THE ANTAGONIST

Often the mad scientist is not only the instigator of horror in digital games, but he also embodies it. He becomes the central antagonist in terms of the narrative and, in particular, in terms of game mechanics: The Soviet scientist Dr. Demichev in *SINGULARITY*, Professor Hojo in *FINAL FANTASY VII*, Dr. Strasse in *WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER*, but also, to an extent, Dr. Fred Edison in *MANIAC MANSION*.<sup>37</sup> They no longer solely justify the plot, but move independently in the game world, also encountering the players. There are a few examples where it is possible for the players to reason with them. For example, players can try to reason with the character of Dr. Nathan Dawkins<sup>38</sup> in *Beyond: Two Souls* to get him to change his mind. Dawkins, who at the start of the game takes on the father role of the young protagonist Jodie, turns out to be the main antagonist towards the end of the game. He creates a rift in a parallel dimension so that he can communicate with his dead family. At the climax of the game, the player can try and convince him of the error of his actions—press X to reason—and as a consequence of this newly gained insight he takes his own life. Here, the mad-scientist narrative develops in parallel with its cinematic tradition, which is no coincidence, as developer Quantic Dream, led by David Cage, is known for developing games that see themselves as interactive films. In *FALLOUT 3*,<sup>39</sup> players also get the opportunity to defeat the sociopathic Dr. Stanislaus Braun by other means than brute force.

The ability to reason is however an exception rather than a rule. In the majority of games featuring a mad scientist as the antagonist, the player’s interaction is limited to a fight for life or death. Neither Dr. “Deathshead” Strasse, in the *Wolfenstein* series<sup>40</sup> nor William Birkin in the *RESIDENT EVIL* game series can transcend this frame of expectation. One of the biggest challenges for game developers

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36 Albert Wesker in *RESIDENT EVIL 5*.

37 *SINGULARITY* (US 2010, O: Raven Software); *FINAL FANTASY VII* (JP 1997, O: Square); *WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER* (US 2014, O: MachineGames); *MANIAC MANSION* (US 1987, O: Lucasfilm Games).

38 Here, too, the similarity of the name to the well-known British evolutionary biologist and self-confessed agnostic is no coincidence.

39 *FALLOUT 3* (US 2008, O: Bethesda Game Studios).

40 *WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER* (US 2014, O: MachineGames); *WOLFENSTEIN: OLD BLOOD* (US 2015, O: MachineGames).

here is how to stage a satisfying showdown with a mad scientist, when a traditional attribute for scientists in cultural representations is their physical fragility.

In *WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER* the writers/developers decided to equip the aging sadistic doctor with a highly-developed mechanical exoskeleton. The player must defeat him in the endgame in an energy-sapping battle. Here, the mad scientist is no longer just a story-set piece, he becomes tangible game mechanics. He takes up space, he causes damage to the player and he takes damage himself. More importantly, he becomes an obstacle. He has to be overcome, defeated. The confrontations with William Birkin in *RESIDENT EVIL 2* and Albert Wesker in *RESIDENT EVIL 5* are similar. The overarching narration of the *RESIDENT EVIL* game universe begins with the mass production of the so-called T-virus commissioned by the *Umbrella Corporation*. It transpires in the games that a side effect of this virus transforms those infected into dangerous zombies. In the main storyline, a certain Dr. James Marcus is credited with its research, but has already died before the game action in *RESIDENT EVIL 1* takes place. In other words, he is a type A mad scientist. His former assistant William Birkin continues the research on the pathogen and infects himself voluntarily with the G-virus in *RESIDENT EVIL 2*. As a result, he mutates into an increasingly grotesque monster who progressively loses the ability to act rationally. The player must defeat him several times, and each time Birkin dies he mutates into a yet more grotesque and more dangerous form, so that in the end he no longer resembles a human being at all. The final battle against Albert Wesker in *RESIDENT EVIL 5* is similar.

What these mad scientists have in common is that through the zealous pursuit of research, they are turned into overpowering foes that the player must defeat. Scientific progress at any price is communicated through the mutated bodies of the enemies. Here, mad scientists resemble their cartoonish counterparts from platform games such as Dr. Eggman from the *SONIC* game series and Dr. Willy from the *MEGA MAN*<sup>41</sup> series. The reason for the prosthetic extension of their bodies lies in the game mechanics. Ascribed the role of antagonist, according to the logic of many games they must also take on the role of the “final boss,” and should therefore constitute an almost insurmountable threat to players. In doing so, they also transgress the boundaries of our established normative notions of the human body, thus aesthetically highlighting their social deviance from the rest of society. This trend towards humans augmented by prosthetics is partly reflected in the super hero films of the last two decades, such as the figure of the mad scientist

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41 The *MEGA MAN* series presently encompasses eight titles, from: *MEGA MAN* (Japan 1987, O: Capcom), to: *MEGA MAN 11* (Japan 2018, O: Capcom). See: “Gameography” for a full list.

Doctor Octopus in *Spiderman*.<sup>42</sup> Unlike films, encounters with mad scientists in games do not follow a predefined script. Although the outcome is predictable—the players are supposed to win—achieving this goal is not a given. If it comes to a fight, in contrast to novels and films, there is always the risk of defeat.

It can be argued that failure, meaning the death of the player's character, may even be one of the central moments of the gaming experience, especially in first-person shooter games and action-adventure games. Failure is an integral part of the learning process in the game. In particular, battles at the end of the game, so-called 'boss fights', are usually designed to be particularly challenging, so that often the player will need to repeatedly tackle them anew, until the mad scientist can finally be overcome. The frequent repetition of one and the same game sequence coupled with a growing feeling of frustration potentially makes it increasingly difficult for the player to feel any empathy with the opponent, as is common in films and novels. So, while mad scientists are often perceived as tragic heroes in film and literature, it is hard to develop a similar understanding of an increasingly mutated Albert Wesker. Instead, we learn from the game to internalize their attacking patterns and specifically look for weak points in our opponents. The final boss degenerates into an annoying obstacle that has to be swept aside by any means necessary.

**“I’VE LOST CONTROL!”<sup>43</sup>**

## **THE MAD FEMALE SCIENTIST IN GAMES**

At the start of this essay, I mentioned that the mad scientist in digital games is predominantly male. Here, in line with traditional depictions of the mad scientist in other media, it seems that almost exclusively men are believed to have a cool—empathy-less—but supposedly logical thirst for knowledge at all costs. However, the character of Brigid Tenenbaum in *BIOSHOCK* shows that there are some exceptions. It is also notable that Tenenbaum, unlike Suchong who appears to be motivated solely by greed, is originally led by a love for science, albeit misguided. In audio diaries found in the game, this love for science is explained to be motivated by antecedent experiences as a prisoner in a German concentration camp. A supposedly male scientific curiosity must apparently be justified by a traumatic

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42 In comics, which in many respects follow a similar narrative structure to build suspense as digital games, comparable mad scientists such as Dr. Freeze, Poison Ivy, etc. already existed much earlier.

43 Dr. Helga von Schabbs in *WOLFENSTEIN: OLD BLOOD*.

experience. As a mad scientist, Tenenbaum is an exceptional case for different reasons. Over the course of the narrative, she acknowledges, for instance, that she has made mistakes, and from this moment tries to make up for them by supporting the protagonist of the game. There is an audio diary that deals with Tenenbaum's role as a woman/mother: "What makes something like me? I look at genes all day long, and never do I see imprints of sin. I could blame the Germans, but in truth I did not find tormentors in the prison camp, but kindred spirits. These children I brutalized have awakened something inside that for most is beautiful and natural, but in me, is an abomination...my maternal instinct." Thus, according to the game's narrative, in order to become a successful researcher, Tenenbaum has had to consciously reject her role as a woman. Maternal instincts here are portrayed as a threat to the position of scientist. She finally succumbs, however, to her "maternal instinct" by protecting the young girls who have been genetically modified and mentally conditioned into becoming so-called "little sisters." In this respect, the character of Brigid Tenenbaum leaves the classic scheme of the mad scientist, while at the same time confirming this "male" myth.

The character of the psychiatrist Sofia Lamb from BIOSHOCK 2<sup>44</sup> comes closer to the male role model. As chosen leader of the hopeless and forgotten of an inhumane libertarian city-state, locked in a struggle against those in power, she seeks to establish a society free from selfishness. With this noble goal in mind, however, she does not shy away from increasingly unethical methods. She subjects the poor and the working classes to mass mental conditioning to establish a society free from egotism, and to fight those in power. Then, when she realizes towards the end of the game that her plans are endangered, she decides to kill all of her followers. With her manic fixation on a social utopia, the character of Sofia Lamb's thus conforms far more to the usual trope of the mad scientist than Tenenbaum.<sup>45</sup>

The character Helga von Schabbs in WOLFENSTEIN: OLD BLOOD is a trained archaeologist and leader of an SS division for paranormal activity, engaged in a project to summon a mystical primordial monster. We are shown that von Schabbs is intellectually superior to the protagonist in several—not interactive—cutscenes. After she summons a mystical monster, however, it quickly turns on her and she is fatally injured. Both Lamb and von Schabbs fulfil the role of mad scientist. There are differences to male scientists, however. With both characters, the

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44 BIOSHOCK 2 (US 2010, O: 2K Marin).

45 Pfister, Eugen: "Avec les anges si purs / La mer / Bergère d'azur, infinie (BioShock 2)," in: *Horror-Game-Politics*, <http://hgp.hypotheses.org/1621>, 30.11.2021.

players cannot interact directly, their actions are predetermined by the story.<sup>46</sup> Nor can the players face them at the climax of the game in a final battle. Also, both characters represent so-called “soft sciences” of psychology/ philosophy (Sofia Lamb) and archaeology (von Schabbs).

There is one game where the player can battle a woman in the role of a mad scientist. Alexia Ashford in *Resident Evil: CODE VERONICA*. Her character seems almost directly lifted from the background story and game-play features of the character William Birkin from *RESIDENT EVIL 2*, including the increasingly grotesque physiognomic mutations. Nevertheless, compared to examples of male mad scientists, it hardly seems an “equitable” representation. Her appearance in cutscenes brings to mind the stereotype of an immature young girl with her high-pitched voice and nervous giggle and mannerisms. Her coyly delivered: “I still have experiments to perform. Would you care to play along?” evokes more the idea of a spoilt, latently asocial girl from a rich family, rather than an assertive scientist. She thus conforms to the cliché of a sexualized “child-woman” often used in games.

In most games, then, the classic figure of a mad scientist remains primarily male. The fact that female mad scientists are often assigned so-called soft sciences like psychology and archaeology would suggest that game developers are still invested in seeing the figure of the mad scientist imbued with traditionally “male” attributes for the foreseeable future. It would appear that women are not deemed to possess the evil rationale necessary to inhabit such a character, as bourgeois gender norms from the 19th century would still appear to have a strong foothold here, as described by Karin Hausen.<sup>47</sup> The idea of “polar gender characteristics” found broad social consensus at the time: men as “individuals” were assigned “culture,” “reason,” “activity,” “energy,” (political) violence and thus the “public” sphere; women were assigned “nature,” “emotionality,” “passivity,” “weakness,” and in this sense, the “private,” domestic sphere.<sup>48</sup> This is exemplified in the character of Brigid Tenenbaum, who suddenly finds herself unexpectedly confronted with her “maternal instinct”—supposedly only reserved for women—which apparently makes it impossible for her to continue her research. Even the character

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46 In *BIOSHOCK*, however, the players have the opportunity to decide the fate of Lamb by making certain moral decisions.

47 Hausen, Karin. “Die Polarisierung der ‘Geschlechtscharaktere’—Eine Spiegelung der Dissoziation von Erwerbs- und Familienleben,” in: *Frauenarbeit und Familie. Series: Schriftenreihe des Sfb 186 der Universität Bremen*, Hausen, Karin/Wunder, Heide (eds.), vol. 3, 11-40. Klett-Cotta, 1976, pp. 363-393.

48 Ibid.

of Helga von Schabbs, who is otherwise a match for the protagonist, is condemned to passivity by the monster at the climax of the game. This can be understood in the tradition of how women are persistently represented in a problematic way in digital games. Typically, women “tend to be found in the passive, non-controllable supporting roles.”<sup>49</sup> In particular, enemies and ‘bosses’ are and have always been predominantly male in games.<sup>50</sup> Alexia Ashford alone fulfils this role, although she is not presented as a rational scientist but with her shrill giggle, gives us more the impression of a mentally and emotionally unstable person.

**OUTLOOK: “STEP ONE: FIND PLANS,  
STEP TWO: SAVE THE WORLD,  
STEP THREE: GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!  
LET’S GET GOING!”<sup>51</sup>**

On the one hand, the myth of the mad scientist in digital games appears to be a current iteration of a traditional—in fact century old—popular cultural perspective on science. Its translation into a fictional framework enables a space to negotiate widespread fears evident in public discourse, be they on stem cell research, artificial intelligence or quantum physics. The trope of the mad scientist is a reflection of the distrust held by many towards the closed world of science, which in turn perpetuates this distrust. The frequent appearance of the mad scientist attests to the fact that what we are dealing with here is a popular cultural discourse that is deeply rooted within our (Western) cultures. When faced with a grotesque monster, a larger-than-life caricature or emotionally conflicted figure, the player immediately knows how to respond in the game world. The political message that the mad scientist carries has not fundamentally altered in content. According to this logic, scientists are still assumed to harbor a secret desire to transgress ethical limitations, which naturally is also the premise of the narrative. This widespread suspicion is beautifully illustrated in one of the three possible endings in the first-person shooter game *SINGULARITY*. With the help of the benevolent scientist Barisov, the protagonist succeeds in defeating Demichev, the mad scientist. If the

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49 Grapenthin, Helga: “Geschlechterbilder in Computer- und Videospiele,” in: Bevc, Tobias; Zapf, Holger (eds.): *Wie wir spielen, was wir werden: Computerspiele in unserer Gesellschaft*, Konstanz: UVK 2009, pp. 161-184.

50 Ibid., p. 170.

51 Dr. Fred Edison in *DAY OF THE TENTACLE*.



players then decide to help Barisov, however, the story repeats itself, only this time Barisov becomes the world-conquering mad scientist. This can be understood—with reference to Toumey—as an anti-rationalist reaction, or as a necessary repetition of a collective warning not to give up social control of science.

The humanities—with the exception of the occult National Socialist archaeologist mentioned above—seem for the most part harmless in the context of these games. It is mainly genetic engineers, quantum physicists and medical doctors who allow themselves in these games to become seduced into unethical behavior, and their cold-blooded and inhuman rationality is generally attributed to men. In this respect, the depiction of the mad scientist in these games corresponds with those in films, television, etc.

On the other hand, the myth's translation into the digital game has brought with it some significant qualitative changes, the effects of which can only be speculated on at this point. When the mad scientist becomes an opponent in the digital game, here in contrast to film and literature, the player must actively defeat him (or her). Thus, in games, the mad scientist has to be transformed into a powerful threat in order to pose a challenge to the players, either with the help of artificial prosthetics or by progressively mutating, diminishing/obscuring his human nature. This makes him appear and act even less like a human being (therefore the players need not treat them as such). The constant irritation caused by attempts to defeat the mad scientist make the figure yet more emotionally distant for the player. Anyone who has died twenty times at the hands of the enemy and now has to repeat one and the same battle again probably feels little sympathy for his virtual adversary.

There are many questions still to be answered, which could not be covered within the scope of this short text. Here, I focused on the mad scientist as the instigator of dramaturgical conflict and as the antagonist. For the time being, I had to omit those representations which show the mad scientist as a benevolent or neutral figure. It would be interesting here to investigate how 'good' or 'bad' mad scientists differ in how they are staged and their message is communicated. Finally, the central question of what effects the increased dehumanization of and emotional distance to these scientists can have on science and public discourse must unfortunately remain unanswered at this point.

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## **Medial Boundaries**





# Serial Games in a Transmedial World

## A Typology for the Digital Age

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SVEN GRAMPP

### Abstract

Computer games that refer to previously unfolded serial narrative worlds reflect the relationship between media in various forms. They offer different suggestions on how to think about the relationship between part and whole, which is fundamental to all (transmedial) serial storytelling. This article illustrates this observation by analyzing three computer games, namely *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER* (2003), *ENTER THE MATRIX* (2003) and *THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON ONE* (2012). All of them are transmedial extensions of serial narrative worlds established in other media contexts. In different ways they reflect the relationship between part and whole on an intermedial level as part of ongoing transmedial storytelling. The main aim thereby is to offer a typology of intermedial reflections in the age of transmedial storytelling.

Let's play a game!

The task of this game is to put together as many big and notoriously fuzzy terms from the humanities as possible, and to link them as coherently as possible. Consider the following text as a walk through a world in which I take up as many of these terms as possible and try to put them together. In proceeding this way, a typology is sketched that will serve to analyze intermedial phenomena in the context of both transmedial and serial narrative worlds.<sup>1</sup> I will illustrate the different

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1 Cf. Rajewsky, Irina O: "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality," in: *Intermédialités / Intermediality* (6) 2005, pp. 43-64, <https://doi.org/10.7202/10055>; Schröter, Jens: "Discourses and

types based on some computer games, which relate to serial narrative worlds already before constituted in other media. Computer games are particularly interesting in this context because firstly, in the age of serial media convergence, they have been under special pressure to legitimize themselves from the beginning, which in turn made intermedial reflections particularly urgent.

Secondly, their role and status in a transmedial narrative world has changed considerably over time. In the 90s, transmedial narrations became popular in all media. Computer games<sup>2</sup> are a part of this development. Different intermedial relations were quickly formed: starting with the computer game to the film or television series as part of the franchise business, then on to the computer game that narrates events between individual films of a movie series, or is set between seasons of television series, all the way to computer game series that are set within a serial world already established in other media contexts.<sup>3</sup>

In the following, I will illustrate this thesis by analyzing three computer games. All of them are transmedial extensions of serial narrative worlds established in other media contexts. These three computer games were chosen because they prototypically present very different ways in which the relationship between part and whole is reflected on an intermedial level as part of ongoing transmedial storytelling.

First, I will look at the computer game published in 2002 for the television series *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER* (hereafter: *BUFFY*), which was first broadcast over seven seasons on the US network channels *The WB* and *UPN* between 1997 and 2003.<sup>4</sup> This is followed by an exploration of the 2003-released computer game

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Models of Intermediality,” in: *Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1790>; Jenkins, Henry: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University Press 2006; Long, Geoffrey A.: *Transmedia Storytelling Business, Aesthetics and Production at the Jim Henson Company*, Master Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2007, <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/39152>

- 2 The term ‘computer game’ is intended to be a generic term for all possible forms not only of games played on a computer, but also video games, console games, video games, tele games, vending machine games, television games, etc.
- 3 Cf. Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon et al.: *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*, London: Routledge 2013, pp. 53-116; Denson, Shane / Jahn-Sudmann, Andreas: “Digital Seriality: On the Serial Aesthetics and Practice of Digital Games,” in: *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 7 (1), 2013, pp. 1-32.
- 4 *BUFFY* (US 1997-2003, D: Joss Whedon).

ENTER THE MATRIX,<sup>5</sup> which acts as a narrative bridge between the animated short FLIGHT OF THE OSIRIS<sup>6</sup> and THE MATRIX RELOADED,<sup>7</sup> the sequel to THE MATRIX.<sup>8</sup> The third computer game is a series that was released over four seasons from 2012 to 2019. This computer game series follows on from the serial narrative cosmos already told in comic book form and in a television series from 2010 to 2022 under the title THE WALKING DEAD<sup>9</sup>. In the comparison of these computer games, the different strategies are finally outlined in terms of how they reflect the relationship between the part and the whole.

## 1 THE PARS PRO TOTO PRINCIPLE: BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER

Buffy Summers is a rather slight girl with long straw-blonde hair who, at the beginning of the TV series BUFFY, has just moved with her single mother to the fictional Californian small-town Sunnydale. There, Buffy is not only confronted with the ‘horror’ of everyday high school life. She also has to hunt down vampires and demons week after week on behalf of the so-called Watcher’s Council. Together with her friends, the vampire slayer thwarts no less than twelve apocalypses during the television series. In 2002, between the broadcast of the second to last and the final season, one of a total of five computer games for the series was released.<sup>10</sup>

This computer game (like the four other BUFFY games) has at least two crucial problems in relation to the television series: On the one hand, as a piece of the BUFFY franchise, the computer game must make its affiliation to the ‘Buffyverse’ clearly recognizable. This makes an intermedial reference in the mode of imitation, for the purpose of an identifiable similarity almost an obligatory operation. On the other hand, the computer game should not simply be a cheap copy of the television series. This raises the question of what kind of added value this computer game has to offer. To make matters worse, the computer game has always

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5 ENTER THE MATRIX (US 2003, O: The Wachowski Brothers—Shiny Entertainment. Atari).

6 FINAL FLIGHT OF THE OSIRIS (US 2003, D: Andy Jones).

7 THE MATRIX RELOADED (US 2003, D: Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski).

8 THE MATRIX (US 1999, D: Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski).

9 THE WALKING DEAD (US 2010-2019, D: Frank Darabont, various).

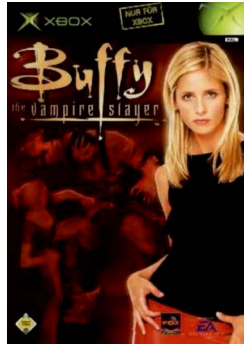
10 BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER (USA 2002, O: The Collective). For a full list of all the BUFFY games, see “Gameography.”

had, and still has, a difficult position in comparison to the preceding films or series. As a game ‘to X’ it is suspected of being a mere supplement to an economic exploitation chain and thus ultimately a trivial accessory.

Therefore, intermedial operations are simply necessary for the computer game, which mark—on the one hand—differences from the television series. Be it in the form of variation (‘an old story is told/played in a different way’), as an optimization of the TV series (‘Everything you need to know about Buffy in just one game!’), in form of a revision (‘Finally, stake vampires yourself!’) or as an overbidding strategy (‘Right in the middle, instead of just being there’). On the other hand, as part of the BUFFY franchise, the computer game must make its affiliation to the ‘Buffyverse’ clearly recognizable as a mimicry of already established visual and narrative elements and structures. I will show that in the case of the computer game BUFFY, the two diametrically opposed intermedial activities—reproduction versus difference—are constantly rebalanced. The computer game offers thereby a reflexive condensation of the television series BUFFY as a whole in that special game part.

An intermedial reference is clearly marked ‘before the game’ on the cover of the supplement to the computer game (see Fig. 1). Already there, a contradictory double movement of computer games to television series or films is visualized. Both an imitation of the television series and a differentiation in the form of variation can be found there. The cover shows the branding logo of BUFFY and below it a photographic portrait of the actress Sarah Michelle Gellar, in the role of Buffy, which she plays in the television series of the same name. Clearly, we are dealing here with imitative operations, that is, the effort to establish identity across different media platforms. To the left of the photographic portrait—slightly offset to the back—a graphic figure can be seen kicking a demon. This figure is similar to Buffy from the television series (hair, clothes, fight against demons that appear to be overpowering); however, it is also characterized by some differences (unlike body proportions, rougher facial features, change of media form from the reproduction of a photographic portrait to a graphic figure).

*Figure 1: Into the game before the game: The double logic of the Buffy game cover*



This combination of a photographic portrait and a traced still image from the computer game has a clear goal: it refers explicitly to the fact of changing the media. But we are dealing with a change that focuses on continuity to make the transition into the computer world smoothly.

The photograph of the Buffy from the TV series is placed in the foreground, and she is looking at us. To her left, slightly offset to the back, is the fight scene from the computer game. The ‘other’ Buffy has turned her head away from us and towards her opponent. The overall composition implies a balancing of imitation and variation: The Buffy of the television series makes eye contact with us at the image threshold like a figure in so many paintings of the Renaissance and thus leads the viewer to a pictorial event in which the world of the computer game becomes visible to the left behind Buffy. First of all, this computer game world looks graphically different from that of the television series. Secondly, it becomes obvious that the Buffy avatar looks different from the Buffy character of the TV series. At least in terms of body proportions and fighting technique, she appears much more like Lara Croft from the computer game series Tomb Raider. The intermedia reference on the cover serves to balance the poles of continuity and change to the television series and therefore prepares the recipient for the change already in the para-text of the computer game.

In the computer game itself, which is primarily a jump-and-run game, Buffy fights the ‘Master’, a powerful and very old vampire. The ‘Master’ of the computer game is a resurrection of the television series. The central plot of the first TV season is the confrontation between Buffy and the ‘Master’. In the last episode of this season, Buffy kills the ‘Master’. In the epilogue of the computer game, it is pointed out that the ‘Master’, although only bones remained of him at the end

of the first television season, had almost returned in the meantime through magical powers; but Buffy had just been able to prevent this return in the second television season. But now he will return for real in the computer game, where Buffy must kill him once more. The computer game thus takes an already-known character from the 'Buffyverse' and brings him back to life again.

Despite these narrative, structural, and motif connections to the television series in the prologue of the computer game, the knowledge of this connection ultimately plays no role in the game's plot. The computer game works like another episode that takes up the established patterns to tell a story that is comprehensible in itself. In this respect, the computer game is a sort of stand-alone episode.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, the computer game is not designed to continue and does not advance the overarching plot of the series in any way. In other words, a new story is told episodically according to well-known patterns, motifs, and characters from the 'Buffyverse'. The story with the 'Master' is only minimally varied. In this respect, the same thing is told, only slightly differently. So here, too, the computer game oscillates between similarity/repetition and difference/variation.

Moreover, the computer game is a kind of *pars pro toto* of the television series. The computer game 'episode' in fact encompasses everything that characterizes the series in principle. At least this is how the computer game is staged. This is true on many different levels, first and foremost on the level of the ensemble cast. Not only is Buffy versus the 'Master' a well-known story told again, but differently. In addition, almost the entire ensemble of characters from the TV series makes appearances. The computer game gives the impression of a class reunion, where all kinds of characters from different TV episodes and seasons are gathered. Not only Buffy's usual comrades-in-arms are involved, but also a myriad of vampires, zombies, demonic 'sleepers', hellhounds, demonic spider demons, and much more.

Secondly, the entire mythology of the 'Buffyverse' is presented to us in a fast-forward right at the beginning. Giles, Buffy's mentor, tells us in the first 3 minutes of the game in detail—at least in much more detail than in any of the opening credits of the TV series—the basic mythology of the 'Buffyverse' (a Chosen One who fights the forces of evil and who, after her death, is inherited by another Chosen One, etc.). Following this, Buffy's biography is told in short, and then the centuries-long life story of the 'Master'. In the process, we learn details of the 'Master's' life that are not brought up in the television series. In the computer game, for example, the Master's actual name is mentioned for the first time,

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11 Cf. Mittell, Jason: *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York/London: New York University Press, 2015, 296ff.

namely Heinrich Joseph Nest. In these opening credits, everything relevant from the 'Buffyverse' is explained to us by the narrator Giles, from the overarching mythology of the 'Buffyverse' to the biography of the 'Master' vampire to Buffy's short life journey to the point where the story of the computer game begins.

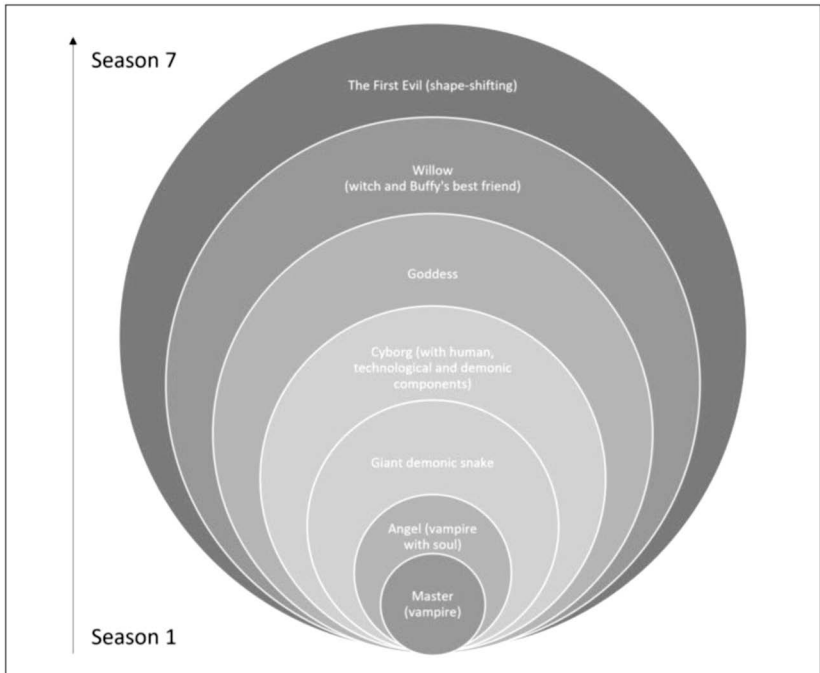
Giles' speech is followed by the opening credits, which imitate those of the television series. Giles then explains their special mission, now addressing Buffy. It is a test of her abilities in a Spanish mission near Sunnydale. Giles says: "This is a crucial part of your training [...]." And continues: "This test is extremely challenging. And comes with its share of peril." Of course, as time goes on, this training turns to brutal reality as the 'Master' and his demonic minions intervene and attack. What is important about Giles' words is that they speak about a "crucial part" of "training." This can be understood as a meta-communicative speech act, which is saying: This computer game is a particularly important episode. Namely, one in which we will be able to test, repeat, practice, and, if successful, acquire the many skills and abilities of the vampire slayers in training with Buffy, or more precisely as Buffy, since we control the avatar. In other words: the central elements that made up Buffy/Buffy are compressed here into a special episode in training mode, i.e., with many, many repetitions.

At the end of his speech to Buffy, as Giles warns of how challenging this test will be and that it brings with it peril, Buffy replies, annoyed: "Don't they all?" To this, Giles, after a short pause, replies only: "Yes." This again tells us, the players, on a meta-communicative level: We are not only to learn about and rehearse the many different aspects of Buffy during the game. We are also to become acquainted with the risk of being a vampire slayer, a risk that reappears episode after episode in the series with the monsters of the week. Indeed, that constitutes the series. The typical reaction of the protagonists of the television series to this risk is also clearly presented to us at this point and again turned into a meta-communication statement, namely an ironic reaction to the dangers, and even more importantly, to the structural logic and ultimately paradoxical claim of the series. After all, every episode, strictly speaking, is about something extremely challenging, about peril, and every episode ultimately promises to be a crucial part.

That the computer game is an episode that is meant to encompass all other episodes, becomes evident beyond motif recurrence and meta-communicative explication in its structural logic. In this context, the first thing that is striking is the fact that the television series *BUFFY* itself is organized according to the level structure of a computer game: In the individual episodes, the so-called Monster of the Week must be hunted down. From the beginning, however, the cross-episodic narrative boils down to the fact that a Big Bad must be hunted down at the end of each season. In the first season, for example, it's the 'Master'. From season to

season, an even more powerful Big Bad is introduced, one that is even more difficult to defeat. From vampires to giant demonic serpents, goddesses to the first evil, which can take on all kinds of forms of the dead.<sup>12</sup>

*Figure 2: Big—Bigger—Biggest Bad: Cross-season escalation logic of the television series BUFFY*



In short, the series follows an escalation logic, segmented by Big Bads at the end of each season. Structurally, this is identical to computer games or, more precisely, to a hitherto prevailing idea of computer games, especially action games and adventure games: Each level has its Big Bad, the level of difficulty increases from level to level, and thus the Big Bad becomes more powerful; at the end, all mission objectives are fulfilled; nothing remains to be done. Based on these clear structural analogies, one can certainly claim that a certain form of intermedial reference is present here: The narrative structure of the television series imitates the level structure of computer games. But even more central in the present context: In the computer game *BUFFY*, precisely this structural principle is taken up again and turned back in a concentrated form into a single game: At the closing of each level

12 Cf. Fig. 2.



there is a Big Bad who is replaced by a 'Bigger Bad' in the next level. In the end, the game leads to a confrontation with the 'Biggest Bad', the 'Master'. Consequently, the 'Master' of the computer game is not simply the one from the first season of the TV series; indeed, he only exists as a phantom in the computer game—and is accordingly more difficult to fight than a vampire in flesh and blood. In other words, the 'Master' of the computer game is a 'Bigger Bad' than the one of the television series. Thus, the computer game not only follows a logic of intensification internally from level to level, but also on the scale of transmedial storytelling.

Here, in the game accompanying the television series, the serial order of the television series, including its logic of escalation, is reflexively intensified in a transmedial expansion. Seen in this way, the computer game is an episode that reflects the series as a whole. Thus, the computer game itself, in its intermedial references to the initial series, shows and thinks itself primarily in the mode of similarity. However, a special figure of similarity is formed: It is a similarity that structurally encompasses all the other episodes. The computer game is thus distinguished as a meta-episode from the episodes of the television series and, at least in this intermedial twist, also presented as a higher-quality ('crucial') episode.

The problem of part and whole mentioned at the beginning, with which every serial narrative is confronted, finds a clear solution in this transmedial expansion of the TV narrative zone into the computer game by means of intermedial relations: a single, outstanding episode can encompass all other episodes and thus illustrate the whole in a concentrated way. The Aristotelian axiom of the whole always being more than its parts is taken upside down here: a (certain) part is already the (not yet, perhaps never completely, finished) whole.

## 2 THE PUZZLE PIECE PRINCIPLE: ENTER THE MATRIX

The computer game *ENTER THE MATRIX* tells the story of Niobe, captain of the *Logos*, the fastest ship in the rebel fleet, and Ghost, Niobe's first officer. Both are minor characters who appear in the cinematic sequels to *THE MATRIX*, namely *THE MATRIX RELOADED* and *THE MATRIX REVOLUTION*. Accordingly, they participate in the world established in the *MATRIX* films, which is based on the master narrative of a confrontation between humans and machines. *ENTER THE MATRIX* builds the narrative bridge between the animated short film *FINAL FLIGHT OF THE OSIRIS* and the sequel to the first *MATRIX* film sequel. *ENTER THE MATRIX* is thus part of a multiple media networking franchise, making it an almost ideal example of transmedial storytelling in the sense of Henry Jenkins<sup>13</sup>: The diegetic world of the *MATRIX* films is hereby continued and deepened in another media context.

The player can control and play one of the two avatars. Niobe and Ghost have different strengths and weaknesses. Accordingly, the player can fight his way through the many dangers of the Matrix with varying ease or difficulty and thus explore and experience the Matrix world in different ways. A special feature of *ENTER THE MATRIX* is that the film sequences inserted into the computer game are not just recycled from former movies, as is still common in many other cases today. Rather, these sequences were shot together with the follow-up films of *THE MATRIX* and uses exclusively in the computer game. In this sense, the game's manual proudly states, that the "plot of *Enter the Matrix* [...] is told through a combination of different elements, including real film sequences shot with the original actors [...]" In any case, on this level, as in *BUFFY*, the intermedial relation is imitation, in fact, extended even further towards indistinguishably: because they are not simply film sequences taken from the film—or, as in the case of the manual cover for the *BUFFY* computer game, a photograph from the set. Instead, exclusive film footage becomes part of the computer game. Thus, the computer game participates on the original (real) Matrix film world at the level of material production and recording processes.

The transition from this (real) film starting point to the digital world is, however, staged in the computer game itself, unlike in the films, as a change of forms of representation. Whenever the characters move from the 'real' film world into the Matrix, there is a change in the visual representation register, namely from an analogue image space to a digital one.<sup>14</sup> In the 'real' world of the ship we see the

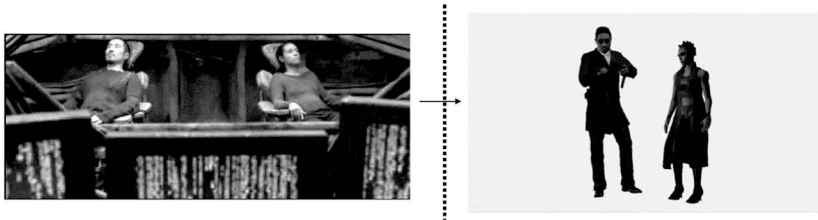
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13 Cf. H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, p. 93ff.

14 Cf. Fig. 3a-c.

two protagonists in (real) film sequences, but in the Matrix itself we then see them as digitally animated avatars. ENTER THE MATRIX: The title of the computer game is taken quite literally here. After all, with Niobe and Ghost we enter the Matrix, which exclusively represents a digitally generated world and no longer gives the impression of witnessing a (however digitally heavily processed) reproductive re-cording of external reality and the performance of real actors. This again marks a strong difference to the original film, in which the difference between the space outside and inside the Matrix is not connected to a distinction between the real/analogue and the artificial/digital world; indeed, the highlight of the films visually consists precisely in keeping this difference unrecognizable or even blurred.

*Figure 3: The Passage into the Matrix: From the analogue 'real' world to the digital simulation*



We also learn something about their motivations, which make the actions of these characters more plausible in the subsequent third MATRIX film. Overarching story lines also become more coherent through the narrative of the computer game. In the animated short film FINAL FLIGHT OF THE OSIRIS, for example, at the end a letter to the ship Nebuchadnezzar is dropped into a letterbox. This letter contains important information about machines that want to destroy Zion, the central place of human resistance. At the beginning of ENTER THE MATRIX, the player must fetch exactly this letter from a post office. Again, at the beginning of THE MATRIX RELOADED, this 'final delivery' of the Osiris is briefly discussed. If the viewers have only seen the first MATRIX film, they have no way of knowing where this letter came from and how much effort was involved in its circulation through various media.<sup>15</sup>

The individual media parts intertwine in order to continue and deepen an overarching story. The computer game ENTER THE MATRIX is therefore a part of an ongoing transmedial world building. A world is 'built' here, which is founded on

15 Cf. H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, p. 101.

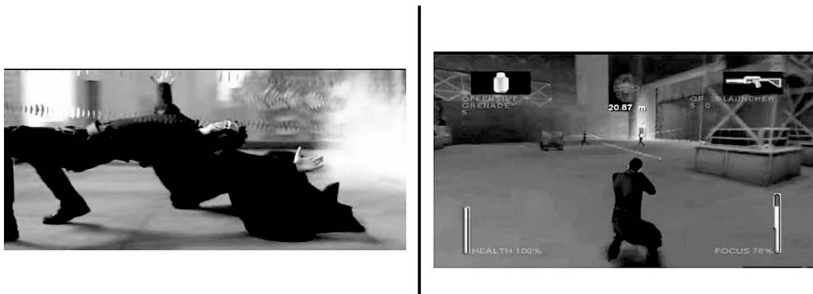
the concept of an infinitely expanding and deepening narrative cosmos across different media. Apparently in building this narrative cosmos, great care has been taken to ensure that the individual parts of the narrative do not contradict each other. Instead, the parts should intervene coherently towards an imagined whole.

The connection between part and whole is hence understood and staged as an information deficit that is only temporary although may be infinite. Each part of the Matrix is another piece of the puzzle to understand the Matrix even better, but at the same time it contains references to further elements that are not yet understood (other secondary characters, other motivations, other ships, etc.) and that must be understood once again, in a different way. The narrative cosmos does not become completely visible in one part by means of symbolic compression, as it is the case in the computer game *BUFFY*. Rather: In the individual part, it is possible to have the experience that there are, potentially, infinitely many other parts that have to be told, received, and played in order to really overview and understand the entire cosmos. But what is important, despite all the information deficits, is that even if the cosmos will never be completely accessible, may continue to expand, and all motivations and connections will never be revealed—we are still dealing with a coherent diegetic world. In this respect, the *MATRIX* franchise follows an indicative narrative: It tells what really is/was, not what could be or contradicts what has been told so far. It is about decoding the Matrix, which is admittedly complex and in which false traces are laid. But still there is one reality, the one diegetic world (behind) the Matrix, which becomes more understandable in each of its (narrative) parts. This principle is symbolically expressed in the game *ENTER THE MATRIX* insofar as stories of characters are told and played, who were previously secondary characters but now rise to become main characters. In addition, plot motivations and narrative contexts are made clear, which will be important for understanding future film events. This also formulates something about the significance of the computer game in the inter media structure: Knowing and playing this computer game has crucial advantages. In this sense, there is no subordination to other media, but rather a subordination of various media in the trans-medial narrative world of *THE MATRIX*.

Of course, one could still ask what the added value of such a computer game is. Even if it provides information that is important for the overall story and even if film sequences are used exclusively for the computer game, this has little to do with the media specifics of the computer game. Apart from the fact that the computer game is not only narrated, but can also be played, we can point to a perhaps marginal aspect that nevertheless shows particularly well how the appreciation of a computer game through an intermedial reference is accomplished in *ENTER THE MATRIX*, namely in a specific appropriation of bullet time in the computer game.

On a stylistic level nothing is more associated with the *MATRIX* films than the so-called bullet time, a special effect that, starting with the *MATRIX* films, has become a major influence on many moving image productions in popular culture. Technically, the basic concept of bullet time is to direct a semicircle of still cameras at the same point in space. Images taken at the same time are projected one after the other as a film, resulting in a movement around a still object. The term ‘bullet time’ has become established for this technology because the viewer can be guided around a bullet that has just been fired and is now stationary. In *THE MATRIX*, these still images are additionally blended into each other through morphing processes, thus creating the specific ‘Matrix style’: Scenes can be slowed down in time and at the same time kept spatially mobile.<sup>16</sup>

*Figure 4a-b: Different Media—different Bullet Times: form an aesthetic point of view to a performative turn*



This technique finds a very specific twist in the computer game *ENTER THE MATRIX*, because the aesthetic form of bullet time takes a performative turn.<sup>17</sup> The game can activate the ‘Focus’ option and thus trigger a slowing down of the passage of time in the sense of bullet time.<sup>18</sup> However, this bullet time does not apply to the player themselves. The player can not only make an input as quickly as ever, but his avatar also reacts just as quickly as before the activation of the focus function. In such a way, bullet time is shifted from purely aesthetic perceptual pleasure to the performative register: bullet time becomes a slowing time option, allowing the player to act quickly.

16 Cf. for example Fig. 4a.

17 Cf. S. Denson/A. Jahn-Sudmann: “Digital Seriality: On the Serial Aesthetics and Practice of Digital Games,” p. 14f.

18 Cf. Fig. 4b.

In this way, not only is a similarity to the aesthetics of the films aimed at, but a central stylistic element of the films varied and even transformed. It is precisely through this transformational treatment of bullet time that *ENTER THE MATRIX* shows a difference to the movies and has insofar something like a unique selling point. The computer game stages itself, insofar as a crucial part of a virtual holistic whole, that would never be fully completed.

### **3 THE POSSIBLE WORLDS PRINCIPLE: THE WALKING DEAD**

*THE WALKING DEAD* tells the story of a zombie apocalypse. It follows various characters, centered around former sheriff Rick Grimes, as they wander through the (now) inhospitable landscapes of North America. Started in 2003 as a comic book series, *THE WALKING DEAD* was adapted into a television series seven years later. From 2012 to 2019 there has also been a computer game series in four seasons, which was quickly and frequently examined, not to say celebrated, after its launch in the context of Game Studies.

To begin with some inter media aspects beyond the computer game series: The television series started as an adaptation of the comic book, but quickly developed a certain autonomy from the original series. This means that even if the arsenal of characters is similar, the processes, sequences of events, and characteristics of the protagonists and their motivations for action are smoothly modified, which leads to an independent narrative development. What we have here is neither a pure adaptation of the comic on television, nor a narrative cosmos coherently expanded as in *ENTER THE MATRIX*. Instead, we are dealing with two possible plots that are very similar to each other, but which are not compatible in all aspects. To give just one obvious example of this: The main character Rick loses his arm quite early in the comic book series; in the television series, however, he still had it, until his death in Season 9.<sup>19</sup> Two possible worlds<sup>20</sup> are existing simultaneously in two different media, one with Rick's arm, one without it. *THE WALKING DEAD* narrative

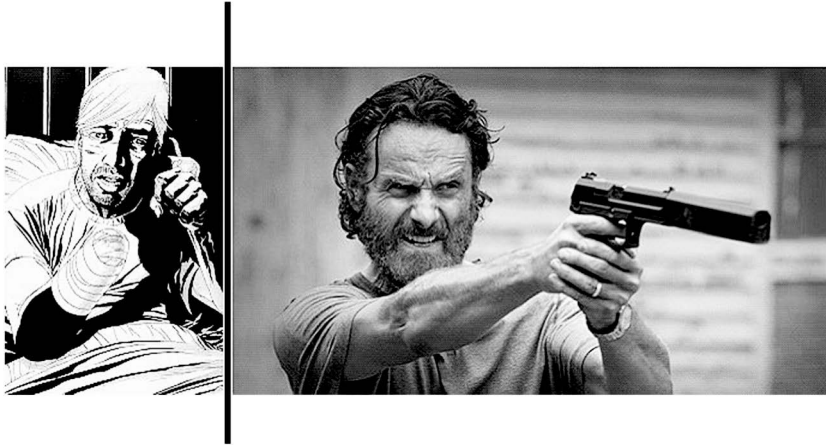
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19 Cf. Fig. 5a-b.

20 Cf. Ryan, Marie-Laure: "From Parallel Universes to Possible Worlds: Ontological Pluralism in Physics, Narratology and Narrative," in: *Poetics Today* 27.4, 2006, pp. 633-674.

mode is therefore conjunctive. Intra-medial ‘What-is’ narratives are transformed on a transmedial level in an ‘what-if’ mode.<sup>21</sup>

*Figure 5a-b: Different Media—Various Stories—Several Numbers of Arms*



The computer game series *THE WALKING DEAD* also follows this ‘what if’ principle, but as will be shown, in a special sense. There, two new main characters are inserted, and in addition a few characters who had already appeared in the comic and the television series have a (mostly brief) performance. Nevertheless, this series does not function according to the *Buffy* principle of a stand-alone episode, nor according to the principle that the entire series is concentrated in the computer game. Just as little, however, is a story told further with the help of new or secondary characters, thus expanding or deepening the narrative cosmos, as in *ENTER THE MATRIX*. Instead of concentrating, deepening or expanding, we get a new possibility with the computer game, how the *WALKING DEAD* cosmos could be told in a different way again.

What is interesting in the case of *THE WALKING DEAD* is that the options narrated in each case do not offer radically different possibilities in the way that one

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21 Cf. J. Mittell: *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, p. 214ff.

finds them in the field of so-called counterfactual history.<sup>22</sup> In the latter case, major questions of history are usually played out with fundamentally different events than those that actually took place: What if Hitler had won the war, Alexander the Great had died much later, the Iron Curtain had not perished, etc.? In contrast, the transmedial extensions of *THE WALKING DEAD* are about minimal variations of the narrative. How such minimal variation changes the plot lines can be illustrated with a small example: Shawn Greene is a character who briefly appears in the comic book, the television series and in the computer game. Shawn's story is told a bit differently in all three media.<sup>23</sup>

Figure 6: 'Healthy is what repeats itself minimally': The many Walking Deads of Shawn Greene

Comic	TV	Game
Hershel's biological son	Hershel's stepson	Hershel's biological son
bitten by zombies (cause undetermined, slow death)	bitten by zombies (cause undetermined)	bitten by zombies (caused by Duck, instantaneous death)
killed after zombification (Hersehl)	killed after zombification (Shane, Andrea or T-Dog)	state after zombification uncertain

As already mentioned, the differences are minimal, and one could legitimately argue that these differences are not relevant to the overall narrative. But that is not my point here. Much more important is that Shawn's origins and modes of death are not compatible with each other in all respects across the various media

22 Cf. Raghunath, Riyukta: *Alternative realities: Counterfactual historical fiction and possible-worlds-theory*, –Doctoral–Thesis, –Sheffield–Hallam–University, –2017, <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/19154/>

23 Cf. Fig. 6.



platforms. So, neither is a narrative cosmos coherently expanded or depends upon, nor is there a strict adaptation of the 'comic book' in the television series and/or the computer game. Instead, we are dealing with minimal variations of the narrative in the television series and the computer game.

If one does not want to understand this operation, which could be demonstrated by many other examples, simply as an error or carelessness, or if one is not tempted to somehow establish a coherence between the individual narrative sequences, as is the case on many fan sites, this strategy could be understood as a pragmatic decision or an economic calculation. In this way, different actors can, with little need for co-ordination, produce autonomous stories, which may correspond to the respective clientele, but which are nevertheless set in the same fictional milieu.<sup>24</sup>

Intermedial variation can be interpreted in a somewhat more ambitious way as a certain aesthetic form, which Umberto Eco has assigned to the arsenal of postmodern aesthetics regarding television series such as *Columbo*.<sup>25</sup> According to Eco, the basic understanding of postmodern aesthetics does not consist in seeking differences from other works. Above all, postmodern works do not want to be innovative through radical differences. Rather, it is about the minimal variation of a basic scheme. Be it in the form of twelve-tone music or in the shape of a soap opera, the basic understanding of postmodern aesthetics does not consist, according to Eco, in seeking the rough distinction to other works, episodes or tune sequences. In the TV series *Columbo*, for example, more or less the same crime story is told again and again, only in minimal variations. It is precisely this minimal variation of the scheme that gives pleasure to a certain type of recipient, following Eco. *THE WALKING DEAD* follows this postmodern aesthetic of minimal variation, but not so much in the individual comic, television, and computer game series, but through and in the intermedial relations of the different media formats. It is only in the comparison of the different media that this structural principle of minimal variation becomes virulent.

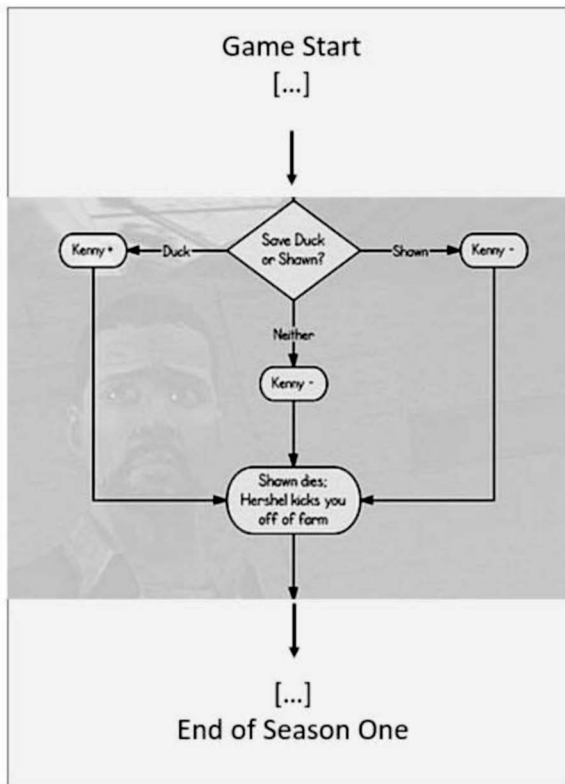
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24 Cf. J. Mittell; *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, p. 315f.

25 Cf. Eco, Umberto: "Innovation & Repetition: Between Modern & Postmodern Aesthetics," in: *Daedalus* 134, no. 4, 2005, pp. 191-207.

This is precisely where one of the decisive features of the computer game series can be found. The principle of conjunctive storytelling previously only worked on an inter media level. The comic series, as well as the TV series, tells the story in a ‘What-is’ mode. The ‘what-if’ mode only comes about the media comparison of the two. This inter media logic is turned into the computer game logic itself. The player must make decisions again and again, decisions that influence the course of the story. These choices have consequences over several episodes and seasons, and thus lead to different story lines.

*Figure 7: ‘Shawn or Duck or none?’ ‘Whatever!’ The Art of Decision Making in THE WALKING DEAD*



These decisions are mostly about minimal differences—like the inter media differences. Incidentally, this has led to a lot of criticism, especially of the first game season. The central point of criticism consists in pointing out that despite all the player’s freedom of choice, nothing fundamental really changes in the course of

history. No matter what we decide, in the end—spoiler alert!—our avatar will be dead in any case. This reproach can also be applied to the character already mentioned above, namely Shawn Green: In the very first episode of the first season, we are given the choice of saving either Shawn, Duck, or neither of them from the zombies. But in the end, it doesn't matter how we decide: Shawn will die.<sup>26</sup> The conclusion is obviously that something like freedom of choice and actually different courses of history is basically only pretend.

However, this course can be interpreted quite differently in light of what has been formulated above. Critically: Nothing really changes because of our decisions (Shawn will be dead either way), but small things do change, because of our decisions. Hershel, for example, will behave differently towards our avatar based on whether he or she wanted to save his eldest son or not. So, Shawn's fate is also a splendid example of the minimal variation principle. Shawn is dead for sure. However, there are minimal differences, namely Hershel's different reactions to us.

The connection between part and whole is presented here through the establishment of a conjunctive mode of narration and play. The individual parts are reflected as the actualization of an open field of possibilities that could always have been realized in a different way. In the computer game series, we are constantly reminded of this fact, while the possibilities branch out more and more from season to season. After all, we must always make decisions that influence the course of the story and minimally readjust it.

The computer game is thus, on the one hand, the performative culmination of this principle within a single medium. What previously could only be revealed in a comparison of different media is now turned into an intra-medial constellation, and there symbolically condensed. The computer game series is thus ultimately the outstanding series in comparison to the comic and television series. On the other hand, the computer game as a series is parallel and simultaneously—at least this is true from 2012 to 2019—with the comic and television series, designed for an open future full of possible, still undefined, even indeterminable worlds that multiply and branch out further in the intermedial comparison.

## 4 'IT'S ALL IN THE GAME'

In a final step, the three computer games presented will be placed in relation to each other with the help of different interpretative registers. In doing so, I would like to show on the one hand what is fundamentally characteristic of the particular series, and on the other hand that they stand for different types of how computer games deal with the problem of part and whole in the context of transmedial narration.

If one had to choose a rhetorical or logical figure to describe the central principle of the computer games presented here, the following three figures, illustrated in Fig. 8, would certainly be suitable candidates.

First line: In the case of *BUFFY*, the synecdoche is central insofar as it describes a rhetorical figure which, by naming a part, actually means and represents the whole. The computer game *BUFFY* corresponds precisely to this rhetorical figure: the game is contained as a special part the whole. The situation is quite different in the case of *ENTER THE MATRIX*. There, the story is told in order to expand and deepen the *MATRIX* universe. Consequently, this play corresponds to the logical figure of conjunction: *THE MATRIX* and *THE MATRIX RELOADED* and *ENTER THE MATRIX* and so on. The case of *THE WALKING DEAD* is quite different. The central logical operation of this game is adjunction. Shawn is Hershel's stepson or his biological descendant, if Shawn dies a quick or a slow death; the player either wants to save Shawn or not. With each decision there comes a new, minimally different narrative progression. Something that could previously only be observed in the media comparison now becomes directly apparent in the structural logic of the computer game, namely the 'what-if' mode of adjunction. It could be also different. 'Choose to save Shawn or not'. Enter the game means in this case 'enter possible worlds!'

Figure 8: Figures, Modes and Orders of Intermedial References in Computer Games as Part of Transmedial Storytelling

Computer game	<i>Buffy</i>	<i>Enter the Matrix</i>	<i>The Walking Dead</i>
<b>rhetorical/ logical figure</b>	syndeckdoche (part as a whole)	conjunction (and)	adjunction (or)
<b>narrative mode</b>	imperative	indicative	conjunctive
<b>time mode</b>	fruitful moments	arbitrary moments	virtual moments
<b>epistemic order</b>	similarities and mirroring of an organic world	causal and final relations in an homogeneous infinitely expanding system space	minimal differences in various possible worlds

In correspondence to the rhetorical-logical figures, the different narrative modes can be pinpointed, too:<sup>27</sup> THE WALKING DEAD narrates conjunctively; alternative scenarios are unfolded in parallel in different media as well as in the individual decision options of the computer game series. In contrast, the entire MATRIX franchise, and therefore the computer game ENTER THE MATRIX, are based on indicative narration: It is not told what could be at the same time, but what is. In turn the computer game BUFFY could be assigned to an imperative narrative mode: After all, it tells, or rather claims, what the central elements of the ‘Buffyverse’ are and should be. It is not about continuation, deepening or possibilities. It is about an ultimate authorial definition of what Buffy is and always will be.

In accordance with a famous provision by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, which he already formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century regarding a central quality of (appropriate) art, the computer game BUFFY could be described as a fruitful moment<sup>28</sup>—or perhaps more appropriately, although paradoxically, as a fruitful moment sequence (Fig. 8, third line). What I mean by this is, the computer game BUFFY concentrates on the central elements of the television series BUFFY and is therefore not just any other random episode in the series cosmos. Rather, the computer game compresses the series in much the same way that, according to Lessing, a successful painting or sculpture compresses and captures the entire story, the before and the after, in just one moment. It is precisely in this sense that a moment is fruitful:

27 Cf. Fig 8, second line.

28 Cf. Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim: *Laocoon; An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1992[\*1766].

it points beyond itself; ideally to everything essential that happened or will happen before and ever after.

In contrast, *ENTER THE MATRIX* is much more about arbitrary moments in a basically endless chain of events.<sup>29</sup> ‘Arbitrary’ here does not mean that an incomplete story is told. Rather, it means that the story of Niobe and Ghost is one among many others in the *MATRIX* universe, or more precisely: one among any number of others. *ENTER THE MATRIX* does not reduce the entire *MATRIX* universe to a single point but is one part of a basically infinite number of other parts that also contribute to the world-building of the *MATRIX* with their different narratives.

In contrast, *THE WALKING DEAD* refers to something I would like to call the principle of the virtual moment. This formulation is supposed to mean in the individual moments. With the help of the decision options and the (minimal) variations of the parallel events in other media, reference is made to the fact that an event is just one among many other possible ones. In contrast to *BUFFY*, the whole is not present in a fruitful moment. Rather, the whole is present as a field of infinite possibilities, which as such cannot be brought together in a single point (or sequence). Every actualization shows that there are also other possibilities of actualization.

If one asks more broadly about the epistemes<sup>30</sup> of the games, i.e., about the specific orders of knowledge and representation to which they belong and which they unfold, we can also separate the games quite clearly.<sup>31</sup>

The computer game *BUFFY* follows the principle of similarity or mirroring within a world conceived as organic. This is the case because all elements are in an interrelation of similarity or mirroring with all others. This is precisely why the computer game *BUFFY* can figure as a synecdoche for the entire narrative cosmos of the *BUFFY* series. The part is not only part of the whole, but also resembles the whole; there is a suggestion of an organic connection between the phenomena in this narrative cosmos. This structure corresponds pretty much to what Michel Foucault calls the order of knowledge, which characterizes a pre-modern episteme. In *The Order of Things* Foucault writes: “Up to the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture. [...] The universe was folded in upon itself: the earth echoing the sky, faces seeing

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29 Cf. Deleuze, Gilles: *Cinema 1: The movement-image*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1986, p. 4f.

30 Cf. Rheinberger, Hans-Jörg: *On Historicizing Epistemology. An Essay*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2010.

31 Cf. Fig. 8, last line.

themselves reflected in the stars [...]”<sup>32</sup> Or as Charles Taylor puts the key point of pre-modern thinking about the world: “They all embody the same idea reflected in different media [...]”<sup>33</sup> We can turn this idea to the computer game *BUFFY: The game* reflects in a ‘fruitful sequence’, the ‘Buffyverse’ as a unity of similar things which mirror and resembles each other.

The *MATRIX* universe, on the contrary, takes place in a so-called system space, i.e., in a kind of infinitely large container in which the individual things and events are clearly distinguishable from each other and interlock with each other in a causal form and not at all in the way of similarity.<sup>34</sup> Although the various media explore and show many different aspects of the Matrix, bullet time, for example, is used differently in films and computer games. Nevertheless, it is the same world that is told or played out differently across all media.

*THE WALKING DEAD*, in turn, takes place in plural worlds that simultaneously branch out endlessly, following the principle of minimal variation. The knowledge of the world is not concentrated in one point, the things are not connected on the basis of similarity, nor are the events and things of this world causally interrelated in an infinite system space.

## 5 ‘THE GAME REMAINS THE SAME, BUT DIFFERENT’

A perfectly justified question to the previous presentations and allocations could be: What is the point? At least six answers seem obvious to me and should be briefly outlined in a final step.

- 1 The presented computer games show in a prototypical way how differently the fragile relationship between part and whole can be expressed in a trans media context.
- 2 In the computer games, the still future-open totality of a trans media narrative series is imagined and anticipated as different wholes. The parts of a series, therefore, create various ‘wholes’ during the series. At least in this respect, the parts are actually more than the whole.

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32 Foucault, Michel: *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Pantheon Books 1971, p. 17.

33 Taylor, Charles: *Hegel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977, p. 4.

34 Koselleck, Reinhart: *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, New York: Columbia University Press 2004.

- 3 The computer games presented here, however, not only design diverse wholes, but also create different epistemic orders. In the games, distinct world views and ideas of the order of things are designed. However, this does not take place on the level of content or motif, but on the level of (inter-)medial shapes and reflections. In the end, it doesn't matter whether it's about vampires, zombies, or simulation worlds. What is more crucial is that the narratives of computer games draw up such world images due to their intermedial references within a serially generated world of fiction.
- 4 The fact that such inter media operations occur elaborately and become particularly vivid in computer games, which connect to already established narrative worlds, should not be surprising. As 'secondary' phenomena they are always already under pressure of legitimacy and must dignify themselves against already established media of the narrative world.
- 5 Although it has been repeatedly emphasized here that computer games in particular, which connect to already established series worlds, undertake this kind of inter media reflection in an especially ambitious way, this does not mean that they do not also occur in other media contexts. This has two implications: on the one hand, the inter media references presented here are representative examples and can be found in other fields as well. In my opinion, they are useful to create a typology of narrative strategies in a trans media context in general, even beyond computer games. On the other hand, such reflections and strategies are perhaps particularly characteristic of inter media operations in trans media narratives but can also be found in intra media contexts, which means without changing the media of storytelling. In the TV series *BUFFY*, for example, there is already an episode that narrates conjunctively beyond and before transmedial extensions. In the *Buffy* comic series, there are also stand-alone stories that can be interpreted as *pars pro toto* for the entire comic series. Or think of the Marvel franchise with its myriads of superheroes and the multiple interconnections of films, television shows, computer games or comic series up to fan fiction. In this context, one could also think of ambitious projects like the episode *BANDERSNATCH* of the Netflix series *BLACK MIRROR*. In this episode we are confronted with an interactive film about the making of a computer game in which the viewer/player must make decisions similar to those in the computer game *THE WALKING DEAD*. Here we are dealing with a media hybrid that can be understood as an intramedial reflection of the series *BLACK MIRROR* within the context of a digital platform. The examples could be continued almost indefinitely. What is important to me is that in all these cases the three forms of serial reflection about part and whole can be related to different medial contexts and levels of serial narration. So, they could be



used fruitfully for the analysis of serial phenomena, be they inter, intra, trans medial or whatsoever.

- 6 The fact that this kind of media reflection in a serial context occurs particularly frequently in the context of trans media narration probably has to do with the increasing networking of media forms and platforms. The essential characteristic of our media situation is probably connectivity. Intermedial references that reflect the relationship between part and whole are places where this interconnection is stabilized in a special way, precisely through intermedial reflections on how parts of a complex network can be thought of as belonging together. Seen in this way, games to series always have the big whole of connectivity in view.

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# **Playing with Batman**

(De-)Constructing Transmedial Characters

in THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the role of three core principles in the construction and deconstruction of transmedial characters: irony, plasticity, and playfulness. By using the LEGO BATMAN MOVIE as its central case study, it is argued that the film offers a meta-perspective on the divergent and inconsistent media history of the Caped Crusader—one that invites recipients to play with the various building blocks of his character. The essay also analyzes the narrative and aesthetic means by which the film addresses the materiality of Lego bricks, the intertextuality of various media franchises, and the role of recipients as potential constructors or master builders. By that, it is suggested that the film is not only a tribute to Batman as a transmedial icon, but also an exploration of the importance of the core principles mentioned above in the construction and deconstruction of characters across media.

## INTRODUCTION: THE ONE AND ONLY BATMAN?<sup>1</sup>

“Sir, I have seen you go through similar phases in 2016 and 2012 and 2008 and 2005 and 1997 and 1995 and 1992 and 1989—and that weird one in 1966.”

“I have aged phenomenally.”<sup>2</sup>

Theoretically speaking, characters with a long media history are a complicated matter. Film scholar Jens Eder defines characters very broadly as “identifiable fictional beings with an inner life that exists as communicatively constructed artifacts”<sup>3</sup> and if they exist within a more or less stable and coherent storyworld, different incarnations across media could be understood as one and the same (“glocal transmedia characters”).<sup>4</sup> If those characters have been modified and/or expanded on over time, however—for example, Sherlock Holmes, Peter Pan, or Batman—they might appear in familiar and yet often separate storyworlds without any continuity between them. In other words: It seems more like they all *refer* to the same character without plausibly being one and the same. Thon speaks here of “global transmedia character networks,”<sup>5</sup> indicating that there is not one all-encompassing ideal representation of a character that is shared over time and across audiences. Instead, there are multiple interconnections between different incarnations, establishing links that may strengthen some core characteristics, but also often add new aspects or modify certain elements (for example displacing Sherlock Holmes into New York in *ELEMENTARY*,<sup>6</sup> or turning Peter Pan into an adult in *HOOK*).<sup>7</sup> In this context, Roberta Pearson speaks of several more or less stable core elements as

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1 This contribution is based in part on chapters of Hanns Christian Schmidt’s book *Transmediale Topoi. Medienübergreifende Erzählwelten in seriellen Narrativen*, Marburg: Büchner 2020; but it is a largely revised and expanded version of these sections.

2 Alfred Pennyworth and Bruce Wayne, *THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE* (AU/US/DK 2017, D: Chris McKay)

3 Eder, Jens: “Understanding Characters,” in: *Projections* (no. 4) 1 (2010), pp. 16-40.

4 Jan-Noël Thon distinguishes between “local work-specific characters,” “glocal transmedia characters” and “global transmedia character networks.” See: Thon, Jan-Noël: “Transmedia Characters: Theory and Analysis,” in: *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* 5 (2019), pp. 176-199, p. 171.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *ELEMENTARY* (US 2012-2019, CBS)

7 *HOOK* (US 1991, D: Steven Spielberg)

“established character templates”<sup>8</sup> that define a character’s recognizable attributes on the one hand and a need for the producers to keep each new incarnation innovative and interesting on the other.

Although we mostly treat characters as intersubjective concepts, we might imagine them differently depending on individual experiences and knowledge. To speak of intersubjective qualities for a character is to create a hypothetical mental model for an assumed ideal recipient.<sup>9</sup> In the case of transmedial character networks, even divergent textual incarnations<sup>10</sup> may converge within the mind of the recipient to an individual—possibly still contradictory—mental model of the character. The recipients may be aware of facts about production contexts that explain certain contradictions and still be able to imagine a character as a coherent fictional being, an entity that somehow still ‘functions’ or ‘works well’ regarding the particular story at hand. Thon refers here to Kendal Walton’s “principle of charity”<sup>11</sup> that recipients apply to solve—or rather, to cognitively smooth out—such conflicts.

The difficulty to locate an ‘origin’ for such characters highlights several problems that are inherent to the understanding of fictional characters: What are characters, where do they live, and what makes them ‘alive’ in the first place? We may be tempted to see a character as something created by textual representation and mainly fulfilling textual functions (being the hero, the villain, the sidekick, and so on). However, once we get to know them, we can think of Batman, Sherlock Holmes, or Peter Pan independent of their textual incarnations. We may even know about them, without ever reading, watching, or playing a media artifact that represents them (children may know about Darth Vader, for example, from images of school backpacks or lunch boxes). Other characters, such as Hello Kitty or

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8 Pearson, Roberta E.: “‘You’re Sherlock Holmes, Wear the Damn Hat!’: Character Identity in a Transfiction,” in: Paola Brembilla/Ilaria A. De Pascalis (eds.), *Reading Contemporary Serial Television Universes: A Narrative Ecosystem Framework*, New York, NY: Routledge 2018, pp. 144-166, here p. 150.

9 Eder, Jens: *Was Sind Figuren? Ein Beitrag zur Interdisziplinären Fiktionstheorie*, Paderborn: mentis 2008, p.65.

10 As common in cultural theory, we understand text as “any set of signs which can be read for meaning” (Chandler, Daniel/Munday, Rod: “Text,” in: Chandler, Daniel/Munday, Rod (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2011, pp.429-430, here p. 429.

11 J. Thon: “Transmedia Characters,” p.185.

Uncle Sam, may even exist without any memorable text-based narrative connection at all (as pre-narrative character or “kyara”).<sup>12</sup>

As Essri Varis points out, fictional characters, then, are in general a bit like Frankenstein’s monster: dead and constructed through artificial elements until they are struck by a spark of life.<sup>13</sup> Varis’ metaphor emphasizes the role of the recipient in reviving such characters. In this sense, we—as audience members—take over the role of Doctor Frankenstein, animating characters from a potentially unlimited pool of source materials and letting them live again in our imagination. Hence, the necessity to distinguish between the *textual representations* (Figurendarstellungen) of a character and the *mental representations* (Figurenvorstellungen) in the recipients’ mind:<sup>14</sup> as ‘communicatively constructed artifacts’ characters can be seen equally as textual elements and abstract concepts imagined by an audience.<sup>15</sup>

With the example of the Lego Batman, we would like to propose another metaphor to better understand characters across media—or, quite literally, add another building block to this concept. In the Lego Franchise, Batman appears to be a more or less coherent glocal transmedial character. However, he already lived through an impressive history of representations in different media. Those representations appear as points of connection—the different links that Thon points out, not unlike the stud-and-tube-system of Lego bricks—and invite us to playfully rebuild the character in our minds. In this sense, we do not become a mad scientist like Frankenstein, but rather a master builder; not only constructing, but also constantly *deconstructing* Batman’s image. This is highlighted in the opening quote of Bruce

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12 Cf. Wilde, Lukas R.A.: “Kyara Revisited: The Pre-Narrative Character-State of Japanese Character Theory,” in: *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* 5 (2019), pp. 220-247.

13 Cf. Varis, Essi: “The Monster Analogy: Why Fictional Characters Are Frankenstein’s Monsters,” in: *Substance* 48 (2019), pp. 63-86.

14 J. Eder: *Was Sind Figuren?*, p. 64.

15 James Phelan even suggests three possible perspectives for a better understanding of characters and their modes of action: the mimetic, the synthetic, and the thematic sphere of a character. The mimetic sphere addresses the character as an imagined ‘fictional person’ with an inner life, the synthetic sphere addresses the character as a ‘textual element’ consisting of words and images, the thematic sphere addresses the cultural ‘function’ of the character as a symbol or metaphor for other abstract concepts. (Cf. Phelan, James: “Narrative as Rhetoric and the MTS Model,” in: Clark, Matthew/Phelan Matthew (eds.), *Debating Rhetorical Narratology: On the Synthetic, Mimetic, and Thematic Aspects of Narrative (Theory and Interpretation of Narrative)*, Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press 2020, pp.146-148.



Wayne's butler Alfred in *THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE*, establishing a narrative link between specific live-action adaptations of Batman and the Batman of *THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE* (see Fig. 1-10).

*Figures 1-10 (left to right and top to bottom): BATMAN V SUPERMAN (2016), THE DARK KNIGHT RISES (2012), THE DARK KNIGHT (2008), BATMAN BEGINS (2005), BATMAN & ROBIN (1997), BATMAN FOREVER (1995), BATMAN RETURNS (1992), BATMAN (1989), BATMAN (1966), THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE (2017)*



In 2016, Zack Snyder introduced us to arguably the grimmest big-screen adaptation of this character with *BATMAN V SUPERMAN*,<sup>16</sup> a gritty continuation in the style of the already quite ‘dark knight’ established by Christopher Nolan’s trilogy in 2005, 2008, and 2012.<sup>17</sup> The trilogy was preceded by Joel Schumacher’s *BATMAN FOREVER*<sup>18</sup> and *BATMAN & ROBIN*,<sup>19</sup> in 1995 and 1997 respectively, a flashy, camp-infused version of the superhero, in which not least George Clooney’s ‘nipple suit’ left a lasting impression in the popular imagination. And in 1989 and 1992, while not strictly speaking the first time Batman came to the big screen, Tim Burton directed the billionaire in a bat costume in the first two full-length Hollywood feature films.<sup>20</sup>

Most of these cinematic incarnations of Batman exist separately from each other—for example, there is no continuity between the Batman who adopts Dick Grayson as his sidekick Robin in 1995’s *BATMAN FOREVER* and the following *DARK KNIGHT* trilogy by Christopher Nolan.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the selected examples present Batman as oscillating between his dark and gritty origins and more carnivalesque or even camp incarnations that are often associated with his goofy sidekick Robin.<sup>22</sup> A prime example for the latter is the 1960s TV series *BATMAN*<sup>23</sup> and the accompanying movie *BATMAN: THE MOVIE*,<sup>24</sup> which is here referred to as Batman’s “weird phase.” The comment devalues the camp aspects of Batman and thus plays into recent interpretations of Batman’s comic book origins as mainly ‘dark and gritty’—quite ironically because *THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE* in itself is a rather silly and campy incarnation of the Caped Crusader. In addressing the rather disparate history of Batman, the movie shows an awareness of the

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16 *Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice* (US 2016, D: Zack Snyder)

17 *BATMAN BEGINS* (US/UK 2005, D: Christopher Nolan); *THE DARK KNIGHT* (US/UK 2008, D: Christopher Nolan); *THE DARK KNIGHT RISES* (US/UK 2012, D: Christopher Nolan)

18 *BATMAN FOREVER* (US 1995, D: Joel Schumacher)

19 *BATMAN & ROBIN* (US 1997, D: Joel Schumacher)

20 *BATMAN* (US/UK 1989, D: Tim Burton); *BATMAN RETURNS* (US 1992, D: Tim Burton)

21 The trilogy only pays a subtle tribute to the infamous sidekick, by revealing at the very end that one of the supporting characters, John Blake, is actually called ‘Robin’ John Blake.

22 Brooker, Will: *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-first Century Batman*, London: I. B. Tauris 2012.

23 *BATMAN* (US 1966-1968, ABC)

24 *BATMAN: THE MOVIE* (US 1966, D: Leslie H. Martinson)

contradictions between the different representations of Batman and their perception in public discourse. Or, to put it differently: “Every fan knows Batman’s origin story,”<sup>25</sup> as journalist Charlie Jane Anders writes in her review of the *LEGO BATMAN MOVIE*, not meaning the one about the murder of Bruce Wayne’s parents, which he witnessed as a young child:

“I’m talking about the tale of a gritty urban vigilante who was created in 1939, only to be mercilessly watered down into kid-friendly fluff, culminating in a hyperkitschy 1966 TV show. Ever since then, the story goes, brave creators have fought to make the Dark Knight dark again.”<sup>26</sup>

Which version is considered to be the ‘right’ one is primarily a question of marketing, rhetoric, and the interests of the respective licensors who will advertise ‘their’ version of the character accordingly.

As we will see, something decidedly playful is taking place here: The meta-perspective of *THE LEGO MOVIE* franchise—consisting of *THE LEGO MOVIE*,<sup>27</sup> *THE LEGO MOVIE 2: THE SECOND PART*,<sup>28</sup> *THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE*, and *THE LEGO NINJAGO MOVIE*,<sup>29</sup> as well as various media tie-ins, such as digital games and comic spin-offs—plays with the potential cognitive dissonance between a mental image of Batman as an incoherent global transmedial character network created by several distinct medial incarnations and Batman as an ‘ideal’ singular character that exists only for the global storyworld of the *Lego* universe. This aspect of playfulness highlights how we make sense of such characters, especially when they are contextualized within a long media history: Instead of searching for a unifying, unbreakable ‘core’ of traits and a heterogeneous backstory, we engage in a propositional stance, creating ‘what if’-scenarios. As media culture constantly adjusts and modifies the template of the characters like Batman, our mental models of them are by no means monolithic, but rather plastic—in the literal sense of the word.

Our hypothesis is supported by several narrative and aesthetic means, which are decidedly ‘meta’: The first means lies in the ironic meta-approach to Batman as a character, for example, in the intertextual backreferences to Batman’s diverse

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25 Anders, Charlie Jane: “Fun Batman or Dark Batman? Hell, Why Not Both,” in: *Wired*, February 10, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2017/02/fun-batman-vs-dark-batman/>

26 Ibid.

27 *THE LEGO MOVIE* (AU/US/DK 2014, D: Phil Lord/Christopher Miller)

28 *THE LEGO MOVIE 2: THE SECOND PART* (AU/US/DK 2019, D: Mike Mitchell)

29 *THE LEGO NINJAGO MOVIE* (US/DK 2017, D: Charlie Bean/Paul Fisher/Bob Logan)

audio-visual media history as we just described it above. The second one lies in the meta-reference to its constructional foundation; Lego bricks as something both plastic and ‘sticky’; an additive and malleable material that is both meant to be played with in games of make-believe and a construction toy made for building something new out of already existing material. The third one lies in the prominent role of the recipients as potential ‘constructors’ or master builders, as well as of the Lego world and of popular characters such as Batman. This is addressed in the movie franchise as a form of metalepsis, a stylistic device that highlights the construction of the text itself. These three means will be identified and elaborated on through a formal close reading of selected parts of the film.

## **IRONY: (BAT-)MAN IN THE MIRROR**

As the historian Michael Saler notes in his ‘pre-history of virtual worlds,’ the early visitors of the first modern literary storyworlds, such as the one of Sherlock Holmes, often used the distancing means of irony to avoid completely losing themselves in the fiction in an escapist way.<sup>30</sup> Saler sums up this approach as “being delighted without being deluded”<sup>31</sup>—and goes on by describing how a potential “colonization of the imagination”<sup>32</sup> by serially produced stories may have taken place as early as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Saler outlines the powerful effect irony as follows:

“[B]y the Edwardian era of the ‘New Imperialism’ the imagination had become domesticated as a topographic space awaiting colonization; by the mid-twentieth century imaginary worlds were readily available as places of prolonged mental habitation. [...] Adults could now reside safely within carefully mapped geographies of the imagination without compromising their reason [...]—because the necessary distinction between fantasy and reality was securely reinforced through the distancing power of irony.”<sup>33</sup>

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30 Cf. Saler, Michael: *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Pre-history of Virtual Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012.

31 *Ibid.*, p.12.

32 Eder, Jens. “Transmediale Imagination,” in: Julian Hanich/Hans Jürgen Wulff (eds.), *Auslassen, Andeuten, Auffüllen*, Leiden: Brill 2012, pp. 205-237, here: p. 230, trans. by VO/HCS.

33 M. Saler: *As If*, p. 29.

He claims that early ‘super fans’ of characters like Sherlock Holmes—which also included cosplayers (*avant la lettre*) and eager writers of fan fiction—were both emotionally involved and, at the same time, keenly and jokingly aware of the artificiality of their object of interest. On a certain level, this approach is similar to our case study: *THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE* is downright infused with a particular blend of self-aware, tongue-in-cheek self-parody. In addition to that (and as was already demonstrated at the beginning), *THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE* not only heavily relies on the audience’s knowledge of its titular hero, but also makes the knowledge of his malleability a *de facto* condition for the unfolding of its meta-reflexive potential. In other words: The Lego Batman is not simply another incarnation of the Dark Knight—who is often not as dark as certain fans and certain marketing strategists would like him to be. Rather, he serves as a figurative crystallization point of *ironic commentary* on the character. Given that Batman has been a fixture of popular culture for over 75 years, it is understandable that researchers such as Brooker would dismiss attributions such as “‘truth’ and ‘fidelity’”<sup>34</sup> as meaningless in relation to Batman. As the already mentioned flashback scene shows, in the character of the Lego Batman are all—and simultaneously none—of the screen adaptations to date intertwined. Thus, highlighting the individual building blocks that apparently could be attached to and removed from the character at will.

When we look at the more or less stable parts of Batman’s transmedial character template—his outward appearance, mental properties, social situation, and essential parts of his biography—the Lego Batman takes these attributes to extremes. In many aspects, this particular Batman ends up being a reservoir for just about every gag ever made about the character—“[A] sort of greatest-hits of Bat-jokes.”<sup>35</sup> Out of Batman’s intelligence and athleticism grows such an inflated ego that even his voice-controlled computer responds to the command “overcompensate!”; the billionaire lifestyle is maintained in a Hugh Heffner-reminiscent bathrobe and with a plate of microwave lobster in the swimming pool; and the starting point of Batman’s character arc (his fear of allowing a normal familial bond again after the traumatic loss of his parents) finds a reflection in his symbiotic relationship with the Joker, who wants nothing more than to finally be accepted by Batman as his favorite enemy.

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34 W. Brooker: *Hunting the Dark Knight*, p. xi.

35 Robinson, Tasha/Adi Robertson/Chaim Gartenberg: “Question Club: The Lego Batman Movie’s Original Content, Smart Humor, and Endless Recycling,” in: *The Verge*, February 13, 2017, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/2/13/14600838/question-club-lego-batman-movie-robin-batgirl> (accessed: 03.04.2020).

In the larger context of the story presented, however, it is surprising that shortly after a completely revved-up opening sequence we witness a much calmer passage. This becomes all the more powerful through the contrast of its ordinariness: The vast, deserted lair of the Batcave echoes the masked vigilante's voice several times over; we watch Batman reheat his microwave meal for minutes in a dark kitchen, see him watching the romantic comedy *JERRY MAGUIRE*<sup>36</sup> alone in his home theater and finally witness how he becomes engrossed in the family photos in the entrance hall of his mansion. Here, he is surprised by his butler Alfred, and the self-reflexive scene described at the very beginning of this article takes place.

This passage and the inserted scenes (Fig. 1-10) make it clear that, surprisingly, this very meta-Batman provides the film with much more emotional realism and personality than we've been used to from other film adaptations of the character to date (quite unlike, say, the Snyder or the Nolan films, which portray Batman as decidedly one-sided between anger and a self-imposed sense of duty). The focus here is no longer (only) on saving the world or Gotham City, but at least provides believable hints about the character's inner life and emotional states—treating Batman more like a 'fictional person.' With this blend of irony and emotional realism, we are presented a parody of the character, but one that foregrounds its usual artificiality by contrasting it with something new.

## **PLASTICITY: LEGO BRICKS AS TOPOI OF MEDIA CULTURE**

At the end of the movie, Batman is finally able to overcome his inner conflict when he sees his friends in danger, acknowledges the importance of social connections (his own connectivity), and finally allows emotional bonds. Nevertheless, at the last second, the Joker's bomb detonates, causing the Lego base plates on which Gotham City is built to drift apart—but Batman manages to prevent the worst with an idea: "We're gonna stick together. Literally." In the process, the Lego figures athletically pile on top of each other, using their bodily fitness to form a 'human' chain to hold the two panels together and eventually reunite them.

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36 JERRY MAGUIRE (US 1996, D: Cameron Crowe)

Figure 11: Joker and the other villains and Batman and his friend each turn themselves into a Lego chain connected in the middle by Batman and Joker joining hands



Source: THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE.

As we see in this scene (Fig. 11), the irony mentioned earlier is closely interlinked with the materiality of the depicted scenes. The representation of Lego bricks evokes not only a very specific audiovisual style between CGI, actual film footage, and stop-motion-aesthetics that serve as a foundation for many Lego-specific jokes but also provides some interesting theoretical insights that become central for our understanding of transmedial characters. Lego bricks are a malleable material that enables a variability in form—due to its materiality—or rather its plasticity, to be more precise. The general aesthetic of the material plastic is summarized, for example, by Roland Barthes in his collection *Mythologies* in the following way:

“So, more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement.”<sup>37</sup>

But Lego bricks are even more than just building blocks made of plastic. As a fundamentally additive technology, each Lego component offers two essential properties: (1) They can be combined to construct a distinct shape or object and (2) provide connection points that make either more material applicable or lets the builder take away material without ‘breaking’ the foundational building substance, i.e., the brick. While other plastic objects in Barthes’ sense are sculptural

37 Barthes, Roland: *Mythologies*, New York, NY: Hill and Wang 2011[\*1957], p. 79.

‘traces of movement’ frozen in time, Lego bricks provide a technical means to dissolve the trace of movement again—transforming its forms possibly ad infinitum. The reason for this is simple: All Lego bricks are based on a patented interlocking binding system, meaning that all Lego bricks manufactured since the very first one are compatible with each other. New pieces can always be added; existing Lego worlds can be rebuilt and extended, destroyed and rebuilt again. By that, Lego bricks by design highlight the very idea of interconnectivity with other elements, a built-in seriality brick by brick (by brick...). As Gauntlett points out:

“The LEGO System, as commonly understood, refers to the idea that any LEGO element, or any LEGO set, is not an isolated or complete object, but comes with the potential, and the promise, that it is part of a much larger whole. The system of interconnecting studs and tubes, patented by the LEGO Group in 1958, means that any LEGO object can be connected with others and almost endlessly extended.”<sup>38</sup>

This serial interconnectivity as well as the malleable plasticity of the material make the Lego models we build with our hands quite similar to the mental models we build in our minds, whenever we imagine fictional characters and their worlds. To further explain: According to literary scholar and writer Umberto Eco, whenever we engage with the world of a text, we are constantly creating further possible world designs based on obvious probabilities. Eco puts it this way:

“[W]hen the fable tells the reader ‘x performs such an action,’ she will suppose: ‘and because every time x performs such an action that takes the outcome y, so will’—this is the conclusion—‘the action of x take the outcome.’”<sup>39</sup>

Thus, the readers enter into a “propositional stance” in which they explore various “hypotheses about world structures.”<sup>40</sup> To illustrate this, Eco chooses another metaphor—which is, the act of playing a chess game:

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38 Gauntlett, David: “The LEGO System as a Tool for Thinking, Creativity, and Changing the World,” in: Mark J. P. Wolf (ed.), *LEGO Studies: Examining the Building Blocks of a Transmedial Phenomenon*, Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis 2014, pp. 189-205, here p. 190.

39 Eco, Umberto: *Lector in fabula: Die Mitarbeit der Interpretation in erzählenden Texten*, München: dtv Verlag 1990, p. 149.

40 Ibid., p. 143.



“All this together—the shape of the chessboard, the rules of the game and the scenographies of the game—[...] represents a totality of possibilities that open up from the encyclopedia of chess. On this basis, the reader sets out to work out her own solution. And for this she carries out a double movement: on the one hand she considers all objectively recognizable possibilities as ‘permitted’ [...]; on the other hand, she considers the move she thinks is the best one. [...] And therefore, finally, the world prefigured by the reader is based both on objective conditions of the network [as well as the encyclopedia of chess, VO/HCS] and on the reader’s own subjective speculations about the behavior of other persons.”<sup>41</sup>

The rules of a chess game—together with its pieces and their probable moves in specific game situations—work in a very similar way when transferred to possible world and character designs in narratives. They are—speaking in Lego terms—bricks that can be applied in a particular way to construct a certain shape, object, or model. Predictions about the course of a story, then, coincide with certain experiences of a reader who is already familiar with specific literary conventions. These conventions are then compared to the actualized situation described by the text. Now, this creates by no means a strict ‘set of rules’ like that of an actual chess game; instead, we extract a sense of plausibility from the text in the course of reading it. According to Eco, however, the art of a successful narrative lies in designing a scenography that has not yet been depicted based on the space of possibilities constructed in the text, but which is nevertheless within the bounds of what is deemed acceptable:

“In the second case, one will present a game situation in which the winner has dared a completely unexpected move, not yet recorded by any scenography, so that it has entered history because of its audacity and novelty, and the reader has the pleasure of having his predictions contradicted. [...] Every fable plays its own game, and pleasure decides what prevails in it.”<sup>42</sup>

In reading a text, familiar scenarios are thus always actualized; and “[e]nactualizing a scenography [...] means, in effect, returning to the topos.”<sup>43</sup>

In particular, the fact that Eco repeatedly mentions the term *topos* (from Gr. *tópos*: place) in his explanations is quite interesting in this context—and it can certainly be fruitfully anchored in the discourse on global transmedial character networks, character templates, and the Lego metaphor. Frauke Berndt and Lily

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41 Ibid., p. 146.

42 Ibid., p. 148.

43 Ibid., p. 149.

Tonger-Erk established a similar connection in their monograph on intertextuality.<sup>44</sup> They understand the term *topos* as a “commonplace (*locus communis*)” that “can be realized in different media on their media-specific terms” and see a “building-block principle” at work that releases a “generative potential” through its “limitless combinatorics.”<sup>45</sup>

Grasping the term *topos* ambiguously in this way may not seem conducive to scholarly debate at first glance; however, this use of the term has a certain tradition: In the ancient doctrine of their use—the ancient topics—*topoi* were designated both as sites for evidence, arguments, and thoughts and as such, rhetorical elements themselves. They were primarily intended to assist public speech with concrete functions (such as legal argument) and through rhetorical stylization (such as the “conclusion from the opposite (*argumentum a contratio*),”<sup>46</sup> but also to serve as “memory aids [...] and ornaments of speech [...]”<sup>47</sup> In literature, however, *topoi* became a “basic stock of fixed images, standing phrases, and traditional motifs,”<sup>48</sup> which were collected and systematized in the early modern period in “compendia, rhetoric manuals, and topocatalogs.”<sup>49</sup> In poetic use, *topoi* thus indeed become “format templates”<sup>50</sup> that are properly archived in cultural memory. This archive, as Berndt writes in a survey article on poetic topics, was described as mental “houses and temples” by Cicero; and Quintilian understood them as a body that can turn out “well-proportioned or monstrous” depending on the “building project.”<sup>51</sup> In this sense, a *topos* can also be understood as part of an established character template in Pearsons’ understanding. We would add: *Topoi* could as well be imagined as building blocks for mental models that are flexible, malleable, and dynamic—literally plastic.

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44 Cf. Berndt, Frauke/Tonger-Erk, Lily: *Intertextualität: Eine Einführung*, Berlin: E. Schmidt 2013.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

46 Müller, Wolfgang G.: “Topik/Toposforschung,” in: Ansgar Nünning (ed.), *Metzler-Lexikon Literatur und Kulturtheorie: Ansätze—Personen—Grundbegriffe*, Stuttgart: Metzler 2008, pp. 722-23, here p. 723.

47 Oestersandfordt, Christian: “Topos,” in: Dieter Burdorf/Christoph Fasbender/Burkhard Moennighoff (eds.), *Metzler Lexikon Literatur: Begriffe und Definitionen*, Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler 2007, pp. 773-74, here p. 774.

48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*

50 Berndt, Frauke: “Poetische Topik,” in: Rüdiger Zymner (ed.), *Handbuch Literarische Rhetorik*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2015, pp. 433-60, here p. 441.

51 *Ibid.*

Thus, various analogies can be drawn between the ‘construction methods’ of transmedial narrative worlds and their characters as well as to the properties generally attributed to topoi. Both are structured (1) by a form of regularity or seriality that appears to be plausible according to the archived textual passages. These textual references can then (2) be constantly recombined and continued as in a modular system. As “literate readers,”<sup>52</sup> we learn to read and recognize transmedial topoi, such as the depiction of the Caped Crusader and his world, through our everyday media experience; and we use such topoi as building blocks to construct imaginative spaces in order to anticipate world structures and courses of action.

## **PLAYFULNESS: AUDIENCES AS MASTER BUILDERS**

As we said in the beginning, it seems as if the Batman in *THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE* represents an idealized mental image created by an avid viewer of Batman’s audiovisual representations—like a remix of various building blocks. Or to put it differently, he seems as if he has fallen into a toy box and been shaken vigorously, losing some pieces and gaining some pieces in the time being. The film shows us a meta-perspective of Batman that includes an awareness of several textual representations that exist in the mind of the recipients and in this way the opening quote of this paper can be seen as an “epistemic metalepsis.”<sup>53</sup> A metalepsis is a narrative element that transgresses the borders of the storyworld. In the example described above, Batman and his Butler possess knowledge about events that didn’t happen in the local work-specific world of *THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE* and are also not strictly part of the global transmedial world of the Lego Franchise. Both characters possess knowledge about Batman’s complicated distribution history and thus appear to become part of the world of the audience.

This transgression of boundaries is not surprising in the context of the Lego Franchise as a whole. When we look at the first *LEGO MOVIE*, for example, we already witness a link to a world outside of the character’s perceived reality: In a plot twist at the end of the movie, it is revealed that the characters in the movie are actually the toys of a young boy (the “Master Builder”) and that the villain of the movie (“Lord Business”) bears a suspicious likeness to his father, who threatens to glue the Lego figures together, and thus ending their existence as playful,

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52 F. Berndt/L. Tonger-Erk: *Intertextualität*, p. 223.

53 Thon, Jan-Noël: *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press 2016, pp. 65-66.

malleable, and creativity-inspiring beings—or as Herman calls it as “a basis for a fictional world you [the child] controlled.”<sup>54</sup>

THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE is a little more subtle when it comes to the inclusion of a similar framing narrative that alludes to the Lego characters as actual children’s toys. Nevertheless, it can be argued that it is still there. This becomes evident when we take a closer look not only into the potential of the Lego bricks (which we did in the last section) but also its limitations. These limitations are not part of the inherent materiality and form of the Lego bricks but are part of Lego’s company history. In 1999 Lego started to buy licenses from different media franchises and to sell themed packages, potentially limiting the children’s imagination and further commercializing a ‘creative’ construction toy.<sup>55</sup> This practice has been broadly criticized, however, there is also an argument to be made that speaks against these commercial limitations and ascribes much more agency to the children and their practices of play:

“[W]ithout direct observation or memories it cannot be known how these toys are played with, and what worlds they may generate. Moreover [sic], as has already been indicated, once the pieces of any particular themed set are mixed up with a child or family’s existing collection, all kinds of worlds can be constructed, and different kinds of knowledge, from popular media to science, are brought to bear, explored, and mixed up.”<sup>56</sup>

Giddings indicates here that the mixing of elements from different narrative worlds might be a cornerstone of kids’ play with Legos. He further identifies the ‘Box’ which holds the Lego bricks from different sets as the origin place for these intertextual encounters:

“‘The Box’ as an evocative focus for a multiplicity of memories, and the well-spring from which many LEGO play events emerge, and its collection or absorption of numerous sets, negates critique of themed sets and instructions as constraining. Not only does the box mix

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54 Herman, Sarah: *A Million Little Bricks: The Unofficial Illustrated History of the LEGO Phenomenon*, New York, NY: Skyhorse Publ. 2012, p. 22.

55 Cf. Cross, Gary S.: *Kid’s Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood*, Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press 1997.

56 Giddings, Seth: “Bright Bricks, Dark Play: On the Impossibility of Studying LEGO,” in: Mark J. P. Wolf (ed.), *LEGO Studies: Examining the Building Blocks of a Trans-medial Phenomenon*, Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis 2014, pp. 241-267, here p. 264.

up initially distinct sets, it often originates in, or has incorporated, LEGO from older siblings, relatives or buildings.”<sup>57</sup>

When we transfer these observations about Lego’s marketing strategies and probable playful practices, we can see an analogy to ‘the Box’ in the so-called Phantom Zone in *THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE*’s storyworld. Like in the kids’ toy box, a plethora of different characters populate this realm, detached from their own storyworld, mixed-up, and reduced to a few template sentences.

In *THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE*, Batman successfully utilizes a projector beam to transport the Joker to this ‘notorious space jail.’ In the Phantom Zone, the Joker encounters numerous familiar antagonists and tries to recruit them for his evil plans to destroy Gotham City. The twist in this movie, however, is, that these antagonists not only have nothing to do with Gotham City and the expanded Batman canon, nor can they be found in the DC universe. Rather, this scene features characters from very different entertainment franchises: A gang of Gremlins from the film of the same name;<sup>58</sup> Sauron in the guise of the flaming eye, complete with his tower, from *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* franchise; a Godzilla lookalike; the white shark from *JAWS*,<sup>59</sup> a couple of velociraptors that could have come from *JURASSIC PARK*;<sup>60</sup> the giant ape King Kong; the Wicked Witch of the East from *THE WIZARD OF OZ*;<sup>61</sup> Count Dracula; some Daleks from *DOCTOR WHO*;<sup>62</sup> Lord Voldemort from the *HARRY POTTER* franchise; a swamp monster from the Lego *MONSTER FIGHTER* toy model series; Medusa from Greek mythology; and Agent Smith along with numerous doppelgangers from *THE MATRIX* franchise—all in Lego guise. In the process, we hear all sorts of self-ironic comments on the characters’ narrative backgrounds as typical villains (for example, Sauron asks the Joker to dye Gotham’s rivers red with Batman’s blood—to which the latter hesitantly responds and promptly offers Sauron lava as a more pleasing substitute instead).

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57 Ibid., p. 265.

58 GREMLINS (US 1984, D: Joe Dante)

59 JAWS (US 1975, D: Steven Spielberg)

60 JURASSIC PARK (US 1993, D: Steven Spielberg)

61 THE WIZARD OF OZ (US 1939, D: Victor Fleming)

62 DOCTOR WHO (UK 1963-present, BBC One)

Figures 12-15 (left to right and top to bottom): Sauron, Voldemort, and the Daleks (THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE)



The Phantom Zone is thereby—similar to Cloud Cuckoo Land in the LEGO MOVIE—an *oútópos*, a fantastic place of the in-between, in which on the one hand the (thematically) inappropriate parts are banished from the world of Gotham City and which on the other hand, serves as the starting point of an eclectic experiment in free play. This illustrious squad of villains is unceremoniously shipped back to Gotham City by the Joker to prove finally to Batman that he is the greatest villain of all time (and to completely destroy Gotham City).

Keeping the image of the Lego box in the child's room in mind, this hodgepodge of different characters from media history can be seen as another reference to the convergence of different characters—completely independent of their respective storyworlds—within the recipients' mind. Like memory fragments, these characters are reduced to simple elements of their established character templates (*topoi*). This entails mostly their outward appearance transformed into a Lego-specific visual style, significant props (such as a wand for Voldemort), significant abilities (like being 'all-seeing' in the case of Sauron's eye), and some catchphrases—which are sometimes even only loosely connected to the character in question (for example, Voldemort doesn't shout his infamous killing course "Avada Kedavra," but repeats the phrase "Wingardium Leviosa," which is one of the more harmless charms in the Harry Potter universe).

## CONCLUSION

As has been demonstrated, irony, plasticity, and playfulness play a significant role when we construct transmedial characters in our minds. *THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE* illustrates exactly that: It not only articulates an awareness of what distinguishes Batman as a Lego-licensed superhero, but also downright celebrates the pleasures of reception, richness of variation, communal exchange, and productive appropriation of his world.

While the core story of the *LEGO BATMAN MOVIE* appears to be a typical ‘what if’ scenario in the Batman canon, the deviations from and reflections on the canonical Batman character are significant for the study of transmedial characters. The story departs from patterns of strict serial repetition and slight variation of the character. Instead, it reflects on Batman’s divergent and inconsistent media history by creating a meta-perspective on the character through the double existence as a fictional being and as a children’s toy. Furthermore, by opening up existing canon boundaries between different media franchises, the movie conveys the message that deconstruction and recombination of textual material can contribute to an innovative and creative playing experience. By appropriating numerous characters from different media franchises existing boundaries can be broken down in favor of Lego-typical playfulness. Various elements can be mixed and rearranged—no matter whether they have been produced as a set by Lego or constructed from Lego bricks themselves (a King Kong, Matrix, or Godzilla Lego set does not exist, for example). The film not only articulates an awareness of what makes Batman a Lego-licensed superhero but advocates the pleasures of reception, variety, sharing, and productive appropriation of his (and in essence all fictional) world(s). In this way, the *LEGO BATMAN MOVIE* is both a film about Batman as a transmedial icon and an exploration of the significance of irony and plasticity for constructing and deconstructing his character. The film also makes a case for a very specific way of dealing with topoi: By playing with them. It suggests, that our approach to characters takes on an all the more fruitful turn when canon boundaries are opened up, common templates are inverted and characters from completely different story-worlds are integrated into a narrative world. These processes ultimately mirror the convergence of different media in the recipient’s mental image. With its transgressive use of metalepsis, however, it is less a critique of Batman than an affectionate homage. In the end, *The LEGO BATMAN MOVIE* is not only a film that incorporates certain brand values of the Lego company (family and friendship) but also a meta-commentary on how interactions with fictional narratives never happen in a vacuum.

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THE WIZARD OF OZ (US 1939, D: Victor Fleming)

## **Batman**

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# **Ontological Boundaries**



# The Multimodality of Immersion

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ROBIN CURTIS

## **Abstract**

Human perception is considered multimodal in that it depends on the processes of interaction and overlap of the five senses that occur in consciousness. Recent research into synesthesia finds that a far greater percentage of the population has synesthetic capacities than was earlier thought (although they are oftentimes unaware of those capacities). Moreover, research has found that the synesthetic intermingling of sense perception and cognition produces far more complex experiential results than a simple combination of five discrete senses would imply. Aesthetic experience relies equally on the intermodality of aesthetic objects themselves: all media, old and new alike, generate multimodal orchestrations and thus appeal to various channels of communication and affection. What are the consequences of these interminglings in production and reception for a theory of immersion? I will argue that immersion is the name we give to the experience we have when our senses are attuned by a medium or a text to the expansive possibilities of our intermodality capabilities.

## **OBJECTS & SUBJECTS**

The term multimodality makes reference to the individual modes through which communication, meaning, and experience may be categorized with regards to objects and phenomena under study, as well as to the modes of perception (conventionally divided into five realms of perceptual interface namely, seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling) that are called upon in various combinations to provide access to and awareness of the things around us.

Thus, on the one hand, these terms describe the objects of the world and the way in which they produce meaning: common questions on this (objects) side of the coin, so to speak, pertain to semiotic modes and include the manner in which text and image work together, for instance, in advertising or in comics, or how image and sound work together in audio-visual media. These questions pertain broadly to issues of intermediality and intertextuality

On the other hand, multimodality and intermodality additionally describe the interaction of living beings (or subjects) with the world through the available perceptual apparatuses. The investigations that have been undertaken in this realm include research into synesthesia, into the fundamental intermodality and multimodality of human infant perception; (for instance in the late psychologist and psychoanalyst Daniel Stern's work)<sup>1</sup> and into the perceptual systems available to other beings such as bees, dolphins, whales, dogs, etc. Recent research into synesthesia, a perceptual capacity that seems to be genetically determined (i.e., one is a synesthete or one is not, and generally other family members are as well), suggests a greater prevalence of this capacity within society than had once been thought (findings from 2006 suggest it is 88 times more prevalent than had been previously thought when testing did not rely on self-referral).<sup>2</sup>

These two charts, which give an inkling of the vast array of overlapping sensations which may be present in synesthetic experience, was compiled by the researcher and synesthete Sean A. Day.<sup>3</sup>

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1 See Stern, Daniel: *The Interpersonal World of The Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology*, London: Routledge 2018 [\*1985]. See also the more recent work by Stern: *Forms of Vitality: Exploring Dynamic Experience in Psychology and the Arts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010, that focuses attention on the implications of intermodal perception for aesthetic experience.

2 The first testing of synesthesia prevalence with sampling that did not rely on self-referral took place in 2006, using objective tests to establish genuineness. The results suggested it was up to 88 times more prevalent in the general population than previously estimated (it had been previously held that it was extremely rare at 0.05% of births) and equally distributed among men and women. See Simner, J. et. al.: "Synesthesia: The Prevalence of Atypical Cross-Modal Experiences," in: *Perception* 35, no. 8 (2006), pp. 1024-1033, <https://doi.org/10.1068/p5469>

3 See Sean A. Day's listserv *The Synesthesia List*, <http://www.daysyn.com/Synesthesia-List.html>. Day has operated a form of this List since 1992 to enable self-reporting and collection of data from synesthetes worldwide, which has been an important source of information for synesthetes, who often are not aware that their particular form of perception is unusual or even called synesthesia. He has compiled a list of at

Chart 1: intermodal perceptual experience and triggers

	emotions	flavors	graphemes	kinetics	lexeme	music note	music sound	odors	orgasm	pain	personality	phoneme	prop.	sound	spatial loc.	temp	time	touch	vision/color
emotions	black																		
flavors		black																	
graphemes			black																
kinetics				black															
lexeme					black														
music note						black													
music sound							black												
odors								black											
orgasm									black										
pain										black									
personality											black								
phoneme												black							
prop.													black						
sound														black					
spatial loc.															black				
temp																black			
time																	black		
touch																		black	
vision/color																			black

least 75 types of synesthesia from that data, which lays out the complexity of overlapping sense perceptions.

“Table 0.1. Seventy-five types of synesthesia. The left-hand column is inducers, the top row is concurrents. White indicates the type has been documented; red indicates no case of this type has yet been recorded; black signifies that this would not be a type of synesthesia. This is not to say that the other types—perhaps all 262—might not also exist; but, if they do, they are apparently extremely rare.”<sup>4</sup>

*Chart 2: distribution of varieties of intermodal perception*

emotions -> flavors	0.26%
emotions -> odors	0.35%
emotions -> sounds	0.09%
emotions -> visions	3.24%
flavors -> musical sounds	0.09%
flavors -> sounds	0.53%
flavors -> temperatures	0.09%
flavors -> touch	0.53%
flavors -> vision	5.78%
general sounds -> vision	16.21%
grapheme personification (OLP*)	4.65%
grapheme -> sound	0.09%
grapheme -> touch	0.09%
graphemes -> vision	61.26%
kinetics -> personality	0.09%
kinetics -> sound	1.05%
kinetics -> vision	0.53%
lexemes -> flavors	2.89%
lexemes -> odors	0.61%
lexemes -> temperature	0.09%
lexemes -> touch	0.44%
lexemes -> vision	0.70%
mirror speech	0.18%
mirror touch	*****
musical notes -> vision	7.80%
musical sounds -> flavors	0.44%
musical sounds -> personality	0.09%



musical sounds -> spatial coordinates	0.09%
musical sounds -> temperatures	0.09%
musical sounds -> vision	18.05%
non-graphemic ordinal personification	*****
number -> flavor	0.26%
object personification	*****
odors -> flavors	0.09%
odors -> sounds	0.44%
odors -> temperatures	0.09%
odors -> touch	0.70%
odors -> vision	6.13%
orgasm -> flavors	0.09%
orgasm -> vision	1.93%
pain -> flavors	0.09%
pain -> odors	0.09%
pain -> sounds	0.09%
pain -> temperature	0.09%
pain -> vision	5.43%
personalities -> flavors	0.35%
personalities -> odors	0.70%
personalities -> sound	0.09%
personalities -> touch	0.09%
personalities -> vision ("auras")	6.49%
phonemes -> flavors	*****
phonemes -> vision	7.54%
proprioception -> flavor	0.09%
proprioception -> vision	0.09%
sounds -> flavors	5.00%
sounds -> kinetics	0.96%
sounds -> odors	1.58%
sounds -> temperatures	0.53%
sounds -> touch	4.38%
spatial sequence (number form)	*****
temperatures -> sounds	0.09%
temperatures -> vision	1.84%
ticker-tape	*****
time units -> flavors	0.09%
time units -> sounds	0.09%

time units -> spatial coordinates	*****
time units -> vision	22.96%
touch -> emotion	0.26%
touch -> flavors	1.14%
touch -> odors	0.35%
touch -> sounds	0.35%
touch -> temperatures	0.09%
touch -> vision	3.94%
vision -> flavors	2.98%
vision -> graphemes	*****
vision -> kinetics	0.09%
vision -> odors	1.14%
vision -> sounds	3.07%
vision -> temperatures	0.35%
vision -> touch	1.58%

“Data is based upon files on 1297 individual synesthetes. The numbers given are the percentage of synesthetes who have the given specific type, not the percentage of the general public. About 3.7% of the general public has some form of synesthesia. Thus, for example, the ratio of people with 'graphemes to vision' synesthesia to the general population is about 1 out of every 44 people; or, there are currently about 162 million people in the world with 'graphemes to vision' (e.g., 'colored letters and numbers') synesthesia.”<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, as demonstrated by the complex and specifically unidirectional overlap of perceptual qualities and cultural technologies in both of these charts, a broader array of cross-modal perceptual experiences has been found to exist than the 20 that would be presumed possible if the modes were limited to those made available via the five conventional senses. Contemporary research suggests a greater number of cross-modal perceptions—in fact up to 73 experiential combinations of perceptual triggers and resulting sensory impressions including the overlap of emotions and scents, kinetic experience and sounds, temporal perception and flavors, sounds and the experience of a temperature change, etc.

Clearly, the interaction between subjects and objects, or rather between all the things of this world, is more complex than it might look at first glance.

My goal in highlighting the two realms of research into multimodality, both on the side of the objects and phenomena that are perceived, as well as on the side

of the perceiving being or subject, is that approaches to immersion have thus far limited themselves in large part to single aspects of the phenomenon, producing to my mind an excessively simple and limited definition of immersion that is only suited to a single context while ignoring all others. How can we hope to communicate with one another as scholars of immersion if we stick to these limited perspectives?

As immersion becomes an ever more important buzzword in our day, appearing in ever more contexts, the goal of working toward a broader understanding of that phenomenon becomes ever more important. But what do we mean when we use the word immersion? Is there a consensus? Obviously, I would argue that there is not. And even if there were consensus among ‘us’—that ‘us’ including such diverse fields of inquiry as games studies scholars, literary scholars, psychologists, neurologists, film studies and media scholars, sound studies scholars, philosophers, or art historians, to name only a selection of the fields occupied with the word—what is to be made of the relationship between immersive object and immersive experience? I seek in my research to highlight the ways in which any discussion of immersion must be sensitive to the complexity of the interrelationship between research object and human/perceiving subject.

## DEFINITIONS OF IMMERSION

There is, in fact, a wealth of semantic perspectives inherent in the word immersion. This turn to the lexicon is no empty scholarly exercise—the specific manner in which subjects and objects are brought together here and are mingled is significant—and I will soon return to this aspect. First, from the German perspective, the term immersion hails from the late Latin *immersio* and points, according to the German *Duden*, in practical usage to four possible contexts:

- 1 In the field of microscopic observation, in physics, for instance, or in microscopy in general, immersion signifies the placement of an object into a fluid, to enable a precise study of the characteristics of that object, such as one might, for example, find when a crystal form is submerged in a light-refractive fluid.
- 2 In the realm of astronomy, one speaks of immersion when, for example, a moon moves into the shadow of a planet, and thus, from the perspective of the one observing, seems to merge with the disc of the planet itself.
- 3 As a method of foreign language instruction immersion makes reference to an instructional strategy that prohibits the use of other languages than that of

instruction in the schoolroom and thus creates something like an artificial cultural habitat, that encourages fluency. And finally,

- 4 “[Submersion] in a virtual environment”<sup>6</sup> is referred to as immersion, although through the additional reference in brackets “(EDV)” Duden sets this experience explicitly and exclusively in the context of *elektronische Datenverarbeitung* (or EDV) and thus exclusively as an effect of electronic and interactive media.

However, it is in particular as a loan word from the English language in this latter semantic context that immersion has enjoyed popularity in German language games studies as well as film and media studies. However, this reduction of complexity common to German usage has resulted in a tendency to overlook some of the additional semantic detail of usage of the word in the English language context.

Besides the first semantic entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, (namely, “The action of immersing or immersing”) a second is listed which has essential importance for a description of aesthetic experience, namely:

“Absorption in some condition, action, interest, etc.”<sup>7</sup> This typical usage, already noted in 1647, points clearly to the multiplicity of possible usages in the English language, which are completely independent of a particular cause or a specific medium for the experience in question (whether it be a medium of virtual reality, a novel or only the concentration on the solution to a mathematical problem), and simply describe a specific form of intense engagement with an object or a phenomenon.

The definition in *Duden* in contrast brings immersion and aesthetic experience together solely through the influence of electronic media. Furthermore, in usage the term immersion in German is not rarely associated with a minimally challenging form of distraction, one brought about—passively and indeed unavoidably for the viewer—by radical proximity to an aesthetic object. These are obviously rather negative connotations. If one does encounter a definition of immersion in German that offers more detail it is nonetheless often included in an implicitly judgmental dichotomy, which is meant to explicate the characteristics of immersion but does nothing of the sort: it merely sorts without explanation. They are nonetheless prevalent and go something like:

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6 *Munzinger Online/Duden—Deutsches Universalwörterbuch*; 7. überarbeitete und erweiterte Auflage, Bibliographisches Institut GmbH (Mannheim, 2011), s.v. “Immersion”. Web. 20.11.2014.

7 *OED Online*. Oxford University Press (September 2014), s.v. “immersion, n.”. Web. 20.11.2014.

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|-----------------------|-----|---------------|
| • Immersion           | vs. | contemplation |
| • Proximity           | vs. | distance      |
| • Defenseless abandon | vs. | reflection    |

I am keen to break down these dichotomies and look with more attention to the variety of ways in which immersive experiences have come about in various medial contexts at various moments in time in various cultural contexts. For although immersive effects are particularly often associated with video games and virtual reality, immersion is by no means exclusively the product of an exchange with the so-called new media, or even contingent on the availability of electricity. One might recall having read a novel as a child or having played a role-playing game during which one was so overwhelmed that one had to physically distance oneself, in order to withdraw oneself from those overwhelmingly frightening or pleasurable scenarios. This is an experience that we, as adults, may re-encounter in aesthetic experience.

The plurality of semantic contexts and tonalities that are all contained by the term, immersion, force the question, which type of experience is suggested by the word. A definition of immersion is thus not to be arrived at in a single go: indeed, its plurality is a key source of its contemporary cultural usefulness. It is a ubiquitous phenomenon that comes about in a wide variety of contexts and is taken up by an equally wide variety of disciplines.

To situate the term, immersion, within these contexts somewhat lets us return to the original definition offered by *Duden*: while in the first semantic context an object is prepared via an immersion for an examination under the microscope (something becomes visible), the second semantic context points to a process of obscuration or concealment in astronomy (something becomes invisible). In these first two cases immersion acts upon an object. In the last two semantic contexts however it points to a transformation in the subject: In foreign language instruction immersion pushes the students to cognitive achievements in foreign language acquisition of which they otherwise would not be capable (one lets oneself be transformed); and with immersion that is inspired by the electronic and interactive media that create simulative virtual reality settings, an ostensible transposition of the subject into a fictional space (one lets oneself be transported). I want to highlight that several or even all of these shades of meaning which can be found in the lexical entries for immersion, may be operative and indeed potent aspects within the broad spectrum of immersive phenomena—to varying degrees.

What role do “media” play in all of this? Expanding Marshall McLuhan’s hypothesis from *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*, Elaine Scarry (1994)

argued in a technological and medially inclusive fashion that “If our artifacts do not act on us, there is no point in having made them. We make material artifacts in order to interiorize them. We make things so that they will, in turn, remake us, revising the interior of embodied consciousness.”<sup>8</sup> With Scarry’s long-term view of this matter in mind, one that allows for a complex intermingling of past, present, and future media and texts in our desires and projections, I would like to consider one contemporary encounter with media, mediatized environments, and other complex, multi-layered aesthetic interactions. Specifically, I am interested in exploring how the overlapping of texts, media, technologies, and cues—and thus also the affordances of each—highlights the ways in which our past experiences can significantly shape and intermingle with present ones, highlighting the presence of networks of possibilities within each of those texts, media, technologies, cues, and affordances.

I would like to briefly look at one single example of immersive entertainment to highlight the complexity of immersive experience. This example, the “immersive” theater experience of *Sleep No More*, has become a permanent phenomenon in the New York City theater landscape similar to what Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap*, which has been performed continuously in London since its premiere in 1952, once represented: it has been running continuously since 2011 and no doubt attracts repeat local visitors and tourists alike. To my mind, this complex form of engagement renders any definition that is suited to a single type of affordance (for instance, a 360-degree environment, interactivity, or highly detailed—4K resolution—illusory images) primitive and selective.

## DISSOLVING ORIENTATION

Recently a number of media scholars have argued that our contemporary sense of space (and time) is increasingly represented through aesthetic strategies defined by “post-continuity.”<sup>9</sup> Within this aesthetic paradigm, exemplified, for instance by Michael Bay’s explosive blockbusters (including the BAD BOYS and

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8 Scarry, Elaine: “The Merging of Bodies and Artifacts in the Social Contract,” in: Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckrey (eds.), *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*, Seattle: Bay, 1994, pp. 85-97, here p. 97.

9 See Shaviro, Steven: *Post-Cinematic Affect*, Winchester: Zero 2010; and Denson, Shane: “Crazy Cameras, Discorrelated Images, and the Post-Perceptual Mediation of Post-Cinematic Affect,” in: Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (eds.), *Post-Cinema. Theorizing 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Film*, Falmer: Reframe Books 2016, pp. 193–234.

TRANSFORMERS franchises),<sup>10</sup> narrative cohesion is not entirely disrupted. However, the cohesion of time and space certainly is. This latter cohesion was once considered a hallmark of continuity editing's "human" perspective on the world, guided by a particular conception of the manner in which attention operates.<sup>11</sup> A decisive shift has taken place that has done away with an overarching need for a cohesive spatial-temporal narrative thread to guide one's movement through cinematic space. According to Steven Shaviro's account of this shift:

"In classical continuity styles, space is a fixed and rigid container, which remains the same no matter what goes on in the narrative; and time flows linearly, and at a uniform rate, even when the film's chronology is scrambled by flashbacks. But in post-continuity films, this is not necessarily the case. We enter into the spacetime of modern physics; or better, into the 'space of flows,' and the time of microintervals and speed-of-light transformations, that are characteristic of globalized, high-tech financial capital."<sup>12</sup>

But as the success of Bay's blockbusters suggests, we continue to assimilate these shifts in some fashion, despite the change to the "space of flows" cited by Shaviro, which is implied by this recent evolution away from editing strategies based on a classical continuity that privilege psychological and spatial coherence. Indeed, these new strategies have quickly become the template for spatial and temporal navigation, now as familiar as continuity editing was in the past.

If, as Vivian Sobchack has argued, "cinematic and electronic screens differently solicit and shape our presence to the world, our representation in it, and our

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10 Michael Bay is known for fast-paced action films. The BAD BOYS franchise was initiated in 1995 and was followed by a sequel BAD BOYS II directed by Bay in 2003. The TRANSFORMERS Franchise was initiated in 2007 with the film TRANSFORMERS and was followed by four sequels directed by Bay and several subsequent sequels directed by others.

11 From Hugo Münsterberg to Christian Metz, that is from the 1910s to the 1960s, classical film theory was long occupied with revealing the psychological logic of classical forms of film narration. See particularly Münsterberg, Hugo: *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings*, New York: Routledge 2002, and Metz, Christian: *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1986.

12 Shaviro, Steven: "Post-Continuity: An Introduction," in: Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (eds.), *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Film*, Falmer: Reframe Books 2016, p. 60.

sensibilities and responsibilities about it,”<sup>13</sup> what effect does our increasing exposure to the digitally facilitated post-cinematic, post-continuity strategies of negotiation in time and space have on our movement through other environments, mediated or (apparently) unmediated? Reminding us of the pertinence of Heidegger’s point that “the essence of technology is nothing technological,”<sup>14</sup> Sobchack emphasizes the need for an examination of the complex parameters at play beyond the merely “technological” aspects of any phenomenon. Indeed, the assumption and examination of a reciprocal relationship between technology and the human body is an absolutely central aspect of Vivian Sobchack’s project. With Heidegger’s postulation in mind, she highlights precisely this readily neglected reciprocity, which occurs due to the contextual qualities of technologies in use and thus counters the inclination to understand technology as a static force exerting unilateral influence on a human body. She describes technology as:

“[Historically] informed not only by its materiality but also by its political, economic, and social context, and thus it both co-constitutes and expresses not merely technological value but always also cultural values. Correlatively, technology is never merely used, never simply instrumental. It is always also incorporated and lived by the human beings who create and engage it within a structure of meanings and metaphors in which subject-object relations are not only cooperative and co-constitutive but are also dynamic and reversible.”<sup>15</sup>

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13 This very early text by Vivian Sobchack first appeared in a hugely influential volume *Materialities of Communication* edited by the German scholars Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, which was simultaneously published in English and German in 1988 by Stanford University Press in the US and Suhrkamp Verlag (as *Materialität der Kommunikation*) in Germany. The volume is a collection of writings by almost all figures from various interdisciplinary branches of German media theory and *Bildwissenschaft* who would become influential in the following two decades. Sobchack’s text has since been reprinted multiple times, including in the author’s own book: “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic ‘Presence,’” in: *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2004, p. 136.

14 Sobchack, Vivian: *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2004, p. 137. For the original citation, see “The Question Concerning Technology,” in: *Martin Heidegger Basic Writings*, (ed.) David Farrell Krell, New York: Harper 1977, p. 317.

15 *Ibid.*, 137.



Sobchack has taken care throughout her body of work to offer thorough examinations of very specific examples of the media texts and situations and their particular affordances. A key part of her project is underscoring that there are reciprocal processes<sup>16</sup> at work in those technologies of representation simultaneously serving as technologies of perception (such as photography, film, television, videotapes, DVDs, cell phones, and computers):

“[A] qualitatively new techno-logic begins to alter our perceptual orientation in and toward the world, ourselves, and others. Furthermore, as this new techno-logic becomes culturally pervasive and normative, it can come to inform and affect profoundly the socio-logic, psycho-logic, axio-logic, and even the bio-logic by which we daily live our lives.”<sup>17</sup>

Examinations of the rise of hybrid space and spatial experience typically see the proliferation of mobile technologies and digital media as the source of that rise. The 1990’s are generally identified as the decisive decade of shift, during which the borders between physical, material space, and the space of information became blurred.

We need to pay attention to the relationship between space and time, our physical situation, and our movement through space and time as generated through a complex layering: how can the spatial effects of navigation be isolated from a notion of time postulating a layered, or hybrid present or presence, which is rendered by the various kinds of templates and experiential layers at play at any given moment? What role does recollection or projection play in the experience of the multiple present? Whereas we are becoming rapidly accustomed to the integration and indeed imbrication of digital media into everyday routines, to the extent that we barely register their presence or influence, do contemporary forms of aesthetic experience train and shape experience in the material, unmediated world through a similar practice of layering? I argue that they do—by virtue of choice and trajectory.

## **KALEIDOSCOPIC (IMMERSIVE) THEATER**

Upon entering at the ground floor door to the six-story building, which had long served as a warehouse in New York’s Chelsea district (and after being obliged to turn over your cell phone, bag, coat, and ticket to attendants), you find yourself in

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16 Ibid., 137.

17 Ibid., 137.

a series of hallways shaped by black-painted pressboard walls—much like a traditional funhouse such as those still in operation at the Prater in Vienna. Although these hallways suggest the jagged-edged trajectories of a maze there are still no choices to be made yet. They lead to a single destination (thus operating according to the principles of a uni- rather than multicursal maze):<sup>18</sup> the “Hotel McKittrick,” which is, according to your ticket, the name given to this ensemble of rooms. It is from there that the multicursal pathways of this experience open themselves to you.

In the immersive theater experience *Sleep No More*, you are confronted first and foremost by the vastness of the space available and second by the task of negotiating this space consisting of over 100,000 square feet, covering six floors, and divided into more than 100 rooms.<sup>19</sup> These have been meticulously set-decorated with a mixture of props, period furniture, and fixed detritus to suggest the combination of the precise attention to detail of an art installation (or the equally peculiar contemporary *Wunderkammer* that is the “Museum of Jurassic Technology” in Los Angeles),<sup>20</sup> and the look of a video game (eerily reminiscent of the scenography of early interactive adventure games such as *THE SEVENTH GUEST* or the later horror game series *SILENT HILL*).<sup>21</sup>

And yet much of what has been written thus far about this wildly popular immersive theater experience limits itself to a focus on the structuring power of the

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18 In his book *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth revisits the notion of the labyrinth and points to the usefulness of Penelope Reed Doob’s research from the 1990s, which identified the two distinct models of the labyrinth that may be found in classical and medieval culture, one of which has since been forgotten. While the multicursal labyrinth has dominated more modern conceptualizations of the searching pathway, the unicursal mode was a significant part of earlier physical and metaphorical notions of what a labyrinth is and does. Aarseth argues, this other notion can be very helpful in the conceptualization of the reading and experiencing processes enabled through cybertexts. See: Aarseth, Espen J: *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1997.

19 For a series of photos of these rooms and information regarding the size of the space see: Goodman, Wendy: “First Look: An Unnerving Night at the Theater,” in: *New York Magazine* (March 1, 2022), <http://nymag.com/homedesign/features/sleep-no-more-2011-3/>, (last accessed August 1, 2017).

20 See the website of this most curious museum for more details: <https://www.mjt.org/>

21 *THE SEVENTH GUEST* (USA 1993, O: Rob Landeros and Graeme Devine—Trilobyte); *SILENT HILL* (JPN 1999, O: Keiichiro Toyama—Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo).

dramatic text that seems to provide the basis for the *Sleep No More* experience, namely Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. W.B. Worthen's examination of the significance of character in *Sleep No More* is a compelling and detailed analysis of the encounter with the space. I consider this as a *pars pro toto* example of a large body of recent theater scholarship addressing this work.<sup>22</sup> By choosing to summarize *Sleep No More* as "a meditation on *Macbeth* and a response to the function of Shakespeare in contemporary performance culture,"<sup>23</sup> Worthen situates the experience squarely within a single frame of reference, to which other experiences might perhaps be peripherally—and secondarily—added. However, just as Games Studies has struggled to position itself in relation to the demands of ludology and narratology in developing a fitting methodological strategy for revealing the specifics of the gaming experience,<sup>24</sup> any account of immersive theater necessarily struggles with the pluralities of space and time made available via this aesthetic form. Why *must* you seek out the threads that link the wanderings and wonderings of your allotted stay in the *Sleep No More* environment to *Macbeth*, or its human performers? Why would you not wander and wonder, as *World of Warcraft* players have often been wont to do as they pass through expansive digital landscapes, chatting online with the fellow travelers /gamers in digital space (although you are obliged by the "rules of the game" to remain silent in *Sleep No More*)? Why not simply check out the space itself, without undertaking any tasks or actions at all?

Despite the obvious relevance here of the multimedial implications accompanying the late German theater scholar, Hans-Thies Lehmann's influential *Postdramatic Theater*,<sup>25</sup> which highlights the mid- to late twentieth-century shift in theater, away from a textual to mediatized image and sound culture and the apparent automatism of "immersion" through the removal of the fourth wall in a theatrical setting—the kaleidoscopic specifics of the particular experience of

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22 See Worthen, W.B.: "Sleep No More and the Space of Character," in: *Theater Journal* 64, no. 1, (March 2012): pp. 79–97. It is notable that Worthen's text announces on its first page that it "is part of a current project on Shakespeare performance studies," p. 79.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

24 For a very succinct introduction to this debate see Janet Murray's response to Espen Aarseth on her blog *Janet H. Murray: Humanistic Design for an Emerging Medium* entitled "The Last Word on Ludology vs. Narratology" (posted June 18, 2003) <https://inventingthemedium.com/2013/06/28/the-last-word-on-ludology-v-narratology-2005/> (last accessed August 2, 2017).

25 Lehmann, Hans-Thies: *Postdramatic Theater*, Jürs-Munby (trans.), Karen, London: Routledge 2006.

make-believe<sup>26</sup> made available through *Sleep No More* can be easily excised from any written account of the experience via the insertion of an overarching narrative (*Macbeth*).<sup>27</sup> Upon arrival in the space of the performance, you might indeed choose to trot after the performers through the space as best you can, along with the rest of the crowd, while using the links to the narrative of Shakespeare's drama like Ariadne's ball of thread.<sup>28</sup> Such reliance on the *Macbeth* narrative, however, threatens to either rule your experience or, *ex post facto*, your account of that experience, of the navigation, the encounters, the juxtapositions, and the choices you make during your roughly three-hour inhabitation of the space afforded by virtue of the roughly \$100 ticket you have purchased. The reliance on such a narrative thread carries an economic advantage: you can thus be assured of having seen a performance of *Macbeth* (a middlebrow to perhaps highbrow activity) and not just visited an expensive funhouse (a lowbrow activity).

However, you might prefer not to follow but instead, to wait, wonder, wander, and appreciate the silent eeriness of the many, many heavily decorated rooms that you encounter (empty of any human presence other than your own) while asking yourself what are the peculiarities of the experience of space on offer here. Upon arrival, for instance, you are greeted with the actorly lasciviousness of a young woman dressed for a night out in the 1930's (as are all the performers) and are then led from the "Manderley Bar" (the name of Maxim de Winter's estate in Hitchcock's *REBECCA*)<sup>29</sup> of the "Hotel McKittrick" (familiar from Hitchcock's *VERTIGO*),<sup>30</sup> in which you are obliged to gather with other participants before being led toward and then released into the spaces that are part of the show. The general ambiance of the Manderley Bar is reminiscent of an amalgamation of

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26 I will return later to the significance of Kendall Walton's examination of make-believe as a key feature of aesthetic experience in his *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1993.

27 Interestingly, in his assessment of the role of audiovisual media in the concept of post-dramatic theater Hans-Thies Lehmann also references an early version of Vivian Sobchack's "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic 'Presence,'" (which was familiar to a German audience through its inclusion in the Suhrkamp publication in 1988) in describing the effects of multimodality and (digital) intermediality on contemporary theater.

28 It is important to note that the performances in *Sleep No More* remain entirely wordless throughout, and the performers move into and out of view through doorways that are often rendered inaccessible to the audience.

29 *REBECCA* (USA 1940, D: Alfred Hitchcock).

30 *VERTIGO* (USA 1958, D: Alfred Hitchcock).

David Lynch's films, due to the sense of temporal dislocation that is affected by the collection of signifiers at work in the bar (an experience also typically evoked by Lynch's oeuvre). What effect do all these signifiers (even if fictional) of multiple situations in time, space, and diegesis have upon the experience of space that is to come, when presented to the theatergoer upon entry to the *Sleep No More* venue?

I would argue the effect goes beyond a simple case of having other forms of intertextual reference superimposed onto the *Macbeth* narrative. Instead, we experience *Sleep No More* as an ergodic<sup>31</sup> encounter with a cybertext, which questions our ability to easily distinguish between the visual epistemes of presence discussed by Sobchack. Moreover, the merging of different sound references (audible are excerpts of Bernard Herrmann's scores from Hitchcock films, suggesting that we may actually be dealing with audiovisual epistemes) with an array of other verbal and visual fictional deictic markers places us functionally within the frame of reference of contemporary digital media experience, even though *Sleep No More* employs no electronic screens. We simply carry the neural pathways already formed by post-continuity with us.

## POST-CONTINUITY AND THE DENSITY OF SPACE

I hope that through this example of experience in real space, which employs trompe l'oeil effects or illusions beyond the ostensible fiction of the actors' movements through the same space I moved through, one can see the need for further discussion of the term 'immersion'. There is much more at stake with this term than the discussion of single media, for which we have come to expect the confines of scholarship to allow. In *Sleep No More* there are no electronic or digital images employed and nonetheless, I felt as if I had entered into a space that was distinct from the one I had left outside, one that was eerie and solitary despite being one of several hundred guests let loose in the space. The form of immersion I experienced there had less to do with my breaking through a "fourth wall" or an engagement with the fiction provided by the actors' performances and any links that

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31 The "ergodic" is a key term in Aarseth's study of cybertextual strategies employed by a wide variety of media. The word "ergodic" is a neologism of his own creation, derived from an amalgamation of the Greek *ergon* or 'work' and *hodos* or 'path.' It describes how texts such as those under study require non-trivial work on the part of the reader or user, in order to actively construct a 'pathway' into and through the aesthetic experience.

might have to my knowledge of Shakespeare's text (although that was also at play); it had far more to do with the sheer impact of the density of the space with which I was confronted and ultimately the intangible borders between fiction and fact, introduced by the plurality of modes at work in the presentation and my particular form of engagement with them.

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## **GAMEOGRAPHY**

THE SEVENTH GUEST (USA 1993, O: Rob Landeros and Graeme Devine—Trilo-byte)

SILENT HILL (JPN 1999, O: Keiichiro Toyama—Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo)



# Stories and Political Imaginaries

Self, Us, Now?

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DIRK HOYER

## Abstract

Political imaginaries are articulating future images that are framing devices for the possible options and anticipate the potential for change. The political imaginaries that are dominating the contemporary political discourse—neoliberal, apocalyptic and nostalgic—are limiting the prospective horizons by either foregrounding fear, limiting agency or perceiving the future possibilities in a rear-view mirror. In this climate of negative future anticipation storytelling is playing a crucial role to reanimate the potential for hope, articulating a concept of agency that transcends the individual and thereby reclaiming the void between today and tomorrow with a constructive vision. In the story wars which set the framework for future discussions new spaces of possibility can be created by reactivating the ruins in the periphery and perceiving the future as a quest plot and not as a one-way journey into disaster.

Former UN secretary Kofi Annan, in a meeting ahead of the Paris Climate Summit in 2015, (rhetorically) traveled back in time, back to the year 1979, back to Nikita Khrushchev, back to the menace of a Nuclear Armageddon in the Cold War. Khrushchev was reportedly warning that a nuclear war would “leave the living envying the dead.” Annan replaced the fear of a nuclear war, the apocalyptic image of 1979 with the apocalyptic image of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and said: “...climate change would leave the living envying the dead.” This sounds like the scenario for a perfect Hollywood disaster movie, the ultimate menace, the annihilation of all mankind, the maximum stakes, the ultimate evil, enter...the hero, the savior who, despite the immense destruction (and the millions of dead) along the hero’s

journey will save the planet and eliminate all evil before the end credits start to roll. The perfect cast: Arnold Schwarzenegger. Schwarzenegger, dressed in a businesslike suit, without any visible weapons, takes the microphone: “I’ve starred in a lot of science fiction movies and, let me tell you something, climate change is not science fiction, this is a battle in the real world, it is impacting us right now. The debate is over and the time for action is now.” This is a good prologue for a trashy disaster movie. The opening credits roll, fast paced music, CGI generated intro-titles, the expectation is rising. The intro-titles are over, the Paris summit concludes an agreement, on the photos the politicians raise their arms like boxing champions, applause, then the music stops, a hard cut with a dramatic slow-down sound effect and...nothing. Almost a decade later Arnold Schwarzenegger still hasn’t saved the world. After the opening credits there is no film. The time is running but where is the hero to save humanity before the end credits roll? Imagine the voice of Schwarzenegger telling you, in *The Running Man* style: “I am not into politics, I’m into survival.”

Is it possible to be into survival without being into politics? Emirbayer and Mische expand the scope of the temporal understanding of any human activity, including survival, when they point out:

“As actors respond to changing environments, they must continually reconstruct their view of the past in an attempt to understand the causal conditioning of the emergent present, while using this understanding to control and shape their responses in the arising future.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus, survival can only be perceived in a perspective that transcends the present, and renders the past experience future perspective. One of the central cognitive devices for such a complex reconstruction of the past, conditioning of the present, and shaping of the future: storytelling.

Philip Seargeant underlines the world building power of storytelling which he sees as the key factor behind humankind’s incredible success. According to Seargeant it is “the power we have to imagine complex sets of ideas into being, and then to share them among the community, which creates both the societies we live in and the cultures that provide the meanings for our lives. Remove stories from the human equation and civilization itself fades from the picture.”<sup>2</sup>

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1 Emirbayer, Mustafa/Mische, Ann: “What is agency?,” in: *American Journal of Sociology* 103 no.4 (1998), pp. 962-1023.

2 Seargeant, Philip: *The Art of Political Storytelling—Why Stories Win Votes in Post-truth Politics*, London: Bloomsbury Academic 2020.

Stories organize and reconstruct the past, the present and the future. As Paul Ricoeur emphasizes “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience.” Consequently, stories thus play a significant role in shaping the perception of the future.<sup>3</sup>

The bleak future images and narrative frames of Kofi Annan and Arnold Schwarzenegger are part of a political story that is hugely influential on the mind-scape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Stories of Armageddon through climate disasters are part of the public imagination in this new millennium. The pandemic has transported the scenarios of the most dramatic Hollywood disaster movies into the real life and locked down humanity for years. The outbreak of a war in Europe has even brought Khrushchev’s forgotten warning of a nuclear war back into the public imagination. The realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century could validate the assumption that it is not religious leaders, politicians, public intellectuals or academics but the script-writers of Hollywood disaster movies who are the prophets of the future.

In addition to the global inferno, through climate change, pandemic or nuclear war, there is another challenge to humanity: the prospect of becoming useless. According to a study by the McKinsey Global Institute (2017) half of current jobs in the United Kingdom and the United States could be automated in the near future. The Oxford Martin School (2016) has a similarly bleak prognosis for the jobs in the 38 OECD countries, predicting that 57% are susceptible to be replaced by automatization in the next 20 years. The “second machine age” is coming. Peter Fleming sees two possible paths for future development: “the societal implications of the ‘second machine age’ – mainly in economics and sociology – take either an optimistic view of this workless future (e.g., more leisure time) or a bleak one, envisaging levels of unemployment never before seen.”<sup>4</sup> Yuval Noah Harari paints a pessimistic picture of the future impact of automation predicting that from an economic point of view large parts of the population will become useless. Harari asserts:

“Whereas in the past human had to struggle against exploitation, in the twenty-first century the really big struggle will be against irrelevance. And it is much worse to be irrelevant than exploited.”<sup>5</sup>

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3 Ricoeur, Paul: *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1983.

4 Fleming, Peter: “Robots and Organization Studies: Why Robots Might Not Want to Steal Your Job,” in: *Organization Studies* 40 no.1 (2019), Sage, pp. 23-37.

5 Harari, Yuval Noah: *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, London: Jona-than Cape 2018.

The menace of mass unemployment on an unprecedented scale is thus added to the possibility of the global disaster of climate breakdown, global pandemic and nuclear war. In case this is not sufficiently bleak to fall into complete apathy, here are some more potential menaces that could produce catastrophic scenarios: terrorism, hyperinflation, water shortages, demographic explosions that lead to mass exoduses, conventional wars, breakdown of the global data infrastructure...

The future is dominated by images and narratives of global disaster. Apocalyptic predictions date back to the Old Testament (and even before) but they have never had the science-based plausibility that dominates the discourse in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The apocalypse has left the realm of religious and secular storytelling and entered into the arena of perceptible, measurable, analyzable and projectible. In such a context, how is it possible to conceive the future in any other way than a threat? To understand today's future images and narratives, a journey "back to the future" allows to map the drastic change in in future images.

In the 1960s, optimism in regards to the future dominated. The potential to expand the possibilities infinitely (even into space) combined with the faith in technological progress and growing levels of economic prosperity created a mind-scape of hopeful anticipation in the Western countries.

This is also reflected in Bertrand de Jouvenel's concept of *futuribles*. In a lecture given at the RAND Institute in the end of 1964, he put forward an optimistic vision of the future. For de Jouvenel, *futuribles* was a way of examining possible futures, with an emphasis on the idea that any present state of affairs can have different outcomes that depend on the intervening actions. De Jouvenel reinterpreted Cicero's division between *facta* and *futura*—between what is accomplished and solid and what shall come into being—as an encouragement to engage with the realm of the possible. De Jouvenel claimed that the future should not be perceived exclusively by the overemphasis on the facts of the present. He asserted that "while there can be no science of the future, we cannot avoid thinking of the future. We do so implicitly: it is better to do it explicitly." To explicitly articulate the assumptions of the future is thus a way of making them debatable and criticizable and thereby avoid that the future will be dominated by the faits accomplis of the dominant powerful groups. Articulating a future image is thus a way of opening the *futura*, which always contains a normative dimension, for debate.<sup>6</sup>

De Jouvenel already acknowledged in the 1960s that the "rapidity of change implies that our present knowledge of the environment has a short validity." The

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6 De Jouvenel, Bertrand: *Futuribles* (= Studies and Documents on Prospective), Paris: Centre d'études prospectives 1965, <http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2008/P3045.pdf>

remedy is thus what he called “reasoned conjectures”, informed speculation of the consequences of decisions in the future. These reasoned conjectures are in essence taking the shape of informed narratives. While it is easy to dismiss de Jouvenel’s optimism in the current intellectual climate, his call for an open articulation of the ideas of the future, his insistence to engage with the normative dimension of future images and his perception of the future as the realm of possibilities are still valuable contributions to any contemporary debate.<sup>7</sup>

Roughly a decade later, Fred Polak interpreted the images of the future more ambiguously. The untarnished optimism of the mid-1960s was gone and in his book *The Image of the Future* the admonitory undertone became more perceptible. Polak described the image of the future not only as a barometer of the present time, but also as a regulative mechanism that can either open up or close down certain possibilities in the future. The future image is thus a reflection of contemporary choices, serves as a promotion tool of these choices and thereby determines the future. Polak sees “the positive image of the future at work in every instance of the flowering of a culture, and weakened images of the future as a primary factor in the decay of cultures.” The strength and optimism of future images is thus a barometer for the whole culture. The decisions on the future thus also reflect the self-perception which is projected into the future, or, as Polak explains, the future image becomes the future in a move from diagnosis to prognosis. The future is thus influenced by the future image and the question of who defines the future images is thus inherently a power question. Polak emphasizes the role of agency in the definition of future images:

“The choice for modern man is no longer between this image of the future and that, but between images of his own choosing and images which are forced upon him by outside pressures. The empty void between today and tomorrow cannot withstand the magnetic pull of tomorrow...”<sup>8</sup>

Renouncing to define future images thus means to renounce the control over the future. Polak thereby echoes de Jouvenel’s call for an open discussion about the possibilities of the future. And he adds a strong warning of a passive attitude towards the future:

“Our contemporary culture negates just those qualities which would be virtually necessary in giving new life to our culture, such as faith in man’s essential worth in spite of social

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7 Ibid.

8 Polak, Fred: *The Image of the Future*, Amsterdam: Elsevier 1973.

cataclysms. There must be some basic certainty that in spite of the current dehumanization of man there can be some radical reversal of the existing order.”<sup>9</sup>

Abandoning the idea that the future could be different thus leads to a growing dehumanization and a loss of vitality. From the contemporary perspective of the looming disasters pessimistic future images and narrative appear plausible. But, seen from Polack’s perspective, those pessimistic future images and narratives reduce the options to act in relation to the future take the vitality out of the effort to develop possible futures that are different and thereby reduce the scope of the action. Polak diagnoses that any culture that is “turning aside from its own heritage of positive visions of the future, or actively at work in changing these positive visions into negative ones, has no future unless strong counterforces are set in motion soon.”<sup>10</sup> The question is whether the disaster discourse that animates contemporary debates has the potential to change negative visions into positive visions and thereby set the necessary counterforces in motion.

Franco Beradi asserts the importance of collective imagination as a source of alternatives to trends that are leading to devastation. He identifies the outside pressures that, as Polak described, force future images and thereby define choices. For Beradi, it is evident that “capitalism has become a system of techno-economic automatisms that politics cannot evade.” Therefore, future images, including the contemporary disaster images, are defined by these techno-economic automatisms. Beradi claims that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the century with no future because the spatial exploitation of new territories has come to an end. Thus, the spatial understanding of the future (“new territories”) shifted into a temporal understanding. Beradi explains: “The future is the space that we do not yet know; we are yet to discover and exploit it. When every inch of the planet has been colonized, the colonization of the temporal dimension has begun, i.e., the colonization of mind, perception, of life.” Despite ongoing attempts to colonize to new spaces, for example Elon Musk’s Space X and its mission to colonize Mars, the visionary power is not the same as in the 1960s. Space X and Richard Branson’s Virgin Galactic appear to be prestige projects of billionaires in need of approval.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is thus dominated by the idea of growing spatial limitation: demographic growth meets growing spatial limitation. The projected rise of sea level due to climate change is likely going to decrease the Earth’s surface while the United Nations prognosticate 10 billion Earth inhabitants for 2070. But in spite of all, the image of (economic) progress as expansion is still dominating global

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9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

policies. As Frederic Jameson writes, with a remnant of Marxist undertones: “our imaginations are hostage to our own mode of production (and perhaps to whatever remnants of the past ones it has preserved).”<sup>11</sup>

Immanuel Wallerstein sees our epoch, the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, as a point of bifurcation, as a transition point of world systems. The permanent crisis mode is thus in Wallerstein’s interpretation a result of the, from a historic point always hyper-conflictual, transition of the capitalist world system into something unknown. As Wallerstein describes:

“...the science of complexity is teaching us that, in such chaotic situations resulting from a bifurcation, the outcome is inherently unpredictable. We do not know— we cannot know— how this will come out. What we do know is that the present system as such cannot survive. There will be a successor system or systems. It may be better; it may be worse; it may not be too different in its moral quality.”<sup>12</sup>

The painful side-effects of the transition of the economic world system and the transition of the global power structure from a unipolar to a multipolar order validate Wallerstein’s claim that points of bifurcation are chaotic and conflictual. However, Wallerstein claims that despite the obvious negative side effects, in the chaos of our epoch “the free-will factor will be at its maximum.” That means that individual and collective action can have a greater impact on the future than in times when the historical world system is stable. Wallerstein calls these moments of bifurcation and historical transformation in which the possibility for change becomes real “transformational TimeSpace.”<sup>13</sup>

If we understand the current chaos as transformational TimeSpace, in which the dysfunctional capitalist world order will transform into something else, then it is even more surprising that the imagination is still hostage, in Frederic James’ words, to our mode of production. As Arjun Appadurai criticizes, “the future had been more or less completely handed over to economics.”<sup>14</sup> In this future handed over to neoliberal economics, according to Jens Beckert “the present is assessed

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11 Jameson, Fredric: *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London: Verso, 2005.

12 Wallerstein, Immanuel: *Utopistics. Or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century*, New York: The New Press 1998.

13 Ibid.

14 Appadurai, Arjun: *The Future as a Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*, London: Verso 2013; B. de Jouvenel: *Futuribles*.

principally through the lens of the future, which is itself considered using imaginaries of future states in order to anticipate as yet unrealized profit and loss.”<sup>15</sup>

In *Futuribles*, de Jouvenel emphasized that possible futures should be discussed in a “market place of ideas.” In the current downsized mindscape, futures are merely discussed in the framework of the market, thus in the categories of economic profit and loss. Appadurai calls for “a victory of a politics of possibility over a politics of probability.”<sup>16</sup>

Possibly the abundance of disaster images is covering up the fact that underneath the narrow focus on (neoliberal) economics there is no imagination, and certainly no imagination that transcends the narrowness of the horizon. If the solutions to the real existing problems thus cannot be thought or conceptualized outside the narrow horizon of neoliberalism, the only alternative to the status quo is a complete break-down. The exclusion of alternatives and the focus on disaster narratives are thus control mechanisms to keep the production of different future images in check. Thinking and conceiving the disaster disables the mind in relation to the future. As Maurice Blanchot pointed out:

“We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather already past, and yet we are under the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the future—that which is yet to come—if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has to put a stop to every arrival. To think the disaster [...] is to have no longer any future in which to think it.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite its limiting effect on thinking and imagination, the disaster is the dominant motive of contemporary political imaginaries, especially in the climate movement. Greta Thunberg in her 2019 Davos speech echoed Annan’s “leave the living envy the dead” reference to Khrushchev when she stated: “I do not want you to be hopeful. [...] I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act.”

The obvious irony is that while we are, according to Wallerstein, in a “transformational TimeSpace”, the imagination is impaired by its focus on disaster. At a point of bifurcation, collective imagination matters and alternatives to the politico-economic status quo are more essential than ever in order to stimulate the free-will factor.<sup>18</sup> Yet the dominating future image is the apocalypse.

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15 Beckert, Jens: *Imagined Futures*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2016.

16 A. Appadurai: *The Future as a Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*.

17 Blanchot, Maurice: *The Writing of the Disaster*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1986.

18 I. Wallerstein: *Utopistics. Or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century*.



A polarized world, often divided by often opposing values, norms, and priorities, needs a more pluralized future image. So, the reigning future image of disaster should be replaced with collective future images that encourage the free-will factor in the transformational TimeSpace in which we are living. These future images can only be developed in political imaginaries that are transcending the status quo and its dominant disaster images.

As Charles Taylor pointed out, social imaginaries define “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”<sup>19</sup> The deeper normative notions and images are thus related to the future expectations in relation to social existence. These normative notions and images are shaping the imaginaries. As Cornelius Castoriadis explains, social imaginaries are “norms, values, language, tools, procedures, and methods of dealing with things and doing things, and, of course, the individual itself both in general and in the particular type and form.”<sup>20</sup>

Social and per definition political imaginaries are thus in a circular relation to future images. If there are no deeper normative notions and images about the future, it affects the present and the future simultaneously. Jens Beckert has underlined the importance of the articulation of expectations in imaginaries: “Under genuine uncertainty, expectations become interpretative frames that structure situations through imaginaries of future states of the world and of causal relations.”<sup>21</sup>

Imaginaries are therefore defined by fictional expectations of the future.

The current intellectual mindscape being dominated by neoliberal and apocalyptic imaginaries reflects normative notions that are either related to profit maximization or to global disaster. The third type of political imaginary is nostalgic (for a more detailed taxonomy of political imaginaries).<sup>22</sup> The nostalgic imaginary is animated by a longing for an (imagined) past and drives the right-wing populist and reactionary political movements.

All three political imaginaries—neoliberal, apocalyptic and nostalgic—are limited in their future image (profit/disaster/nostalgic past), their concept of agency, their spatio-temporal scope and their dominant emotional drive. The

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19 Taylor, Charles: *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2004.

20 Castoriadis, Cornelius: “The Imaginary Institution of Society,” in: Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon Books 1984, pp. 175-197.

21 J. Beckert: *Imagined Futures*.

22 See: Hoyer, Dirk: *Retopia*, London: Routledge 2023.

concept of agency defines the space of possibility and the spatio-temporal scope: the geographical range and the temporal dimension (past, present or future). The dominant emotional drive delineates a deeper emotional attitude towards the perception towards change in the present and the future. Philip Seargeant describes this as a basic fundament of any effective political story: “You pin your story around two emotions: hope or fear. This is what drives the desire for change; it’s this which leads to the conflicts which give to shape the plot.”<sup>23</sup> The dominant emotional drive affects the potential for mobilization and the scope of the political horizon. As Ernst Bloch has pointed out:

“Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly.”<sup>24</sup>

The neoliberal imaginary is limiting agency to the idea of economic agency, from the idea of freedom to the idea of economic freedom, and thus narrows down not only the future images but also the potential for agency in the present. The spatio-temporal scope is global, and limited to fictional expectations of profit maximization. Neoliberalism projects hope as a dominant emotional drive, albeit the hope is limited to privatized profit maximization. Privatized hope is narrowing down the idea of a better future to the individual dimension, and thus is thus confined towards interpretative frameworks that limit collective action.

The apocalyptic imaginary is reflected in disaster images and dystopian visions of the future. The future is thus increasingly defined by the outside pressures that Fred Pollack was warning about, and not by images of one’s own choosing. The concept of agency is thus diffused, often articulated in an abstract “we”, and activism becomes a way of avoiding the worst possible outcome. The global scope of planetary destruction and the unknown moment of the “apocalypse”, thus the revelation of the moment of tribulation, are creating a sense of fear. As Greta Thunberg has underlined in Davos, she wants everyone to feel the fear she feels every day. The dominant emotional drive is thus in correspondence with the final chapter of the bible in the Book of Revelations: fear of world destruction.

Svetlana Boym has defined the essence of the nostalgic imaginary: “The twentieth century began with utopia and ended with nostalgia.” The nostalgic

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23 P. Seargeant: *The Art of Political Storytelling—Why Stories Win Votes in Post-truth Politics*.

24 Bloch, Ernst: *The Principle of Hope*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1986.

imaginary reflects the longing for a lost past. Right-wing populist movements such as the Rassemblement National in France, the Fratelli d'Italia in Italy, the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany or the Vox in Spain are capitalizing on the feeling of nostalgia. Nostalgia translates as “longing for a return home” (from the Greek “nostos” and “algia”), so as an emotion it is perfectly suited to paint the home of the past in golden colors and use them as fantasies of restoration. But, the nostalgic imaginaries of right-wing populism are, per definition, divisive and narrowed down. Boym explains that “Algia (or longing) is what we share, yet nostos (or the return home) is what divides us.” The concept of agency is thus limited to the “in-group” and delegated to a leader and thereby nullified. The spatial scope is the nation state, and the temporal scope the narrowed down idea of the past. In the absence of hopes for a different future there is a fear of change and an alienation from the present.<sup>25</sup>

None of the three political imaginaries—neoliberal, apocalyptic or nostalgic—are thus articulating ways of imagining a different social existence from either ‘more of the same,’ ‘destruction’ or ‘lost home(s).’ Geoff Mulgan diagnosed that the world faces a deficit of social imagination:

“We find it easy to imagine apocalypse and disaster; or to imagine new generations of technology. But we find it much harder than in the past to imagine a better society a generation or more into the future. There are many possible reasons for this decline; loss of confidence in progress and grand narratives; declining imaginative capacity; slowing down of innovation.”<sup>26</sup>

The absence of political imaginaries that are articulating an “otherwise” or an “elsewhere,” which is not locked in the dominating neoliberal, apocalyptic or nostalgic limitations of agency, spatio-temporal perceptions and emotional drives of the contemporary mindscape are also reflected in the stories that are told. Christopher Booker writes that the “plot of a story is that which leads its hero or heroine either to a ‘catastrophe’ or an ‘unknotting’; either to frustration or to liberation; either to death or to a renewal of life.” The “from rags to riches” plots of

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25 Boym, Svetlana: “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” in: Daniel Herwitz (ed.), *The Star as Icon: Celebrity in the Age of Mass Consumption*, New York: Columbia University Press 1999, pp. 189-203.

26 Mulgan, Geoff: “The Imaginary Crisis (and how we might quicken social and public imagination),” in: *UCL Demos Helsinki and Untitled*, 2020, <https://demoshelsinki.fi/julkaisut/the-imaginary-crisis-and-how-we-might-quicken-social-and-public-imagination/>

neoliberalism, the fear driven “overcoming the monster” plots of apocalypse or the “voyage and return” plot of right-wing populism are all based on what Booker calls the “cycle of self-destruction.” According to Booker this cycle has five stages: “from the initial mood of anticipation, through a ‘dream stage’ when all seems to be going unbelievably well, to the ‘frustration stage’ when things begin to go mysteriously wrong, to the ‘nightmare stage’ where everything goes horrendously wrong, ending in that final moment of death and destruction.” At the moment, the plots of these political stories are stuck somewhere between the third and the fourth stage: frustration and nightmare. (Political) Storytellers and their imaginaries are thus leading their heroes and heroines into a ‘catastrophe’ rather than an ‘unknotting.’<sup>27</sup>

What does this mean for storytellers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? As Jackson emphasizes:

“[...] we tell stories as a way of transforming our sense of who we are, recovering a sense of ourselves as actors and agents in the face of experiences that make us feel insignificant, unrecognized or powerless. This covers the connection between storytelling and freedom—the way we recapture, through telling stories, a sense of being acting subjects in a world that often reduces us to the status of mere objects, acted upon by others or moved by forces beyond our control.”<sup>28</sup>

Jackson sees storytelling as a vital strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering conditions. The emphasis, according to Jackson, is that stories disclose “not just ‘*who*’ we are, but ‘*what*’ we have in common, not just ‘*who*’ we think we are but ‘*what*’ shared circumstances bear upon our lives and our fate.” The emphasis is on “we” as one of the key elements is a renewed understanding that the hero and the heroine can only exist in plural. Agency thus exists only in the heroines not in the heroine. A group based on ‘being in common’ has the potential to undo the disempowering conditions by articulating shared circumstances. Thus, the privatized hopes of neoliberalism’s ‘rags to riches’ plots have to be dismantled as opposed to be merely criticized. The understanding of the ‘heroines’ as acting subjects transcends the protest culture that is nurtured by apocalyptic imaginaries. The emphasis of freedom challenges the authoritarianism of the nostalgic imaginaries.<sup>29</sup>

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27 Booker, Christopher: *The Seven Basic Plots*, New York: Continuum 2004.

28 Jackson, Michael: *The Politics of Storytelling*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2013.

29 Ibid.

Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning maintain that the “currency of story is not truth but meaning.”<sup>30</sup> In his famous presidential campaign for Barack Obama for 2008, Marshall Ganz, in his public narrative method, capitalized on the hope for change. His approach was to activate citizens through the power of storytelling. Ganz considered the idea that a story should reflect the “self, us and now” as a fundament for effective political storytelling. Even if during his presidency Obama did not deliver on his promises on hope for a change, the campaign was groundbreaking and successful. This shows that meaning can be provided by fear narratives, or stories that create a sense of agency. As Will Storr points out, the appeal to a heroic self is an essential part of the creation of meaning. Storr writes:

“...if we’re psychologically healthy, our brain makes us feel as if we’re the moral heroes at the centre of the unfolding plot of our lives. Any ‘facts’ it comes across tend to be subordinate to that story. If these ‘facts’ flatter our heroic sense of ourselves, we’re likely to credulously accept them, no matter how smart we think we are.”<sup>31</sup>

In the neoliberal imaginary, the self is the only reference point for the creation of meaning, the apocalyptic and the nostalgic imaginaries create a sense of “us” that is created through fear, whether it is fear of the apocalypse or fear of a disintegrating national community. The hope image is present not in its future dimension but as a reference to the (unattainable) past. The protagonists of the contemporary political imaginaries are either alone, or united in imaginary communities of fear. Whenever some form of protest against the very foundations of this societal arrangement flares up the absence of a real community, an authentic “us” leads to the ultimate disintegration of the movement. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has given birth to too many protest movements that dissolved after a very effective creation of a short time momentum.

Reinsborough and Canning call the momentum that ignites protest movements and gathers thousands or even millions of people on the street “the story of the battle.” Of, course, these moments of rallying are essential for a democracy and can affect change. But the system reverts back to “business as usual” if, after the mobilization, there is no narrative that unites the protesters. Due to the absence of an alternative political imaginary, it is easy to unite people in protest but difficult

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30 Reinsborough, Patrick/Canning, Doyle: *Re:Imagining Change: How to use story-based strategy to win campaigns, build movements, and change the world*, Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing 2010.

31 Storr, Will: *The Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make Us Human and How to Tell Them Better*, London: Harper Collins 2019.

to sustain the momentum in the aftermath. Reinsborough and Canning write: “The story of the battle is about mobilization; the battle of the story is about persuasion.”<sup>32</sup>

Without a narrative that animates the “battle of the story,” the neoliberal, apocalyptic and nostalgic imaginaries will continue to dominate the public discourse. Without a story that has a strong “currency” of meaning, that activates the heroic self while at the same time articulating an idea of “us”, that goes beyond the protest momentum, politics reverts back to the status quo. The absence of these stories, or myths, since they are based on meaning and not on truths, is leaving a void that can be filled by the marketeers of short time happiness and self-indulgence. Jonah Sachs underlines that “we live in a world that has lost its connection to its traditional myths, and we are now trying to find new ones—we’re people and that’s what people without myths do.”<sup>33</sup>

The stories with the potential to win what Jonah Sachs calls “story wars”<sup>34</sup> will certainly not be found in way of a blueprint utopia that fits all humanity. In an increasingly complex world, these stories are bound to have a specific location and a specific community. They will articulate a sense of agency, a local scope, a concrete future orientation and an emotional drive based on hope. When Thomas More created the term utopia, the neologism carried an ambiguous meaning. The composite word based on ancient Greek contains “ou-topos” (no place) and “eu-topos” (good place). Often this was interpreted as the good society can only exist in a no-place, which was seen as a place in the imagination. Lewis Mumford creatively reinterpreted Thomas More’s neologism when he asserted that the good place can only be possible in a no-place, but this no-place is not in the imagination but in the peripheries deserted by capitalism because they lost their meaning in the (economic) value creation process. Lewis Mumford wrote in 1922, underlining the eu-topos (the good place) aspect of Utopia: “It should not surprise us therefore if the foundations for eutopia were established in ruined countries; that is, in countries where metropolitan civilization has collapsed and where all its paper prestige is no longer accepted at paper value.”<sup>35</sup>

Coming back to Jackson’s idea that stories disclose who we are and what we have in common, another dimension becomes crucial for political storytelling: where we are. Stories of hope are more likely to be found in the ruins of

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32 P. Reinsborough/D. Canning: *Re:Imagining Change*.

33 Sachs, Jonah: *Winning the Story Wars*, Boston: Harvard Business Press 2012.

34 Ibid.

35 Mumford, Lewis: *The Story of Utopias*, New York: Boni and Liveright, 2008 [\* 1922].

metropolitan civilization. So, the heroines of the new stories can inhabit the peripheries and its spaces of possibilities. In Christopher Booker's typology, these stories would be the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of quest plots.

In times of environmental degradation, the possible emergence of a "useless class" and the growing spatial limitation (which, at least in Europe, is paralleled by the depopulation of the periphery), these quest plots have the potential to generate stories of hope, based on "being in common" as opposed to "having in common". The heroines, pioneering the revitalization of ruins, would gain spaces of possibility, and therefore also freedom and agency, to experiment with different forms of cohabitation. Christian De Cock and Damien O'Doherty have pointed out that "stories always fill in the gaps left by the ruin's material remains."<sup>36</sup>

Thus far, dystopian and science fiction stories, have often depicted ruined spaces as spaces of oppression and located the battle for a better society in the (distant) future. A new understanding of ruins would revalidate them as contemporary places with a high free-will factor, places of struggle for a new form of cohabitation, places for society start-ups. These places are not located on Mars, as Elon Musk tends to believe. These places are not the squares and streets of the "story of the battle" protests. These places are located on the European map, in the depopulated periphery. Whether Sicily, Pleven in Bulgaria, or Liepaja in Latvia, peripheral regions can become spaces of possibility at the very moment when the "ruin" is not seen as a dystopian and apocalyptic location, but rather, in Mumford's terms, as a utopian space.<sup>37</sup>

The stories about the future cannot project agency, hope or potential to explore the possibilities of what Wallerstein calls the transformational TimeSpace, if the only horizon is a future where, in Kofi Annan's words, we 'leave the living envying the dead'. It is time to stop being the audience of a disaster film in the making. The 20<sup>th</sup> century action heroes, like Arnold Schwarzenegger, with their 'I am not into politics, I'm into survival' ethics and their one-dimensional understanding of action are blocking the view on the potential heroines of the future (stories): people who transform the ruined peripheries not only in order to survive, but also as a strategy to develop new political stories that leave the living envying the life of the new heroines. These lives have the potential to become the new stories of self, us, and now.

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36 De Cock, Christian/O'Doherty, Damien: "Ruin and Organization Studies," in: *Organization Studies* 38 no. 1 (2017), pp. 129-150.

37 L. Mumford: *The Story of Utopias*.

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# Shared Realities, Solitary Actions

## Media Languages as Agents of Formation, Reinforcement, and Change

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J. MARTIN

### Abstract

Narratives in any medium, from orally transmitted myths to video games, can be powerful agents on the personal and on the societal level—as formative agents, agents of reinforcement, and agents of change. However, while individual books or films have had a huge impact both on the personal and the societal level, the impact of games still seems to be restricted to the personal level. “Shared Realities, Solitary Actions: Media Languages as Agents of Formation, Reinforcement, and Change” explores some of the conditions that help or hinder individual games to have a societal impact similar to narratives in other media, from the external perspective of media change and the internal perspective of player action and agency.

### INTRODUCTION

Any narrative—a story, a book, a movie, a video game—can be an agent of self-formation for personal development. Involved, prominently, are personal spiritual journeys and rites of passage, in other words, myth. Myths are vital for self-formation. Being part of the human condition, myths safeguard the past, explain the present, and affirm the future.

Also, every narrative can be an agent of reinforcement: reinforcing personal beliefs about doing the right thing or being on the right side, including the right side of history. Naturally, this also encompasses norm-reinforcement.

Finally, every narrative can be an agent of change, with changes in beliefs and attitudes. These changes, of course, do not necessarily have to be good.

In this context, we usually think of these changes as changes on a personal level, not on a societal level. There is a component of societal change in journey structures, e.g., when the traveler in the hero's journey returns home, somewhat reluctantly, with the boon. Nevertheless, mythical journey structures are essentially cyclical, notwithstanding later injections of eschatological concepts and, even later, the invention of the future as a non-eschatological place different from the present.<sup>1</sup> Thus, our rite of passage templates provide us with shared realities, but in the absence of the modern conception of the future, mastering these realities remains solitary and mostly directed at ourselves.

## **From *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to POKÉMON GO**

The question is: can a narrative trigger social action as well? Would it be possible, for example, to create a video game that rallies people to fight against fracking, against voter suppression, even galvanize people, perhaps, to overthrow the political order to avert a climate catastrophe?

While this might not appear too plausible in the present public discourse, narratives exist that did have a comparable impact. From the Western cultural sphere, a famous book and an infamous movie might serve as examples.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852,<sup>2</sup> became, except for the Bible, the best-selling book in America in the nineteenth century. It fueled the abolitionist cause and drove people to become active in the abolitionist movement. Among these people were also high-ranking military personnel, and the book is said to have been among the factors that prepared the ground for the Civil War.

The second example, *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*,<sup>3</sup> is widely considered the most racist movie ever made in the United States. It was released in 1915, and it was

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1 In Luhmann, Niklas: "The Future Cannot Begin: Temporal Structures in Modern Society," in: *Social Research* Vol.43 no.1, 1976. 130–52, Luhmann dates the beginning of the modern conception of the future, i.e., a future that is neither cyclical along turning points nor a completely different order of the world or time itself, as late as the seventeenth or even late eighteenth century.

2 Stowe, Harriet Beecher: *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*, Boston: John P. Jewett 1852.

3 *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* (USA 1915, D: D. W. Griffith).

the highest-grossing movie until *GONE WITH THE WIND* in 1939,<sup>4</sup> about which a lot could be said in this context too. *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* became a major contributor to racial segregation doctrine; it was an acknowledged inspiration for the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan; and it was the strongest historical influence on how people viewed the Reconstruction era, and how they acted and voted on these views.

Now what about video games? The mobile augmented reality game *POKÉMON GO*, released in 2016,<sup>5</sup> certainly had a visible societal impact, even with a topical touch: players go out and capture creatures to enslave and train them for gladiatorial combat. This example might sound somewhat facetious, which it is. But it is not entirely facetious. *POKÉMON GO* did facilitate social action—or at least mass-socializing with strangers in public spaces.

A bar, admittedly, that is not very high. Could games do better than merely facilitate socializing with strangers? Could games even impact players to the point of social action? There are aspects that make this less likely or more likely for video games than for other media. But before these aspects can be explored, an important postulate has to be taken care of first.

## THE LANGUAGE OF GAMES IS THE LANGUAGE OF ACTION

It can be postulated that the language of games is the language of action. Numerous metaphors revolve around this, like “verbs” for gameplay mechanics. This language of games is complemented by the language of game design—which, as C. Thi Nguyen put it in *Games: Agency as Art*<sup>6</sup>—is the language of agency.

Despite action and agency, however, games don’t strike us as the most likely or most suitable medium to get people out onto the streets and help bring about societal change. We do not expect to hear a player say, for example, “I played *WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER*<sup>7</sup> and now I want to fight against voter suppression!”

Then again, a much more sinister version of that is exactly what certain people think is the case, or pretend to think: that games do send people out onto the streets for a very special kind of social action. This action, as they see it, is mass murder,

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4 *GONE WITH THE WIND* (USA 1939, D: Victor Fleming).

5 *POKÉMON GO* (USA 2016, O: Niantic).

6 Nguyen, C. Thi: *Games: Agency as Art*, Oxford: Oxford UP 2020.

7 *WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER* (USA 2014, O: MachineGames—Bethesda Softworks).

and antisocial behavior in general that might well bring about the breakdown of Western civilization if left uncensored.

How valid is this? How did it come about? While first-person shooter games are often at the center of these controversies, the dominant driver for these sentiments is not game content, but video games as a medium. For example, we can follow the controversy around DOOM<sup>8</sup> along the documentary footage collected by Tim Rogers in “Action Button Reviews DOOM.”<sup>9</sup> In DOOM, released in 1993, the player takes the role of a nameless space marine who fights against all kinds of demons and monsters on the moons of Mars and in Hell with an arsenal of real and futuristic weapons. In 1999, after the Columbine High School massacre, where two mass murderers wearing black, who also liked to depict themselves in trench coats, killed fifteen people and injured twenty-four more with carbines, shotguns, pistols, knives, and explosives, Senator Joe Lieberman claimed that “the school gunmen murderously mimicked DOOM, down to the choice of weapons and apparel.”<sup>10</sup>

This claim, as stunning as it is, actually represents the level of accuracy one has come to expect around these kinds of accusations. Along subsequent mass murders, even more bizarre and irrational assertions filled the ether. Games were blamed that the shooter hadn’t been interested in or played at all, or had been played by one of the victims. In another case, the mass murderer’s favorite game was DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION.<sup>11</sup> The question is, where did Senator Lieberman and other people and politicians get these notions? They can easily be traced to established media and the circle of “experts” to whom TV formats and newspapers incessantly gave prominence. What was actually going on under the hood was a media war.

## INTERPRETATIVE DOMINANCE

What all this is primarily about is interpretative dominance or, more catchily, *Deutungshoheit* in German. But this demands an immediate caveat. The dynamics of interpretative dominance are often explored ahistorically, as if they were largely or even solely directed against video games, which occasionally leads to

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8 DOOM (USA 1993, O: id Software).

9 Rogers, Tim: “Action Button Reviews DOOM,” YouTube, Sept.13, 2020, <https://youtu.be/38zduHkwGcc>

10 Ibid.

11 DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION (JPN 1998, O: Konami).

arguments perilously close to game exceptionalism. The media war against video games, instead, hails from a hallowed tradition. Whenever there was a new kid on the block to capture people's attention and imagination, and could potentially become a conduit for social action, established media did not take well to it.

In the beginning, people used language, aka speech. Speeches are famous for rousing people to social action, beginning with Pericles, as related by Thucydides, and other depressing examples.<sup>12</sup> Then, along came the first competitor: writing, or text.

Contrary to expectations, writing was by no means uncontroversial. Socrates, in Plato's *Phaedrus*,<sup>13</sup> asserts that writing leads to laziness and forgetfulness, and that future generations—that is us—will only appear being properly taught and wise but not actually be so. What is at stake here, as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida astutely observed, is that Socrates perceives writing as a threat to the patriarchal immediacy and control of the spoken word.<sup>14</sup>

A few hundred years later in England, one of several historical showdowns between the spoken and the written word played out. There, the early church championed the written word against the massive resistance of English warlords, more popularly known as nobles and kings, whose entire legitimacy was based on orally transmitted genealogical myths. One way the church tried to break their power was by establishing writing, or books, as the only legitimate source of authority. Which, so to speak, finally handed patriarchal immediacy a remote control.

Another new kid on the block was film. Again, there's the notion that speech and text and film got along fine. And, once again, that was not the case at all. Film was decried as an agent of demoralization and corruption, from providing "education for crime" to being a "training ground for prostitution and robbery"—original quotes from the time, as documented by Trine Syvertsen in *Media Resistance*.<sup>15</sup> Which, in turn, triggered the Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays Code, with its brutal censorship that was to remain in effect for a whole generation. The same, as a final example, happened to comics in the mid-1950s, almost exactly twenty years later. Here, too, a moral panic was created with distorted and even

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12 Thucydides: *The Peloponnesian War*, Hammond, Martin (trans.), Oxford: Oxford UP 2009.

13 Plato: *Phaedrus*, Hackforth, R. (trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1972.

14 Derrida, Jacques: *Of Grammatology*, Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (trans.), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1976.

15 Syvertsen, Trine: *Media Resistance: Protest, Dislike, Abstention*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2017, pp. 21-23, here p. 21.

manufactured evidence, as attested to by Carol L. Tilley's findings in "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics."<sup>16</sup> Similar to film, the media pressure and the ensuing political pressure led to the establishment of the Comics Code Authority as an instrument of self-censorship. The impact all this had on the development of comics as an artistic mainstream medium, on publishers, and on the personal lives and careers of comic writers and artists—examined, among others, by David Hajdu in *The Ten-Cent Plague* and fictionalized by Michael Chabon in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*<sup>17</sup>—lasted for two generations from 1954 until the early 2000s.

To return to DOOM and video games in general, it was exactly this interpretative dominance that had been at stake in the 2000s. Supported by a lot of vested interests from retaining eyeballs to averting gun laws, established media sought to inflict the same detrimental conditions on video games that had been inflicted on other media before. Indeed, that this attack on a new medium did not succeed, after all, is a historical exception of note.

Now that video games belong to the club of established mass media and are no longer singularly responsible for all of society's ills, questions can be explored as to the actual potential of video games to lead players from the language of action to social action.

## ON FROGS AND FIRING SQUADS

To shine a light on player action and player agency that is not too rosily-tinted, it might be best to start with some examples of how games themselves can reflect critically on player action and agency in clever ways, from two rather simple examples, FROG BLENDER and EXECUTION, to more complex examples like IRON SUNSET and MOIRAI.<sup>18</sup>

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16 Tilley, Carol L.: "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics," *Information & Culture* vol.47 no.4 (2012), pp. 383–413.

17 Hajdu, David: *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*, London: Picador 2009; Chabon, Michael: *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, New York: Random House 2000.

18 THE JÓESTERIZER 10 SPEED FROG BLENDER 2000 (USA 2000, O: Joe Cartoon); EXECUTION (USA 2008, O: YoYo Games); IRON SUNSET (USA 2015, O: Edu Verzinsky, Jon Romero, Ragde Games, and sergeeo); MOIRAI (USA 2013, O: Chris Johnson, Brad Barrett, and John Oestmann).



In Joe Cartoon's game FROG BLENDER or, more accurately, THE JÓESTERIZER 10 SPEED FROG BLENDER 2000, a cartoon frog in a blender taunts the player with a colorful repertoire of insults ("You ain't got the balls. No balls.") to crank up the blade to higher speeds. From speed level 7 on, however, the frog begins to plead with the player ("Ok joke's over, turn it off.") to stop. Probably not many players on this planet did set the mixer back to zero and stopped playing; the game wasn't even programmed to react properly to that. (But there was a follow-up game involving a gerbil and piranhas that did.) In the experimental game EXECUTION, the player sees a wall, a prisoner bound to a stake in front of the wall, and the cross-hairs of their gun in first-person view. The player can look around and shoot at anything, but that is all they can do. If the player shoots the prisoner, the prisoner dies and the game is over. If the player reloads the game, the prisoner is still dead, and there is nothing the player can do about it (because the game file rewrote itself). The point made by these two games, with regard to action and agency, should be obvious.

IRON SUNSET and MOIRAI, both secret multiplayer games, reflect on player action even more poignantly. In IRON SUNSET, the player must decide which of three prisoners to shoot as a traitor. The prisoners defend themselves with pop-up dialogue lines; some pleading, some cryptic, and everything in between. After shooting one of the prisoners, the player is informed that it's their turn now to being accused as a traitor, with a prompt to type in a message to save their life. Later, outside the game, the player receives an email message that a relative of theirs was foully murdered at a certain date and time, together with the number of seconds it took the assassin to shoot. In MOIRAI, the player looks for a missing woman in a cave near a village, where they encounter a farmer with a blood-stained knife. The player asks the farmer three questions, and when the farmer has answered these questions, the player can either kill him or let him pass. When the player leaves the cave after explorations and complications and a moral choice regarding the life of the missing woman, they are confronted by another person who asks the same three questions the player had asked before, with prompts to type in their own answers.

Games like FROG BLENDER, EXECUTION, IRON SUNSET, and MOIRAI show how games themselves can be critical of the language of action and the language of agency in interesting ways, and of an all-too-prevalent "cult of player agency" in general, while also showing their potential.

## THE ETHICAL-MECHANICAL COMPLEX

This critical perspective leads to what will be designated as the “ethical-mechanical complex.” Two of its aspects make it less likely that games trigger social action at any scale, while a third aspect might make it more likely. The first two aspects are people and purpose or, more precisely, non-player characters and the goal of the game. The third aspect is fiction or, more precisely, fiction’s involvement in Kant’s categorical imperative.

The first aspect, people/NPCs, comes with a very particular flavor in games, but can be observed in all other media as well. In John Barth’s novel *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, a postmodern retelling of Sinbad’s travels that constantly reflects on itself and its own writing process, the narrator introduces a new chapter like this: “[Sinbad] makes it to shore, as always, this time with a handful of others, whose next job in his story is to die and leave him the sole survivor.”<sup>19</sup> In games, just as in other media, the author or creator or designer sets these “others” up. But in games, it’s regularly the player who actually kills them off.

The argument here is not that clicking on mouse or controller buttons equals shooting, or that pixels are people. What is at stake here is the logic of player action and agency. There was a contest once on Twitter, initiated by video producer and streamer Jess aka @VoidBurger, to “unnecessarily humanize the enemy in video games.” This contest went into interesting corners in that regard. Three examples of many, by @wooper, @Waffleman\_, and @Ouijae, respectively: “Fworg just got health insurance and can finally afford therapy for his emotional issues.” “The soldiers in this unit often donate significant portions of their paychecks to a local home for battered women.” “\_\_ was conscripted at the age of 18, he’s been at war for 5 years. He wants to go home to his boyfriend and adopt a child.”<sup>20</sup>

Killing everything that moves has a long tradition in video games. In lockstep with advances in technology, the targets have become more and more realistic, but player action has become more realistic too. In *THE LAST OF US*,<sup>21</sup> for example, killing NPCs is extremely visceral, and the game leaves the player no choice when

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19 Barth, John: *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, New York: Little, Brown, and Company 1991, here p.11.

20 Jess aka @VoidBurger: “Molydeux-style idea I had: Have a manual with enemy descriptions that don’t help you and unnecessarily humanize the enemy,” <https://twitter.com/VoidBurger/status/321260177326239744>

21 *THE LAST OF US* (USA 2013, O: Naughty Dog—Sony Computer Entertainment).

it comes to inflicting wholesale slaughter. Many players—even Neil Druckman, the lead writer, acknowledged this—stopped playing, particularly toward the ending, because they couldn’t do what the game told them to do.<sup>22</sup>

The point to make here is that the player must speak the language of action, but the game does not necessarily grant the player the language of agency. More often than not, it is action, or mechanics, all the way down, the way it has been since players stomped on turtles in MARIO games.<sup>23</sup>

This leads to the first hypothesis about why it is harder for games than for books or movies to motivate people to participate in societal action and social change, even though games create shared realities that are much more tangible and visceral than works in other media: that games are overdetermined in terms of action. Every challenge within a game, on top of its narrative motivators, must be solved with a certain set of actions aka mechanics that define the gameplay loop and demand to be used.

This overdetermination works both in the familiar sense, i.e., that there are more causes present than are necessary to cause a certain effect, and in the psychoanalytical sense of a surplus of potency that might be generated by these dynamics. Overdetermination can backfire, however, as can be observed even in contexts as mundane as promotional pricing: if any one cause falls away, a disproportionate decline in motivation can follow, which is then measurably below what it would have been if it had been driven by one cause alone in the first place.

The second aspect, purpose/goal of the game, is best introduced with some game examples. In MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR,<sup>24</sup> the player battles Sauron’s minions for fifty hours at least, prominently through mind-enslaving orcs who are persistent NPCs to boot, thanks to the game’s Nemesis system.<sup>25</sup> But anyway: by the end of the game, all that notwithstanding, the player has made Middle-Earth a safer place. A perhaps more joyful example is DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS.<sup>26</sup> Again, after 50–100 hours of gameplay, the player has changed the world, freed the slaves, saved the kingdom, and beat the game. And they worked hard for that, didn’t they! Finally, as a third and contemporary example, the player can

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22 “The AIAS Game Maker’s Notebook: Neil Druckman,” Podcast, December 20, 2017.

23 In fact, ever since the inaugural game, MARIO BROS. (JP 1983, O: Nintendo).

24 MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR (USA 2014, O: Monolith Productions—Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment).

25 All that happens after the player character has been sufficiently motivated by way of the “Women in Refrigerators” trope, i.e., by watching their player character’s wife and family being sacrificed to Sauron.

26 DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS (USA 2009, O: BioWare—Electronic Arts).

retake the Capitol in TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION 2<sup>27</sup> and free America from an authoritarian rogue government. Yay! But, according to Ubisoft, it is not political—an assertion lavishly reported on and ridiculed by, e.g., Charlie Hall, Rosh Kelly, or Zack Zwiezen in *Polygon*, *Wired*, and *Kotaku*, respectively.<sup>28</sup>

This leads to the second hypothesis, that the language of action is not only overdetermined in games, but perpetually at risk of being “always already” absorbed by the medium. Games offer shared realities, but player actions remain safely and non-threateningly contained as solitary actions within the game world. So much so that all the major studios and publishers can play the “hey, it’s not political!” card with a straight face, up to and including for games like CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE.<sup>29</sup> And the player? Will they go out and join a cause, right after they invested hundreds of hours to save the universe?

## LITTLE FICTIONS AND THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

The third and last aspect is fiction in its relation to ethics. In *The Ethics of Reading*, J. Hillis Miller discusses Kant’s categorical imperative, and how one can possibly test, or know, whether a maxim that underlies a particular action would qualify as a universal rule. According to Miller, Kant already gave an answer to this, inadvertently, through his “as if” in the law of nature formulation—“Act as if the maxims of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature”—and his subsequent examples that Miller calls “miniature novels” or “little fictions.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, narrative acts are the necessary and perhaps only bridge between the universal law on the one hand and life’s practice on the other.

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27 TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION 2 (USA 2019, O: Massive Entertainment—Ubisoft).

28 Hall, Charlie: “Tom Clancy’s *The Division 2* ‘Is Not Making Any Political Statements’: A Game About the Next Civil War Refuses to Take a Side,” *Kotaku*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/e3/2018/6/12/17451688/the-division-2-is-not-making-any-political-statements>; Kelly, Rosh: “*The Division 2*’s Refusal to Engage with Politics Makes It Hard to Enjoy,” *Wired*, March 16, 2019, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/the-division-2-review>; Zwiezen, Zack: “Ubisoft Insists Latest Game, [INSERT NAME], Isn’t Political,” *Kotaku* May 28, 2021 (updated May 31, 2021) <https://kotaku.com/ubisoft-insists-latest-game-insert-name-isn-t-polit-1846995146>

29 CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE (US 2019, O: Infinity Ward—Activision).

30 Miller, J. Hillis: *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin*, New York: Columbia UP 1987, here p.28.

And that is the place where games can shine. Because the player can play out these narratives, cross these bridges, and test if particular actions are fit to become universal law. Or, in slightly less grandiose terms, experience the consequences of their actions in worlds where these actions, qua mechanics, are set up as universal laws.

## THE FUTURE

The question or challenge is whether this third aspect can overcome the first two, overdetermination and absorption, or even reconcile all three, to unlock video games' potential to facilitate action beyond purely personal experiences of self-formation, reinforcement, and change. It seems possible: by way of wider, more interesting palettes of game mechanics; goals that engage in the world's burning challenges; player action complemented by the language of agency; and narratives that invite us to test our strategies and tell us where these strategies might lead. A kind of games we should create and experiment with and advance in the future—alongside many other kinds of games that are equally important and enjoyable in different ways—to become agents of change not only on the personal level, but on the societal level as well.

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# Gaming on Climate Change

## Discursive Strategies of Environmental Problems in Strategy Games

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ANDREAS ENDL/ALEXANDER PREISINGER

### Abstract

Due to the life-threatening impacts of climate change, the generation and communication of knowledge associated with it is given high priority. In recent years, environmentally changing behavioral knowledge can also be found in popular culture in a generally understandable form (= inter-discourse). Accordingly, the authors examine the games ANNO 2070, URBAN EMPIRE, and FATE OF THE WORLD with regard to their respective environmental discourse. For this purpose, the authors designed an analytical framework, which addresses current scientific discourses and investigates games for completeness, topicality, and validity of knowledge and mechanics and their aesthetic implementation. Overall, the authors identified three types of games: agenda, realistic and mixed-type games covering criteria of both other types. Despite the fact that games like URBAN EMPIRE or ANNO 2070 do not adequately reflect the complexity of real-world environmental problems (such as FATE OF THE WORLD), they effectively simulate intervention logic, understanding, and systemic representation. The authors contribute to the discourse on the environment and Serious Games' design by providing an analytical framework that practically identifies environmental discourses and has been tested successfully on three games. The analytical framework and consecutive systematization of games into realistic and agenda games can be of importance for didactics and guidelines when using digital games for school teaching: School teachers could specifically select games to portray certain aspects of environmental discourses.

## THE DISCOURSE OF CLIMATE CHANGE: BETWEEN DISASTER METAPHORS AND SCIENTIFIC LANGUAGE

“Radical Appeal,” “Warning to mankind,” “Greenhouse gas emissions at record levels,” “Hurricanes,” and “strong rainfalls, rising sea level and warmer oceans”<sup>1</sup>—along with reoccurring extreme weather events and world climate conferences, the catastrophic climate change narrative with its drastic metaphors gets invoked constantly.

Against the background of discourse analysis, the authors understand climate change not as a well-established fact, but as a discursive phenomenon. Such a phenomenon is created through strategies and the practice of language as well as its validity, determination and consequences negotiated by different actors in public space.<sup>2</sup> This view is particularly relevant for climate change, since it is not directly evident to or experienceable by humans; whether extreme weather events are isolated phenomena or caused by climate change, is still debated among experts.

From the perspective of cultural studies the focus therefore shifts towards climate change as a meaning generating discourse: the drastic nature and collective-symbolistic clarity (tsunamis, storms, greenhouse gases, etc.) utilized in order to portray a rather abstract phenomenon such as climate change are part of a strategy trying to establish the need to act, “[a]nd this poses the question, what form of enactment, even perhaps, visualization is possible and necessary to overcome this abstract nature and uncover climate change and its apocalyptic consequences.”<sup>3</sup> As a global and future-oriented narrative, climate change must not remain an expert discourse only. Instead, climate change and the narrative behind it intend to prompt people to act more climate-friendly.

Climate change must become a narrative which is more easily communicable and more tangible. Furthermore, climate change must attain a certain level of attention in the daily lives of lay people in order to conceptualize daily routines (decision to buy a car, choice of energy provider) or the way weather phenomena are experienced as climate change impacts. According to Jürgen Link

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1 <http://orf.at/stories/2414697/2414703/>, from 19.11.2017.

2 Keller, Reiner: *Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse. Grundlegung eines Forschungsprogramms*, Wiesbaden: SV 2008.

3 Beck, Ulrich: *Weltrisikogesellschaft*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 2015.

epistemological discourse analysis<sup>4</sup> these discourses are called interdiscourses. They use metaphors, accentuated narratives, like friend-foe schemes, or drastic enactments. Art, for example, is an interdiscursive generator which does not simply reduce complexity of expert discourses, but instead converts it to a more subtle representation. Such art interdiscourses can occur in conventional forms such as the US American disaster movies (e.g., Roland Emmerichs *THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW*) or more experimental forms such as Ernest Callenbachs novel *Ecotopia* (1975). Against this background, digital games are especially complex interdiscourses due to their multimodality as well as interactivity and immersion. They enable us to simulate experiences to which we otherwise would have no access in real life.

In this paper the authors want to describe the discursive construction of climate change on the basis of three digital games. These games represent strategy and simulation genre games on the topic of global politics and city building: *URBAN EMPIRE*, *ANNO 2070* and *FATE OF THE WORLD*.<sup>5</sup> While games such as *ABZÛ* and *INSIDE* portray environmental problems from subjective, aesthetic, and affective points of view,<sup>6</sup> the authors' selected games represent abstract perspectives encompassing more complex interdependencies in global politics or city building. Therefore, these games are able to depict expert discourses and knowledge. The paper utilizes a conceptual framework based on criteria from environmental sciences and system dynamics as well as policy sciences in order to describe and compare the selected games. The authors address the question in how far the games are able to transform expert discourses into interdiscourses on the topic of climate change.

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4 Link, Jürgen/Parr, Rolf: "Semiotik und Interdiskursanalyse," in: Bogdal, Klaus-Michael (ed.): *Neue Literaturtheorien. Eine Einführung*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2005, pp. 108-133.

5 *ANNO 2070* (Ubisoft 2011, O: Blue Byte Software/Related Designs); *URBAN EMPIRE* (Reborn Games 2017, O: Kalypso Media Digital); *FATE OF THE WORLD: TIPPING POINT* (Red Redemption 2011, O: Red Redemption).

6 Brittner, Sascha: "Tabula Rasa. Wie Videospiele Klimawandel verarbeiten," in: *WASD. Bookazine für Gameskultur* 11 (2017), pp. 122-127.

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND SELECTION OF GAMES

In order to more easily compare the selected games, our analytical framework utilizes binary variables along all analysis criteria. The binary defined variable levels represent extreme position on a spectrum of available dispositions in order to better illustrate differences.

The analysis category “aesthetic elements and supplementary information” investigates visual, acoustic and game mechanic means which represent environmental quality. The authors describe “expert discursive explanatory notes” as in-built Wiki’s or didactic supplementary digital materials referencing in-game representation with discourses outside the game. From a holistic perspective the system of bio-geophysical processes (here defined as the term “environment”), which guarantees the function of human society, encompasses a number of indicators. Against this background, besides climate change other global environmental challenges are relevant: Steffen et al. characterizes this in the concept of planetary boundaries, which defines different indicators for environmental quality relevant for a safe operating space of human society.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, the authors defined the analytical criteria “representation of environmental quality” depicting how environmental quality can be perceived by players. In order to account for the complexity and holistics of environmental challenges in our society the paper also investigates the importance of different environmental quality indicators (complex: climate change or biodiversity) and their representation (e.g., specific: greenhouse gas emissions or extinction rate).

Inter- and transdisciplinary in sustainability sciences attribute high importance to complex and systemic approaches in order to better understand environmental problems and interventions to combat them.<sup>8</sup> The debate on systemic analysis of

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7 Steffen, Will/Richardson, Katherine/Rockström, Johan et al.: “Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet,” in: *Science* 347 (2015), p. 1259855.

8 Frame, Bob: “‘Wicked’, ‘Messy’, and ‘Clumsy’: Long-Term Frameworks for Sustainability,” in: *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 26(6) (2008), pp. 1113-1128; Metzner, Andreas: *Probleme sozio-ökologischer Systemtheorie: Natur und Gesellschaft in der Soziologie Luhmanns*, New York et al.: Springer 2013; Verweij, Marco/Douglas, Mary/Ellis, Richard et al.: “Clumsy Solutions for a Complex World: The Case of Climate Change,” in: *Public Administration* 84(4) (2006), pp. 817-843. Whyte, Kyle P./Thompson, Paul B.: “Ideas for How to Take Wicked Problems Seriously,” in: *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 25(4) (2012), pp. 441-445.

global environmental problems und their solutions is complemented by more recent concepts such as the Anthropocene.<sup>9</sup> The Anthropocene represents the era of human development characterized by planetary anthropogenic environmental change. This concept recognizes important aspects increasing the understanding of as well as solutions for global environmental problems such as climate change:<sup>10</sup> Against this background, it constitutes 1) anthropogenic global response patterns, 2) global socio-ecological networks, and 3) global socio-ecological system dynamics and interdependencies illustrating the relationship among complex systems (economy, environment, etc.). Consequently, this article investigates the prevalence of characteristics of such a systemic representation of societal and natural systems in the concept of the Anthropocene (represented as analytical criteria “Systemic representation”).

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- 9 Crutzen, Paul J.: “The ‘Anthropocene’,” in: Ehlers, Eckart/Krafft, Thomas (eds.), *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene. Emerging Issues and Problems*, New York et al.: Springer 2006, pp. 13-18; Steffen, Will/Grinevald, Jacques/Crutzen, Paul. et al.: “The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives,” in: *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 369 (2011), pp. 842-867.
- 10 Donges, Jonathan F./Lucht, Wolfgang/Müller-Hansen, Finn et al.: “The Technosphere in Earth System Analysis: A Coevolutionary Perspective,” in: *The Anthropocene Review* 4(1) (2017), pp. 23-33; Donges, Jonathan F./Winkelmann, Ricarda/Lucht, Wolfgang et. al.: “Closing the Loop: Reconnecting Human Dynamics to Earth System Science,” in: *The Anthropocene Review* 4(2) (2017), pp. 151-157; Steffen, Will/Crutzen, Paul J./McNeill, John R.: “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature,” in: *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment* 36(8) (2007), pp. 614-621; Verburg, Peter H./Dearing, John A./Dyke, James G. et al.: “Methods and Approaches to Modelling the Anthropocene,” in: *Global Environmental Change* 39 (2016), pp. 328-340.

Table 1: Analytical Framework

<b>aesthetic elements and supplementary information</b>		
aesthetic representation of climate change via visual and graphical elements (e.g., environmental pollution as dark areas) or audio effects (e.g., gloomy music)	utilized	not utilized
expert discursive explanatory notes	utilized (e.g., in-build Wiki, mouse-over info texts)	not utilized
<b>representation of environmental quality</b>		
complexity	simplistic: a single indicator represents environmental quality	complex: more than one indicator represent environmental quality
level of abstraction	abstract: aggregated, highly abstracted indicator (e.g., ecological footprint, ecological assessment)	specific: indicator for a specific environmental quality (e.g., rise of temperature)
<b>systemic representation</b>		
influence on environmental quality	direct-univariate: direct influence on a single parameter (e.g., productivity)	direct/indirect-multivariate: direct or indirect influence on more than one parameter
causality of indicators	mono-causal / no system mechanisms	interdependent / existing system mechanisms
impact of interventions on system performance	equilibrium / no side-effects in systems	side-effects present: interventions produce unintended side-effects
<b>representation of interventions</b>		
quality of intervention	mono-thematic: only a single intervention type is available to solve an environmental problem (e.g., engineering, or one type of building)	holistic: more than one type of intervention solve an environmental problem
logic of intervention	curative, symptomatic response: corrective measures, polluter pays principle	preventive, root cause response: measures avoid harm, precautionary principle
environmental politics and negotiation	regulated: simple or not represented; via, for example, top-down decisions	negotiated: environmental problems are political and can be negotiated
<b>narrative representation</b>		
please see expert discursive explanatory notes		

Discursive concepts in systems theory<sup>11</sup> and system dynamics<sup>12</sup> have developed as a kind of standard for understanding environmental problems: system barriers and thinking via representation and relationships of variables (univariate versus multivariate); reciprocal and interdependent interaction or feedback loops (mono-causal versus interdependent) between different systems (equilibrium solutions versus unintended side-effects).

Investigating how players can influence the game-mechanic (representation of interventions), provides insights into system understanding and intervention logic of the game as well as the degree of knowledge to be gained by players on how to solve environmental problems. In this regard, the authors analyze the spectrum of possibilities as well as the diversity of possible alternative solutions to solve environmental problems (mono-thematic versus holistic), logic of intervention, (curative versus preventive), and the negotiation of preferred interventions (regulated versus negotiated).

In the discourse of sustainability sciences, environmental problems such as climate change or biodiversity loss are defined as so-called ‘wicked problems’ (‘wicked’ can be defined as complex, ambivalent, or dangerous).<sup>13</sup> Accounting for the characteristics of wicked problems is important<sup>14</sup> when designing interventions or approaches of political steering: According to Head/Alford<sup>15</sup> these characteristics comprise 1) social pluralism, 2) institutional complexity, and 3) scientific uncertainty.

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- 11 Von Bertalanffy, Ludwig/Sutherland, John W.: “General Systems Theory: Foundations, Developments, Applications,” in: *IEEE Transactions on Systems, Man, and Cybernetics* 4(6) (1974), p. 592.
  - 12 Sterman, John D.: *Business Dynamics: Systems Thinking and Modeling for a Complex World*, New York et al.: McGraw-Hill 2000.
  - 13 Jones, Roger/Patwardhan, Anand/Cohen, Stewart et al.: “Foundations for Decision Making,” in: Edenhofer, O. et. al (eds.), *Climate Change 2014: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press 2014, pp. 195-228; Rittel, Horst W. J./Webber, Melvin M.: “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” in: *Policy Sciences* 4(2) (1973), pp. 155-169.
  - 14 Head, Brian W./Alford, John: “Wicked Problems: Implications for Public Policy and Management,” in: *Administration & Society* 47(6) (2015), pp. 711-739; Verweij, Marco/Douglas, Mary/Ellis, Richard et al.: “Clumsy Solutions for a Complex World: The Case of Climate Change,” in: *Public Administration* 84(4) (2006), pp. 817-843.
  - 15 Head, Brian W./Alford, John: “Wicked Problems: Implications for Public Policy and Management,” in: *Administration & Society* 47(6) (2015), pp. 711-739.

Ad 1) Solutions or interventions to solve environmental problems such as climate change<sup>16</sup> are affected by a multitude of different actors on different levels (international to local) with different interests (civil society objectives for increased participation or free-market goals such as free trade).<sup>17</sup> Against this background, the authors investigate game-mechanics in relation to occurrence of different actors and their degree of involvement in interventions. The type of interaction can vary between protests, economic/military sanctions, or involvement in political and diplomatic negotiations (regulated versus negotiated).

Ad 2) Due to the interrelationship of different actors and organizations, coordination mechanisms need to be in place to account for their steering capacity or decision-making power in solving environmental problems. The prevalence of decision-making power can manifest via different pathways on the intervention logic: 1) technocratic interventions (e.g., environmental technologies such as wind power or carbon capture and storage), 2) sectoral interventions (agriculture, transport, or energy production), or 3) different policy instruments as interventions (emission standards, fiscal instruments such as taxes) can be utilized to solve environmental problems. In their analytical framework the authors consider the simultaneous application of all three forms of intervention as a holistic approach to solve environmental problems (mono-thematic versus holistic).

Ad 3) Due to the fact that complex or wicked problems require unconventional solutions and that scientific knowledge for solutions is fragmented and imperfect, interventions follow a precautionary principle:<sup>18</sup> Solutions addressing the root

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16 Corell, Elisabeth/Betsill, Michele M.: "A Comparative Look at NGO Influence in International Environmental Negotiations: Desertification and Climate Change," in: *Global Environmental Politics* 1(4) (2001), pp. 86-107; Wittneben, Bettina. B./Okereke, Chukwumerije/Banerjee, Subhabrata Bobby et al.: "Climate Change and the Emergence of New Organizational Landscapes," in: *Organization Studies* 33(11) (2012), pp. 1431-1450.

17 Rietig, Katharina: "The Power of Strategy: Environmental NGO Influence in International Climate Negotiations," in: *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 22(2) (2016), pp. 268-288; Spaargaren, Gert/Mol, Arthur P.: "Greening Global Consumption: Redefining Politics and Authority," in: *Global Environmental Change* 18(3) (2008), pp. 350-359.

18 Epstein, Larry G.: "Decision Making and the Temporal Resolution of Uncertainty," in: *International economic review* 21(2) (1980), pp. 269-283; Foster, Kenneth R./Vecchia, Paolo/Repacholi, Michael H.: "Science and the Precautionary Principle," in: *Science* 288 (2000), pp. 979-981; O'Riordan, Timothy/Cameron, James: *Interpreting the Precautionary Principle*, Vol. 2, London: Earthscan 1994.



cause of the problem compared to damage control or mitigation measures (i.e., polluter pays principle) are represented by different analytical criteria (curative versus preventive).<sup>19</sup>

Besides a micro-structural analysis—the utilized analytical framework and its analysis criteria on the representation of the environment –, the authors also add a narrative analysis of the macro-structure—the narration of climate change. Therefore, they use a simplified form of Greimas<sup>20</sup> narrative analysis, which is f.e. used by Viehöver<sup>21</sup> for climate change narratives. The basic narration of climate change deals with the fact that an actor (civil society, environmental NGO, politics) tries to metaphorically disconnect (extreme weather phenomena, rise of temperature etc.) or connect from an object (decrease of greenhouse gas emissions, species protection etc.) while at the same time putting up resistance against a villain or anti-hero (industry, consumer society, lobby groups etc.).

## URBAN EMPIRE

In URBAN EMPIRE the player assumes the role of the mayor in the fictional country of Swarelia. The story of the city is played over five historical periods. In an isometric perspective the player designs the city by building streets, deciding on the planning scheme, and proposing regulations to the city council. The quality of life in the city is represented by the so-called “Wheel of life”. It is a quantitative indicator constituting the quality of life in the city from the perspective of a citizen: it subsumes six basic needs (e.g., built environment, safety, personal development, health). In each period the demands of citizens change. The player can influence these basic needs by utilizing different building options (infrastructure and public services such as a sewer system) or regulations.

This game does not utilize explicit climate change related nor any generic environmental quality indicators (complexity: simplistic). The player has difficulty figuring out for themselves how interventions (i.e., regulations or measures for city building) work and what their impact on the environmental quality is, since

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- 19 Kiehl, Jeffrey T.: “Geoengineering Climate Change: Treating the Symptom over the Cause?,” in: *Climatic Change* 77(3) (2006), pp. 227-228.
- 20 Greimas, Algirdas Julien/Courtés, Joseph: *Semiotics and Language. An Analytical Dictionary*, Bloomington Ind. et al.: Indiana University Press 1982.
- 21 Viehöver, Willy: “Öffentliche Erzählung und der globale Klimawandel,” in: Arnold, Markus/Dressel, Gert/Viehöver, Willy (eds.), *Erzählungen im Öffentlichen. Über die Wirkung narrativer Diskurse*, Wiesbaden: SV 2012, pp. 173-215.

the game does not offer any supplementary notes except for very short texts. For example, the technology section “internet of things” encompasses the measure “taxation of car traffic”. The indicator for environmental quality is highly aggregated and represented by “built environment” (level of abstraction: abstract), and iconically represented by a tree. The tree symbolizes the citizens perspective on the built environment. Accordingly, the indicator is influenced by interventions such as street lights as well as the building of parks and introduction of electric vehicles. Therefore, the indicators do not represent the objectively measured environmental quality, but rather a subject-oriented value of built environment (i.e., the subjective valuation of environmental quality by citizens).

The manipulation of the “built environment” is a simple game-mechanic: Interventions and measures taken in a certain area or district directly improve the indicator (influence on environmental quality: direct-univariate), and consequently in the whole city (causality of indicators: mono-causal). Infrastructure improvements, such as parks, also influence other basic needs such as health or social interaction. All basic needs next to “built environment” can only be changed in a positive way. The impact of interventions is displayed directly in short info-texts. The only limiting factor is the city council budget, which covers running costs of interventions. Since system mechanics or un-intended side effects are absent, urban environmental problems are easily deal with targeted interventions and can be kept relatively stable (equilibrium / no side-effects in systems). In addition, the quality of “built environment” is only influenced by the periodically increasing demands of citizen. Consequently, it is irrelevant how the player influences the indicator “built environment” (e.g., by building new industrial areas). It is only the relative change in citizens perceptions due to recently introduced interventions that influences the indicator “built environment”. Thus, environmental quality is perceived as a static indicator.

It is difficult to respond to the questions of ‘quality of intervention’ and ‘logic of intervention’, since environmental quality is hidden within the highly aggregated indicator “built environment”. Only in the technology section game-mechanic the player recognizes certain topics of environmental quality: In each period the player can access different scientific advancements via research points. Advancements such as “sustainability,” “health care system,” or “smart growth” comprise a diverse set of interventions (quality of intervention: holistic) in the environmental sector (i.e., infrastructure, services, new regulations). Interventions can be broadly categorized into curative (“taxation of car traffic”) or preventive (“protection of water bodies,” “fair trade”) without having any impact on the game-mechanic.

Environmental policy and negotiation of interventions play a central role in the game: The city council, which serves as the decision-making body, votes on all interventions and regulations. The city council is comprised of different parties which have their own agenda and preferences for particular regulations and environmental concerns. Therefore, environmental interventions are not simply decided by top-down decisions but are subject to negotiation processes.

Similar to infrastructure or urban planning interventions, regulations proposed by the city council have little influence on other indicators: According to infotexts, the introduction of a regulation on “measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions” improves the indicator “built environment” while at the same time reduces the turnover from industrial companies. The player can only make the assumption about the system mechanisms of how specific company sectors generate less turnover, which in turn influences employment and overall satisfaction. Many of the possible interventions only negatively influence the city budget without any other conflicts or unintended side effects, but almost exclusively positively influence basic needs: Introducing “taxation of car traffic” negatively influences basic needs “social relations” and “personal development” (equilibrium / no side-effects in systems). Environmental interventions only affect the city budget and are targeted sure-fire success and automatically increase “quality of life”.

Due to the rather static and hidden environmental quality indicators, the narrative representation is difficult to assess; the source of environmental problems or polluters cannot be identified, the indicator “built environment” is too abstract and highly aggregated to act as indicator for environmental quality, causality of indicators is difficult to assess. Protagonists of environmental quality refer to infrastructure (“large park”, “recycling centre”) as well as regulations affecting changes in mindsets (“fair trade”, “smart growth”). The latter is hardly perceived in digital games which commonly refer to technocratic interventions for environmental quality.

## **ANNO 2070**

Ubisoft’s ANNO series exists since 1998 and comprises of seven different games. In this city-building game the player colonizes islands, develops economic sectors to produce goods and services to satisfy needs of the population. This in turn generates increased satisfaction generating income, which enables the setup of more complex economic sectors and systems of production and consumption. In ANNO 2070 the player is involved in a world that is already heavily impacted by climate change. The introductory movie describes a world prone to resource scarcity, rising sea levels and melting of polar caps. At the same time infertile lands turned

into fertile lands and new mineral deposits could be accessed. In this post-apocalyptic setting, three factions compete with each other: the “Eden Initiative” utilizes renewable energy and represents a strongly democratic society; the “Global Trust” focuses on non-renewable energy sources, heavy industries, and capitalism; the “S.A.A.T.” (Scientific Academy for Advanced Technologies) focuses on scientific advancement.

From an isometric perspective the player plans the economic development in a world comprised of only small islands. On the aesthetic level environmental quality is depicted in a cinematic-graphic and collective-symbolic enactment via an introductory movie and small video-sequences during game-play: green meadows and tree lines represent high levels, grey and withered plains and leafless treetops low levels of environmental quality. The three factions are also enacted in a collective-symbolic appearance: White buildings in the “Eden Initiative” are contrasted with sooty-grey ones by “Global Trust”. The central indicator for environmental quality is “eco balance”. “Eco balance” represents a highly aggregated numerical indicator for environmental quality which is calculated by adding or subtracting “eco balance” points (level of abstraction: abstract; complexity: simplistic). Each island starts with a positive “eco balance” (i.e., no negative influence of production). The construction of buildings generally decreased the indicator (negative influence), while only a few special buildings increase (positive influence) the indicator (influence on environmental quality: direct-univariate). The decrease of the “eco balance” not only graphically changes the land, but also reduces productivity of buildings producing goods, and, consequently, general satisfaction of the population (particularly of the “Eden Initiative”) as well as tax income (causality of indicators: interdependent / existing system mechanisms). However, system mechanisms are limited to islands and thus represent closed systems in themselves which are not interdependent. There is no further information on relationships among indicators or interventions which point towards the prevalence of equilibrium / no side-effects in systems. Similar to URBAN EMPIRE environmental quality is perceived a static indicator, which is only influenced by interventions set by the player.

With regards to possible interventions the game is designed in a simple way: One can distinguish between different interventions (quality of intervention: mono-thematic) primarily by deploying certain technologies in different sectors (energy provision, waste water recycling etc.). One of the few exceptions are found in certain buildings of the “Eden Initiative” (education cluster: data policy “new from old” reduces the need for certain products), which target changes in mindset and values. Accompanying explanatory texts only explain game-mechanics and therefore do not represent expert discursive explanatory notes establishing

a relation between game-internal and external discourses (this would be particularly interesting for exotic technologies such as the “ozone maker station”—a zeppelin purifying the air). With regards to intervention logic, most of the interventions can be characterized as curative, symptomatic response (e.g., sewage system, weather control station, carbon capture and storage, ozone maker) and are implemented with negotiation (environmental politics and negotiation: regulated). The only exception is the sector energy provision where the “Eden Initiative” utilizes buildings which focus on preventive measures (logic of intervention: preventive, root cause response).

Investigating the narration, the separation of major actors (the “Eden Initiative” and the “Global Trust”) serves a prominent cliché: the environment polluting omnipotent multi-national player (“Global Trust”—anti-hero) and the democratic, environment preserving actor (“Eden Initiative”—hero). However, even the presumably responsible heroes of this narrative negatively impact the environment due to their consumption patterns, which in turn only affect the source of origin on their home island (one independent “eco balance” indicator on each island).

## FATE OF THE WORLD

Against the background of escalating climate change, in FATE OF THE WORLD (FOTW) the player assumes the role of the *Global Environment Organisation* (“GEO”), namely the world government. In a first step, the players select a scenario defining winning and losing conditions. With regards to aesthetics the game is similar to a turn-based board game, wherein one round normally comprises 5 in-game years starting with 2025 and normally ending in 2200. In the center of the screen the player sees the globe, which only changes according to the rise in temperature and the prevalence of extreme weather events (aesthetic elements are hardly implemented). During each round of gameplay, the status of environmental quality is communicated via news-entry like animations: reports by journalists in front of extreme weather event scenery. The players, however, can rarely assume game-play and strategies through these interdiscursive elements alone, but rather need to consult statistics. In addition, a game-internal wiki supports the player in their decisions and describes the relationships and interventions without providing any information on how these influence any indicators or game-mechanics.

FOTW is more multi-faceted than other games, since environmental quality is comprised of several indicators (complex) which are either abstract (eco-toxicity: index for soil quality or water stress) or concrete (carbon dioxide concentration). These indicators all exist in relation to each other and can be viewed in the

statistical section of the game. In addition, environmental quality is also subject to unaffected external factors, which is rarely the case in other games: climatic conditions change (sometimes to the benefit of the player) when soil fertility in Europe increases due to the increase in average temperatures. The exploitation of clathrates can eventually lead to methane eruptions.

What makes FOTW complex and challenging is the direct and indirect influence and interdependency of indicators. An increase in electric vehicles and mobility leads to increased energy consumption, which in turn increases exploitation of coal, leading to increased greenhouse gas emissions (direct/indirect-multivariate). Even obvious negative interventions can have positive impacts: A collapse of the South-American rainforest leads to increased area for agricultural activity (side-effects present: interventions produce un-intended side-effects). The presence of interdependent relationships among indicators requires the player to further investigate system mechanics in order to better understand game mechanics and consequently set the appropriate interventions: the expansion of school education in Africa will decrease child mortality and result in decreased birth rates, which in turn will lead to an aging population. A challenging task for players is also prevalent goal-conflicts and resulting side-effects (interventions produce un-intended side-effects):

The decrease in greenhouse gas emissions resulting in decreased productivity and standard of living (Human Development Index), means that greenhouse gas emission reductions will lead to loss of financing for future interventions and responses. The many interdependent relationships of indicators prevent equilibrium situations where no side-effects in systems occur. However, the game does not explicitly depict these relationships. The player is required to consult statistics by investigating interdependent relationship based on data in the statistics screen. Against this background, the intervention “e-mobility” describes: “massively cuts back dependency on oil. Increase in electricity in proportion.” The high amount of prior knowledge needed, the learning by trial and error, combined with a highly complex world climate model developed by the Oxford University Climate Dynamics Group define FOTW as a Serious Game.<sup>22</sup>

The interventions improving environmental quality are comprised of different sectors (e.g., energy or agriculture), and relate to science or technologies as well as climate-policy instruments (e.g., awareness raising campaigns or greenhouse

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22 On this category see also Fromme, Johannes/Biermann, Ralf/Unger, Alexander: “‘Serious Games’ oder ‘taking games seriously’?,” in: Hugger, Kai-Uwe/Walber, Markus (eds.), *Digitale Lernwelten. Konzepte, Beispiele und Perspektiven*, Wiesbaden: VS 2010, pp. 39-57.

gas emission taxation). Therefore, climate change is addressed in a holistic way on the level of interventions (quality of intervention). The game clearly differentiates among technological as well as value and behavioral changing interventions in the areas of curative (e.g., flood protection against tsunamis) as well as preventive impact (facilitating a change of values for cutting consumption or increasing e-mobility).

The authors identify the representation of climate policy and politics as problematic: All relevant interventions are ordained by the World Government (environmental politics and negotiation: regulated: simple or not represented; via, for example, top-down decisions). The level of approval for selected interventions is only represented by symbols of “green hearts” in each world region, respectively, which can be easily managed via other simple interventions.

The complexity of the game presupposes that the climate change narration is ambiguous: In many scenarios, the industrialization of Africa leads to political stability which in turn successfully concludes the scenario even though environmental quality decreases. Similarly, the deforestation of tropical rainforests provides additional agricultural productivity through increased access to land for bio-fuels. The most effective form of narration is the emblematic comparison of atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration and increase in temperature between the game rounds. This mechanic lets the player identify CO<sub>2</sub> as the central factor for climate change. However, a distinct differentiation of protagonists in a climate change narration is not possible simply due to the fact that relationships among indicators are not easy to identify.

## RESUMÉ

From the perspective of sustainability sciences and with respect to game-mechanics all three selected games clearly reference environmental problems and climate change. The more games such as URBAN EMPIRE try to engage in a more holistic approach to human development (e.g., a sustainable development approach) representing environmental indicators next to other ones, such as safety, the less environmental problems are at the center of the discourse. Interdependent relationships of environmental problems are very prominently addressed in FOTW: This is the case for both winning conditions as well as the complexity and differentiated representation of environmental quality in the game (e.g. atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration, biodiversity loss, etc.) which makes FOTW a game best

reflecting the current expert discourse.<sup>23</sup> URBAN EMPIRE and ANNO 2070 represent environmental quality indicators on par with other indicators for winning conditions. Due to the complexity of environmental expert discourse, all three games fundamentally reduce this complexity in its game-mechanic as well as narration.

The most relevant aspect of learning in digital games is playful problem solving; the logic of intervention influences gaming experience and fun, the immersion, as well as a better understanding of contexts and connections. Solving environmental problems in digital games relies more on understanding root causes in climate change debates, which are equally relevant to the scientific discourse,<sup>24</sup> than un-intended side-effects. With regards to the possibilities of players to respond to problems in the form of interventions, all three games have slightly different approaches. All three games, however, strongly rely on curative interventions, which often represent technological solutions (cleaner production processes or renewable energy provision).

This conveys a sense of necessity for technocratic approaches as the only possible solution to the player. FOTW and URBAN EMPIRE offer players different preventive interventions to choose from. However, the two games do not provide additional information on whether preventive over curative interventions are more effective in the long term. Only FOTW addresses the impact of societal values, as well as changes of mindsets and goals for satisfying basic needs in relation to economic growth and rising production of goods in its game-mechanic. Against this background, the game indicates a societal development path away from consumer-oriented capitalism towards a model of “life styles of health and sustainability”<sup>25</sup> which represents one of the most urgent challenges for addressing global environmental challenges such as climate change.<sup>26</sup> ANNO 2070 and FOTW provide simply top-down interventions without account for diverse interests and side-effects on other stakeholders. Only URBAN EMPIRE makes it possible for the

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- 23 Steffen, Will/ Richardson, Katherine/Rockström, Johan et al.: “Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet,” in: *Science* 347 (2015), p. 1259855.
  - 24 Blanco, Gabriel/Gerlagh, Reyer/Suh, Sangwon et a.: “Drivers, Trends and Mitigation,” in: Edenhofer, O. et. al (eds.), *Climate Change* (2014), pp. 351-411.
  - 25 LOHAS: transition towards a life style based on activities on less resource intensive consumption and instead built on more social relationship building see also Schommer, Peter/Harms, Thomas/Gottschlich, Hendrik: *LOHAS Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability*, Heilbronn: Ernst & Young 2007.
  - 26 Jackson, Tim: *Prosperity without Growth. Economics for a Finite Planet*, London: Earthscan 2009.



political dimension to be addressed in multi-party and negotiations systems in an environmental discourse via the city council.

In conclusion, based on the manifestation of different criteria and binary disposition from the analytical framework, the authors differentiate between two groups of games: 1) Agenda games, which portray different options for interventions and, therefore, potentially foster awareness raising and change of behavior. 2) Realistic games, which makes it easier to understand foster system mechanisms of environmental problems. The authors are aware that these two types are ideal positions which are indeed perceived to some extent as hybrid forms in the selected games.

*Table 2: Categorization in Agenda and Realistic Games based on Binary Disposition II in the Analytical Framework (righthand column)*

style		aspects	Anno 2070	Urban Empire	FOTW
agenda games		narrative representation			
		aesthetic elements— <i>aesthetic implementation</i>			
		intervention— <i>quality of intervention</i>			
		intervention— <i>logic of intervention</i>			
		intervention— <i>environmental politics and negotiation</i>			
realistic games		expert discursive explanatory notes & texts			
		systemic representation— <i>influence on environmental quality</i>			
		representation of environmental quality— <i>complexity</i>			
		representation of environmental quality— <i>level of abstraction</i>			
		systemic representation— <i>influence on environmental quality</i>			
		systemic representation— <i>causality of indicators</i>			

Despite the fact that games like URBAN EMPIRE or ANNO 2070 do not adequately reflect the complexity of real-world environmental problems, they effectively simulate intervention logic, understanding, and systemic representation. FOTW primarily focuses on best simulating system mechanisms and understanding while at the same time following a drastic aesthetic representation facilitating reflection by

players. The authors would like to contribute to the discourse on environment and serious games design by providing an analytical framework which practically identify environmental discourses and has been tested successfully on three games. The analytical framework and consecutive systematization of games into realistic and agenda games can be of importance for didactics and guidelines when using digital games for school teaching: School teachers could specifically select games to portray certain aspects of environmental discourses.

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## **GAMEOGRAPHY**

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URBAN EMPIRE (Reborn Games 2017, O: Kalypso Media Digital).

FATE OF THE WORLD: TIPPING POINT (Red Redemption 2011, O: Red Redemption).



# Womanhood Beyond Stereotypes

## Interrogating Women & Future-Making in Contemporary African Films

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EZINNE M. EZEPUE

“Until Lions have their own historians, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter.”

*African Proverb*

### Abstract

Japhet & Feek,<sup>1</sup> as well as other scholars, have indicated that fictional narratives can be used successfully as an agent of change. My research argues that African men, benefiting from the superior position Colonialism left them, have used Film as a medium to tame and shape African women, defining expectations for women, prescribing the ‘acceptable’ virtues, and discouraging ‘unwholesome’ and ‘unbecoming’ behaviors. Throughout postcolonial Africa, women have been thus stereotyped, usually portrayed as one-dimensional characters who are extremely good, loyal, and virtuous or portrayed in antagonistic ways as ill-mannered, impatient, and poorly groomed. But in contemporary Africa, the tables are turning and questions are being asked about existing orders and the definitions of woman and womanhood. Women are increasingly becoming active in the industry, and this is warranting that their portrayals in films are changing. What is the implication of this? If stereotyping women in postcolonial African films shaped women into

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1 Japhet, Garth/Feek, Warren: “Storytelling can be a Force for Social Change: Here’s How,” in: *World Economic Forum* 2018, accessed 30/1/2023, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/06/storytelling-for-social-change-communication-initiative/>

conformity, can the changing portrayal create a reversal? Can it lead to behavioral modification and the emancipation of African women? This article aims at understanding the possibilities of using fictional narratives to affect concrete behavioral modifications in how the African woman is perceived and understood. Through content analysis of selected films from across African film industries, especially those directed by women, this study intends to establish how differently women are being portrayed and what this could mean for Africa and African women of the future.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

“I was a movie-struck kid, and I learned much from watching the screen, including things about men and women that I later had to unlearn or learn to ignore. I learned that women needed to be protected, controlled, and left at home. I learned that men led, women followed.”<sup>2</sup>

Writing for *The New York Times*, Manohla Dargis’ reflects on what the movies taught her about being a woman. The author highlights that besides the stereotypes of ‘women are to be kissed,’ ‘women need spanking,’ and ‘women live to support men,’ some films are teaching women to transcend these stereotypes and become heroes too. But this is not restricted to Dargis’ America. Growing up, what I learned from films about being a Nigerian woman in particular and an African woman in general, is that I belong to somebody at every stage in life—first to my father and family, then to a husband and his family. I learned that I must do as I am told, be patient and loving, forgiving and enduring, submissive, and never talk back to a man, especially father, uncles, or husband. I learned that men are the center of my world and I have no independence from them. This reflects in my earlier publication nearly a decade ago.<sup>3</sup> Like Dargis, I had to unlearn a number of things I learned through films. This little preamble goes to illustrate the potency of film as a tool for shaping the behaviors/beliefs of a people. Films have been and

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2 Dargis, Manohla: “What the Movies Taught Me About Being a Woman,” in: *The New York Times* 2018: n.p., accessed 20/11/2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/30/movies/women-in-movies.html>

3 Igwe, Ezinne: “Cultural Representation and Intercultural Interaction: Nigerian Women in Films,” in: *Creative Artist: A Journal of Theatre & Media Studies*. 8(2014), pp. 54-73.



continue to be used for propaganda. Although Reeves<sup>4</sup> argues that the power of film as propaganda is more myth than reality, my personal experience as well as research by Kubrak<sup>5</sup> indicates that film becomes a powerful tool when used to teach and reiterate socially accepted values, stereotypes, realities and ‘truths’. To further enforce these teachings, adherers are rewarded while non-adherers are punished. Many African films, with the exemption of those made by some early post-colonial filmmakers, but especially Ousmane Sembène who explored themes of women empowerment,<sup>6</sup> have contributed to such shape-shifting, creating images that are acceptable to the society as well as images endorsed and acceptable to men, the patriarchs. For Sembène, filmmaking was radical and significant to how one is able to rethink and redefine freedom in post-colonial Africa.<sup>7</sup> His films empowered women as much as they did men. Through films, I was informed about acceptable feminine qualities, the same qualities re-echoed in/through socialization. Films have been used to keep women in the position colonialism had left them—relegated, and stripped of value and relevance.<sup>8</sup> Colonialism fortified, advanced and justified patriarchy, promoting an already existing prioritization of male children, further suppressing the woman by the sort of role reserved, and the future prepared for her.<sup>9</sup> While men worked and earned, women were groomed to be homemakers. Ignoring examples of ambitious women who existed in Africa prior to or during colonialism,<sup>10</sup> the postcolonial woman is “portrayed by both

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- 4 Reeves, Nicholas: “The Power of Film Propaganda—Myth or Reality,” in: *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 13(1993), pp. 181-201, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439689300260201>
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  - 9 Segueda, Wendpanga: “Imported Religions, Colonialism and The Situation of Women in Africa,” in: *Schriftenreihe Junges Afrikazentrum der Universität Würzburg* 3(2015), pp. 1-23, [https://opus.bibliothek.uni-wuerzburg.de/opus4-wuerzburg/front-door/deliver/index/docId/12240/file/JAZ03\\_Segueda.pdf](https://opus.bibliothek.uni-wuerzburg.de/opus4-wuerzburg/front-door/deliver/index/docId/12240/file/JAZ03_Segueda.pdf)
  - 10 Ogbomo, O. W./Ogbomo, Q. O.: “Women and Society in Pre-Colonial Iyede,” in: *Anthropos*. 88(1993), pp. 431-441, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40463751>

colonial and patriarchal male perceptions,”<sup>11</sup> a gaze that determined her behavior and roles in society. Through film, men dictated and prescribed to women, conjuring their ideal woman and impressing her on the audience. Women filmmakers at this time were rare, with Safi Faye being credited as the first African woman to make an African film—KADDU BEYKAT (1975), and hence called the mother of African cinema. KADDU BEYKAT mirrors the daily lives of African men and women who are struggling through nature and nurture—drought and the burden of colonial taxes. Set during the colonial times, it portrays women as homemakers with no ambition but marriage and raising a family. Nonetheless, Faye presents the woman, both in KADDU BEYKAT and FAD’JAL (1979), not as object, but as subject, physically and temporally dynamic.<sup>12</sup>

This study is interested in interrogating, how films were used by filmmakers through the patriarchal lens, to dictate to women audience members, thus molding them into the ideal persons desired of them. Drawing examples from films made in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, this study will attempt to illustrate how the portrayal of women in films was a deliberate effort towards shaping the woman to the expectations and dictates of patriarchy. This birthed the stereotyping of women in films, creating one-dimensional characters which lacked depth and strength. Once this is established, this study will then attempt to establish how women began to be recast in and through films. Recast in this context will mean being represented differently from existing stereotypical portrayals. Drawing examples from films produced in the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s, the study will attempt a discourse on the differing and new interpretations given to women and womanhood in films made by African filmmakers. It will equally look critically at what difference the presence of women in film production is contributing to the new interpretations women are receiving in films. In essence, this study will critically review films directed and/or produced by women/feminists. Finally, the study will inquire into the future of women in Africa, querying the impact of this changing representation of women and the possibilities of its leading to the emancipation of the African woman. In what ways are films being used as a tool to effectively realize the goals of feminist struggles in Africa?

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11 Bolat, Eren: *Postcolonial Representation of the African Woman in the Selected Works of Ngugi and Adichie*, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2022, p. 12.

12 Riesco, Beatriz: “The Woman in Contemporary African Cinema: Protagonism and Representation,” in: *Buala* 2011, accessed 22/11/2022, <https://www.buala.org/en/afroscreen/the-woman-in-contemporary-african-cinema-protagonism-and-representation>

## 2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS, FRAMEWORK, AND METHODOLOGY

In addition to the question above, this study intends to pose two other overarching questions:

How differently do contemporary African women filmmakers portray African women in films? What are the possibilities of this difference causing the emancipation of African women? To answer these questions, this section gives context to the African variant of feminism, the framework for this study. Feminism in Africa has struggled with efficiency and acceptance, despite deliberate attempts to de-westernize the movement and localize it within existing African cultures. While Western feminism is characterized by confrontation, aggression, and militancy,<sup>13</sup> African feminism, according to Nnaemeka,<sup>14</sup> is characterized by negotiation, a willingness to accommodate and endure, to win some and lose some. Named differently—womanism,<sup>15</sup> black womanism,<sup>16</sup> Motherism,<sup>17</sup> Stiwanism,<sup>18</sup> Snail-sense,<sup>19</sup> Nego-feminism,<sup>20</sup>—feminism in Africa appears to adjust its definitions and purpose in search of acceptance. African feminisms attempt to find relevance in existing African norms and cultures, some of which are detrimental to womenfolk as well as children. Instances abound and include, but are not limited to early marriage for girls, female genital mutilation, marginalization of women who have no child or male children, and by extension, a nuanced rejection of the girl child, the forceful transfer of a woman to her husband's next of kin upon his demise, limited leisure time for the girl child compared to male children,

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- 13 Acholonu, Catherine: *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, Owerri: Afa Publications 1995.
  - 14 Nnaemeka, Obioma (ed.): *Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora*, Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc. 1998.
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  - 20 Nnaemeka, Obioma: "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa's Way," in: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29 (2003), pp. 357-385.

*Okujepisa omukazendu*—a Herero term for wife swapping practice among the Himba people of Northern Namibia, *Trokosi*—an Ewe term for girl slave-child in Ghana, breast ironing in Cameroun—a preventive step for early sexual activity among girls, *Kusasa fumbi*—the Chewa (Bantu) term for sexual cleansing in Malawi.

African feminisms have continued to show deference to African cultures while attempting to argue that culture is never static, but ever-changing and dynamic. For a movement that began to solidify in the mid-1970s, its achievement has been more productive in scholarship than in practicality. With the exception of a few African countries which have enacted reforms increasing gender equality, African women remain largely marginalized and underrepresented, especially in politics and economics and their inequality to men remains wide and unabridged. The hostility that feminism encounters in Africa indirectly affects the demand for women's empowerment, a feminist agenda that patriarchy wishes to isolate and control among the many demands of feminism. Hence Senzu<sup>21</sup> opines that the feminist agenda, i.e., the demands for equality of rights and liberties between genders, remains inapplicable in Africa. This author's position becomes further disturbing as he recommends that due to a rise in the number of broken homes, women should not be educated about feminism, but rather empowered to 'improve' in their current subordinate positions to men. This position sounds absurd as Senzu suggests that emancipation and enlightenment in women account for failed marriages and broken homes. Advocating for the non-emancipation of African women whose life dreams should be about building stronger families, the author enjoins that woman be empowered only in house management and technical skills for economic contribution. Senzu's position serves as an illustration of the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of feminist standpoints and struggles in Africa which have birthed hostility and rejection against the movement.

Mansoor<sup>22</sup> for example attempts to put this misunderstanding in a scholarly perspective by implying that 'third world' feminism (a rather broad category) copies or mirrors Western feminism. Without attempting to critically evaluate the positions of renowned 'third world' feminist scholars and scholarship, the author presumes a total understanding of feminism in the 'third world,' falling victim to

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21 Senzu, Emmanuel: "The Economic Ramification in Equating Women Empowerment with Feminism in Africa," in: *Frederic Bastiat Institute* 2016, [https://mpr.aub.unimuenchen.de/83490/1/MPRA\\_paper\\_83490.pdf](https://mpr.aub.unimuenchen.de/83490/1/MPRA_paper_83490.pdf)

22 Mansoor Asma: "Erratum: 'Marginalization' in Third World Feminism: its Problematics and Theoretical Reconfiguration," in: *Palgrave Communications* 2(2016), pp. 1-9, doi: 10.1057/palcomms.2016.26.

their own assumption by persistently referring to Western scholars—Derida, Eisenstein, and Bhabha. Without actively looking inward to truly define her standpoint and argument as a ‘third world woman,’ Mansoor advises ‘third world’ feminists to “engage in agentive practices to re-view herself in herself.”<sup>23</sup> Replete with such ornamentalism, Mansoor’s study does not demonstrate an understanding of the demands of feminism in Africa or anywhere else in the third world. Feminism in Africa, as understood by African feminists, is an opportunity to address African-woman-related challenges like early marriage, gender preference, education for the girl child, gender roles or career and stereotyping, lack of representation in politics, economic empowerment, gender-based violence, and other issues which have continued to cause and perpetrate gender inequality in the society. Hence, contrary to Mansoor’s claims, African feminism is largely situated within the African woman’s challenge and not indiscriminately mirroring Western feminism. African feminist scholars and theorists mentioned earlier have variously attempted to conceptualize African feminist standpoint and identity, once described as African Sisterhood.

Because anti-feminists like Senzu fail to understand the demands of African feminism, they equally fail to recognize that African feminism is radically different from Western feminism. While Western feminism is disruptive, forceful, confrontational, and radical, African feminisms are persuasive, and by advocating negotiation, wish to achieve a harmony between women’s need for emancipation and respect for existing patricultural values. Patricultural values are those cultural values that acknowledge, if not uphold, and exist in deference to patriarchy in society. These values, prized among men, are engrained in society such that men are favored and prioritized only for being biologically male and women become subordinate. What the author Senzu and other anti-feminist Africans are resisting is the rise of a generation of women who are resisters of patriarchal subjugation, women who tow the paths of early African women who stood out in public spheres, who were anti-patriarchal and uncompromisingly anti-colonial like Hudda Shaarawi of Egypt, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti or Nwanyeruwa of Nigeria, Mabel Dove Danquah of Ghana, Lilian Ngoyi of South Africa, Wambui Otieno of Kenya, Nehanda Charwe Nyakasikana of Zimbabwe, Bibi Titi Mohammed of Tanzania, among others. The feminism which continues to be resisted in Africa is defined as “a celebration of the amazing power, beauty, knowledge, courage and farsightedness of women who say ‘No,’ unequivocally and unambiguously, to any

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23 A. Mansoor: “Erratum: “Marginalization” in Third World Feminism: its Problematics and Theoretical Reconfiguration”, p. 9.

and all forms of oppression, repression and exclusion.”<sup>24</sup> African feminisms are therefore careful not to offend or oppose, hence their description as nego-feminism<sup>25</sup>—the feminism of negotiation. Feminism projects and promotes the sister archetype portrayed in Ousmane Sembène’s *EMITAI* (1971), defined by courage, unity, defiance, and fearlessness. The women in *EMITAI* defied the men who attempted to bring discord among them, stood firm against colonial oppression and held down the village when their men buckled under colonial suppression.

Through societal structure, informal education, and entertainment (film, radio, tv, theatre), African women have been taught and continue to be groomed to exist in the shadows of men who run the homes and society. In their study on the social construction of gender in traditional Igbo (Nigeria) society, Anah & Okere<sup>26</sup> illustrate how gender (positionality, responsibility, roles) is culturally and psychologically produced. The authors highlight how selected play texts, while differing to some extent, punctuate lines, arguments, and advice with the reminder of how and what a woman should be, emphasizing and re-emphasizing them for the purpose of assimilation. There is a need for women and girls to begin to unlearn the existing definition of ‘African woman,’ lose the stereotyped identity, and relearn to exist as humans of equal standing with men. This study is proposing that through entertainment, the sister archetype could be reignited in women, and the goals of realizing gender parity in Africa, projected 140 years into the future,<sup>27</sup> could be attained sooner.

Having established that film was instrumental in designing and promoting a patriarchy-conforming identity for women, it becomes important to add that through film, a purposefully redesigned and redefined identity can be promoted

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24 McFadden, Patricia/Twasiima, Patricia: *A Feminist Conversation: Situating our Radical Ideas and Energies in the Contemporary African Context*, Maputo: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2018, p.2, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mosambik/14981-20190219.pdf>

25 O. Nnaemeka “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa’s Way.”

26 Anah, Cletus/Okere, Mary: “The Social Construction of Gender in Traditional Igbo Societies: A Comparative Study of Language used as Socialization in John Munonye’s *The Only Son* and Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*,” in: *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 9(2019), pp. 84-90.

27 Moodley, Lohini/Kuyoro, Mayowa/Holt, Tania/Leke, Acha/Madgavkar, Anu/Krishnan, Mekala/Akintayo, Folakemi: “The Power of Parity: Advancing Women’s Equality in Africa,” in: *McKinsey Global Institute* 2019, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/the-power-of-parity-advancing-womens-equality-in-africa>

for women. Following a study of over 20,000 people who saw Robert Kenner's *FOOD, INC* (2008), researchers submit that films successfully impact audience behavior.<sup>28</sup> Through purposefully designed films, women can be persuaded to alter their behavior, mindset and perception of themselves in order to improve their existence. This process requires strong women willing to stand up to or ignore criticisms such as those faced by feminism and African feminists. It equally requires sustainability as Kubrak<sup>29</sup> suggests that single movie exposure does not always leave a lasting effect on viewers' attitudes. Kubrak's study equally suggests that content must be category-specific, for example, gender, race, or age, for efficiency. Hence, Hanich<sup>30</sup> argues that cinematic experience, and indeed its effect on the viewers, is not static, but constantly evolving and transforming the attention, intention, actions, and emotions of both the filmmakers and the audiences. Films affect or shape value and belief formation, hence it is important to pass the right and valuable information through films. For this reason, there is a need to critically evaluate films made for, by, and about women, especially women in Africa who rank among the most marginalized women in third-world societies. The scope of this research will therefore not be limited to films made by women, but will equally include African films made for and about women. For the purpose of this study, 'African films' will be those films produced by Africans living in Africa or the diaspora which target Africans living in Africa.

### **3 THE MOLD: WOMEN THROUGH THE PATRIARCHAL LENS**

The essence of this study is not to determine or satisfy the standards set by men for women, but essentially to understand the nature and motive of the standard and how, by understanding this, filmmakers are currently attempting to reverse it. In this section, I will establish how colonialism and religion hybridized existing cultures, empowered men, and informed the representation which was projected for

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28 DeMos, Jackson: "Research Study finds that a film can have measurable impact on audience behavior," 2012, accessed 15/-7/2022, <https://annenbergl.usc.edu/news/centers/research-study-finds-film-can-have-measurable-impact-audience-behavior>

29 Kubrak, Tina: "Impact of Films: Changes in Young People's Attitude after Watching a Movie," in: *Behavioral Sciences* 10 (2020), p.86, <https://doi.org/10.3390%2Fbs10050086>

30 Hanich, Julian: *The Audience Effect: On the Collective Cinema Experience*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2018.

women through films in order to shape their behavior. I interpret this ‘shaping’ as a mold that determined who a woman was and how she must act in public and private spaces. The effects of colonialism continue to reflect on all aspects of African existence, including the position of women in society. It is important to note that although pre-colonial Africa was largely patriarchal, women still enjoyed some privileges and prominence, and were not as subjugated as they later became following colonialism which further relegated them. Authors such as Davies,<sup>31</sup> Sudarkasa,<sup>32</sup> Leith-Ress,<sup>33</sup> Bolat,<sup>34</sup> among others have attempted to describe pre-colonial African women. While reading Walter Rodney’s position on the colonial impact on women in Africa, the feminist, Angela Davis<sup>35</sup> avers that colonialism re-ordered labor and its definition in Africa, whereby women’s work became traditional and backward. Colonialism equally warranted that women’s status diminished, hence the consequent loss of rights to determine indigenous standards of labor merit following independence. As a result of colonialism, African women ceased to be history-makers. For example, the Ghanaian queen mother, Yaa Asantewaa I, was captured and sent into exile following her uprising against the British colonialist over their attempt to seize the Golden Stool of Ashanti. It also caused the dearth of the Dahomey Amazons,<sup>36</sup> deprived them of significant pre-colonial political power,<sup>37</sup> and quelled several women’s uprisings across the African

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- 31 Davies, Carole: “Introduction: Feminist Consciousness and African Literary Criticism,” in: Davies, Carole/Davies, Carole Boyce/Graves, Anne Adams (eds.), *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, Africa World: New Jersey 1986, pp. 1-23.
- 32 Sudarkasa, Niara: “The Status of Women” in Indigenous African Societies,” in: *Feminist Studies* 12(1986), pp. 91-103.
- 33 Leith-Ress, Sylvia: *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1965.
- 34 Bolat, Eren: *Postcolonial Representation of the African Woman in the Selected Works of Ngugi and Adichie*, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2022.
- 35 Davis, Angela: “Walter Rodney’s Legacy” 2019, accessed 16/07/2022, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4127-walter-rodney-s-legacy-by-angela-davis>
- 36 Alpern, Stanley: *Amazons of Black Sparta: The Women Warriors of Dahomey*, New York: New York University Press 2011; Masioni, Pat/Serbin, Sylvia/Joubeaud, Edouard: “The Women Soldiers of Dahomey,” in: *UNESCO Series on Women in African History*, Open Access Repository, Paris: UNESCO 2014, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000230934>
- 37 Hanson, Holly: “Queen Mothers and Good Government in Buganda: The Loss of Women’s Political Power in Nineteenth-Century East Africa,” in: Allman,



continent. The impressive story of the Dahomey Amazons inspired the Hollywood film, *THE WOMAN KING* (2022).

Recalling colonial activities in Zimbabwe, Jackson<sup>38</sup> explains that only men were considered natives and thus granted passes into ‘Whitemen’s’ Township. Although this allows women more freedom of movement, Oyewumi<sup>39</sup> clarifies this as a Western ideology that identifies only men as citizens and thus, of any relevance. Colonialism set a standard for women based on European expectations of women at the time. In their analysis of some European fairy tales from which early Disney princesses were created, Doster<sup>40</sup> establishes European expectations of an ideal woman—passive, patient, enduring, forgiving, designed for home and domestic chores, to be provided for and rescued by a man. The idea here is not to blame African women’s subjugation on colonialism but to ponder on what could have become without colonial interference. In their discussion of marriage and marrying among the traditionally matrilineal Ashanti people of Ghana, Allman & Tashjian observe a deterioration in women’s status “as strategic resources such as land, labor, and cash income increasingly concentrated in male hands,”<sup>41</sup> birthing laws which turned the once independent women into men’s ‘pawns’. Colonialism thus further reinforced traditional African patriarchal formation, engraving it into all aspects of existence for the woman and giving absolute power to the men. Oyewumi<sup>42</sup> attempts to clarify the impact of colonial intrusion on the Yoruba cosmological understanding of certain terms such as gender and sex, social and biological responsibilities. The author explains that in indigenous Yoruba conception, one’s anatomy (biological make-up) did not determine or define their social

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Jean/Geiger, Susan/Musisi, Nakanyike (eds.), *Women in African Colonial Histories*, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2002, pp. 219-236.

- 38 Jackson, Lynette: “‘When in the White Man’s Town’: Zimbabwean Women Remember Chibeura,” in: Allman, Jean/Geiger, Susan/Musisi, Nakanyike (eds.), *Women in African Colonial Histories*, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2002, pp. 191-215.
- 39 Oyewumi, Oyeronke: *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press 1997.
- 40 Doster, Irene Virginia: *The Disney Dilemma: Modernized Fairy Tales or Modern Disaster?*, Dissertation, Tennessee 2002, [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_chanhono-proj/532](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhono-proj/532)
- 41 Allman, Jean Marie/Tashjian, Victoria: *I Will Not Eat Stone: A Women’s History of Colonial Asante*, Portsmouth: Heinemann 2000, p. 238.
- 42 O. Oyewumi: *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*.

responsibility. Among African Muslims, Schildkrout<sup>43</sup> notes, Islam and the purdah system ensured strict segregation based more on gender than age. In essence, across Africa, religion and colonialism enforced the patriarchal lens through which women became molded and defined within and beyond colonial Africa. Urbanization in Africa following the independence of states in the 1960s, saw the influx of men into urban areas, leaving large numbers of women in rural areas, whose occupation was largely unpaid domestic labor and agriculture. This economic disempowerment, in addition to religious teachings, further relegated women, making them vulnerably dependent on the men in their lives, and thus malleable.

Oyewumi and Rideout,<sup>44</sup> among others argue that African women were colonized twice—first as Africans and then as women. Colonialism altered an existing mold with which African women defined womanhood—the African Sisterhood. It has been argued that because a linguistic equivalent for sisterhood might not have existed in pre-colonial and early colonial Africa, co-motherhood would be more appropriate to describe the existing female solidarity in the period.<sup>45</sup> While this position is in the least assumptive, if not unfounded, my concern here is not to trace the term’s (or archetype’s) history or evolution. The point is to establish that the idea of sisterhood existed and thrived among African women, constituting their manner of showing solidarity, training, indoctrinating, and building a strong society of/for woman. Contributors to Nnaemeka’s<sup>46</sup> edited volume on sisterhood and feminism have established the archetype as inherent to traditional African women and society. Bastian documents that while bearing witness before a colonial court to the massacre of women who participated in the *Ogu Umunwanyi* (Women’s Fight) of 1929 in Aba, South Eastern Nigeria, witness Ahudi of Nsidimo alludes to this sisterhood, expecting that it is a lifestyle understood by women across the globe:

“If you come to a satisfactory conclusion that will satisfy all the women here, then peace will be restored. If not, then we will create trouble again. No doubt women like ourselves

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43 Schildkrout, Enid: “Dependence and Autonomy: The Economic Activities of Secluded Hausa Women in Kano, Nigeria,” in: Bay, Edna (ed.), *Women and Work in Africa*, Oxon: Routledge 2018.

44 Rideout, Jennifer: “Toward a New Nigerian Womanhood: Woman as Nation in Half of a Yellow Sun,” *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 36(2014), pp. 71-81, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.5213>

45 McDonald, Katrina: *Embracing Sisterhood: Class, Identity, and Contemporary Black Women*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2007.

46 O. Nnaemeka: *Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora*.

are in your own country. IF NEED BE WE SHALL WRITE TO THEM TO HELP US. We shall continue fighting until all the Chiefs have been got rid of, but until then the matter will not be settled.”<sup>47</sup>

The fight was the women’s way of objecting to the colonial administration’s attempt to destabilize existing structures, evidence of the independence and power which women wielded in pre-colonial Africa.<sup>48</sup>

Contrary to this fierceness, sisterhood, and independence documented of pre-colonial and colonial women, Dovey<sup>49</sup> observes that Nollywood, which became popular in 1992, introduced a ‘voyeuristic,’ ‘pleasure-driven,’ representation of women in films. A filmmaking model that objectified woman and fixated its gaze on her body. According to Ogundele, “in the representations of women is concentrated all the distortion of tradition compounded by contemporary male prejudices.”<sup>50</sup> Ibbi’s<sup>51</sup> study of the representation of women in Nigerian films illustrates how negative portrayals of women in these early video films have turned stereotypical, providing single narratives on women, their capabilities, and impact on society. Ogundele<sup>52</sup> adds that films written, directed, and produced by women in the early days of the industry, were also ingrained with sexist ideologies and stereotypical portrayals of women. This model, emulated across several African states—Ghana, Cameroun, and Kenya, among others, mirrored the shifts in power

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- 47 Bastian, Misty: “‘Vultures of the Marketplace’: South-eastern Nigerian Women and Discourses of the Ogu Umunwaanyi (Women’s War) of 1929,” in: Allman, Jean/Geiger, Susan/Musisi, Nakanyike (eds.), *Women in African Colonial Histories*, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2002, pp.260-281, here p. 275.
- 48 Nzegwu, Nkiru: “Recovering Igbo Traditions: A Case for Indigenous Women’s Organizations in Development,” in: Nussbaum, Martha/Glover, Jonathan (eds.), *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*, ed. Nussbaum, New York: Oxford University Press 1995, pp. 444-466, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198289642.003.0021>
- 49 Dovey, Lindiwe: “New Looks: The Rise of African Women Filmmakers,” in: *Feminist Africa* 16(2012), pp. 18-36.
- 50 Ogundele, Wole: “From Folk Opera to Soap Opera: Improvisations and Transformations in Yoruba Popular Theater,” in: Haynes, Jonathan (ed.), *Nigerian Video Films*, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies 2000, pp. 111.
- 51 Ibbi, Andrew: “Stereotype Representation of Women in Nigerian Films,” in: *Cinej Cinema Journal* 6(2017), pp. 50-70, <https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2017.166>
- 52 W. Ogundele: “From Folk Opera to Soap Opera: Improvisations and Transformations in Yoruba Popular Theater.”

and exaggerated the breakdown of social structures on which women's coalitions were mostly formed,<sup>53</sup> thus destroying the foundation on which women's sisterhood archetype was built. But this mold representing women through patriarchal lenses was not solely created by Nollywood. LOVE BREWED IN THE AFRICAN POT (1980) defines acceptable 'qualities' of a 'good woman,' fitting her into a mold that defines 'perfect and peaceful' co-existence with men, in homes and society. The film further enforced its teaching through reward and punishment for adherers and dissenters.

In this film, Mr. Bensah educates his daughter on the qualities of a good woman:

"A good woman is a woman who cooks well, works hard for the home and family (*signs to his wife to top his tea*), a good woman does not talk back to her husband. Your mother is a good woman."

His daughter does not only talk back at home but refuses to marry according to his dictates. However, she is punished, not only with an unhappy home but ends up psychotic. Films such as LOVE BREWED IN THE AFRICAN POT deny women of power and ownership of their sexuality. Through such films, filmmakers contributed to further destroying the essence of sisterhood by stereotyping women.

By stereotyping women in films, filmmakers promoted an identity that sold male-desired values to women, pitching women against women and thus ensuring that the sister essence is not revived. Contemporary examples include, but are not limited to: MALAIKA NIGHTS (2014) in which women are portrayed as inept, docile, evil, and greedy, with a sister murdering her sibling to secure herself a man; FATUMA (2018) which defines a virtuous woman as enduring, forgiving, submissive, long-suffering as Fatuma who welcomes her reckless and unfaithful husband after he sells her crops to fund his mistress's education; THE UNKNOWN SAINT (2019), where women are faceless, voiceless and brunt-bearers; here, a man blames his wife for giving him a 'useless' son. The list is endless and the

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53 Derrickson, Teresa: "Class, Culture, and the Colonial Context: The Status of Women in Buchi Emechta's *The Joys of Motherhood*," in: *International Fiction Review*. 29(2002): n.p., <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/IFR/article/view/7715/8772>

stereotype unrelenting. Petty,<sup>54</sup> Ogundele,<sup>55</sup> Okwuowulu,<sup>56</sup> among others, observe that female directors equally contribute to promoting the chauvinist stereotypical female construct established by men. Thus, rather than change the narratives as African women attain some levels of emancipation, such films only reinvent them, recycling the docile, powerless, subservient, passive, and weak woman narrative. For example, in *CHIEF DADDY* (2018), Lady Kay Beecroft, the elegant wife of the multimillionaire, Chief Beecroft, goes completely bankrupt immediately after the death of her husband. His daughters, Tinu and Teni begin to fail in their business without an explanation. This recycles the popular Nollywood narrative of women who once lived in the cities and in comfort only to relocate to the villages or slums and suffer following the deaths of their husbands. Like Olayiwola,<sup>57</sup> one may indeed argue that this misrepresentation is unintentional, oftentimes an attempt to discourage unacceptable behavior in the audience. However, it also ‘unintentionally’ promotes stereotypes and profiling.

#### 4 THE RECAST: CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN

As noted earlier, female filmmakers equally promote stereotypical representations of women. Some, however, are becoming conscious of how this lopsided portrayal contributes to molding women, and raising girl children to believe that such misrepresentation truly defines them. Female film directors and producers, actresses, and scriptwriters are becoming more aware of how women’s representation in films impacts on the wider perception of women in society. Films have been used successfully to create an identity for women by molding them as desirable to men

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54 Petty, Sheila: “‘How an African Woman Can Be’: African Women Filmmakers Construct Women,” in: *Discourse* 18(1996): pp. 72-88.

55 W. Ogundele: “From Folk Opera to Soap Opera: Improvisations and Transformations in Yoruba Popular Theater.”

56 Okwuowulu, Charles: “Nollywood and the (Re)Construction of Femininity in Female Narratives: A Critical Appraisal,” in: *African Performance Review* 11(2019), pp. 41-56.

57 Olayiwola, Elizabeth: “New Nollywood and the Female Gaze: Changing Female Stereotypes in Nigerian Cinema,” in: *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 40(2021), pp. 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2021.1984822>

and their bodies have been commodified for the male gaze and sexual pleasure.<sup>58</sup> Through enculturation and socialization, the new values and virtues presented in films become the defining qualities of ideal versus loose women in society. As Azeez explains, films

“[...] are devoted to controlling and dominating women and they do this in such a way as to make the control and domination seem natural and given, but with the power to propel women to internalize their objectives.”<sup>59</sup>

In this section, I wish to engage with how African cinema is leveraging on cultural cross-pollination, filmmakers’ self-consciousness, and increasing opportunities and awareness, to re-position the woman by countering internalized stereotypical representations of the African woman. While molding women into conformity, stereotyping became the medium’s way of projecting an identity and through reward and punishment, the audience is informed about what is expected and acceptable. A reversal of this process requires an unlearning of established ethos. It demands deliberate or purposeful storytelling which counters existing narrative on and around the woman. Contemporary filmmakers, especially women, are becoming unapologetic in their representation of fellow women in character and personality. In so doing, the audience gets varied narratives on the woman, rather than the lone binary which Chari<sup>60</sup> categorizes as Free Agents (e.g., the femme fatale, aggressive, over-sexed woman) and Boxed Women (e.g., the docile, subordinated, dependent, long-suffering woman). The author argues that lone-binary films offer the female audience no role models to aspire towards. Sadly, this representation has become the norm and a stereotypical definition of women in films; a chauvinistic approach geared towards manipulation and control of womenfolk. Hence, Olujinmi<sup>61</sup> urges that a more realistic and balanced image of women in society should be presented.

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58 Mulvey, Laura: “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in: *Screen* 16(1975), pp. 6-18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>

59 Azeez, Adesina: “Audience Perception of Portrayal of Women in Nigerian Home Video Films,” in: *Journal of Media and Communication Studies* 2(2010): p. 201.

60 Chari, Tendai: “Representation of Women in Selected Zimbabwean Films and Videos,” in: *Africa Through the Eye of the Video Camera*, ed. Ogunleye, Foluke. Manzini: African Publishers 2003, pp.128-145.

61 Olujinmi, Bunmi: “The Image of Women in Yoruba Films: An Evaluation,” in: Ogunleye, Foluke (ed.), *Africa Through the Eye of the Video Camera*, Manzini: African Publishers 2003, pp. 119-127.

A change in narrative is currently observable across film industries in Africa. Films from male directors such as Abderrahmane Sissako, Joseph Gai Ramaka, Moussa Sène Absa, Jean-Marie Teno, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, among others, have portrayed female protagonists who are multidimensional and un-stereotypical. Dovey notes that the females in their films are “unconventional, rounded, sometimes idiosyncratic, sometimes fighters.”<sup>62</sup> The author describes their films as male-authored feminist cinema, representing women as strong and unrestricted, films that uphold the value of women and appear critical of patriarchy. But the rise of women in the film industry is contributing ‘an own voice’ to recasting women, their roles, and perceptions in films. They are turning the tables on stereotypical portrayals of women, and in some cases, offering exemplars for African women of the future. While these films are not completely without problematic female representations,<sup>63</sup> I choose to examine the positive or at least, conversation-inducing, un-stereotypical portrayals and how these are countering the status quo. I will draw examples from films to illustrate how contemporary representations of women can be read as attempts to recast modern and future African women.

In the sci-fi short, PUMZI (2010), Wanuri Kahiu projects the image of a nurturing female lead who is also pre-emptive and pursues her intuition, against established authority, to contribute to salvaging the eco-system. In I SING OF A WELL (2009), Leila Djansi addresses a number of issues including the helplessness of women in the face of tradition and customs. Although Djansi offers no respite or solution to the problem her women face in their traditionally patriarchal African society—like the choice of whom to marry, cost of dowry, interference of external family members in their affairs, etc., she creates strong women who negotiate around rather than succumb to these challenges. Negotiating around patriarchal bottlenecks or Nego-feminism,<sup>64</sup> is best reflected in Mmabatho Montsho’s GROOM’S PRICE (2017). In a previous study, I observed that Montsho’s use of tight spaces illustrates the intrusiveness and rigidity of some African traditions as well as the futility of negotiations<sup>65</sup>—the problem never goes away. This results from a single-sided negotiation—women negotiating a place of ‘equity’ in a rather rigid culture.

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62 L. Dovey: “New Looks: The Rise of African Women Filmmakers,” here p. 19.

63 Ibid.

64 O. Nnaemeka “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa’s Way.”

65 Ezepue, Ezinne: “Mmabatho Montsho, director. THE GROOM’S PRICE. 2017. 25 minutes. English/Zulu. South Africa. The National Film & Video Foundation. No price reported,” in: *African Studies Review* 66(2022), pp. 1-3, <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.108>

Filmmakers quite often represent women in non-controversial topics, like politics and nationhood in Jenna Bass' *THE TUNNEL* (2010, Zimbabwe), violence and the female body in Raja Amari's *DOHAWA* (2009, Tunisia), custom and tradition in Oshosheni Hiveluah's *TJITJI: THE HIMBA GIRL* (2015, Namibia), career choice in Salla Sorri and Jessie Chisi's *BETWEEN RINGS: THE ESTHER PHIRI STORY* (2014, Zambia), child marriage in Enah Johnscott's *THE FISHERMAN'S DIARY* (2020, Cameroun), gender hierarchy in Gretel Marín's *BLOW IN THE BACKYARD* (2021, Angola), gender role in Ramata Toulaye Sy's *ASTEL* (2021, Senegal). Some filmmakers have also attempted to tackle certain 'forbidden' issues through their films. For example, Wanuri Kahiú's *RAFIKI* (2019) and Uyaiedu Ikpe-Etim's *ÌFÉ* (2020), Kenyan and Nigerian LGBT romantic films, and the duo, Bailey and Onuorah's documentary about being queer in Nigeria, *THE LEGEND OF THE UNDERGROUND* (2021). While the documentary gets an HBO distribution (unavailable in Nigeria), Kahiú's and Adie's films were banned from screening in their countries. This goes to illustrate the institutional and cultural obstacles which hinder progressive ideas and movements, including feminism and gender equality.<sup>66</sup>

In Nollywood's Netflix original four-part mini-series, *BLOOD SISTERS* (2022), the Nigerian woman, especially the contemporary woman, is given a new ability, dream, ambition, and a character with depth. Created by a team that includes strong women such as Mosunmola (Mo) Abudu, Tamara Aihie, and Zelipa Zulu, *BLOOD SISTERS* eschews a number of stereotypes. In my reading of the limited series, I pointed out that although some stereotypes persist among the aging parents, the young women, Kemi and Sarah, share a bond and sisterhood which is tested to its limits.<sup>67</sup> Approaching gender issues from the crime genre, *BLOOD SISTERS* promotes the sister-archetype by creatively suggesting that when women are supportive of each other, they achieve more. Unlike in Genevieve Nnaji's *LION-HEART* (2018) where the protagonist, Adaeze, struggles alone to prove herself 'enough' to oversee her father's transportation company, Kemi and Sarah have each other. While this does not make their journey any easier, it confutes the

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66 For a society to become fully progressive, it must be inclusive and the benefits of an inclusive society, according to Lutfiyya & Bartlett (2020: 10.1093/acre-fore/9780190264093.013.1022), are multifaceted, including social and economic benefits. The duo argues that incremental social change, reflected in policies, must be embraced to bring about transformative social change.

67 Ezepeue, Ezinne: "BLOOD SISTERS: Why the Mini-Series on Netflix Sets a New Pace for Nollywood," in: *The Conversations*, accessed 10/11/2022, <https://theconversation.com/amp/blood-sisters-why-the-mini-series-on-netflix-sets-a-new-pace-for-nollywood-184072>. Published 02/06/2022.



existing narrative that a woman is her fellow woman's worst enemy. Unlike films made to mold women into conformity, these films do not indulge in scenes where women idle away discussing men and their desires. Often scoring high on the Bechdel test,<sup>68</sup> films like *WHO IS THE BOSS* (2020), *THE VOICELESS* (2020), *OLO-TURE* (2020), and limited series *BLOOD SISTERS* (2022), *KING OF BOYS* (2018/2021), among others are providing a new mold for recasting the contemporary Nigerian woman.

But beyond passing a Bechdel Test, feminist films advocate that the social, legal, political, and economic rights of women be the same and equal to men's.<sup>69</sup> The author adds that such films are intended to inspire and start a conversation on and around women, their lived experiences, and their status. The aim of such films is not to un-stereotypically represent women, but to educate the audience about social inequality. Rungano Nyoni achieves this through her film, *I AM NOT A WITCH* (2017), which mirrors a culture practiced in some parts of Africa<sup>70</sup> where women are branded witches and discriminated against. Unlike the aged grandmother 'witch' in Idrissa Ouédraogo *YAABA* (1989), the protagonist of *I AM NOT A WITCH* is a nine-year-old orphan Shula, labeled a witch following a number of unfortunate coincidences. She, along with other older women tagged 'witches,' is exploited and inhumanely treated. Despite the care and support she gets from her

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- 68 Bechdel Test, named after the American cartoonist, Alison Bechdel, is a set of structural criteria which evaluates women's involvement and dialogue in films using simple quantitative formula. For a film to be feminist, it must pass three tests—have at least 2 female characters, who talk to each, about something other than a man. For more information, please refer to O'Meara: "What 'The Bechdel Test' Doesn't tell us: Examining Women's Verbal and Vocal (dis)empowerment in Cinema," in: *Feminist Media Studies* 16(6) (2016): pp. 1120-1123, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1234239>
- 69 Budowski, Jade: "So What Really Makes A Film 'Feminist'?" in: *Decider* 2018. Accessed 16/07/2022, <https://decider.com/2018/02/19/what-really-makes-a-film-feminist/>
- 70 For more academic insight into the practice and understandings of witchcraft in Africa, refer to Kroesbergen-Kamps: "Witchcraft After Modernity: Old and New Directions in the Study of Witchcraft in Africa," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 10(3) (2020), pp. 860-873; and for witchcraft in the Zambia: Mufuzi: "The Practice of Witchcraft and the Changing Patterns of its Paraphernalia in the Light of Technologically Produced Goods as Presented by Livingstone Museum, 1930s-1973," in: *Zambia Social Science Journal* 5(1) (2014), pp.50-71, <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/zssj/vol5/iss1/5>

fellow ‘witches,’ Shula’s depression mounts. She leaves the community, in search of liberation, but returns dead, murdered for being a ‘witch’. Like *OLOTURE* (2020) which explores social injustice and inequality against women, *I AM NOT A WITCH* not only advances the sister-archetype but also encourages conversations around inequality, misogyny, misrepresentation and profiling. GG7733, a contributor to a YouTube conversation on *I AM NOT A WITCH*, understands this as a problem unspecific to African society. Describing the film as a metaphor, she opines:

“I can relate to this girl’s (Shula’s) character, just someone trying to live a life, just getting too tired to fight anymore. Can you just be left alone to be yourself and not constantly have to fight someone else’s hatred, someone else’s fear, or any number of ways in which a woman is objectified as a female. This is an everyday, every kind of society, every echelon of society, every woman’s problem.”<sup>71</sup>

A successfully feminist film must raise such consciousness in the viewers—a realization that fellow women are not always enemies or contenders, but fellow victims of stereotypical representations and profiling. An African feminist film must achieve this purpose of addressing such issues—initiating a conversation around women’s rights and well-being and importantly, reigniting the sisterhood and strength which stereotyping and profiling of women have destroyed. Shula’s death motivates the ‘witches’ to dare to live free in solidarity, a bleak and uncertain future notwithstanding.

These uncertainties and the courage to face them serve as motivation for contemporary African filmmakers who tell stories about women. If there exists a connection between the passive or docile women and the type of films promoted in the past, it is expected that a new generation of women will be formed by the types of films currently being made. Docility and passivity in women will yield to boldness in the future if and when Africans are adequately educated on gender equity and fairness. This position explains the need for women to retake and reform the place of ideology formation. With her award-winning film, *ADAM* (2019), Maryam Touzani tells the story of two women struggling with their truths and realities in a society that is brutally oppressive and merciless to women. Through an exploration of their personal traumas, especially that of the unwed pregnant Samia, Touzani advocates for a re-examination of prejudices against women. While Touzani only re-enacts women’s plight in her film, demonstrating women’s inner

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71 Get into Film: “I am Not a Witch Interview with Rungano Nyoni,” YouTube Video, 7:23, 2017, accessed 5/07/2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LE8eUU7SkWo>

strength as they face the challenges of existing daily in an unforgiving patriarchal society, Donovan Marsh's *I AM ALL GIRLS* (2021) portrays women taking action to fix their problems. The protagonist, Ntombizonke (Ntombi) Bapai, trafficked, sexually abused, and held captive as a sex slave from when she was a little girl until she's admitted into the South African Police Academy, is on a mission to track down her abusers. Unlike her colleague Jodie who is emotionally traumatized from rescuing and sometimes failing to rescue young kidnapped and trafficked children, Ntombi strategically avenges all five of the girls who were trafficked with her. Ntombi dies unavenged, prompting Jodie to go undercover. One may question the sensibility of self-justice or taking laws into one's hands and killing offenders and how this makes one a hero. As Korsgaard<sup>72</sup> suggests, taking laws into one's hands is both morally and politically problematic. An important question, however, for many societies in Africa where justice is more often denied than served, is how should offenders be discouraged in a society where the offended gets no justice. With widespread corruption, and a lack of public trust in law enforcement agencies, citizens, Faull<sup>73</sup> maintains, will more likely engage in illicit activities, avoid tax, resort to violence or take laws into their hands to solve problems. While Faull writes for South African society, this reality is widespread across African states, including Nigeria. But can film promote a change if the system remains unchanging?

In Nigeria, Kenneth Gyang's *OLOTURE* (2020) tells a similar story—of sex trafficking. Concerned over the rising number of women being trafficked in the country, Ehi, a young journalist, goes undercover, pretending to be a prostitute, Oloture, to uncover the criminal gang behind the multimillion-dollar business. Although she gets her story, she does not stop, despite the impending danger and unknown future threatening her. Having been battered, raped, and lied to, she is further motivated to discover the fate of her fellow women. *I AM ALL GIRLS* and *OLOTURE* are based on true life experiences, and these stories provide an insight into the multidimensionality of women and their struggles beyond the stereotypes used to profile and define women. In Ntombi and Oloture, the audiences see heroes in women too, inspiring a future of female heroes.

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72 Korsgaard, Christine: "Taking the Law into Our Own Hands: Kant on the Right to Revolution," in: Korsgaard, Christine (ed.), *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology*, New York: Oxford University Press 2008, pp. 233-262, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199552733.003.0009>

73 Faull, Andrew: "South Africa's Renewal Starts with the Rule of Law," *Institute for Security Studies* 2021, accessed 12/03/2023, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/south-africa-renewal-begins-with-the-rule-of-law>

Alanna Brown looks beyond heroines and explores the theme of sisterhood in *TREES OF PEACE* (2022). Women have been persistently stereotyped as antagonistic toward fellow women. The moral is that women are not to be trusted, but men are. *TREES OF PEACE*, is set in the Rwandan ‘ethnic cleansing’ genocide of 1994 when hundreds of thousands of people—men, women, and children, were massacred and the surviving were left in hiding for several weeks without food or shelter. Four women from different cultural and social backgrounds—Annick, Peyton, Mutesi and Jeanette, build an unbreakable friendship while hiding in a small underground storage underneath Annick’s kitchen. It was tumultuous at first, but the sisterhood which they built in these 81 days of hiding sustained them. Strengthened by this sisterhood and the new bond she has developed, Mutesi, previously sexually abused by her uncle and told to be silent about it by older women, vows never to be hurt again by a man. Also based on a true story, *TREES OF PEACE* indicates that the revival of sisterhood among women is quintessential to empowerment and progressive feminist struggles in Africa.

Filmmakers such as these mentioned above, both male and female, are redefining the African woman through their films. According to Hooks,<sup>74</sup> they are “talking back” both to audience and content creators, a reassertion of women as subjects, not objects, proffering their own definition of women’s reality, shaping their identity and the conception of it, making their history and telling their story from their perspective. This perspective, Baker adds, creatively opposes “mainstream representations of Black femaleness.”<sup>75</sup> How women are represented in films matters and impacts how they are perceived. Hence Hall, Evans & Nixon’s<sup>76</sup> submission that meanings are formulated through representations, including the words used to describe them, stories told about them as well as images produced on them. Filmmakers who are attempting to recast women through their films target reconstruction of meaning and disruption of “the unidimensional images”<sup>77</sup> that control their experiences and opportunities, thus projecting a resistance to objectification, stereotyping, and oppression.

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74 Hooks, Bell: *Talking Back: Inking Feminist, Inking Black*, Cambridge: South End Press 1989.

75 Baker, Christina: *Contemporary Black Women Filmmakers and the Art of Resistance*, Columbus: Ohio State University 2018, p. 3.

76 Hall, Stuart/Evans, Jessica/Nixon, Sean (eds.): *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), Milton Keynes: Sage Publications Ltd 2013.

77 C. Baker: *Contemporary Black Women Filmmakers and the Art of Resistance*, p. 3.

## 5 THE FUTURE: WOMEN IN FILM AND THE EMANCIPATION STRUGGLE

Harrow<sup>78</sup> once wondered why the active body of female African filmmakers, like Safi Faye, Anne-Laure Folly, Sarah Maldoror, were not disrupting the established norm or what I refer to here as stereotypes. Putting this wonderment in context and the filmmakers' times in perspective, Riesco<sup>79</sup> argues that their tenacity laid the foundation for the more daring representations observable in contemporary African cinema. This section will argue that the future of women in film and the emancipation struggle lies with what women filmmakers do with the medium presently. In the section above, I attempted to establish that filmmakers are creating disruptors, heroines, or models by representing the multidimensional challenges women encounter in contemporary African society. Through these films, the audiences are made aware that women too can be multifaceted and elusive.<sup>80</sup> What and how much this achieves will be determined by the sustainability of this representation. The promise in the contemporary representation of women in films and filmmaking heightened by a growing global culture offers a hopeful future.

With the success of ADAM, Touzani hopes to inspire women filmmakers to lend their voices to the course through their stories. While she believes much more change is desired both in the perception and representation of women, she's optimistic that change is on course.<sup>81</sup> As Cook and Johnston<sup>82</sup> discuss in their critical

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78 Harrow, Kenneth (ed.): "Women with open eyes, Women of Stone and Hammers: Western Feminist and African Feminist Filmmaking Practice," in: Harrow, Kenneth (ed.), *Postcolonial and Feminist Readings*, Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc. 1999, pp. 225- 240.

79 Riesco, Beatriz: "The Woman in Contemporary African Cinema: Protagonism and Representation," in: *Buala* 2011, accessed 22/11/2022, <https://www.buala.org/en/afroscreen/the-woman-in-contemporary-african-cinema-protagonism-and-representation>

80 B. Riesco: "The Woman in Contemporary African Cinema: Protagonism and Representation."

81 Stewart, Sophia: "Cannes 2019 Women Directors: Meet Maryam Touzani — 'Adam'," in: *Women and Hollywood* 2019, accessed 25/07/2022, <https://womenandhollywood.com/cannes-2019-women-directors-meet-maryam-touzani-adam/>

82 Cook, Pam/Johnston, Claire: "The place of Woman in the cinema of Raoul Walsh," in Nichols, Bill (ed.), *Movies and Methods* Vol.II, Los Angeles: University of California Press 1985, pp. 379-390.

strategies to realizing the aims and objectives of women's movement, mobilizing the media for women's struggle is essential. The number of female filmmakers is rising across film industries in Africa and some female filmmakers are actively advocating for and supporting the inclusion of more females in the industry. From Seko Shamte's all-female production team for *BINTI* (2021, Tanzania), to networks such as Tsitsi Dangarembga's Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe, Sisters Working in Film and Television of South Africa, and individual filmmakers and producers, female Africans are getting more opportunities to empower themselves and others through self-expression in films. A new generation of African females is on the rise, refusing to be complacent, docile, or profiled by existing 'unagreeable' norms disguised as traditions or culture. Kenyan filmmaker Dorothy Ghetuba insists that the time is now for women to raise their voices that need to be heard.<sup>83</sup> But the task of altering the future is not easy. Head of programming at Mosunmola (Mo) Abudu's EbonyLife Media, Heidi Uys, offers, "As women, and as trailblazers, we have a mammoth task ahead of ourselves because there isn't an instance as a woman where you don't have to prove to men that you're up to the job."<sup>84</sup>

Kemi Adetiba, writer and director of Nollywood's most sensational, high grossing non-comedy film—*KING OF BOYS* (2018/2021)—argues that every woman needs the positive impact that these films and representations are promoting. In an interview, she describes her worldview as a woman:

"I don't think the way everybody else does. I grew up with a strong mum that excelled in her career, she excelled in her personal life. I am used to having strong women mentors around me. I have been mentored by them, tutored by them so I can't distinguish that a man is supposed to do something."<sup>85</sup>

Kemi Adetiba evidences this in the creation of the anti-hero, Eniola Salami, in *KING OF BOYS* (2018/2021). Young Eniola escapes from domestic violence and is trafficked as a sex slave until she meets Alhaji Salami who keeps her as his mistress. Eniola learns from the unfairness of life, advancing from a passive victim of

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83 Vourlias, Christopher: "For the Women Driving the Booming African Screen Industries, the 'Time IS Now'," in: *Variety* 2022, accessed 22/11/2022, <https://variety.com/2022/tv/global/african-women-driving-film-tv-boom-1235185815/amp/>

84 Ibid., n.p.

85 Ukiwe, Urenna: "King Siblings: Kemi and Remi Adetiba," in: *Life: The Guardian Magazine* 2018, accessed 26/7/2022, <https://guardian.ng/life/king-siblings-kemi-and-remi-adetiba/>, n.p.

circumstances to an active anti-hero. She leverages every opportunity, growing with her personal experiences, remaining human and even compassionate sometimes, toughening up with every challenge and setback, masterminding and manipulating incidents until she marries Salami and occupies his position as head of the criminal underworld lords following his death. Eniola becomes powerful, effectively competing with men in a male-dominated underworld while raising her children and growing her business empire and political ambitions. Eniola effectively balances her personal and career lives, safe for the sibling rivalry between her children and her son's overbearing sense of entitlement. Audience members have expressed awe and admiration for the character of Eniola Salami. In her review of this character, Animashaun opines that Eniola "is one of the most important female characters in Nollywood history, as we rarely ever see a woman in as much control as she is, daring to cross as many boundaries as she did."<sup>86</sup> Animashaun, like many other viewers and scholars, including my position earlier in this chapter, adds that Nollywood portrays women as either inherently good or inherently bad, translating societal views and impositions on women to the screen with a melodramatic exaggeration. Eniola Salami is human, complex, and flawed, a perfect anti-hero who celebrates her femininity and womanhood while subverting societal expectations and returning stronger in the sequel despite losing everything in the first part. My position must not be read as an exaltation of Eniola as a perfect role model, but a reading of the portrayal of women in a film that subverts existing stereotypes, making her multidimensional and giving her depth. Osakpolor<sup>87</sup> reads Eniola's character as an extension of the 'crafty and deadly' woman stereotype which abounds in Nigerian and African narratives. However, despite her flaws and weaknesses, Adetiba sustains Eniola's ambition, strengthening rather than breaking her with every tragedy she encounters. Eniola is shaped by the circumstances surrounding her, and she creates defenses in order to survive as a single mother and build a future for her children. Eniola is not a role model considering her ruthlessness, but she commands conversations around the potentials and capabilities of women masked under expectations of passivity and subservience.

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86 Animashaun, Damilola: "Alhaja Eniola Salami is One of Nollywood's Most Important Female Characters," in: *Native*, 22/03/2022, accessed 22/11/2022, <https://thenativemag.com/looks-like-king-boys-sequel-well-way/>, n.p.

87 Osakpolor, Emwinromwankhoe: "Portrayal of Women in Contemporary Nollywood Films: Isoken and King of Boys in Focus," in: *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, 9 (2021), pp. 117-145, DOI 10.5195/cinej.2021.299.

Reminded daily of her past, Eniola molds her adopted daughter, Kemi, into a miniature version of herself, while her son, Kitan, is spoiled, overbearing, and feels entitled. Kemi is raised to be anything but the stereotypical woman expected to be passive and enduring while waiting for a prince to rescue her through marriage. One could read Eniola's concern over Kemi more than Kitan as a shift from society's obsession with male children and their welfare, a call to give attention to the girl child, especially her future ambitions, potential, and contribution to society. But this equally raises questions about the preparedness of male children for the emancipation of girls. Kitan is not exactly a reflection of Eniola's failure as a mother as typical African films would make women believe—a woman who is career-driven often neglects her children. Kitan is a reflection of a society that accords privileges, not based on merit, but on gender and sometimes, age. Kitan does not work hard at improving himself because he is certain that, being the only male child of his mother, her wealth is automatically his to inherit. This mentality is portrayed in Femi Beecroft (*CHIEF DADDY*, 2018), who, believing himself to be an only son and thus heir apparent of his wealthy father's empire, does not build a career for himself. This male-child supremacy is thus being challenged. Biodun Stephen's *BREADED LIFE* (2021), for example, focuses on male-child supremacy and their feelings of entitlement. The dramedy tells the story of a young man whose life is altered following an accident. Here, Biodun creates a mother who does not succumb to and take over guilt as a result of her son's wrong personal choices. Films like *BREADED LIFE* and *KING OF BOYS* are countering the stereotypical narrative that every let-down (e.g., marital failure, childlessness, infidelity, family problems, domestic violence, etc.) emanate from women. Like misogyny, this knowledge has become systemic, internalized through socialization and thus no longer feels wrong, oppressive or prejudiced.

With a rise in films that promote emancipated women's tales, filmmakers are educating young females who will build another generation of stronger women. Narratives from these filmmakers hint that it is not unhealthy, unethical, uncultured, or abnormal for women to want/have it all and still be strong. As told in Chinasa Onuzo's *Who's the Boss* (2020), being a strong woman is not about not needing help and support from others—men and women alike, but building on and maximizing one's inner strength for empowerment. The woman in African films of today must continue to be empowered and emancipated in order to birth a new generation of empowered and emancipated females. Through film, women and men can be enlightened about, and prepared for, gender equity. White<sup>88</sup> avers that

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88 White, Patricia: "Feminism and Film," *Oxford Guide To Film Studies* 1998, pp.117-131, accessed 17/07/2022, <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-6lm-media/18>



the presence of women in filmmaking forms a prominent model of resistance and opposition to stereotyping and the status quo. Their works will serve as a reference for the theoretical effort feminists in Africa have contributed toward attaining gender equality. Women must be consciously promoted outside of traditional or stereotypical gender roles. That way, filmmakers can attain a reversal of stereotypes and build a future where women compete in fairness with men. The journey to this anticipated future is slow, but steady, “we don’t have equality, but we really do have increasingly improved representation, and we’ve got to continue to fight for that.”<sup>89</sup> This is the assurance for a future of emancipated women.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This essay has attempted to interrogate changes in the representation of women in African films. Here, I discussed how African women in pre-colonial Africa upheld and cherished a sisterhood that united them, a sisterhood that embraced women from across tongues, tribes, and races. Colonialism however introduced a new definition and role for the woman, one which further reinforced existing patriarchal dominance over her. With the attainment of independence across Africa, film continued to be used as a medium to entertain and educate the audience on these new definitions. Discussed under the mold, the recast, and the future, this study has attempted to put in context and capture the changes in representations of women, especially following the active involvement of female and feminist filmmakers.

This study finds that the active involvement of women in African cinema is not birthing a cinema of opposition, but rather a cinema of redress. Women are subtly challenging unwholesome definitions of women, putting in their place more rounded and inspiring ones. The participation of women in filmmaking, especially as directors, scriptwriters and producers, is leading to changes in the on-screen representation of women, rewriting the misrepresentation which women have received both in colonial and postcolonial Africa. By so doing, these films are educating the audience about a ‘new’ woman, shaping their thoughts and perceptions of women of the future. These filmmakers are countering established stereotypes, creating female characters with depth and purpose. They are raising the argument that women are and can be more than the stereotypes projected through these films. Drawing examples from contemporary films which portray women

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89 C. Vourlias: “For the Women Driving the Booming African Screen Industries, the ‘Time IS Now’,” n.p.

differently, this chapter concludes that a narrative and portrayal twist is observable in these African films which, if sustained, would impact positively on gender equality struggle in Africa. Gender equality will in turn lead to better education, and contribute to individual, collective, and national growth as well as the advancement of society. What would be necessary is further studies interrogating the preparedness of traditional African men for this equality of genders and emancipation of women as well as the changes they will force on African cultures.

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# Exploring Contemporary Southern African Culture through Animation and Video Games

A Case Study on KURHWA and THE TALE OF STAVO

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EUGENE RAMIREZ MAPONDERA

## Abstract

The breadth of narrative videogames and animated films has expanded wildly over the past 30 years, not only in the sheer volume of titles released in recent decades, but also to include a multi-cultural cast of characters that celebrates the range of ethnic diversity that exists in reality. Among these cultures, norms, and values are those belonging to contemporary southern Africa, and how its pre-colonial socio-economic practices, which were guided by indigenous philosophy called *ubuntu*, have been fused with post-colonial norms to result in a wholly unique backdrop to stories emerging from this region. This fusion has influenced how stories are told and changed, how a new generation of African storytellers share their reality with the global audience. KURHWA is a video game that is in development in Zimbabwe, and together with an animated series entitled THE TALE OF STAVO, the two projects will serve as references for the use of contemporary southern African culture in modern storytelling.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

*Kurhwa* means “to fight” or “fighting” in the Shona language of the Zezuru or Shona people of Zimbabwe. It is also the title of a video game franchise in development by a team I lead at Kay Media Africa, a game development studio in Zimbabwe. Since 2017, I have been the lead writer and character designer for the game, which is building up to become a narrative franchise that draws audiences

from outside of the gaming niche by appealing to fans of fantasy literature, comic books, and animation from around the world.<sup>1</sup> My team includes fellow Zimbabwean creatives such as Tinodiwa Zambe Makoni and Keith Kuhudzai. The mobile game is designed to be a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena game (MOBA) in the style of Valve's DOTA2 (2013).<sup>2</sup> The characters are made up of a cast of Zimbabwean archetypes, that are inspired by both folklore and contemporary urban legends unique to the southern African landscape. The players are free to draft a team from this selection of culturally accurate but diverse characters in order to compete against an opposing draft by another group of players. The ensuing race for resources and siege of the opposing team's stronghold is what determines the winner. The aesthetic of the game's maps and environments are heavily influenced by Afrofuturistic and traditional African landscapes, architecture, and props. The game aims to stir up the player's competitive nature while immersing them in both traditional and modern African sounds, language, ideas, visuals, and culture.

EPHEMERAL TALES: THE TALE OF STAVO (2022)<sup>3</sup> is an animated African mini-series available on YouTube. It exemplifies the use of African culture and contemporary social phenomena as a device in which culture and tradition can be shared through animation. I served as the writer and director of EPHEMERAL TALES, which uses a format with strong musical elements and a contemporary approach to teen comedy. The series has 4 episodes that tell a story about 2 young people, who meet under very serendipitous circumstances on an informal taxi. They unintentionally complicating each other's lives after a freak accident causes them to accidentally swap cellphones. EPHEMERAL TALES is fictional; however, it does not lean on fantasy elements, but uses the cultures, practices, and social systems found within the township setting as devices to escalate events and build tension. The various social phenomena exist only in the African townships, thus I'm calling this type of story 'Township Drama.'

THE TALE OF STAVO approaches the musical genre differently from the Western format, which involves singing dialogues, acting out of emotions in dance scenes, etc. Though there is a strong focus on music, there are only few classic

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1 KURHWA's development has been pending since 2022 as a result of disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent HR challenges. The game continues to be developed under Kay Media Africa and updates on the development and publishing of the game can be found on the company's website ([www.kaymdiaafrica.com](http://www.kaymdiaafrica.com)) and social media platforms. All content and media in this article are a genuine representation of the progress made to date.

2 DOTA 2 (USA 2013, O: Valve Corporation).

3 EPHEMERAL TALES (ZW 2022, D: Eugene Mapondera).

(Western) musical elements. This is specific to African musical tradition, where the narrative is sung in the verse and the moral, or lesson, is repeated in the chorus. This leaves the male and female singing voices to play the roles of the narrator, and in some parts for emphasis, the characters. This format is a derivative of the ‘fireside oral tradition,’ in which a verbalized story could be accompanied by a chorus in which the audience could join in to break the monotony, or introduce a new chapter.

I have paired the two projects as case studies for this written piece because they contribute to the same mandate, namely the use and celebration of African modernity and culture through animation and games. The essential outcomes we want to achieve through *KURHWA* and *THE TALE OF STAVO* arise by answering the following questions:

- How do we share the near-extinct folklore of minority groups from Africa through games and animation, in the hope of initiating some genuine global interest in them?
- How do we introduce the sophisticated dynamics that African society has to the world through the game’s menus and gameplay?
- How do we challenge the prejudice that African social and cultural beliefs are backwards or primitive through the game’s narrative?
- How do we give global audiences another avenue to experience Afrofuturism as a narrative device?

## 2 AFRICAN FOLKLORE FOR GEN Z

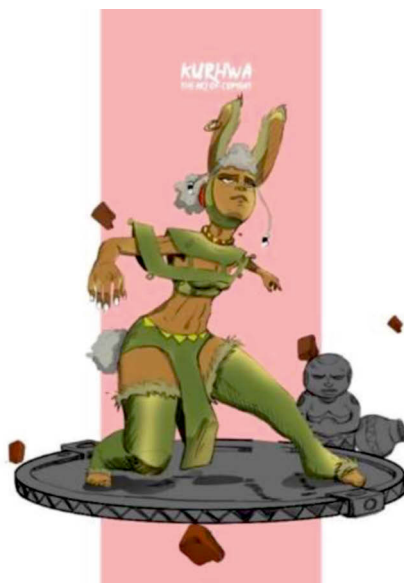
Southern African folklore and folktales, specifically from Zimbabwe, are a combination of history and a fictional ending or moral warning, where the protagonists and antagonists are represented by animals. The most popular series of folktales among the Shona people in Zimbabwe is that of the Rabbit and the Gorilla, *Tsuro na Gudo*.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, the two characters have chance encounters where they

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4 Tsuro is the name of the rabbit; Gudo the name of the gorilla. Depending on the interpretation, Gudo can be a gorilla, a monkey, a baboon, or a bird. Tsuro’s character remains consistently a rabbit or hare. There is no record of the exact origin of the *Tsuro na Gudo* folktale, as it has been passed down through generations of oral storytelling in Zimbabwe and other African countries. One of the earliest known written versions of the story was recorded by missionary and ethnographer Andrew W. Smith

behave like human beings as they engage with each other because of some basic need, such as rights to build shelter, ownership of a food source, or other beneficial outcome. The folktales involve some exchange in which the rabbit outwits the gullible gorilla. In almost all cases, the gorilla is outwitted or cheated. This is a kind of meta-narrative, that shows us that intellect triumphs over physical strength and size. These types of stories have been used traditionally to teach young children about the value of investigation, wisdom, and not taking whatever possessions or opportunities they may have for granted. The *Tsuro na Gudo* folktales also reinforce the morality of honesty by showing the rabbit as being shrewd and self-serving, because she always seems to get away with taking the gorilla's 'birth-right' or possessions. This aspect of the folktales is meant to teach young people that selfishness is contrary to the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*.<sup>5</sup> KURHWA uses this folktale and reimagines the two characters as anthropomorphic characters from a mystical place within the setting of our game. Tsuro and Gudo are now represented as two teenage anthropomorphic girls from competing houses, who

*Figure 1: Early concept of Tsuro, an anthropomorphic character from the game KURHWA*



Source: Kay Media Africa/Sigma Digital Studio.

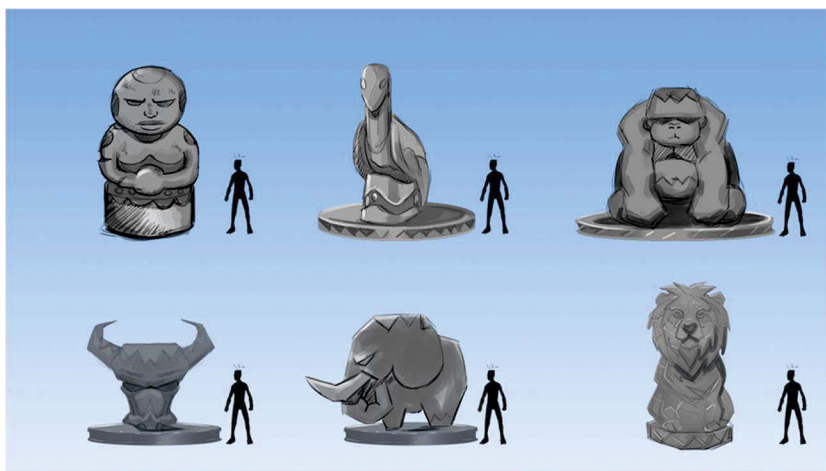
in his book *The Folklore of the Shona People*: Smith, Andrew W.: *The Folklore of the Shona People*, Harare: Baobab Books, 1997[\*1929].

5 This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 4.

later become stranded in unfamiliar territory and are forced to put their differences aside.

The retelling of this age-old story was intended to appeal to the so-called Gen Z audience, without taking away the traditional uses of these characters as a means of teaching moral lessons of teamwork, family, and unity. Furthermore, their redesign as anthropomorphic teenage girls was deliberate to provide a representation of women in this fictional world, where battles and conflicts do not necessarily need to be remedied by men alone. This is a nod to how women in pre-colonial times played a pivotal role in decision-making, warfare, and battle. Historical examples of this in Zimbabwe include Mbuya Nehanda, a spirit medium who would later be executed by British settlers for leading the resistance against the colonial incursion of the early 1900s in Zimbabwe.

*Figure 2: Early Totem designs from KURHWA*



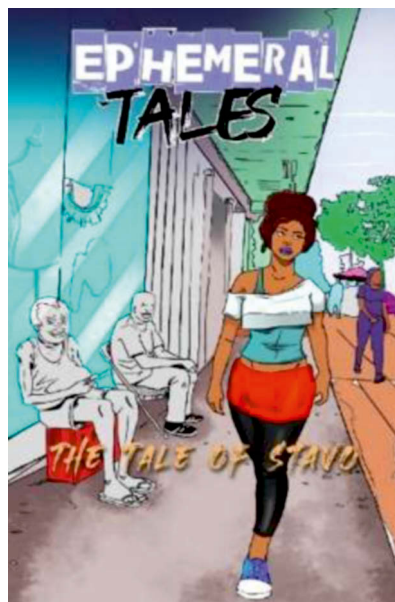
Source: Kay Media Africa/Sigma Digital Studio.

### **3 UNIQUE AFRICAN SOCIAL DYNAMICS: INTRODUCING THE ‘TOWNSHIP DRAMA’**

In *EPHEMERAL TALES: THE TALE OF STAVO*, the writing was structured in such a way, that the protagonist falls deeper into unpleasant situations as a result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is set on the backdrop of the African ‘township’, where the story takes place. African townships are urban settlements that emerged because of gentrification in the colonial era. They are high-density

suburbs that thrived beyond the colonial era because of informal economic systems, such as unofficial marketplaces and services, tightly knit communities, religion, and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. The most famous African township known to the world today is Soweto, in South Africa. Nearly every Southern African Country has a township. Because of the numerous unique social phenomena that exist within townships such as informal ridesharing, foreign currency trading and lending, African religious beliefs, and the relationship that the people have with law enforcement, it offers an interesting and specifically African setting which nevertheless serves as an arena for a modern, and universal, story. For example, *THE TALE OF STAVO* begins with an informal ride share, that is known in the township as *mushika-shika*. This style of transport emerged only because of the failed provision, or neglect, of gentrified people living in the township. Our story takes advantage of this by placing our lead characters in one of these ride shares, and compelling them to engage with each other due to the inconvenience of it all. The first scene descends into events that feature sexism and harassment within the car, to the harassment of the same car by the police, who treat those who run this system with extreme prejudice. The result of this is how *EPHEMERAL TALES* can feature entertaining, unique scenarios to show foreign audiences, and offer an authentic look at certain aspects of township life.

Figure 3: Scenes of Township life from *EPHEMERAL TALES: THE TALE OF STAVO*



Source: Kay Media Africa.

Township life also features some universal challenges, such as drug and alcohol abuse, which take place in what are called *beer halls*, or *shabins*, instead of the Western or Eastern alternatives. THE TALE OF STAVO references the ‘legal’ crack-down by the police on young people’s abuse of over-the-counter drugs. It then goes as far as to focus on bribery and the involvement of loan sharks that make up the antagonist of the animated show.

## 4 AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY INCORPORATED INTO CHARACTER LEVELING IN *Kurhwa* THROUGH *UBUNTU*

*Ubuntu* can best be described as an African philosophy that places emphasis on ‘being self through others.’<sup>6</sup> It is a form of humanism that can be expressed in the phrases ‘I am because of who we all are,’ or *ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, in the Zulu language. In this case, the Zimbabwean narrative tradition relates much more to the ensemble than the Western, hero-centered narrative. This avoidance of messianic figures aims to strengthen social ties and communalism beyond the family unit. Though *KURHWA* is designed to be a MOBA like DOTA2, it deviates from traditional MOBA character leveling mechanics, which typically have each individual teammate accumulating gold and experience while getting stronger alone. *KURHWA* employs a different approach as a game by leveling up the team as a whole, thus promoting teamwork and fulfilling *Ubuntu* within the gameplay.

MOBAs generally feature a single shop for buying items that boost damage, health, armor, etc. *KURHWA* features a different approach by having ‘tuck-shops’ across the map, which are inspired by family-owned tuck-shops that exist in African townships, where you can buy from a local family or even get household items on an informal credit system based on your family’s relationship with the owner or reputation in the community. The same system is featured in the game as a call-

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6 The earliest known text on African philosophy of *Ubuntu* is from 1980: Samkange, Stanlake J. W. T.: “Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy,” in: Chimakonam, Jonathan (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017[\*1980]. The book discusses the concept of *Ubuntu* as a philosophical concept and its significance in African society. The concept of *Ubuntu* emphasizes the significance of community and teaches that “a person is a person through others.” Archbishop Desmond Tutu drew on the concept of *Ubuntu* when he led South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which helped South Africa reckon with its history of Apartheid. See: Tutu, Desmond: *No Future Without Forgiveness*, New York: Doubleday, 1999.

back to contemporary African communalism or *Ubuntu*. KURHWA as a game features aesthetics in its style of character and environment design which shows these types of venues and gives the player opportunities to purchase non-licit shop items to gain an advantage or a power-up.

In THE TALE OF STAVO, the main character's motives are revealed not to have been selfishly motivated but as a realization of *Ubuntu*. At the end of the series, his goals are revealed to be in service of someone weaker and more vulnerable than himself.

## 5 REDEEMING AFRICA'S REPUTATION THROUGH AFROFUTURISM IN VIDEO GAMES SUCH AS *Kurhwa*

The MOBA genre of video games is made with the intention of offering the player base an intricate variety of archetypes to explore from different genres of fiction. For example, most popular MOBAs such as Valve's DOTA2 and Riot Games' LEAGUE OF LEGENDS (2009)<sup>7</sup> have a cast that is in excess of 100 characters. These characters may be inspired by one genre, for example technology or sci-fi, or may have purely fantasy elements, including mythical creatures. Others may be physical warrior-like characters, while others still are assassins or archers. The idea is that each role in the team is filled by a specific class of character.

For a game like KURHWA, this presented itself as an opportunity to showcase various archetypes with an African interpretation or an African take. An example is the character of Tashinga, a marksman. The typical marksman in a MOBA wields a ranged weapon—a gun, rifle, bow, etc.—and fires with bursts of varying damage from varying distances. One common archetype of a marksman, known as a gunslinger, carries a Western-style gun with bullets. Tashinga is a character with a clear Afrofuturistic background and technology. Although he's categorized as a marksman, his weapons are two soapstone-carved devices that emit purifying energy. The concept of bullets is a Western invention, and the principle was to abandon bullets in exchange for African mythology, which implies that soapstone can purify things from a distance. Soapstone sculptures are small yet valuable and popular in southern Africa. They have a distinct smoothness and color that stands out as opposed to the machined appearance of metal on guns and rifles. This nuance allowed for sleek and curved designs to be created for Tashinga's soapstone weapons and informed his gameplay mechanic, which doesn't require him to reload since his weapon does not use physical ammunition. The modernity of it,

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7 LEAGUE OF LEGENDS (USA 2009, O: Riot Games).



along with its aspiration of a superior yet regal weapon, distinctly bears the hallmarks of Afrofuturism without changing the genre of video game under which KURHWA is classified.

*Figure 4: Early prototype of KURHWA displaying in-game combat*



Source: Kay Media Africa/Sigma Digital Studio.

*Figure 5: Early character design of Afro-futuristic character*



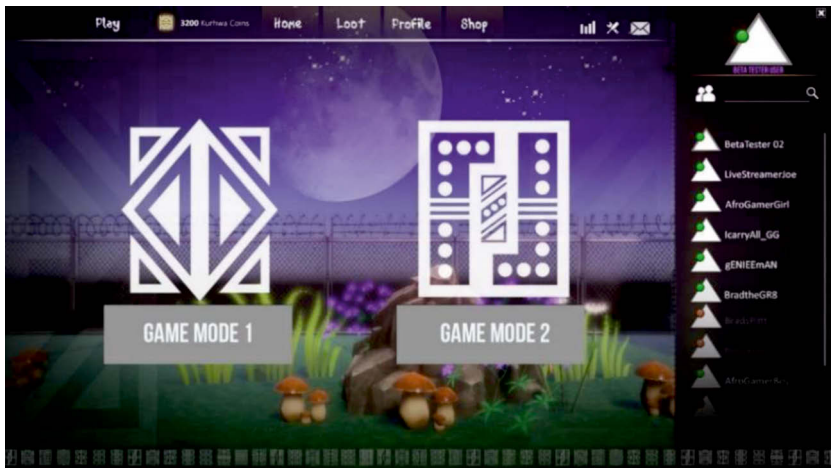
Source: Kay Media Africa/Sigma Digital Studio.

## 6 MUSIC AND SOUND AND SYMBOLISM IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

Both KURHWA and THE TALE OF STAVO utilize African music and symbolism in their communication and design. By referring to African tradition, THE TALE OF STAVO utilizes more music than KURHWA. The music, however, borrows from African oral tradition by fusing Afro-pop and hip-hop-like chants. It tells the story of THE TALE OF STAVO by introducing a mixture of English and Shona vernacular to make the storyline more engaging. Dialogue is absent and narration is carried out through the four songs' verses and choruses.

KURHWA as a Game utilizes African dingbats<sup>8</sup> and typography by renowned African graphic designer and typography artist Baynham Goredema. This came from the game designers identifying an opportunity to introduce the world to African typographic art. Unlike the Western community's familiarity with Asian characters and typography, such as Mandarin characters and Japanese kanji, there hasn't been an occasion for the world to experience African characters and symbols in a similar manner. The user interface, or GUI, of KURHWA places a number

*Figure 6: Early GUI design showing African typography in the Kurhwa game menu*



Source: Kay Media Africa/Sigma Digital Studio.

- 8 Dingbats are non-letter, non-number, and non-punctuation graphical symbols that are used to add decorative or symbolic elements to a text. Examples of dingbats include stars, arrows, smiley faces, and other graphical icons that are included within a typeface. The Microsoft Word font Wingdings is one example of a font made up of dingbats.

of these modernized graphics and symbols into the navigation experience. It attempts to create an immersive African experience where a non-African audience can begin a journey of cultural discovery.

## 7 CONCLUSION

In summation, this investigation has looked into the initial questions on the global appeal and potential of African culture and contemporary social practices with some definitive answers based on our case studies. We certainly can utilize the near-extinct folklore of minority groups from Africa within games and animation in the hope of initiating some genuine global interest. By highlighting our philosophies, such as *Ubuntu*, and incorporating them into gameplay and game design, we can introduce players and audiences to specific African ideals. Through this, we can demonstrate our ability to be inventive, creative, and enterprising, comparable to the rest of the developed world.

By integrating concepts of everyday social interaction which are common within African Townships, we can introduce these dynamics into cooperative gameplay in a way that is reflective of modern African society. Credit systems that are based on trust can be made available to teams as a secondary way of scaling the team's power or gaining an advantage over an opposing team that's failing to apply the communal system effectively.

We, as African game developers and narrative writers, can challenge the existing prejudices that African social and cultural beliefs are primitive by incorporating Afrofuturism within our character designs and game aesthetics. The design and incorporation of local technology and scientific concepts can help to dispel inaccurate prejudices while celebrating the indigenous sciences around geology, climatology, and physics, that would be categorized as fringe science by Western academics.

Global audiences can be introduced to several avenues to experience Afrofuturism as a narrative tool. African modernization was interrupted by colonialism. However, the aspirational aspects of Afrofuturistic fiction allow new audiences to join in on the positive societal, scientific, and political aspirations of African creatives. Through Afrofuturism, people can entertain ideas about what could have become of Africa if it were not for the deprivation and disruption caused by social, academic, political, and military infringement—that is, colonialism.

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## GAMEOGRAPHY

DOTA 2 (USA 2013, O: Valve Corporation)

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS (USA 2009, O: Riot Games)

# Keeping Memory Alive through Digital Games

Relating to Real World Memories through Game Narratives in  
THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES

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JÖRG FRIEDRICH

## Abstract

This article describes the development process of the game THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES and its aim to connect players with real-world memories and historical events. It explores the use of digital games as a medium for conveying individual and collective memories, fostering a culture of remembrance, and enhancing understanding of historical situations. The authors discuss their approach of integrating historical events and resistance fighters' biographies into the game, while maintaining a balance between entertainment and critical reflection of the past.

## INTRODUCTION

THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES, the game I have been working on for the last three years with my colleague Sebastian Schulz, and later with a team of seven, is a game that lets you lead a civilian resistance group in Third Reich Berlin, trying to resist the Nazis, help the persecuted, educate the people, and weaken the regime, all while evading capture by the Gestapo. It is also an experiment: a game, that aims to entertain and excite its players, while simultaneously contributing to the commemoration of the recent German past.

*Figure 1: Early Concept of the resistance group meeting in the back room of a bar*



Source: Paintbucket Games/HandyGames

## THE QUESTIONS

The questions about how history will be made accessible to future generations are still to be answered. Games enable users to become an active party in historical-like situations, with unprecedented intensity. Individual experiences can surpass the efficacy of ‘classic’ history lessons. Ultimately, digital games are very likely to have a significant impact on which events from history are communicated, how they are understood, and how this understanding is passed on within a culture.

The questions we were asking ourselves while developing *THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES* were all variations of ‘how?’, specifically:

- How can real memories find their way into a medium, which allows recipients to build upon them to create their own stories?
- How do we fulfill the players’ need for agency, while maintaining the integrity of the topic at hand?
- How can game mechanics be used to enhance the understanding of a historical situation?
- How can video games contribute to building and sustaining a culture of remembrance?
- How can entertainment and a critical reflection of the past be balanced?

## COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

Most historical strategy games are based mainly on what I call collective memories: The broader historical facts, as they are usually taught in history lessons. Which king ruled from when to when; which countries were conquered; which new political order or regime was established or abolished. These are important facts, no doubt about it, and it is good that one can play games that cover these events. Games are a good tool for conveying these systemic and cause-and-effect mechanisms to the players.

*Figure 2: Germany invading (then) Czechoslovakia, displayed on a strategic map*



Source: Paintbucket Games/HandyGames

Having your troops at your border might make the neighbors angry. Economical needs might push countries to declare war. These are the types of mechanics that are well-covered in games.

Before continuing, here are some questions to consider:

- Did you make a significant decision today, one that changed world history?
- How about this week?
- This year?
- How about ever?

Games provide a specific experience, not achievable through another medium: The ability to step into the shoes of many different characters, for example, rulers or generals making tough decisions in the heat of war. This is something most of us would never have the chance (or misfortune, depending on your point of view) to do in our day-to-day lives. It is a fantasy, and an interesting one. But history is more than that. History is the sum of all the little individual experiences and memories of the millions of people who did not change the fate of the country, but who simply tried to live their lives. What about them? Aren't they worth a look? Aren't their stories worth being told?

With *THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES*, we wanted to explore not only the collective memories, but also connect to individual memories of an era: Memories of people who happened to live in Berlin when Hitler became Chancellor, and who were opposed to the dictator when most of the country fell for him and his ideology. People without influence or power, people without special skills—ordinary people, who refused to fall for an inhumane regime when almost everyone else did—which made them so very extraordinary after all.



## TRANSFORMING THE PAST INTO THE PRESENT

*Figure 3: Once a day in 2017, we took one historical event that really happened on that same date in 1933, and transformed it into a tweet*



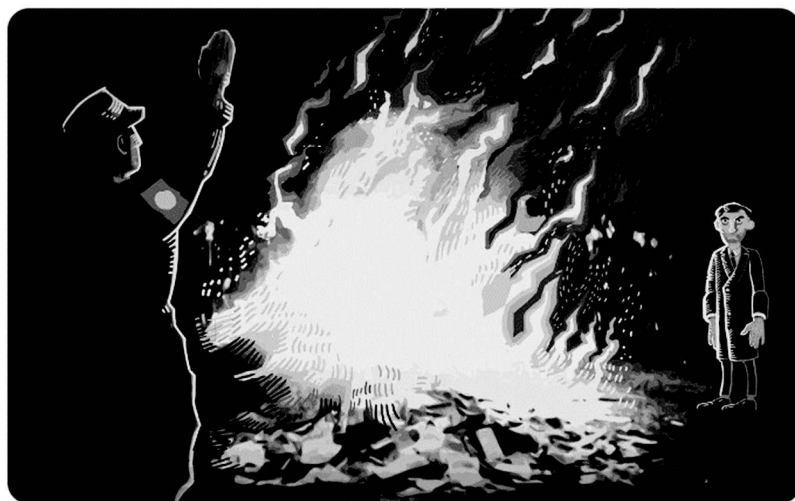
**Through the Darkest of Times**

@TtDotGame

...

10 May 1933: Berlin writer Erich Kästner stands incognito and watches when the Nazis burn his works.

In a propaganda spectacle incited German students burn 25 000 volumes of "un-German" books.



Source: Paintbucket Games/HandyGames

## HISTORICAL EVENTS AS TWEETS

In the early days of THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES, when it was still a side project of Sebastian's and mine, we were both still working other full-time jobs, and had only very little content of the game to show—and content is king, as every social media expert will tell you.

A large part of my research involved reading historical newspapers from 1933, the year Hitler came into power, and finding events for the game's timeline. How fast some things happened in 1933, and how closely certain events resembled

those currently taking place, surprised and sometimes shocked me. I imagined that this might be the case for many others, too.

Every day, I checked the news of that same date in 1933—for example, if it was the 1<sup>st</sup> of May in 2017, I looked at the 1<sup>st</sup> of May in 1933. I picked one event which I found particularly fitting and tweeted it using the game’s Twitter account. These tweets simply took an event and re-told it in rather short, neutral language—but the events spoke for themselves.

For as small an account as ours, the tweets were quite successful. Not only were they re-tweeted frequently, but people also approached me in person and told me how shocked they were by how closely the events from Hitler’s first year in power sometimes hit home. It also reached the right people: Historical content posted by an indie game account led to an overlap of gamers who were into history, and historians who were into gaming. This cross-section represented exactly the audience we were hoping to target.

This proved to be useful as a marketing tool, and as a catalyst for us to empathize with these people from the past: It helped us better understand how dissidents must have felt in 1933 when they had to slowly watch their country change and turn against them; how they must have stood in shock and likely disbelief, telling each other that this will be over soon.

Our followers on Twitter who weren’t that familiar with German history often demonstrated these reactions when they read the tweets. Some of their reactions made it into the game as brief sentences of your group’s members, who comment on the latest atrocities of the regime. They reassure each other, that this time, Hitler took it too far and will be brought to justice—a reaction we are still seeing today when a society switches to autocracy, and democrats simply cannot believe it is happening until it is too late.

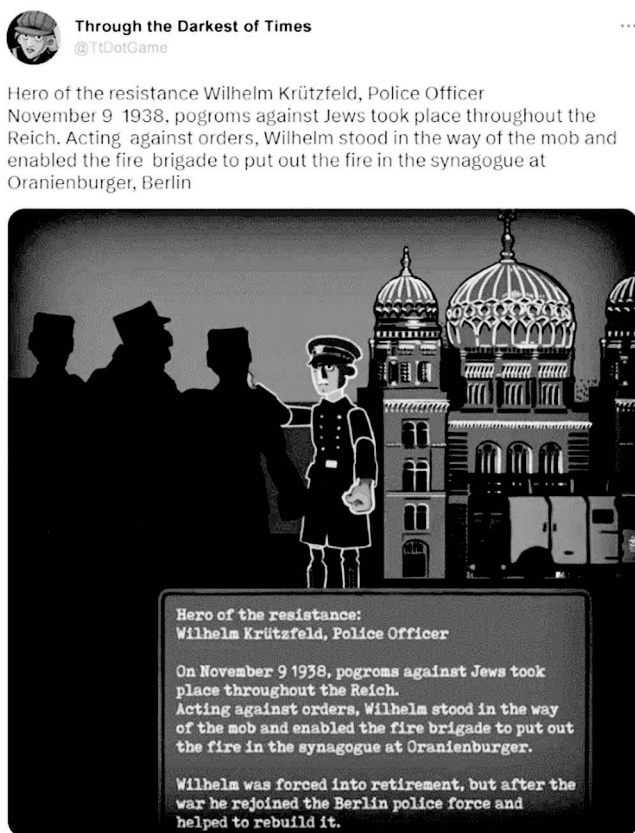
## **HEROES OF THE RESISTANCE**

The tweets about historical events did, however, pose a problem: since they almost always covered negative events, people were reluctant to like them, which damaged the algorithm. We needed something that could still chronicle the darkest of times but was positive enough to remain relatable to our audience. The solution was so obvious, that once we thought of it, we wondered why we had not thought of it already: we would make posts about the resistance fighters themselves: The men and women, whom we would like to commemorate with our game.

Instead of daily historical events, we switched to making weekly posts featuring short biographies of historical resistance fighters, complete with their

character portraits as they appear in-game. While most of the characters suffered tragic fates, every post described at least one successful resistance action for which each person was responsible. These posts received a great deal of positive attention and helped us spread the word about our game, while still educating our audience, and supporting the tone and intention of the game.

*Figure 4: In 2018, we switched from daily events to only highlighting people who had resisted the regime.*



Source: Paintbucket Games/HandyGames.

## THE AVERAGE RESISTANCE FIGHTER

Figure 5: The character editor where players create their own resistance fighter



Source: Paintbucket Games/HandyGames.

The game's heroes are the resistance fighters, the player-avatar, and the other members of the group. To design these characters, we needed to understand their real-world counterparts. We needed to find out:

- When does someone make the decision to risk their life to fight an inhumane regime?
- Is it despair or hope that drives them?
- Pride? Anger?
- How do they keep their courage up?
- Is there something that connects them?

While we did read standard literature about civilian resistance groups, we were mainly interested in firsthand accounts and historical documents; interviews, letters, and accounts from relatives and friends. Luckily, there was a lot of material we could explore, especially in Berlin.

We found the blog and podcast *DIE ANACHRONISTIN* by Nora Hespers, the granddaughter of resistance fighter Theo Hespers, who was active in Cologne and murdered by the Nazis in 1938. Nora, a journalist, was in the process of publishing her grandfather's diaries. When we reached out to her, she was very enthusiastic about our project. She not only offered to help us on the historical-research side,

but also the practical-artistic side: It is her voice you hear in the trailer, and voicing over the entire game.<sup>1</sup>

We read through collections of interviews with Berlin resistance fighters that were only printed in small quantities, and in which they described their feelings of anger towards the regime and the people who fell for it, their neighbors, co-workers, or relatives. They spoke of their hope for change, their hope that the world would come to help them eventually, and of their despair when they realized that no one would come to the rescue; that they were alone.

Did we find an answer to our question, what motivated these people to fight? More than one. Many! The answers to the question as to why someone would risk their life to fight an inhumane regime were as diverse as the civilian resistance groups themselves. Many were political, of course. Democrats, socialists, communists, and conservatives, who despised what the new regime did, who despised it so much, felt compelled to take action.

Some were spiritual—or believed in a higher goal, a higher cause. A cause that did not need to be religious—although many were Christians. Some were humanists. They believed in humanity and were convinced that humans were able to build a better world—and that this would happen sooner or later; that the Nazis were just a temporary detour on humanity's path to a brighter future.

Of course, there were people who were affected by the discrimination of the Nazis. Some were angry at the regime because it had stripped them of their culture—Berlin in the 1920s was a place of progressive lifestyles, clubs and parties, experimental music, and art. The Nazis discarded this and replaced it with their made-up pseudo-historicism, a homogenous culture that they called 'German'. They enforced cultural dominance.

Most resistance fighters were also into progressive art and music. Some came from these types of subcultures and got into the resistance because they did not want to accept that the Nazis were taking their lifestyles from them. There were plenty of different motivators to consider for the upcoming heroes of our game.

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1 Nora visited us several times in our office in Berlin, the earliest to memory having been in Spring of 2018. Everything she shared with us is also in her podcast, DIE ANACHRONISTIN.

## INDIVIDUAL MEMORIES

A question we received quite frequently, mainly from folks who were not game design professionals or avid gamers, was “But can you play as [enter well-known resistance fighter or group here]?” This is a clear example of the primary difference between a game and a movie: If *THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES* would have been a movie, it might have just re-told the biography of one of the many civilian resistance groups, like for example the Red Orchestra. But *THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES* is a game, so naturally, we wanted to utilize the strengths of a game.

So, what about the individuals within the groups? During our research, we amassed a sizeable collection of individual memories and considered how we could implement them into the game. One way would be to let players play as one specific historical character and limit the player’s choices in such a way that the outcome would match up with the biography of that person. This of course would have limited player freedom substantially, so we decided against it.

Another option would have been to let players play as a specific person but to allow them to make whatever decisions they liked. This was better, but it didn’t feel right to let players change the biographies of these people who really existed. Somehow, this felt acceptable for collective memories, like those of a state, but not for individuals—especially individuals, who had often suffered as brutally as the ones we were discussing.

*Figure 6: In TTDOT, players might get arrested and interrogated*



Source: Paintbucket Games/HandyGames.

Ultimately, we went with fictional characters, later with procedurally-generated characters. Rather than reproducing the exact events and memories of existing people, we tried to build mechanics and dynamics that would lead to situations, which would call the fitting event to mind.

For example, we learned from the diary of the resistance fighter Theo Hespers, that once caught, interrogated, and tortured by the Gestapo, he gave the names and actions of resistance fighters who were already dead, or who had already been discovered. As a result, we added this as a mechanic in interrogations. Saskia von Brockdorff, the daughter of a member of the Red Orchestra, told us about a letter that her mother wrote to her when she was five years old, her mother was imprisoned and knew she would have to die soon.<sup>2</sup> Instead of simply retelling this heart-breaking story, we created a simulation where members of your group could have children. The group mentions these children, talks about them, and discusses how terrible it is for someone with children to have to die. The events for the group bemoaning a mother who dies and leaves her child are individually written and get triggered following specific rules and mechanics, creating a narrative simulation.

## CONCLUSION

So, what about the initial question: Can games in general contribute to commemoration, and was *THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES* successful in doing so? Just like any other medium, games shape our idea of the world, the present, the future, and the past. So, the question shouldn't be whether they contribute to commemoration, but rather how good they are at doing so.

I believe there are plenty of good examples out there, but it is not up to us, the creators, to decide whether our game is successful in doing so or not. What we can do is try to translate these topics in an appropriate and respectful manner. In my opinion, we have achieved this goal.

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2 Saskia von Brockdorff we met at a Zeitzeugen workshop in Berlin in 2019.

## **INTERVIEWS**

Hespers, Nora. Interviewed by Jörg Friedrich & Colleagues, 2018.  
von Brockendorf, Saskia. Interviewed by Jörg Friedrich & Colleagues, 2019.

## **PODCASTS**

DIE ANACHRONISTIN podcast, created by Nora Hespers.



# Towards the Ludic Cyborg

## History and Theory of Authorship in Western Modernity

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GUNDOLF S. FREYERMUTH

### Abstract

New media create new forms of authorship. The historical investigation starts with an introspective remembrance of the changes in authorial practices during the past half-century. The paper then traces the four major developmental phases of authorship and their cultural reflection in the modern era.—Between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, individual authorship originated in the context of letterpress printing. Two radically new concepts formed its philosophical and legal basis: the assertion of intangible and inalienable property. Industrialization, however, introduced new mass media that relied on the collaboration of many artisans. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, analog film, radio, and television challenged the established and esteemed concept of individual authorship in favor of collective and hierarchical production. One response to this conflict between the cultural ideal and actual practices was the attempt by the holders of new managerial positions in the auditory and audiovisual media, particularly conductors and directors, to claim the author's function. The research and theories of new academic disciplines complemented this deconstruction, resulting in declarations of the 'death of the author' in the late 1960s. At the same time, the onset of digitalization and digital networking opened up the possibility of—and created the demand for—different practices. Since the 1990s, distributed and potentially egalitarian authorship of digital knowledge workers has developed in the software medium and its central genre of digital games. Currently, a fourth transformation of authorial practices is underway. Rapid advances in digital technology realize what was hoped for already 60 years ago: a symbiotic relationship between human and machine intelligence. Thus, across all media and genres, the emergence of cyborgian authorship becomes apparent.—A media-specific theory of authorship concludes the investi-

gation, i.e., the insight into the interdependence between the evolving state of media and the formation of authorial practices as well as their cultural acceptance.

## INTRODUCTION

The cultural practice and perception of authorship are currently undergoing radical change. Digitalization affects its existing forms and brings about entirely new variants. Of course, the present transformation is neither the first nor the second since the concept of secular authorship emerged in the early modern era. Its bedrock was artistic freedom. Two fundamental changes were historically necessary to achieve such freedom.

First, the Christian belief in the monopoly of divine creative power, which dominated the European Middle Ages—that God was the author of everything—had to be secularized in favor of human creative power.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, this spiritual freedom to secular creation had to be complemented by practical independence concerning content, form, and technology. In early modernity, the prevailing funding by feudal or bourgeois patronage implied that most artistic works were commissioned and associated inevitably with specific requirements. In contrast, the anonymity of the markets that originated in the transition from a subsistence economy to a monetary economy offered less dependence on patrons and patronizing institutions and more artistic freedom.

Markets, of course, required tradeable goods. Therefore, a *sine qua non* for authorship was technological reproducibility, the central role of which Walter Benjamin first recognized.<sup>2</sup> In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, letterpress printing enabled textual reproduction. Around the same time, the transition from fixed-in-place fresco painting to transportable and saleable canvas paintings meant an essential first step into the markets for visual authorship. But reproduction remained possible only through manual copying, for example, by apprentices and disciples. It took three hundred years until, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, photography allowed the capture and reproduction of images. A few decades later, various technical methods established the recording of acoustic works, i.e., their storage and reproduction. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the (sound) film finally realized audiovisual reproducibility.

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1 See below chapter II *Pre-Industrial Authorship: The Individual Artisan*.

2 Cf. Benjamin, Walter: “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in: *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections. Edited and With an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. Preface by Leon Wieseltier*, New York: Schocken Books 2007, pp. 217-252.

Unlike writers, artists in the industrial visual, auditory, and audiovisual media needed access to mechanical and industrial technologies already for recording, i.e., in the creative process. A studio system emerged as a further development of the pre-industrial ateliers of visual artists. Photo, sound, film, and finally, television studios bundled and configured the necessary technical resources. Consumer technology that empowered individual artists to independent visual, auditory, and audiovisual creation—though in less than professional quality—became accessible only decades later.<sup>3</sup> Thus, access to studio facilities constituted another fundamental prerequisite for authorship in visual, auditive, and audiovisual media.

So-called ‘middlemen’ or ‘gatekeepers’ granted such access. Publishers or producers, assisted by reviewers, lectors, or editors, picked from the works offered suitable ones. Success or non-success in this cultural selection constrained authorship in auditive and audiovisual media. Until digitalization, only texts and still images—paintings and photographs—could be authored independently of institutions and gatekeepers. Writing, though, (pre-)produced not only literature but also auditory and audiovisual works, e.g., through libretti and sheet music, texts for radio features and plays, dramas, and film scripts. Since the Renaissance and through the industrial era, therefore, writing has functioned as the pioneering model of authorship both in cultural practice and in the—also text-based—legal system.

Of the 500 to 600 years that have passed since the emergence of modern authorship, I have worked roughly 50 years, between a tenth and a twelfth of the period in question, as a writer—of monographs, non-fiction books, and novels, essays, reporting, radio features, radio plays, screenplays, and documentaries. Thus, an introspection seems in order (*I Introspection: The Last Fifty Years in Writing*) before I proceed to outline the history of authorship in the different media and propose a historical and media-specific theory of authorship. For this purpose, I will proceed in six further steps.

In the second chapter, I sketch the prehistory and origins, as well as the cultural, economic, and legal conditions of the concept emerging in early modernity (*II Pre-Industrial Authorship: The Individual Artisan*). Following the development further into the industrial era, I trace the deconstruction of individual authorship through, on the one hand, the practices of industrial mass media, on the other hand, the research and theories of new academic disciplines (*III Industrial Authorship: The Hierarchical Collective of Workers*). A pivotal response to the conflict

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3 For still images with consumer cameras around 1900, for silent moving images in the 1920s, for sound recording with magnetic tape around 1950, for video recording in the 1960s.

between the cultural ideal of individual authorship and actual collective production in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was the emergence of organizing managerial functions in auditory and audiovisual media, mainly conducting and directing (*IV Appropriated Authorship: The Rise of the Chief Artistic Officer*).

Since the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, digital technology and networking have modified authorship in two steps. Initially, software replaced material media and hardware tools in media production. This virtualization made possible new distributed—de-localized, and asynchronous—practices (*V Postindustrial Authorship: The Distributed Network of Digital Knowledge Workers*). At present, a further modification of media production is taking place through the implementation of artificial intelligence as a service. With it, the playful collaboration of human and artificial intelligence in authoring becomes an option (*VI Digital Authorship: The Ludic Cyborg*). The insights of the historical investigation finally allow for a media-specific definition of authorship (*VII Elements for a Theory of Authorship*).

## I INTROSPECTION: THE LAST FIFTY YEARS IN WRITING

When I prepared my first academic paper in the early 1970s, as a student of comparative literature at the Free University in West Berlin, I had just learned in a seminar about the origins of silent and solitary reading and its contribution to the history of bourgeois individualism. Writing seemed no less solitary to me, although it required plenty of social contacts during the research phase. I had to commute from my Kreuzberg courtyard apartment to Dahlem to visit the institute's library and sometimes the more extensive university library. While I sat there day in and day out reading and excerpting by hand, I frequently needed the help of experienced library staff to find suitable sources or bring them to me from the archives. It was not unusual to wait weeks before loaned materials were available. Analog books occasionally came with indexes. But even then, to find what you needed, you had to spend many hours browsing and reading about topics and details you didn't want to know—at least not in the short term.

The usual writing aids that authors had at their disposal at that time were pens, notepads, mechanical typewriters, little bottles of correction fluid, and sheets of rather expensive typing paper. I also had a tattered Duden dictionary. As far as most of these tools were concerned, one had to make provisions to avoid running out of something during the most rewarding writing phase, an ink ribbon, the last ballpoint cartridge, the correction fluid, or the paper. Home offices also offered minimal information resources or means of communication. I owned a transistor radio, a black-and-white TV set that could receive three channels, and about 100

books, primarily novels, which I had devoured since puberty. In Kreuzberg, in the early 1970s, few people could afford a (landline) telephone. Communication with fellow students or professors—such as requests for advice, information, or feedback—had to occur face-to-face at the university or in pubs, where people met by chance. In short, authorship was, on the one hand, necessarily a lonely work, and could, on the other hand, only be carried out in the geographical proximity of large libraries, i.e., well-populated areas.

The writing process proper was tedious as well. Given the necessity of using a typewriter to put the text on paper and the impossibility of significantly changing a typed word, every sentence had to be planned meticulously or written by hand first. You had to manually keep track of all used sources in a separate document. If you forgot to investigate something, had the bold idea to restructure the original planning, or even to add new elements, several working days were immediately lost—with trips and long reading sessions in libraries. Plus, many hours of typing a new copy of your text as you couldn't add sentences or paragraphs to existing pages.

Ultimately, the final version, including the references, had to be created linearly, from the first to the last page. All omissions, later corrections, and stylistic editing required extensive retyping. In the end, you had only one copy of the finished text unless you had gone through the extra trouble of typing on carbon paper. The only way to get more copies—short of retyping—was to visit a copy shop. The photocopies could then be distributed personally or put into envelopes and sent by mail, whether to friends for feedback, professors for grading, or editors for publication.

Thus, the defining characteristic of working as a scholarly, journalistic, or literary author in these pre-digital times was the need to plan precisely and long in advance every step of the research as well as the writing phase. Technologically speaking, authorship was craft work. Like all manual labor—done with simple tools that were generally not yet electric—it required a carefully defined project goal, diligent procurement of tools and materials, and precise execution according to plan. Lack of precision or playful spontaneity was costing time and money. In hindsight, the reason seems obvious: Media production happened in the material world where actions do not come with unlimited undo. In the analog age, authors of texts had to produce them as artisans.

These days, I am working from a somewhat remote ranch in Arizona, all the while communicating with colleagues and friends worldwide via a satellite internet connection and various chat, email, and video conferencing programs. Most of my research I do via search engines like Google Scholar in the 'archives' of the Internet, platforms like academia.edu, researchgate.net, archive.org, Google

Books, and sribd.com. To a smaller extent, I use the databases and e-books of online libraries, specifically of the distant Cologne University where I teach. To an even minor degree, I buy and download electronic material. Neither the research nor the writing process itself requires meticulous planning anymore. Additional information or sources can be obtained on demand during the authoring process.

For research and writing, I use computers of different form factors—desktop, laptop, tablet, smartphone—with at least two dozen off- and online programs, many of them AI-driven. Word processors allow unlimited editing, arbitrary rearrangement of text, and autocorrect typos. Other programs take dictation, manage the sources used and cited, translate and paraphrase text passages, improve grammar and punctuation errors, suggest more precise wording, stylistic corrections, titles, help with necessary cuts, etc. Once a text is finalized, I can transmit it within seconds to those for whom it was written. It also takes hardly any longer to publish on my homepage or the many web platforms supporting self- or pre-publishing.

Being an author has lost almost all similarities to practicing a manual craft. Instead, it is very much in line with digital knowledge work.<sup>4</sup> Hence, in media production, the future has arrived that J.C.R. Licklider called for in 1960: the “man-computer-symbiosis.”<sup>5</sup> A little later, for such a functional relationship, the term “cybernetically augmented organism” was coined, short: “cyborg.”<sup>6</sup>

In my lifetime, authorship has thus changed categorically. What had to be achieved with analog materials and pre-industrial technology, tediously and linearly, can now be done with digital technology through iterative trial-and-error processes. As a result, writing and most media production evolved from ‘serious’ work—necessarily concerned with the economical use of time and other scarce resources—to a spontaneous, almost ludic activity, i.e., from material craft work to immaterial knowledge work. The author, formerly an individual artisan, has become a digitally networked cyborg.<sup>7</sup>

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4 See for the term *Knowledge Worker* Drucker, Peter F.: *Post-Capitalist Society*, New York NY: HarperBusiness 1993. And for the term *Symbolic Analyst* Reich, Robert B.: *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st-Century Capitalism*, New York: A.A. Knopf 1991.

5 Licklider, J. C. R.: “Man-Computer Symbiosis,” in: *IRE Transactions on Human Factors in Electronics*, March, 1960, pp. 4–11, <http://www.memex.org/licklider.pdf>

6 Clynes, Manfred/Kline, Nathan: “Cyborgs and Space (\*1960),” in: Gray, Chris Hables (ed.), *The Cyborg Handbook*, New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 29-34.

7 About the cyborgization of authorship see below chapter *VI Digital Authorship: The Ludic Cyborg*.

Analyzing this digitalization of authorship in its phases and details would be a worthwhile endeavor. My intention here, however, is different. I seek to situate the latest transformations in the overall history of authorship.

## II PRE-INDUSTRIAL AUTHORSHIP: THE INDIVIDUAL ARTISAN

Two peculiar ideas unthought over millennia of human civilization form the legal basis of authorship: first, the notion that, in this world, there is intangible property, and second, the notion that there is inalienable property. Both ideas are inherently secular and individualistic and emerged in the early modern era. The production of media, of course, dates back much further. About 5000 years ago, writing systems were invented. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” proclaims the Gospel of John.<sup>8</sup> From Judaism to Islam, dozens of religions codified their mythologies in holy books that presumably contained the proclamations of the respective gods received and documented by humans. The origin of the term author and its usage in early modernity reflect this typical belief of pre-modern “book religions.”<sup>9</sup>

Author, like authority, derives from the Latin *augere*, meaning to ‘make’ and ‘increase.’<sup>10</sup> However, according to Christian mythology, only God could ‘make’ in the creative, creating sense. All knowledge was God’s knowledge. Human

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8 N.N.: *The Holy Bible, Revised Atandard Cersion, Containing the Old and New Testaments*, Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers 1982, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/rsv/rsv-idx?type=DIV1&byte=4926419>

9 Cf. Lang, Bernhard: “Buchreligion,” in: Cancik, Hubert / Gladigow, Burkhard / Laubscher / Stuttgart, Matthias Samuel (eds.), *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*: Kohlhammer 1990, pp. 143-165.

10 Cf. author: “c. 1300, autor ‘father,’ from Old French auctor, acteur ‘author, originator, creator, instigator’ (12c., Modern French auteur), from Latin auctorem (nominative auctor) ‘enlarger, founder, master, leader,’ literally ‘one who causes to grow,’ agent noun from auctus, past participle of augere ‘to increase’ (see augment). Meaning ‘one who sets forth written statements’ is from late 14c.,” [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=author&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0:](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=author&allowed_in_frame=0:)—Cf. authority: “early 13c., autorité ‘book or quotation that settles an argument,’ from Old French auctorité ‘authority, prestige, right, permission, dignity, gravity; the Scriptures’ (12c.; Modern French autorité), from Latin auctoritatem (nominative auctoritas) ‘invention, advice, opinion, influence, command,’ from auctor ‘master, leader, author’ (see author (n.))” ([http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=authority](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=authority))

scribes could only ‘increase’ God’s glory by copying, compiling, and editing His words and rarely by original contributions. Thus, the Christian Middle Ages didn’t link the manual production of texts—as well as images and sounds—necessarily to individuals and their talents. Most media production remained collective and anonymous as part of ecclesiastical and secular institutions. Only the cultural and technological changes that ushered in the Renaissance initiated human authorship’s complex and protracted emergence.

## 1 Social and Cultural Origins of Individual Authorship

The fusion of antiquity’s ‘rediscovered’ scientific knowledge with the existing advanced medieval craft practices triggered the transition into the modern era. New technological practices evolved, from compass-based high-sea navigation to pump-improved mining, calculated scaffolding in building and banking based on advanced accounting methods, to daily routines organized around accurate time-keeping introduced by the mechanical clockwork. The penetration of new technology into almost all areas of life initiated the first phase of the division of labor and, with it, the emergence of a new middle class between the feudal nobility and the serfs and peasants: artisans and shopkeepers, merchants and bankers, architects, engineers, and military experts for firearms, humanists, natural scientists, scholars, and artists.

This professionalization correlated with the general transition of Western societies from a subsistence to a money or market economy. The number of men and women who had sufficient education, income, and leisure time to consume cultural goods grew. Most of them lived and worked in cities, the rising centers of producing goods and art, trading, and exchanging information. Of course, most authors also belonged to this urban and literate bourgeois middle class.

The social and economic change was matched by a cultural awakening. With the Renaissance—*la rinascita*, the vision of a rebirth of classical culture<sup>11</sup>—a steady process of secularization set in and the development of humanistic thought with it. At its very core were this-worldly human interests. Secular human-centeredness drove the scientific revolution and the subsequent increase of technical command of nature, which soon did not consider any other needs besides the needs of *Homo sapiens*. In political terms, the “grand narrative”<sup>12</sup> of bourgeois

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11 The term *la rinascita* (“rebirth”) was first used by Vasari, Giorgio: *The Lives of the Artists*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press 1998 [\*1550].

12 Cf. Lyotard, Jean-François: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984 [\*1979].



humanism was associated with the desire for self-determination, economically with self-reliance, culturally with self-realization, and artistically with self-expression. Humanism fostered the rise of the bourgeoisie between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, culminating in the demands for democratic freedom in the American and French Revolutions. Yuval Noah Harari calls humanism “the dominant world religion”: It “worships humanity, and expects humanity to play the part that God played in Christianity and Islam, and that the laws of nature played in Buddhism and Daoism.”<sup>13</sup>

In the early modern period, one implication of humanism was individualization. Although the term itself was not coined until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century—and with pejorative intent—the process commenced as early as the Renaissance.<sup>14</sup> Procuring individual experiences, mainly three new media based on mechanical technology, initiated and reinforced individualism. First, the crystal mirror, invented and popularized around 1300, allowed self-control and personal stylization for the first time.<sup>15</sup> In it, modern humans gained their self-image. “Whereas in early medieval times, you defined yourself by your household or guild or church or relation to the Lord, the self-consciousness offered by mirrors (and their aesthetic offspring, portraiture) turned people more individually conscious.”<sup>16</sup> Through the cosmetic corrections the owners of—expensive—mirrors made and the behavioral changes they rehearsed on their interactive likeness, they became individuals in the modern sense, one and unique. Likewise, the linear perspective, established in architecture and painting since the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, created views of the material world that presented objective reality from a subjective perspective. Realistic perspectival images of human beings promoted the essential part of the bourgeoisification that Jacob Burckhardt characterized as the “development of

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13 Harari, Yuval N.: *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, New York, NY: Harper, Kindle Edition 2017, loc. 1403 and 3816.

14 Lukes, Steven M.: “Individualism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 10, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/individualism>

15 Cf. Melchior-Bonnet, Sabine: *The Mirror: A History*, New York: Routledge 2001; Pendergrast, Mark: *Mirror Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection*, New York: Basic Books 2004; Mortimer, Ian: *Millennium: From Religion to Revolution—How Civilization Has Changed Over a Thousand Years*, New York: Pegasus Books 2016.

16 Baer, Drake: “Mirrors Turned People Into Individualists,” in: *The Cut*, November 11, 2016, <https://www.thecut.com/2016/11/mirrors-turned-people-into-individualists.html>

the individual.”<sup>17</sup> Werner Jung thus speaks of “the construction of the isolated individual, of an autonomous subject which relates completely to himself and cultivates his own inner values.”<sup>18</sup>

The third and most decisive medial element in the evolution of individualism and authorship was the invention of letterpress printing with movable type in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. As a medium, print created, as McLuhan stated in the subtitle of his classic study on the birth of the modern world, a new social character, the “typographic man.”<sup>19</sup> To printings formative power, McLuhan attributes, among other things, the rise and imposition of Protestantism, secularization, capitalism, and nationalism.

## 2 The Reproducibility Dilemma

Suddenly, writers—called authors in English since the late 14<sup>th</sup> century and German since the late 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>20</sup>—faced a historically new and contemporarily unique dilemma. The material works of artists, such as manuscripts, paintings, or sculptures, had always been protected as it was generally punishable to steal property. However, it had been accepted traditionally to copy books or paintings if someone was willing and able to do so. After all, manually making a copy was hardly less labor-intensive and costly than producing the original. In Roman antiquity, slaves did the copying and monks in the Christian Middle Ages. With

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17 Burckhardt, Jacob: *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Vienna, London: Phaidon Press; George Allen & Unwin 1937 [\*1867], <https://archive.org/details/civilizationofre0000burc/>

18 Jung, Werner: *Von der Mimesis zur Simulation: Eine Einführung in die Geschichte der Ästhetik*, Hamburg: Junius 1995, pp. 50f. My translation.

19 McLuhan, Marshall: *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1962.—My outline of the print medium’s development in the remainder of this chapter follows McLuhan’s classic work as well as Hauser, Arnold: *The Social History of Art*, London: Routledge & K. Paul 1951. Man, John: *The Gutenberg Revolution: The Story of a Genius and an Invention That Changed the World*, London: Review 2002, <https://archive.org/details/gutenbergrevolut0000manj>; Gantz, John/Rochester, Jack B.: *Pirates of the Digital Millennium: How the War over Intellectual Property is Corrupting Youth, Provoking Government Encroachment on Our Personal Freedoms, and Damaging the World’s Economy*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall/Financial Times 2005.

20 Cf. Maurer, Friedrich/Rupp, Heinz: *Deutsche Wortgeschichte: Band 1*, Berlin: Walter De Gruyter 1959, p. 359.

Gutenberg's invention, written works could be reproduced mechanically, i.e., faster and in greater numbers, and sold without the authors receiving a share of the revenues. On the other hand, book printing and the evolving book trade also opened up unprecedented opportunities to make a living as a writer. Those who financed the publications—initially printers and booksellers, and later the new profession of publishers—paid at least some money for manuscripts. The book trade soon rivaled the widespread communications network of the Catholic Church in cultural influence.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, authors gradually left the realms of patronage provided by the state, the church, or wealthy aristocratic and bourgeois families to step out into the ambivalent freedom of the market. In the beginning, those who sold their writings were considered lesser artists. Also, they continued to count, practically and legally, no more than the many other artisans who contributed to a printed matter. Insofar as not older manuscripts were simply reprinted free of charge, publishers considered authors no different from typesetters or bookbinders. Like the other crafts, they held no further rights or royalty claims. In the most developed societies of Western Europe, this opened up an ever-widening gap between the growing public influence of authors, especially those of popular books and pamphlets, on the one hand, and their economic exploitation and lack of rights on the other. However, not only authors suffered from the absence of legal protection for what we now call intellectual property.

Printers faced the problem of an entirely new form of 'piracy.' Books they had produced in the original—while paying a fixed fee to the authors—could be reprinted by others with impunity and then sold at lower prices. In a matter of years after the introduction of printing, such 'book piracy,' which dispossessed publishers and authors alike, became a Europe-wide practice and problem. The printers were fortunate, however, that their economic interests coincided with the political fears and financial greed of the state authorities. Suspicious about the social and political impact of the new medium, they wanted to control what was published (and read) in their jurisdiction, and they wanted their share of the profits. A solution to both 'problems' was found by recourse to a time-honored procedure: privileges or monopolies. Just as it had been customary for centuries to grant individual merchants the monopoly of importing certain goods in return for government fees, publishers could now acquire the privilege of printing exclusively specific titles after preliminary state censorship and in return for payments. The first book privileges were issued by the Republic of Venice in 1486 and by Great Britain in 1518. Of course, the printer's privileges did not help the authors. On the contrary, they amounted to their expropriation. The mixture of economic control and

political censorship also ran counter to the demands of the reading bourgeois public, making some works unavailable and all others more expensive.

Despite censorship and high costs, the tens of thousands of new fiction and non-fiction titles authors wrote and publishers distributed in ever-larger editions between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries profoundly shaped the everyday life and mindset of the rising bourgeoisie. While illiteracy remained the rule among Europe's total population until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reading and writing became the central qualification of bourgeois existence. Printed matter served an expanding desire for fictional and non-fictional literary products, specifically stories of individuals and their inner life. In the process, printing changed the typical reception of written matter.

Over the millennia, the loud reading of rare manuscripts dominated in public as well as in families.<sup>21</sup> Through the number of affordable copies and the increasing handiness of books, printing now promoted solitary and silent reading. The experience reinforced bourgeois individualization already by its circumstances of physical and mental seclusion. "Print is the technology of individualism," McLuhan states.<sup>22</sup> New genres further extended this effect. Above all, the bourgeois psychological novel, this emerging and increasingly popular genre of realistic mimesis, reckoned in form and content with secluded readers and their willingness to engage for a more extended period with stories that, given the breadth of their narrative arc and their tendency toward personal content, were not particularly suitable for reading aloud.

### 3 Copyright, Authors' Rights, and Human Genius

At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the wake of their growing cultural and political weight, authors experienced a second turning point in their reputation and legal status. This further rise happened in association with the bourgeois class as a whole, to which the majority of authors belonged and on whose members their writings exerted such a significant influence. Of course, a book laid the intellectual foundation, John Locke's theory of individual property.<sup>23</sup> It derived—against the

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21 Cf. M. McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 103.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

23 Locke, John: *Two Treatises of Government: In the Former, the False Principles, and Foundation of Sir Robert Filmer, and His Followers, Are Detected and Overthrown. the Latter Is an Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and the End of Civil Government*, London: A. Churchill 1690.—Locke is therefore considered to be "copyright's über-father." Mayer-Schönberger, Viktor: "In Search of the Story: Narratives

traditional claims of the church and the feudal state—secular bourgeois property rights from the human labor that transformed matter.

When adapted to cultural production, the assumption was that the labor of writers produced, in addition to the material property of the handwritten pages, also the intangible property of the specific arrangement of words. This idea was legally expressed with the first copyright legislation, the Statute of Anne, in 1710. It granted authors for their work an exclusive right of publication for a fixed period of 14 years, after which they could renew it once. Authors banned from self-publishing could sell their rights to publishers, who were then protected against unauthorized reprints.

The third and most lasting turning point happened in the context of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, which had the printed book as their central medium. In 1785, Immanuel Kant, in his theory of individual creativity, redefined the works of authors from intangible property, which, like all goods, could be sold and bought, to inalienable property, an individual creation that remains permanently bound to the person of the creator.<sup>24</sup> Shortly after, the Constitution of the United States (1788) and legislation of the French Revolution (1793)<sup>25</sup> codified “author’s rights,” securing on top of the intangible property also moral rights, i.e., the ability to control the integrity and attribution of creative works. These moral rights are personal, perpetual, inalienable, and imprescriptible. Authors cannot transfer or waive their moral rights, only assign or license their economic rights. Consequently, publishers can no longer acquire ownership of creative works—

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of Intellectual Property,” in: *Virginia Journal of Law & Technology* 10, no. 11 (2005), [http://www.vjolt.net/vol10/issue4/v10i4\\_a11-Mayer-Schonberger.pdf](http://www.vjolt.net/vol10/issue4/v10i4_a11-Mayer-Schonberger.pdf)

- 24 Kant, Emanuel (sic!): “Of the Injustice of Reprinting Books,” in: *Essays and Treatises on Moral, Political, and Various Philosophical Subjects*, Kant, Emanuel (sic!) (ed.), London: William Richardson 1798, pp. 225-239. The text was first published in 1785 (in German).
- 25 For the US, see Authors, Alliance: “Faq: Authorship and Ownership in U.S. Copyright Law,” *Authors Alliance*, May 20, 2014, <https://www.authorsalliance.org/2014/05/20/authorship-and-ownership-faq/>. Congress passed the first related bill in 1790.—For France, see Hesse, Carla: “Enlightenment Epistemology and the Laws of Authorship in Revolutionary France, 1777-1793,” in: *Representations*, Spring, 1990, pp. 109-137, here pp. 128-129, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928448>.—However, the original French legislation was not yet as clear as the American in determining moral authorial rights, rather it was “effecting an epistemologically impure and unstable legal synthesis that combined an instrumentalist notion of the public good with a theory of authorship based upon natural rights.” (p. 130).

and thus also the right to modify and resell them at will—but only time-limited exploitation rights. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most continental European countries enacted similar regulations.<sup>26</sup> Also, authors' rights eventually spread to other media, inter alia music, the visual arts, and, after quite protracted cultural struggles, the new industrial media of photography and film.

Parallel to this legal protection of authorship, social and cultural change commenced. First, between the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, artistic production—of texts, images, and sounds—stepped almost entirely out of the protective cage of patronage and into the free agency of the market, at least in the most developed Western nations. Secondly, the authors' new economic situation of having to assert themselves against competition required cultural repositioning. The reliable realization of given forms measures the quality of pure craftsmanship. Artisans follow traditions, rules, and conventions. The competitive situation of the market, however, required qualities that distinguished artists from one another more radically. A cultural idolization of individual creativity set in. The primary criterion of literary and, soon, all artistic production became uniqueness, a constant break with tradition and its rules. Around 1800, authors presented themselves—and were regarded—as creators who, like gods, generated something unique *ex nihilo*. In Weimar Classicism, they were worshiped as poet princes; in *Sturm und Drang* and Romanticism, as original geniuses.

The growing popularity and influence of authors and the defining medium of the mechanically reproduced book, which aimed at the broadest possible distribution and individual reception, demonstrated literature's adaptation to secularization, the ideology of humanism, and, particularly, the bourgeois drive to individualization—and simultaneously reinforced these processes. Authors rose to admired models of secular and humanistic individuality. At the end of the pre-modern period, their almost God-like assertion of uniqueness and geniality clearly expressed and represented the bourgeois claim to supremacy in the realm of the mind and the arts, as well as economics and politics.

Particularly in the bourgeois fight for political emancipation, literature played a crucial role. Ultimately, books—through their authors and readers—instigated the Enlightenment and industrialization that escalated literacy and the textualization of knowledge in all areas of life.

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26 In the German-speaking area first in Prussia in 1837.

### III INDUSTRIAL AUTHORSHIP: THE HIERARCHICAL COLLECTIVE OF WORKERS

The hypertrophy of individual creativity went so far as to individualize even traditionally collective artistic practices. Since the Renaissance, most successful painters had followed the model of Titian, Raphael, and others: They maintained workshops with students and assistants who, not least, helped them produce their colors, canvases, and multiple replicas of their works. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such collective practices suddenly indicated commercially compromised craftsmanship à la Hans Makart. ‘Genius’ painters like Paul Cézanne or Vincent van Gogh worked alone like literary authors using premanufactured painting utensils and materials.<sup>27</sup> However, while high culture idolized individual creatorship, the concept was undermined by the rapid industrialization of cultural wares.

#### 1 Social and Cultural Origins of Collective Authorship

Secularization and humanist individualization, the two “grand narratives” that characterized the first period of the modern era, evolved during the Enlightenment and early industrialization. Mass production, as it developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, required collectives to operate. Industrial transportation and communications technology—railroads, telegraphs, telephones, automobiles, and airplanes—made such centralized mass production possible. With it, large cities such as London, Paris, Berlin, and New York grew into metropolises with millions of inhabitants. Vast bureaucracies controlled and provided for these masses, especially security, health, and public services.

The implementation of industrial technology also initiated a second phase of the division of labor, the Taylorization of craft activities. Compulsory schooling laid the foundation for the necessary vocational training and academic education. New segments of society evolved: skilled and unskilled factory workers, engineers, technicians and mechanics, managers and professionals, administrators

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27 The return to the practice of collective production began in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially with Andy Warhol’s studio aptly named “factory.” Today, most major artists, from Jeff Koons to Maurizio Cattelan, again employ countless collaborators—which, given the orientation of copyright and author’s rights to individuals, promptly triggers litigation. Cf. Meier, Philipp: “Ein Mitarbeiter des Starkünstlers Maurizio Cattelan hat genug: Er will seinen Teil von dessen Erfolg,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, July 7, 2022, <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/maurizio-cattelans-mitarbeiter-daniel-druet-will-anerkennung-ld.1691677?reduced=true>

and bureaucrats, as well as a new breed of intellectuals: school teachers, university professors, journalists, and artists catering to the industrial masses and their growing education, information, and entertainment needs. Like their audiences, the petit bourgeoisie of blue- and white-collar workers, most authors lived and worked in the growing metropolises that became the centers of industrial fabrication and mass culture.

The transformation that resulted from the massification of social life was profound. On the one hand, secularization escalated into the certainty of permanent worldly progress of science, technology, economy, and culture. On the other hand, humanistic individualism was superimposed by the humanism of the masses. New ideologies arose—socialism and communism, nationalism and fascism—and, with them, mass movements and mass parties. In political terms, humanism was now associated with the masses' desire for self-determination, economically with mass welfare, culturally with mass education, and artistically with representations of the masses and their lives in a more or less realistic way.

Industrialization thus triggered the next phase of media history. The masses of workers who produced mass goods, the growing numbers of salaried employees who distributed and serviced them, and the expanding ranks of bureaucrats who managed mass society demanded information and entertainment en masse. The visual and audiovisual media of the pre-industrial era were hardly able to give a realistic portrayal of their lives. The experiences of the industrial cities and their traffic, the factories, the tenements, the palaces of pleasure, sports stadiums, battlefields, and other sceneries of mass work, entertainment, and murder largely eluded painting and theater.

Four new media, based on industrial technology and requiring new practices of authorship, conveyed heightened collective experiences, thus acting as mirrors of the masses. Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, photography has allowed the rapid and serial generation and copying of realistic images of people, crowds, and environments. Film—a further development of photography—captured since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century what could hardly be put on a theater stage: the rush of railroads, automobiles, and airplanes, the hectic pace of industrial life, and the intricate parallelism of events in mass societies. As Siegfried Kracauer wrote, film accomplished the “redemption of physical reality.”<sup>28</sup> Since the 1920s, radio, like telephony from which it evolved, has technified orality and extended its reach through broadcasting. Communication of news and stories so returned to pre-modern ways, including the reading aloud of literature, albeit on a mass scale.

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28 Kracauer, Siegfried: *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, New York: Oxford University Press 1960.



Finally, since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, television escalated the medial synchronization of the masses: Millions of people who watched—had to watch—the same program at the same time to be socially and culturally informed and integrated.

Increasingly, mass media shaped everyday life, its rhythms, habits, prevailing attitudes, and opinions, reinforcing massification. Particularly the broadcast media caused radical transformations: Face-to-face and peer-to-peer discourses once dominating the pre-industrial public sphere turned into mediated discourses by proxy. A unified national public consisting of few senders and many receivers replaced the diverse local and regional public spheres. Never before were works of entertainment and information so influential on so many people as in industrial mass culture—and at the same time, individual authors so powerless.

Throughout the industrial era, politics strengthened the rights of media producers. One by one, the Western industrial states abolished prior censorship and concluded international copyright treaties. A key agreement was the Berne Convention of 1887. Copyright and authors' rights were extended to new media and longer and longer periods. The primary beneficiaries, however, became the large media conglomerates that formed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century around mass printing and later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century around film, radio, and television. Their position of power resulted essentially from the complex technical requirements and high division of labor involved in the production and distribution of mass media. Individuals or small groups could neither shoulder the substantial capital investments nor did they command the variety of necessary technical skills.

## **2 The Practical Establishment of Collective Authorship**

Following the invention of the steam press at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the introduction of wood paper around the middle of the century, the mass press marked the beginning of industrial media production. Newspapers and magazines were either commercial endeavors aimed at increasing circulation, mainly through spectacular entertainment, or tied to political parties and committed to spreading their particular ideologies. Many talents and crafts had to collaborate to produce an issue. Each edition represented a collective effort. But not only did newspapers and magazines not have an individual author. All contributors had to adapt the content and style of their articles to the various editorial standards or have them adapted by editors. The mass press offered little freedom for individual authorship and introduced a new form of collective text production to the medium of print. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the new genre of news magazines derived, from this practice and policy, the consequence of not naming the articles' authors at all.

Disempowerment of individual authorship also characterized the industrial medium of film. The movie studios that sprang up in most developed nations were called dream factories for a reason: Film production followed the industrial organization of work. Like the editorial departments of the mass press, the multi-member film teams produced collectively. In pre-industrial times, the author's profession had emerged as part of the first division of labor, the formation of different crafts. Now authorship experienced the second stage of this process, i.e., Taylorization: the division of each craft into discrete work steps.

The Hollywood studios of the classic period provide a good example. During the Second World War, they employed America's and Europe's literary elite. MGM's Thalberg Building alone hosted, among others, Alfred Döblin, Alfred Polgar, Walter Mehring, Bruno Frank, Vicki Baum, Christopher Isherwood, and Aldous Huxley.<sup>29</sup> All these—well-paid—authors had to sit in their office cubicles from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., controlled by the time clock and supervised by producers. At the end of their workday, they were supposed to deliver a fixed page number of literary half-products: not complete texts but story ideas that others would draft into first versions, repeated rewrites of their own and other authors' scripts, single scenes, or dialogues.

Writing scripts in a work-sharing manner resulted from the general requirements of analog film production. Dramatic actions were no longer played out live and in continuity like on the stage but were repeatedly prerecorded in arbitrary order. After principal photography was completed, the various versions of the many parts shot were assembled into the final cut. Technical and economic reasons dictated this approach. Analog sound film was "so heterogeneous, with so many technologies woven together in a complex and expensive fabric," Walter Murch stated, "that it is almost by definition impossible for a single person to control."<sup>30</sup> The highly labor-divided production process denied all individual participants—besides the writers, also actors, cinematographers, editors, set and costume designers, make-up artists, etc.—an authorial function. Even the directors reigning on the set were little more than arrangers of people and things in front of the camera's fleeting space-time window, constrained by the material medium and

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29 Freyermuth, Gundolf S.: "Wunderkind in der Traumfabrik—Gottfried Reinhardt," *stern*, June 9, 1988, pp. 96-108, here p. 104, [https://freyermuth.com/WebsiteArchive/reprints/Archiv2009/reprint\\_Mai\\_2009/Reinhardt.html](https://freyermuth.com/WebsiteArchive/reprints/Archiv2009/reprint_Mai_2009/Reinhardt.html)

30 Murch, Walter: "The Future—A Digital Cinema Of the Mind? Could Be," *The New York Times*, May 2 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/library/film/050299future-film.html>

the studio hierarchy headed by producers, who were themselves interchangeable at any point in a production.

The industrial working conditions corresponded to the industrial aesthetics of the analog medium. In contrast to the stage, films fragment their characters. Their actors appear not holistically but in partial views and chopped-up movements. From the series of disjointed images on the silver screen, the audience must piece together the larger-than-life human beings and their actions like a jigsaw puzzle. Thus, cinematic narratives, especially their combination of perspective and montage, have a Tayloristic effect. In their dissection of the human form, film aesthetically shaped what John Ruskin already proclaimed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as the consequence of the industrial division of labor: “It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided, but the men.”<sup>31</sup>

The prototypical author created by industrial media is the collective. Mass culture essentially eliminated the freedoms of individual authorship in favor of standardized production, a process that Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in the mid-1940s denounced as the rise of the “culture industry.”<sup>32</sup> Their criticism focused on the standardization of content and forms as well as production processes. As print, radio, and TV journalists, writers of radio or screenplays, composers, graphic designers, photographers, etc., authors lost their status as self-employed individuals or independent small business owners. The culture industries forced all kinds of authors into employee and other contracts that left little creative freedom. The unequal negotiating situation, authors countered like other workers: In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they founded trade unions, guilds, and similar professional organizations, usually segregated by media, to represent them vis-à-vis the all-powerful media conglomerates, and they also went on strike from time to time.<sup>33</sup>

As Marshall McLuhan noted, industrial mass culture challenged the cultural dominance of textuality: on the one hand, in favor of a new technically mediated orality—telephone, gramophone, radio, tape recording—and on the other hand, in favor of (audio-)visual representation—silent movies, talkies, television, and

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31 Ruskin, John: *The Stones of Venice*, New York: J. Wiley 1864, p. 162f.

32 Horkheimer, Max/Adorno, Theodor W.: *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002.

33 Cf. for example: “Unlike directors and actors, writers have historically been willing to strike. The most recent strike stretched from 2007 into 2008, lasting 100 days. One in 1988 dragged on for five months.” (Barnes, Brooks: “Why There Is Talk of a Writers’ Strike in Hollywood,” in: *The New York Times*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/wga-writers-strike-hollywood.html>)

video.<sup>34</sup> In the process, the moving images and sounds captured by analog cameras and microphones replaced the literary depiction of individual introspection and sensibility, as conveyed by the bourgeois novel, poetry, essay, and even the bourgeois tragedy. Instead, the mundane and—in every sense—‘moving’ everyday life of the industrial masses became a central subject. As in production and reception, the collectives asserted themselves in the content and genres of mass media against the minority of bourgeois individuals. However, the longing for uniqueness persisted in the narrative cult of heroes and their journeys.<sup>35</sup>

### 3 The Theoretical Reflection of Collective Authorship

Parallel to the practical deconstruction of individual authorship, its intellectual and academic questioning also commenced. The new humanities and social sciences disciplines that emerged during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as part of industrialization’s academic division of labor consistently cast doubt on the sovereignty of intellectual production. From Marxist history and sociology to psychology and psychoanalytic theory, they demonstrated the dependency of individual insights or actions on external factors. The deconstruction of authorship gained particular currency in the studies of the arts and, later, media. The Russian and Czech formalism of the 1920s and 1930s mark the beginnings of its relativization, especially the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin and Roman Jakobson.<sup>36</sup> Also, in 1934, during his pre-war exile in Paris, Walter Benjamin noted, in an address that he probably never gave, “The Author as Producer,” that the reader, as an expert in his profession, “gains access to authorship. Work itself has its turn to speak.”<sup>37</sup> This change, Benjamin predicted, “revises even the distinction between author and reader.”<sup>38</sup> At the same time, Paul Valéry proposed—reminiscent of de Condorcet’s 18<sup>th</sup>-

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34 M. McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

35 Campbell, Joseph: *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Novato, Calif.: New World Library 2008 [\*1949].

36 Cf. Bakhtin, M. M.: *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press 1981 [\*1934-1941]; Bakhtin, M. M.: *Rabelais and His World*, Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press 1968 [\*1940]; Jakobson, Roman: *Language in Literature*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press 1987 [\*1919-1979].

37 Benjamin, Walter: “The Author as Producer,” in: *Selected Writings*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999, pp. 768-782.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 772.

century deliberations—writing literary history without authors’ names.<sup>39</sup> In the USA, New Criticism developed, insisting on the immanent interpretation of literary works and rejecting the recourse to authors’ intentions as a fallacy.<sup>40</sup>

The crisis of individual authorship—increasingly considered a romantic idea—continued to escalate after World War II, with the passage from modernity into postmodernity. Its denunciation significantly impacted French structuralism as well as Umberto Eco’s 1960s theorem of the closed (art) work’s end and the ensuing end of authors’ dominance over the form and reception of texts.<sup>41</sup> Anti-authorship impulses also informed, in high culture, a series of artistic experiments aimed at reducing the role of the author and opening up literary works to less pre-determined modes of reception. For example, writers Raymond Queneau and Francois Le Lionnais founded *Oulipo*, a “workshop for potential literature,” in 1960.<sup>42</sup> Its central goal was to limit authorial freedom through formal constraints. And in 1961, Marc Saporta published his *Composition No. 1*, consisting of 150 unnumbered pages delivered in a box to be read in any order without direction from the author.<sup>43</sup>

The cultural turning point came with poststructuralism. Its abandonment of the concept of individual authorship, i.e., of subjective intentions, talents, and passions, resulted from a new understanding of textuality. Poststructuralism conceived works of all media—as well as culture in toto—as texts, and all texts as no longer autonomous but as interfaces of discourses, as montages and collages of non-original elements. Eight decades earlier, Nietzsche’s dictum that God was dead, killed by the Enlightenment, had replaced the Christian God with the creative human individual—the author. Now, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault proclaimed the “death of the author”: Barthes in favor of the recipients, Foucault in favor of cultural discourses.<sup>44</sup>

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39 Cf. Gilleßen, Maximilian: “Das Relais der Kunst,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, February 3, 2023. For Condorcet see C. Hesse: “Enlightenment Epistemology and the Laws of Authorship,” pp. 116f.

40 Ransom, John Crowe: *The New Criticism*, Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions 1941.

41 Eco, Umberto: *The Open Work*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1989 [\*1962].

42 Oulipo is short for “Ouvroir de littérature potentielle,” i.e., “workshop for potential literature.”

43 Saporta, Marc: *Composition no. 1, a Novel*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1963 [\*1961].

44 Barthes, Roland: “The Death of the Author,” in: *Aspen Magazine*, Fall-Winter, 1967, <http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes>; Foucault, Michel:

In summary, the industrial age completed what began during the Renaissance: the cultural establishment and legal protection of the complex concept of individual authorship based on creating immaterial and inalienable properties. At the same time, however, emerging new industrial mass media, particularly the mass press, film, radio, and TV, undermined this concept. The practical reality of cultural production institutionalized new forms of collective authorship based on the division of labor—on the margins of the existing legal framework and contrary to the culturally prevailing values and prejudices. In parallel, numerous academic disciplines and intellectual schools of thought, particularly poststructuralism, deconstructed the cult of individual genius to the point of challenging the possibility of human authorship altogether.

#### **IV APPROPRIATED AUTHORSHIP: THE RISE OF THE CHIEF ARTISTIC OFFICER**

The historical process, however, did not proceed as linearly as sketched. The two-fold—practical and theoretical—challenge to individual authorship stirred up resistance that dragged on for decades. In retrospect, most discussions and conflicts centered on power struggles between authors in the pre-industrial sense and the ascendant representatives of a new aesthetic management necessitated by the increasing complexity in the production of mass culture and, in particular, of auditive and audiovisual works. This development in media production can be compared to the formation of similar functions in the management of other industries—Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), or Chief Technology Officer (CTO). By analogy, I propose the term Chief Artistic Officer (CAO).

In classical music, the function of the conductor arose from the need to organize the interplay of ever larger and more diverse orchestras. The beginning is usually dated to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony because orchestras could hardly perform it without appropriate direction. Wagner's formal principle then became that he composed "conductors' music," as Adorno stated.<sup>45</sup> Something similar was

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"What Is an Author?," in: *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, New York: New Press, Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1998 [\*1969], pp. 205-222.

45 Cited after Spice, Nicholas: "Theirs and No One Else's: Conductors' Music," *London Review of Books*, March 16, 2023, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n06/nicholas->

evident in the theater. The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed “the rise of the director”—whose role among the many members of theater companies until then had been more of an organizational stage manager—to dictatorial original genius.<sup>46</sup> In the German-speaking world, larger-than-life figures such as Max Reinhardt and Erwin Piscator exemplify this change. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the development escalated to the so-called “director’s theater”: “The dominant creative force in today’s theater is the director. No longer just an organizer, directors are now considered artists in their own right.”<sup>47</sup> In director’s theater, the dramatic texts—of classic and contemporary playwrights—no longer serve as authoritative blueprints but as starting points for far-reaching changes and further evolutions. The directors assert individual authorship for rewriting and rearranging existing plays according to their ideas.<sup>48</sup>

A comparable development unfolded in the film industry. As a reaction to the collectivization of authorship in the big factory-like studios, the claim arose in post-war France that directors should be considered the actual authors of a film. Alexandre Astruc’s essay “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo,” published in 1948, provided the theoretical basis.<sup>49</sup> The central metaphor of the camera-pen emphasized, in a clear parallel to literary and painterly authorship, that filmmakers could use the camera to write or paint thoughts and ideas in light. “Direction is no longer a means of illustrating or presenting a scene, but a true act of writing,” Astruc stated: “The filmmaker-author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen.”<sup>50</sup> From the early 1950s onward, André Bazin’s journal *Cahier du Cinema* advocated that directors—and not screenwriters or producers

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spice/theirs-and-no-one-else-s. See also Adorno, Theodor W.: *In Search of Wagner*, London; New York: Verso 2005.

46 Bradby, David/Williams, David: *Directors’ Theatre*, New York: St. Martin’s Press 1988, pp. 3ff.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

48 This indicates the path to postdramatic theater, which does not rely anymore on a dramatic text as the main source of meaning and expression. Cf. Lehmann, Hans-Thies: *Postdramatic Theatre*, London, New York: Routledge 2006 [\*1999].

49 Astruc, Alexandre: “The Birth of a New Avant Garde: La Caméra-Stylo (France, 1948),” in: Scott, MacKenzie (ed.), *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014 [\*1948], pp. 603-607.

50 Graham, Peter: *The New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday 1968, p. 22.

or cinematographers—were responsible for this writing in light.<sup>51</sup> The American film critic Andrew Sarris summarized the assertion under the term “auteur theory.”<sup>52</sup> At its core is “the belief that a director is most centrally responsible for a film’s form, style, and meanings.”<sup>53</sup> Some *Cahiers du Cinema* writers, notably Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, tried to redeem this directorial claim to sole authorship in their *French Wave* films.

Parallel efforts affected West German film and television during the 1960s and 1970s. Filmmakers of the *New German Cinema*, such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, Alexander Kluge, and Wim Wenders, sought sole authorship, mainly by combining the roles of scriptwriter, director, and sometimes even producer. Public television financed most of their films. Over the years, the influence of the young advocates of a director’s cinema altered authorship not only in the film industry but also television. At that time, the West German public broadcasting system—in the 1950s a monopoly of the First Program (ARD), in the 1960s an oligopoly of the First and Second Programs (ZDF) and regional Third Programs—operated largely free of economic constraints. Funded by compulsory license fees, their budgets automatically grew with each TV set sold. The acquiring editors were tenured and made production decisions according to criteria that were more patronage-based than commercially oriented. Moreover, in its early days, public television organized the production of its audiovisual content in a writer-centered manner:

“Television emerged in the broadcasting institutions from radio. The people employed there at the time were suddenly told: We no longer work only with microphones, but also with cameras. They had previously created radio plays, and now they were creating television plays. But radio plays had always been writers’ plays. Directors had a lesser role in radio plays. There’s not much to do: You can talk with the actors about accents or mix in some music. But this creative diversity, which exists in the optical medium of film, does not exist.

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51 Though the editor-in-chief Andre Bazin always stayed skeptical of the “politique des auteurs.”

52 Sarris, Andrew: “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,” in: Mast, Gerald/Cohen, Marshall (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979 [\*1962], pp. 650–665.

53 Thompson, Kristin/Bordwell, David: *Film History: An Introduction*, New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Higher Education 2009, p. 492.



In that respect, the writer was in the foreground. That was first transferred to television. Then it was called 'a film by' and the 'by' was the writer."<sup>54</sup>

The working conditions described by producer Günter Rohrbach for the 1950s and 1960s changed throughout the 1970s. The turning point can be identified with some precision using the example of two TV plays written by award-winning author Wolfgang Menge and commissioned by Günter Rohrbach as head of television drama at the WDR, ARD's largest regional subnetwork. In 1969, director Eberhard Itzenplitz filmed *DIE DUBROW KRISE*.<sup>55</sup> The credits stated, as usual, a film "by Wolfgang Menge." One year later, director Tom Toelle filmed *DAS MILLIONENSPIEL*.<sup>56</sup> The credits said: "A film by Wolfgang Menge and Tom Toelle." In the following decades, the writer's medium of television turned into a 'director's medium. Günter Rohrbach described the changed practices in 2014:

"In the German television play and the German series, we have [...] a director's television. You don't know the writers at all. As a result, they are unhappy and also lose commitment. Someone writes a script, then a director comes and puts that into motion, and the writer disappears. He no longer exists at all. Of course, that's not exactly an incentive for someone to make a life decision to become a writer—only to disappear into the anonymity of a medium dominated by entirely different names and functions."<sup>57</sup>

During the 1960s and 1970s, in the Hollywood studio system, directors started to struggle for individual authorship, too. In their uprising against the 'old' Hollywood, the baby boomer rebels, many of them first-generation film school graduates, used auteur theory, which in Europe was going from being a battle cry to a term for the status quo, as an ideological weapon. Francis Ford Coppola operated at the forefront of this culture war: "From the very start of his career, Coppola attempted to balance his desire for creative autonomy with an ambition to make

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54 Rohrbach, Günter: "'Wolfgang Menge war mein erster Autor.' Im Gespräch mit Gundolf S. Freyermuth und Lisa Gotto," in: Freyermuth, Gundolf S./Gotto, Lisa (eds.), *Der Televisionär: Wolfgang Menges transmediales Werk: Kritische und dokumentarische Perspektiven*, Bielefeld: transcript 2016, pp. 515-522, here pp. 518-19. My translation.

55 *DIE DUBROW KRISE* (Germany 1969, S: Wolfgang Menge, D: Eberhard Itzenplitz)

56 *DAS MILLIONENSPIEL* (Germany 1970, S: Wolfgang Menge, D: Tom Toelle)

57 G. Rohrbach: "'Wolfgang Menge war mein erster Autor,'" p. 519.

big, important movies.”<sup>58</sup> The result was “a decade-long series of confrontations and conciliations with the major studios regarding authorship, control, and cash.”<sup>59</sup> The victory that Coppola and several others of the most successful *New Hollywood* directors won—at least temporarily—over the established studio system was owed in no small measure to its internal weakening. In the 1970s, non-film companies took over several major studios. “The authority these days is almost always shared with people who have no business being producers and studio executives,” Coppola stated in 1975. “With one or two exceptions, there is no one running the studios who’s qualified, either, so you have a vacuum, and the director has to fill it.”<sup>60</sup>

In analog film production, however, individual authorship—whether of writers, producers, or directors—could only be gained by usurping the achievements of others. Even successful auteurs like Coppola could justifiably not associate a cinematic work entirely with their name. The auteur theory was an aspiration but never the reality, as Jon Lewis described:

“The authorship of major studio films evolves over a period of years. The actual production of a motion picture begins only after a series of industrial concerns—the acquisition of adequate financing, the optioning of a screenplay, casting, and so on—are finally settled. And even then, film production involves far more than just creative concerns. Even a director with as much of a stake in controlling the product as Coppola is forced to develop each picture through a series of negotiations, and what ends up on the screen is not only a miracle of persistence and inspiration but also the result of certain practical concessions to the limitations of the studio system.”<sup>61</sup>

In summary, the period of transformation between two historical forms of authorship, the individual and the collective, allowed in auditive and audiovisual media for a simulation of individual authorship in collective production: the hypertrophic self-empowerment of self-appointed auteurs. What was originally an activity of managing the different trades’ artistic contributions—conducting or directing—claimed increasingly creative power and, finally, authorship. On the one hand, such autocratic leadership can be compared to the roles of CEOs in industrial corporations: conductors and directors act as CAOs, i.e., Chief Artistic Officers. On

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58 Lewis, Jon: *Whom God Wishes to Destroy ...: Francis Coppola and the New Hollywood*, Durham: Duke University Press 1995, p. 11.

59 Ibid.

60 Murray, William: “Playboy Interview: Francis Ford Coppola,” *Playboy*, July 1, 1975, <https://www.playboy.com/read/the-playboy-interview-with-francis-ford-coppola>

61 J. Lewis: *Whom God Wishes to Destroy*, pp. 3-4.

the other hand, the public's and critics' quick acceptance of such 'authorship via management' shows the rise of the CAO to be a counter-reaction to, and ideological correction of, the creeping industrial collectivization and anonymization. Jim Hillier noted: "Given the dominance of modernism in the other arts, and particularly developments in literature and literary criticism that rejected Romantic forms and Romantic views of the artist, the establishment of the idea of authorship [in film ...] could be seen as a retrogressive step."<sup>62</sup>

In this late 20<sup>th</sup>-century situation of unresolved conflicts between the collective-hierarchical organization of large parts of cultural production and the appropriation of the results by individuals, entirely new, digital means of media production became available. They were to change authorship more radically than ever before.

## V POSTINDUSTRIAL AUTHORSHIP: THE DISTRIBUTED NETWORK OF DIGITAL KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

Already in 1962, Marshall McLuhan emphasized the influence of the new electronic media: "Instead of tending towards a vast Alexandrian Library the world has become a computer, an electronic brain."<sup>63</sup> Networked digital labor and communication—in McLuhan's words: "electronic interdependence"<sup>64</sup>—started replacing the individualistic culture of letterpress printing. Consequently, a third variant of authorship evolved in addition to the "typographic man" and single author and the hierarchical industrial collective.

### 1 Social and Cultural Origins of Distributed Authorship

The technological foundation of digital production and culture was laid in the late 1940s. John von Neumann conceived the virtualization of tools and devices (programs), and Claude Elwood Shannon that of materials and storage media (files).<sup>65</sup>

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62 Hillier, Jim: "Auteur Theory and Authorship," in: Grant, Barry Keith (ed.), *Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film*, Detroit: Schirmer Reference 2007, pp. 141-151, here p. 149.

63 M. McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 32.

64 Ibid., p. 31.

65 Cf. Neumann, John von: "First Draft of a Report on the EDVAC," (1945), <http://www.histech.rwth-aachen.de/www/quellen/vnedvac.pdf>;  
Shannon, Claude Elwood: "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," in: *The Bell System Technical Journal* Vol. 27, July / October (1948), pp. 379-423, 623-656.

The outlines of new media practices and, thus, new forms of authorship began to surface a couple of decades after this categorical separation of hard- and software was accomplished. Bit by bit, the virtual production and manipulation of media—texts, sounds, graphics, and moving images—became technically feasible.

For a third time in modern history, the rise of new technology gave rise to a new class of professionals who developed and used the latest means and techniques to their economic advantage: hardware engineers and software programmers, IT entrepreneurs and venture capitalists, system and web administrators, network and satellite technicians, specialists for IT-support or e-commerce, CGI-animators, CAD- and video game designer, scientists working in new fields like robotics, Artificial Intelligence, genetics, superconductivity or nanotechnology and, of course, a new sort of scholars and intellectuals who study and analyze the societal, psychological, and cultural effects of the current transition from industrial to digital civilization.

Around 1960, Peter F. Drucker observed this change and also new forms of work in the established professions. He subsumed both under the term “knowledge work” and traced the swift rise of “knowledge workers” in the following decades.<sup>66</sup> In contrast to labor in the material world, knowledge work mainly occurs in virtuality. Whether writing or illustrating texts, doing financial planning or stock market trading, designing architecture or a new consumer product, editing a film, or developing a game—knowledge workers have in common that they create value by analyzing and manipulating virtual symbols on screens. In the 1990s, thus, Robert Reich spoke of “symbolic analysts” and Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein of a “virtual class” whose members are “dependent for their economic support on the drive to virtualization.”<sup>67</sup> In 2002, Richard Florida proposed for knowledge workers in science and technology, business and management, arts, culture media, and entertainment, who are a central force in post-industrial economies, the term “creative class.”<sup>68</sup>

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Online reprinted with corrections from *The Bell System Technical Journal*, <http://cm.bell-labs.com/cm/ms/what/shannonday/paper.html>

66 Drucker used the term “knowledge work” first in 1959, the term “knowledge worker” first in 1967. Cf. Drucker, Peter F.: *Landmarks of Tomorrow: A Report on the New ‘Post-modern’ World*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers 1996 [\*1959]; Drucker, Peter F.: *The Effective Executive*, London: Heinemann 1967.

67 Kroker, Arthur and Michael A. Weinstein: *Data Trash: The Theory of the Virtual Class*, CultureTexts, New York: St. Martin's Press 1994, p. 15.

68 Florida, Richard L.: *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, New York: Basic Books 2002.

The virtualization of work and consumption that began in the 1960s received its decisive thrust with the implementation and popularization of digital networking through the Internet and the World Wide Web in the last two decades of the century. The once pervasive influence of analog broadcast media—of its schedules and standardized content—was waning. The old analog electronic networks overlaying city life and remote controlling it in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were replaced by a new virtual, i.e., software-based infrastructure produced by the spatialization of virtuality as well as by the virtualization of space. Mass-mediated proxy participation slowly gave way to virtual involvement. Decentralized and distributed forms of virtual collaboration between highly-specialized knowledge workers evolved, specifically in media production. With the new modes of work and entertainment, authorship practices also started to change.

During industrialization, the transformation of artistic work became most evident in the medium of film. Walter Benjamin noted that the montage of running images effected a series of shocks that corresponded to the experiences of urban life and machine work: “The film is the art form that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face.”<sup>69</sup> Film and later television expressed the life of the industrial masses and trained their sensorium for industrial reality. In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, games took on this role that film once possessed: familiarization with a new world and form of existence. As the moving images related to factory work, the navigations and decisions of digital games relate to knowledge work. Their iterative calls to action virtually mirror the demands of digital work and culture. And just as film required and developed a new form of authorship in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the new medium of software and the genre of digital games were formative in the last decades.

Software, in general, demanded different modes of production and distribution than hardware. In addition, the transmedia genre of games posed special requirements. On the one hand, these were similar to those of the older linear audiovisual media theater, film, or television. Like them, game development must combine and integrate highly specialized artistic and technical talents. On the other hand, the multilinear audiovisual narratives of digital games are generated virtually and allow for meaningful interactions. Since the 1960s, three components emerged in software development, especially in the burgeoning games industry, that gave rise to a third variant of authorship.

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69 W. Benjamin: “The Work of Art,” p. 26, footnote 19.

## 2 The Open Knowledge Work

The first step was the transition from craft work to knowledge work, as described above by the example of authoring texts.<sup>70</sup> Standardized machine cycles do not longer set the pace. Knowledge workers are neither cogs in the industrial machinery nor solitary artisans. This—in comparison to industrialization—radical restoration of autonomous work demands the individual as a universal machine that, as Manuel Castells suggested, is “self-programmable” and gains in capability with each new task solved.<sup>71</sup> Over the last decades, knowledge work has grown to be a leading source of economic value generation, especially in the so-called ‘creative industries.’<sup>72</sup>

The economic importance brought about cultural and behavioral changes. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the contradiction between work ethics and play ethics, which industrial rationality presupposed and existed in factories and bureaucracies, started to dissolve to the same extent as the Gutenberg Galaxy. Today, knowledge workers create value through self-determined, explorative, experimental, and, most importantly, playful interactions with virtual symbols, i.e., software programs and files. The production of digital games was based on such knowledge work from the very beginning. However, other areas of media production, which had relied primarily on analog craftsmanship, have now transformed into digital knowledge work as well—in film, for example, the creation of special effects or the central processes of editing images and sound.

Another essential element that characterizes knowledge work is an interconnected, interactive, and largely egalitarian collaboration of individuals that only became possible with the digitization of media and networking. In contrast to works of analog culture like books, paintings, photographs, or movies, pieces of

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70 See above chapter *I Introspection: The Last Fifty Years*.

71 Cf. “Self-programmable labour is equipped with the ability to retrain itself, and adapt to new tasks, new processes and new sources of information [...]” (Castells, Manuel: “Materials for an Exploratory Theory of The Network Society,” in: *British Journal of Sociology*, January/March, 2000, pp. 5–24, here p. 12.)

72 Cf. P. F. Drucker: *Post-Capitalist Society*, p. 8. “The central wealth-creating activities will be neither the allocation of capital to productive uses, nor ‘labor’—the two poles of nineteenth- and twentieth-century economic theory whether classical, Marxist, Keynesian, or neo-classical. Value is now created by ‘productivity’ and ‘innovation,’ both applications of knowledge to work.”—Drucker’s theory, and especially the concept of knowledge work, gained influence over the past quarter century as the digital reorganization of economic life progressed.

software are, in principle, always ‘unfinished’ in the sense of Umberto Eco’s *Open Work*.<sup>73</sup> Programs and files can be continuously and arbitrarily expanded and modified through updates and add-ons.<sup>74</sup> The technological openness inherent in all software corresponds to an aesthetic openness of digital artifacts. While the first forms of software have existed since the 1950s—the term was coined in 1959<sup>75</sup>—the digitization of audiovisual media dates to the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Digital networking has only been available to most people since the mid-1990s. Around the turn of the century, Barry Wellman termed the result “networked individualism.”<sup>76</sup> From it, new creativity arises, which is neither individual nor collective but distributed. The individuals involved don’t have to collaborate in traditional ways anymore, i.e., hierarchically organized and at the same place or at the same time. Instead, they act as nodes in a network of peers. Thus, virtualization has enabled a historically new form of authorship: the collaboration of individuals who design, write, produce, modify, and update transmedia projects largely independently of one another and without spatial and temporal constraints.

This distributed creativity is not limited to professionals. It also concerns what used to be the later process of reception. User-centered design is complemented by user-driven design or even user-generated design. The propensity of future consumers to get involved in design processes is essentially due to the fact that design in digital culture no longer concerns artifacts alone but the shaping and enhancement of real and virtual experiences. Amateurs and fans, readers, viewers, players, and users—precisely “the people formerly known as the audience”<sup>77</sup>—increasingly participate in creative processes. Over the last quarter century, very different forms of such ‘amateur’ contributions have evolved. They range from various interaction opportunities built into games or transmedia worlds to simple interventions to planned or unplanned co-authorship through user-generated content—

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73 U. Eco: *The Open Work*.

74 As soon as books or films become digital, they are no less open in terms of technological principle. In artistic practice, however, this new affordance is so far hardly exploited.

75 Cf. Leonhardt, David: “John Tukey, 85, Statistician; Coined the Word ‘Software’,” in: *The New York Times*, July 28, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/07/28/us/john-tukey-85-statistician-coined-the-word-software.html>

76 Cited after Castells, Manuel: *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press 2001, p. 132.

77 Rosen, Jay: “The People Formerly Known as the Audience,” *press think*, June 27, 2006, [http://archive.prsstink.org/2006/06/27/pp1\\_frmr.html](http://archive.prsstink.org/2006/06/27/pp1_frmr.html)

add-ons, mods, mashups, remixes, machinima, fan cuts, fan fiction, *Let's-Play-Videos*, etc.<sup>78</sup>.

These developments, and particularly the emergence of a new “participatory culture,”<sup>79</sup> questioned once more the culturally still dominating idea of single or collective authorship, i.e., of individual or corporate ownership of intellectual property. Consequently, the 1990s saw new copyright wars. On the one hand, their origins can be traced to these user claims and interventions; on the other hand, the historically unique circumstance that works in the software medium can be copied without generational loss and distributed globally via digital networks. The conflict culminated in the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) of 1998, strengthening corporate control once again.

### 3 Authorship By Design

The third fundamental change that the transition from material to virtual creation brought about is a shift from text-based conception and linear modes of development to design practices. Any real-world production’s starting point usually combines precise and typically written plans and signed contracts. In film development, for example, the script and secured financing are prerequisites for the following steps: casting, location scouting or set design, determining the technical requirements, and so on. The transmedium of software permits the abandonment of such sequential order. Design practices—especially cyclical iteration and prototyping—can replace linear procedures and finalized financing.<sup>80</sup>

What we call design originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the early days of industrial manufacturing, to evolve functional models for mass production. In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the established analog practices underwent a digital upgrade.<sup>81</sup> The iterative steps of designing the product or work must happen early in material fabrication. In virtual development, however, the arrow of time has only a limited effect. Software products can be developed, produced, and even

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78 See Curtis, Joanna/Oxburgh, Gavin/Briggs, Pam: “Heroes and Hooligans: The Heterogeneity of Video Game Modders,” in: *Games and Culture* 0 (0) (2021), pp. 1–25.

79 Jenkins, Henry: *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, New York: New York University Press 2006.

80 Unlike film production, it is quite common in digital game development to produce prototypes—as a vertical or horizontal slice—and then seek funding for the actual production on that basis.

81 Freyermuth, Gundolf S.: *Games | Game Design | Game Studies: An Introduction*, Bielefeld: transcript 2015, pp. 153-159.



distributed entirely with iterative design practices. Moreover, the digital trans-medium allows for escalating these techniques, for example, the acceleration ('rapid prototyping') and reuse of essential elements for further prototypes or even end products ('evolutionary prototyping').

Since the turn of the century, design practices have penetrated almost all areas of digital media production. A particularly significant role they gained in game development. Unlike the older audiovisual media of theater, film, and television, games do not offer prefabricated narratives but rather "systems of interaction," as Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman have noted.<sup>82</sup> Designers craft these systems and prefigure their use in varying degrees, not least from genre to genre. Nevertheless, the design of games almost always aims not at the audiovisual representation of actions in their temporal sequences but at the provision of procedures that are first to be realized in the act of playing: "The game designer only indirectly designs the player's experience, by directly designing the rules."<sup>83</sup> Therefore, game development is not about creating a text in the narrower or broader sense but about narrative spaces and possibilities for action. Henry Jenkins speaks of "story architecture" and designers as "narrative architects [...] privileging spatial exploration over plot development."<sup>84</sup> Authorship thus turns from writing stories to designing, for example, 'narrative corridors' that players can traverse and experience with a certain range of variation in their—iterative—efforts to get from A to B.

A particularly far-reaching variant of this 'authorship by design' is constructing open worlds that can be arbitrarily navigated and manipulated in real time. Such world-building is not an entirely new practice in the history of the arts.<sup>85</sup> Literature strove to capture dying worlds, as, for example, Honoré de Balzac undertook with the *Comédie Humaine*.<sup>86</sup> Others attempted to invent new epic worlds,

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82 Salen, Katie/Zimmerman, Eric: *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, Kindle Edition 2003, loc. 651.

83 Ibid., loc. 4940.

84 Chatfield, Tom: "Bridging the Gap," *Prospect*, 2011, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/bridging-the-gap>

85 For the following see G. S. Freyermuth: *Games | Game Design | Game Studies*, pp. 173-175.

86 French writer Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) conceived the idea of a panoramic portrait of society which came to be known as *La Comédie humaine* in 1832. It "consists of 91 finished works (stories, novels or analytical essays) and 46 unfinished works (some of which exist only as titles)." ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La\\_Comédie\\_humaine#cite\\_note-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Comédie_humaine#cite_note-1))

like J. R. R. Tolkien with *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>87</sup> Dramatic storytelling, however, bound to audiovisual representation in time and space, was barred from such world-building—primarily due to media-technological constraints, both the production conditions and the reception modes in theater, cinema, and television. Only with the transition to virtual, i.e., software-based audiovisuality, did the construction and experience of complete audiovisual worlds become feasible.

Digital world-building was pioneered in games but is also practiced in filmmaking. “Constructing worlds is the main idea,” stated Hollywood production designer Alex McDowell: “By creating a 3-D virtual production space, you can work with your fellow filmmakers in a very descriptive, data-rich, virtual representation of the film before you even start making it.”<sup>88</sup> Similarly, director James Cameron described AVATAR’S hyperrealistic “movie-scape”: “It’s like a big, powerful game engine. If I want to fly through space or change my perspective, I can. I can turn the whole scene into a living miniature.”<sup>89</sup> Tom Chatfield thus considers the “aesthetics of world-building” central to digital culture.<sup>90</sup> By empowering humans to engage in situations and conflicts, they would try to avoid outside of a game and take actions they would not dare to do in real life for better or worse, game designers—unlike writers or directors who tell and show fixed and completed stories in different linear media—are “metacreators of meaning.”<sup>91</sup>

In summary, postmodernity experienced a successive transition from the paradigms of the book and reading and linear audio visions and viewing—closed works and their interpretative comprehension—to the paradigm of games and playing—the open work and its participatory appropriation. The social character of modern culture, the “typographic man” (McLuhan), as well as the ‘cinematic

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87 British writer and professor of English language John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892–1973) wrote the epic saga *The Lord of the Rings* as a sequel to his children’s book *The Hobbit* (1937) between 1937 and 1949. Published in three parts in 1954 and 1955, the saga created a whole fantasy world whose strong influence on popular culture and specifically games and transmedia productions is ongoing.

88 Quoted from Hart, Hugh: “Virtual Sets Move Hollywood Closer to Holodeck,” *Wired*, March 27, 2009, <http://www.wired.com/underwire/2009/03/filmmakers-use/>

89 Quoted from Chatfield, Tom: *Fun Inc.: Why Games are the Twenty-First Century’s Most Serious Business*, London: Virgin, Kindle Edition 2010, loc. 623–625.

90 Schell, Jesse: *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses*, Amsterdam, Boston: Elsevier/Morgan Kaufmann, Kindle Edition 2008, loc. 2188–92.

91 Fullerton, Tracy/Swain, Christopher/Hoffman, Steven et al.: *Game Design Workshop: Designing, Prototyping and Playtesting Games*, San Francisco, Calif.: CMP 2004, loc. 289.

collectives,' shaped by textual and audiovisual sequentiality, hermeneutical interpretation, and causal rationality, were gradually giving way to the digital "homo ludens" (Huizinga), characterized by transmedial simultaneity, playful interactivity, and contingency thinking. The prototypical authors preconfigured by digital tools—programs—were networked knowledge workers who, largely independent of one another and without restrictions regarding space and time, designed media by playfully manipulating virtual symbols in distributed non-hierarchical collaboration with other knowledge workers and also future users.

The constant interplay between the audiovisual systems created by game designers expressing worldviews such as expectations of how one should act and the actual realization of these potentials by those playing, individuals, and groups, make it clear that fundamentally new forms of storytelling are emerging. "Most of all, the procedural medium will challenge our notions of authorship," Janet Murray foresaw in 1997.<sup>92</sup> A quarter century later, artificial—and artistically relevant—intelligence adds the fourth and most essential facet to digital authorship.

## VI DIGITAL AUTHORSHIP: THE LUDIC CYBORG

The conditioning of human authorship by machines predates digital culture. Filmmaker Dziga Vertov famously initiated the Kino-Eye movement. In 1923, he wrote:

"I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it. Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them. [...] My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world. I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you."<sup>93</sup>

In "A Berlin Diary (Autumn 1930)," the first chapter of his novel *Goodbye to Berlin*, Christopher Isherwood described a similar reshaping of his perception, memory, and writing by an optical machine: "I am a camera with its shutter open,

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92 Murray, Janet Horowitz: *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, New York: Free Press 1997, p. 275.

93 Vertov, Dziga: "Kinoks—A Revolution," in: Vertov, Dziga/Michelson, Annette (eds.), *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press 1984, pp. 11-21, pp. 17-18.

quite passive, recording, not thinking. [...] Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.”<sup>94</sup>

## 1 The Origin of the Cyborg

Three decades later, J.C.R. Licklider did not speak of a symbiosis with analog machines but computers, so-called Von Neumann machines with separate hardware and software components. Licklider observed that they enabled a qualitatively enhanced interaction between humans and machines. The psychologist, computer scientist, and science manager—later instrumental, among other things, in the development of the computer mouse and Arpanet—no longer saw computers as mere calculating machines to be operated by experts but as amplifiers of human intelligence that should benefit everyone. Thus, he proposed a “man-computer-symbiosis”: “The hope is that, in not too many years, human brains and computing machines will be coupled together very tightly, and that the resulting partnership will think as no human brain has ever thought.”<sup>95</sup> Thereby, Licklider launched the concept of human authorship augmented by artificial intelligence.

However, shortly after, two other researchers coined the term by which this augmentation was to become known. To express the human fusion with the technology necessary for journeys into space, the neurologist Manfred E. Clynes and his co-author Nathan S. Kline formed—from the first syllables of ‘cybernetic’ and ‘organism’—the term ‘cyborg’: “The Cyborg deliberately incorporates exogenous components extending the self-regulatory control function of the organism in order to adapt it to new environments.”<sup>96</sup> The radically new idea immediately seized contemporary thinking and dreaming. By the mid-1960s, cooperations and combinations of flesh, steel, and silicone, hard-, soft- and wetware were conjured up in almost all media, from non-fiction literature to science fiction in novels, film, and television, to the visual arts.<sup>97</sup>

Highly unusual was the fact that the fascination emanating from the figure of the cyborg was by no means limited to fiction but also encompassed the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Marshall McLuhan was among the first

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94 Isherwood, Christopher: *Goodbye to Berlin*, New York: Random House 1939, p. 11.

95 J. C. R. Licklider: “Man-Computer Symbiosis.”

96 M. Clynes and N. Kline: “Cyborgs and Space.”

97 Cf. for example Halacy, D. S.: *Cyborg: Evolution of the Superman*, New York: Harper & Row 1965; Herbert, Frank: *The Eyes of Heisenberg*, New York: Berkley Books 1966. *The Avengers*, Season 4, Episode 3: *The Cybernauts*, October 12, 1965, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Cybernauts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cybernauts)

researchers to recognize cyborgization as a historical process: “New technology breeds new man [...] The Eskimo is a servomechanism of his kayak, [...] the businessman of his clock, the cyberneticist—and soon the entire world—of his computer. In other words, to the spoils belongs the victor.”<sup>98</sup> Particularly influential became Donna J. Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto.” In 1985, the feminist historian of science declared the symbiosis with our machines to be the *human condition*: “[W]e are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are Cyborgs.”<sup>99</sup>

Two factors, however, distinguished Licklider's 1960 vision from later cyborg fantasies and theories. First, he was not seeking a physical fusion with digital machines but a functional symbiosis. Licklider assigned the decisive role to the software. The concept of such “machine intelligence” had been independently conceptualized around 1950 by Alan Turing and Claude Elwood Shannon. Both had sought to prove the viability of their concepts by means of digital (chess) games.<sup>100</sup> John McCarthy then proposed the term “Artificial Intelligence” in 1956. Second, Licklider did not suggest that the software portion of the human-computer symbiosis should act autonomously—as Vertov’s optical kino-eye was to replace the biological and Isherwood’s celluloid film replace human memory—but to assist in human work.

## 2 Short History of Cyborg Textuality

The longing for such cooperation did not begin with digital technology either. What “generative pre-trained transformers” do today, forming seemingly meaningful sentences word for word according to defined rules, was attempted by literary avant-gardes as early as the 1920s. Dadaist Tristan Tzara, for example,

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98 Norden, Eric: “Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan—a Candid Conversation with the High Priest of Popcult and Metaphysician of Media (1969),” in: McLuhan, Marshall/McLuhan, Eric/Zingrone, Frank (eds.), *Essential McLuhan*, New York NY: BasicBooks, 1995, pp. 233-269, here p. 264.

99 Haraway, Donna Jeanne: “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, ed. dies., New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 149-182, here p. 150.

100 Turing, Alan: “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” in: *Mind*, no. 59 (1950), pp. 433-460, <http://www.loebner.net/Prizef/TuringArticle.html>; Shannon, Claude Elwood: “XXII. Programming a Computer for Playing Chess,” in: *The London, Edinburgh, and Dublin Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science*, 1950, pp. 256-275, <https://vision.unipv.it/IA1/ProgrammingaComputerforPlayingChess.pdf>

created poems by drawing words out of a hat like raffle tickets.<sup>101</sup> André Breton and other surrealists experimented with various rule-based methods of “écriture automatique,” automatic writing.<sup>102</sup> Around 1960, the birth year of the cyborg concept, William S. Burroughs used the cut-up technique proposed by painter Brion Gysin to produce random passages of text for the novels in his *Nova* trilogy.<sup>103</sup> In France, Raymond Queneau published the interactive poetry collection *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (*Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*) that let the readers create their own sonnets by browsing.<sup>104</sup> And in Germany, the philosopher and writer Max Bense—already using computers—had his stochastic literature created automatically by combining rules and vocabulary, such as words from Franz Kafka’s novels. Like GPT technology, Bense’s “generative aesthetics” efforts were based on probability rules.<sup>105</sup>

The many artistic experiments of the avant-gardes correlated with technical advances. In the 1960s, the electrification and electronification of writing began. Its mechanization dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the typewriter entered offices. Friedrich Kittler regarded typing as part of the automation of writing and associated it with the experiments of the Surrealists.<sup>106</sup> Culturally, replacing handwriting with standardized type meant that suddenly people could write who actually couldn’t—because the typists had mastered spelling and punctuation, and the people dictating had to only sign their names. The electric “golf ball” typewriter

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101 Cf. Burroughs, William S.: “The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin,” *UbuWeb*, [\*1961], [https://ubu.com/papers/burroughs\\_gysin.html](https://ubu.com/papers/burroughs_gysin.html)

102 C.f. Esman, Aaron H.: “Psychoanalysis and Surrealism: André Breton and Sigmund Freud,” in: *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 2011, pp. 173-181, [https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0003065111403146?casa\\_token=D72Zb\\_S54R0AAAAA:GyF4FKqrmqxhfJa12t78kzFo5m3O\\_JtV8fOHhyndFTSdb2LYuGJjwI4kvEfMrM7myWdDjol6VV1LN88](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0003065111403146?casa_token=D72Zb_S54R0AAAAA:GyF4FKqrmqxhfJa12t78kzFo5m3O_JtV8fOHhyndFTSdb2LYuGJjwI4kvEfMrM7myWdDjol6VV1LN88)

103 W. S. Burroughs: “The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin.”

104 Queneau, Raymond: *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, Paris: Gallimard 1961. An English interactive online version can be found here: <http://www.bevrowe.info/Internet/Queneau/Queneau.html>

105 Cf. Beals, Kurt: *From Dada to Digital: Experimental Poetry in the Media Age*, Berkeley: eScholarship.org 2013, pp. 102 ff., <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7wc7510k>

106 Kittler, Friedrich A.: *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press 1999.

was introduced in 1961,<sup>107</sup> the electronic word processor in 1964,<sup>108</sup> and the first writing program for computers in the early 1970s.<sup>109</sup> The transition from analog to digital machines did not only entail the virtualization of hardware to software, i.e., the typewriter to the writing program. Gradually, the expertise of those who had previously operated the machines was also virtualized—in the case of writing, spelling, and punctuation skills, knowledge of the structure and stylistic elements of certain types of texts. The first autocorrect function, for example, was introduced in 1993 with Microsoft Word 6.<sup>110</sup>

While AI research worked on more complex assistance systems, artistic experiments with augmented authorship continued as well. Singer-Songwriter David Bowie, for example, texted his songs in the mid-1990s using a sentence randomizer called *Verbasizer* that a friend had programmed for him. The app was a digital version of the traditional cut-up method. *Verbasizer* songs appeared on all three albums of Bowie's famous Berlin trilogy.<sup>111</sup> A quarter century later, many AI bots augment literary authorship—*Jasper*, *Jenni*, *Otter*, *Bing*, *Quillbot*, *Summari*, *Instatext*, *Granthika*, *Grammarly*, *Wordtune*, *Trint*, *Neuroflash*, *NovelAI*, *AuthorsAI*, just to name a few.<sup>112</sup> They all no longer function as mere tools like mechanical typewriters or simple applications but have risen to more or less intelligent collaborators. With tireless zeal, they make up for human weaknesses, obtain information, painstakingly correct countless errors, and sometimes have good ideas.

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107 Reisinger, Don: "IBM celebrates 50 years with the Selectric typewriter," *CNET*, July 27, 2011, <https://www.cnet.com/home/smart-home/ibm-celebrates-50-years-with-the-selectric-typewriter/>

108 Haigh, Thomas: "Remembering the Office of the Future: The Origins of Word Processing and Office Automation," in: *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing*, October-December, 2006, pp. 6-31, here p. 9f, [https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/abstract/document/4042483?casa\\_token=QMSUE2RkzXQAAAAA:IVuonyyPk52ifOIO3ka4-EU65L3uIAJBbZSShkKCLoPvmB6JU1xgn8FoDv2Yakg6Y2Nc0j-zAfBP9hA](https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/abstract/document/4042483?casa_token=QMSUE2RkzXQAAAAA:IVuonyyPk52ifOIO3ka4-EU65L3uIAJBbZSShkKCLoPvmB6JU1xgn8FoDv2Yakg6Y2Nc0j-zAfBP9hA)

109 *Ibid.*, p. 16f.

110 Lewis-Kraus, Gideon: "The Fasinatng... Fascinating History of Autocorrect," *Wired*, July 22, 2014, <https://www.wired.com/2014/07/history-of-autocorrect/>

111 Braga, Matthew: "The Verbasizer was David Bowie's 1995 Lyric-Writing Mac App," *Vice*, January 11, 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xygxpn/the-verbasizer-was-david-bowies-1995-lyric-writing-mac-app>

112 <https://www.jasper.ai>; <https://jenni.ai>; <https://otter.ai>; <https://www.bing.com>; <https://quillbot.com>; <https://www.summari.com>; <https://www.granthika.co>; <https://www.grammarly.com>; <https://www.wordtune.com>; <https://trint.com>; <https://neuroflash.com>; <https://novelai.net>; <https://authors.ai>

### 3 Short History of Cyborg Visuality

As textual production changed through functional cyborgization, so did visual and audiovisual authorship. Again, experiments by the avant-gardes over decades pointed the way in the direction that AI research would eventually take. 20<sup>th</sup>-century art history is rich in procedures of decontextualizing and recombining existing materials and works on the one hand and producing visuals (semi-) automatically on the other. Examples range from the 1910s and 1920s—such as Pablo Picasso’s and Marcel Duchamp’s Found Objects and Readymades and John Heartfield’s Photomontages—to the 1940s and 1950s—such as Jackson Pollock’s or Willem de Kooning’s Action Paintings—to the 1960s and 1970s, especially Andy Warhol’s Pop Art, from the exhibition of ‘found’ consumer goods to the serial reworking of ‘found’ photographic images in analog manners reminiscent of digital image processing. All these experiments have in common that they do not so much probe styles and materials as play with the established understanding and accepted practices of authorship.<sup>113</sup>

Again, technological developments followed and complemented the aesthetic experiments of the avant-gardes. Around 1960, CAD (computer-aided drafting, later called computer-aided design) was developed. In 1961 Ivan Sutherland at MIT programmed the first application for interactive computer graphics.<sup>114</sup> Sutherland’s *Sketchpad* represented digital data visually and allowed its interactive manipulation, with the program automatically correcting human imperfections such as the angles of triangles or rectangles. Automated digital generation of moving images commenced in the second half of the 1960s with so-called scene generators for flight simulators. In 1967, General Electric delivered the first real-time 3-D electronic simulator to the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas. Another digital prototype was independently constructed in 1968 by David Evans in

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113 See the long-running lawsuit over whether Andy Warhol infringed photographer Lynn Goldsmith’s copyrights: Moynihan, Colin: “Why Warhol Images Are Making Museums Nervous,” *New York Times*, March 1, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/01/arts/design/warhol-prince-goldsmith-museums.html>. After decades, the Supreme Court decided that Warhol had infringed on the photographers copyright: Liptak, Adam: “Supreme Court Rules Against Andy Warhol in Copyright Case,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/18/us/supreme-court-warhol-copyright.html>

114 Sutherland, Ivan Edward: *Sketchpad: A Man-Machine Graphical Communication System*, New York: Garland Pub. 1980 [\*1963], <https://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/tech-reports/UCAM-CL-TR-574.pdf>



collaboration with Ivan Sutherland. The combination of optimized hardware and innovative software calculated new images from digitized recordings of real scenes that corresponded in perspective to the training pilot's commands.<sup>115</sup>

From the origins of CAD in the 1960s, the historical path leads to computer-generated imagery (CGI), the digitization of analog captured still and moving images, and, above all, to their arbitrary manipulation. The cyborgization of the creative processes started with semi-automated image editing applications like *Photoshop* (1987) or film editing programs like *Premiere* (1991) and *Final Cut* (2004). Currently, a variety of AI applications allow still images to be generated by simple text prompts.<sup>116</sup> Others restore or colorize black and white photos 'true to original.'<sup>117</sup> Text-based video generation is in promising early stages,<sup>118</sup> as is AI-assisted editing of footage.<sup>119</sup> Subtitles and synchronizations can be created automatically—lip-syncing and cloning voices in many languages included.<sup>120</sup> In the same way, the early Scene Generators point to our present. On the one hand, they led to the procedural—i.e., algorithmic and thus, in the traditional sense, authorless—generation of AV content, such as assets or game levels, as it became possible in the 1980s and gained significant importance in the past decade.<sup>121</sup> On the other hand, scene generators were the precursors of present-day game engines, automating the real-time generation of audiovisual worlds in digital games since the 1990s.<sup>122</sup>

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115 The first computer image generation systems for simulations were produced by the US General Electric Company for the space program. Rolfe, J. M./Staples, K. J.: *Flight Simulation*, Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press 1986, p. 35.

116 For example, <https://leonardo.ai>; <https://www.midjourney.com>; <https://openai.com/product/dall-e-2>;

117 For example, <https://cleanup.pictures>

118 For example, <https://www.synthesia.io>

119 For example, <https://runwayml.com>

120 For example, <https://www.flawlessai.com>

121 In 1984, "Elite was the first game to feature a procedurally generated world, while Frontier: Elite II was the first game to feature procedurally generated star systems." (N.N.: "First Use of Procedural Generation in a Videogame," *guinnessworldrecords.com*, 2023, <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/first-use-of-procedural-generation-in-a-video-game>)

122 Of particular importance were and are the Unreal Engine (Epic Games, since 1998), the CryEngine (Crytek, since 2004), and the Unity Engine (Unity, since 2005).

Games, however, do not present themselves as authored audiovisual works ready for passive consumption. Only the process of playing generates, through numerous interactions between the procedures laid out in the game engine and the players' decisions, the game's gestalt, one of many possible. This structured web of ludic and narrative elements experienced by individual players has no single author but at least two kinds of authors: the designer(s) and the player(s). Like the designers, the players owe their co-authorship to the processes of cyborgization. Digital games not only empower players to meaningfully co-create their experiences. This playful activity is also radically different from real-world actions as the technological conditioning of playing digital games puts players in "mixed realities."<sup>123</sup> While their bodies remain in reality, they control virtual characters in cybernetically generated worlds. This "integration of virtuality and actuality" transforms the players into—functional—cyborgs, as Seth Giddings analyzed: "Digital games aestheticize this cyborg world, but they also realize it: this is an aesthetics of control and agency (or the loss of these) through immersive, embodied pleasures and anxieties [...]"<sup>124</sup> Brendan Keogh concurred: "[T]he hybridity of the videogame text demands a cyborg identity that understands the player as posthuman [...]"<sup>125</sup>

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123 Hayles, N. Katherine: "Cybernetics," in: Mitchell, W. J. T./Hansen, Mark B. N. (eds.), *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press (Kindle Edition), 2010, pp. 145-156, here p. 148.

124 Giddings, Seth: "Playing With Non-Humans: Digital Games as Techno-Cultural Form," *DiGRA '05—Proceedings of the 2005 DiGRA International Conference: Changing Views: Worlds in Play*, 2005, <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/06278.24323.pdf>.—See also: "The gamer as simultaneously avatar acting in the gameworld, player sitting by her computer and perhaps being part of an (both online and offline) community around the game can perhaps be characterized as a cyborg." (Albrechtslund, Anne-Mette Bech: "Gender and the Player Cyborg: Ideological Representation and Construction in Online Games," *Paper presented at Internet Research 8.0: Let's play, Vancouver, Canada*, 2007, <https://vbn.aau.dk/en/publications/gender-and-the-player-cyborg-ideological-representation-and-const>).

125 Keogh, Brendan: "Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Video Games," *Journal of Games Criticism*, Januar, 2014, <http://gamescriticism.org/articles/keogh-1-1>.—See also: "Videogame play in particular is a vivid and explicit performance of the cyborg, as scholars have noted [...]. To play a videogame is to both expand and constrain bodily ability through technological augmentations (controllers, motion sensors, touchscreens)." (Keogh, Brendan: "Hackers and Cyborgs: Binary Domain and Two Formative Videogame Technicities," in: *Transactions of the Digital Games*

In summary, prototypical authors preconfigured by digital machines—engines—are networked knowledge workers who, in collaboration or individually, manipulate virtual symbols in playful cyborgian relationships with Artificial Intelligence, providing the augmentation of human skills, talent, and knowledge as a service. These cyborg authors are like all cyborgs, as Alexis C. Madrigal wrote in his portrait of Manfred Clynes, “not less human, but more.”<sup>126</sup>

## VII ELEMENTS FOR A THEORY OF AUTHORSHIP

In the previous chapters, I have undertaken an investigation of the origins and development of authorship in Western modernity. It demonstrated a close dialectical relationship between the emergence of new media, their specific affordances, modes of production and distribution, and new practices and forms of authorship. This interdependence makes an understanding of the evolution and accumulation of media between the early modern period and our present a precondition for a historical theory of authorship.

The first centuries of these roughly 800 years saw the rise of new mechanical media like perspectival canvas painting, stage, and print, affording originals or small series. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the transition to industrial technology and mass-produced media like photography, film, radio, and television commenced. Despite their differences, pre-industrial and industrial media had in common that they were produced and received in the material world. The third evolutionary step brought virtualization, i.e., the replacement of hardware tools and materials with software. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, digitalization has modified the existing analog media and given rise to entirely new ones.

### 1 Medialities and Dispositifs

In the early days of this last phase, Harry Pross proposed a categorization of medialities that can provide a historical and systematic framework for understanding

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*Research Association (2/3)*, 2016, pp. 195-220, [http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/26\\_Keogh\\_Hackers-and-Cyborgs.pdf](http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/26_Keogh_Hackers-and-Cyborgs.pdf).)

126 Madrigal, Alexis C.: “The Man Who First Said ‘Cyborg,’ 50 Years Later,” *The Atlantic*, September 30, 2010, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/09/the-man-who-first-said-cyborg-50-years-later/63821/>

this evolution of modern media and authorship.<sup>127</sup> Pross' central criterion was the escalating use of 'technology,' which he understood narrowly as material realizations of scientific insights. Accordingly, he distinguished three medialities. Primary mediality characterizes technology-free communication and aesthetic presentation. Everyone involved can participate interactively. Examples are personal conversations, improvised vocal performances, or improvisational theater. Secondary mediality uses advanced technology on the production side. New secondary media evolving in the early modern era include letter printing, perspectival canvas painting, and the performances of the illusionary stage. Works of these media could still be received technology-free and autonomously, even though they could no longer be influenced in form and content or only peripherally. Tertiary mediality then emerged with industrialization. It required advanced technology for both production and reception. Analog film, radio, and television enforced a heteronomous reception dictated by their respective programming, at least before 'remedial' options were introduced, such as private sound or video recording.

Half a century ago, when Harry Pross presented this taxonomy, the rise of the digital transmedium was not yet in sight. Today, it constitutes a new quaternary mediality that is software-based.<sup>128</sup> While it also requires technology for both production and reception, software virtualizes formerly material processes—e.g., word processing, creating and editing of graphics and moving images—and enables real-time interactions through feedback channels. Quaternary mediality also successfully integrates the modes of reception associated with primary, secondary, and tertiary mediality. For the first time, choosing or switching arbitrarily between autonomous, heteronomous, and interactive use of media artifacts is possible.

The outlined medialities' technological foundations generate their affordances, i.e., their different modes of production and reception. All four coexist at present and are connected by a complex, multilayered system of relationships and dependencies:

- First, technological possibilities; e.g., in production, modes of storage and manipulation; in distribution and reception, capacities for material or immaterial transport as well as for the exchange between producers and their customers;

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127 Pross, Harry: *Medienforschung: Film, Funk, Presse, Fernsehen*, Darmstadt: Habel 1972.

128 The digital transmedium as a quaternary medium is already spoken of to some extent by Faßler, Manfred: *Was ist Kommunikation?*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink 1997, p. 117.

- Second, economic conditions; e.g., in production and distribution, variants of financing and recouping; in reception, the quantity of disposable income and free time for media consumption;
- Third, legislative frames, such as regulations on censorship or copyright and authors' rights;
- Fourth, cultural aspects; e.g., in production, the role and reputation of authors; in reception, questions of literacy concerning certain media and the established communicative practices in different age groups, genders, classes, and societies.

Following Michel Foucault, this systemic network can be conceptualized as the contemporary media dispositif containing various interwoven sub-dispositifs for single media.<sup>129</sup> A historical theory must reflect on authorship's embeddedness in these dispositifs. At the core is whether and how the four basic medialities—irrespective of the individual media falling under them, for example, the stage under secondary or film under tertiary mediality—preconfigure media practices and authorship. Both evolved in four significant shifts since the Renaissance: under pre-industrial, industrial, post-industrial, and digital conditions. These four shifts further divide into an analog and a digital phase and can be summarized in seven assumptions per shift.

## 2 Pre-Industrial Authorship: The Individual Artisan

- 1) In the Christian mythology of the Middle Ages, authorship—i.e., original creative power—belonged only to God. In the wake of the Renaissance, it was secularized according to humanist ideology and became a human capability.
- 2) In this first phase, the affordances of pre-industrial media, such as texts and images that could be produced by manually operated hardware—with craft tools—prefigured the individual authorship of independent artisans.
- 3) Literature provided the pre-industrial model of individual authorship—practically, legally, and economically.
- 4) The individual authorship of textual media correlated with their—historically new—‘silent’ and ‘solitary’ individual reception.

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129 On the meaning of the term dispositif in Foucault's work, and in particular his change from the term apparatus to that of dispositif, cf. Panagia, Davide: “On the Political Ontology of the Dispositif,” *Critical Inquiry*, January 3, 2019, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7kg7p7d5>

- 5) With letterpress printing, the reproducibility dilemma arose: whatever authorship produced could be mechanically reproduced for the first time. Thus, the new potential to market literary works was challenged by ‘piracy.’
- 6) Between 1700 and 1800, two new legal principles secured individual authorship legally and economically: intangible property (copyright, following Locke) and inalienable property (authors’ right, following Kant).
- 7) Around 1800, the Romantic genius aesthetics and art religion glorified individual authorship as a cultural ideal.

### **3 Industrial Authorship: The Hierarchical Collective of Workers**

- 1) Industrial mass media required high capital investment and specialized knowledge that individuals generally did not command. They challenged individual authorship in three phases: starting with the steam-driven mass press of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continuing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with electric film and the electronic broadcast media of radio and television.
- 2) The affordances of media that, such as film, radio, and television, could be produced using automated hardware—with industrial machines—prefigured collective authorship by teams of salaried workers working in a division of labor.
- 3) Film provided the industrial model of collective authorship—practically, legally, and economically.
- 4) The collective authorship of the film correlated with its collective reception (in the cinema).
- 5) After 1800, new leadership functions emerged in the auditory and audiovisual media. These functions can be understood—parallel to industrial Chief Executive Officers (CEOs)—as Chief Artistic Officers (CAOs): conductors in music and directors in theater, film, and television. The director’s theater and the auteur film are examples of how these new managerial functions were used to appropriate the collective achievements of industrial teams. Such authorship through artistic direction can be seen as both an adaptation to and a rebellion against culture-industrial working conditions and corporate control.
- 6) In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the interests of media corporations in securing ‘their’ intellectual property, created through collective work, were met by politics with a multitude of international agreements as well as extensions and modifications of copyright and authors’ rights regulations. At the same time, the mass media, with their free offers, undercut the cultural view that works are the property of individual authors.

- 7) The practical questioning of individual authorship was supported by the findings of new academic disciplines that evolved in the industrial age. These disciplines included literary studies, sociology, and psychology. They deconstructed individual authorship in favor of social and cultural influences and finally declared the “death of the author” (Barthes, Foucault) at the end of the 1960s.

#### **4 Postindustrial Authorship:**

##### **The Distributed Network of Digital Knowledge Workers**

- 1) Digitalization, commencing in the postmodern era, increasingly replaced hardware with software in media production. Craft and industrial work turned into knowledge work, creating values and works in the manipulation of virtual symbols. Authorship thus gradually shifted from the material world to virtuality.
- 2) The affordances of media that can be produced using individually operated software—software tools—prefigured a distributed authorship of networked knowledge workers.
- 3) Digital games provide the post-industrial model of networked-distributed authorship in media practice and, to some extent, already legally and economically.
- 4) The distributed authorship of digital games correlates with their networked-distributed reception (‘online,’ participatory practices such as modding, Let’s Play, etc.).
- 5) The digital transmedium allows works to be reproduced without generational loss and distributed via global networks. This affordance gave rise to new copyright conflicts. At the turn of the century, these conflicts led to new legislation worldwide and adjustments by media corporations to the changing needs of consumers, such as digital distribution and streaming.
- 6) After 2000, professional media production—in textuality, visuality, and audiovisuality—increasingly switched to networked virtual production following design principles, thus promoting distributed authorship (e.g., ‘Writers Room,’ agile working).
- 7) The involvement of future consumers in design and development processes originated in digital games and social media. Such involvement is spreading to almost all media and occasionally amounts to co-authorship.

## 5 Digital Authorship: The Ludic Cyborg

- 1) The progressive automation of knowledge work marked the transition to a digital culture around 2020. Authorship enters into “man-computer symbioses” as imagined around 1960 and promoted under the term “cyborg.”
- 2) The affordances of media that can be produced using automated software—engines, GPTs, etc. (machines)—prefigure cyborgian authorship shared between human and artificial intelligence.
- 3) The model of cyborgian authorship evolved in the production of digital games with the procedural generation of assets, levels, and so on. Since then, the combination of human and artificial intelligence has expanded to include producing text, sound, still, and moving images.
- 4) Reception is starting to reflect authorship again. Cyborgian relations characterize the interaction with and in digital games. Reading and watching content in virtuality are increasingly integrated into AI feedback systems. And the utopian vision of the metaverse aims cyborgize all media consumption.
- 5) Compared to analog media production, creation in the digital transmedium allows unlimited undo’s at zero cost, thus enabling arbitrary experimentation. With its virtualization and cyborgization, authorship becomes ludified.
- 6) Authorship is currently undergoing a new historical cesura. As digitization accelerates, new conflicts and opportunities are emerging. Two examples of these are: On the one hand, training AIs typically use copyrighted material without permission; on the other hand, NFTs automate the permanent establishment of authorship and could secure authors’ participation in future re-sales for the first time.
- 7) Under analogous circumstances, variants of authorship accumulated. Not only did secularization not settle the belief in the divine creative power. Parallel to the collectivization of authorship in the tertiary media of industrial mass culture, individual authorship continued to exist in the secondary media, especially in high culture. However, the transition to digital media production seems to transform both variants of analog authorship—craft and industrial labor—into networked and cyborgized knowledge work. Soon, as was once the case at the beginning of the modern era, there could be only one variant left.

Thus, in the modern era, authorship has undergone a fourfold transformation. First, it went from being a divine to a human capability exercised with hand tools by artisans. Second, it evolved from manual labor by individuals to industrial labor by hierarchical collectives simultaneously working in the same place. Third, it



transitioned to virtual knowledge work carried out de-localized-asynchronously by networked individuals on an essentially equal basis. Fourth and most recently, it progressed to cyborgian authorship performed by networked individuals in symbiosis with Artificial Intelligence to accomplish work neither individuals nor collectives could previously achieve.

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