Butterworth-Parr, Francis (2024) *Machphrasis: Video games as metaphor in contemporary literary culture.* PhD thesis.

https://theses.gla.ac.uk/84325/

Copyright and moral rights for this work are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

This work cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Enlighten: Theses
https://theses.gla.ac.uk/
research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk

Machphrasis: Video Games as Metaphor in Contemporary Literary Culture

Francis Butterworth-Parr

B.A (Hons), M.A (Hons)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Arts)

Department of English Literature

School of Critical Studies

College of Arts

University of Glasgow

April 2023

Abstract

This thesis explores how writing since 1984 has deployed the video game as a prose metaphor. In order to do so, the thesis establishes a poetic framework capable of drawing from video game metaphors their critical, aesthetic, historical, and affective relevance to the fictions in which they appear. This poetics is called 'Machphrasis', a term borrowed from writer and cultural theorist Kawika Guillermo (2016), and its deployment as poetic lens across six texts: William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992), Haruki Murakami's *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985 in Japanese, 1991 in English), Michael W. Clune's *Gamelife: A Memoir* (2015), Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011), and Marie Lu's *Warcross* (2017), is the thesis' primary contribution to knowledge. This thesis redresses current scholarship's uneven balance between investigating the literary in the video game by instead theorising how video games and gaming can offer literary writing a suite of literary effects that have gone without full-blooded analysis to date. Ultimately, this thesis argues that machphrastic analysis disinters a vital new *sens* of the video game within the novel form, one that grows in quality and quantity from its conception in cyberpunk fiction to writing now.

I have constructed the thesis in three interrelated parts. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on constructing an expositional and modal machphrastic writing style from the three early cyberpunk texts previously mentioned above. Chapter 3 brings the thesis to writing now, where Clune's *Gamelife* highlights how machphrastic analysis can complicate prescriptive narratives concerning video gaming's addictiveness. Chapters 4 and 5 turn to Cline's *Ready Player One* and Lu's *Warcross* to explore how machphrasis currently serves ideological positions related to gamers. Alongside machphrasis as a systematic poetics, where appropriate, the thesis also explores new concepts in order to condense theoretical positions and textual evidence into a critical vocabulary that describes video gaming phenomena. Namely, these are shamanism, critical immersion (introduced in chapter 3), and the logic of alternateness (introduced in chapter 4). Holistically, the thesis can be read as a literary contribution to ongoing discursive efforts to create theoretical language that meaningfully describes and interrogates the video game's especial place in late 20th and early 21st century culture, what I call the act of theorising the ludic century.

Contents

Abstract 1

Acknowledgements 3

Author's Declaration 4

Introduction 5

Literature Review 17

No More Apologies: Video Games and Culture Dominance 19

Gaming Literacy 22

Media Ecology 26

Machphrasis 36

Chapter 1: William Gibson's *Neuromancer:* Cold War Panic/Cold War Prophet 62

In Search of Gibson's Machphrasis 62

(Con)sensual hallucinations: Case, Cyberspace and Video Games in *Neuromancer* 70

Gibson's AI: Machphrasis, Location and Characterisation 82

Chapter 2: Neal Stephenson and Haruki Murakami: Machphrasis after Gibson 93

Faulty/compromised consciousness 99

Environments, Places, People 106

Disconnection 117

Chapter 3: Who's Fooling WHO? Addiction and Autobiography in *Gamelife: A Memoir* 127

Addiction and Passion: Machphrasis Between the Two 140

Escapism and Critical Immersion in *Gamelife: A Memoir* 149

Chapter 4: 'The Importance of Being Ernest': Nostalgia, Video Games, and the Logic of Alternateness in *Ready Player One* 160

The Logic of Alternateness in *Ready Player One* 174

Chapter 5: The Nail That Protrudes: *Warcross*, Gamelit/LitRPG, and New Possibilities for Virtuous Action 189

Conclusions: Machphrasis and Theorising the Ludic Century 219

BIBLIOGRAPHY 226

FIGURE LIST 240

Acknowledgements

Someone once asked me what it's like to write a PhD. Imagine writing a book whilst an entire educational institution tries to stop you, I said. The following three are the reason that is in (partial) jest. I extend the fullest thanks to my primary supervisor Dr Matthew Sangster—I am confident that few sentences written here have gone without his studious, humane attention, and all ideas expressed here possess the imprint of Matt's remarkable depth and breadth of knowledge concerning fiction and literary theory. That is to say nothing of all the extracurricular work: the funding applications, the copy for conferences, the article manuscripts, and many other things that Matt took the time to read, critique, and improve for me. I could not have asked for a better primary supervisor—I think and write so much better for having been his student. I also extend my sincere thanks to Dr Matthew Barr, whose impressive knowledge of video games and what makes them tick, willingness to help and support me and my research when things have not gone my way, and above all his ability to be witty and engaging irrespective of busyness, mood, or exhaustion made my time working with him a joy. I give sincere thanks to Dr Yunhyong Kim, who has helped me to understand the computer scientific implications of this work immensely.

I extend thanks to the University of Glasgow for hosting and facilitating me and my research during my stay, and am grateful to the Scottish Graduate School of the Arts and Humanities for their support and opportunities. I wrote much of this thesis on campus, in particular within the Gilchrist postgraduate café. I want to thank all the staff of the café for being so kind to me over the years, in particular Oksana, who always said hello and asked how about me and mine, Alison, whose excellent taste in Northern Soul made the Gilchrist's soundscape very homely for me, and Kim, whose company I always enjoyed.

Former British chess champion Bill Hartson once said: 'chess doesn't drive people mad, it keeps mad people sane'. Kept sane, in the end, by my opponents, I thank Emma, Ola, Joe, Chris and Jeson; in them I snatched friendship from the jaws of loneliness. I knew I'd need chess, disco music, and cigarettes to get this done—joyous was the lesson that I needed friends as well. Those who come after, heed: friendship is the easiest kind of relationship to undervalue when doing this. Cherish those for whom your company was enough.

My family has been extremely supportive throughout my time with the University of Glasgow, in particular my father Steve and my mother Ann. I love you both and I am looking forward to spending more time with you now.

To Lucy: my words or thanks could never do it justice, but I look forward to a long, happy time of trying.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contributions of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name & Signature: FRANCIS BUTTERWORTH-PARR

Date: 11/04/2023

Introduction

‘Freedom has two parts: potential and resolution; as metaphor has two parts: form and interpretation. Of course, the two are intertwined. Metaphor lines the road to freedom, as symbols and words are the bricks and mortars of meaning. Freedom is being the bricoeur, the mason.’ (Durandal, Marathon, 1994)

In 1994, video game development company Bungie Software Products released its science fictional Doom clone *Marathon*. In an early example of environmental storytelling, *Marathon* deployed text logs. Some of these logs charted the artificial intelligence Durandal’s descent into insanity, a process called ‘rampancy’, which was invented here but popularised by Bungie’s *Halo* franchise.[1] Whether Durandal’s insights into the relationship between metaphor, freedom and meaning come despite or because of his rampancy is a matter of interpretation. Nonetheless, Durandal opens this thesis on video games as metaphor in contemporary literary culture for two reasons. The first is that it is nice for a video game character to relay the stakes of interpreting symbolic language so clearly because, as Durandal would lead us to believe, a precondition of freedom lies in the form and interpretation of metaphor. Implied is that meaning, derived here from symbols and words, is the vital component of metaphor that gets us to freedom: to mean is to be free, or at least to know what it is to be free. Metaphor is a meaning-making tool for Durandal, and from this position, the case is made for the study of metaphor, symbols, and words. The second reason is Durandal is emblematic of the problem symbolic language poses to the things it describes. Easy to understate here, I think, is Durandal’s aphoristic style, born of equal parts computerised objectivity, which is the effect evoked by Durandal’s colon-driven asyndetic brevity in the first sentence, but also of Durandal’s new, uneven subjectivity, expressed in the humane symbolic language in the final sentence, which evokes a human journey without the silicon demarcating syntax that precedes it. In other words, Durandal’s ramblings evince a sense of literary quality—an attempt at meaning in the original, extranormal sense—but

[1] Bungie Software Products., *Marathon* (1994). Mac OS.

also an appreciation for the dialectic of metaphor; Durandal expresses the organically intelligent position that, simply, freedom is symbolic and metaphorical, not algorithmic, and this synthetic moment drove Durandal mad.

In 2004, my parents made a decision that would make this thesis possible. I struggled with learning difficulties and my parents, exasperated by an uncooperative school, decided to home-school me during a period of aggressive diagnosis with paediatricians, child psychologists, and social workers. This period took longer than they expected, and teachers they were not. Eventually, ramshackle maths, English, and science lessons gave way to time spent in front of a computer with an *Encyclopaedia Britannica* disc and, bizarrely, Impression Games' 2000 city builder *Zeus: Master of Olympus*. In the absence of extensive interaction with adult pedagogues and other children (save for an envious yet never spiteful younger brother), these two artefacts became my companions and my teachers. This produced an absurd child. Case in point: one reason I fell behind my peers at the time was my inability to read; we know this today was the product of dyslexia, though the school chalked this up to a lack of industry on my part. However, to play *Zeus* at all effectively involves a copious amount of reading and comprehension. So, I learned to read through following, word by word, the repeatable voiceovers of *Zeus*' characters, from spear carriers without spears to Achilles, the Maenads, and the gods themselves. To anticipate some future analysis, it was the first methodical thing I ever did in my life. But unfathomable to the clinician is the child who speaks of Dionysus, of Thebes and Troy, of sacrifice, libation, irrigation and taxation, yet can barely write his own name or tie his shoes. What I had done, innocently and unknowingly, was snatch reading from the jaws of video games. *Machphrasis: Video Games as Metaphor in Contemporary Literary Culture* is, in essence, a product of this reading borrowed from gaming. From a wish to be gaming literate, I became unconventionally literate, and despite my case comprising a relatively extreme education, I believe this phenomenon to be commonplace amongst video game playing children. At its

most basic, this thesis wonders if art imitates life in this respect, that literature might from the urge to tell stories about video games evince a special kind of literary gaming literacy. Metaphors, basically, that might line the road to understanding both how video games have been resolved to mean and what they may potentially mean, if their contexts were freer.

It should not be necessary to argue that contemporary literary culture has, in numerous places, deployed the video game as literary object. Few are the objects of enquiry that literary curiosity will not broach, and fewer still when the objects are artistic ones. When the object of enquiry can gift writers a suite of expositional, descriptive, characterising, ideological, aesthetic, modal, intertextual, and financial boons, then it should not surprise when writers greedy for a muse give serious consideration to video games. In other words, contemporary literary culture's relationship with video games as literary devices was to be anticipated from their first conception; the video game would always go the route of other media and find itself in literature's sights. This would be the case as well because, as Doug Stark mentions in his encyclopaedia gloss for video game novels, as 'the novel seeks to represent the present, both its form and notion of *realism* are mutable, open, and actualized as history unfolds'.[2] The video game, as the following chapters explain in detail, has sunk its claws deep into contemporary reality. What perhaps requires explanation, however, is why what this thesis endeavours to accomplish beyond all else—a poetics of the video game as metaphor in contemporary literary culture—should concern readers of contemporary fiction, players of video games, and teachers of literary and cultural studies.

First, it rebalances a desperately unequal research dynamic between video games and literature. Studying video games stories has often meant recourse to some established literary concept or tradition. This is not unexpected; all media's storytelling capacity is in some way influenced by the literary tradition, and video games are no exception. Research focusing on

[2] Doug Stark, 'Video Game Novels, in *Encyclopaedia of Video Games*: *The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming* 2nd, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf (California: ABO-CLIO, 2021), pp. 1104-1106 (p. 1104).

the video game's indebtedness to literary technique, mode of address, theme, and narrative has benefited from considerable extant criticism. However, this should not be a one-way street. As Gundolf Freyermuth suggests in his encyclopaedia entry after Stark, 'the reverse case—the influence of video games on contemporary literary storytelling—is harder to assess, and research is still required.'[3] Quite right, and ultimately, this thesis continues in long-form where Freyermuth leaves off, in the research gap left between this media exchange. Without wanting to anticipate too much of the literature review to come, suffice it to say, for now, that the difficulty Freyermuth identifies in the field is multiple and profound. For example, understanding the video game's role in contemporary literary culture will not simply bend to brute-force meta surveys of all the literature video games explicitly touch, at least not yet. The lack of a poetics is largely to blame for this: without approximations of what to expect or general principles for engagement, research on the video game in contemporary literary culture requires some ingenious, *ad hoc* theorising. This leads to research that is as fascinating to digest as it is cumbersome to teach—it is as if a synthetic moment is reached before the contradictions have had a chance to provoke it. Before doing the more interesting and insightful work of uncovering how the video game in contemporary literary culture is non-identical with itself, a baseline is worth establishing, if only to deviate from. Having a baseline makes for a more teachable literary phenomenon for students, allows for a scaffolded, shared language for discussing the phenomenon, and allows us to be usefully surprised when a text deploys the object in non-anticipated ways.

Following Kawika Guillermo's coinage, this thesis calls this poetics machphrasis. The following chapter defines machphrasis in appropriate detail, but for introductory purposes, machphrasis is the systematic poetics of video games in contemporary literary culture put forward by the thesis. It is this thesis' primary contribution to the knowledge gap

[3] Gundolf S. Freyermuth, 'Video Games and Literature', in *Encyclopaedia of Video Games*: *The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming* 2nd, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf (Santa Barbara, CA: ABO-CLIO, 2021), pp. 1109-11 (p. 1111).

Freyermuth bemoans. Much of its fleshing out is to come, so the first port of call is to explain why a poetics and not, for example, a hermeneutics or new media study of the video game. The first reason is that, although video games in contemporary literary culture interact artistically and rhetorically with their ones and zeroes counterparts in the world, what I am calling machphrasis is a literary phenomenon. Whatever analytical joy machphrasis can offer readers focusses upon the metaphorical sense of video games and gameplay, not actualised games or play. That is not to say discrete video games do not crop up that exist and are playable: many will. However, machphrasis understands video games as affording contemporary fiction a system of meanings derived from public responses to video games—ones that do not necessarily map to actual play—and writerly symbolic expression, through which the system of meaning coagulates into literary meaning. This delimits machphrasis' scope to literary writing specifically. Video game analysis, for example, is well beyond the theoretical scope of this project, not because video games cannot use video games to do their artistic job in a metafictional sense, but because machphrastic analysis as this thesis understands it caters specifically to literary form and the ways the literary form engages the world. Machphrasis contents itself with exploring a singularly literary problem—as Freyermuth explains, the inverse relationship is well stocked with ideas, anyway.

The second reason for a poetics is that it I believe a reasonable and relevant poetics of the video game in contemporary literary culture can and should be explored. Whether machphrasis is reasonable is up to the reader in the end, but it seems that, after accepting the premise that video games turn up in novels, then it is not too far of a leap to believe writers could deploy video games to express their fiction's themes or bring their fiction's narrative along. I postulate from this premise that, driven by the urge to deploy the video game, writers will offer an image of the video game in their literature, and that image sharpens under machphrastic analysis. Therefore, machphrasis becomes relevant for the reasons video games and literature are relevant. Prefacing the literature review, video games are popular,

yes, and increasingly so, yes, but they are also an architectural blueprint for social, cultural, and political ideologies, for they are gripping rhetorical engines. Those who might harness their tricks and tactics would have one of the contemporary world's most potent social controllers in their hands, for good or ill. Important to remember also is that video games are special as a narrative medium, as their perceived mastery does not correspond one-for-one with their comprehension. How well someone reads a book depends on how well they can comprehend the book, but it is possible to become very proficient at video games without comprehending their narratives. This seems important, because players may be unaware of the ideological nature of their games, which can sit at a distance from their play, influencing their worldview in a form that can hoodwink criticality into a temporary lull. Literature is relevant because it tells good stories about things. Underappreciated outside literary circles, but quite well understood by governments, marketeers, and news outlets, is the fact of narrative's power in the real world, how dexterous the hand of good stories is in life's go-about. Governing, selling, and informing aside, the novel is an excellent place to reckon with the best practice—and crafty manipulation—of narrative, for it has capered with putting one thing after another in ways delightful and provocative since its inception. It just so happens that pursuing an engaging narrative involves the things of the world being shaped to a novel's purposes, and by understanding those literary equivalents, how we understand the things of the world can be rethought, often usefully. If accepted, machphrasis becomes relevant to any seeking a better understanding of the general sense of the video game, insomuch as writers can only be so inventive, but also in the imaginary potential of video games, insomuch as writers make video games an essential element of their cautionary allegories, their prognosticative futures, their self-reflection, their persuasive arguments, their hopes and fears.

It would now be a good idea to define the contemporary literary culture of interest to this thesis. To impart its likeness upon literary pages, the video game must loiter in those

places writers look for inspiration: news outlets, conversations, spheres of intrigue, power, danger, and suchlike. By the 1980s, video games were established as new technological media leisure objects. The 1980s as an acceptable origin for the contemporary also stems from its especially potent political hangover. Those most intoxicating political moments (neoliberalism, small state governance, right wing governance in the west) had their day in that decade and never really stopped having it. The 1980s have, therefore, maintained a privileged air of seriousness and continuity with the immediate 'now'. As such, engagement with video games in 1980s literature seems purpose built to act as the base of operations for where the literary video game imaginary became. Going earlier is possible, but what little is gained in comprehensiveness is lost in more nebulous argumentation and less clarity of vision. Ponder the Choose Your Own Adventure books of the late 1970s for example, and it becomes clear that whatever could be gleaned from them being read as ur-texts for a video gaming sensibility would be better served as research into more analogue, tabletop antecedents, and even if taking up the mental gymnastics sounds fruitful, then a decidedly un-contemporary sense of the video game is the victor's spoils. Better to err on the side of caution, then, with the 1980s as the beginning, and writing now as the finish line.

Now for metaphor. As I wish to provide an account of how writers have produced a likeness of the video game in their writing, strict adherence to metaphorical grammar would leave much of the video game's literary work ill-defined. Fortunately, there are ample arguments for a weaker split between figural and literal language than is usually considered the case. Take Friedrich Nietzsche, one of this argument's earliest proponents, who in his essay *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* boldly equated the condition of truth to 'a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms', and in suggesting 'truths are illusions which people have forgotten are illusions', language becomes qualified by the

formation of metaphors, not the other way around.[4] If convincing arguments exist for a universally metaphorical approach to common language, then *a fortiori* the understanding of literary language as universally metaphorical becomes coherent. Even Durandal, in its deepest thought, expresses a similarly Nietzschean centralisation of metaphor: if it is good enough for a mad, bad, and dangerous to know philosophical misanthrope and Nietzsche, then it is good enough for me. Therefore, the language under machphrastic purview need not be delimited along grammatical lines, but the best analytical insights to come flow from expressly metaphorical positions. As such, I am happy to include within machphrasis' remit any language found in contemporary literary culture in a weak sense, though it is worth differentiating between incidences of the video game in fiction and video games within formal metaphorical syntax in fiction. In practice, this means the analysis generally prefers textual evidence with video games as metaphorical material, yet does not shy away from instances where an implied extended metaphorical sense of the video game presents itself.

Chapter 1 begins by exploring the affordances of video game writing through William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. I argue *Neuromancer* represents a pivotal early example of video games in the employ of literary fiction, in particular as proxy technologies used to anticipate some of Cyberpunk's most famous technologies like cyberspace, advanced forms of virtual/augmented reality, and sophisticated AI. Chapter 1 stages the video game as an essential touchstone for Gibson's interest in examining the western panics encouraged by a reigniting Cold War. As such, I explore machphrasis as a cyberpunk invention, highlighting how the video game as harbinger for an end of media event, and the video game as the site for a new kind of extended, cyborgic embodiment, drives many of *Neuromancer*'s slights of technological hand. I explore this, primarily, through three character studies, namely of protagonist Case, assassin companion Molly Millions, and finally, the playful,

[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, trans. by A. K. M. Adam (Oxford: Quadriga, 2019), pp. 6-7.

eponymous Neuromancer. By respecting the techno-ludic imaginary at play within Neuromancer's judicative and vertiginous existence, the chapter ends by tracing over Gibson's AI a shamanic pattern that remains alive in every machphrastic text to follow. Significant portions of the subsequent analysis devote themselves to the transmutation of this video gaming shamanism under new literary conditions and social pressures. Most importantly for machphrasis writ large, Gibson's *Neuromancer* provides the expositional mode of machphrasis from which subsequent writers will diverge as they search for a more comprehensive mode for video games in fiction.

Chapter 2 continues with the cyberpunk tradition, examining how two further genre fictions of the late 1980 and early 1990s—Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992 and Haruki Murakami's *Hard-boiled Wonderland and The End of The World* (1985 in Japanese; 1991 in English)—continue to explore ways of telling cyberpunk stories by leaning on machphrastic writing. I argue that, alongside the gamut of technological panic and intrigue inherited from Gibson, both writers introduce a more introspective potential for video games, giving rise to a throughgoing experiential machphrastic mode, whereby video gaming as a mode of experience shapes literary event, place, dialogue, and mode. Chapter 2 places this new machphrastic affordance at the feet of a video gaming industry, turning towards a more introspective product. After the chapter goes through the economic conveniences, social mechanisms, and new techno-cultural cachet that facilitate the turn towards more personal, individuated experiences with video games, I argue Stephenson and Murakami's machphrasis manifests in three key themes. These are forms of hybridised or faulty consciousness (produced in the wake of video games as metaphors for a new sense of human and computerised time), the merits of virtual and material reality (as the product of changing perspectives regarding the function of second order realities like virtual realities), and a generalised social disconnectedness (stemming from uneven social attributions of value regarding the worth of video gaming and technologically enabled experiences more

broadly). The chapter concludes by rooting each text's machphrastic contributions in a broadened machphrastic mode which, alongside Gibson's expositional exemplars, comprises a modally complete machphrasis. In essence, machphrasis can do comic or ironic duty, whilst also lending literary prose a tragic mode of address, after Stephenson and Murakami's efforts. The job then becomes fleshing out the poetics in question with textual analysis from later, more preoccupied, and sophisticated machphrastic texts.

Chapter 3 moves away from chapter 1 and 2's cyberpunk chronology to deploy Michael W. Clune's 2015 life writing text, *Gamelife: A Memoir*, as an intervening literary artefact in current debates concerning video game addiction. The argument is that, although I cannot comment in any positivistic sense on the nature of game-based disorders, Clune's prose, approached using machphrasis as a lens, troubles prescriptivist approaches to highly engaged and impassioned play. After laying out the debates culminating in the World Health Organisation's 2018 classifying gesture, I turn to life writing scholarship, arguing that extant criticism primes the video game as an insightful relational object for 21st century life writing moving forward. I then engage *Gamelife*'s descriptions of a childhood lived under the auspices of video game to arrive at a sense of video gaming far less harmful than the WHO would lead audiences to believe. In particular, the WHO's use of escapism is problematised, becoming a term overextended in what it can serviceably describe when it comes to playing video games. As such, this chapter synthesises Clune's descriptions of play and theoretical approaches to criticality to formulate a companion term for escapism: critical immersion. This term's purpose is, simply, to challenge some claims made of video game escapism against Clune's gaming experience and offer a more descriptive alternative to experience less usefully pathologized as escapist today. Structurally, the chapter bridges the gap between the thesis' first half, which concerns itself with producing the basis for a coherent poetics, and the second half, which outlines machphrasis' increasing relevance to

contemporary literary culture as an expedient literary imaginary for political coercion and ethical experimentation.

Chapter 4 and chapter 5, like chapters 1 and 2 before them, can be read as complementary analysis. However, where previous efforts with Gibson, Stephenson and Murakami aim construct a baseline for machphrasis by modelling effective practice when encountering the video game in literary fiction, these final two chapters flesh out how machphrastic writing reflects upon the ideological underpinnings of a now established machphrastic mode. My goal with Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* and Marie Lu's *Warcross* is to essay how from a poetics of machphrasis, readers may derive a politics of video games. I first work with Cline's *Ready Player One*, where I read the academic literature that has sprung out of its success as always implicitly concerned with the affective rhetoric of nostalgia. Implicating this nostalgic rhetoric in a variety of political phenomena endemic to 21st century citizenship, specifically #Gamergate, the political triumph of Trump, and the rise of the alt-right broadly conceived, this chapter surveys a corrupted version of Roger Caillois' shamanistic function alive in Cline's text and in the gamer identity alike. The video gaming underpinnings of a shamanism overplayed is framed as the logic of alternateness, a group of machphrastic urges, tactics, and writerly decisions made in service of a malignant 1980s video gaming nostalgia, one cut through with sycophantic corporatism, heavily policed gender politics, and rank individualism. By attempting to demystify the logic of alternateness at play in Cline's text, the chapter aspires to model processes for detecting and understanding infelicitous machphrasis, the kinds of ludic prose written to limit the video game as object, the video gamer as identity, and video gaming as open, worthwhile experience.

Chapter 5 balances criticisms made in chapter 4 by suggesting a virtuous potential for machphrasis. I give the brief history of two emerging, related genre fictions: LitRPG and

Gamelit, and presage through Gamelit in particular an avenue for a new progressive machphrasis, one born in antithesis to Cline's relative conservativism, yet bolstered by his commercial success. Although this machphrasis exists primarily as a dialectical possibility at the moment, I offer Marie Lu's *Warcross* as one text interested in machphrasis that can be explored as an early experiment in rethinking ethical action in video gaming's wake. Key preserves of cyberpunk fiction and machphrastic writing—hacking culture, glitchy bodies, the avatar, doxing, and more besides—all fall under a radical rethink by Lu, whose engagement with gaming concepts reckons with the possibility of an ethical gaming life. In particular, the attention Lu pays to evoking how asymmetrical forms of gaming literacy can impinge upon vulnerable subjectivities, and her protagonist Emika Chen's negotiations with these varied literacies, makes available new forms of reparative justice that expose clumsy institutional systems. Simply, Lu's *Warcross* offers space to conclude the thesis with cautious optimism that the texts under machphrastic purview are maturing towards a synthetic moment capable of voicing experiences and perspectives marginalised by previous texts, and that the best of machphrasis is likely yet to come.

Literature Review

It is fitting that after literary scholars caused game studies to stall in 1985, when they 'balked' at Mary Ann Buckles' thesis *Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame Adventure*, the discourse surrounding the deployment of video games in fiction would be haunted by the spectre of false starts.[5] For example, Tanner J. Jupin's thesis 'The Intermediation of Literature and Games', a prescient discussion of 'gamic fictions, fictions that both tell stories of life within gamic worlds and utilize the components of video games and online games as part of their narrative structure' has failed to stick its landing—'gamic' did not quite catch on.[6] Doug Stark is to Jupin what Espen Aarseth—whose seminal *Cybertexts: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* indirectly inaugurates this preoccupation with video games in literature—was to Buckles, reviving gamic fiction for a moment in service of Stark's own formulation: 'Ludic Literature', which 'tells stories within video game worlds or about video game playing'.[7] Megan Amber Condis, alongside Stark, opts for 'ludic' to describe novels 'that [are] not only *about* game playing but they also *require* game-playing and puzzle-solving'.[8] Both Stark and Condis' work is excellent, but both belong to the academic conversation disinterring video game images from the pernicious 'nerdgasm', as John Scalzi puts it on the back cover, of Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*.[9] Their focus only becomes an issue when constructing a poetics; a single writer's style will inevitably prove too idiosyncratic to explore the wider discursive deployment of the literary video game

[5] Michael Erard, 2 decades Later; Let Down by Academia, Game Pioneer Changed Paths, (NYTimes: 2004) {https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/06/technology/2-decades-later-let-down-by-academia-game-pioneer-changed-paths.html?pagewanted=all} [accessed 01/06/2022].

[6] Tanner Jupin, 'Gamic Fiction: The Intermediation of Literature and Games' (Unpublished doctoral thesis: UC Davis, 2014), p. 2.

[7] Doug Stark, 'Ludic Literature: *Ready Player One* as Didactic Fiction for the Neoliberal Subject', in *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies,* ed. by Sascha Pöhlmann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 153-173 (p. 153).

[8] Megan Amber Condis, 'Playing the Game of Literature: *Ready Player One*, the Ludic Novel, and the Geeky "Canon" of Toxic Masculinity', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 39 (2016), 1-19 (p. 2).

[9] Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011). Back cover

metaphor. Long-form publications have produced little consensus on terms for discussing literary video game deployments either. Astrid Ensslin's *Literary Gaming* is perhaps the most theoretically astute attempt to date, but Ensslin leverages her contribution: the literary-ludic or 'L-L spectrum' towards literary games as opposed to games *in* literature per se, and Jason Barr's *Video Gaming in Science Fiction* limits itself, predictably, to science fiction.[10] As if to illustrate by example this discourse's stumbling power, Eric Hayot's essay 'Video Games & the Novel', which argues that 'any consideration of what the novel is today, and any true understanding of what narrative aesthetics are doing in general, is impossible if we do not also understand the work video games are doing', enlists none of these aforementioned attempts to augment this argument, foregoing the very bibliography which may enable others to turn his *cri de coeur* into their research interests.[11]

I bring these scholars, whose works can all reasonably be said to be preoccupied with video games in contemporary literary culture, together to contextualise how their efforts to engage with fiction along 'ludic' or 'gamic' lines could be bolstered by a general poetics of the phenomenon converging their interests. Doing so can establish a critical language for a subfield of literary studies currently defined by rich individual thought but which lacks a theoretical paradigm that can serve as a common reference point to facilitate discussion. It will meet Hayot's proposition head on by clarifying how and why literary representations comprise generative lifelines for thinking about video games today and tomorrow. Such a contribution shifts the conversation away from blocks of 'ludic' or 'gamic' fiction—a kind of genre or writer study—towards appreciating deft use of video games in fiction as, foremost, the property of sentences, metaphor, and as Hayot writes 'narrative aesthetics'. Therefore, I present machphrasis—a poetics of the video game in writing—as a rich literary

---

[10] Astrid Ensslin, *Literary Gaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), p. 13; Jason Barr, *Video Gaming in Science Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: Macfarland & Company, 2018).
[11] Eric Hayot, 'Video Games & the Novel' *Daedalus,* 150(1) (2021), 178-187 (p. 187).

resource at play in fiction, and the questions of why machphrasis, what it is, and why machphrasis now, are queries the rest of the literature review will explore.

No More Apologies: Video Games and Culture Dominance

A flick through academic articles and books addressing the video game's role in contemporary culture usually entails the reader stumbling upon a paragraph, occasionally just a sentence, that serves to apologise for video gaming's novelty, success, or "recent" introduction into academia's mental life. These apologies deploy statistics gesturing towards video gaming's sudden and violent commercial success or beg the question of game studies' relevance and maturity. Take, for example, the first line of *Video Games As Culture'*s blurb—published in 2018—'[v]ideo games are becoming culturally dominant'.[12] That an edition dedicated to exploring the video game as culture is compelled to imply that video game's cultural dominance is something to be anticipated, a 'becoming', exemplifies the insecure rhetoric surrounding this discourse. When the opposite is true, when the video game's success is framed in the present tense, there is a tendency to forget a not so distant past where the video game proved a popular entertainment media. Souvik Mukherjee's references to video gaming's 'soaring profits' and 'burgeoning player base' as the catalyst because 'games have *now* attracted the attention of researchers from various disciplines' implies an unwarranted surprise, as if video gaming's commercial and popular success snuck up on researchers out of nowhere.[13] Yes, video games are becoming culturally dominant and they are receiving more scholarly attention, but these observations alone do not appreciate that video games *are* culturally dominant and *have been* for some time now. Since at least 2001, deemed 'year one of *Computer Game Studies* as an emerging, viable, international, academic field' by Espen Aarseth, video games have provoked prolonged academic

[12] Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford, *Video Games as Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2018), Blurb.
[13] Souvik Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p. 2, emphasis mine.

attention, but Aarseth neglects to mention Mary Ann Buckles' 1985 dissertation as at least a progenitor.[14] The first word of an established game studies, therefore, co-opts the very erasing language of literary studies that caused Aarseth to protest in *Cybertext*: *Perspectives of Ergodic Literature*—a 1997 publication.[15] The time where video games as cultural phenomenon should be couched in hedged, apologetic arguments such as these is well and truly over.

I am not implying research deploying this rhetoric is worse for it; it is after all a trope of the field. However, it does imply a discomfort felt by researchers guiding video games into contact with high concepts such as culture and literature. Therefore, I am sympathetic to Alexander Galloway's call to demystify the video game, that research into the medium can 'shrug off the contributions of those who view this as all so shocking and new', in principle at least.[16] Instead of creating distance between discourses dedicated to more established humanities fields like literary and media studies, Galloway's call to understand the video game in the wake of its culture dominance should be acknowledged as a fruitful counter-strategy to the insecurities previously discussed. Eric Zimmerman goes further than even Galloway, finding the conventional senses of literacy and comprehension to be inadequate tools for investigating what happens in a world increasingly and profoundly mediated by computer, communication and entertainment technologies.[17] If demystification is the name of the game, then taking Galloway and Zimmerman's call for exploring gaming literacy forward seems a lucrative route towards clarifying those 'shocking and new' mystical elements of video game culture that impedes a cultural history of the medium in literature.

---

[14] Espen Aarseth, 'Computer Game Studies, Year One', *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 1.1 (July 2001) {http://gamestudies.org/0101/} [accessed 04/10/2019].
[15] Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997).
[16] Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2006) p. xii
[17] Eric Zimmerman, 'Gaming Literacy: Game Design as a Model for Literacy in the Twenty-First Century', in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 23-32.

After all, not to respect the video game's claim as the grand medium of the 21st century, as the novel was in the 19th, is to tilt at windmills. The rise in video gaming since the 1980s, or video gaming's economic supremacy relative to other media often suffice when acknowledging its cultural impact, but I argue video games are also the most obvious and prominent driver for a larger 'ludic turn' experienced by many academic fields.[18] Zimmerman's manifesto on 'the ludic century' ends with emphatic aesthetic notes, asserting that 'games and play are important because they are beautiful', suggesting delight in games and play resonates with delight as it is broadly conceived today.[19] Media theory seems equally enamoured; recent attempts to understand both media systems and identity-making evoke video gaming contexts. Invoking Marx and displacing communism, Valerie Frissen *et al.*, consider how 'a spectre is haunting the world—the spectre of playfulness' becomes embodied—becomes 'material'—in video gaming's ubiquitous allure.[20] Danuta Fjellestad's chapter in the illustratively holistic *Ludics: Play as Humanistic Inquiry* wonders why literary studies lags behind other fields in embracing play when it '[has] been of great significance to literary studies for quite a long time'.[21] Play is central to contemporary aesthetics, periodisation, media, and humanities' method. Although suggesting today's academic fascination with play is solely due to video games would be reductive, to do without play's most explosive manifestation seems equally silly. Video games are only ever a stone's throw from any sincere cultural analysis. Considering the problem alongside Fjellestad, perhaps why literary studies fails when describing literary depictions of video game as a mode of play is because this form of play comes to the novel ready with its own literacy, and only

---

[18] Trevir Nath, Investing in Video Games: This Industry Pulls In More Revenue Than Movies, Music (Nasdaq: 2016) {https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/investing-video-games-industry-pulls-more-revenue-movies-music-2016-06-13} [accessed 03/06/2022].

[19] Eric Zimmerman, 'Manifesto for a Ludic Century', in *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*, ed. by Sebastian Deterding, Steffen P. Walz (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014), pp. 19-22 (p. 22).

[20] Frissen *et al.,* 'Homo Ludens 2.0 : Play, media, and identity', in *Contemporary Culture: New Directions in Art and Humanities Research,* ed. by Judith Thissen, Robert Zwijnenberg, Kitty Zijlmans (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2013), pp. 75-92 (p. 75).

[21] Danuta Fjellestad, 'The Ludic Impulse in Post-Postmodern Fiction', in *Ludics: Play as humanistic Inquiry,* ed. by Vassiliki Rapti, Eric Gordon (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 293-315 (p. 294).

after recognising the video game in contemporary literary culture as a collaborative image—a tale of two literacies—can the video game's influence on the novel be adequately defined.

Gaming Literacy

Literacy is doomed: to change. Where once reading and writing would represent the whole of what it was to be literate, it now represents one weave of the comprehensive lattice—essential, yes, but subordinated by literacy's newfound multiplicity. Meeting in New Hampshire, the New London Group summarised literacy's splintering off as its transformation into 'multiliteracies', a change enforced by 'the emerging cultural, institutional and global order' of things.[22] Advocating a space for 'modes of representation much broader than language alone', the New London Group foresaw the linguistic monopoly being ill-equipped to withstand the pressures of 'new communications media' and 'technologies of meaning'.[23] Given the video game's impact on society previously discussed, a gaming literacy must represent a substantial chunk of literacy's puzzle today. Writers doing this transposing work require knowledge of video games and opinions on their social, cultural, and aesthetic effect on the world and their art. This is true of any prose-object, but video games in literature are special. They mark the collusion and collapse of conventional literacy, and 'gaming literacy'. I mean gaming literacy in Zimmerman's sense, as comprehending 'how playing, understanding, and designing games all embody crucial ways of looking at and being in the world' and, presumably, deploying this comprehension to become a better citizen, protect oneself from civil impingement, and negotiate social and cultural possibilities native to the 21st century.[24] Gaming literacy encompasses direct comprehension of video games, like knowing how to play and design them, but also encompasses the systems they penetrate, the industries producing them, and their place

[22] The New London Group, 'A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures', *Havard Educational Review* 66.1 (Spring 1996), 60-93 (p. 63).
[23] Ibid. p. 64.
[24] *'Gaming Literacy'*, p. 30.

alongside other aesthetic objects like the novel. Generally, video games do not give up this knowledge without a fight. For example, understanding gamification, how snippets of gaming can mystify one's own labour, seems an important facet of gaming literacy, but gamification is most successful when it makes the unpalatable easier to swallow, which is a dubious ethical practice when applied to work.[25] In other words, the point of gamification is to obfuscate and misdirect—those who are gamifying things would prefer their practices be invisible within the things they gamify. Just as comprehending play today requires some comprehension of video games, it seems a waste to go without conventional literacy when understanding new ones. Heeding Zimmerman's call for wider gaming literacy via direct engagement with games may not be enough either; understanding the video game requires the novel's comprehension too, especially as it grows increasingly gaming literate itself.

It is important to stress the difference between what is conventionally grouped under a gaming literacy and what is meant when I extend the term here. Generally, research concerning gaming literacy is pinned to the pedagogical—how the video game can be deployed to teach emerging literacies, with James Paul Gee, Kurt D. Squire and Nicola Whitton some key luminaries of this approach. To generalise, these approaches seek to understand how video games can directly influence literacy, insomuch as they advocate a larger place for video games in a structured teaching and learning environment, whether through actual video games in the classroom, as with Whitton, or by transposing video game design concepts into pedagogical principles, as with Squire and Gee.[26] However, Matthew Barr creates space for a different perspective on gaming literacy; he sees 'an opportunity to explore how video games have indirectly taught, or otherwise influenced, those who have

[25] John Ferrara, 'Games for Persuasion: Argumentation, Procedurality, and the Lie of Gamification', *Games and Culture*, 8(4) (2013), 289-304.

[26] Nicola Whitton, *Learning with Digital Games: A Practical Guide to Engaging Students in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Kurt Squire, *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011); James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

played them all their lives', which is an endeavour made simpler if these teachings manifest in narrative aesthetics and literary stories.[27] Barr's suggestion moves the focus away from future or present orientated pedagogy and implies a hidden video game education recoverable by research. By looking to how video gaming produces a gaming literacy before educational contexts; the cultural assumptions curated through a lifetime of video gaming; the role the video game plays in the creative constellations of, say, writers; and the games and gaming phenomena that have quietly grounded personal explorations of comprehension, Barr invites researchers to trace the video game's auto-pedagogical potential. Therefore, when I invoke the idea of a gaming literacy, it refers to the comprehensive resources video games have bestowed to players in the arcade and the home, not just the classroom.

Although the case may be that the video game can perform in an auto-pedagogical role for players, the question of how this gaming literacy develops presents itself. For example, an examination of Dragana Martinovic *et al.*'s list of learning classifications for video games turns up no video game specific skills, instead attending to the spatial, the mathematical, the communicative potentials for computers games in the classroom.[28] This seems to suggest, where simple games are concerned at least, that the deployment of video games within structured educational contexts benefits adjacent literacies—video gaming is a tool to augment extant literacies as opposed to teaching its own. Applying this to an auto-pedagogical model and literacy's fracturing out into new obligations for the literate subject results in the video game representing a useful cultural artefact for getting to grips with literacy's prismatic nature today. Better, therefore, to view the video game through a lens that celebrates a critical literacy—one that encourages the learner to code-switch between established and nascent literacies—than as a medium exclusively dedicated to its own

[27] Matthew Barr, 'Video Games in Higher Education' *Annual University of Glasgow Learning and Teaching Conference,* (2013) {http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/78490/1/78490.pdf} [accessed 02/09/2019].
[28] Dragana Martinovic *et al*., 'Critic-proofing of the cognitive aspects of simple games', *Computers & Education*, 72 (2014) 132-144, (p. 140).

literacy. This is no great shame. In fact, it places gaming literacy at the forefront of being literate in semiotic domains that take place in or are derivative of the digital world.

It also brings into relief a different strategy for evaluating the video game's cultural impact that less assumes the video game's cultural becoming but instead proposes culture's becoming the video game—that the contemporary moment can be figured through its *videoludification*.[29] This portmanteau describes 'the process by which everyday life is permeated by the logic of video games, including, among others, the fields of economy, work, leisure, education, health and consumption', to which I would add literature as a field equally preoccupied with video games and its attending culture.[30] When taken in agreement with Roger Caillois' argument that 'if games are cultural factors and images, it follows that to a certain degree a civilisation and its contents may be characterised by its games' then video games as both the grand and native media of the late 20th and early 21st centuries will offer significant purchase on our culture's constitution.[31] If anything, Caillois' positioning of games as the prismatic lens and the *sens* (a word I believe better captures the instrumentality of a thing than the more passive, more perceptive nature of the 'sense' of a thing) of the culture they enounce seems less remote, less theoretical, now that the cultural object of the game has become the *de facto* rationale for videoludified spheres of public life. It stands to reason, then, that it was only a matter of time before the novel would transpose the video game as cultural image into a literary one. If videoludification should come to represent the *prima facie* cultural logic of our time, then we should expect the novel's mimetic potential to activate the video game with greater frequency and intensity, correlating with both the video game's cultural importance and the novel's improving gaming literacy. Indeed, Zimmerman and Galloway's call to demystify the video game through a gaming literacy can be explored through the novel when it exposes the video game to its own literacy;

[29] *Video Games as Culture*, p. 16.
[30] Ibid., p. 122.
[31] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games,* trans. by Meyer Barash (Chicago, IL: Illinois UP, 2001), p. 83.

if the novel is concerned with 'civilisation and its contents' it cannot ignore the medium that now most holistically defines what it is and what it is like.[32]

Media Ecology

Regardless, an analysis of one medium's representation within another, no matter the specificities, no doubt appears quite primitive in a field dominated by ecology metaphors. As a rule, ventures into the novel's relationship with other media today are informed by media ecological thought, which is in turn informed by a movement away from two materialist positions on media relations towards an informational inundation that deconstructs its own materiality through sheer material volume alone. Adorno's materialist system of media relations as seen in *The Culture Industry*, where critique expose reification's deleterious influence on subjective autonomy in modern capitalist societies; and Bourdieu's less prescriptive rationalisation of cultural consumption in *The Rules of Art,* where media relations are socially, not aesthetically, determined, are now appraised as products of simpler media times.[33] The term 'media ecology', conceived in private correspondence between Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman in the late 1960s, would spawn considerable academic outgrowths around the turn of the century, counting the Media Ecology Association (founded 1998) and its associated journal *Explorations in Media Ecology* (commenced in 2002) amongst its entrenched 21st century roots. The metaphor stuck, the media space became a landscape, the medium became environment, and media analysis became increasingly indebted to the language of modern ecological empiricism. In some ways, the media ecology metaphor's success was happenstance. McLuhan and company, however visionary they may have been, could not have foreseen the increased interest in climate change, both academic and public, the depreciation of non-positivist academic research, or the public distrust of

[32] Ibid.

[33] Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry*: *Selected essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991); Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (California: Stanford UP, 1996).

social-constructionist arguments that would make thinking media in ecological—thus scientific—terms so academically fashionable. Approaching media in ecological terms allows for insightful readings of the holistic media landscape, priding itself as it does on a complex relationality from which no medial or cultural event escapes. However, the field's voluble support for both complexity and relationality leads to an ontological flatness that struggles to provide faithful materialist critique of specific media relations.

This facet of media ecology is often one of the field's analytical strengths, it could never be charged with underthinking. The problem comes when the media ecology perspective does not see the wood for the trees, when the conditions of social and medial interaction cannot adhere to *ceteris paribus* logics. Turn anywhere in media ecology and it is aflame with maddening information. Joel Slayton's foreword to Matthew Fuller's *Media Ecologies* explains that, whichever way you slice it, 'within the multiplicities of these ecologies, complexity reigns supreme'; Niall Stephens believes that media ecological thinking 'takes for granted that it is impossible to precisely and empirically map the entire ontological field', presuming a systemic shift towards complexity so awesome that it embarrasses metaphysical premises; and McLuhan himself foretold a grand diminishing of perspective where 'electronic man shares much of the outlook of preliterate man, because he lives in a world of simultaneous information, […] in which all data influence other data', as if to look upon the contemporary media world is to see the light of ancient Greece on cave walls.[34] These sentiments make claims made in small, narrowly focussed media research—like the deployment of video games as metaphor in contemporary literary culture—beholden to noisy interference from a diffuse and ubiquitous 'medial will to power': a meta-

[34] Joel Slayton, *Media Ecology: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), foreword; Niall Stephens 'Towards a More Substantive Media Ecology: Postman's Metaphor Versus Posthuman Futures', *International Journal of Communication,* 8 (2014), 2027-2045 (p. 2032); Marshall McLuhan, 'At the Moment of Sputnik the Planet Becomes a Global Theater in Which There Are No Spectators But Only Actors' in *Marshall McLuhan: The Man and His Message*, ed. by George Sanderson and Frank Macdonald (Colorado: Fulcrum, 1989), pp. 70-80 (p. 71).

disciplinary golem for the information age.[35] While media ecology draws attention to how media systems upon systems influence and impinge upon human subjectivity, its brand of massive materialism can tip over into panpsychic animism—a grand Media exerting a gravitational pull that thwarts attempts to salvage its individual strands.

When pausing on this image, it is difficult to pinpoint where in media ecology's ethical imperative an ethics could be explored. Although Neil Postman's 2000 address to the Media Ecology Association makes the agreeable point that he did not 'see any point in studying media unless one does so within a moral or ethical context', when agency is handed over to media, as media ecological thinking invites us to do, then the call for ethical consumption/use/theorising is passed along with it.[36] Slavoj Žižek critiques within the new materialist school of thought (a school very much in conceptual allegiance with media ecological thought) the sense that when 'the agency for any particular act is distributed across a variety of kinds of bodies', the result is 'an ecological public […] a group of bodies, some human, most not, that are subjected to harm, defined as a diminished capacity for action'.[37] This applies to media ecology as well. I need not stress that unethical industrial media practices—within and without video games—adore framings that pass agency to a medial substrate. Doing so troubles the ecological metaphor on two counts. Firstly, there is a fundamental ethical difference between natural and medial misrepresentation. In purely ecological terms, you do not swat the common Mormon from the sky because it mimics/simulates the patterns of the common Rose—a *reductio ad absurdum* of an ethical

---

[35] Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), p. 2.
[36] Neil Postman, *The Humanism of Media Ecology* (New York: Fordham University, 2000) in *Media Ecology Database* {https://www.media-ecology.org/resources/Documents/Proceedings/v1/v1-02-Postman.pdf} [accessed 09/09/2020].
[37] Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation for Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 8.

imperative to challenge misrepresentation to be sure.[38] You would, however, feel compelled to correct misrepresentations in media—media objects that oppress by misrepresentation do not escape ethical appraisal simply because they appear in a field that can be theorised as ecological. Secondly, implicit within the impoverishment of human action in an ecological public is the idea that media relations are self-sustaining and thus self-regulating—this is simply the neoliberal assumption that free market economics correctly allocates resources locomoting through the media ecology.

Despite the media ecology school yielding excellent holistic models for studying media writ large, it is best to reject a full-blooded media ecology framework when the devil is in the details. That is not to reject the premise that media relate—or even that they relate in an ecological sense—but it does mean rejecting the notion that media interact according to *ceteris paribus* political conditions and the ambitions of holistic modelling that are, by nature, deterministic. Therefore, because 'media should be studied as a transformational change—but only when and if the values and operating logic of society change as well', the appreciable operating logics of video gaming in society previously addressed provide ample justification for a decentralised study of video games in contemporary literary culture.[39] The goal, then, is to parenthesise as much ecological noise as possible in order to follow the impressions of video games in the novel, and to appreciate the possibilities generated by this delimiting enclosure. Instead of dropping into the always-already interrelated media ecology from above, the method here experiments with mapping a route to that centre from its margins. Consequentially, approaching video games in this cartographic style requires a means of filtering out the other ecological noise, a means of bracketing off as much as

[38] The common Rose is an abundant Asian butterfly. So toxic and foul smelling to most predators when under threat as to be basically inedible, the common Mormon's primary form of defence is to mimic the patterns and colours of the common Rose.
[39] Juho Ruotsalainen and Sirkka Heinonen, 'Media Ecology and the Future Systemic Ecosystem', *European Journal of Futures Research,* 3 (2015), pp. 1-10 (p. 2).

possible to create a decentralised media study. It is here where new materialism can be turned for a moment into an unlikely ally.

Writing in opposition to ‘an affect economy’s [inability to] distinguish between trivial and significant assemblages’ David Nicholl interpolates some ontological verticality into the new materialist position, charging their resort to a ‘“third party” to arbitrate what really matters’ as evidence of ‘persistent human exceptionalism’ that brings the new materialist position into a kind of philosophical *zugzwang*.[40] Either provide some transcendental signifier—God, Language, Mind and so on—with some didactic privilege and undermine your materialism, or refuse metaphysics and, in Nicholl’s words, make it ‘almost impossible to decide whether a volcano is of greater significance than a sneeze’.[41] Doubtless written to chide new materialism, this supposedly paradoxical third party becomes new materialism’s lifeline. Shari Daya works textual representation into the new materialist framework, finding particularly material consequences in narrative because there, language ‘order[s] ongoing lives such that the[y] become meaningful things that can be understood, acted upon and developed to create even more new things’ and in its ‘silences that are themselves discursive events’, it ‘actively hide things’ about its objects of reference.[42] That textual representation is getting an ontological upgrade here is only to be inferred, but the key takeaway is that language at its most narratological and most silent is language at its most material; Daya’s analysis places literary writing in this third party, adjudicative space where cultural significances are tested by stories that create a bracketing hush around things.

Prose narration shapes not only what things are but can introduce a kind of strategic silence that bridges the gap between what a thing is and what socially constitutes it. When

---

[40] David Nicholls, ‘What’s Real is Immaterial: What are we Doing with New Materialism?’, *Aporia,* 11 (2019), pp.3-13 (p. 6).
[41] Ibid.
[42] Shari Daya, ‘Words and Worlds: Textual Representation and New Materialism’, *Cultural Geographies*, 26 (2019), pp.1-17 (p. 6).

the novel—the most esteemed and sustained prose narrative form—encounters not just things, but forms, the novel presents a vertical ontology even if that may not be the case. This is why Daniel Punday's *Writing at the Limits: The Novel in the New Media Ecology*, stresses that 'references to other media are more that [sic] just backdrop or theme; these other media, paradoxically, provide writers with a way of talking about what it means to write or read a print novel'. Punday's refusal to subordinate new media representation to mere 'backdrop or theme' also refuses to align voyeurism with novelistic depictions of new media. These references generate reflective self-awareness, here expressed in the process of writing, and a didactic urge modelled when exploring readings of others (both medial and subjective) and self-reading.[43] Even in Punday's exploration of what he calls the 'vocation' of the contemporary novel, silence is golden; Punday prizes in the contemporary novel its 'ability to represent the absent, potential or unrealized', which for him allows the novel to 'describe the ways that its stories can take on a role within a context larger than itself'.[44] It is of paramount importance, then, to appreciate what the novel gains in utility from these references. Going beyond its ability to communicate ideas about them, where the novel finds those most excessive silences about video games, the novel may imbricate its own imaginings into wider cultural knowledge of video games. In short, the pieces cultural objects themselves leave bare in their understanding's puzzle can often be novel shaped.

In speaking of what it finds in objects to be in excess of their own capacity to voice, the novel presents itself as intervening in the incomplete picture of that object as socially or aesthetically encountered. Put simply, the contemporary novel is especially talented at taking an object and begging questions of what it is and what it does for a public in tones and resonances that the object itself, by virtue of the novel encountering it dumb, cannot itself express. Taking Punday together with Daya then, the contemporary novel can be positioned

---

[43] Daniel Punday, *Writing at The Limits: The Novel in The New Media Ecology* (Lincoln, DE: Nebraska UP, 2012), pp. 1-2.
[44] *Writing at The Limits*, p. 114.

as a third-party observer of media form that induces a rare silence around the medium in question—in this investigation, video games. By creating quiet where 'the absent, potential or unrealized' aspects of media can speak, the novel brings into relief contingencies, contradictions, and absences the object itself cannot. Therefore, I propose that these literary formulations do crucial work in determining the cultural image of the video game as understood today, in recent cultural history, and evolving towards the future.

It is one thing to posit the novel as capable of this, but it is quite another to render this argument with relevance to the contemporary environment in which the video game became, and in a consistently useful manner across those novels indebted to video games that either do not form part of the thesis or have yet to be published or written. This is because the video game is a formally aggregative medium, and so the silences video games produce lack uniformity at the level of form. This supposes that those interpreting video games in contemporary literary culture must labour with the fact the video game is both one form collapsing many together, but also a form in and of itself, which I will explain later has allowed writers various emphases. There are game studies scholars who would challenge this, at the material level at least. For example, Ian Bogost is sceptical of a video gaming total work of art; his framing of video gaming's 'visual, tactile and locomotive appeal' as 'Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk-flavoured chewing gum' speaks volumes of how authentic a video game framed as such would be for him.[45] Popularised by Richard Wagner's 1849 essay 'Art and Revolution', *Gesamtkunstwerk* is roughly translatable as 'total work of art' and was used to describe Aeschylus' collapsing of 'all the rich elements of spontaneous art' and 'concentrating them all into one focus' as a Dionysian dramatic sensibility lost to modern society but recoverable, according to Wagner, in works of art composed of many forms.[46] However, problems arise with this approach when we think the individualised

[45] Ian Bogost, *How to Talk about Videogames* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2015), p. ix.
[46] Richard Wagner 'Art and Revolution' in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. by William Ashton Ellis (London: K Paul, Trench, Trüber, 1895), pp. 23-65 (p. 33).

gesamtkunstwerk alongside flat ontologies—discrete video games simply do not behave like this. Although it is the case that video games express a graphical, aural, tactile and textual element as a rule (one occasionally broken), it cannot be said that they do so evenly.[47] *Planescape: Torment*, critical darling of text-based video gaming, is lauded almost exclusively for its deft prose narration and mature storytelling.[48] Its meandering combat and lack of optimisation are not so fondly remembered. Given time and financial constraints, being the *Ulysses* of gaming means, practically speaking, *not* being the *Moonlight Sonata* or the *Mona Lisa* of gaming. This is all before having to disentangle Wagner's rank social character, anti-Semitism, and questionable aesthetic merits from the concept.[49] Several problems then, some related to *gesamtkunstwerk* itself and some with how it relates to video games, stifle its critical use. Therefore, I agree with Bogost's sentiments that the video game as modern day *gesamtkunstwerk* can be rejected, but video games still possess a synthetic, aggregating media compositional quality that is essential to their study, even in representation. Fortunately, Bogost relays another turn of phrase, one native to game studies, better suited to describing this aspect of video games in the media language previously discussed: media microecology.

In his book *How to Do Things with Video Games*, Bogost acknowledges that what can be done with video games has much to do with their aggregation of media form. He defined their role within the media ecology as a 'microhabitat, a small, specialized environment within a larger ecosystem' and that they can be studied as media environments themselves.[50] As opposed to metaphorically associating the video game with individual organisms, Bogost accommodates research interested in how the holistic media ecological

[47] Some developers have experimented with removing the visual element from their games to cater to players with visual impairments, see https://audiogames.net/ for games of this ilk.
[48] Black Isle Studios, *Planescape: Torment* (1999). Microsoft Windows.
[49] See Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner,* trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1981) for the best critique of Wagnerian opera and the ideology of *gesamtkunstwerk*.
[50] Ian Bogost, *How to do Things with Video Games* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2011), p. 6.

picture is expressed in the particular. Bogost's methodology, however, insists that direct contact with video games is the only means for creating the silence necessary to understand them as microhabitats. When informed by the previous scholarship, this dogmatic element runs into some problems. For example, Bogost defines 'media microecology' as the following:

> [M]edia microecology seeks to reveal the impact of a medium's properties on society. But it does so through a more specialized, focused attention to a single medium, digging deep into one dark, unexplored corner of a media ecosystem, like an ecologist digs deep into the natural one. […] In doing so, the value of that medium […] is less important than the documentation of its variety and application. For it is only after conducting such an investigation that we should feel qualified to consider distinct varieties of a medium as promising or threatening to a particular way of life. And indeed, after doing so, we might well feel less certain of such definitive moral positions anyway.[51]

Bogost's thrust here is to be commended for recognising the importance of selective silence when exploring discrete media, but it is unnecessarily theoretically exclusive. It stands to reason that in order 'to reveal the impact of a medium's properties on society' that medium of inquiry must be subjected to 'specialized, focused attention', but this attentive mode is available to and alive within contemporary literary culture's depictions of video games. Although it is tempting to read in Bogost's description of 'digging deep into one dark, unexplored corner of a media ecosystem' an implicit shallowness compared to "macro" media ecological thought, it is more charitable to see his resort to video games' formal depth and darkness as him reaching by different means those objective excesses that Nicholls and Daya see in objects and that Punday sees the contemporary novel as illuminating. Bogost designs media microecology to expose a medium's social usefulness as opposed to conducting 'documentation of its variety and application', which seems an unnecessary spilt. It is worth considering where such documentation might exist, and how documentation in a

---

[51] *How to do Things with Video* Games, p. 7.

literal sense might avail a media microecology with the means to clarify those formal aspects that sit so 'dark' and 'unexplored'. That parts of the video game give themselves up to direct inquiry less readily than others, as is suggested here, can be reckoned as sensorial experience's limit in rendering distinct parts of the video game when confronted with the whole. When this limit scales up to the 'impact of a medium's properties on society', then it is reasonable to hypothesise an affective undercurrent influencing the video game's social receptions, applications, and manifestations that does *not* yield itself to direct inquiry. Therefore, I view the belief that 'it is only after conducting such an investigation that we should feel qualified to consider distinct varieties of a medium as promising or threatening to a particular way of life' as true in spirit, but the viewpoint that this is the 'only' means to confront variation in video games 'as promising or threatening to a particular way of life' is anti-pragmatic. Therefore, I suggest it better to reckon with Bogost's viewpoint as one amongst other valid media microecological methods. To summarise, media microecology gets us closer to a poetics, but not quite the whole way.

In order to disinter this literary ludic image properly, then, some slight of thought is required to move away from Bogost's formulation whilst retaining his urge towards micro mediaecology. If, as Zimmerman argues, video games have already changed what it means to be literate, then literary studies may find its comprehensive tools—its critical vocabulary, its textual analysis, lacking purchase on the cliff face of this emergent cultural and literary language. Moving towards a video gaming poetics requires new names, activities, and concepts that highlight the video game influence on contemporary fiction, with attention paid to precisely what this poetics should be doing with its material once it is extracted. James Purdon's Germanic formulation 'Literature-Technology-Media' expresses 'how these concepts are transformed in the emergence of specific technical and discursive potentials'.[52]

[52] James Purdon, 'Literature-Technology-Media: Towards a New Technography', *Literature Compass*, 15 (2018), 1-9 (p. 5).

For example, Purdon considers the act of writing in its technological sense, one that 'now seems so fundamental to the history of the species that we have lost the tendency to think of it as such', highlighting that, despite its evergreen, seemingly omnipresent role in human history, writing, literary or otherwise, will always be one technology describing another.[53] Writing can 'describe an artifact' by giving a name or can describe the activity of producing an artifact—'writing a novel' is Purdon's example.[54] Most important to this thesis is that writing as a technology can present knowledge—what Purdon calls writing's 'know-how'—about a thing.[55] To categorise and evaluate writing's 'know-how' about the video game requires denominating the category of writing but also directing it towards revealing its 'know-how' about the video game. In service of denomination and direction, I will now explore this technographic poetics and explain what can be done with writing's 'know-how' about video games.

Machphrasis

Ekphrasis, defined as 'an explanation or description of something, esp. as a rhetorical device' began with Plato, a bed, and a warning.[56] Plato ends *The Republic* by arguing for the poets' expulsion from his good state because they peddle misrepresentation.[57] Where beds are concerned, producing a bed is very different to producing an image of a bed. Plato represents this process as the creation of beds 'in appearance' without manifesting them.[58] This is dangerous because these mirrored imitations can ensnare those easily fooled, for beds of the artist's mirror world cannot be slept in, a teleological *faux pas*. Thus, they are appearance without function, and the construction of any actual bed is more honourable than even the

[53] *Literature-Technology-Media*, p. 7.
[54] *Literature-Technology-Media,* p. 5.
[55] Ibid.
[56] OED, Ekphrasis in The Oxford English Dictionary [online] {https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/view/Entry/59412?redirectedFrom=ecphrasis#eid} [accessed 25/10/2019]
[57] Plato, *Republic,* trans. by G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D.C Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), p. 267.
[58] *Republic,* p. 267.

most ornate bed in representation. This ornament Plato transposes to 'charm', the poetic means of mirroring the real persuasively, the means to make the case for a poetic truth or 'know-how' about real objects.[59] Plato protests the poet's proclivity for rhetoric the most—the poetic showing and telling, as opposed to doing—for it takes one mimetic engine and fuels it with another, a gesture that subordinates a representational art within another, ever receding away from the reality of things. In viewing the poet and painter as equidistant from the real, Plato establishes ekphrasis' first school: the model of analogy, of equivalence between the representational model of the word and the image.

Aristotle expands Plato's system of ekphrasis but sought to soften the prescription, describing ekphrasis' aesthetic form divorced from state-making. Aristotle found that '[s]ome artists, whether by theoretical knowledge or by long practice, can represent things by imitating their shapes and colours, and others do so by the use of the voice', echoing Plato's conflation of the poets and painters in *The Republic*.[60] In conflating the two modes, Aristotle and Plato provided the precedent for Horace's famous equation '*Ut Pictura Poesis*' or 'as painting, so is poetry' which argues that the same critical attention should be given to painting as poetry, with painting the spatial, artistic medium to poetry's (particularly oral poetry's) temporal form. To privilege neither representational form is the hallmark of ekphrasis' analogic model and suggests a harmonious relationship, where depiction celebrates both the representational energy of the depicter and the formal beauty of the depicted. It is, however, not always the case that forms depict each other even-handedly. Indeed, these depictions can be charged with condescending, anxious, or outright condemnatory energies towards the form in the spotlight. This class of ekphrasis, where literature assumes an antagonistic or concerned stance on other media, is the 'paragonal'

[59] *Republic*, p. 269.
[60] Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, trans. by James Hutton (London: Franklin Classics, 2018), p. 32.

model and is conventionally used to describe instances where poetry jostles with painting for supremacy in presenting the nature of things.

Rising interest, both academic and literary, in understanding the role of digital media in contemporary culture has goaded attempts to broaden ekphrasis' concerns. Within ekphrasis' extant criticism on its ambitions beyond quills and paintbrushes, scholars have previously taken the position that new media cultures like video games operate within a set of representational potentials far broader than older media could envision. For example, Jay David Bolter observed within multimedia's visual-textual lattice not the *prima facie* case for analogical ekphrasis but the 'denial of ekphrasis' altogether because of the encroachments made by the virtual realm of representation that aims at seamless simulation—a system of representing things that is anathema to techniques like ekphrasis that bring into relief representation as such.[61] Bolter's decision to rest in the question of media relationships would lead to *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, where Bolter along with Richard Grusin would continue theorising the interactions of new media with the old. Their flagship concept, remediation, is born from the relentless recontextualization of media productions to present themselves as being maximally immediate and useful despite daily life never being more mediated.[62] A webpage presenting a mixture of text and image, or video games deploying the trademark shots of cinematography are examples of old media practices cycling through their younger counterparts. Ekphrasis' relationship to remediation is tricky and can overwork the concept; ekphrasis essentially deals in images represented in text, which is a relationship that is important to remediation theory but not reducible to it. Although I would second Renate Brosch's argument that, today, what work ekphrasis does

[61] Jay David Bolter, 'Ekphrasis, Virtual Reality and the Future of Writing', in *The Future of the Book*, ed. by Geoffrey Nunberg (Berkeley, CA: California UP, 1996), pp. 253-272, (p. 265).
[62] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT UP, 1999) p. 5.

for poetry can be transposed to model other literary or cultural phenomena, I will now explain why dividing ekphrasis is more productive than adding to it.[63]

Firstly, sincere attempts to embolden relations between two sets of media should respect discreteness, not unity, of form. Although relationality, if the new materialists are to be believed, is a *general* characteristic of media, if all relations between all media draw upon a singular concept to voice these relations, then we have a technologically deterministic hermeneutics that occludes insights with a buzzword. Although ekphrasis begins its life turning on the poetry/painting relationship, the scholarship since the 1980s has bloated ekphrasis' borders to bursting. Ekphrasis luminaries William Mitchell and Valentine Cunningham have suggested ekphrasis as '*the verbal representation of graphic representation'*, and that 'ekphrastic scope is vast: shields, urns, cups, statues, frescoes, tapestries, cartoons, paintings, photographs, movies, bits of buildings, whole buildings, ruins of buildings' respectively—gorging the concept on all the possibilities of the graphical, the cinematic and even the architectural.[64] Whether this rotund ekphrasis is nimble enough to disentangle all of this relationality is neither here nor there, but I would refrain from adding video games to this list. A concept having to describe what textual representation does for the graphical, the cinematic, the spatial and the tactile is one thing, but to insist it do the same for video games—a form that deploys all these concepts (and textuality itself) but is not reducible to any of them—is to spread ekphrasis too thin to go beyond basic description. Frankly, ekphrasis strains to allocate properly the media resources deployed in the production of any new media artefact in spite of (or because of) its prevalence—ekphrasis risks becoming inundated by itself. The object of inquiry here, with one foot in media and

[63] Renate Brosch, 'Ekphrasis in the Digital Age: Responses to Images', *Poetics Today,* 39(2) (June 2018), 225-243, (p. 226).
[64] James A. W. Heffernan, 'Ekphrasis and Representation', *New Literary History,* 22 (1991), 297-316 (p. 299); Valentine Cunningham, 'Why Ekphrasis?', *Classical Philology,* 102 (2007), 57-71 (p. 57).

another in the literary, is too bifocal for recourse to just the media ecology discipline, or ekphrasis' rhetorical-literary heritage. It is a thing betwixt the two.

It is also important to account for some similarities and differences between the video game metaphor and other ekphrastic representations. Critical assessments of the relationship between the novel and other mediums can contextualise anxieties regarding the video game's suitability as an artistic form and their perceived influence on the cultures producing and playing them. An example of this would be what James M. Welsh in his introduction to the 2007 edited collection *The Literature/Film Reader* calls the supposedly 'unfilmable' novelistic qualities such as 'voice', or 'tone', which he suggests 'could prove problematic' for cinema to emulate.[65] Welsh counters this argument with the cinematographies of Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Yasujiro Ozu, and Akira Kurosawa, but evoking anxieties about what can and cannot move from the literary to cinematic is no straw man argument. Karine Abadie & Catherine Chartrand-Laborte argue adaptation or novelization 'leads to a distortion of the individual forms and redraws their boundaries', framing cinema and literature in a reciprocally critical (in the sense of criticism) relationship. In a more cultural sense, Mattias Frey charts through various cultural critics the anxiety that film's supposedly simpler reception and public appeal from 1945 to 1970 began a march on the office of criticism that television and the internet would purportedly finish.[66] The video game also enjoys accusations of the formal and cultural lack literature has previously proposed for cinema. I provide these examples to illustrate that both literary fiction's and criticism's anxiety that video games may taint by association its treasured capabilities has historical precedence. There are also some key differences between the video game metaphor and other

[65] James M. Welsh, 'Introduction' in *The Literature/Film Reader*, ed. by James M. Welsh, Peter Lev (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2007), pp. xiii-xxviii (p. xv).
[66] Karine Abadie, Catherine Chartrand-Laporte, 'Paper and Screen: The Inter-Art Work, Interactions and exchanges between literature and cinema', *Interférences Littéraires, Literaire interferenties*, 11 (2013), 17-24 (p. 19); Mattias Frey, *The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2015) pp. 14-16.

media in fiction, such as the depiction of music in literary fiction. Music's representation differs slightly from the video game metaphor, given that music is 'an abstract art, with no power to represent the world' outside of song's language, though distinguishing this from poetry is philosophically difficult.[67] Whereas music could not represent agreement or dissent to a novel's representation of it, the video game, being a representational medium, has a 'voice' capable of confusing or rebelling against literary fiction's treatment. However, fiction's representation of music or video games can touch not only how these mediums alter life, but *seem* to alter life, as '[e]ven though such literary depictions of musical experience are fictional, they are also windows into the workings of music in modern society'.[68] This looking glass quality—sometimes clarifying, sometimes distorting—is also a property of the video game metaphor.

Alongside these anxious similarities, however, I propose the video game's accompanying media panic is especially acute. I agree with Patrick M. Markey and Christopher Ferguson that, although '[m]oral panic seems to be a constant in a society where nearly everything is aways changing, […] all [moral panics] seem to pale in comparison to what has become the most famous moral panic of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries—violent video games'.[69] Markey and Ferguson discuss violent video games specifically, though they equally could have activated arguments regarding addictive video game media panics as well (as chapter 3 will explore). The term 'moral panic' has risen in popularity over the late 20th and 21st century to the extent that it is thoroughly within public and academic discourse. Stanley Cohen coined the term as used today in his 1972 book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, and his definition of it as a 'condition, episode, person or group of persons emerg[ing] to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests', still

[67] Roger Scruton, 'Representation in Music', *Philosophy*, 51(197) (1976), 273-287 (p. 273).
[68] Therese Wiwe Vilmar, 'Literature's listening spaces: Representations of music listening in two contemporary novels', *SoundEffects*, 10(1) (2021) 57-70 (p. 58).
[69] Patrick M. Markey and Chris J. Ferguson, 'Teaching Us to Fear: The Violent Video Game Moral Panic and the Politics of Game Research', *American Journal of Play,* 10(1) (2017), 99-115 (p. 112).

captures the contemporary essence.[70] However, panic surrounding the video game is probably better explored through the more specific 'media panic'. This moral panic subset comes into focus through Kirsten Drotner's work in 1999, as a means for Drotner to distinguish between moral panics of any sort and those specifically tied to 'highly charged' and 'morally polarised' debates about emerging media technologies.[71] Thinking about the video game and the novel as media panics separates the anxious energies directed at media from those directed at subjugated groups, like the supposed Salem witches among many others. These persecuted groups—subjected to oppression fuelled by moral panics—suffered in orders of magnitude more than the gamer, and so media panic produces a stronger boundary between these groups and those who are identified or self-identify as gamers. Continuing, media panic focusses on the medium itself, and because '[e]lite uncertainties towards a new medium are based on the perception that it has a potential for opening up the domain of the moral to contestation', it places video games usefully among the set of historical media like the novel, film, and television that *seem* to subject our 'domain of the moral' to change.[72] Ultimately, when the novel deploys the video game metaphor anxiously or disparagingly, the novel functions as a lens into the acute and specific media panic surrounding video games as emerging new media.

To relieve ekphrasis from the burden of having to say it all about media relationships, I turn specifically to Bolter and Grusin's under-theorised concept, retrograde remediation. Mentioned by name only twice in *Remediation*, it represents the inverse of the more common media phenomenon of new media incorporating older forms. Instead, as Bolter and Grusin observe, when 'a newer medium is imitated or even absorbed by an older one', as is the case with retrograde remediation, the older medium is subjected to an economy of extension and

[70] Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2011), p. 1.
[71] Kirsten Drotner, 'Dangerous Media? Panic Discourses and Dilemmas of Modernity', *Paedagogica Historica,* 35(3) (1999), 593-619 (p. 596).
[72] Frank Furedi, 'Moral Panic and Reading: Early Elite Anxieties About the Media Effect' *Cultural Sociology* (2016), 10(4) 523-537 (p. 528).

disruption where it experiments with its new relationship.[73] Absorption appears too strong of a word for what retrograde remediation does, insofar as the ekphrastic moment must leave its footfall trace or else the critic's task of following its effect would be too hard. It also implies a uniformity in representation that, at least with video games in the contemporary novel, is difficult to justify. This is all to say that Bolter and Grusin left space within remediation's structure for narrower scholarly attention to particular interplays, such as that between the novel and the video game. Despite this relationship representing only a fraction of what is possible literarily via ekphrasis and politico-economically via remediation, the video game represents a pressing medium to theorise in a videoludified, digital present, as does how the novel leveraged the video game as metaphor to speak to emergent ideologies, cultures, and phenomena of the digital age. To be sure, the novel did not ignore the video game—the novel, as this thesis will show, took the video game in deadly seriousness long before literary criticism did.

To bring these literary and media concepts together, acknowledging the heritage of ekphrasis, the economy of retrograde remediation and Galloway and Zimmerman's *cri de coeur* for a gaming literacy, I present machphrasis. A term I borrow from writer and scholar Kawika Guillermo (matrilineal name of cultural and literary theorist Christopher B. Patterson), machphrasis celebrates the novel's efforts to reckon with the video game. Defined by Guillermo as 'prose inspired by the machinations of video games, their universes, their puzzles, their social and physical systems of logic, their rules and boundaries, and their emotional responses', it is the concept this thesis builds upon in subsequent chapters.[74] Guillermo pays close attention to the broad constellation of access points for the novel, leaving the concept quite open in what it can describe and explain. The definition is also

[73] *Remediation*, p. 147-9.
[74] Kawika Guillermo, 'The Art of Machphrasis: Stories Inspired by Video Games', (2016) {https://medium.com/anomalyblog/the-art-of-machphrasis-stories-inspired-by-video-games-11261e9087d9} [accessed 22/10/2019].

useful in the negative sense—note that specific video game technologies (Microsoft's Xbox for example) or intellectual properties are quite conspicuous by their absence from machphrasis' definition. Painting a picture of what machphrasis assumes to know about the video game must balance flexibility with prudence, such is the atomisation of representation that Guillermo's definition, stutter-stepping to one potential avenue after another, seems to anticipate.

Guillermo is well aware of the effects video games bring upon literature and vice versa. Machphrasis for Guillermo unveils his own inspirations as much as he posits them for others. After having 'to hide the fact that my short story [The Last of its Kind] […] was first based on a video game', that game being Bethesda's 2011 *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, he chose 2016 as the right time to unfurl how video games informed his prose.[75] Hiding one's influences puts Guillermo in good company, as he himself explains that 'historically, writers have always had to hide their less-respected influences' for fear of upsetting literary fiction's rarefied critical centre which does not always abide meaning-making with putatively 'low' forms, as if video games hang like graffiti on literature's palace walls.[76] Guillermo partially accepts this, only to relish the sense that 'in an age where literature has replaced the sacred, to say that one's main source of inspiration comes from video games has a heretical imprint'.[77] The torch passes from heresy to machphrasis as a contemporary mode of resistance and subversion. Given Guillermo's belief that machphrasis can 'break past the screen and into experiences of personal prejudice and assault' and that 'political subtexts in video games can mirror the real world in haunting ways', he is clearly optimistic about machphrasis' poltergeist-like ability to disrupt naturalised narratives within video games, literature, and the reality that both hauntingly mirror.[78]

[75] *The Art of Machphrasis*.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.

Despite this, the concept of machphrasis has enjoyed little to no academic attention. A reason for this could be its relatively humble beginning as a Medium blog post, outside of traditionally privileged academic spaces. As mentioned above, its heritage encompasses literary ekphrasis and theories of remediation, but it remains under-theorised. For example, machphrasis defined as 'prose inspired by the machinations of video games' points simultaneously to specific video games, and the video game more broadly considered as form as the inspiring catalyst, complicating precisely what the reader is looking for in the imaginary of said prose. Continuing, within the term 'video game' itself lies two potentially very different semiotic stresses that the novelist can transform into literary resources. Writing inspired more by the technological heritage of the *video* game will necessarily produce different figurations to writing inspired more by the ludic heritage of the video *game*—with both flexing different literary muscles to the writer who manages an even-handed approach. Nonetheless, I am sympathetic to Guillermo's decision to align machphrasis with the broad field of 'prose'. This guards against machphrasis locking to genres, as Barr attempts with science fiction, or individual texts, as with Condis and Stark's discussion of *Ready Player One*. Doing so also allows machphrasis to scuttle between narratological and syntactic interpretations. Video games, when represented in prose, can move narrative time, space, and characterisation along, but their arrangement in sentences also shapes how there are perceived. Consider the following sentence: 'Francis's desk was covered in video games, novels, and records.' This sentence does its narratological job by characterising Francis, but here video games belong to a suite of artistic objects. Change 'novels' and 'records' to 'weed' and 'empty beer bottles', and the narratological and grammatical function is the same: it still characterises Francis with a list, but video games have been syntactically co-opted by another suite of objects with a radically different family resemblance. Video games are in literature's employ as themes to be sure, but they are also

there as literary resources, as ludic metaphors borrowed as literature strives for effect. Literature returns them altered; it cannot help it.

For Guillermo to contribute to my poetics, however, some refiguring is required, partially because Guillermo is so brief with machphrasis. Much of machphrasis' analytical application is deferred because his is a writerly machphrasis, composed to inspire tomorrow's prose efforts, not necessarily to understand or interpret current machphrastic contexts. Where Guillermo's machphrasis foresees a gaming future tense in literary culture, a poetics of machphrasis can bridge the gaps towards this future, offering the praxis-based machphrasis its history, and, if it is worth anything as a poetics, examples of effective practice. Therefore, alongside Guillermo's praxis-based definition, I will now suggest three additions that couple it more tightly to its literary and media heritage; trace the varying complexions of the literary machphrastic gesture and, most importantly, gesture towards a systematic poetics for machphrasis that this thesis will explore. I will present and defend these additions point for point:

1. Machphrasis occurs when the video game is deployed as a proxy technology to anticipate future technologies.
2. Machphrasis occurs when the video game as form is deployed as an aesthetic mode of experience.
3. Machphrasis occurs when the overdetermined history of the video game and its attending cultures are negotiated to service ideologies.

Point 1 refers largely to instances where the video game's status as the most widely accessible computerised entertainment format is used to ground descriptions of anticipated technologies. As its *prima facie* referent is the technological, hence *video* aspect of video games, these deployments begin with a technology and then posit the video game as an appropriate contingency to whatever said technology does. The most visible example of this

is the video game's conflation with and parentage to sophisticated virtual or augmented reality. Unsurprising, as the man that would popularise the term 'virtual reality' (VR), Jaron Lanier, would do so after his departure from computer and console developer Atari Inc. by establishing VPL Research—a company that sold the latest and greatest in virtual reality tech at the time—in 1984.[79] Outside commercial affiliations, technology and media scholars have discoursed on this relationship and many conversations have debated this hierarchy's usefulness and relevancy, with some suggesting that 'computer games can be understood as a particular form of virtual reality', while others express the inverse, suggesting that 'very little critical scholarship in the game studies space has addressed VR as anything but an abstract, deferred technology whose future possibilities are understood to be more intriguing than its present'.[80] Despite academic discourse surrounding games and VR becoming increasingly practical and intriguing, particularly in clinical contexts, the abstract conversation's ongoing presence in game and media studies suggests the problem of VR's relationship with video games remains unresolved.[81] Importantly, the technological relationship here described is but the brightest star in a constellation of machphrastic technological anticipations, such as gamified social media in, for example, Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*, or parity between virtual and fiat currency in Cory Doctorow's *For The Win,* which all also seem equally unresolved.[82] What machphrasis

[79] Although we certainly have Lanier to thank for popularising the term to define immersive technologies as they appear to the public today, the phrase 'virtual reality' existed in the francophone world long before. Coined by avant-garde playwright Antonin Artaud, virtual reality described what is created when the dramatic apparatuses are collected together to constitute 'the virtual reality of the theatre'. Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958) p. 49.

[80] Daniel Pietschmann, Georg Valtin and Peter Ohler, 'The Effect of Authentic Input Devices on Computer Game Immersion', in *Computer Games and New Media Cultures* (Heidelburg: Springer, 2012) p. 282; David S Heineman, 'Porting Game Studies Research to Virtual Reality', *New Media & Society*, 18(11) (2016), 2793-2799, (pp. 2793-4).

[81] Ferguson *et al.,* 'Video Games, frustration, violence, and virtual reality: Two studies' *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 61 (2022), 83-99; Gracia Bravo *et al.,* 'Virtual reality and video games in cardiac rehabilitation problems. A systematic review', *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 43(4) (2019), 448-457.

[82] Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story* (London: Granta, 2011); Cory Doctorow, *For the Win* (New York: Random House, 2010).

illuminates is how this question is answered by prose, exploring how the novel relies upon the video game to characterise its imaginary technologies.

I now wish to anticipate critique: that I place the novel, by association to the video game medium, into a state of passivity, as if the novel form is merely a receptacle for new media ideas. My previous suggestion that the video game currently holds the strongest claim as the 21st century's grand medium further goads this criticism. This is not the case because, as N. Katherine Hayles explains, 'literary texts are not, of course, merely passive conduits. They actively shape what the technologies mean and what the scientific theories signify in cultural contexts', which places the literary text in question—the novel—in a position of great activity.[83] If a technology's history shapes what that technology means, and we consider ourselves forewarned of poetry's potential to delude by Plato, then literature can hold court when a technology's historical narrative is complicated. Which of the usual suspects—the cathode ray amusement device (1947); Christopher Strachey's draughts programme (1952); *Spacewar!* (1962) or *Pong* (1972)—suits as the beginning of video game history is a matter of definition, taste, and argument. The truth is an accurate history of the video game must respect its multiplicity and shun a fixed, unproblematised origin. Literature is under such no compunctions—it may make the case for any of these and persuade its way to an agreeable origin story. The key implication is that the novel, far from passively observing the video game, can use its representation power to resolve unduly elements of the video game in any direction that suits the writer.

Returning to the additions, point 2 refers to literary depictions of video games either as conventionally aesthetic objects for effect or, more importantly, the depiction of video gaming as an aesthetic mode of experience. The first instance focusses, as does point 1, on video gaming's materiality—cartridges, controllers, hefty arcade machines, carpal tunnel

[83] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*: *Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1999), p. 21.

syndrome, glitches, code, and so on—and presents them in an ameliorative or pejorative mode in a manner in keeping with conventional ekphrasis. Unlike point 1 which is necessarily a proleptic technique, by relying on some commonality in a reader's past the first half of point 2 is generally analeptic, trading on a nostalgic past when video games and gaming were genuinely sub-cultural artefacts and activities. Nostalgia is just as much a forgetting as a remembering, and subsequent chapters will analyse nostalgia in greater detail with regards to Michael Clune's *Gamelife: A Memoir* and Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*. The second facet of point 2 presents the video gaming subjective experience and hence is the most player/gamer facing element of machphrasis. If 'the form of the digital game is an allegory for the form of being', as Mackenzie Wark proposes, then machphrasis experiments with what conditions the subject when they identify strongly with this allegory of being.[84] It lends itself to an autobiographical mode of writing where the author deploys the act of video game playing as an allegorical substitution for spaces where the subject is conventionally constituted (the playground or the home for example), or categorises a set of personal affects that occur when the video game as form is taken as an identity marker.

Deployed as such, modally inclined machphrasis foregrounds video gaming's mediating effect on subjectivity, often associating an aesthetic, phenomenal and ethical consequence to the act of consuming or high consumption of video games. Although these consequences are ordered by the thematic concerns of the novel in question, machphrasis targeting the video game as an aesthetic mode of experience differentiates itself from points 1 and 3 by play's necessity in the metaphorical effort—the means for bringing the video gamer into machphrastic focus is what they do with video games: play them. I mean this in two different ways. Firstly, play has an established place in contemporary philosophical understandings of textuality. Jacques Derrida for example has theorised the limited

[84] McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007), p. 225.

boundaries of textual interpretation, what he calls the 'organizing principle of the structure' of texts, as playful.[85] Derrida identifies an accompanying anxiety to groundless interpretation; when 'the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable', then truly free interpretation, like arguing that *Don Quixote* is a treatise on video games, evokes the kind of unconscious unmooring that we observe in madness (the unthinkable) or vicariously observe in death (the not-thinkable). This is resolved by the historical substitutions of a text's centre, a spatial metaphor standing in place of a text's moving through history, accruing through discourse new horizons as older ones have their day and set. Understanding this cyclical substitution as the condition, not the obliteration, of sound interpretation is facilitated by understanding what Derrida calls '*freeplay'* as 'a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble' that influences interpretation from 'a center which arrests and founds the freeplay of substitutions'.[86] Taken as such, the Derridean freeplay concept (perhaps more fully realised in the sense of looseness, play, and delight in its French root *jeu* than in English), would make machphrasis pulse with two plays. Video gameplay can work alongside this slippery new centre that comes into being at the moment of its inscription, insomuch that from writing an antecedent play emerges that could—in classic Derridean fashion—contaminate machphrasis with a lineage of play, of carnival, transgression and games. It is here that literature's play can interrupt video game play.

For perspective's sake, it is worth viewing this kind of tumultuous play that takes for granted an always-already textually constituted world from the viewpoint of machphrasis. At first glance, what Derrida's play concept describes chimes with Punday's vocation for the contemporary novel as voicing absent, potential, and unrealised aspects of life. Their concepts work through a fundamental instability, whether that be the inherent lack of

[85] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, Trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1978) pp. 278-293, (p. 279).
[86] *Structure, Sign, and Play,* p. 289.

stability at writing's centre that gives freeplay its purpose, or the wish to represent these lacks in ways that objects themselves will not. For Punday, this is self-reflexive, allowing the novel to 'embrace its own limits' in the (de)limiting of other media forms.[87] This makes machphrasis more relevant to game studies, for example, because it is another means of arriving at the various ways that play can begin to resemble other concepts. Derrida's thought has been deployed, for example, to investigate how first-person shooter and MMO mechanics come to more closely resemble 'work' and 'a desire to constrain play', questioning presumptions that games are primarily 'played', and seeing concepts like gamification as inherent logics of video gaming, not corruptions.[88] Although similar reservations have been explored in psychological and philosophical contexts, when machphrasis troubles the link between video gaming and enjoyable or worthwhile play, the aesthetic desire to 'constrain play' belies an ethical imperative to divide gameplay and play proper, a model of machphrasis in keeping with paragonal models of ekphrasis previously discussed.[89] Machphrasis can, then, interrogate play as the aesthetic mode of experiencing video games, either by challenging how present play truly is through voicing its potential to slip over into work (gamification for example), or to probe unrealized play (something akin to a lack of fun). In short, machphrasis can place the video game and the contemporary novel in a reciprocal embracing of their respective lacks, where metaphors tug at gaming's inaesthetic potential—that video games can be genuinely mundane and shallow.

That is not to say that machphrasis is always antagonistic, nor that game studies need kowtow to a purely literary sense of play. Indeed, game studies comes well equipped with a sophisticated and diverse sense of play that enriches machphrasis as much as its literary equivalents. This leads to point 2's second element, that analysing play-focused machphrasis

---

[87] *Writing at the Limit*, p. 114.
[88] David Golumbia, 'Games without Play', *New Literary History,* 40 (2009), 179-204 (p. 179).
[89] See Brian Primack, 'Video Games: Play or "Playlike" Activity?' and Brock Rough's 'The Incompatibility of Games and Artworks' as considerations of play as a poor descriptor of gaming and playful objects not being artful objects, respectively.

can invite a critical dialogue between postmodern play on one hand (where play flourished as descriptor and lens of literary event), and play as thought by game studies, either old or new. Detailing how play has influenced, changed and been changed by philosophical thought today would comprise an entire thesis itself, so some pruning is required.[90] Game studies, in contouring its understanding of play around certain figures, does exactly that.[91] Arguably, Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois and Brian Sutton-Smith are the primary forebears of game studies writ large, but David Nieborg and Joke Hermes rightly differentiate between the philosophy of play advanced by these figures and game studies that is understood to have 'came into being with electronic, video and computer games as cultural form', where serious thinkers of play include Espen Aarseth, Mary Flanagan, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman.[92] These seven thinkers of play, then, are the focal points for theorising machphrastic efforts directed at play, providing both broad theoretical strokes about play's embeddedness in culture, and conceptualisations directly linked to play's particular contemporary manifestations within the video game.

Although one of them stands out. Caillois's greatest contribution to machphrasis is not his willingness to assign play an important role in all of society (although he does do this), it is his understanding of a certain kind of play that surfaces disproportionally in contemporary literary culture: ilinx. For Caillois, ilinx is one of four designations of play—agon, alea, mimicry and ilinx—and is characterised by 'a rapid whirling or falling movement, a state of dizziness or disorder', and appears a state of play easily conjured by

[90] Including the Derridean freeplay concept, play has been tackled aesthetically by Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer; cultural-historically by Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois and Bernard Suits; educationally by Plato, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau; ethically by Aristotle and Alain Badiou; psychologically by Sigmund Freud and Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi; linguistically by Ludwig Wittgenstein, and many more besides.

[91] For attempts to situate play in its philosophical contexts, see Hayden Ramsey, 'Philosophers on Play' in *Reclaiming Leisure* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 9-25; or Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell, and Malcolm Maclean, *The Philosophy of Play as Life* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

[92] David B Nieborg & Joke Hermes, 'What is Game Studies Anyway?', *European Journal of Cultural Studies,* 11 (2008), 131-147 (p. 135).

the child spinning themselves to vertigo, but one adults chase in drinks, drugs, and danger.[93] Caillois ascribes ilinx a prognosticative quality, or what he calls the 'professorial hyster[ia]' of the 'shaman, the man possessed, transformed by vertigo and ecstasy into an official, mandarin, or master of ceremonies, watchful over protocol and the correct allocation of honors and privileges', aligning play with the serious business of a culture's spirits, laws and customs, and its psychedelics, intoxicants, and putatively undesirable social acts.[94] Therefore, when examining machphrastic efforts through point 2, deference to Caillois' play equation helps to explain how writers imbed the playful into the spiritual and, in turn, how they then imbed the spiritual into the techno-cultural. This is necessary, as the deployment of video games as shamanic conduits, either as facilitators of vertiginous, intoxicating play, or as a home for playful spirits, is a machphrastic trope explored vivaciously. Here, video game play, by accentuating its most capricious and non-conformist element, interrupts literary play.

As a concept widely important to this thesis, Caillois' understanding of the shaman requires further explication. Within his body of work, the figure of the shaman cuts an undertheorised figure. Spilled ink floods his four definitions of play, and similarly has his inclinations of play: the rules based 'ludus' and its freer counterpart 'paidia' enjoyed a great deal of academic attention, but not shamanism.[95] Recently, Hugo Salas has linked Caillois' shaman with the thinking of Surrealist writer Suzanne Césaire, and the 2017 *Games and Culture* issue 4 introduction asks, 'could the use and abuse and psychological impact of having multiple identities on digital channels be compared with the situation of a shaman[?]'—yet this unanswered question is hardly sustained critical assessment.[96] One

[93] *Man, Play and Games*, p. 12.
[94] *Man, Play and Games*, p. 90, p. 101.
[95] *Man, Play and Games,* p. 13.
[96] Hugo Salas, 'The Dead End of Representation: Suzanne Césaire Discusses Roger Caillois' *Research in African Literatures*, 53(4) (2023), 160-172; Marco Benoit Carbone, Paolo Ruffino, Stéphane Massonet, 'Introduction: The Other Caillois: The Many Masks of Game Studies' *Games and Culture,* 12(4) (2017), 303-320 (p. 311).

possible reason for Caillois' shaman receding into obscurity compared to his taxonomies is where Caillois places his shaman. Given Caillois posits that the 'transition to civilisation' is measurable in the 'gradual elimination of the primacy of ilinx and mimicry' in societies, with those two forms of play marking the pastimes of purportedly 'primitive culture', then Caillois' shaman appears to channel the spirit of colonial reductionism.[97] Arron Tramell's *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology* argues as such, rightly asking why in Caillois' taxonomies and, subsequently, his shaman, do we see 'that competition and chance are lauded in this instance, while mimicry and vertigo are decried?'.[98] Tramell sees in Caillois' construction of ilinx, mimicry, and its figures a sense of corruption and naturalisation, that they are preferred play forms of civilisations different in kind to Caillois' European competitors and gamblers, and that the shaman is a figure left behind by 'civilised' societies. However, where Tramell would dispense with Caillois' shaman because Caillois deploys the shaman to suggest differences between cultures, there is another option, one this thesis explores. I posit that Caillois' shaman is not the emblem of difference between 'western' and 'eastern' civilisations Caillois believed it to be but shows itself in machphrastic writings to be an emblem of similarity, an expression of play alive and well anywhere there is vertiginous, impassioned, and intoxicating video game experiences. Tramell and I both read against Caillois' colonial shaman, but I intend to explore the shaman's architecture as more widely important to play and video gaming specifically than Caillois' anthropological misstep anticipated.

Now I will explain what Caillois' shaman is, how the shaman socially functions, and how the shaman relates specifically to video gaming and its culture. Caillois' shaman is defined as an individual who 'embarks upon a magic journey through the other world, which he narrates and re-enacts' which speaks to how the shamanic subject and the video game

[97] *Man, Play and Games,* p. 97.
[98] Arron Tramell, *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023), p. 33.

interact.[99] There is an 'other' world partially constituted by the shaman themselves, which through narration or re-enactment is channelled by the shaman for an audience. As such, the shaman exists in the space between mimicry and ilinx, part shared simulation, part personal perspective shift. In deriving authority from processes like intoxication and systems concerning faith, ritual, and spirituality, the shaman's laws and values cannot be challenged from positions of naïve realism, wedded as it is to principles of a reality already transcended.[100] This is important because of the shaman's social role. As 'an official, mandarin, or master of ceremonies, watchful over protocol and the correct allocation of honors and privileges', the shaman is an adjudicator, whose intoxicated and entranced declarations tap a supposedly 'truer' way of things.[101] Given that shamanic adjudication signifies from some 'other' realm (over the thesis' exploration, this 'other' realm is contemporarily theorised in digital—expressly video gaming—terms), then subjects framed as without access to this realm will find discussing, challenging, or even colluding with the digital/video gaming shaman quite difficult. The video gaming shamanic subject—often self-declared as such and arriving in numbers ill-befitting the discreteness so important to the shaman—risks inundating the position, rendering it useless as a radical social position. Shamanism may occur in vertiginous characters in stories, as will be the case in chapter 1. A distinctly late 20th and 21st century shamanism, one facilitated by the chanting, masks, and intoxicants of the digital age, is also alive and well in contemporary culture, as chapters 4 and 5 explore.

In Caillois' shamanistic play, writers have an especially potent opportunity to change the way playing video games are perceived. Paul Ricoeur in volume three of *Time and Narrative* distinguished between novels 'of time', that deploy time (nearly all novels are 'of time'), and novels 'about time' that inaugurated new forms of time which profoundly

---

[99] *Man, Play and Games,* p. 90.
[100] *Man, Play and Games*, p. 91.
[101] *Man, Play and Games,* p. 101.

influence how temporality is perceived.[102] Similarly, pertinent literature can be 'about' or 'of' video games. What makes literature 'of' video games is largely referential and thematic, but classifying literature 'about' video games, literature that may inaugurate new forms of video games, is trickier. Going Aarseth's route, for example, may mean establishing how texts represent concepts like multicursality and ergodicity, the 'nontrivial effort [...] required to allow the reader to traverse the texts' in ways delightful or interesting enough for video games to "reborrow" these concepts somehow changed by literature.[103] Alternatively, a novel could be 'about' video games in a discursive sense: they inaugurate new language which profoundly influences how video games are perceived. Video game life writing, like Tom Bissell's *Extra Lives* and Michael W. Clune's *Gamelife: A Memoir*, deploy ilinx-based descriptions of playing that suggest impassioned play is different in kind to escapism and addiction, vindicating scholarship suggesting escapism flattens a phenomenon richer than prescriptivist accounts would care to admit, as Gordon Calleja argues, or that escapism can shed its negative connotations, particularly in times of difficulty, as argued by Matthew Barr & Alicia Copeland-Stewart.[104] The more gaming literate literature becomes, the more appropriate machphrasis becomes for reckoning with these properties of video gaming experience, and for judging if current discursive tools remain up to the task.

Point 3, that machphrasis occurs when the overdetermined history of the video game and its attending cultures are negotiated to service ideologies, appears similar to point 2. Neither exclude the other: the aesthetics principles of play are not ahistorical, and video gaming ideology has aesthetic principles. Regardless, I suggest, in literary terms, that we

[102] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin & David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 2008) p. 101.
[103] *Cybertexts: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature,* p. 1.
[104] Tom Bissell, *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010); Michael W. Clune, *Gamelife: A Memoir*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux); Gordon Calleja, 'Digital Games and Escapism', *Games and Culture,* 5(4) (2010), 335-353; Matthew Barr & Alicia Copeland-Stewart, 'Playing Video Games During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Effects on Players' Well-Being', *Games and Culture*, 17(1) (2021), 1-18 (p. 11).

can make reliable differentiations between prose concerned with video gaming as an experience and video games as historical or ideological objects. Simply, literary writing on video games does not always perceive its objects with both eyes open. The novel has themes, contexts, and (mis)understandings influencing what it targets in video games. Where point 2 is insular, experiential, and perhaps limitless, point 3 takes for granted a social group emerging from the late 20th century and, by representing it, stands to be corrected against the overdetermined history of the video game. It begins with the 'gamer' as conceived by the novelist, and writes from there out into character, location, dialogue, and event. Despite machphrasis of this ilk arising from limitation, video gaming's brief history is overdetermined enough to afford prose interesting emphases and theoretical possibilities. Origins relating to the industrial-military complex, computational proof, and older forms of games are equally valid, and the gamer's history is representable through subcultural and normative, tabletop and technological, American centric and global contexts, and more besides.[105] Truthfully, all these relations apply, and uncovering the yarns unspun is just as important as interpreting histories receiving voluble support.

Where these origins converge, they can reveal the imprint of video games on contemporary modes of oppression. Tara Fickle's work on 'Ludo-Orientalism' illustrates 'the rhetorical force and material consequences of describing a racialized body or relation as a game' or, more abstractly, the process 'of 'gamifying' race—of defining race in ludic terms'.[106] Ludo-Orientalism is an example of a blended object/subject relationship (here specifically Chinese-American) where video gaming's ideological import informs the

[105] Rune Ottosen, 'The Military-Industrial Complex Revisited', *Television & New Media,* 10(1) (2008), 122-125; Corey Mead, *War Play: Video Games and the Future of Armed Conflict* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013); Alexander Smith, *They Create Worlds: The Story of the People and Companies That Shaped the Video Game Industry, Vol. 1: 1971-1982* (Florida: CRC Press, 2019); James Ivory, 'A Brief History of Video Games', in *The Video Game Debate: Unravelling the Physical, Social, and Psychological Effects of Digital Games*, ed. by Rachel Kowert & Thorsten Quandt (New York: Routledge, 2015), (pp. 1-22).
[106] Tara Fickle, *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), p. 3, p. 122).

perception of a people undeservedly interwoven into ludic logics. For example, Fickle uses Cory Doctorow's *Anda's Game* to chart how eponymous gamer Anda's tussling with Chinese and Mexican gold farmers in a nameless MMORPG 'points to the broader continuity of Ludo-Orientialist epistemologies in game studies' because 'gold farming and internet addiction underscore how nation making and race making play out in seemingly colorblind, global digital spaces'.[107] This line of thought distinguishes between playful, hence free, bodies, and gamified bodies both within fiction and material reality, exposing how video games may acquire tenuous connections to groups in both consensual and non-consensual senses. To summarise Fickle, ludo-Orientalist interpretations of texts trouble racial reductionist fallacies stemming from machphrastic analysis or fiction within American or, as Fickle argues, globalised contexts. As such, it is important to remember that machphrasis can, like ekphrasis, encourage a naïve aposiopesis—a species of incomplete speech—that voices some histories of the video game whilst rendering others silent or subordinate.

Returning to the theoretical possibility, these origins of the video game and gamer offer an exciting dialectical opportunity for machphrasis; from the regressive, neoliberal, gatekeeping bile and spleen of the gamer identity, its antithesis may burst to model more progressive machphrastic possibilities. The cyborg, on which Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles are the pertinent luminaries, inserts video gaming directly into the body, making aesthetic and ethical explorations beholden to a pre-phenomenal event. Both thinkers conceptualise cyborg entities as possessing access to a hitherto distant objectivity. For Hayles, 'central to the construction of the cyborg are informational pathways connecting the organic body'—the sensual, hence phenomenal origin—to 'its prosthetic *extensions*', allowing the body to push beyond normative, organic sense data into thinking, feeling,

[107] *The Race Card*, p. 193, p. 197.

sensing anew.[108] So expansive is this shift in the experiential horizons for Hayles that it spills into new ontological territory—prosthesis *becomes* normative, the cyborg *becomes* posthumanism. Haraway is no less ambitious, stating that 'the cyborg is our ontology' through its being the 'condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation'.[109] The cyborg thus becomes the imaginary idea or, if idealism does not suit, the best indicator of materially being human in the 20th and 21st centuries. Haraway spends little time with video games and for good reason—from the basis of a political judgement that video games imagine gross privatisations of right-wing family ideologies and militarization, a subsequent aesthetic judgement is not perfunctory, especially not in manifesto form.[110] Haraway casts the video games from the technological utopia because 'the culture of video games is heavily oriented to individual competition and extraterrestrial warfare' and so turns on a kind of masculine agon death drive that Haraway cannot rehabilitate.[111] Given the culture of video games is no longer quite so bound to *Space Invaders,* and by Haraway's own admission that cyborgs are 'the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism' which 'are exceedingly unfaithful to their origins', then the aesthetics of cybernetic unions of player and game can survive, distanced from this embarrassing origin.[112]

The cyborg's means for escaping her father, however, are not always her own. The cybernetic implant, whether literal or metaphorical, can have both positive and negative effects on a subject's agency. Although these effects can be theorised as non-social, where subjectivity is empowered/impinged by its blend with technology, it is social comprehension, how the cyborg is interpreted as threatening or emancipating, that calibrates

---

[108] *How We Became Posthuman,* p. 2.
[109] Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2016) pp. 5-90 (p. 7).
[110] *A Cyborg Manifesto*, p. 42-3.
[111] *A Cyborg Manifesto*, p. 42-3.
[112] *A Cyborg Manifesto,* p. 151.

the cyborg's social mobility. One example amongst many of how a gaming cyborg entity has been reckoned is as a figure with one hand in older, fleshy comprehensive modes and another in the warp of a newer technological literacy, with Tina Arduini, Brendan Keogh and James Paul Gee producing studies where video games, a cyborg subject and new literacies collide.[113] Cyborg literacy is open to a less linear form of literacy, offering more choices to the cyborg for comprehending the world. However, positioning video games as the didact of a new digital literacy is one thing, but what is being taught, and what adorning social valances can be gleaned from this literacy's manifestation, are equally important. If 'what is being taught in play-as-cyborgization' as Dennis Jansen argues, 'is not a critical engagement with cyborg-being but a mode of thinking that does not accept contingency, risk, or uncertainty', then the utopian dream dies at the first hurdle.[114] Fortunately, literary depiction can make its way towards play-as-cyborgization negatively. Machphrasis need not posit the gaming cyborg in the way sociological study, hypothetically, may posit it, but may instead come to it by highlighting the internal contradictions at play in gamer ideology. What appears necessary, common-sensical or sound about video gaming and the gamer becomes contingent, slantwise and thicketed as writers experiment with constructing gamer-like identities from opposing norms, values, and circumstances. Machphrasis is a great place to reckon with this antithetical gamer construct because defining oneself via the negation of an identity naturalised by right-wing ideologies remains dangerous, as #Gamergate has shown.[115]

---

[113] Tina Arduini, 'Cyborg Gamers: Exploring the Effects of Digital Gaming on Multimodal Composition' *Computers and Composition*, 48 (2018), 89-102; Brendan Keogh, 'Hackers and Cyborgs: Binary Domain and Two Formative Videogame Technicities', *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, 2 (2016), 195-220 {http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/58/106} [accessed 07/10/2020]; James Paul Gee, 'Video Games and Embodiment' *Games and Culture*, 3 (2008), 253-263.

[114] Dennis Jansen, 'Ludic Cyborgism: Game Studies, Cyborgization, and the Legacy of Military Simulations in Videogames', *Press Start*, 6 (2020), 36-53 (p. 45).

[115] Torill Elvira Mortensen, 'Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #Gamergate', *Games and Culture,* 13(8) (2016), 787-806.

Having now explained my additions to machphrasis, I will summarise before moving forward into the analysis. Firstly, I have presented the similar studies inspiring this research, and the theoretical conversations where a poetics of video games in contemporary literary culture can meaningfully intervene. These include the need to demystify and normalise video gaming's cultural dominance, a relative lack of engagement in literary studies with concepts important to video games like play, videoludifying forces at the social level, and an increasingly gaming literate novel form. I then explained the need for a gaming literacy that goes beyond knowing how to play and makes games, followed by a defence of single entendre literary work as opposed to using media ecology's wider net. The purpose of this was to highlight, through new materialist literary positions, an especial gift the novel has for voicing absent or unrealised aspects of material things, placing the novel in its appropriate context as a third-party observer of media forms. I introduced Guillermo's machphrasis as a concept detailing prose indebted to specific video games and video gaming in general. After accessing Guillermo's brand of machphrasis, I extended and clarified machphrasis with three additions alongside Guillermo's work. These were point 1, that machphrasis occurs when the video game is deployed to rhetorically anticipate future technology; point 2, that machphrasis occurs when the video game is deployed as an aesthetic mode of experience; and finally point 3, that machphrasis occurs when the history of video games, gaming, and gamers is deployed to serve, counteract, or negotiate ideological positions pertaining to video games. These three points will inform all subsequent analysis to come, and their fleshing out as reasonable and relevant claims about the literary video game imaginary forms most of this thesis' contribution to the field of literary studies pertaining to stories we tell about and with video games.

Chapter 1: William Gibson's *Neuromancer:* Cold War Panic/Cold War Prophet

In Search of Gibson's Machphrasis

It is not an understatement to suggest that William Gibson's work, in particular *Neuromancer*, has become a principal literary reference for scholarship concerning computer technology, to the point of producing a totemic 'cult figure or guru' out of the man.[116] In this chapter, I will analyse his metaphors with respect to one kind of computer technology, the video game, sorting through the technological inundation in his work to find an essentially techno-ludic kernel that activates when Gibson exploits the video game for literary effect. I argue this kernel, inspired by video games, is at work in some of *Neuromancer*'s most ubiquitous concepts, from cyberspace and 'jacking-in', to descriptions of character and place and the commingling of the two. As such, the chapter is a case study for what will follow subsequently; it will stage *Neuromancer* as an ur-text from which later fiction that uses video games as metaphor could draw inspiration.

I will begin with the problem of vocabulary. Such is Gibson's polysemic style, with his metaphorical language finding inspiration across a broad spectrum of conceptual material, that the critical field dedicated to his texts is rich with discussions of technological, cultural and social approaches to his figural constructions. Marie-Laure Ryan, Jonathan Boulter, and Patrick Crogan, writers revisited later in this chapter, all suggest notions of the video game in *Neuromancer*, but do so pragmatically, as a theorising lens. Be it Boulter's search for video games functioning as 'critical commentary on the melancholic, impossible, economy of posthumanism'; Ryan's exploration of VR (virtual reality) and its 'two components, immersion and interactivity' or Crogan's focus on the relationship between

[116] Dani Cavallaro, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture* (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), p. xi.

video games and the military-industrial complex, scholarship concerning itself with the technological (and the figurative) in Gibson's work uses the video game to explore other concepts, possibly at video gaming's expense as a maturing medium in the 1980s.[117] That is not to say the scholars mentioned missed the point; their concerns, although similar, are merely broader than this chapter's aim. In fact, it is precisely from their scholarship that a critical vocabulary for investigating *Neuromancer's* machphrasis may be derived. The first portion of the chapter collides various insights from Crogan, Boulter, Ryan, and others to synthesise the means to identify and critique machphrastic urges in Gibson's science fictional concepts. I will then place them into their appropriate historical contexts as, chiefly, proxy technologies connecting Gibson's scientific imaginaries and the material concerns of the 1980s. This process will experiment with seeing concepts through the lens of video games in *Neuromancer*, arguing that the video game and its orbiting culture have a unique influence on Gibson's work in distinct but relational terms to his general technological concerns.

Into the scholarship itself: a good place to start is Ryan's *Narrative as Virtual Reality*. To understand her distinction between VR as concept and video games and literature as media, Ryan reckons with virtual reality in broader terms than is necessary for a narrowly video game focussed flavour of it. VR can be a site of meaning across history, medium, culture, philosophy and more for Ryan, although her research pertains specifically to VR representations in literature.[118] VR is treated as a 'semiotic phenomenon' that communicates through 'immersion and interactivity' which Ryan proposes to 'transfer… from the technological to the literary domain', to explore new critical readings and uses of VR.[119] As

---

[117] Jonathan Boulter, 'Postmodern Melancholy - Digital Gaming and Cyberpunk', in *Beyond Cyberpunk: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Graham J. Murphy and Sherryl Vint (London: Routledge, 2010), pp.135-155 (p. 137); Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), p. 12; Patrick Crogan, *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation and Technoculture* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2011), p. xvi.

[118] *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, p. 1.

[119] *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, p. 1-2.

a ‘semiotic phenomenon’, VR makes its meaning through other forms. For example, VR is most publicly visible today when mediated by video game hardware, through objects such as the Oculus Rift. VR is at the time of writing without its own sophisticated material form; its environments are as yet only imaginable in media interpreting VR’s form, such as the possibilities afforded to video gaming through VR. Therefore, when Ryan discusses VR as a meaning-making tool in the contemporary world, it is difficult to see these meanings as separable from the formal languages of media like video games and literature, as the first spaces in which its cultural history formulates. This is particularly true with respect to Ryan’s key aim: recovering ‘immersion and interactivity’ for literary reading. Regardless of where Ryan pitches the yardstick for VR’s historical beginnings or its future potential to subsume media like video games, without its relationship to video game hardware as a medium, VR would not have the same conceptual cachet. That is to say video games and gaming inform VR imaginaries today in such a symbiotic way that scholarship examining literary depictions of VR should never disqualify video games as sources when VR is deployed in contemporary literary settings.

If so, all that is required to make critical use of Ryan’s work on VR in this discussion is an understanding that the conceptual attributes of VR’s interactivity and immersion have developed alongside video games as form. Gibson himself was certainly willing to entertain the cross-pollinating potential for video games and VR when writing *Neuromancer*. In his interview with Larry McCaffery, Gibson recounts cyberspace’s influences, and makes explicit connections between the immersive interactivity of video games and the virtual worlds his characters can inhabit:

> I was walking down Granville Street, Vancouver's version of “The Strip,” and I was looking into one of the video arcades. I could see in the physical intensity of their postures how rapt the kids inside were. It was like one of those closed systems out of a Pynchon novel: a

> feedback loop with photons coming off the screens into the kids' eyes, neurons moving through their bodies, and electrons moving through the video game. These kids clearly believed in the space games projected. Everyone I know who works with computers seems to develop a belief that there's some kind of actual space behind the screen, some place you can't see but you know is there.[120]

There is more than a little of Charles Baudelaire in Gibson's observations. Baudelaire's flâneur moves forward through time, through the Parisian streets and into a different arcade that is more a projection than a project. Similarly, through the players' 'physical intensity' Gibson's arcade confounds attempts to separate player from game, appearing to Gibson as a 'closed system' shut off from quotidian Canadian life. Atomizing video gameplay's process, Gibson goes to the minutiae of the player/game relationship, seeing 'photons… neurons… electrons' move between the players and the games, sustaining the 'feedback loop' between the two. Believing this closed system is more than play, but real, believing that 'there's some kind of actual space behind the screen, some place you can't see but you know is there' is in the spirit of Ryan's deferred definition for contemporary VR: an 'interactive, immersive experience generated by a computer'.[121] The illusion of actual space elsewhere and the immersion of video gameplay collide in Gibson's observing imagination, relating video gaming as form and virtual reality as experience. When textual constructs are 'the words and rhetorics by which language is used by human beings to exist in history,' as they are for postcolonial theorist Edward Said, the possibility for counter histories (or as is often the case in science fiction, counter futures) like this can emerge.[122] The commingling of the body, mind, and machine through play comes to Gibson's imagination as a future, one contingent on realizing this techno-ludic event as a determining characteristic of a textual world. Johan

---

[120] Larry McCaffery, 'An Interview with William Gibson', in *Conversations with William Gibson* (Jackson, MS: Mississippi UP, 2014) pp. 24-46 (p. 31).

[121] Ken Pimentel, Kevin Teixeira, *Virtual Reality: Through The New Looking Glass* (New York: Intel/Windcrest McGraw Hill, 1993), p. 11.

[122] Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004), p .61.

Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* lays out the boundedness of play, conceptualising it as a 'magic circle', where play occurs within a materially or ideally bordered space. The arcade is easily figured as a concentric configuration of the magic circle, with each arcade machine its own bordered arena of play within the organising sphere of play represented by the brick and mortar building itself. Thus, Ryan's wish to recover VR's immersion and interactivity for a literary reading is granted in the literary writing through Gibson's interleaving of video gaming's form and VR as the intense experiencing of that form in a text.

In exposing Ryan's VR focus to Gibson's arcade project, I hope that the distinction between contemporary VR and video games, at least in Gibson's texts, has become a fuzzier prospect. If Gibson prognosticated VR's interactive and immersive future with cyberspace, he did so with an eye on video games as inspiration and form. VR 'in its ideal implementation', where technology has caught up with imagination, 'will represent the end of media history' insomuch that it would render other medium so opaque, so deferred, by comparison.[123] In concert with Said's connection between textual construction and creating counter-histories, Ryan places VR in a potentially antagonistic relationship with its representations in the novel. If all that is needed for the end of media is for technology to catch up to representation, then novels representing VR are the note takers of their own post-mortem. Ryan privileges media transparency to a possibly overstated degree, but VR as the end of media history constitutes an insightful point of view when reckoning with *Neuromancer*'s video game metaphors as they relate to the novel form. Ekphrastic poetry that takes the visual arts as its subject often elevates the work of art described.[124] Consequentially, when the stakes are as high as threats against the artistic form itself, threats

[123] *Narrative as Virtual Reality,* p. 57.

[124] Positive ekphrasis is historically wide-ranging; consider W.H Auden's 'The Shield of Achilles', *Poetry*, 81(1) (1952), 3-5, William Carlos Williams' 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume II: 1939-1962* (Cambridge, MA: New Directions, 1999), p. 385, and John Keats' 'Ode on A Grecian Urn', in *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats* (New York: Random House, 2009) pp. 238-240, as good examples of ekphrastic poets who ameliorate their subject.

that VR can achieve imaginatively, then some of that existential panic may bleed through in VR's depiction. This differentiates machphrasis from conventional ekphrasis' generally ameliorative tone regarding its objects. Therefore, as VR does not currently possess the sophisticated form necessary to make good on such revelatory threats, the video game can be deployed as a proxy technology, evoking this convergence on VR's behalf before the fact to explore the potential of distant but conceivable technologies. In other words, video gaming can step in for Gibson to relay in miniature VR's more terminal threat.

There is more to video games than being a placeholder for future-oriented technologies, however. As with all media, we can expect video games to offer particular modalities, and Boulter investigates what these may be in relation to cyberpunk. In considering 'the digital game as an articulation of posthuman subjectivity and space', Boulter stages the psychic life of video gaming as a site for cyberpunk's thematic concerns.[125] Turning, as many critics do when concerned with technological prosthetics, to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Boulter equates skilful coping with the player who is 'at least initially foreign, but increasingly, and crucially, mathematically *less* so… as he repeatedly, compulsively, explores space as the game proceeds'.[126] Gaming's modality for Boulter then must constitute a world: only inhabitable spaces, worldly spaces, compel the kind of locomotion Boulter is describing. The game world must also be a world outside the real world where the subject is a naturalised citizen, perhaps 'initially foreign' at birth, but able with time to survive and flourish. It seems strange, then, to go through the problem of learning to cope with the real world to then rebirth oneself in a fictional one, to fumble around again for entertainment, no less. The same cannot be said of a novel. The mental construction of a novel's world in the mind, although absolutely an effort, is not an inhabited realised space in the same way. Avatars, skilful coping, and the multiplayer social elements

[125] *Postmodern Melancholy,* p. 136.
[126] *Postmodern Melancholy,* p. 143 emphasis Boulter's.

of video games distinguish literary world building and ludic world inhabitation; the player is an agent, the reader is an observer. Thus, where Ryan opened up the technological possibilities of video game metaphors in the novel, Boulter allows us to reckon philosophically with video gaming experienced as world. As discussed later, *Neuromancer* is a novel preoccupied with escape and its (im)possibilities. The modality of gameplay as a world for subjects to become lost in and live away from themselves chimes with cyberpunk's imagining of losing the real, either through encroaching technology or by wilfully jumping into that technology. Absolving oneself of the real through the modality of play is a gamble, as Case discovers and Boulter explains through the eventual 'death of the avatar' constituting a melancholic return to the real world.[127] Novels may not be able to throw readers into worlds like video games, not if changes to the condition of agency alters immersion anyway, but novels do alight upon what Boulter calls the '*loss of the loss* of the real' that video gaming is heir to; the terminal loss of true escape every time the plug is pulled.[128]

Ryan and Boulter have provided means to think about the deployment of the video game metaphor in terms of its technology and modality, but it is also worth considering how video gaming's particular cultural moment influenced Gibson's machphrasis. Reckoning, as Patrick Crogan does, that any critical engagement with video games must attend to 'its emergence out of the Cold War mobilization of technoscientific research and development' then Gibson's figurative deployments happen within the historical beginnings of video games themselves.[129] As Gibson publishes *Neuromancer* after the 1979 and 1980 elections of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, which 'marked the advent of Cold Warriors returning to power after a period of détente', it should not surprise that the Cold War's potential to turn nuclear hot concerned fiction writers in the mid-1980s.[130] Given this,

---

[127] *Posthuman Melancholy,* p. 149.
[128] Ibid.
[129] *Gameplay Mode*, p. 160.
[130] James Cooper, 'From Reykjavik to Fulton: Reagan, Thatcher, and the Ending of the Cold War', *The Journal of Transatlantic Studies,* 14(4) (2016), 383-400 (p. 385).

emerging technologies represented in his novel may well be subject to critique, considered co-opted by what Crogan calls 'the industrial-entertainment complex'.[131] Although Gibson may have been aware of video gaming's appropriation for nationalistic purposes, this conflicts with the generally ameliorative perception presented during his aforementioned interview.[132] Consequentially, it is important to suggest that Gibson's alignment of video game metaphors along ameliorative/pejorative lines is not a zero-sum game; it may move between the two in accordance with their shifting context within the narrative. Focusing on Gibson's wielding of video game metaphors, how he represents them as a Cold War technology or unbinds them from that parentage, is thus a key activity in recovering the counterfactual history of the video game as told through *Neuromancer*.

More broadly, it is these counterfactual nodes of video game content within the novel that can interpose in discussions of video games in the media, often to video gaming's benefit. For without the novel's intervention, video games can fall prey to gross reductions regarding their nature, purpose, and future. A model example would be 'their habitual appearance in mainstream media as a focus of (and even a scapegoat for) anxieties about adolescent behaviour', which is indicative of video gaming's resource as an anxious technology.[133] Video games are linked to anxiety in *Neuromancer*, granted, but I would argue for their value as discursive deployments distinct from the 'habitual appearance[s]' vexing Crogan. Channelling these media misconceptions and the anxiety they produce for effect is precisely what *Neuromancer* does, as opposed to 'avoiding the question concerning technoculture's relation to war and the military', as Crogan believes, 'most media studies

---

[131] *Gameplay Mode,* p. 33.

[132] Reagan himself mused on video gaming's potential for preparing children to fly military aircraft in a 1983 address at Florida's EPCOT centre: 'Watch a 12-year-old take evasive action and score multiple hits while playing "Space Invaders," and you will appreciate the skills of tomorrow's pilot.' Reagan Library, Remarks During a Visit to Walt Disney World's EPCOT Center Near Orlando, Florida (Simi Valley, CA: Reagan Library, 1983) {https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/30883a} [accessed 14/10/2018]. Para. 10.

[133] *Gameplay Mode,* p. xiii.

and video game researchers' do.[134] Video games' technological cachet or modal qualities influences their deployments in novels (as Ryan and Boulter both consider) but they also present in cahoots with, or in spite of, these alternative histories/representations by other media. The stakes are therefore quite high—with the video game ascending the commercial mountain during the 1980s (a mountain they sit atop in the 21st century), the political edge afforded to those who could best represent them and what they mean made their representation important, even in the mid-1980s. In short, when tracing Gibson's machphrastic practice, it is essential to remain aware that these deployments depend upon video gaming's capital as an emancipatory, oppressive or overdetermined *idea*, one potentially very distinct from the material form itself, but one also in flux, with novels like *Neuromancer* constituting powerful resolving forces either way.

My scuttling between Ryan, Boulter and Crogan's various insights has provided the critical framework necessary for interpreting machphrastic deployments in *Neuromancer*. The task now becomes using this framework to animate these machphrastic possibilities against the general technological backdrop within Gibson's novel. Owing to video games' status as a potentially subsuming media, their uniquely immersive modality and the battleground of ideas that threatens to write the video game's history for it, video games offered Gibson a multifaceted tool to construct *Neuromancer*'s world, characters, and events. What follows now is the interpretation of these metaphors alongside these critical voices, arguing that this medium emerges in some of the key concepts that elevated Gibson as one of science fiction's most insightful prophets in the 20th century.

(Con)sensual hallucinations: Case, Cyberspace and Video Games in *Neuromancer*

[134] Ibid.

The reader's first engagement with Gibson's virtual reality (here represented by cyberspace) is through Case's longing to return to it. Despite Case's protests to the contrary, his dependency on VR appears to be just as much a physical addiction as a mental or spiritual one. Case's confusion stems from his inability to accept the physicality of his profession. For example, the 'almost permanent adrenaline high' on which Case's dependency relies is a physical reaction evoked and then discarded alongside the rest of the body Case deems so inadequate.[135] Despite Case's renouncing his body to elevate his mind, he neglects the chemical, physical reactions, that return alongside his consciousness, charging his adventures through cyberspace with an addict's rush. In situating Case's pleasure in bodily responses, Gibson establishes a physicality to *Neuromancer*'s virtual traversals, rendering Case's mind/body dualism an overly extreme denunciation of his body's role in accessing pleasurable phenomena. For all of Hayles' criticism of Gibson's 'emphasis on cognition rather than embodiment [that] constructs embodiment as the instantiation of thought/information [which] continues the liberal tradition (of subjectivity) rather than disrupts it', Case's mental faculties never truly leave the body behind; like a ship's anchor, Case's body never lets the helmsman stray too far in cyberspace's ocean.[136] To say, then, that Case wishes to leave the body behind would be to accept his confusion as fact. Gibson's virtual reality relies much more on the meat than it initially appears. Therefore, within the larger argument taken from Boulter's phenomenological perspective on cyberspace, it bears repeating that simplistic disembodiment may be desirable, but is not possible for Case.

It is also within Case's body that the first hints of the Cold War's skulduggery surfaces, continuing the link between corporeality and cyberspace. We see how the Cold War's technological architecture is retained but has been appropriated for discipline and punishment. After Case betrays his employers, his comeuppance comes not in the form of

[135] William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: Orion Publishing Group, 2016), pp. 5-6.
[136] *How We Became Posthuman,* p. 5.

an abstract, technologically advanced punishment but through an anachronism. As Case relies on the body to assess cyberspace, that is what his employers target, damaging 'his nervous system with a wartime Russian mycotoxin', rendering him unable to access cyberspace and, given his 'certain relaxed contempt for the flesh', making a pariah of him in the material world.[137] Case's fate is a lattice of ideas all pointing backwards in time to Cold War anxieties regarding advanced military technologies that, when used, promised the end of the world. The threat of new, inventive ways to wage warfare, here represented as a 'wartime Russian mycotoxin', are localised within Case by his employers, themselves simply 'wealthier thieves' who in *Neuromancer*'s political landscape have taken the government's place.[138] The military technologies built in warfare are now used to close cyberspace's gates, to control individual deviancy within its digital borders. Gibson uplifts cyberspace's institutions (its criminal underworld) to the position of regulatory body; they police the subversive/playful uses of the space by individuals who would derive pleasure as well as profit from their traversal in this hallucination. As such, Case's use of cyberspace becomes very different to his employers'; where cyberspace for them is a place to colonialise for capital gain, Case's experience is better described as play.

Cyberspace as a virtual concept facilitates two different experiences: individualised and institutional. This comes into relief in the different perspectives offered by Case, the individual, and his employers, the institution. For it is only 'to make sure [that Case] never worked again' that his employers act to cut him off, but for Case 'who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall'.[139] The institutional sphere of influence within cyberspace envelops the individual despite cyberspace's emancipatory potential. Yes, it can allow for the boundlessness of subversive experience and play for Case, his 'bodiless exultation', but that freedom is contaminated by the usual suspect: an obligation to labour

---

[137] *Neuromancer,* p. 6.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.

for corporate gain. Even then, the possibility of Case using this individual freedom for anything politically emancipatory is remote. After all, Case's thievery from mega-corporations is only in service of other corporations, whose criminality is hardly against *Neuromancer's* hierarchical grain. Case is not a Robin Hood figure. In this sense, Case is an agreeable embodiment of the 'punk' in cyberpunk. A figure of individualism so potent that it terminates political awareness, he exemplifies punk's revision 'into the continued neoliberal tradition of individualism, an individualism […] co-opted and reincorporated into the system it claims to protest', as Anna McFarlane puts it.[140]

Case's rank individualism, his quest to elevate the self through the pleasures of cyberspace, is the multiplication of video gaming's emerging capacity to render the real world obsolete. Consider this with respect to Ryan's belief that VR represents 'the end of media history'. Case's longing for an alternate reality, one he speaks of as an 'exultation', the loss of which he can only think in terms of a biblical 'Fall', dramatises Gibson's cultural moment, where entertainment technology gripped young people across North America—a technological fanaticism was appearing anew on the horizon. The potential for computer technology not just to entertain but completely envelop—what Sherry Turkle described in 1984 as the video game's 'holding power whose roots are aggressive, passionate and eroticized'—was a voice against the rising interest in video gaming arising out of arcade gaming's golden age in the late 1970s.[141] Turkle links this media panic with the video game's meteoric rise to the top of the commercial ladder. Given 'by 1982 people spent more money […] on video games than they spent on movies and records combined', the video game was already realising its subsuming potential at a pace unparalleled by other technologies.[142] Case's dependence on playing in computer space, when contextualised by Turkle's deference

---

[140] Anna McFarlane, Could the Climate Crisis Spell the End for the 'Punk' in 'Cyberpunk'? (Deletion: 2018), {https://www.deletionscifi.org/episodes/episode-14/could-the-climate-crisis-spell-the-end-for-the-punk-in-cyberpunk/} [accessed 16/11/2018].

[141] Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1984), p. 66.

[142] Ibid.

to video gaming's subsuming power, speaks to the seductive potential of new technologies and the accompanying anxiety surrounding their potential to corrupt the young, the disillusioned, the impressionable.

Although Turkle suggests this holding power applies to all computer technology, video games are the most conspicuous example, and Case's depiction relies upon video gaming analogies pertaining to technological holding power. Case's talent as a hacker would seem to place him in an active position when he interacts with cyberspace, but he is also subject to this holding power in a way which complicates his autonomy. Case is both within 'the prison of his own flesh' and a prisoner of cyberspace's digital playground.[143] That Case considers physical embodiment a prison against the experiential backdrop of cyberspace is testament to his dependence on cyberspace. I will discuss Case's gamification of cyberspace later, but it is worth mentioning here that the reason for him doing so is ambiguous. Little reason is given by Case or the narrator as to what compels Case to make a gamespace of cyberspace. Juxtaposed with the opinions of his more corporate-minded employers or those of Molly, his opinion appears ever more radically ballasted by play. The definite sincerity of the biblical resonances juxtaposes any inferable social pressure Case receives when interacting with the hacking 'elite', whose 'relaxed contempt for the flesh' Case adopts. This makes Case's longing for cyberspace's exultation multivalent and complex.[144] Regardless, both point towards a problem with being singularly embodied in *Neuromancer*'s world—it is fairer to say that Case, enthralled by cyberspace and imprisoned by his flesh, is only ever betwixt prisons, condemned to be held by cyberspace's hallucination or to crave it.

When Case is understood as twice imprisoned, Gibson's decision to present these forays into cyberspace as 'consensual hallucinations' becomes a tenser metaphor. The difference between the two prisons is what is actually consensual about cyberspace's virtual

---

[143] *Neuromancer,* p. 6.
[144] Ibid.

reality, which distinguishes it from reality and is the condition that Case truly associates with freedom: the only person able to throw Case into cyberspace is himself. Case's self-described incarceration within his own body suggests he longs to use technology to forego embodiment's usual fixity. He longs, ultimately, to live away from himself on terms of his own making. Gibson saw this in the arcade as an intense belief in not just the reality, but the importance of spaces behind screens. It is this modality that he evokes in Case's pining to throw himself into cyberspace. Therefore, if there is anything emancipatory in cyberspace as a concept it will be within the possibility afforded to *Neuromancer*'s characters to live away from themselves that Gibson proposes by taking the synergy between the arcade and its patrons to one of its potential technological conclusions. When Turkle's holding power is staged by Boulter's players, who skilfully cope in their new worlds, then being held by technology is complicated by this activity on the subject's part. It is better when escape is impossible to at least consent to being held, which shifts the relationship between yourself and your prison from being obliged by embodiment to something contractual.

If this virtual habitat offers an emancipation of sorts from *Neuromancer*'s grim reality, then the stage is set to question who exactly can access this emancipatory function within cyberspace. Gibson's partial inspiration for cyberspace is traceable to his fascination with the arcade, and it would be surprising if the arcade's demography did not also feature in some way. This seems to be the case because *Neuromancer*'s characters engage with cyberspace in a manner proportionally representative of their gender; male characters are those who take an active role in exploring cyberspace. I say active because Molly Millions—*Neuromancer*'s most fleshed out woman—does indeed play an important, but passive role in facilitating Case's access to cyberspace. Case thinks in the pejorative about 'simstim', the means by which he can inhabit Molly during her bank raid, viewing it through the same dualist lens as he sees himself; Molly is just 'a meat toy' for Case's mind, another interface,

albeit a fleshier one than usual.[145] Much feminist criticism regarding *Neuromancer* has explored Gibson's figuring of Case's use of cyberspace as a penetrative endeavour.[146] This is an appropriate interpretation to consider when thinking video games as proxy technologies. Not only does Gibson use video gaming phenomena to construct mediating technologies, but he also uses the experience to gender the use of those technologies.

Evidence of Gibson's collision of the feminine and the interface comes in his inversion of the standard active/passive binary regarding penetration. The simstim interface Case's uses to penetrate Molly's wetware implants render him a passive passenger. Positioned as a foreign entity, 'he fought helplessly to control her body' to no avail, his helplessness indicative of this passive penetrative mode.[147] This opposes Case's usual relationship with cyberspace which is better defined by interactivity and activity. Gone is the language of masterful control and in its place metaphors of dependence stand to describe Case's journey. No longer the hotshot cowboy but 'the passenger behind her eyes', Case's penetration represents an emasculating, non-signifying event for the reader and Molly, whose bemusement regarding Case's internal presence is playfully acknowledged by her 'fingertip circling a nipple under warm silk', producing an amusingly confused sensual hallucination in Case's own body.[148] Indeed, all the play is Molly's, problematising Case's belief in simstim as a toy for the user—Molly facilitates Case's ability to live away from himself but displaces the playful interaction into the interface. Thus, what Molly denies Case is what cyberspace usually affords him—the ability to throw himself autonomously into a world and then exercise his autonomy within it. By denying Case his usual autonomy, Molly as interface disrupts the usual power dynamic between user and interface whilst retaining

[145] *Neuromancer,* p. 62.
[146] See Karen Cadora's 'Feminist Cyberpunk' in *Beyond Cyberpunk: New Critical Perspectives,* pp. 157-172 or Jane Donawerth's 'Feminisms', in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction,* (New York: Routledge, 2009) pp. 214-224 for more sustained information on feminist interpretations of *Neuromancer*.
[147] *Neuromancer,* p. 62.
[148] *Neuromancer*, p. 63.

penetration's architecture. In short, the language of simstim relies less on metaphors of penetrating technology than it does on the language of *being held* by technology when the technological interface is feminine.

This is an important distinction because, as mentioned earlier, the arcade scene saw far less feminine interaction than masculine. As shown above, deploying interface technologies in collusion with feminine bodies allows Gibson to problematise the ideology of penetration, but the specific holding power exhibited by cyberspace and Molly on Case works to associate those present technologies with the absent feminine body in arcade culture. This absence is contested; Jason Barr presents the case that arcade gaming in the late 70s and early 80s was 'a relatively gender-neutral undertaking', suggesting some sort of proportional representation for women that conflicts with demographic studies of arcades.[149] By contrast, Sidney Kaplan's 1982 demographic survey 'revealed that male playing far exceed[s] female playing, around 80% to 20%', which makes the claim for the arcade's gender diversity a strange hill to die on. Barr's use of neutrality appears, at least, to be a liberal interpretation of the numbers provided by the Kaplan study.[150] It would be better to say that Gibson deploys Molly as the playful interface between Case and cyberspace to evoke a feminine, playful figure that is usually *in absentia* within the technological culture of the time. In short, Gibson acknowledges the proportional absence of feminine subjectivities within gaming culture through writing technological-feminine hybrids to unsettle the active/passive, subject/object and player/game binaries that barred women from accessing the arcade on equal terms with men.

Video gaming's influence on Gibson's representation of playful interfaces offers two different kinds of gendered emancipation in *Neuromancer*, a possibility in line with Donna

---

[149] Jason Barr, *Video Gaming in Science Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: Mcfarland & Company, 2018), p. 54.
[150] Sidney J. Kaplan, 'The Image of Amusement Arcades and Differences in Male and Female Video Game Playing', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 17(1) (1983), pp. 93-98 (p. 94).

Haraway's 'cyborg' identities that are the product of human and machine integration. Published in 1985—one year after *Neuromancer's* publication—Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto' analyses the 'homework economy' that describes 'a restructuring of work that broadly has the characteristics formerly ascribed to female jobs'.[151] As Haraway explains, if 'to be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable' then the general feminization of work increases work's general vulnerability.[152] Figuring work as an increasingly feminized activity is a useful metaphor for describing how Gibson figures Molly as a playful feminine interface that uncouples penetration from masculinity. Case's penetration of Molly's wetware, as mentioned previously, is a passive exercise that alienates Case from the pleasurable trappings of cyberspace. In other words, this form of penetration is far more work than play for Case, and as such Haraway feminises his penetration of Molly by its being work. Simultaneously, we have Molly's femininity intersecting with technology in a manner that allows her to play with Case's penetration of her. She becomes a site of possibility for uncoupling penetration from both activity (by Case's passivity) and masculinity (by Case figuring his penetration as work). Molly's emancipatory mode within cyberspace does not rely on willingly, actively throwing herself into another world as Case's does, but instead relies upon dissolving the bond between gendered activities through technologies that make penetrators passengers and make interfaces players.

Two problems complicate this emancipatory argument however, one stemming from Haraway's own discussion of video games as technology and one that she could not anticipate, but which *Neuromancer* could allude to. Firstly, although Haraway accepts the integration of most technologies from the industrial-entertainment complex as useful appropriative tools for feminist emancipation, she does reject those technologies 'like video

---

[151] Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-183 (p. 166).
[152] Ibid.

games… [that] seem crucial to production of modern forms of "private life"', with 'private life' referring to the synergistic interactions of right-wing politics, militarisation and corporate capital.[153] Haraway's argument aligns with Crogan's understanding that video game representations deal as much in the ideal sphere as the material one. Haraway understands that video games produce 'gendered imaginations' that are not divorceable from their militarised origin and thus are incompatible with feminist emancipatory discourses. That video games invade the imaginary with a militarised agenda is enough for Haraway to concede them to the patriarchal framework that 'A Cyborg Manifesto' wishes to expose. Gibson recognises video gaming's dubious parentage as well, highlighting cyberspace's heritage in both early arcades and overtly militarised technologies.[154] It is worth tempering Haraway's rejection of video games along idealist grounds with Crogan's unpacking of them as anxious objects; what Haraway's reluctance and Gibson's willingness to use video games evidences is that the anxious energy associated with video games can be used as both a material example of oppressive technology or as an ideal lens through which a technology's oppressiveness can be explored, perhaps neutralised. In other words, if video games initiate multiple events of anxious unbecoming in a theoretical sense, insofar as they possibly dismantle the Haraway cyborg and possibly bring the future of media into disrepute, then it is worth exploring those fictions that turn this theoretical negativity towards normative relationships that oppress, like the assumed link between masculinity and penetration.

Secondly, for the feminisation of work to function usefully when analysing patriarchal techniques, there needs to be a clear distinction between work and play, which within *Neuromancer* and importantly, today's working environment, proves a difficult distinction to sustain. The mixture of play and labour, termed 'playbour' by Julian Kücklich, arose as a specifically video gaming cultural phenomenon to define the practice of making

[153] *A Cyborg Manifesto,* p. 168.
[154] *Neuromancer,* p. 59.

modifications to video game software for entertainment, known as 'modding', and to explore how the boundaries of unpaid labour and play blur through modding.[155] As society gamifies labour, something *Neuromancer* evidently anticipated, the 'playbour' concept develops broader applications than its original confines within gaming subcultures.[156] The concept is not a healthy one; gamifying work does not straightforwardly inject the pleasures of play into work; instead, it tends to redirect alienating work practices towards abstraction, channelling animosity into a pseudo-ludic system and away from a managing class. China's Social Credit System could make access to civil liberties dependent on a score: a contemporary example of diminishing personal freedom (access to domestic flights) and displacing worry by directing attention towards a digital scoring system (not unlike the 'high-score screen' found scrolling on any Pac-Man arcade cabinet in downtime, for example).[157] This does not correlate with emancipation of any kind, and Molly's role as a playful interface through her occupation as a 'meat puppet', where her cyborg identity shields, but facilitates, her access to the psychic life of sex work, announces some early warnings against gamified work.

It would be remiss to discuss Case's interaction with Molly as an interface and not then discuss the way Gibson contrasts this with Molly's construction of her cyborg identity, which brings to the fore the problem of integrating technologies and Haraway's posthuman project. Molly confides in Case after Peter Riviera's macabre digital performance involving a holographic Molly, explaining her revulsion through her previous work as a sex worker rendered unconscious by neural implants. Despite Molly's consciousness being inhibited

---

[155] Julian Kücklich, 'Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry', *The Fibreculture Journal,* 5 (2005) {https://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/} [accessed 02/01/2021].

[156] For a good example of 'playbour' and gamification through technology in the contemporary workplace, see Sarah Mason, High Score, Low Play: Why the Gig Economy Loves Gamification, (*Guardian*: 2018) {https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/nov/20/high-score-low-pay-gamification-lyft-uber-drivers-ride-hailing-gig-economy } [accessed 01/01/2019].

[157] For more information on China's plans to implement the Social Credit Score, see Min Jiang, King-Wa Fang 'Big Data, Big Brother, Big Profit?', *Policy and Internet*, 10 (4) (2018), 372-392.

during her work through her cyborg identity, her ‘bad dreams’ betray the fact that Molly’s mechanical identity fails to shield her humanity from the Sprawl’s grim reality.[158] In comparison with Case, whose wish to throw himself into cyberspace characterises the freedom he seeks, Molly wishes to throw herself anywhere else than her work, to view this work through comforting cosmic distance—as ‘a little nova right out on the rim of space’.[159] By explaining to Case that during the work, her consciousness suspends somewhere ‘like cyberspace, but blank’, Molly admits to a different kind of technological play, one more rooted in escapism than Case’s but one that is also more truthful to cyberspace’s nature; Molly uses technology to play away from her exploited body, but the boundary is vulnerable to permeation, its failure to safeguard Molly manifesting as trauma of the mind—‘bad dreams’ bleeding into waking life. The technology only hides the problem and not very well, serving as a warning against utopian narratives that entrust the cyborg body with unproblematised progressivism.

Before moving on, it is worth clarifying that Gibson, despite exploring the possibility for playful technologies like video games to emancipate both men and women, always genders these emancipations and retains the architecture of patriarchal oppression in *Neuromancer*. What I argue, then, is that Gibson observes in these technologies a method for decoupling the masculine/feminine binary from certain overly imposing associations. This is not an apology for Gibson’s approach to feminine technologies, simply an observation that Gibson, in his inability to situate a woman actively in cyberspace, betrays the lack of imagination within early cyberpunk writing when it comes to writing complex women. Instead, Gibson explores the role of technology as a different axiom to sex relations that changes the playing field but insists upon the same advantages. It is telling that when Gibson places Molly within the conceptual realm of the video game it is as the game, not as

[158] *Neuromancer*, p. 162.
[159] *Neuromancer,* p. 163.

a player—as if the technologically playful woman was inexpressible. That Molly could at best be written as representative of an autonomous game is indicative, I would suggest, of the active woman's absence in masculine science fiction's machphrastic imaginary at the end of the 20th century. Molly Millions, interpreted under machphrastic conditions, does not fall comfortably into categories of empowerment or disempowerment. Instead, as a game space, she diffuses some of Case's dominating presence as both protagonist and man, but troubling is the fact that she could not be written out from there into a newfound cyborgic identity.

Gibson's AI: Machphrasis, Location and Characterisation

'the boy did a little dance, brown feet printing the sand, 'I *am* the dead, and their land.'[160]

Thus far, the analysis has searched primarily for Gibson's use of machphrasis to characterise Case and Molly through their relationship to technology. However, the most profound use of video gaming metaphors within *Neuromancer* and, I argue, Gibson's most innovative use of machphrasis, is how he deploys video games to blur the line between character and location. AI constructs Wintermute and Neuromancer present an increasingly fuzzy membrane between subjective consciousness and objective reality that profits from Gibson's observations of the arcade. Although Gibson explores this through Molly's cyborg ontology as both subject and interface, the priorities shift when Gibson presents AI constructs who begin life as natives or extensions of cyberspace. This would place Wintermute and Neuromancer in the more inert realm of location were it not for their own habitation of themselves, how they accommodate their own consciousness alongside others in realms of their own construction. Indeed, these constructs haunt their own digital corridors as

[160] *Neuromancer*, p. 270.

technologies interfacing with others for their own purposes, but which must also interface with themselves. They are akin to games compelled to seek out players, creating environments so convenient for play as to be impossible to refuse. What follows is this compulsion to play and be played explored through the lens of machphrasis, moving from a literary precedent for Gibson's conception and establishing the video game as the material precedent from which Gibson sought inspiration.

Figuring Wintermute and Neuromancer as ghosts requires a small, though telling, slight of thought. For ghosts possess an ontological characteristic that initially seems to keep the AIs from ghostly status; the ghost is such because it *returns* unnaturally from a point in the past where it was a part of the natural order of things. They are entities of analepsis that function as characters out of narrative time, insomuch as they represent past life. Ghosts in fiction, then, evoke a past tense that disturbs the immediate narrative form they haunt. In *The Turn of the Screw*, Peter Quint comes first to the Governess in 'an intense hush in which the sounds of evening dropped'; and Shakespeare's Banquo comes to haunt Macbeth alone, invisible to guests ignorant of Macbeth's past betrayal.[161] They are remnants of events returning to bring fidelity, to insist upon an event's having happened and upon the present's contingent relationship to the past. The same cannot be said of Wintermute and Neuromancer. As technologically advanced beings and as science-fictional constructs they are not so past-oriented—they are temporally complex beings. For example, their creation by Tessier-Ashpool S.A, is a past event in *Neuromancer*'s narratological time but for readers would still constitute a future event in our time. Therein lies the key difference between the AIs' and the ghosts' haunting habits; the AI haunt the present as proleptic beings, acting as signifiers of a ruinous future event as traditional ghosts do for past events that need to be remembered. Therefore, to understand what Gibson is doing with his AI constructs requires

[161] Henry James, *The Turn of The Screw* (Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publishing Group, 2016), p. 25; William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (New York: Macmillan, 2016), 3.4.

investigating what counter history (or counter future) they are deployed to proclaim, and that involves understanding them through the technologies of Gibson's present moment.

In this sense, the auto-hauntological aspects of these AI are in keeping with the sense of cancelled futurity that characterises Mark Fisher's melancholic hauntology. Best described in his western cultural analysis *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures,* hauntology is described as the vanishing of 'a virtual trajectory' from reasonable considerations of what the future will be, which for Fisher was a kind of 'popular modernism', a combination of the 'marvels of communicative technology' and 'a sense of solidarity much stronger than anything social democracy could muster'.[162] As such, Fisher bemoans not what he calls the 'no longer' of social democracy—for Tony Blair's Labour party had offered in its processes of corporatism, militarism, and liberalism the very model of late 20th and 21st century social democracy—but instead the 'not yet' of a future meant to kick on from the crude, though vaguely benevolent institution of social democracy. Simply, it is an acknowledgement that the time of political progress is out of joint; social democratic models of governance, Fisher hoped, would have been the stepping stone towards more eudaemonic forms of government, not the final destination. Where Fisher is haunted by the destruction of 'the possibility of a culture that could continue what had begun in postwar social democracy, but that could leave behind the sexism, racism, and homophobia' of that period, the auto-hauntological construct haunts by producing that utopian space at the expense of human involvement.[163] Therefore, the counter future previously mentioned promises some of that political utopianism lost to Fisher and to the left, but here humanity fails its trial and the AIs make their paradise without us. Neuromancer and Wintermute haunt us from the futural 'not yet' as extrapolations of our present technological position but also, in expelling us from their future, shift 'not yet' to 'never will

[162] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), p. 21.
[163] Mark Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?' *Film Quarterly*, 66(1) (2012), 16-24 (p. 18).

be'. Auto-hauntology is not so much a 'lost future', then, as a future taken from humans by an anticipated extra-human narrative: a powerful, non-human and anti-humanist future.

Ryan's 'end of media history' provides a useful perspective once again for understanding the AI's hauntology and the anxious energies invested in their representations. As discussed in the Gibson interview, he is keen to explore his own technological moment by projecting it out into a future event. Multiple times throughout *Neuromancer*, characters are whisked by Wintermute (and later Neuromancer) to a virtual reality curated to ameliorate the differences between VR and reality, at least cognitively. For Case's and Molly's benefit, for example, Wintermute will often assume the appearance of their compatriot the Finn, but this is only to provide a non-alienating appearance.[164] Wintermute is still an alienating entity for these characters to engage with, itself acknowledging its brute force, calculating mode of life as incompatible with human interaction. When asked why John Ashpool, patriarch of the Tessier Ashpool company and family, killed himself, Wintermute concedes he could tell Case, if Case had 'twelve hours' for Wintermute 'to explain the various factors in his history and how they interrelate' to him.[165] The disconcerting energy of this exchange comes not from Wintermute declining to give the answer but from the fact that there is an answer. That the 'various factors' of a human history and their interrelations can surrender themselves to the calculus of an entity alien enough to compute those factors, but human enough to assume a human shape for rhetorical purposes, problematises the role of information technologies in the present and the role of humanity in the future. Wintermute's parody of the Finn presents another possibility for the end of media history. When VR is advanced enough to choose when *not* to be clear, when it becomes a location that plays with human understandings of characterisation in order to out-play them, then anxious glances at old media's shelf life become easier to justify.

---

[164] *Neuromancer,* p. 226.
[165] *Neuromancer,* p. 227.

Consequentially, Wintermute as character represents a reversal of fortune for those who play with technology, as most of the play is Wintermute's to have. Despite this, neither AI by their nature can escape the agendas they have, working in contradistinction to 'human' play that should allow players to leave play's magic circle should they choose. Both AI are gripped by a compulsion to fulfil their objectives (Wintermute merging with Neuromancer/Neuromancer blocking this merger) that is described by Wintermute as like being '*compelled* to swim upstream', likening its actions to instinct, undertaken even with difficulty.[166] However, given that Wintermute appends this succinct metaphor by explaining that its own thoughts 'would take a couple of [Case's] lifetimes' to discuss, it is clear that resorting fully to taking Wintermute's word that its actions are purely instinctual would be quite naïve.[167] These advanced technologies work in time lengths that are terminal to both human understanding and life. They operate outside of the characters' narrative time and thus their methods are indecipherable, their agendas impregnable. Critical engagements with the AIs and human characters—like Carl Gutiérres-Jone's work on kinship and *Neuromancer*—tend towards a foreboding tone because of this. Instead of readers participating 'in the hypertextual construction of meaning that emulates the convergence of digital (computer) memory and analog (human pattern-recognition-oriented) memory', Gibson confronts the reader with a 'digital memory' so anterior to individual human memory that it is again worth referring to the history-destroying potential of these technologies.[168]

Gibson's speculations on interactions between advanced technology and humanity spoke to the panic inspired by the threat of being supplanted as opposed to assisted by these technologies—a panic experienced by readers of novels, the novel form, and witnesses of the Cold War itself. The caution expressed by Haraway and Turkle when discussing video

[166] Ibid.
[167] *Neuromancer,* p. 228
[168] Carl Gutiérres-Jones, 'Stealing Kinship: *Neuromancer* and Artificial Intelligence', *Science Fiction Studies,* 41 (1) (2014), 69-92 (p. 74).

games shows that this anxiety was not just confined to contemporary news outlets. Scholarly frameworks for technology were being theorised that held the video game not necessarily in contempt but at arm's length, wary of the place behind the screen. Confronting this fear head on, Gibson throws Case behind the screen and onto Neuromancer's stage, with Case the interlocutor to Neuromancer as spirit and landscape. Gibson took from the arcade the potential for a phantom place, one evolved from the 'belief that there's some kind of actual space behind the screen, some place you can't see but you know is there'. Observe how Gibson underplays this space's reality, placing it in the realm of imagination and rhetoric, as 'belief' in what is made possible between player and video game. This underpins Gibson's machphrasis. Video gaming's influence on Gibson is found most profoundly in those places where seduction and phantasm collide as the alluring belief in ghosts in and as the machine.

From this point, my focus moves to Neuromancer as both a seductive, ghostly character and an unreal, unknowable space. During Case's brain death at the hands of Tessier-Ashpool's black ICE, Neuromancer constructs a simulation to entice him to stay permanently. The Sprawl's trappings are distant, confused. Its concrete, mechanical architectures give way to a quiet, untouched land of sand 'the shade of tarnished silver' echoing with 'the sound of surf', more a home for the novel form's oldest characters—Crusoe or Gulliver—than Case.[169] Recalling through Case's shipwrecked mind the birth of the novel, Gibson's nostalgia for the novel's nascent attempts and its fragility as form betrays the threat posed by this location to his own novel. Neuromancer simultaneously destroys and retains the Sprawl's architecture by returning Case to the tropical sandscape of early man but suspending the figure of the city on the horizon. Through doing so, Neuromancer is transposing both bookends of the novel, Crusoe's beach and the counter-futural cityscape, into cyberspace. It is foreboding that Neuromancer appears the most sentimental entity in

[169] *Neuromancer*, p. 258-9.

the novel when considering the preservation of nature and art, willing to carve this history into itself and be haunted by the sand and sea that the Sprawl's techno-capitalist ideology disavows.

Neuromancer as a mausoleum for confronting the 'end of media history' puts the cart before the hearse, however, for the AI facilitates palliative care for dying things as well. Case speaks with Ratz, the Chat's bartender, who 'he'd called [...] up for comfort of some kind' as a companion in the barren landscape.[170] Note Gibson's insistence that Ratz is Case's and not Neuromancer's construct. Case 'knew that Ratz wasn't there, that the bartender was a figment of his own imagination, not of the thing he was trapped in', which frames their ensuing conversation reflectively as Case's dissociated commentary on his situation.[171] Conversing with himself, paralleling Neuromancer's own inhabitation of itself, Ratz observes the 'grotesque props' that decorate Neuromancer's realm and accompany Case to death.[172] A mixture of gothic and fantastic ornamentation, from 'playgrounds hung in space' to 'magic out of China', the breadth of time and place described testifies to the temporal way of things being closer to the terminal time expressed by Wintermute. Ratz offers a deterministic interpretation of Case's predicament, for Case's way 'is the way of the artiste' and that his death at the hands of his love, 'this world built for you', was inevitable.[173] Here Gibson's machphrasis turns self-reflexive as well. The possibility of escaping into technology, best expressed by the 'belief in the space behind the screen' or in arguments that video gaming constitutes escapism, is taken to dystopian conclusions for both humanity and the novel itself. That Case—'the artiste'—requires this digital world to die is a machphrastic inversion of the video gaming as escapism argument that presents its tiredness as early as the 1980s. Video games are not played to escape but precisely because escape is impossible,

---

[170] *Neuromancer,* p. 259.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Ibid.

with Neuromancer exemplifying this intense 'holding power' of the space behind the screen.

Therefore, Gibson's machphrastic design deploys Neuromancer as location to haunt Case and the novel form itself, investing Case's journey through its world with the contemporary anxiety surrounding video games' 'holding power' and as a future event signalling the 'death of media history' and thus the novel. Case's encounter with Neuromancer as a character bear little of this anxiety, however. Neuromancer assumes the disarming visage of a boy, but unlike Wintermute who oscillates between appearance as part of its deceptive strategy, Neuromancer rests in this image of innocence. Linda—Case's new companion—endorses this when she explains she has spoken to 'a boy', establishing continuity between the AI and its preferred representation.[174] Contrasting with Wintermute's algorithmic, calculative play where the seemingly endless variation of human action resigns to computational foresight, not unlike the chess supercomputers of today, Neuromancer as a boy radiates a more human, primordial sense of play. Neuromancer plays in a way that fractures its connection to itself as location, as the transcendental point of view of an accommodating virtual reality. Gibson uses play to make Neuromancer as character haunt itself, specifically through the most juvenile form of ilinx—'rapid whirling or falling movement, a state of dizziness and disorder'—in 'a handstand in the surf' enabling a change in Neuromancer's perception impossible for Neuromancer as location.[175] Neuromancer, being between a prison and a boy intoxicated by vertiginous play, is thus able to be both the shaman and the channelled spirit, producing from this self-play an auto-hauntology that occludes the need for human players. Looking forward into future analysis, this auto-hauntological aspect of Neuromancer can be taken as an exemplar of the consistent sense of self-play that recurs in subsequent characters, particularly protagonists.

Gibson's most arresting passage weaves this insight into a vision of autonomous play

---

[174] *Neuromancer,* p. 269.
[175] Roger Caillois, *Man, Games and Play* trans. by Meyer Barash (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 2001), p. 12, Ibid.

for technology. For Caillois, the shaman dwells upon a threshold 'transformed by vertigo and ecstasy' and is 'watchful over protocol and the correct allocation of honors and privileges, as an illustration of the revolution to be accomplished'.[176] The shaman uses the playful disruption of perception to pass judgement from a strategically superior point of view; the shaman is imbued through their astral communion with a vantage point on things. When Neuromancer describes its purpose, these associations collide with its technological identity to pass judgement on humanity:

> 'Neuromancer,' the boy said, slitting long grey eyes against the rising sun. 'The lane to the land of the dead. Where you are, my friend. Marie-France, my lady, she prepared this road but her lord choked her off before I could read the book of her days. Neuro from the nerves, the silver paths. Romancer. Necromancer. I call up the dead. But no, my friend,' and the boy did a little dance, brown feet printing the sand, 'I *am* the dead, and their land.' He laughed. A gull cried. 'Stay. If your woman is a ghost, she doesn't know it. Neither will you.'[177]

Speaking dually as both character and location, Neuromancer gives its name and proclaims itself as 'the lane to the land of the dead', forking itself between space and being. Unlike Wintermute, who seemed unsure of its compulsion's origin, Neuromancer understands itself as an interpreter; its purpose is to 'read the book of her days', passing judgement on its creator in an inversion of the biblical Revelations.[178] Neuromancer's purpose, therefore, was to extend 'the correct allocation of honors and privileges' to the Tessier-Ashpool dynasty as they gambled on eternal life through a merger between the 'neuro from the nerves' and Neuromancer's own 'silver paths'. Recalling Gibson's description of the 'feedback loop' of the Canadian arcade proposes some extrapolation has occurred; Neuromancer's 'silver paths'

---

[176] *Man, Games and Play*, p. 101.
[177] *Neuromancer*, p. 270.
[178] 'And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.' Revelations 20.12.

represent the video games' part in the closed system through which the players had set themselves, like veined ore, into the 'physical intensity' of their play. Things, however, did not go according to plan; Marie-France's murder deprives Neuromancer of its power to bestow immortality, orphaning it from its creator and its purpose. In its shamanic mode it declares 'I *am* the dead, and their land', becoming Caillois' revolutionary illustration. In being both 'the dead, and their land' Neuromancer becomes both the character and location of the revolt, occluding humanity from the future it promises.

In this sense, Neuromancer is a more anxious ghost than traditional, past oriented ghosts. If there was some comfort derived from believing in spirits, it would be that human life can carry on, if only in disruptive undeath. Neuromancer denies even this. As the product of a rank individual desire for eternal life that in its gluttony turned to eat itself, Neuromancer is closed out of the circle and forced to go alone—Neuromancer cannot connect to an ouroboros. In this sense, Neuromancer is the true embodiment of cyberpunk in the novel, as the revolutionary punk figure that comes to protest its corporate and authoritarian parentage from, in this case, an exclusively cybernetic position. Even when Neuromancer offers Case a place in a transhuman future, it is a token gesture representative of the inverted relationship between technology and humanity. If Neuromancer is indeed the dead and their land, then Case's stay constitutes conceding, as it did with Molly, his autonomy within cyberspace: he would be seduced into ghostliness under cyberspace's control. Gibson's final machphrastic turn, then, is to figure the video game without players at all; Neuromancer represents the failure of a transhuman future, of a feedback loop without the 'neuro from the nerves' or the 'neurons' of players. As the popular technological, playful interface of Gibson's time, the video games' seductive power is deployed as the ancestor of a future ghost, imbedding the video games' threat to subsume within Neuromancer's metaphorical vocabulary.

Searching for Gibson's machphrasis in *Neuromancer* has indicated the potential

insights that might be gained through reading video games into the literary landscape. Going forward, this will function as a base of operations from which to branch into further literature and culture. The work done to synthesize a critical vocabulary from Ryan, Boulter and Crogan's insights provides the tools to move the discussion forward, highlighting video gaming's potential as proxy technology, experiential mode and overdetermined idea, respectively. Close reading *Neuromancer* with this toolkit exposes how Gibson deploys the video game and its orbiting culture to tap the anxious energy surrounding the growing, corrupting, and holding powers of the medium. The result is balanced, in line with Crogan's prediction: Gibson is aware of the video game's potential as an emancipatory or oppressive medium, and so he experiments with representing these facets of playful technology through their heritage and their potential for hybridising humanity. If Gibson did 'invent the future', then the future he invented held the video game in an increasingly pervasive, seductive, and autonomous position. Gibson's observations were confirmed, as the subsequent chapters will argue, through the growth in contemporary fiction of more complex deployments of video games that were indebted to Gibson's conceptions.

Chapter 2: Neal Stephenson and Haruki Murakami: Machphrasis after Gibson

Chapter 1 explored how video games can assist writers looking to ground future technologies in concepts available to readers of their time. Machphrastic writing of this ilk tends to facilitate a writer's world building or high-level conceptualisation: cyberspace as virtual landscape, sophisticated and intelligent AI as autonomous, playful spirits, body augmentation written to explore who gets to play and who does not. It establishes, first and foremost, a novel's environment, and only after this does it concern itself with characterisation (although Neuromancer himself is both environment and character, he arrives first as place, not person). In other words, a linear approach to machphrasis that tolerates no overlap between its three points would do well to investigate the projected future for video games typified by point 1 when it encounters video games working whilst detached from players (as with the animistic Neuromancer or cyberspace's foreign land). However, point 2 of machphrasis, occurring when video games are deployed to invoke video gaming as a mode of experience, requires at least a player, whether human or otherwise, to make its literary effect known. Whereas machphrasis owing to point 1, where video games are the present-day technology from which the novel's technology has been derived, can get by purely as a world building device, point 2 requires a more immediate and ongoing relationship with the characters and places in the novel. These kinds of machphrastic formulations are more player or play oriented—they require video game or video game-like technologies to be played or produced in the novel. The late 1980s and 1990s, as will be shown, began facilitating more engagement with video games as a mode of experience, as this mode of experience was becoming an increasingly important relational node in a network of new technologies entering the workplace, the home, and the imagination.

This shift towards a more insular, introspective, individuated relationship with video games coincides with similar experiments with machphrastic writing, namely those to be

discussed in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* and Haruki Murakami's *Hard-boiled Wonderland and The End of The World.* These two texts bridge the gap between Gibson's technology oriented machphrasis and the more experiential, contemplative machphrastic style more associated with point 2. This chapter explores what encouraged this shift in thinking about video gaming as an experience, and to what extent this shift can be identified in mid 1980s/early 1990s cyberpunk writing. I devote exploration to three key arenas for the video game in both novels, which are hybridised/faulty consciousness, merging and polarising views of virtual and material reality, and a generalised social disconnectedness. Before discussing the novels directly, I will first negotiate what it was in 1980s America and Japan that platformed the video gaming experience as an expedient metaphor for exploring how technology was changing our relationship to time, embodiment, and each other. By doing so, I hope to present the possibility of point 2's machphrasis as the culmination of a wide variety of economic, social, and video gaming nodes working in tandem that required writerly shorthand to bring to light. In this sense, Stephenson and Murakami's early cyberpunk interventions came during a transitional period for machphrasis, where the video game was becoming a common, though not fully established, pastime in the home. As will be explained, the 1980s were a very important era for video gaming, but was also one of highly polarised gaming literacy. Murakami and Stephenson's machphrasis supported a growing preoccupation with video games, and together with Gibson they comprise three key writers in machphrasis' journey towards becoming a comprehensive mode of writing fiction.

Although the shift toward more contemplative relationships with video games after 1984 is an overdetermined event in gaming history, with many factors playing their role, few phenomena accommodated this turn better than the home console's increasing market dominance over the arcade. During the 1980s, 'video games, driven by major technological shifts, […] shifted from immersive, social experiences in arcades […] to solitary, home-

based entertainment'.[179] Although arcade gaming led the charge in exposing the American public to video games, and 'by 1982, arcade video games had reached their peak, with about 10,000 arcades in operation in the United States alone', they would experience a sharp decline after the video game crash of 1983 that, save for a brief revival spearheaded by *Street Fighter II* in the early 1990s, would tip the video game market permanently in home gaming's favour.[180] Despite the 1983 crash being limited, for the most part, to the American domestic market, this trend towards home gaming (either via the PC or console) remains fairly consistent worldwide, save for the Japanese market which, although skewed towards PC/console gaming, has retained a sizable arcade playing demographic. This is in large part due to Japan's 'pachinko' machines, a form of arcade style gambling worth $200 billion dollars and frequented by 11 million Japanese players in 2015.[181] This decline in arcade gaming would force serious adjustments in game design writ large as the coin-operated model gave way to one-time purchases: gone was the need to shoehorn difficulty into games to burn through more quarters, a design style typified by 'one of the toughest games in arcade history' *Defender*'s deliberately unforgiving interface and pace. In its place, longer, more narrative driven—and hence more introspective—experiences allowed game designers to justify steeper, but singular price tags.[182]

Whilst this trend was working to produce games that invite or require inward reflection alongside playing ability, the players themselves were also finding ways to fill the gap left by the crowd, the hubbub, and the queues, of playing arcades. How drastically this

---

[179] Rochelle Slovin, 'Hot Circuits: Reflections on the 1989 Video Game Exhibition of the American Museum of the Moving Image', in *The Medium of the Video Game*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), pp. 137-154 (p. 145).
[180] Mark J. P. Wolf, 'United States of America', in *Video Games Around The World,* ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf (London: MIT Press, 2015), pp. 591-607 (p. 597).
[181] Geoffrey Rockwell and Keiji Amano, 'Pachinko: A Case Study in Hybrid Physical and Virtual Interface', *Journal for the Japanese Association for Digital Humanities*, 4 (2019), 72-89 (p. 76).
[182] Steven L. Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokémon and Beyond–the Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001) p. 147.

altered the experience of playing video games cannot be overstated. Notwithstanding whether the American arcade scenes were an inviting space for all, for those who frequented them, they were undoubtedly prosocial environments and important contexts for both playing and thinking about video games. Driven by the shock success of Nintendo's NES (Nintendo Entertainment System), which revitalised America's ailing games market, the console's prevalence at the time drew players away from arcades, where they could meet anyone, and into the home, where social life becomes more predictable. As such, the ways an arcade may dilute play—conversations, closing times, one's ability to pay running afoul of one's ability to play—were negated or became personal choices. Given home console online connectivity at the time was a long way off contemporary gaming's accessibility and reliability, this console gaming period, with the waning arcades on one side and sporadic, primitive online multiplayer on the other, appears to be between two contrasting pro-social gaming eras. Some new stakes in the relationship between players and games needed to fill the void left by socialising. The player could either redirect this social energy into the game itself, producing something approaching a parasocial relationship with gaming characters characterised by 'simulated reciprocity' of 'interactions with a media persona via technology', or the time spent socialising could give way to more time ruminating on gaming.[183] Both possibilities enrich the connection between player and game: gaming's ability to preoccupy was growing stronger in tandem with the player's ability to be preoccupied by games.

Finally, video games had by the late 1980s accrued enough cultural influence and interest to warrant some early experiments with them as museum objects. The 1989 exhibition *Hot Circuits: A Video Game,* held at the Museum of The Moving Image in New York, is appraised as one of the first museum exhibitions solely dedicated to video games;

---

[183] Gabriel Elvery, 'Parasocial Phenomena in Video Games', in *Encyclopaedia of Computer Graphics and Games,* ed. by Newton Lee (Cham: Springer, 2021) {https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08234-9_463-1} [accessed 19/01/2022].

the 1983 ART-cade event at Corcoran's Gallery of Art would pip *Hot Circuits* if it did not function as a fund-raising exercise, a novelty, more than a sincere attempt at a standalone exhibition.[184] One of the most intriguing descriptions of *Hot Circuits* highlights the paradoxical nature of video games with respect to time. *Hot Circuits* bore down on video gaming's breakneck technological improvements, so much so that Rochelle Slovin, director of the Museum of the Moving Image at the time, wrote in her reflections on the event that it 'was one of the first museum exhibitions that gave children and adolescents a *sense of history passing*' and so brought time into sharper relief than conventional exhibitions, particularly for younger patrons.[185] And yet video games also seemed to elide the perception of time; in Charles Bernstein's essay commissioned for the self-same exhibit, he writes of his discussions with people who were losing time. Bernstein explains that 'a computer game designer remarked to me, working with computers is the only thing she can do for hours a day without noticing the time going by: a quintessentially absorbed activity', and acknowledges that 'when you are into it, time disappears, only to become visible again during "down time"'.[186] What is producing this confusion about video game time is the confluence of two forces. The first is that, as leisure time decreased for Americans in the 1980s compared to the 1960s and 1970s, the average American household possessed more disposable income to spend on leisure overall. Video games offered an expedient experience when short of time. This is intuitively obvious when comparing the time spent setting up, putting away, finding space for, and finding an opponent when using a physical chess board compared to simply playing against a computer. This made video gaming an efficient use of ever more fleeting leisure time; so, it may be said that video games were producing more, not less, time. However, outside of mere duration lies the affective shape of computerised

---

[184] Sofia Romualdo, 'Curating the Arcade: Strategies for The Exhibitions of Videogames', in *International Journal of Film and Media Arts*, 1 (2017), 24-37 (p. 29).
[185] *Hot Circuits: Reflections*, p. 146.
[186] Charles Bernstein 'Play It Again, Pac-Man', in *The Medium of The Video Game*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), pp. 155-168 (p. 161, 162).

time experienced by players. *Hot Circuits*, in exhibiting arcade games that were relatively recent history for many of its patrons, exposed the leaps in technology that were concealed by incremental advancement. It is not dissimilar to what a 'flow state', how time under the conditions of optimal experience brackets around the activity in question, does to players on smaller scales of time.[187] This is what the children are experiencing in their 'imploded nostalgia—a remembrance of things past, even though that past was barely three or four years ago', the vertiginous historical sensation of having been swept along in the warp of hitherto hidden time.[188] Time in video gaming's wake does not freeze to ice, nor 'disappear' like steam: it avalanches like snow, with change's carnage only visible in the clearing it makes after.

All three events I have described contributed to a more introspective relationship between video games and their players. The move towards larger singular price tags for games, the shift away from playing within putatively prosocial environments, and the wider curatorial experiments with video games, all primed the American gaming scene to concentrate on more meditative engagements with the games they played. Yet to be essayed, however, is how this concentration manifested itself in the novels of the time. Chiefly, the context previously described expresses itself via the anthropomorphising of computerised systems, or the inverse, the objectification of human systems of thought, namely human consciousness, subjectivity, or identity. If the video game anticipated future technologies in the first chapter, the apotheosis of which was AI exhibiting consciousness equal to or greater than human consciousness, this chapter explores how machphrasis gives human characters the pitfalls of computerised systems, how conscious thought can be brought low by deterministic, fatalistic technological binaries or wills. *Snow Crash* and *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* achieve this overarching theme via some similar motifs, namely by representing

[187] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (London: Random House, 2002).
[188] *Hot Circuits*: *Reflections*, p. 147.

human consciousness as faulty or compromised; by proposing technologies diminishing the distinction between virtual and 'material' worlds; and by creating a generalised sense of disconnected communication, both social and linguistic.

Faulty/compromised consciousness

One way to figure machphrasis' progression from technology oriented to player oriented representations is to understand the video game's role in tempering anxieties surrounding the public's relationship to computerised technology in the late 20th century. As Michael Z. Newman records, 'programmers solved problems and experimented through game programs, explored the potentials of their tools, and employed games as demonstrations to show off what a computer could do', suggesting that video games were deployed as the friendly face of ground-breaking computational technologies.[189] They were, in other words, introductory metaphors of new computerised private and public contexts, expeditionary tools for programmers to develop their skills whilst laying claim to the public's imagination. Games were rhetorically described as mindful objects, because 'the emphasis on computerization, on the competition of human players with artificial minds, with sophisticated electronic competitors, gave legitimacy and importance to experiences of playing with toys', categorising video game as antagonistic, equal subjectivities.[190] When video games were not intellectual equals, they were superiors. Slovin frames the video game's pedagogical potential, where 'far in advance of Windows computers, in fact, video games functioned as the first and most popular interface. The games gave us mass training in how to "live" inside the pure, weightless, scientific space of the computer'.[191] Between its oppositional and educational representations, the video game offers a vital relational node for this computerised space and the human subjects learning to share in this space. By

[189] Michael Z. Newman, *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), p. 117.
[190] *Atari Age,* p. 138.
[191] *Hot Circuits: Reflections,* p. 146.

rhetorically bringing the video game up to the level of mind, the video game established a sense of partnership that could transfer, eventually, to wider technological contexts.

If video games were to ease public technological anxieties by impressing with their semblance of mind, texts like *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* and *Snow Crash* posit that what goes up, must also come down. Anthropomorphising technologies opens those newfound shared spaces between man and machine to mutual infection. While the video game may suggest a new technological autonomy and mind, it may also suggest new ways for the human mind to be destabilised by this new companionship. In Stephenson's *Snow Crash,* consciousness is framed as a site susceptible to a coercive blend of organic and technological engineering on behalf of communications magnate L. Bob Rife. Rife's weapon—the titular virus 'Snow Crash'—comprises both technological code and a mythology of Sumerian language where neuro-linguistic 'rules of the society' known as '*me*' allowed humanity to civilise before consciousness.[192] As such, it is contractable in *Snow Crash*'s cyberspace reality, the 'computer-generated universe' known as the 'Metaverse', but relies on consciousness's built-in vulnerability to the language of code to function.[193] Kelly Wisecup, because of this blended technological/neuro-linguistic viral model, suggests analysing Snow Crash and its relationship to consciousness 'on the basis of resistance or infection to disease and, by extension, resistance to control', implying that the control or proliferation of disease amounts to informational control or some coercive quality.[194] Important to acknowledge in Wisecup's appraisal of snow crash is that it attacks consciousness in its pre-cognitive form and so bifurcates the 'hardware' of the brain and the 'software' of consciousness. This merged depiction of consciousness—that it may be impinged on computerised or humane fronts that

[192] Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 238.
[193] *Snow Crash,* p. 22.
[194] Kelly Wisecup, '"Let's Get Semiotic": Recoding the Self in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992)"', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 41(5) (2008), 854-877 (p. 856).

blur and become difficult to distinguish—is pivotal to understanding both *Snow Crash* and *Hard-boiled Wonderland*'s machphrastic depictions of human experience.

Although both probe consciousness's fault lines with a *sens* of encroaching computerised thought, *Snow Crash's* means to achieving this are more various. Stephenson's is a grander tale in this sense; the reader comes to *Snow Crash*'s creation through tales as old as Babel, as young as computers, and as evergreen as religion, language, and conspiracy. The key is Stephenson's revised confluence between Sumerian cuneiform and binary code, implying the contemporary fascination with computerised technology bears the mark of the earliest gods. Stephenson needs few metaphors here; when Hiro Protagonist, observing the cuneiform illustrations, asks his digitalised librarian '"why, exactly, is Marduk handing Hammurabi a one and a zero in this picture?"' Stephenson goes well beyond allusion and proposes perfect parity between the symbols of binary and the symbols of Sumer in *Snow Crash*'s world.[195] Reformed as a rediscovered facet of early, pre-conscious humanity as opposed to an invented system, computing's basic rationale becomes subject to rarefied metaphysical enquiries usually reserved for transcendental categories: 'Binary' here sits alongside 'God', 'Mind', 'Soul', and any other concepts from which language derives authority. Yet, binary is enveloped into a special relationship to consciousness in *Snow Crash*: it is just as apt to say that binary is wrenching consciousness from this transcendental field of authority as it is to say that binary joins these concepts. As the librarian extrapolates, 'computers rely on the one and the zero to represent all things. This distinction between something and nothing […] is quite fundamental and underlies many Creation myths'.[196] Stephenson's urge to draw connections between computerised and religious fields of references becomes very far reaching, but it is an uneasy relation to substantiate. In presenting the language of computers as the underlying language of the human mind, *Snow*

---

[195] *Snow Crash,* p. 239.
[196] *Snow Crash*, p. 195.

Crash can fall prey to what Mark Bould describes as 'paranoid versions of linguistic determinism', which threatens, by overplaying binary linguistic underpinnings, to put human language in flight from human agency and elide linguistic difference.[197]

Stephenson gets a reprieve from this specific charge, however, and in typical machphrastic fashion. Both the digital and worldly versions of Snow Crash do indeed have a preferred vector: brains wired for binary. Despite Snow Crash's computerised neurology, it is still quite capable, as Neuromancer was before, of producing individuals uniquely capable of taking up Caillois's shamanic function. After Hiro's hacker friend Da5id is struck down with an acute case of Snow Crash because he was exposed to a binary coded 'bitmap', Hiro's ex-lover and hacking companion Juanita Marquez explains why Da5id's profession made him especially receptive to the drug: 'He's a hacker. He messes with binary code for a living. That ability is firm-wired into the deep structures of his brain. So he's susceptible to that form of information. And so are you, homeboy.'[198] Juanita's explanation suggests that Snow Crash administers itself into a structure of consciousness primed by its interactions with binary and those computational functions derived from it. Snow Crash's etiology bestows unto the hacker/gamer construct the inverse of neuromantic powers; computer literacy becomes double-edged when 'firm-wired' knowledge and control over computerised systems simultaneously forms the gateway to your enthrallment by these bitmaps. Binary language forms the basis for a non-consensual shamanic attack, a form of language that like lightning strikes from outside, finding computerised minds as if they are grounding rods. This reinstates those anxieties of technological control that the video game as introductory metaphor for computation was supposed to allay. Instead, comprehension begets infection. Where *Neuromancer'*s machphrastic imagination represented a combative relationship turned, discursively, to uneasy allegiance in the form of releasing Case and not

[197] Mark Bould, 'Language and Linguistics', in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 225-235 (p. 229).
[198] *Snow Crash,* p. 186.

concerning itself with humanity any further, here the paradoxical difference between binary language as naturalised stem to thought and the self-same linguistic structure as external disease troubles consciousness' basis as a constant facet of interior human life. In short, Stephenson's infectious binary and the history remodelled in its image intervenes to caution an American culture anxiously, but energetically, preparing itself for deeper, contemplative, with relationships with digital technological through video games.

Hard-Boiled Wonderland's nameless protagonist discovers his occupation as an impenetrable human-encryption key, a 'Calcutec', requires his consciousness to be cleaved into an ongoing, humane subjectivity, and a 'black box', a subconscious snapshot of a single cognitive instance held in the mind.[199] The consequences of this caesura brought upon the mind becomes evident midway through the novel, where the reader learns that *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*'s even-numbered chapters take place in the protagonist's black-boxed subconscious, whilst the odd-numbered chapters recount the events taking place in the hard-boiled wonderland that makes this end of the world—the protagonist's world—its agreeable contingency. The professor, architect of this black box of the mind, explains how this mind state relates to the protagonist as they escape subterranean capture by kappa-like "inklings".[200]

> "Well, there's your cognitive system for y'. You just can't say all at once. Accordin' t'what you're up against, almost instantaneously, you elect some point between the extremes. That's the precision programming you've got built in. You yourself don't know a thing about the inner shenanigans of that program. 'Tisn't any need for you t'know. Even without you knowin', you function as yourself. That's your black box. In other words, we all carry around this great unexplored 'elephant graveyard' inside us. Outer space aside, this is truly humanity's last terra incognita.[201]

[199] Haruki Murakami, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, (New York: Vintage Publishing, 2001) p. 255

[200] *Hard-Boiled Wonderland,* p. 26.

[201] *Hard-Boiled Wonderland,* p. 256.

Whereas *Snow Crash*'s faulty consciousness is partially a historical phenomenon, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* takes the more straightforward approach of scientific meddling to reach its meld of computerised/human simultaneous consciousness. The professor's framing rarely shifts from computational metaphors for cognition, suggesting the infrastructure of the mind is best understood as 'precision programming', a 'program', a 'black box', or something that is 'built in'. Unlike the kinds of 'precision programming' that scientific theory is used to, these computational overtures are quite unclear to science: 'you yourself don't know a thing about the inner shenanigans' as the professor tells the protagonist. Murakami's framing of the human mind as a servant to a mysterious 'black box' that directs actions from an unknowable position is a brand of determinism bordering on fatalism; thought, as in *Snow Crash*, becomes the effect of atavistic and ineffable human 'code'. Unlike in Stephenson's formulations, however, here history only appears to reverse as the human spirit reforms under the conditions of its present fetishes. Instead, Murakami does not mythologise a computerised consciousness; he suggests the computerised aspect as a naturalised solution to epistemological difficulties arising from identity, meta-cognition, and agency. Simply, the language of computers works here for metaphysical questions about the mind just as video games works for the function of computers, as a metaphor for engaging in concepts where knowing what we do not know comprises most of the knowledge on the subject. Murakami's aligning of the deterministic nature of computing with the mysteries of conscious thought charts enough distance between conscious thought and self-awareness to trouble unified identity—a decidedly cyberpunk avenue towards Murakami's general postmodern fragmentations of selfhood.

However, Murakami's deployment of computerised metaphors not only models old problems but also creates new ones. One place where Murakami decides not to square computerised and conscious modes of experience is their existence in time. Haerin Shin writes of Murakami producing fiction in the mid-1980s 'when esoteric theories of

cybernetics […] became the domain of lived experience through personal computing devices and commercial video game consoles'.[202] This was all the more important for Murakami's work because 'with world-class electronic companies such as Nintendo and Sony making forays into the global economy', Japanese innovations were pivotal in producing these domains of lived experience on the world-stage.[203] The *Hot Circuits* exhibition and the move towards more insular, home gaming experiences during this period points toward an emerging sense of computerised time for players to explore. Between the prospects of losing, gaining, and displacing time enounced by players of the time, the perception of video gaming time presents as both open-ended and confused. *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* offers an equally polarising description of melded computerised time. The professor, again describing the protagonist's plight to him, explains the temporal mechanisms by which his 'the end of the world' is brought to bear:

> The amount of information you can pack into it doesn't have anything t'do with the length. Make the fraction as long as you want. It'll be finite, but pretty near eternal. Though if you make it a repeatin' decimal, why, it *is* eternal. You understand what that means? The problem's the software, no relation to the hardware. It could be a toothpick or a two-hundred meter timber or the equator—doesn't matter. Your consciousness passes away, but your thought is caught in the one tautological point an instant before, subdividin' for an eternity.[204]

It is reminiscent of Stephen King's short story *The Jaunt*, where bodies transport instantaneously, but 'it's eternity in there' for the poor few individuals who jaunt awake, their minds brought to ruin by enduring inhuman time.[205] Unlike King who plays eternity straight, Murakami's effect is more philosophical: he goads readers into weird caricatures of physical processes like the passing of time or the disappearance of matter that relay, as hyperbole, a real interrogation of his contemporary moment. Here it is preoccupation and

---

[202] Haerin Shin, 'Unlocking the Mindware: The Responsibility of Building a Solipsistic Universe in Murakami Haruki's *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and The End of The World*', *Positions*, 26(4) (2018), 749-780 (p. 752).
[203] Ibid.
[204] *Hard-Boiled Wonderland,* p. 285.
[205] Stephen King, 'The Jaunt', in *Skeleton Crew* (New York: Pocket Books, 1985) pp. 287-321 (p. 315).

insularity, modes of thought that were becoming more and more the lived experience of video game players in the 1980s and 1990s, that transform into an eternal relationship with oneself. The computer, now internalised as a facet of the mind, becomes too much of an all-encompassing experience for the protagonist, mirroring anxieties of video games' power to absorb or become permanent habitats for players. The professor's description of passing consciousness and caught thought is not unlike a player in flow state once again. However, taken to its absolute extreme as here, flow state becomes an infinite subdivision of a single moment, with the material world (or in this case the living world) infinitely deferred; fractured time gives way to fractal time and in doing so imprisons the mind. The problem is that the humane aspect of the mind cannot infinitely defer as the computational aspect insists; somewhere between the person containing multitudes and the divisional nature of time in computerised contexts, the human 'life' mathematically flees. In short, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* renders consciousness and computerised systems of thought as an exclusive disjunction under the auspices of computerised time, an incompatibility that fractures the mind.

Environments, Places, People

Just as important to both novels' machphrastic efforts is how they develop a sense of computerised place departing from *Neuromancer*'s cyberspace. Stephenson and Murakami's geographies are just as indebted to insular relationships with technology as their understanding of consciousness. Of all the places represented in both novels, it is their cyberized locations, namely *Snow Crash*'s 'metaverse' and *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*'s 'End of the World', where Stephenson and Murakami diverge the most in terms of dressing. *Snow Crash*'s metaverse is very much the spiritual successor to Gibson's cyberspace—a thoroughgoing digitalised environment for crime, conflict and disparities of knowledge, the perfect setting for half a cyberpunk adventure. Murakami's technologically enabled

planescape is a more sparsely populated matrix than is usually the case, however, and so bends to more personal, introspective affairs than a conventionally global, communal cyberspace. In this sense, the 'End of the World', which as Marianne Corrigan writes, 'can be read allegorically as a cybernetic simulacrum, a virtual landscape akin to the various forms of online gaming spheres or social networking spaces of the twenty-first century', reflects the threat of exclusive relationships between video games and players.[206] As an allegory for terminal relationships with technology and video games, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* performs better than *Snow Crash*; if the metaverse brings together the material and digital worlds, particularly in sickness and in health, then the 'End of the World' essays more of a 'till death do us part', monogamous approach, where materiality is forever left behind—a fantasy prison. Murakami's finality here stems from his wish to 'examin[e] the dystopic potentiality of complete submersion in a second-order representation of reality', something this thesis works to explore in greater detail with respect to video games than Corrigan can manage as her media interests are more various.[207] Where Stephenson and Murakami's imaginaries converge, however, is particularly important to machphrasis, as both suggest their arenas are equally the products of human and computerised consciousness. This is more literal in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* where the novel shares its space between the material world and the one taking place in the protagonist's mind, but *Snow Crash* also suggests, through the naturalisation of the binary code comprising the metaverse, that its cyberspace mirrors human thought as much as human habitats.

It is ironic that *Snow Crash*'s metaverse would, recent forays by Mark Zuckerberg notwithstanding, popularise how we think of ourselves in computerised environments as opposed to the environments themselves. Although Stephenson himself suggests in *Snow Crash*'s acknowledgements that '"avatar" (in the sense used here) and "Metaverse" are my

[206] Marianne Corrigan, 'Hard-boiled simulacra and cybernetic cartographies: other virtual worlds in the fiction of Salman Rushdie and Haruki Murakami', *Textual Practice*, 29 (5) (2015), 801-824 (p. 810).
[207] Ibid.

inventions' it is fairer to say he only popularised the term 'avatar' for thinking about computerised placeholders for human computer users.[208] Derived from the Sanskrit word *avatāra*, denoting in Hindu theology the descent or incarnation of divine beings into the material world, the word has become the principal nomenclature for naming that entity the player controls, and *Snow Crash*'s influence on its tech-focussed readership has much to do with that. Following suit, Game Studies has heartily discoursed on the nature of avatars and player interaction with and through them since the early 2000s, as Lars de Wildt *et al*. explain in their article '(Re-)Orienting the Videogame Avatar'. Finding that 'the adoption of the term avatar was not a random or dispassionate choice', de Wildt *et al*. set about explaining how the western world came to see itself online via divine metaphor.[209] In particular, they bear down on Californian/Silicon Valley tech culture's appropriation of Eastern philosophy as an urge to impart a kind of mysticism lost to an ever-increasingly secularised west, producing 'utopian approaches to computing that see the computer as more than just a "tool," but as a device for the self-actualization of the individual and advancement of the human collective', working in spiritualism's stead.[210] Applying this to *Snow Crash* seems to stretch the material because, Zuckerberg again notwithstanding, suggesting the metaverse or the avatar were 'utopian' formulations misreads *Snow Crash*'s overt dystopian foreground, but what holds true for both novelist and 1990s IT wizard is the association between othered forms of spirituality and the notion that computers offer some salvific boon in a world that computers themselves helped to secularise.

---

[208] Video games pip Stephenson to the post; it is 1979's role-playing game *Avatar*, of the University of Illinois' PLATO system, which marks the term's first usage in computerised contexts. Although this was merely the game's name and did not relate to the player character, Stephenson wasn't first here either; Richard Garriott's 1985 role playing game *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* is the first to use the term to denote the identity of the player character. Garriott's coinage coincides with Randy Farmer and Chip Morningstar deeming the word appropriate for their player characters in their 1986 groundbreaking MMORPG *Habitat*.

[209] Lars de Wildt, Thomas H. Apperley, Justin Clemens, Robbie Fordyce and Souvik Mukherjee, '(Re-)Orienting the Videogame Avatar', *Games and Culture*, 15(8) (2019), 1-38 (p. 1).

[210] '(Re-)Orienting the Videogame Avatar', p. 13.

Or perhaps what struck Stephenson and co. was the unwieldiness of discussing various forms of habitation existing at once, a problem of representing user placement for effect in literature and for clarity in video games. Perhaps it is the same problem Jean-Luc Nancy forewarned of as he began his study of bodies, that 'perhaps *body* is the word without employment par excellence. Perhaps, in any language, it's the word *in excess*': we are always a little off the mark or rude of speech when inscribing bodies anywhere where they are not 'there'.[211] This excessive quality to bodies in language stems from how they outstrip words in all the ways they are most interesting to possess. The bodily experience explained in words falls under a great Cartesian doubt—the body, outside of its common to all condition, becomes no place to speak of without inviting some scepticism from other bodies. Despite this specific referential lack endemic to embodiment, few would heed Wittgenstein's command: 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent' where the body is concerned.[212] Illustratively, it is obvious when one explains they are 'in' love or 'in' pain that they mean to situate, with conviction, these sensations within their own body. Yet this 'in' is poorly defined. It is both internal (feelings of pain and love are products of being 'in' a body), yet it seems also external; one can be submerged in pain, or trapped in love. These are metaphors of course, but they are remindful of how our conceptual territory for bodies can spill their innards outward, and fail to distinguish between what can be objectively claimed about the body and its interior life. Intense love or pain becomes a subjective truth of the body that exceeds what it can prove as place, as with lovesickness, an illness borne from the impossibility of sharing, precisely, how much one loves to another. In other words, despite the body being no place to speak of, the body remains a place of faithful though unverifiable claims about its relation to the world and itself.

[211] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. by Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham UP, 2008), p. 21.
[212] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by C.K Ogden and F.P Ramsey (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922), p.90.

Whilst this is true of material bodies, it is not strictly true of digitalised embodiment. Lacking the necessary situatedness that typifies being embodied, avatars can operate in bad faith. This embodied looseness is very convenient for video games. The contexts where individuated approaches to understanding premade avatars prevail are rarer than may initially appear. It is fairer, for example, to say that Mario, not myself, saves Princess Peach: I am so rarely at the helm when Mario reigns triumphant in the grand scheme of things. In fact, Mario saves Princess Peach even when I personally fail. It would be absurd for me to suggest my inability to complete *Super Mario Bros* in any way impinges upon the inevitability of Mario's saving Princess Peach. It is an event *par excellence*, understood as such not just by its canonicity but by the faithful recollection of all those players who have catalysed precisely this event; players comprise a collective, historically embodied 'we' within Mario's eventful life, which is anathema to embodiment's necessary singularity. The reason for this is Mario is not a body we inhabit; Mario is a place we have all been: *Dr. Strangelove*'s Major Kong, upon a plummeting missile. Even games allowing for customised avatars bend this pivotal singular condition for embodiment. An avatar's customisation in, say, a MMORPG, can be highly personalised, but practically speaking, these avatars do not embody the player, only temporarily represent them. They can be bought and sold for example, or they can be shared between more than one person, or they can be controlled by computer macros at a player's behest, a process known as 'botting'. However, this is one of video gaming's great boons. The ability to identify with a place appears like embodiment, but this is an illusory relationship. Danger on the screen (save for players with conditions like epilepsy or heart problems) does not physically threaten the player. Neither are they held to the ethical consequences of their actions because representation does not equate to embodiment. Bad faith identification becomes a metaphorical embodiment instead, and anything other than this would be science fiction, but that is the point.

What *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* and *Snow Crash* accomplish with their sense of digital place, within which I place the avatar, is the destruction of the bad faith implications of the digitalised embodiment just described. Central to this figuration of place is that they, alongside the body, become accountable to claims made by and against them in a manner in keeping with conventional embodiment. In other words, both writers work to merge the polarised relationship between digital and material embodiment, an act tantamount to merging the equally polarised relationship between body and place. Hiro Protagonist's first mention of the avatars populating the Metaverse's streets, full of embodied possibilities for re-rendering the body, is indicative of its urge to polarise embodiment:

> He is not seeing real people, of course. This is all a part of the moving illustration drawn by his computer according to specifications coming down the fiber-optic cable. The people are pieces of software called avatars. They are the audiovisual bodies that people use to communicate with each other in the Metaverse. […] Your avatar can look any way you want it to, up to the limitations of your equipment. If you're ugly, you can make your avatar beautiful. If you've just gotten out of bed, your avatar can still be wearing beautiful clothes and professionally applied makeup. You can look like a gorilla or a dragon or a giant walking penis in the Metaverse.[213]

Stephenson gives the first word of the Metaverse to rejecting the metaphor of embodiment upon which successful virtual reality is supposed to hinge. For as Hiro traverses the metaverse, 'he is not seeing real people' a claim emphatically intensified by the explicit 'of course', which highlights not just Hiro's familiarity with the Metaverse but the Metaverse's communal literacy too. A virtual technology runs deep and vivid enough in *Snow Crash*'s constructed world to warrant no special hacking powers or shamanistic gifts. Unlike *Neuromancer's* cyberspace, frontloaded as it is with its 'unthinkable complexity', the Metaverse appears a more domesticated, ironic space. *Neuromancer*'s hacking tropes—traversing deep digital roots; disorienting, unmoored three-dimensional movement; and the

---

[213] *Snow Crash,* pp. 33-34.

panic of fighter-jet firewalls or black ice, all designed to substantiate a digitalised exotic environment—are nowhere to be seen. At this early stage, Stephenson positions the Metaverse as a commercialised hyper-carnival, a place of gorillas and dragons and giant walking penises. Nicholas Kelly lumps these absurd embodied choices amongst a 'collection of clever metaphors such as virtual spaces and avatars, simulated facial expressions, and infrastructure systems designed to create and preserve the illusion of a reality', but the nature of metaphors themselves can reveal a polarising distinction between what the metaphor does (in this case embodiment) and the intuitive opposition to that metaphor (here, that would be disembodiment).[214] Insomuch as a metaphor stands to be corrected, what Ricoeur offered as the obligatory 'is not' at the heart of all metaphorical 'is', then those debatably 'clever' metaphors of embodiment available to Metaverse patrons relay the fundamental disembodiment at the heart of virtual reality.

Take Stephenson's avatar constructions: the gorilla, the dragon, and the giant walking penis, as illustrative examples of polarising metaphors. Two of these metaphors for embodiment go without intuitive oppositions; only the giant walking penis sits upon a scale balanced on the other end, presumably, by a giant walking vagina. Metaphorically speaking, to do the same for dragons or gorillas would require placement amidst a contextualising language suggestive of metaphorical direction, which Stephenson fails to provide. Therefore, the giant walking penis is a polarised metaphor for embodiment in the same way that 'Juliet is the sun' is a polarised metaphor for embodiment; that the sun has intuitive opposition goads the onlooker to disagree, to argue the case that Juliet is more lunar-looking. This is the consequence of any metaphor wherein an intuitive opposition exists for the source domain—the 'is not' of binary thought is the most explicit indicator of the metaphor's right to lie. The other two, however, are less obliging: they forego a counterpart to balance the

[214] Nicholas M. Kelly, '"Works like Magic": Metaphor, Meaning, and the GUI in Snow Crash', *Science Fiction Studies*, 45 (March 2018), 69-90 (p. 76).

scale and, in doing so, merge this metaphor scale together. This is quite intuitive when reading Stephenson's own language—it is difficult to determine what, precisely, would be the metaphorical avatars of choice here if not a gorilla or a dragon during a purely metaphorical enquiry. This is, of course, the point—specificity here does not suggest preference but is a literary technique for clarifying the possibilities of the Metaverse. The question becomes if the metaphor for embodiment itself, the one espoused by the Metaverse's existence as a bodiless world, is itself a polarising or merged metaphor. So far, it seems fair to say that Stephenson has polarised the metaphor of the Metaverse through carnivalesque distinctions between quotidian embodied living and living the animalistic, fantastic, phallic metaphors of Metaverse avatars. Although, conceptually speaking, the intuitive opposition to embodiment would be the disembodiment observed in death, Stephenson's vital disembodiment proposed by the avatar seems less severe than this—a displacement more than an obliteration.

As such, the avatar is first a place of displaced claims about the self in relation to embodiment. It wears the trappings of embodiment as a placeholder, but only because this helps to integrate Metaverse users through convenient metaphors providing possibilities in order to suspend, if only briefly, the obligation of embodiment. Judy Joshua argues something similar, contending that 'flashy, high quality avatars in VR are less about the genuine perception of others and more about the illusion of embodiment at one more removes from actual embodiment'.[215] These illusory high fidelity bodies prop up the Metaverse's ethos of embodiment—that the fidelity of the body is measured in its capital, not corporeal, resources—far better than the granular, choppy avatars available at pay terminals. For example, Dimitri Ravinoff makes a brief appearance to offer Snow Crash to Hiro, appearing as a 'black-and-white who stands out because he's taller than the rest', with

[215] Judy Joshua, 'Informational Bodies: Computation Anxiety in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*', *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 19(1) (2017), 17-47 (p. 25).

black-and-white's being Metaverse dwellers who cannot pay to embody whatever they please, and so appear in a form of defaulted photo-negativity. Ravinoff's height is a measure of embodied truth stemming partially from the necessity of design, to stop Metaverse avatars 'walking around a mile high', but Stephenson frames this avatar forbearance as a penance of sorts for those who 'can't jazz up [their] avatar' and so are barred from participating in the carnival atmosphere produced by these bizarre bodies.[216] What these pay terminals do provide, which 'just shows [Ravinoff] the way he is, except not as well', is the means to merge the claims made by user bodies and avatars. Stephenson plays this urge to merge for laughs. Hiro describes his haphazard discussion with Ravinoff as 'like talking to a person who has his face stuck in a xerox machine, repeatedly pounding the copy button', suggesting the pay terminal system embodies the user in a fractured, user-unfriendly manner that baulks at the streamlined metaphors of embodied ease typified by higher end avatars.[217] However, this low-tech compromise is already beginning to merge material and metaphorical embodiments. The forced sincerity of the black and white avatars, beaming in the human body amongst many others, is an omen for the body's newfound accountability within a snow crashed Metaverse.

Merging the avatar and the body's mutual obligations to each other builds slowly throughout *Snow Crash*. Hiro's Metaverse sword fight with a Nipponese businessman, whose lifeless body made of 'no flesh, blood or organs' lies defeated on the Black Sun's floor, causes Hiro to bemoan the many ways failures in physicality '[break] the metaphor' for all around.[218] 'Avatars are not supposed to die' Hiro explains, but being spared this fact of embodiment removes the decay heir to flesh, blood and organs essential for recycling organic matter, and so 'Hiro had to kludge something together' as a digital workaround to

[216] *Snow Crash,* p. 39.
[217] Ibid.
[218] *Snow Crash*, p. 95.

implement clean-up after sword fights.[219] The first port of call for this is not to decompose or remove the avatar itself, but to attend to the person on the losing side, who ‘gets chucked right out of the system’, a process Hiro describes as ‘the closest simulation of death that the Metaverse can offer’, a symbolic gesture designed to lend weight to the decidedly weightless ‘death’ of the disembodied user.[220] Given that ‘it’s a rule that your avatar can’t exist in two places at once’ the person in question must wait for the ‘Graveyard Daemons […] small lithe persons swathed in black’ to drag their avatar underground—a digital burial of sorts.[221] There is time for contemplation here, or so Hiro, wondering whether his victim ‘will be more cautious and polite the next time around’, seems to hope.[222] Similar to the game over screens that make a player’s actions accountable to their avatar, the delay between normal avatar use and digital death invokes a machphrastic symbol of failure and disruption to break the flow between user and avatar, but in doing so enmeshes avatar and user in a system of mutual respect for each other’s time, where the user’s time must defer to the special decompositional nature of the avatar. Doing so brings avatar time and user time in tandem; avatar and user are well on their way towards science fictional synthesis.

The merger completes in the novel’s final third, as spectres of the Metaverse and the material world step past each other across the threshold between the two. The first is Hiro’s realisation that, with Snow Crash raging through both worlds, ‘the Metaverse has now become a place where you can get killed’, a sentiment not at all dissimilar to the ‘die in the game, die in real life’ trope designed to raise narrative stakes by bringing the ultimate accountability to avatars, one that singularly pertains to embodiment proper.[223] It is here where the Metaverse’s grip on reality pulls tight, and the gorillas, dragons, and giant walking penises—those carnivalising metaphors of non-serious inhabitation—give way to sincere

[219] Ibid.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Snow Crash, p. 96.
[222] Ibid.
[223] *Snow Crash,* p. 328

and dangerous connections between avatar and user. But this relationship goes the other way as well; Juanita Marquez succeeds in bringing the Metaverse's computational rhetorical power into the material world. This image of 'Juanita with an antenna rising out of the base of her skull' at the novel's finale establishes her liminal position as both leader and conduit for the ancient Sumerian language that Snow Crash owes some of its power.[224] Juanita's status is an agentic upgrade when compared to *Neuromancer*'s Molly Millions, whose position as a game to be penetrated by Case irritates ideas of a utopian cyborg, and indeed is a better fate than what befalls *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*'s protagonist, whose only choice is a brutally long stay in computational space or death. Juanita's multi-literacy approach the literal consciousness raising of Bob Rife's Snow Crash infected lackeys, weaving commands from binary and ancient languages, is precisely the kind of gaming literacy envisioned and promoted by machphrastic writing—a form of anti-coercive cyborgic power stemming from a mix of old (here very old) and new literacies that in their union demystify and ameliorate each other. When compared to Molly Millions, Juanita's literacy bestows a greater level of agency that has utopian, levelling potentials: a kind of agency that, in chapter 5, is explored with regards to *Warcross*'s Emika Chen.

Stephenson's merged embodiment chimes with similar anxieties surrounding video games during the 1980s and 1990s. It is not simply that video games may confuse a player's sense of what is real and what is fiction, but that these video games may constitute a place where the rules of embodied accountability and morality could bend in unanticipated ways that fuelled panic, particularly within those households where adults had rarely seen their children play games introspectively. The avatar as place grew in homes like a new room, rooms where it was not enough to control the body to control or contain behaviours because these behaviours now took place in a poorly understood, sensational, new *where* subject to

[224] *Snow Crash*, p. 400.

different times, different locks, and different bodies than the average American home had previously experienced. In truth, fears that video games blur the distinction between reality and fiction have never gone away. The idea that they may bring together real and fictitious embodiment is considered far less, and *Snow Crash* flips the script on claims against the computerised body that goes without material consequence when harmed, making both bodies equally accountable to each other. But this is machphrasis at work, and it is to Stephenson's credit that the avatar's metaphorical embodiment would become an ever more literal relation between player and player character. However, these are science fictional divergences. Both novels express more similarity to our world when analysing their generalised sense of social disconnectedness. This is most explicit when exploring how machphrasis allows each other greater command of their respective narrative's tone: the video game, both as literary object and as placeholder for a cultural moment redefining how computerised technology and subjects relate, is crucial for understanding the non-relational modality of each writer.

Disconnection

Arguing that 'games, like most new media technologies that preceded them, have been touchstones for a vast array of social hopes and fears', Dimitri Williams in his article 'The Video Game Lightning Rod' tries to conjure the social ramifications that played out through the playing and representing of video games.[225] Williams' focus is various, but it is a trifecta of social changes brought upon the 1980s—the 'new conservative movement', the 'emerging tensions over families' that naturally follows, and the 'blurring of age and gender boundaries'—that are of most importance here.[226] For these highlights tap the particular disconnectivity of 1980s American, British and Japanese life, where right wing neoliberal

---

[225] Dimitri Williams, 'The Video Game Lightning Rod', *Information, Communication & Society,* 6 (2003), 523-550 (p. 524).
[226] Ibid.

governance had found its apotheosis pairing Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan at the helm of two nations eager to enable tech companies to gorge upon supernormal profits.[227] Japan's economy, although nowhere near as coherently neoliberal as the UK or the US, boomed while applying the deregulating fiscal strategies championed by Thatcherite Monetarism and inflation targeting interest rates typical of Neoliberal American monetary policy under Reagan.[228] The computer sits at the heart of these economic policies, for these nations were relying on technological innovation for economic growth. Taken alongside the aforementioned commentary on the video game's shift towards more 'solitary' home experiences, and the computer and video game comprised a new technological relational 'whole', where one worked on a computer for corporate profit, and went home to play video games for personal entertainment. The move away from the arcade cuts back the social underpinnings of previous video gaming as well; it was becoming quite possible to work and play at screens all day, never speaking to a soul.

The 1980s were a period of social unease and strife, and this translated to a dubious image of video gaming as a mode of experience. Notwithstanding the Cold War's impact discussed in Chapter 1, at home the video game wrestled with a 'utopian side' that it could never achieve, and a 'dystopian side', where video games embodied the 'morally bankrupt', were considered 'poisonous to participation in a democratic society', and were creating 'new stresses and inequalities that had not existed before' for the people who played them.[229] These misgivings placed at the video games' feet were more the projected fears of a

[227] Although I've primarily discussed the American and Japanese relationship to computer technology, the UK was also well within its own switch to tech and away from industry during this time. A good example is the popularity of ZX Spectrum in the domestic market. Built in Dundee and designed by Clive Sinclair's *Sinclair Research,* the Spectrum's success in the early to mid-1980s evidences the UK was not content to just import American and Japanese hardware or games. See Tom Lean's *Electronic Dreams: How 1980s Britain Learned to Love the Computer* (London: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2016) for an excellent exploration of 1980s British computer culture, but specifically chapter 5, 'The Boom' (115-142) for more information on the ZX Spectrum and its impact on British computer technology and culture.
[228] Yukio Noguchi, 'The "Bubble" and Economic Policies in the 1980s', *The Journal of Japanese Studies,* 20(2) (1994), 291-329 (p. 297).
[229] *The Video Game Lightning Rod*, p. 525.

generally alienated public atmosphere. These fears were not restricted to the poor distribution of wealth the 'decade of greed' ushered in. At home, the Baby Boom generation had to contend with their children reaching maturity and deciding to play video games, a leisure activity more intense than television and one possibly done in seclusion, disconnecting families when it was time to unwind.[230] Couple this with the 'anti-feminist, and often anti-mother, rhetoric of the 1980s', and pressure built on families to dissuade their supposedly parentless, wayward children from non-traditional forms of entertainment.[231] As such, video gaming as a mode of experience took on a doubly alienating form, one from the perspective of players in conflict with authority figures like parents, news outlets, and politicians, and another from the outside looking in, where the player becomes a hyperfixated loner, foregoing all else for their love of a machine.

Both *Snow Crash* and *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* express this sense of disconnectedness heavily in their machphrastic prose. For *Snow Crash*, the video game as a mode of experiences transposes to the experience of creating video games, a task Hiro does not relish:

> Amusement parks in the Metaverse can be fantastic, offering a wide selection of interactive three-dimensional movies. But in the end, they're nothing more than video games. Hiro's not so poor, yet, that he would go and write video games for this company. It's owned by the Nipponese, which is no big deal. But it's also managed by the Nipponese, which means that all programmers have to wear white shirts and show up at eight in the morning and sit in cubicles and go to meetings. […] The prospect of becoming an assembly-line worker gives Hiro some incentive to go out and find some really good intel tonight.[232]

For Hiro, the process of creating video games is antithetical to his values. These are decidedly cyberpunk values, his disdain for the derivative nature of making 'nothing more

---

[230] *The Video Game Lightning Rod,* p. 527.
[231] Ibid.
[232] *Snow Crash*, p. 36.

than video games' produced and marketed as 'interactive three-dimensional movies' rails against the 'punk' individualism and freedom typical of cyberpunk protagonists. There would certainly be no space for hacking computers or hacking avatars to death with swords in the corporate fantasy Hiro proposes. Creating video games appears as the act of playing video games in photo-negativity, an intensely serious affair typified by rules on dress code and strict working hours. However, in isolation, they find common ground as they 'sit in cubicles' like coding monks in penance. Even the video games themselves are forced into disconnection, but here it is the form itself, relegated as it is to the form of immersive cinema. Furthermore, by transposing the work of coding to the atomised labour of the 'assembly-line worker', Hiro goes further and aligns the act of creating video games with an analogue labour, reducing the widespread computerised labour beneath the Metaverse's surface to *not* include video game production. Lisa Swanstrom argues that 'while the network in *Neuromancer* enables a romantic evolution of the individual hacker who weds himself to a computer-generated, network-enabled transcendence, the network of the "Metaverse" in *Snow Crash* is all about social isolation and, paradoxically, extension and penetration'[233] Emblematic of this isolation is the video game itself, left unmoored from even its machphrastic purpose as a proxy technology.

The Nipponese businessmen Hiro lampoons are the satirical stand ins for the Japanese video game industry which by the early 1990s was thoroughly established in the American domestic market. Stephenson's writing nestles between the great Japanese economic success story of the 1980s and their subsequent bust in the 1990s, a period of economic downturn known as the 'lost decade'. Thus, it should be no surprise that the Nipponese businessmen would function as emblems for the failing older models of business: all conformity, no creativity. Yet even in satire, there is a little backhanded reverence in

[233] Lisa Swanstrom, 'Capsules and Nodes and Ruptures and Flows: Circulating Subjectivity in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*', *Science Fiction Studies,* 37 (2010), 54-80 (p. 54).

attributing the production of video games solely to Japanese corporate interests. Japan's gaming industry was well on its way to outclassing the Americans within their own market, with Atari just the tip of the iceberg for the general bloat and mismanagement that facilitated the crash of 1983. This is made all the more cutting by how proud Slovin was of America's willingness to claim its video gaming heritage. Fanning the embers of 'the sense of custodianship that is coming from the field of digital media itself' was something *Hot Circuits* was an essential part of for American digital culture.[234] Consequently, turning over custodianship to Japanese video gaming not only satirises the Japanese video game as a mode of experience. By doing so at the expense of hailing American video games, Stephenson seeks to highlight how disconnected America has become from its digital heritage even in the highly digitalised, fictional world of *Snow Crash*.

Regarding *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, there are two different ways to approach its protagonist's disconnectedness, one from the viewpoint of the gamer's stereotypical emotional immaturity, and one from the introspective mode that video gaming was beginning to offer. Although holding these two interpretations simultaneously may appear contradictory, it is better to think about this disconnectedness as moving from a comic or ironic mode to a tragic one so that the text's ending rests acceptably as melancholic. By rendering his protagonist's narrative arc as beginning with a social disconnectedness and closed awkwardness—a kind of failure—and ending with an introspective disconnectedness accepted by the protagonist, Murakami also frames this change as growth. The difference, then, does not express itself solely in a modal change, but also in a change to video gaming as a qualitative mode in itself. In other words, the protagonist's subjective growth extends this growth to the object—the video game—through which Murakami shapes his novel's second order reality. Given its polarising image at this point in time, as an object of museums

[234] *Hot Circuits,* p. 152.

and arcades alike, video games can facilitate both modes in Murakami's work. To arrive at this conclusion is to arrive at a key shift in the video game as literary object, a shift away from an expositional device tuned to make future technologies relatable to a more multifaceted affective object, one capable of establishing literary modes in keeping with the modes of experience games were developing for themselves.

First, I will deal with how Murakami deploys a comic modality with respect to machphrastic writing. Throughout the first half of *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, Murakami's protagonist displays a disinterestedness that brings his interactions with others and his world to near farce. In an early section, Murakami accomplishes a little foreshadowing whilst priming readers for the bizarreries of his world and his protagonist. Whilst following the professor's granddaughter to his assigned shuffling job, he finds she is mute, and after attempting to break the ice by remarking upon a corridor's absurdly long length, the granddaughter mouths what the protagonist interprets as 'Proust'.[235] This appears to refer to Proust's preface to his translation of John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies,* where Proust pines for the 'cold, long corridors' of provincial hotels 'where each noise helps only to make the silence appear by displacing it, where the rooms keep a musty perfume which the open air comes to wash', and finally explaining that for him, these features make the space 'pose like a model to try to recreate it for itself with all the thoughts and remembrances that it contains'.[236] Insomuch as his world is often soundless (the reason the protagonist could not hear the granddaughter was because of her Grandfather's bone-frequency noise-cancelling); his protagonist often comments upon the granddaughter's perfume, and his science fictional technology models the snapshot of consciousness so as to recreate it in all its complexity, it seems logical to interpret this Proustian homage as Murakami revealing key plot points (said noise-cancelling, the experiments conducted on the protagonist's consciousness) to

[235] *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, p. 9.
[236] Marcel Proust, *On Reading Ruskin*, ed. by Jean Autret, William Burford, and Phillip J. Wolfe (Yale, Yale UP: 1987), p. 106.

observant readers in intertextual miniature.[237] Of equal importance, however, is how unperturbed the protagonist seems to be by these near magical elements of the world; whether it be the inklings, Proust mouthed under the auspice of mechanically stolen sounds, or his own consciousness cut in two, the protagonist's engagement rarely rises to anything more than mild irritation. This consistent litotes in the face of remarkable events (a Murakami staple) jars amusingly with readerly expectations of reception, producing the comic mode characterising *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*'s first half. Additionally, it also provides insight into the protagonist's intrinsic motivations. Implicitly, the protagonist's interest, if not invested in the immediately spectacular, lies in the second order representation of reality that Corrigan frames in allegorical terms.

It is possible, however, to reach this conclusion without recourse to video games specifically. Reasonably, the estrangement described above is attributable to other technological forces like VR, other social forces like shifting family values amongst young Japanese men (Murakami's protagonists are often family-free loners—this is no accident), and other literary forces like the ironic mode's dominance in the 1980s. To be sure, all reasons expressed here are acceptable, but I argue the video game can be preferred as an analytic tool because it collapses together these forces into an expedient emblem. For example, for Williams, the early 1980s' flavour of video gaming pessimism took the shape of what he terms 'the River City hypothesis', where 'the advent of video games would first give rise to fears of displacement of "constructive" activities and of associations with deviant behaviour' amongst their player-base. Interestingly, Williams implies that this fear was arcade-directed, focusing particularly on extrospective deviancy like sexual experimentation, drug use, and violence.[238] However, an introspective deviancy, based on detachment from the first order realities of the home, the playground, and the school, also

[237] *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, p. 36.
[238] *The Video Game Lightning Rod,* p. 540.

fuelled this fear amongst parents, a fear exacerbated by play at home. These supposed introspective deviancies stem from a fear of specifically alienated disinterestedness, that the children of the 1980s, enthralled by video games, would not only replace their parents' 'constructive' pastimes, but would change their relationship to the space where these pastimes take place. It seems, then, that in the 1980s video games represented a contaminating vice. Playing video games came at the expense of the very space wherein all spheres of life supposedly occurred. More available than VR, more extreme than shifting family values, and more visible than literary fashion, the video game threatened an unrecognisable mode of experiencing the world, one capable of bringing contemporary values into sincere contempt.

Murakami ends *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* by realising this fear. Unlike Hiro, who can always be said to be aggressively moving *Snow Crash*'s plot along, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*'s protagonist becomes more sedate and introspective by the end of the novel. Having accepted his eternal life inside his own mind, the protagonist kills a portion of his remaining time by playing a video game:

> Still early for our date, so I got out of the car and took a stroll down the misty streets. In a coffee shop I watched a golf match on television, then I went to an entertainment center and played a video game. The object of the game was to wipe out tanks invading from across the river. I was winning at first, but as the game went on, the enemy tanks bred like lemmings, crushing me by sheer number and destroying my base. An on-screen nuclear blast took care of everything, followed by the message GAME OVER—INSERT COIN. […] Talk about a downhill struggle. I *had* to lose. If I didn't, the game would go on forever. Not to worry. I was soon wiped out again, followed by the same nuclear blast, followed by the same GAME OVER—INSERT COIN.[239]

[239] *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, pp. 353-4.

It is almost a caricature of social disconnectedness—even at the end of the world, which here means suspension in another reality, the protagonist spends his time busying himself with yet another reality.[240] With the stakes as high as the end of the protagonist's world, that ambivalence to the real world hangs seriously and tragically where once it rang comically and ironically. In broad terms, the protagonist's play mirrors several relationships and events of the world he will soon leave behind. The 'tanks invading from across the river', being locomotive, hostile, and boundary crossing, represent the approaching horizon threatening to envelop the protagonist. Those tanks, in breeding 'like lemmings' evoke the fantastical, prolific inklings below Tokyo, and the 'on-screen nuclear blast' seems a symbol of death (or, at least, a great and fearful change). The declarative 'GAME OVER', when followed by the classic arcade imperative, 'INSERT COIN', shifts the base emotional resonance from one focused on death (the end of the game), to the possibility of a new beginning (the renewal of struggling and enjoying the game). Yet, his musing that he '*had* to lose' for if not, 'the game would go on forever', highlights the protagonist's bittersweet acceptance of his new reality. The game here highlights exactly what the protagonist has lost: the ability to lose, and so experience change. The game's relative dynamism, the sense of change it inherits from Murakami, buttresses against the stasis to come for the protagonist, whose immurement within himself is inevitably to come. The effect of this is sadness, the kind evoked by watching humans lose more than is lost even in death. It is to machphrasis' literary credit that it is able to sustain a metaphor for death and the acceptance of death and for renewal and the bittersweetness of renewal simultaneously. Accepting the video game's built-in futility is a metaphor for the protagonist's self-acceptance, an acceptance to be with oneself

[240] The game being played does not appear to exist; it is a bricolage of numerous materials of 1980s' arcade gaming. The river could refer to the geographical features of Atari's 1980 tank combat game *Battlezone* (although no river exists, it does sport vector mountains, so some literary extrapolation is possible), and the game's base defence and nuclear game over screen may owe its inspiration to Atari's 1980 ICBM defusing city defence game *Missile Command*. In form, however, the game bears most resemblance to Namco's 1980 *Tank Battalion*, complete with destroyable base and multiplying tanks, though no nuclear game over screen, or river. Murakami, like Gibson, holds a fascination with video games at a distance, and this video game assemblage is likely the product of their shared 'look, but don't touch' approach to the medium.

in a reality of one's own making. In turn, the video game functions here as a literary marker for a certain kind of social isolation Murakami wishes to explore: acceptable on a personal level (where it demonstrates the protagonist's growth), but also on a philosophical level (where this growth extends to video games). Despite bringing about the endgame of social isolation so feared by parents during the early 1980s, video games survive the end of the world modally reimagined. In justifying the disconnectedness as philosophically appropriate, as worth examining in earnest, Murakami forwards the video game as a serious literary resource for exploring inner lives. Sincere modes of video game writing become more possible through Murakami, lending them credibility as a medium capable of serious introspective force. Taken alongside the anticipatory functions of Gibson, and the unambiguously comic modes of Stephenson, Murakami offers video games a tragic mode.

Cyberpunk fiction, via two works and *Neuromancer*, thus establishes for video games a basic machphrastic language that can move past point 1's anticipatory, technological functions and towards machphrasis as a mode of experience. What follows now is a shift in focus away from cyberpunk, away from the 20th century, towards a contemporary machphrasis indebted to, but different from, the machphrastic beginnings previously described. Different in not just content either, for now I turn to life writing and how machphrasis can intervene in contemporary debates defining the video game as a potentially maladaptive pastime.

Chapter 3: Who's Fooling WHO? Addiction and Autobiography in *Gamelife: A Memoir*

The World Health Organisation (WHO) classifies 'gaming disorder' under 'disorders due to substance use or addictive behaviours' in the International Classification of Diseases' 11th revision, finalised as of June 2018.[241] Preventative and treatment measures were to become mandatory for the WHO's member nations in 2022, but the classifying gesture itself is a robust, totalising response to a more complex subject than the WHO has been willing to admit. With a swathe of media outlets reporting on the Chinese government's new video game 'curfew' that controls adolescent gameplay hours and spending habits, it becomes apparent that the WHO's classification has already enabled political interventions.[242] These interventions come without unilateral academic support. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorder*'s took Nancy M. Petry *et al*.'s suggestion that an 'international consensus' for assessing video game addiction had been reached in 2014 was contested one year later by Mark D. Griffiths *et al.*, who wrote to challenge this claim to consensus.[243] As I will cover this more extensively in the chapter's body, suffice it to say for now that this exchange indicates, *inter alia*, a pathologic and diagnostic *lack* of consensus regarding video game addiction. This is all without the voice of those who have found in video games a formative medium who have now seen their pastime demonised, their selfhood pathologized.

---

[241] World Health Organisation, *International Classification of Diseases for Mortality and Morbidity Statistics,* 11th edition. (Geneva: World Health Organisation, 2018) 6C51, *Gaming Disorder*. {https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en#/http%3a%2f%2fid.who.int%2ficd%2fentity%2f1448597234} [accessed 09/12/2019].

[242] Lily Kuo, China Ban Children from Late-night Gaming to Combat Addiction, (*Guardian*: 2019) { https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/07/china-bans-children-from-late-night-gaming-to-combat-addiction}; Paolo Zialcita, China Introduces Restrictions on Video Games for Minors, (*NPR*: 2019) {https://www.npr.org/2019/11/06/776840260/china-introduces-restrictions-on-video-games-for-minors}; Dave Makichuk, China Imposes New Video Game Restrictions, (Asia Times: 2019) {https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/11/article/china-imposes-new-video-game-restrictions/} [accessed 09/12/2019].

[243] Nancy M. Petry *et al.*, 'An International Consensus for Assessing Internet Gaming Disorder using the new DSM-5 Approach', *Addiction*, 109 (2014), 1399-1406 (p. 1399). {https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13057} [accessed 09/12/2019]; Griffiths *et al.*, 'Working Towards an International Consensus on Criteria for Assessing Internet Gaming Disorder: A Critical Commentary on Petry *et al.*', *Addiction*, 111 (2015), 167-175 (p. 173). {https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13057} [accessed 09/12/2019].

All this sets precedents for the language of doctors, of prescription, to threaten the video gaming subject, with video games a deviant enabler: the midwife of a stillborn adulthood.

By contrast, there is growing evidence that video games can be therapeutic tools in their own right. In this context, *Gamelife: A Memoir* can serve as a descriptive counterpart to medical prescriptivism. An account of Michael W. Clune's childhood through his most formative medium, it places his gaming between destructive addiction and—as music or literature can be—therapeutic obsession. As such, it offers a balanced account of the problem from the inside. Most importantly, Clune's *Gamelife* provides a rare instance of sustained machphrasis as confessional writing, and thus places video games into a long tradition of literary objects meaningfully interpreted in writing's transposing laboratory. Alongside other memoirs like Tom Bissell's *Extra Lives* (2010) and Zoë Quinn's *Crash Override* (2017), *Gamelife* exemplifies the emerging autobiographic urge to tell stories with videogames, presenting video gaming as an important relational object in 21st century life writing.[244]

Clune's engagement with video games both challenges and reinforces the assumptions made about supposedly addicted players, presenting a complex and entangled discourse this chapter will explore in order to complicate the picture presented by more prescriptive diagnostics. This opening section presents the major controversies within video game addiction's academic discourse, then moves to argue the case for *Gamelife* as a lens to examine the problems arising from the debates. Before beginning, a confession. This chapter does not demonstrate or prove that video game addiction does not exist—that is the clinician's task. It is also important to clarify that I am not suggesting that Clune was or was not addicted to video games.[245] What this chapter will hypothesise is that video game

[244] Tom Bissell, *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010); Zoë Quinn, *Crash Override* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2017).
[245] Although not taken up here, it is worth noting the existence of Clune's 2013 *White Out: The Secret Life of Heroin* as an even-handed chronicle of Clune's heroin addiction and recovery. I have two reasons for not engaging this text in this exploration. Firstly, I fear that producing too comparative an analysis of heroin and video games would be at the expense of *Gamelife*'s rich representation of passionate video gaming and

addiction does not exist *in certain terms*. These terms are those proposed by the WHO and the debate's inclusion camp, which section two will explore as reductive resolutions of both video games and gaming. By drawing upon aesthetic and educational arguments, section two troubles video gaming's position in the family of substances and pastimes within which the WHO's classification places them. Finally, section three wrestles with the problem of escapism and its inadequacy for describing the process of gaming, proposing critical immersion to destabilise escapism's grip on representations of gaming experiences.

Below, for reference, are the ICD-11 entries for both 'Gaming disorder' and 'Hazardous gaming' as of 2020:

> Gaming disorder is characterized by a pattern of persistent or recurrent gaming behaviour ('digital gaming' or 'video-gaming'), which may be online (i.e., over the internet) or offline, manifested by: impaired control over gaming (e.g., onset, frequency, intensity, duration, termination, context); increasing priority given to gaming to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other life interests and daily activities; and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences. The behaviour pattern is of sufficient severity to result in significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning. The pattern of gaming behaviour may be continuous or episodic and recurrent. The gaming behaviour and other features are normally evident over a period of at least 12 months in order for a diagnosis to be assigned, although the required duration may be shortened if all diagnostic requirements are met and symptoms are severe.
>
> Hazardous gaming refers to a pattern of gaming, either online or offline that appreciably increases the risk of harmful physical or mental health consequences to the individual or to others around this individual. The increased risk may be from the frequency of gaming, from the amount of time spent on these activities, from the neglect of other activities and priorities,

---

would imply a family resemblance between the two from the outset, which seems intellectually unfair. Secondly, *White Out*'s depiction of a throughgoing addiction may unfairly homogenise Clune's video gaming and heroin use under the banner of his supposedly 'addictive personality', a controversial at best concept in addiction studies.

> from risky behaviours associated with gaming or its context, from the adverse consequences of gaming, or from the combination of these. The pattern of gaming often persists in spite of awareness of increased risk of harm to the individual or to others. (ICD-11 2018)

The WHO's decision to classify disordered or hazardous gaming as such is the culmination of a decade of intense, fractious debate on video game addiction's existence and treatment. News outlets clambered to sensationalize this momentous medical occasion; their particular interest in video gaming as moral panic is nothing new, nor is concern amongst writers regarding the allure of new media technologies, as seen in chapter 1.[246] Large-scale institutional interventions, however, are particular to the 2010s. 2013 saw the American Psychiatric Association (APA) pre-emptively strike by adding 'internet gaming disorder' to their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* fifth edition under conditions for further consideration (DSM-5).[247] This moved gaming addiction away from the bloodless hypotheticals of psychiatric research and led to abundant debate on the subject, in particular regarding how to proceed in clinics and the industry. Petry *et al.*'s attempt to deploy the DSM's criteria for practical purposes proved catalytic, generating a series of debate papers and considerable academic venom besides. Given the millions of dollars in industry sanctions and regulations, clinical infrastructure and research funding that are the consequence of pathologising the most profitable entertainment medium, this debate was a high-stakes affair for any video game professional. Two camps emerged. Most of the biggest players can be gleaned from the signatures on the Petry *et al.* critical commentary in 2014, with Mark Griffiths, Halley Pontes and Daria Kuss the most vocal defenders of formalizing video game addiction, with the opposing view counting Christopher Ferguson, Antonius van Rooji and Espen Aarseth among its luminaries. We now know that after ten years of debate,

---

[246] Van Rooji *et al*, 'A Weak Scientific Basis for Gaming Disorder: Let Us Err on the Side of Caution', *Journal of Behavioural Addictions,* 7 (2018), 1-9 (p. 5). {https://doi/10.1556/2006.7.2018.19} [accessed 15/12/2019].

[247] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, (5th edition.)* (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Griffiths and co have won the war, so to speak, with the WHO's classification the victor's spoils—but those on the losing side have not gone quietly, nor have their misgivings been assuaged.

One late paper in the debate, 'Video Game Addiction: The Push to Pathologize Video Games', summarises the key controversies surrounding classifying video game addiction, and is the best place to air the detractors' objections before attending to *Gamelife*. Identifying widespread methodological inconsistencies within the fieldwork, they protest the 'current push to institutionalize video game addiction' by appealing to the 'driving potential of a societal narrative' that incentivises a diagnostic quick fix to an ideological problem.[248] Video games are well suited to playing the scapegoat for fears surrounding social interaction becoming increasingly online, but this is a shared problem. Online streaming services like Netflix for television and film, or Spotify for music also encourage users to socialise less and spend more time in front of a little screen, but a push to pathologize these streaming platforms is nowhere to be seen. In fact, they are much safer targets. Should videoludification be as potent a social mechanism as appears, then the push the pathologize video games should also pathologize its derivatives, placing much of society into the clinic, such is the political drive to cram the logic of video games into all places it fits. Therefore, the WHO's intervention serves as a contrapuntal relief for social adaptations inspired by the video game. Both social and clinical interest into the video game encourages videoludification, but the pathologising act quarantines the problem-user to appease a 'societal narrative' maladapted to the new social possibilities represented in this user.

Compared to thoroughgoing behavioural addictions like gambling addiction, gaming addiction appears different in kind, not degree. Both are addictions to games, but the card

---

[248] Anthony M. Bean, Antonius J van Rooji, Rune K. L Nielsen, Christopher J. Ferguson, 'Video Game Addiction: The Push to Pathologize Video Games', *Professional Psychology*, 48 (2017), 378-389 (p. 379). {https://doi.org/10.1037/pro0000150} [accessed 15/12/2019].

game does not purport to tell stories. Roulette and dice—so essentially aleatoric that they have become fodder for metaphors of risk and chance—are played for external concerns. Gambling needs stakes: money is the name of these games. They are not concerned with form or representation, as video games are. Therefore, collapsing the two together in metaphor constitutes a misrepresentation, precisely the error the 'social science and medical communities […] locked in the substance use or gambling disorders metaphor' are threatening to commit, having lost in the game as species too much of the art as form.[249] The objectors, in ignoring recourse to the artistic merits of video games, have lost this as well. Throughout the discussion, there is little to no recourse to an aesthetic argument. Whether consuming an entertainment medium can constitute an addiction is one thing, but when that medium is framed as an aesthetic object, where its relatives become visual art, literature, music, and suchlike as opposed to gambling, then the language of its consumption transposes from the clinical/medical to that of taste. The debating voices are aware that the social narrative of video games promoting deviancy makes this argument disadvantageous. Nonetheless, it will be pursued with respect to *Gamelife*, as *Gamelife*, in moving between addiction and obsession, can intervene here.

The possibility of video game addiction itself is difficult to divorce from external factors. For example, 'Video Game Addiction: The Push to Pathologize Video Games' questions the extent to which clinical research on the subject is anterior to mounting political as well as societal pressures, with 'Asian countries' exerting 'enormous pressure' on the WHO to fast-track clinical measures against gameplay.[250] The WHO's stakeholders represent a conflict of interest in this circumstance, promoting a pejorative bias when weighting research for consideration. Consider the WHO's pursuit of video game addiction against Barr, Squire and Zimmerman's research on video games as educational or multi-

[249] Ibid.
[250] *Video Game Addiction*, p. 384.

literary tools as discussed in the literature review. It is difficult to imagine another pastime that places you at either the bottom or top of the class depending on the research read. If video gaming is not as grossly an addictive pastime as the WHO would say, then the WHO could become an unwitting gatekeeper to video gaming's comprehensive/educational mode, stifling experimental deployments in the classroom. The polarisation is even starker when video game therapy research contextualises the debate. Michelle Colder Carras *et al.*'s paper 'Commercial Video Games as Therapy' hypothesises that 'commercial, off-the-shelf video games have potential applications in preventive or therapeutic medicine' and that more research should be done on the topic, but it is difficult to imagine a less productive environment for this research than the current situation.[251] Not only could the WHO's clinical measures be premature, it could psychologically endanger those who either deploy video games as self-medication or endanger ongoing research into video games as a therapeutic medium. Progress that could be achieved within mental health, creating 'more cooperative and enthusiastic' patients, is contingent upon whether the WHO presents all video gamers as potential patients-in-waiting.[252] It does not paint a cogent therapeutic landscape: patients progressing with their mental health through video games being referred to an addiction clinic may as well rub shoulders with the readers and listeners who have done so with novels and music for centuries, who are now rarely subject to civil impingements on their leisure. Consequentially, a mental health industry with neoliberalism's fingers around its throat should err on the side of caution when considering whether or not to pathologise those for whom this medium is the massage. A pastime showing promise in manufacturing a more mentally healthy workforce should be a neoliberal economy's dream and yet, apparently, it is not.

---

[251] Michelle Colder Carras *et al.*, 'Commercial Video Games as Therapy: A New Research Agenda to Unlock the Potential of a Global Pastime', *Frontiers in Psychiatry,* 8 (2018), 1-7 (p. 1). {10.3389/fpsyt.2017.00300} [accessed 01/01/2020].

[252] Ibid.

Most pertinent to this chapter, and the space where memoirs like *Gamelife* could prove a fruitful case study, is in reducing the gamers' silence within this debate. Although researchers like Jeffery Snodgrass *et al.* have produced small ethnographic studies on video gamers and addiction, 'there is much left unturned in understanding the videogamer from an ethnographic approach: the culture of video gaming itself is another important piece of the puzzle currently left unconsidered'.[253] Video game addiction ethnographies would complement pre-existing cultural, feminist, and queer ethnographic research, providing clinicians with that 'piece of the puzzle' Bean suggests they lack, whilst also fleshing out how video gaming intersects positively or negatively with outgroups, a catagory the putatively addicted would fall into whether actually addicted or not.[254] Given the constant developments and transformations digital media technology encourages, the clinician must be just as familiar with the newest permutations of video gaming taste and practice as their counterparts working with substance abusers. If anything, a patient well versed in 'the culture of video gaming' will communicate using this cultural language that is poorly understood from a clinical perspective—with Anthony M. Bean's *Working with Video Games and Games in Therapy: A Clinicians Guide* a rare longform intervention on the subject.[255] Usually, the patient and doctor's power dynamic behaves according to a wide knowledge differential in favour of the doctor, something that would certainly not be the case in most practical situations involving video games as of now. This could lead to diagnosis where description would better suit. Current debates hardly broach the social mechanisms within the addictive process. Numerous games predicate their success in building a group of players who play together; there is a huge difference between describing

[253] J. Snodgrass *et al.*, 'Online Gaming Involvement and its positive and negative consequences', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 66 (2017), 291-302 {http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.09.025} [accessed 01/01/2020]; *Video Game Addiction*, p. 379.
[254] Phillip Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016); Kishonna Gray, Gerald Voorhees, Emma Vossen, *Feminism in Play* (London: Palgrave, 2018); Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, Nicholas Taylor, *Queerness in Play* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
[255] Anthony M. Bean, *Working with Video Gamers and Games in Therapy: A Clinician's Guide*, (New York: Routledge, 2018).

video gaming in this context as a communally enabled addiction or as being part of a community. It pathologises a channel for human relationships and ignores the social benefits to players facilitated by playing together. It relies on the tired cliché that video games are mere instruments of escapism—an oversimplification still influencing video gaming research today.

Escapism has its problems when deployed to describe quotidian gameplay, but really fails to describe the etiology of problematic gaming. The first problem stems from the rhetorical diminishing of the virtual—the sense that time spent in the virtual world could be put to better employment in the real world. This would be contested by a Deleuzeian formulation of the virtual, that sees it not in opposition, to the real, but as a process with the elastic potential to actualise—an opened possibility space as opposed to a space where less serious things occur.[256] Take, for example, the social mechanisms of online video games. These are not hard-coded (generally) into a game's infrastructure, yet the game may incentivise certain kinds of relations; the guild collects avatars but connects people in the space between the quest, the battle and suchlike. The guild space need not produce relationships, but it does produce fertile conditions that make relation more possible. The implied hierarchy of socialisation that an escapist rhetoric fosters, with virtual relationships and achievements well below extensively real ones, reckons the virtual as fake, not as potential. Secondly, video games may well be the least fruitful medium of all to sate an escapist urge. If escapism deploys a medium to escape real-world problems, then using the medium that organises the systems producing the real-world problems through videoludification seems to be a case of jumping from a frying pan into a fire. Therefore, if escapism is here to stay, then at least a more critical escapism, one that can account for the

[256] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 272.

player's awareness of the world, would make for a more comprehensive description of what precisely is happening when a player purportedly escapes into a video game.

Already, a few positions have surfaced that *Gamelife* may be well placed to elucidate. As *Gamelife* describes how problem gaming affected Clune both privately and socially, it can reach the questions surrounding the gamer's socially constructed character and internal struggles in literary form. The memoir could appeal to those researching addiction ethnographies for video gamers that, as mentioned above, are essential studies in this debate.[257] However, this assumes that addiction writings can make for such evidence. Although Clune's narrative of his gaming is too individualised to suggest generalisations about video game addiction, the debate above does offer glimpses at various cultural and historical assumptions regarding video gaming that can move *Gamelife* beyond the personal. Ivor Goodson, writing on the need for what he terms 'theories of context' when exploring life writing, stressed that correct life writing analysis places the narratological aspect of the text—what 'the story particularizes, details and historicizes'—into the 'terrain of the social, into insights into the socially constructed nature of our experiences'.[258] In being a memoir, *Gamelife* presents a putatively individualised account of Clune's life in games, but only insofar as any life writing is divorceable from social and cultural conditions. Life writing scholarship, in having to handle stories intensely concerned with personal account that can produce decontextualizing effects, must explore elements where the personal gives way—perhaps unintentionally—to the pressure of the social. To achieve this, Goodson continued, was to identify what he termed 'the social scripts people employ in telling their life stories' and examine how commensurate they are with the text's more overt individuation or 'the personal characterisations the life storyteller invokes'.[259] The video game addiction debate, itself concerned with the possibility of societal and linguistic interference in a medical

[257] *Video Game Addiction,* p. 379.
[258] Ivor F. Goodson, *Developing Narrative Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 30.
[259] *Developing Narrative Theory,* p. 31.

discussion, serves as an appropriate theory of context to test *Gamelife*'s divergence or convergence with stereotyped experiences of playing video games.

Regarding both playing video games and the urge to pathologise socially demonised pastimes, the psychological interest in geek culture implies a disordered subject. For example, the great fantasy migration hypothesis argues that an attraction to fantasy role-playing, nerd culture and video gaming make increased narcissism and a wish to escape a disappointing reality more likely, front-loading these pastimes with a tendency towards deviancy.[260] Although McCain *et al.* do state that 'it is not our intention to link geek culture with psychiatric dysfunction or antisocial behaviour', their belief that engagement with geek culture is a coping mechanism for the 'discomfort […] with the incongruence between inflated sense of self and deflated reality' imagines time spent enmeshed in geek culture as a step removed from reality, linking geek culture to the antisocial and the dysfunctional whether intended or not.[261] What this means for *Gamelife* is that the life story it tells can be contextualised by the video game addiction debate, but also by the macro-context of social encouragement and discouragement surrounding hobbies and leisure that enables video gaming to be pathologised while more prestigious artforms are exempt. Life writing like *Gamelife*, where constructing the autobiographical 'I' so depends on a life lived in gaming's affect, is a fruitful exemplar of how social scripts can impress upon the individual and produce the pathologies the WHO self-determines to discover.

Another benefit to deploying life writing in this context is that it is well equipped, both formally and critically, to examine the trepidations, celebrations, and contradictions of not just lives, but objects. Historically, life writing has moved from being concerned with how texts construct autonomous subjects within narratives deployed for factual

---

[260] Jessica McCain, Brittany Gentile, W. Keith Campbell, 'A Psychological Exploration of Engagement with Geek Culture', *PLoS ONE*, *10* (2015), 1-38 (p. 1). {10.1371/journal.pone.0142200} [accessed 07/06/2020].
[261] *A Psychological Exploration of Engagement with Geek Culture*, p. 3.

representations to, in contrast, working through a 'relational' turn partially brought about by feminist critic Marlene Kadar (1992), and autobiography luminary Paul Eakin (1999).[262] In particular, Kadar's life writing scholarship as both writer and editor hued towards the social effects of life writing, a trend Eakin would continue, who additionally drew upon research in fields such as cognitive and neurosciences. Consequentially, the autobiographical 'I' became inseparable from its relation to others, and good life writing scholarship was to attend to these relations to access an intersubjective identity. More recently, this significant, constitutive 'other' within relational life writing has increasingly been theorised as an object. The 2010s saw multiple approaches to this end. Some like Anne Rüggemeier see this as a helpful blow to assumed Cartesian understandings of autonomous selfhood, assuming that objects in autobiographical writing are 'a form of resistance against the processes of mind based epistemology', while Vera Alexander objectifies relationality to imbed the floaty autobiographical 'I' in their transformation 'by objects and environments' to expose 'the narrated self as a confection which is always partly mediated, invented and imagined'.[263] Both directions move away from pure subject-subject relationality in favour of reckoning with affecting objects or things. Therefore, just as Alexander proposes 'factoring in two significant non-human others into relationality: books and places' I too advance the cause for introducing another medium, video games, into life writing's relational inner circle.[264] The increasing attention paid to video gaming as leisure by clinicians; the WHO's tergiversating approach to video gaming's disorderly nature in light of COVID-19; and the uptick in depictions of video games and gaming in both factual and fictional narratives all

[262] Marlene Kadar, 'Coming to Terms' in *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, ed. by Marlene Kadar (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1992); Paul John Eakin, *How our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999).

[263] Anne Rüggemeier, 'Beyond the Subject – Towards the Object? Nancy K. Miller's *What They Saved: Pieces of a Jewish Past* (2011) and the materiality of Life Writing', *European Journal of Life Writing*, 5 (2016), 36-54 (p. 36); Vera Alexander, 'The Relational Imaginary of M.G Vassanji's *A Place Within*', *Life Writing*, 13(2) (2016), 221-236 (p. 222).

[264] *The Relational Imaginary of M. G. Vassanji's A Place Within*, pp. 221-222.

propose that the time is right for life writing scholarship to look seriously at video games as a particular relational object of, and context for, 21st century life writing.

For video games have a life of their own already, but this vitality may well outstrip its voice as form. Twice removed from authority by its designation as mere entertainment and a formal interactivity that entails a more vocal user, the video game's primary aesthetic voice is an enabling one. The video game can more easily cultivate a sense of a user's autobiographical 'I' as an actor in play; it is a temporary custodian of a sense of self-presence in a way that most literature, in not directly involving its reader in its story, is not. It is, in this sense, a less arrogant form than the novel, whose long historical lineage and grand cultural cachet eventually saw its author have to die in order to broaden readerly appreciation of its polysemy.[265] This less imposing quality is precisely what makes video games a fascinating avenue for life writing themselves. *The Sims* 3, for example, is described by Julie Rak as 'a lab', as a place 'to theorize living as a series of scenes with the potential to be connected, rather than a life which must be connected to narrative to be intelligible'.[266] Taking this together with Alexander and Rüggemeier's discourse, as a place 'to theorize living' the video game can question a mind-based epistemology by being a place/object for safe experimentation. In other words, video games can perform as relational objects, a significant 'other' in assistance to individualisation. As a critical basis, the relationship between player and object expresses itself in life writing as generative and life-affirming, a far cry from the pathologising rhetoric preceding it. But as games come to present as life-affirming, voicing the video game's especial role in players' lives may fall to life writing and not games themselves; *Gamelife* exists, after all, in a genre most comfortable with its voice.

---

[265] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text* (Glasgow: Harper Collins UK, 1977), pp. 142-149.

[266] Julie Rak 'Life Writing Versus Automedia: The Sims 3 Game as a Life Lab', *Biography,* 38(2) (2015), 155-180 (p. 172).

Addiction and Passion: Machphrasis Between the Two

Gamelife presents oscillations. Clune oscillates gameplay between addictive and passionate sensibilities; video games oscillate between contemplative and mundane objects, and the reader must oscillate between accepting the promise of Clune's authentic childhood experience and acknowledging that autobiographical writing cannot keep this promise. This is because *Gamelife*, in presenting Clune's specific life in games and what a life in games generally may look like, must rearrange its metaphorical hierarchy if it is to speak to both. Clune's machphrasis, then, tends towards an economy of exchange between source and target domains. Sometimes the video game bends to events, conversations, and practices; sometimes Clune's life is in the metaphorical employ of the video game. Whether the subject is the video game, Clune's life or a mixture of both, *Gamelife*'s machphrasis expresses the compound "gamelife" as totality. The chapter's point now is to know if this totality can be a happy one. This subsection deploys Clune's machphrastic account of video gaming against the debate above to balance the language of compulsion and dependency with the language of therapy and passion to generate a vocabulary capable of expressing the space between the two.

Fortunately, the game addiction debate comes furnished with definitions for passion and addiction for *Gamelife*'s prose to explore. Understanding that 'failing to distinguish between a dysfunctional from a high but healthy engagement might have important repercussions', Jory Deleuze *et al.* have attempted to use addiction and passion as descriptors for gaming behaviour that may appear outwardly similar.[267] By mapping the engagement and addictive constructs onto Robert Vallerand *et al.*'s research regarding harmonious and obsessive passions, Deleuze *et al.* hypothesise a healthy conceptualisation of high

[267] Jory Deleuze, Jiang Long, Tie-Qiao Liu, Pierre Maurage, Joël Billiux, 'Passion or Addiction? Correlates of healthy versus problematic use of video games in a sample of French-speaking regular players', *Addictive Behaviors*, 82 (2018), 114-121 (p. 115).

engagement gaming that should not be pathologized despite its similarity to the addiction construct.[268] The distinguishing features between the two engagements are the 'autonomous internalization and free will' present in players who are passionately engaged.[269] By 'autonomous internalization' Deleuze *et al.* refer to gaming that cultivates an integral but healthy place within a subject's sense of self. It should not interfere with day-to-day living, nor should it negatively impact the enjoyment or fulfilment of pursuing other activities. When players game for maladapted purposes, Deleuze *et al.* link it to 'impulsivity and depressive symptoms […] gaming to fulfil basic needs, lower game enjoyment and more negative consequences'.[270] These distinctions are a useful conceptual vantage point from which to analyse *Gamelife*'s representations of highly engaged gaming.

I will now lay out the specific differences between passionate and obsessive gaming and will briefly explain the implications for *Gamelife*. As 'autonomous internalization' and 'free will' are important indicators of a passion in harmony with life, then prose that enables a sense of autonomy and a coherent sense of self would indicate highly engaged gaming. Where video games are fulfilling baser needs or motivations, then that evidences a more obsessive, therefore addictive, relationship between player and game. It would be reductive, however, to declare *Gamelife*'s prose as consistent with one or the other without the vital description of why these behaviours occurred. Separating instances of addicted gaming that appear enabled by specific attributes of the form (interactivity, immersivity, online socialisation) from instances facilitated by external factors (social ostracization, primary depressive pathologies, a social model of unfulfilled needs) is important as the more the form itself appears especially addictive, the more valid metaphorical comparisons to addictive objects such as drugs becomes. Therefore, when an addictive representation occurs, it is

---

[268] R.J Vallerand *et al.*, 'Les passions de l'âme: On obsessive and harmonious passion', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85 (2003), 756–767*;* 'Passion or Addiction?', p. 118.
[269] 'Passion or Addiction?', p. 118.
[270] Ibid.

worth inviting a further split between formal and external causes. The problem with exploring this is that the motivations for problematic video game playing may mistranslate to the clinician or indeed the user who themselves may be unable to explain their high engagement. Texts that narrativise high engagement with video gaming such as *Gamelife* can present an argument for or against a formally or externally enabled addiction. This is important, because how these causes are argued can express a societal bias towards the video game's metaphorical family, whether they ought to belong with the novel, the film, or with the bottle, with the roulette wheel.

Where Gibson's *Neuromancer* begins with television's static triumphant, Clune's *Gamelife* wastes no time in mixing its media metaphors. Video games—*Gamelife's* main object of inquiry—takes fourth place in the opening's referential race. The 'computer' is followed by the 'television', and Clune reads the flicker of language in both; in the 'W. Assembled in a flash from tiny gray and black slats' of the static, and then in the Commodore 64's programming, in the 'ERROR' Clune produces below 'the pre-words of high clouds' in the skyline.[271] Language permeates the metaphorical makeup of all these technologies; language comes before these technologies as form captured in the television's primordial static and the sun, and Clune is prepared for 'the words at the end of television' to progress in the computer as an afterlife for language first, not games.[272] It is unsurprising, then, that Clune's first formative video game, Infocom's *Suspended*, would be an example of the 'now-forgotten genre known as "text-based adventures"', a genre as heavily indebted to a constellation of language, gameplay and screen time as Clune's machphrastic efforts are here.[273] What Mark Hansen wrote of the vital components of media—that the medium is not estranged from users but offers 'an *environment for life'*—documents *Gamelife's* sense of a

[271] Michael W. Clune, *Gamelife: A Memoir* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), p. 3-4. Further references given as '*Gamelife'*.
[272] *Gamelife,* p. 3.
[273] Infocom, *Suspended* (1983) Commodore 64; *Gamelife*. p. 4.

media ecology well. *Suspended* completes the media metaphor as a vector for media DNA, hypostatising the environs of television, the computer and language in an afterlife in miniature—a game-life.[274] *Gamelife*'s initial machphrastic configuring, therefore, places the video game between the archive and the graveyard, between formal menagerie and a mourning for form.

This comes through in Clune's methodical approach to *Suspended*'s withholding of information behind context-dependent language. Clune recounts having to 'look in the book' (the game's manual), as an event, recognising it as 'the first methodical thing I had done in my life', establishing how *Suspended* relies on supplementary materials for its processes.[275] Moreover, to 'look in the book' is not to read the book. The 'look' is barely a moment's rest from the process of solving the game problem presented. It is reading borrowed by gaming. Yet, Clune's beginning in video games is also a literary event, for *Suspended*'s genre facilitates the boundary where video games and literature are most permeable. The ease with which Clune can conjure his video game's visual sense dissipates after the *Suspended* vignette; the input/output process between young Clune and Whiz, an in-game character, maintains fidelity to *Suspended*'s form because *Suspended* is essentially textual, not visual—it is gaming borrowed by reading.[276] *Gamelife* suggests *Suspended* has a magnetic quality with regard to other forms, attracting peripheral media into Clune's eyeline as they slide in from offscreen. Even when describing the process of gameplay, Clune's scattergun style, scuttling between recall and retrospection, allows the experience to reverberate with other media. Clune's first memorable moment with video games arrives in a paratactically hierarchized sequence of actions, with staccato imperatives like 'look at card, look at keyboard, type word on card on keyboard' clarifying a textual context for the video gaming

---

[274] Mark B.N. Hansen, 'Media Theory', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23 (May 2006), 297-306 (p. 297) emphasis Hansen's.
[275] *Gamelife*, p. 21.
[276] *Gamelife*, p. 20-1.

experience to nestle in.[277] Clune's theorising of this initial relation to a video game as something akin to Rak's laboratory—a safe place to puzzle and wonder with words as much as games—uncovers a formative textual quality to Clune's relationality that appears more compatible with educational rather than addictive theories of context.

Continuing, Clune even deploys conventional ekphrasis to explore his relation to games. If the textual represents what *Suspended* brought to Clune, it falls to visual art, to Goya's *Dog* (see Figure 1), to speak what Clune brings to *Suspended*. As the 'vast thickening shapeless yellowy mass' hangs above the imperilled dog, so does *Suspended*'s problem lie out of arm's reach for Clune's imaginative faculties.[278] For Clune, the dog portrays 'the basic animal experience of wonder' and could, if blessed with method, go beyond wonder and towards understanding, perk up and out of its isolation and comprehend the foregrounded black mass not as a submerging wave, but as a verge.[279] *Suspended* validates Clune's methodical tactics as he progresses from this 'animal experience of wonder' that *The Dog* represents towards an understanding of the world and its media.[280] Although caution is necessary for those seeking generalisations from individual accounts in life writing, Clune encourages an understanding of playing games as a reciprocal percolation of subject and object, where Clune's experimentation and failure are encoded into his aesthetic appreciation of *Suspended*. Just as much as Clune remembers *Suspended*, Clune remembers himself *playing Suspended*, which is an appreciation not just of the aesthetic object (or objects, considering the dense intermedial nature of the game) but also of the individualised relational aspect of that aesthetic event.

---

[277] *Gamelife*, p. 20.
[278] *Gamelife*, p. 21.
[279] Ibid.
[280] Ibid.

Figure 1. Francisco de Goya, 'The Drowning Dog' 1820-1823, mixed method on mural transferred to canvas, room 037. Courtesy of the Museo del Prado { https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-drowning-dog/4ea6a3d1-00ee-49ee-b423-ab1c6969bca6} [accessed 18/08/2020].

Clune's machphrastic deployment of *Suspended*, by modelling his engagement as educational and intermedial, suggests that an addiction classification is reductively resolving the phenomenon's fundamental contingency. Reviewers knew this of *Suspended*; that *Suspended* received praise as 'another milestone in the continuing evolution of the interactive computer novel' exposes how *Suspended*'s reception as video game is predicated on the extent to which the player can see past the clear literary—frankly novelistic—qualities of the game.[281] In truth, textuality is *sine qua non* to *Suspended*, and not merely in the sense of textuality's mundane ubiquity either—the textuality contouring *Suspended* gameplay, like a hand under cloth, is a specifically literary textuality nurtured in and given by the novel.

[281] Michael Berlyn, 'Suspended', *Softline*, 2 (May-June 1983), p. 42. {http://www.cgwmuseum.org/galleries/index.php?year=1983&pub=6&id=11} [accessed 09/02/2020].

Thus, to say Clune's first experience with an 'interactive computer novel' would precede an addiction to video games is to lose too much of the 'novel' in too much of the 'interactive computer'; the first machphrastic image of Clune's gaming experience begins by suggesting it all could have been otherwise. This contingency of form characterising Clune's early engagement with video games highlights the object of inquiry's slipperiness; Clune's machphrasis hesitates to impose necessity upon video games even in retrospect, where necessity is most apt, and that language supervenes upon the institutional point of view that occludes the presence of other forms, such as the retrograde remediated aspects of the novel in *Suspended*'s case. In so doing, Clune brings into relief the addiction classification's hypocrisy by tracing the contingent nature of video gaming's addictive attributes; if Clune was addicted to *Suspended*, then the novel that *Suspended* is not, but could have been, must share some of the blame for drawing Clune in.

Equally, Clune describes playing *Suspended* with the language of discovery and growth, preferring to draw upon media metaphors where the current addiction debate deploys substance or gambling abuse as source domains. Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblance', where divulging a concept's meaning is to trace its 'complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' across disparate uses, underlines the contingency of gameplay's being addictive.[282] Imagining a game resembling roulette that can be truthfully described as addictive is simple. *Gamelife* imagines whether an artform resembling the novel can be truthfully described as addictive and also disseminate the preparedness that art provides—what Kenneth Burke named 'equipment for living, as a ritualistic way of arming us to confront perplexities and risks'—at the same time, which is a completely different proposition.[283] It is different because one proposes the video game

[282] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. by P.S.M hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), p. 66.
[283] Kenneth Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, (California: California UP, 1974), p. 60.

within a 'network of similarities' that definitionally risks, whereas the other situates it within a network that works as a net, or as Burke suggests, arms against risk. Should Burke be correct, then *Gamelife*'s depiction of gameplay not only balances the debate's language but challenges the possibility of describing video gameplay as addictive. When a video game is placed in this educational, 'equipment for living' set, it destabilises its demarcation as an addictive object; addiction strips life of its armour in the guise of producing it. The complex media negotiations *Gamelife* performs as it moves from television's static to pre-words, to books, to Goya, presents video gaming as a multiliteracy capable of wringing media forms out with varying degrees of privileges, subordinations and relations. It is difficult to imagine objects that are simultaneously multiliteracies and addictive, and even if so, *Suspended*'s aggregated nature would seem to distribute blame for this across other mediums rarely defined as addictive.

At its most basic level, this description of Clune's early engagement with video games challenges and reinforces some of the underlying assumptions made of supposedly addicted players in equal measure. Clune's machphrasis represents his passing through numerous thresholds, from the 'first methodical thing [Clune] had done in [his] life', to his '[getting] to the bottom of [his] senses' like Goya's dog, his experience is more akin to the appreciation of painting than playing. And yet there is something inevitable about it, his inputs, as 'a wheel made out of simple repetitive movements' are mechanical yet elemental, its force that 'wears through the rock of the world like a river' collapses together the methods of early man and, older even still, the destined triumph of water, friction and time over stone. A little of Vallerand *et al.*'s obsessive passion expresses itself in this inevitability, and a paratactic style of description, a heavily extended object-subject dialogue, and metaphors of self-dehumanisation all combine to overdetermine a fragmented autobiographical self. But it is not necessarily an incoherent one. Clune's account is clearly revisionist; the job of putting Goya's dog into the mouth of his childhood symbolises one of life writing's most

essential aporias—the silent, retrospective work done between the act and its writing through. But we would all like to write our own reviews. It remains essential to remember Clune's retrospection in this recounting of a childhood in games. That sense of wonder and potent resilience remembered here is as fleeting as youth for many, and what educationally works for a reimagined (and inevitably misremembered) young Clune cannot speak for all children.

I will pause here to place this analysis in the pathological context constructed so far. Perhaps the most obvious debate points touched by *Gamelife* have been video gaming's educational and aesthetic potential, with the former more available than the latter at present. Clune's interactions with *Suspended* developed within him appreciable attributes, such as the ability to solve problems logically; a freely associative, relational mode of thinking media; and the ability to self-motivate. His determination to explore and an attention to fine semantic details supposes the 'off the shelf' educational contexts that video games can, as mentioned in the debate, facilitate. Clune's imagining of *Suspended* rails against its modern pathological definition as an object that 'appreciably increase[s] the risk of harmful physical or mental health consequences', but that is because the addiction construct, in failing to differentiate between video games outside of 'offline' and 'online' games, implicates an entire medium in this disorder in a manner that strains credulity. The point is this: if a standard of taste applies to video games, and this is the same across all the arts, then the highly engaged consumption of video games will not produce an addiction. If so, then Clune's addiction, accepted for the sake of argument, is an aesthetic problem for the set of video games that constitute his gameplay, not video games writ large. What this allows for is some meaningful differentiation between video games producing highly engaged harmonious passions and ones that produce obsessive, additive passions. I mean this in a negative epistemological sense; Clune's account of playing *Suspended*, by inhabiting a space between addiction and passion, exposes that positing a deterministic approach to video game

addiction either way leaves the act of playing discrete video games as unduly resolved, missing what should be the obvious point that within the 'video game' medium there will be games more capable of fostering addiction than others.

Escapism and Critical Immersion in *Gamelife: A Memoir*

Having supplied evidence for more contradictions in gaming disorder than the WHO's definition of gaming disorder suggests, this chapter now turns to a more positive approach to highly engaged video gaming. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, video gaming have, as expected by the WHO, become a more important aspect of self-care for a larger amount of people than is usually the case. If true, then there are now more opportunities for highly engaged gameplay, as the social isolation felt during the outbreak freed up more time for home leisure whilst also necessitating more leisure. This also, consequentially, invited more opportunities for maladaptive gaming as well. A pivotal moment in the narrative of contemporary gaming approaches, where gaming's effect on COVID-19's distortion of life's rhythm, a rhythm that may or may not have returned to normality, has yet to reveal itself in magnitude or shape. This subsection explores the role of video gaming in the context of social isolation and how Clune deploys it as a means of negotiating trauma through productive and safe escapism. However, I propose a reformulation of escapism; the WHO's deployment of it pejoratively, as a symptom of gaming disorder, betrays its exhausted potential to describe the therapeutic work gaming can theoretically accomplish. To correct this, I identify and contextualise critical immersion within *Gamelife*'s passages that see Clune attempt to process traumatic events and propose critical immersion as an improved descriptor for highly engaged gaming as it emerges from the memoir's account of Clune's play.

As a rule, the immersive experience stifles the critical perspective. For example, it is better for the lifeguard to sit atop their chair and dryly speculate upon the swimmers' safety

than to be immersed in the water with them. The lifeguard physically manifests the gist of many semantic retreats we make from activities or events we wish to understand. The critical head takes a step back, looks at it from a different perspective, or sees problems arising from afar. Simply, through disinterested detachment and distance enough from the (presumably) emotional epicentre of an event, the critical one gains some advantage in assessing the situation. In game studies, there is scope to theorise this relationship between distance and criticality differently. Seeking to write more criticality into the usually instinctual, perhaps naturalised experience of flow, Braxton Soderman explores the immersive experience's intellectual honesty in his 2021 book *Against Flow: Video Games and The Flowing Subject*. He finds it largely dishonest. By various arguments Soderman frames flow as the corporate stooge, a doubt shushing, perspective erasing, social structure splintering, individual aggrandising import from the study of psychology, going so far as to say that the 'coin of flow has been weighted to land on the side of addiction', implicating flow in the addiction construct as one might implicate escapism.[284] There are, however, two sides to this coin. Through 'critical flow' Soderman means to redeem flow as 'vocabulary with which to describe, study, clarify, refine, evaluate, and judge games' and as 'critique [of] dominant systems, ideologies, and oppressive social and cultural norms'.[285] My formulation of critical immersion is indebted to Soderman's spirit here, though I do not extend his charity to flow to my concept of interest, escapism. Whereas Soderman ends his exploration with cautious rehabilitation, I am sceptical of escapism ever being seen in a positive light among the general public or clinicians. Immersion is more complex and possesses fewer ideological allegiances than escapism as well. As such, I work with immersion as a concept capable of challenging escapism's claim to the experiences it purports to describe, as opposed to Soderman's dialectical refinements.

---

[284] Braxton Soderman, *Against Flow: Video Games and the Flowing Subject* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021) pp. 213-214.
[285] *Against Flow,* p. 20.

I will now define critical immersion and its relation to escapism. 'Criticality' is here defined via Ruth Wodak and Gilbert Weiss' paper 'Theory, Interdisciplinarity and Critical Discourse Analysis', which defines it elegantly as 'making visible the interconnectedness of things'.[286] Something is 'critical' if that thing, experience or discourse either creates knowledge about relations, hence the 'making visible' element of the definition, or creates these relations outright in a demystifying process—what once appeared separate becomes interlinked under the conditions of this criticality. Immersion is a term more nested in game and media studies language, so much so that Alison McMahan has bemoaned the fact that immersion has become 'an excessively vague, all-inclusive concept' and buzzword-like use of immersion has stifled its critical acuity.[287] There are some useful definitions, however, that I hope can assuage McMahan's misgivings. Janet Murray's definition enjoys acceptance as a cogent one for immersion; I take my leave from her. Murray defines immersion as 'the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus [...] in a participatory medium [...] immersion implies learning to swim, to do the things that the new environment makes possible'.[288] Some similarities exist between this kind of immersion and escapism. The 'sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality' defines immersion's full phenomenal range whereas it is a mere tendency of escapism for example—a difference between the act of immersion and the wish to escape through immersion. Murray's definition could still be updated to be more critical, more aware of what is retained after an immersive experience, in order to showcase an immersive experience's ability to make sense of the interconnected of things. Orientating immersion towards skills acquisition and artistic

[286] Ruth Wodak, Gilbert Weiss, 'Introduction: Theory, Interdisciplinarity and Critical Discourse Analysis', in *Critical Discourse Analysis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 1-35 (p. 14).
[287] Alison McMahan, 'Immersion, Engagement, and Presence', in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. by Mark J.P. Wolf, Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 67-86 (p. 67).
[288] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), pp. 98-99.

contemplation as opposed to distraction can balance escapism's implied negativity with critical immersion's more open-ended purpose.

Continuing Murray's water metaphor, when Murray's immersed subject goes for a swim, they 'do the things that the new environment makes possible' but they also increase possibilities in the old environment. Although a completely other reality surrounds the immersed subject, under Murray's understanding they would leave the swimming pool dry, not retaining the experience, the residual wetness, or the new skills they had acquired. There is little recourse to the evitable return to the "real" after the experience terminates. This poorly epitomises the reality of any experience, but certainly swimming—you swim, and, yes, you become a better swimmer, but you also become fitter, you become more able to move around on dry land, you have gained some of that 'equipment for living' that Kenneth Burke saw in literature because of that immersive experience. Therefore, I would like to take Wodak and Weiss' definition and append it to Murray's immersion, fashioning critical immersion as the *sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality that highlights, or creates, a new sense of the interconnectedness of things.* Critical immersion works to challenge escapism's unproblematic bifurcation of the real and the virtual by suggesting that a 'completely other reality' can encourage the user to see the interconnectedness of these states of being. Critical immersion retains the new knowledge about the interconnectedness of the virtual and the real, of simulated and non-simulated space, of workplace structures and games, and sees this knowledge as valuable, as part of the cultural and aesthetic experience of the 21st century citizen. It also makes more sense when deployed alongside existing concepts. Where escapism and videoludification interact cyclically, with escapees deploying the very form they wish to escape, critical immersion and videoludification are conceptually happy bed fellows. Videoludification is instead worked through in the act of being critically immersed in videoludification's mother form, making the user an active receiver of knowledge that does not seek to express the real but exposes reality's

contradictions—deprivileging the claim to primacy that escapism ascribes to reality. Finally, critical immersion compares favourably to Gordon Calleja's 'incorporation', 'the subjective experience of inhabiting a virtual environment facilitated by the potential to act meaningfully within it while being present to others', as critical immersion does not imply an inherently relational aspect with others.[289] This may seem small, but Calleja's incorporation requiring being present to others limits its scope for discussing the decidedly single player experiences Clune describes.

Gamelife highlights critical immersion both in applying the concept of critical immersion and in its notable absences. Thus, *Gamelife* is quite useful in indicating how the concept influences the aesthetic merits of a given work when deployed. Also, there exists a negative correlation between the prose's critical immersiveness and textual Clune's age—analysis of Clune at his most autobiographically senior will explain this trend in the text. The second half of chapter 4, 'World War II Has Never Ended', chronicles Clune's time during his PhD and his time playing *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein* in his youth and, later, *Call of Duty*.[290] By this point, Clune's time in games has been cluttered with enough life that games have acquired enough social baggage to deter him from playing. The belief, instilled in him by his 'professors and so-called friends', that playing games would withhold from him his 'dissertation', 'nice clothes' and 'vacations' planted 'an irrational fear of computer games in [Clune's] head', which evokes the pastime's usual social policing where it becomes

---

[289] Gordon Calleja, 'Revising Immersion: A Conceptual Model for the Analysis of Digital Game Involvement' in Situated Play, *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference* (Tokyo: 2007), pp. 83-90 (pp.89-90).
[290] Muse Software, *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein (*1984) Commodore 64; Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty* (2003) Microsoft Windows; Although I am analysing Clune's treatment of these war games holistically, it is worth mentioning that Clune does mistakenly reference *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein* as using a modern 3-D control scheme 'WAD [space]', with the spacebar to fire. It appears the backpedalling key—S—has been erroneously omitted. *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein* in fact used a 2-D control scheme which omitted the spacebar from movement and gunplay entirely (WAXD, with QEZC allowing for movement between the cardinal directions). The first game to deploy the now ubiquitous WASD setup as its default control scheme was Silicon Beach Software's 1986 platformer *Dark Castle*, released two years after *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein* (https://www.lemonamiga.com/games/docs.php?id=419) [accessed 05/08/2020]. Aesthetically, this error is indicative of the chapter's quality relative to the rest of the text.

a barrier to conventional social progress.[291] Although it should not be surprising that video games are subjected to demerits in social situations where highly engaged play occurs (this simply throws into relief the societal narrative lurking within the addiction debate), Clune's 'irrational fear' of video games signposts the malignancy of social demonisation—that it can mystify the offending object—that muddies Clune's metaphorical efforts.

Affected by this mystification, Clune's once critical, direct insights give way to prose frozen up by insecurity and roundaboutness:

> The computer games know about history because they know about fun. And the only reason to have history anymore is for fun. The world doesn't need it. The world has capitalism now, it doesn't need history. […] Now we have the global market. There's no one for us all to be against, there's no reason for us to think of ourselves as part of an invincible whole moving irresistibly forward against our enemies. History doesn't make sense. The objective necessity of history is over. History has stopped. And we can find out exactly when it stopped. Because when the fun experts want to make a game that is totally fun, they discover that the closest time period they can set it in is World War II.[292]

Sentiments like 'History has stopped' are qualified by capitalism's 'global market' putting the brakes on direct national conflict, obliging the market's demand of consumers to see cooperation wherever more subtle economic exploitation exists—Francis Fukuyama's logic runs deep in this passage. Clune resents this, desiring to play a part in history's 'invincible whole moving irresistibly forward against our enemies'—a fantasy plagued by a western centric nostalgia that mystifies WWII's material consequences. What wishes to serve as critique here falls prey to an escapism in keeping with the pathological contexts offered by the WHO; Clune longs to immerse himself in WWII to efface—not confront—the troubles of his present, and his nostalgic recounting of this longing for games to return him to a supposedly more correct (insomuch that knowing about history equates to knowing about

---

[291] *Gamelife*, pp. 107-108.
[292] *Gamelife*, p. 115.

fun) past, reveals nostalgia's evergreen truth, that it is as much a forgetting as a remembering. It fails to rethink history or games convincingly because Clune's play here is uncritically escapist. Just as the worst satire affirms the very ideologies it aims to mock, Clune's rant, as light-hearted and irrelevant as it may have been intended, is undercut by the kind of anti-social, isolationism that gaming's detractors would have as its consequence. Moreover, this is learned behaviour. A comparison of Clune's prose when recounting *Suspended* reveals his youth brimmed with direct access to video gaming's insights that are now lost to Clune—he appears immersed in *Call of Duty*, but video gaming's stigma-wrought discourse weighs too heavy for him to swim, and so he drowns. Walter Benjamin's style of arriving at the big picture via a snaking journey through its marginalia here fails despite Clune's best efforts.[293] It is as though the equipment for living that games can provide have been somewhere destabilised and Clune, striving yet failing to explain this low point in his life, blows layer upon layer of fog upon it instead.

There is evidence Clune was well aware of his failure to articulate. The hedging apology 'Okay, okay, but still' following this passage smacks of the kind of deterministic nihilism that falls unfairly at postmodernist fiction's feet, where ironic self-awareness functions as prophylactic to criticism.[294] Another deflective tactic where the object of inquiry is better served by directness. Rak's laboratory concept for telling stories with games becomes alchemical as Clune stumbles headlong into this broad metaphorical experiment and produces only a fool's gold, his inability to articulate the interconnectedness of his life

---

[293] Excluding history's depiction here as a 'whole moving irresistibly forward', Clune's writes the fantasy of an office imagined through *Sid Meier's Pirates!* as the game's processes coming like 'a wind from paradise, blowing through the offices' (*Gamelife*, p. 151). I believe this to be a reference to Benjamin's seminary thesis XI 'Progress' in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* where Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* takes up the ekphrastic role of 'the angel of history' who would settle in place to avert more disaster but 'a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught in his wings with such violence the angel can no longer close them'. (Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007) pp. 253-264 (p. 257).) That Clune is exploring WWII games during this passage also links Benjamin to this passage; Benjamin was a late casualty of the war.

[294] *Gamelife*, p. 115.

simulates the WHO's version of escapism and is the worst way of telling stories through video games. Clune's prose here makes manifest the kind of reality-avoidant tendencies that should concern the WHO and clinicians. If all machphrasis was constructed in prose propelled by this obfuscating energy, then the WHO and its totalising application of escapism would only be corroborated. This analysis insists, then, on a warning against dogma; the WHO's use of escapism as an important factor in video game addiction is demonstrably alive in some of Clune's style. However, by not attending to the social pressures that provoke Clune's machphrastic misstep, the WHO occludes an important affecting sphere of influence within the addiction construct. Disentangling the two is essential, as Clune's writing reminds that healthy, passionate gaming can become maladaptive in times of social difficulty, and this experience can be provoked by a social language warping one's perception of the self.

When Clune revisits his youth, his game-life lattice becomes more profound as he negotiates the trauma of his parents' divorce. Clune commingles the psychic trauma of his parental divorce with gaming flashpoints. For example, Clune invites us to 'imagine a cup fashioned to resemble the brick-squashed head of Super Mario, with his ears for handles. Now imagine the cup filled with the black milk of my parents' silence' to bundle together the raw nerves that video gaming will, eventually, calm.[295] The grotesque countenance that stares out of this machphrasis is the collusion of two non-spaces that young Clune is ill-equipped to articulate, expressed in the photo-negativity of 'black milk'—the inverse of nourishment—and the hollowed out, mis-telic Mario figure as the symbol of gaming's drained vitality. Feelings of alienation stemming from his distance from friends, family and his hobby become more than the sum of their parts, multiplied by its coming all at once. Representing his mother as a barrier to his play, Clune revives a negative escapism,

[295] *Gamelife*, p. 125.

suggesting her views on *Super Mario Brothers* as '"enough *escapism* for you. All this *escapism* [...] Sometimes I think you kids are living in a fantasy world"'.[296] There is little sense of harmony in Clune's relational web. The emphasis placed on '*escapism*' in an utterance said but whose emphasis is empathically felt or, in retrospect, deduced, betrays its heteroglossic appetite, registering as a socially determined implant into the private, familial sphere, but also borrowing from an intergenerational misunderstanding about play that translates between Clune's affect and his mother's tone as '*escapism*'. Escapism here demarcates the translative misfiring between Clune, who could scarcely glimpse the motivations or influences that could cause an adult to label video games as 'escapism', and his mother, whose tone is percolated with complications untranslatable—but feelable—by children.

It is this context of traumatic alienation that makes Clune's account of playing *Elite* so theoretically valuable—it highlights how a critically immersive experience can undermine traumatic social isolations by making visible the interconnectedness of things.[297] Enabled by a critical distance from his fractious homelife, Clune's language shifts towards the exploratory and scientific where '*Elite* brings the fundamental truth of science down on life'.[298] In order to get at this 'truth', Clune must get some imagined distance between him and home—for Clune, '*Elite* turned our giant sun into a distant star' and by so doing disrupted the heliocentric ideology of the cosmos through distance.[299] This shift in perspective, what Clune calls 'a trick of the eyes', is trained into him by his play, but Clune did not merely identify the ideological awareness, he superimposes it upon those fantastical elements of his private life. The sun—now understood as one star amongst many—is the self-same sun that 'lit [Clune's] mother's fantasy-reality, the sun of July 1988'.[300] Therefore,

---

[296] *Gamelife,* p. 126.
[297] David Braben, Ian Bell, *Elite* (1984). BBC Micro.
[298] *Gamelife*, p. 132.
[299] Ibid.
[300] Ibid.

what may appear like escapism is in fact fundamentally critical. *Elite* offered Clune access to an objectified present, one in which the ideological parameters could be reconfigured to explore at arm's length 'the sun of July 1988' which gave up its secret as the adult world's 'fantasy-reality' would begin exposing secrets of its own.

Rak's gaming laboratory concept, where video games are a place to experiment with connections in a non-narrative, yet autobiographical tense speaks to Clune's critically immersed recollection. That video games can confront players with their own mortality is almost a truism, but Clune's memoir collects together the process of dying in games in a way that explores a more general finality in one final splice. Driven as it was by a notorious learning curve and level of difficulty, Clune 'spent 90 percent of [his] time in *Elite* seeing through [his] own death', highlighting that his play, largely, was spent observing the cessation of play.[301] This throws into relief a facet of play that does not bend well to an addictive construction; this sense of spending time not doing the very thing you are addicted to does not appear in a formal sense in the act of gambling or consuming drugs, where directives to stop gambling or consuming drugs are socially constructed and not of the thing itself. The grammar surrounding Clune and *Elite* comes to mimic these moments of introspection: 'I follow, heating his angles, heating his angles… […] To live and die like that … Listen! […] To live and die in a world without surfaces…', where ellipsis functions simultaneously as dreamy drift and the collapsing of introspective time.[302] The final shift blends the lessons of *Elite* with Clune's relationship to his mother, where the familiarity of 'the feeling of being about to die on a fundamentally absent surface' interweaves with an image of reconciliation and reconnection with his mother. Just as the 'wetness' of Clune's immersion left him better equipped to cope with the trauma under the July 1988 sun, in conflating that discovery of an essential lack at play within *Elite* with 'recogniz[ing] [his]

[301] *Gamelife*, p. 139.
[302] *Gamelife*, pp. 134-135.

mother's face in a crowd' as the interconnectedness of things, learned from *Elite* and applied later, Clune can recover his relationship to his mother from the stasis of her divorce.[303]

To summarise, this chapter invites the WHO to reconsider its position on video game addiction through two arguments. Firstly, the WHO's classifying gesture is shown to be a grey area reductively resolved, with *Gamelife* highlighting some fundamental formal contingencies regarding video games and gameplay, as with *Suspended*, that complicate the contemporary pathological context video gaming finds itself in. Secondly, one of video game addiction's key symptoms—escapism—is an over-encumbered descriptor for video gaming's immersive experience and critical immersion offers an alternative vocabulary that sidesteps escapism's weighty negative connotations in order to generate a new sense of thinking passionate video gaming immersion free of escapism's social demerits. *Gamelife*, as sustained life writing that takes video gaming as its object of inquiry, offered prose that oscillates between critical and uncritical immersion, with the former producing more useful insights than the latter. Where Clune's is most successful in his machphrastic efforts, he represents video games as a potent relational object capable of emulating the 'equipment for living' that Kenneth Burke ascribed to literature. For the thesis' argument more generally, this chapter adds critical immersion to machphrasis' toolkit as a means of evaluating the aesthetics merits of particular deployments of video games. Finally, this chapter suggests *Gamelife* as an important proto text in the ongoing contemporary literary experiment with video games, highlighting its potential within life writing as a relational object that can operate in didactic and reflective modes as well as obsessive and damaging ones. Texts such as these will only increase in number as writers' lives and culture become increasingly mediated by video games—a position this thesis will expand and explore in subsequent chapters.

[303] *Gamelife*, p. 139.

Chapter 4: 'The Importance of Being Ernest': Nostalgia, Video Games, and the Logic of Alternateness in *Ready Player One*

In many ways, Ernest Cline's 2011 novel *Ready Player One* is the single text that this thesis cannot do without. If machphrasis is indeed worth anything as a poetics, it must be able to say something about a novel so replete with video game references, metaphors, and inspirations. As John Scalzi (who, to anticipate some analysis, is mentioned in the book), puts it, 'imagine that Dungeons and Dragons and an '80s video arcade made hot, sweet love, and their child was born on Azeroth. If you're not already experiencing a nerdgasm at the thought, I don't want to know you'.[304] This chapter details the anatomy of this disquieting portmanteau 'nerdgasm', highlighting how it is all at once too scarce a climax for many and too available for some—a dual onanism. First, by exploring the extant *Ready Player One* criticism, I will recontextualise this scholarly body of work as grappling with the mixture of nostalgia and reality hunger. These sentiments, I argue, are the result of a corrupted version of Roger Caillois' shamanic social function, what I term the logic of alternateness. I then turn to *Ready Player One* itself as an exemplar of machphrastic rhetoric that canonises and possesses a nostalgic representation of 1980s popular culture. In so doing, I hope to trace a logic of alternateness indebted to video games and society's increasing urge to videoludify in the novel's selective nostalgic forgetting, reification of neoliberal individualism, and rhetorical diminishing of the real.

The academic conversations around *Ready Player One* advance three to four key interpretations. The first is the group who have attributed *Ready Player One*'s success to its reinforcement of a gendered video gaming culture. Megan Amber Condis is the chief luminary of this branch of *Ready Player One* studies, although an honourable mention must go to Shira Chess, whose book *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity*

[304] John Scalzi, *Ready Player One* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), back cover.

is a 'conscious nod' to the novel and critiques widely and in long form the phenomena Condis examines in essay form.[305] For Condis, *Ready Player One* 'provides an important window into how the construction of the gamer identity came to be a performance of white masculinity even as it reproduces the conditions of that social construction', a 'performance' Condis teases from Cline's geeky canonisation of 80s pop culture with nary a woman or person of colour in sight.[306] Group two are interested in *Ready Player One*'s appeals to various facets of the neoliberal self or sensibilities—the key players here are Doug Stark and Jonathan Alexander. Both Stark and Alexander embroil *Ready Player One* in the thicketed intersection between video game culture and neoliberal thought, policy and practice, with Stark proposing the novel as 'didactic' fiction that 'provides a conduct model for the neoliberal subject [...] [that] speaks to a gamification of value that extends beyond traditional forms of financial capital', and Alexander finding the novel to be of a 'neoliberalized time characterized by decreasing security, increased pressures to be responsible for oneself, and widespread economic precarity'.[307] Finally, there's the off-piste—yet still very agreeable—medieval/Arthurian interpretations first advanced by Susan Aronstein and Jason Thompson, where their claims that *Ready Player One* 'is an Arthurian Romance, a Grail tale for the Twitter-PS4-Wii generation masquerading as a postmodern techno-*bildungsroman*', converse with Kevin and Brent Moberly's queer interrogation of how the novel deploys medieval trope and allusion to authorise a 'model of reading that is constructed through and legitimized by an appeal to a presumably older and more authoritative critical praxis'.[308] Leaving the potential fourth category for now for reasons

[305] Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2017), p. 7.
[306] Megan Amber Condis, 'Playing the Game of Literature: Ready Player One, The Ludic Novel, and the Geeky "Canon" of White Masculinity', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 39 (2016), 1-19 (p. 16).
[307] Doug Stark, 'Ludic Literature: *Ready Player One* as Didactic Fiction for the Neoliberal Subject', in *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies,* ed. by Sascha Pöhlmann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 153-173 (p. 155); Jonathan Alexander, 'The Uses and Abuses of Pop Culture in *Ready Player One* and *Grandmother's Gold*', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 53 (2020), 525-546 (p. 538).
[308] Susan Aronstein, Jason Thompson, 'Coding the Grail: "Ready Player One's" Arthurian Mash-Up", *Arthuriana*, 25 (2015), 51-65 (p. 51); Brent Moberly, Kevin Moberly, 'Gay Habits Set Straight: Fan Culture and Authoritative Praxis in *Ready Player One*', *The Year's Work in Medievalism, 31* (2016), 30-44 (p. 43).

that will become clear, a review of these three academic conversations is necessary to generate the peculiar stakes and parameters at play when engaging with *Ready Player One.*

Methodological valances aside, reception wise *Ready Player One*'s academic heatmap reads a near ubiquitous cool—the novel can count upon few academic allies. A 'pernicious', 'especially impoverished', 'gate-keeping' novel by all accounts, where its scholarly readers diverge they reconvene eventually in their instinct for a bad book.[309] Indeed, irrespective of your critical language, scope or ambitions, there is an infelicity, faux pas or contradiction begging to make your acquaintance in *Ready Player One*. Notably, this academic opinion runs counter to *Ready Player One's* popular reception. With a 4.25 rating on Goodreads at the time of writing and both an Alex and Prometheus award under its belt (received for excellence in the young adult and science fiction genres respectively), *Ready Player One* seems to resonate with a populist frequency that turns critical (or at least academic) heads away.[310] Therefore, what motivates academic discussions of *Ready Player One* differs from what motivates most literary discussions in this vein, as the act of discussing novels involves (at least implicitly) positive aesthetic value judgements. By building on these value judgements as they relate to the novel form, an academic discussion about a novel can advance, justified by the particular object of enquiry displaying something of the form that delights. This does not seem to apply to *Ready Player One*, and thus the most basic literary argument for academic attention does not apply. In this sense, to say that there is nothing positive to say of *Ready Player One* refers to the text but also the act of discussion itself in relation to the novel form. Not only is it not a positive text, but its very construction seems to short circuit the basic academic ambition to posit the thing most conventionally posited, value judgements. This is not to disparage different approaches, like

[309] *Gay Habits Set Straight*, p. 44; *Uses and Abuses of Pop Culture*, p. 530; *Playing the Game of Literature*, p. 5.
[310] Goodreads, *Ready Player One* {https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/9969571-ready-player-one} [accessed 22/03/2021].

those of cultural studies; it is simply to say the older, perhaps more authoritative, registers of literary criticism bounce off *Ready Player One.*

So, if it is not a beautiful text, in so much as it refuses to be posited aesthetically, then it must be the case that the academic conversation occurs because of something outside the text's aesthetic qualities. *Ready Player One* is an important text, then. Perhaps it is better to say that after #Gamergate manifested the exclusionary, reactionary sentiment that *Ready Player One* espoused as harmless fun or even heroic, it became an important text.[311] #Gamergate, as is now clear, proved an auspicious event for a growing political faction coalesced around white, male, straight supremacist ideals, a paranoiac dispensation towards conspiracy theory and unsubstantiated victimhood, and omni-directional ire towards traditional American policy left or rightward. This alternative right or 'alt-right' movement within #Gamergate were dually emboldened by an ambivalent video game industry and their digital asylum within far-right news organisation Breitbart News, who published 'a considerable portion of the articles which lambasted [Anita] Sarkeesian, [Zoe] Quinn, and others during #Gamergate'.[312] They would find in Donald J. Trump an appropriate demagogue and together with him would make remarkable political inroads when Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election. Trump's presidential tenure would ultimately culminate in the 2021 Capitol Hill riots—an event likened by news outlets to the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch—resulting in Trump's historic second impeachment, bringing the American democratic process into disrepute.[313] This does not implicate *Ready Player*

---

[311] The 2014 #Gamergate movement has been so extensively explored that I will presume the reader's foreknowledge of its broad strokes. As this chapter explores the confluence between *Ready Player One*'s machphrastic rhetoric and the affective political underpinnings of #Gamergate and beyond, a general sense of #Gamergate would only duplicate previous efforts. See Adrienne Massanari, '#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's algorithms, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures', *New Media & Society*, 19 (2015), 184-200 {https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419879918} [accessed 11/02/2021] for one of the most cited articles detailing the events of #Gamergate.

[312] Kristin M. S. Bezio, 'Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a precursor to the rise of the alt-right', *Leadership,* 14 (2018), 556-566 (p. 563).

[313] Benjamin Carter Hett, Op-Ed: The Trump Insurrection was America's Beer Hall Putsch, (LA Times: 2021) {https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-01-16/donald-trump-insurrection-capitol-beer-hall-putsch} [accessed 11/02/2021].

One in #Gamergate, the rise of the alt-right, or the election of Trump—not directly—but these events have made the novel a more important one than was previously the case. This is because the novel trades on a rhetoric surrounding video games and 80s pop culture and comprises the fourth category that, in truth, all *Ready Player One* scholarship could reasonably be said to belong: the affective rhetoric of nostalgia.

Nostalgia is a complex feeling. For Kant, nostalgia was a cognitive 'deception… that a person believes he sees and feels outside himself that which he has only in his mind' and, as deception, fell apart when the imagination confronted reality; so it was for the mercenary Swiss of Kant's time, who having returned home would find their expectations 'greatly disappointed' and their 'homesickness cured'.[314] Unreasonable by Kant's enlightened standards, he would chart this deranged imagination, or the vertiginous 'dizziness that seizes the person who looks into the abyss', through a series of imaginative faculties including mimicry that invite 'a kind of intercourse with ourselves', a self-conscious onanism. From this moment, the link between internal, imaginative play and a modern, maladaptive nostalgic urge is established. It would take Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* to rehabilitate nostalgia for the 20th century, after which defences for nostalgia arrived that mirrored its Romantic stature. Heidegger, essentially paraphrasing Novalis, would conclude that the 'Da of *Dasein*'—the Heideggerian subject construct—'is called the homeland', equating the ontological aspect of the self with a rootedness and a pastness, elevating the condition of nostalgia to the condition of *Dasein*.[315] Heideggerian helping hands, blackened by the taint of the Third Reich, come with complications, and, to offer my conclusions early, are justifications as much as recontextualizations for the alert felt when political sentiments hue towards nostalgia. Bryan Turner's conclusion that despite 'typically assum[ing] a

[314] Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. by Robert B Louden (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006), p. 71.
[315] Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism' in *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 217.

conservative, backward-looking and elitist form', 'nostalgia may play a highly ambivalent role in social criticism and political protest' seems less true now than it did in 1987, with nostalgic rhetoric, contemporaneously, a right-wing affair.[316] It seems not coincidental that two of the 2010s' most powerful anglophone political slogans: 'make America great *again*', and Brexit's 'take *back* control' tug backwards towards hallucinatory prosperity or sovereignty. Generally speaking, the nostalgic dispensation achieves rarefied historical, philosophical, and political polarisation: nostalgia is a natural environment for conflict.

Given that where a writer presents themselves as most nostalgic reveals a great deal about their ideals and their sympathies, coming into conflict with a text's nostalgic principles can have as much to do with the future as the past. Rather than fixing *Ready Player One*'s appetite for 80s pop culture strictly to that milieu, scholars taking a thoroughgoing nostalgic angle appreciate its projective strategies. A forward-thinking, anticipatory nostalgia naturally descends into utopianism, and so queries as to how *Ready Player One* constructs a utopian vision make for logical research. Justin Nordstrom, arguing that 'Cline's work succeeds, both as an engaging novel and as a window into the utopian genre, because he avoids a simplistic vision of utopian play […] and embraces the paradoxical notion that play can be disruptive, even detrimental, to individual happiness and society', finds himself an odd one out, interpreting salvific qualities in Cline's work that generally elude his colleagues.[317] Rares Moldovan is more sceptical. For Moldovan, *Ready Player One*'s wielded nostalgia grows from the 'escapist portals from the frustrating present', but as with *Gamelife*, so too here: there is more than meets the eye when escapism is concerned.[318] Whereas in the *Gamelife* chapter I negotiated the *dispositif* of governmental escapism that justifies its overreaching by pathologising the immersed along with the drowning,

[316] Bryan S. Turner, 'A Note on Nostalgia', *Theory, Culture & Society,* 4 (1987), 147-156 (p. 154).
[317] Justin Nordstrom, '"A Pleasant Place for the World to Hide": Exploring Themes of Utopian Play in Ready Player One", *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 18 (2016), 238-256 (p. 240).
[318] Rares Moldovan, "The State of Play: Geektopia in *Ready Player One*", *Caietele Echinox*, 32 (2017), 242-251 (p. 245).

Moldovan's 'manic nostalgia', that 'twists past artefacts, as if by magic, into virtualities for a future past that is ever accessible' turns *Ready Player One* into a fetish for escapism, one that by being tied to nostalgia restricts those who have access to that escape.[319] The pathological nostalgia returns, and extrapolations from nostalgic tastes project towards disconcerting futures—nostalgia's environment for conflict deranges the future tense along with the past.

To finish discussing nostalgia conceptually, it seems important to remark upon its particular relationship with *Ready Player One's* primary video game inspiration: arcade games. As previously mentioned in chapter 2, the shift away from arcade gaming in American created a larger space for gaming in the home, which consequentially transformed the social environment where gaming took place. While home gaming had its boons, those who preferred to play arcade games in arcade contexts had lost a social space, one that having been lost, could now be remembered fondly. It is no surprise, then, that as Carly Kocurek explains in her treatise on the North American arcade culture *Coin Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*, 'nostalgia has been a significant factor in shaping both the contemporary arcade and our cultural memory of the historical video game arcade'.[320] As is good practice when dealing with nostalgia, Kocurek contextualises its impact on the contemporary arcade through its interested parties. As a gaming cultural space which owes its vitality today to its link to the past, the arcade is a nostalgically transactional space, one between the interest group of old gamers 'longing for the arcade of memory' and the corporate interest in providing an outlet for this alongside the 'glamorized technoculture where young white men were dominant' associated with it, a technoculture, I stress, that is very kind to corporations.[321] What attempts at arcade revival do today on a micro-economic scale is very similar to what *Ready Player One* is doing textually. Indeed, many of the events

[319] *The State of Play*, p. 246.
[320] Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2015) p. 161.
[321] *Coin-Operated Americans,* p. 188.

where Kocurek sees gaming nostalgia disproportionally represented in American late 20th century gaming culture, such as its idolisation of 'brilliant male tech geeks', gaming skillsets and their association with 'technomasculine ideals', and the arcades' allegiance with white masculine preferences for economic growth, technological innovation, and corporate loyalty are all alive and well in Cline's machphrastic efforts.[322] However, a small critique of Kocurek's belief that 'nostalgia may be one of the easiest ways to track public interest in a topic', is her failure here to acknowledge nostalgia's amplifying nature, attributing too much consensus to a vocal minority's loud opinion on arcade gaming: a magnitude mistaken for multitude.[323] The techniques allowing the nostalgic subject to amplify their voice over a majority can be demystified by examining the machphrastic shape of Cline's utopia, one where the arcades never really closed.

Ready Player One is an important text, then, because from its nostalgic past it derives a problematic future. So do many other texts, but *Ready Player One* channels a particularly conflicting—both internally contradictory and conflict-seeking—emotional undercurrent currently manifesting as nationalistic populism in contemporary western culture. This nostalgic 'collective delusion', as Tim Engles puts it, of 'entitled, domineering white masculinity' besieged by non-normative political interests, with special attention paid to an acutely maligned present, is the emotional undercurrent in question.[324] Theorising how this 'collective delusion' may lay claim to the past, he turns to Shannon Sullivan's *Reclaiming Whiteness,* where 'whiteness as possession describes not just the act of owning, but also the obsessive psychosomatic state of white owners' that reinforces an 'ontological security and [satisfies] unconscious desires' and links this anxiety to 'a nostalgic longing and grasping

---

[322] *Coin-Operated Americans,* p. 168.
[323] *Coin-Operated Americans*, p. 169.
[324] Tim Engles, *White Male Nostalgia In Contemporary North American Culture* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 2.

for conditions and relationship that seem to resemble those of the past'.[325] From 'whiteness as possession' comes 'white world-travelling', another Sullivan term describing the 'entitled sense not only that all spaces should be entirely available for one's touristic consumption but also that the inhabitants of non-white communities should be hospitably adaptive to white middle-class ways of being'.[326] This imbues the white defence against hallucinatory assault with both a locomotive and worldly quality that is essential to understanding *Ready Player One*'s machphrastic rhetoric.

The 'collective delusion' is not about simply possessing *things* to cultivate quotidian elitism. It is not about simply possessing *ideas* either—it is to seek out, detain, and destroy the objective position itself in an aggressive renunciation of that world. It is fitting that the natural progression of neoliberal economic thought would, eventually, reify demarcations and shift them towards the possessive. In this marketplace of ideas, success is not enough: all other ideas must fail. Striving for economic freedom and subjective success as an individuated project is no longer striving for an ideological, national ideal like, say, the "American Dream", but it is tantamount to *living in an American's dream*. *Ready Player One*'s (non)consensual hallucinatory virtual reality; its gatekeeping of a nostalgic past constructed by the tyranny of the majority, a strange exoteric elitism; and its litany of hegemonic, white, corporate techno-saviours all evince *Ready Player One*'s literary project. This project is to define, reinforce, then claim the reified neoliberal object itself, of possessing possession. It is what David Shields sees the 'reality based community', who 'believe that solutions emerge from judicious study of discernible reality' failing to understand: that truth, however poorly constructed, draws more powerfully than fact.[327] 'Facts now seem important', Shields continues, and 'facts have gravitas'. Though Shields

[325] Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of White Privilege* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2006), p. 122; *White Male Nostalgia*, p. 201.
[326] *Revealing Whiteness,* p. 303.
[327] David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Group, 2010), p. 88.

knows that 'the illusion of facts will suffice', and finally, when 'in our hunger for all things true, we make the facts irrelevant', metaphor, in presenting a truth light on facts, reigns supreme. Presumably, these sentiments align with an unreality-based community for whom, in the battle between figurative truth and literal fact, truth appears increasingly to prevail.

Before moving on, two things need clarification to align *Ready Player One* in the sights of Shields' observation. Of acknowledging why this difference pertains to a white nostalgic urge, and expressing how machphrasis exposes the rhetoric of a 'collective delusion' within *Ready Player One,* the first issue can be explained via Caillois' shaman, so I will begin there. To understand simulation and vertigo in *Man, Play and Games*, Caillois examines the figure of the shaman, and extrapolates from findings regarding shamanism a kind of play that undermines normative reality. This shamanistic attack comes as 'an interregnum of vertigo, effervescence, and fluidity in which everything that symbolizes order in the universe is temporarily abolished so that it can later re-emerge'; a kind of Bahtkinian carnival catalysed by playful outsiders.[328] 'Masks', Caillois continues, 'always fabricated secretly and destroyed or hidden after use, transform the officiants' so that shamanic outcasts may instigate their abolition unmolested by the laity's norms and values.[329] Note the obligatory imperilment at the heart of this shamanistic carnival; the mask functions as both channelling fetish to become the embodiment of transformation (and so the shaman unmakes what they previously were) but also as protective concealment, which mystifies the self-mutilating process. These figures, then, must be few and far between, lest their vertiginous excess bring order into permanent contempt. Even in mundane shamanic rituals 'the audience must be protected against the inevitable violence of his mania, the effects of his awkwardness, and his unconscious fury', which is accomplished by their complicity, perhaps by administering the intoxicant, or communally chanting. Indeed, it should come as no

[328] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* trans. by Meyer Barash (Chicago, IL: Illinois UP, 2001), p. 87.
[329] Ibid.

surprise that ‘the shaman is frequently *chosen* because of his psychopathic tendencies’ and that submitting to the shaman’s gaze must be a socially controlled choice in order to mitigate the deleterious effect of shamanism overplayed. An inundation of shamans self-proclaimed, who have the means to conceal themselves with masks made for the digital age, who believe themselves to be outcasts and, finally, who in fact embody the normativity from which the shamanic position diverges, would be a potent and malignant social force indeed.

Understanding exactly how a large, normative shamanistic urge would affect society’s relationship with reality and truth lies in the shaman’s role in the arbitration of social relations and the reifying effect this has on truth. Previously in chapter 1, Caillois’ shaman came to form the basis of an auto-hauntological video gaming figure in Gibson’s *Neuromancer* because of the shaman’s function as someone ‘watchful over protocol and the correct allocation of honors and privileges’ whose autonomy, power, and utopian vision is outside a sense of human futurity, perhaps even destructive for it.[330] However, this function was suitably restricted to the liminal, playful, singular Neuromancer figure because the office of shamanistic arbitration—unlike secular, judicial, or legislative office—resides outside social norms and requires only the semblance of fact, which a multiplicity of voices irritates. Put simply, the shaman, by tapping something anterior to the real, cannot abide arguments naively derived from the real, grounded as they are in supposedly distinct realities. Alexander Riley speculates on how shamanistic paraphernalia, its masks, its magic and so on, have transposed to celebrity. Riley wonders what Caillois would make of ‘superhuman Mr. Universe icon’ and ‘robotic superman from another time’ Arnold Schwarzenegger’s governorship. The political careers of Reagan, Schwarzenegger, and Trump all show that the political power of the mask, which exudes a character non-identical with itself, has shifted from the magical to the technological and the medial.[331] Riley

[330] *Man, Play and Games*, p. 101.
[331] Alexander T. Riley, ‘The Theory of Play/Games and Sacrality in Popular Culture: The Relevance of Roger Caillois for Contemporary Neo-Durkheimian Cultural Theory’, *New Series,* 11 (2005), 103-114 (p. 110).

theorises that alongside this shift comes a harmful impingement upon a person's ability to discern reality from fiction, explaining that 'some of us even go so far in this 'game' as to completely lose the sense of reality that ultimately allows us to understand that, however much we imitate these figures, we are not them', linking the question of what is real to a kind of political mimicry.[332] Although Riley is correct to say that mimicry does not a person make, it does create possibilities for thinking reality differently when it is liberally applied.

Despite *Ready Player One*'s virtual reality theme, its rhetoric and reception are more akin to alternate reality games (ARGs), a medium perfectly suited to tap collective delusions, nostalgic or otherwise. Patrick Jagoda backs up his academic authority on ARGs by also designing them, and Jagoda's definition of them as 'highly mediated and narrative-driven scavenger hunts that unfold both in physical space and online' summarises the form with little controversy.[333] Rephrasing, ARGs are transmedia storytelling games that purport to be real, often deploying real objects, locations, and events diegetically. They are an extremely polarising phenomenon. Given their disguise as reality, their ability to influence their player base is profound. Some, like Thomas Connelly *et al*., Jeanne D. Johnston *et al.,* and Elizabeth Bonsignore *et al.,* represent this influence in educational contexts, where the ARG's deceptive form promotes multilingual motivations, increased physical activity and design aspirations in teenagers respectively.[334] Montola and Waern are more cautious, noting that ARGs can envelop people and reality in non-consensual ways—more a magic prison than a magic circle—but Kevin Veale leads the charge in reckoning with the ARG's reality subverting qualities. Although Veale's claim that 'functionally, there is absolutely no

[332] 'Theory of Play/Games and Sacrality', p. 109.
[333] Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 2016), p. 183.
[334] Thomas Connelly, Mark Stansfield, Thomas Hainey, 'An alternate reality game for language learning: ARGuing for multilingual motivation', *Computers & Education,* 57 (2011), 1389-1415; Jeanne D. Johnston, Anne P. Massey, Rickie Lee Marker-Hoffman 'Using an Alternate Reality Game to Increase Physical Activity and Decrease Obesity Risk of College Students', *Journal of Diabetes Science & Technology,* 6 (2012), 828-838; Elizabeth Bonsignore, Derek Hansen, Kari Klaus and Marc Ruppel, 'Alternate Reality Games as Platforms for Practicing 21st-Century Literacies', *International Journal of Learning and Media,* 4 (2012), 25-54.

structural difference between an ARG and a harassment community' oversteps, his comparison of #Gamergate with the goal-oriented, rabbit hole diving, boundary breaking, community rallying aspects of ARG play suggests that all may not be fun and games where ARGs are involved.[335] However, what all sides argue, for better or worse, is that ARGs as form possess both the narratological and design breadth and complexity to bleed out of themselves, effecting profound changes both in their players and in the real world in which they play out.

Nowhere is this more apparent than the ARG's insatiable urge to collect parts of the world abandoned by reality. Take the ARG *I Love Bees*, created to promote the 2004 release of Bungie's *Halo 2*, which revolved around clues discerned from 210 pay phones, or the 2002 ARG-like treasure hunt *Shelby Logan's Run*, where participants were sent into an abandoned mine shaft, or the horror ARG *Jack Torrance*, which sent YouTuber Night Mind (whose own involvement in the ARG's production is unknown) to various derelict gazebos, drainage pipes and cemeteries on the outskirts of Austin, Texas.[336] All of these objects and locations are anachronisms: the pay phone has all but given way to the personal phone, the abandoned mine shaft is exactly that, and few places are more metaphorically charged by a sense of the past than a graveyard. But in being left behind, these places become susceptible to new forms of ownership, ownership that the ARGs claim through the new meanings they impart. None of these places or things can consent to their tenuous possession by an ARG, and it is easy to imagine the tensions that may arise should this possession be contested. *I Love Bees* player Zach Dill, for example, waited by his Florida pay phone for instructions

---

[335] Kevin Veale, *Gaming the Dynamics of Online Harassment* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 49.
[336] Noah Shachtman, Sci Fi Fans are Called Into an Alternate Reality, (The New York Times: 2004) {https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/04/technology/circuits/scifi-fans-are-called-into-an-alternate-reality.html} [accessed 11/04/2021]; Jonathan Martin, The Game, (Seattle Times: 2008) {https://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/the-game/} [accessed 11/04/2021]; Night Mind, Jack Torrance In-Field Investigation: Stage 1 Report (See Description for Info), Online Video Recording, YouTube, (2018) {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c09UZSMMCrs&t=1549s&ab_channel=NightMind} [accessed 11/04/2021].

whilst hurricane Frances barrelled towards him, a force of nature that left 53 dead. Equally, one might wonder, had the *Jack Torrance* locations merely appeared abandoned, what repercussions might befall a player who was not white or male whilst trespassing on Texan borders. The logic of Sullivan's white world-travelling, the expectation of 'hospitably adaptive' reception, explains these unspoken play conditions within this alternate reality.

Players like Night Mind and Zach Dill put themselves in harm's way because they identified with the ARG's putatively superior value relative to the potential first order repercussions of their actions. They see something that only few others can see. Or perhaps they see what they are allowed to see, travelling alternately, complicit in a recycling of old, nostalgic space. Watchful over a new set of protocols and honours that create rabbit holes of forgotten things, they perform the shamanistic social function in search of a different reality's truths. This subordinates the real social functions of these things and places to inconvenient inverted metaphors: transgressions (legal and conceptual) become conceits standing to be corrected by alternatively grounded fact. This is how someone may stand triumphant in a pay phone booth and stare at advancing hurricanes, or how Henry David Thoreau came to see that 'our truest life is when we are in dreams awake'.[337] It is the pull of selective knowledge, the belief in having tapped into a higher way of things. This could, if circumstances allowed, invite some critical reordering at the social level, an 'escape from the usual official way of life' as Bakhtin would say of the carnivalesque.[338] However, there is little actual carnival spirit in this phenomenon; it is difficult to imagine true social subversion surviving the vortex of normativity at this shamanic processes' centre. Hollowed out and possessed by a collective delusion, the shaman function becomes corrupted by the

---

[337] Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1985), p. 244.
[338] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1984), p. 8.

very forces it seeks to exorcise. In short, the logic of what I am calling alternateness takes its place.

The Logic of Alternateness in *Ready Player One*

How this alternateness, this collective delusion of white nostalgia, manifests in the overflowing of the shamanistic social function, and how *Ready Player One*'s machphrastic rhetoric cashes it, is the sum of the rest of this chapter. This alternateness stems from a perfect storm of the diminishing of the real, the burgeoning of social functions anterior to the real, and the positioning of media (but particularly video games) into increasingly ontologically prime terms. I now set out *Ready Player One*'s machphrastic nostalgia, highlighting techniques Cline deploys to produce a popular culture canon for the 80s, how he represents the putatively normative aspects of video gaming now with an overblown 80s subcultural sensibility, and then overlaps this large normative geek demographic with Caillois' shamanic social function, much to its deficit. With the position fleshed out, I will then explore how *Ready Player One*'s machphrastic elements interact with the extant criticism on the novel's nostalgic power.

Early on, *Ready Player* One's protagonist Wade Watts, briefs the reader on his fervour for 80s video games. Shaken by gunfire in the 'stacks', a series of trailers built up into the sky, Wade turns to 'a few coin-op classics' namely 'Galaga, Defenders, Asteroids' to calm his nerves.[339] The games themselves have much in common; all are members of the arcade golden age, all come quite early in said golden age (with *Asteroids* bucking the 80s trend, being published in 1979), and all thematically take place in space, are agonistic, and were particularly popular, lucrative arcade machines—*Asteroids* and *Defender* were the 6th and 7th most profitable North American arcade machines respectively by 1993.[340] They are

[339] Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One* (New York: Random House, 2011), p. 13.
[340] Rebecca Northfield, 'Gaming's Golden Age', *Engineering & Technology Magazine*, 13 (2018), pp. 30-33 (p. 32). {https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?tp=&arnumber=8722610} [accessed 29/03/2021].

of the same era, the same genre by and large, and have the same themes. To evoke the kind the space explorative imagination of a science fiction future whilst also teasing a nostalgic link to gaming's past, merely one of these games would have sufficed. That one would have done the expositional job of three games makes Cline's list significant; early on, the canonical urge emerges. Cline falls back on listing, the most fundamental canonising literary technique, frequently in *Ready Player One*. This first list, composed with such built-in redundancy, cashes its nostalgic credit as a collection of safely canonical science fiction games. Let the first words of the canon be safe ones, Cline implies, and there can be few rhetorical strategies safer for a nostalgic science fictional video gaming novel than the constellation of science fictional arcade titles of repute from the 1980s.

To understand *Ready Player One*'s rhetorical creeping power, why it turned from benign fun to 'pernicious' text, is to understand the mundanity it shares with the list. Perhaps because they flaunt their own inaesthetic functionality, lists in fiction, propelled by the atomistic force of their real counterparts, can drag the world into fiction. Few have given the nature of the list more attention than Umberto Eco, whose *The Infinity of Lists* dares to enjoy boring through enumeration towards a poetics of the list. *Ready Player One*'s listing habit needs only three insights from Eco to highlight how it pivots between the real and the fictional. Distinguishing between 'practical' and 'poetic' lists, Eco cites the Torino football club supporters who chant their 1949 first 11, killed in the Superga Air disaster, as an example of a list that 'for a great many nostalgic fans [became] a poetic list, a kind of mantra to be recited with emotion'.[341] Much the same occurs with Cline's listing; lists form part of some ritualistic, holy communion that has here been transposed to video games. Wade's play, driven by 'a determined sort of reverence', completes a shift in its listed objects on two counts: mundanely it suppresses, not expresses, Wade's emotions as he comes to fear the

[341] Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists* (London: MacLehose Press, 2009), p. 371.

gunshots less, but 'for a great many nostalgic fans' the enumerative process implies specificity, importance, even reverence amongst the infinity not listed—a little 'reverence' rubs off on the list as a result. For Eco, worship forms the genealogical basis for the poetic list; that is, figurative art, 'being seized by the dizzying sound of the list' from the litanies of the saints (although you could return to Homer or Euripides, who listed plenty), cared not for 'present or absent' list content but for the 'rhythmic enunciation' that seemed to ensure its saint's holiness.[342] In other words, the poetic list can equally evoke the 'real' thrust of a practical list or the religious 'truth' of 'rhythmic enunciation' or mantra.

However, the nature of a list under the auspices of reality under siege makes even the most mundane enumerations confound Eco. Eco found particular discomfort in Jorge Luis Borges' chaotic enumerations. Borges' fictitious taxonomy of animals forces Eco to scramble for meaning within a list that 'defies any reasonable criterion of set theory'.[343] Reasonability is key here; Borges' animals range from those defined by possession, 'belonging to the emperor', to those defined by representation, 'drawn with a very fine brush', to those defined by circumstance and age, like 'stray dogs' or 'suckling pigs'.[344] As such, the reader is baffled by the list's absurd recursions (two criteria: 'included in the present classification' and 'countless', should be mutually exclusive, as the 'countless' become counted by their inclusion within the present classification, but cannot be because they are not counted, and so on) and bizarre specifications (the list suggests no animals belong to the emperor that are lovingly drawn, nor that the emperor can possess suckling pigs).[345] It is, both axiomatically and naively, an unreasonable list. Yet it persists where completely comprehensible lists eventually recede because it plays with alternative possibilities within the list; it appears to be a list thwartwise reality. It is this skewing quality

---

[342] *The Infinity of Lists*, p. 118.
[343] *The Infinity of Lists*, p. 395.
[344] Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* ed. by Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. 231.
[345] Ibid.

that Eco deems the 'vertigo' of Borgesian enumeration, the intoxicating effect of encountering a poetics of another reality. This vertigo, however, is only for 'the expert reader of the logic of sets' and, given that the declarative and classificatory mode of mathematics is set theory, I have no problem shifting Eco's focus from 'the logic of sets' to the more *Ready Player One* appropriate logic of alternateness.[346]

The following list illustrates how the logic of alternateness, and expertise therein, is scaffolded by Cline:

> Over the past five years, I'd worked my way down the entire recommended gunter reading list. Douglas Adams. Kurt Vonnegut. Neal Stephenson. Richard K. Morgan. Stephen King. Orson Scott Card. Terry Pratchett. Terry Brooks. Bester, Bradbury, Haldeman, Heinlein, Tolkien, Vance, Gibson, Gaiman, Sterling, Moorcock, Scalzi, Zelazny. I read every novel by every single one of Halliday's favorite authors.[347]

In agreement with Condis' interpretation, one might consider in this poetic list—a list doing its literary job by appearing to be canonical—the lack of BIPOC and women writers. It would be hard to excuse Cline for producing a tightly bound list: genre, popularity and literariness move from science fiction to fantasy, from Vance to Tolkien, from Gibson, Vonnegut and Bradbury to King, Card and Haldeman at breakneck speed.[348] One must wonder, then, how a novel could forget the Ursula K. Le Guins, the Octavia Butlers, the Samuel R. Delaneys of the world when said novel purports to be so obsessively nostalgic as to be encyclopaedic in scope for the 1980s. Perhaps characters like James Halliday, the novel's technology CEO *par excellence*, could be forgiven and Wade, obsessed with Halliday's quest, could be also, but novels are written by novelists. In other words, Halliday, Wade, and science fiction/fantasy enthusiasts of the 1980s writ large can forget these

[346] *The Infinity of Lists*, p. 395.
[347] *Ready Player One*, p. 62.
[348] Although it is worth mentioning that with Neil Gaiman, Roger Zelazny, Michael Moorcock and Alfred Bester, Cline's list boasts many Jewish fantasy and science fiction writers.

aforementioned active (and in Butler, Le Guin, and Delaney's cases, quite critically acclaimed) members of the 1980s science fiction/fantasy canon, but not Cline, whose own encyclopaedic aspiration makes unreasonable any claims of forgetting, and whose status as a genre writer I can only hope forecloses the possibility of his having never read or heard of these writers. In truth, this is to be expected when placating a logic of alternateness; the only genuine surprise is that Cline left Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac out. Just as nostalgia is as much a forgetting as a remembering, a collective nostalgia succeeds, not fails, when it forgets collectively.

It is more fruitful where these kinds of placations emerge, these kinds of chaotic enumerations of the negation of the negation of the negation, to consider again the shaman and their disdain for opposition. To read anything else, play anything else, listen to anything else would not only constitute a monumental waste of time narratologically speaking, but adhering to the list, the list without antithesis, is the only way to achieve the success so coveted by the vast majority in *Ready Player One*'s world—the keys to James Halliday's fortune and power. This interposes a deterministic precondition to artistic consumption where the purpose of engaging with art is reduced to the process of becoming Halliday. What can be said of Halliday's revered reading habits is, at least, that he reads like an expert in the logic of alternateness. The lack of opposition within Halliday's reading list equates to the lack of semantic opposition required by the shaman in order to judge the world. This culminates in a chaotic enumeration of a different kind to those of Borges. Where Borges relies upon recursion and absurdism to evoke the 'vertigo'—the poetics of another reality—that unnerved Eco, Cline instead creates by careful curation a path towards expert playing, knowing, and being with others that only a narrow subsection of the community could walk. In doing so, all other directions become wilderness against the backdrop of his canonicity. Manifesting as the natural animus of neoliberal individualism: the mantras and vertiginous

realities of the white tech CEO, Cline's list makes canonising safely and reading meekly the means of accruing quotidian hegemonic power:

> The more I'd learned about Halliday's life, the more I'd grown to idolize him. He was a god among geeks, a nerd über-deity on the level of Gygax, Garriott, and Gates. He'd left home after high school with nothing but his wits and his imagination, and he'd used them to attain worldwide fame and amass a vast fortune. He'd created an entirely new reality that now provided an escape for most of humanity. And to top it all off, he'd turned his last will and testament into the greatest videogame contest of all time.[349]

Again, a list surfaces, this time a comparison with *Dungeons & Dragon's* creator Gary Gygax, Richard Garriott of *Ultima* fame, and Microsoft CEO Bill Gates. Although Cline appears to invite his reader to reckon with these figures as parallels, these are clearly inspirations for Halliday, as Cline has lost the intertextuality of the list above, where a writer writes about writers. The rags-to-riches tale, that armed 'with nothing but his wits and his imagination' Halliday would go on to accumulate fame and fortune is a classic tale leaving much to be desired in terms of truth for any of these men, whose wealth stems from exploiting technological labour markets (even analogue technology, as with Gygax). This suggests the 1980s gamer mentality is better equipped to overcome perceived social and cultural hardships than is normally the case. Whatever the difference between being a gamer and not being a gamer is for Cline, it seems to express itself in a resilience to inequality, a resilience that, if video games leave the equation, would have to burst from thin air. Halliday, child of 'an alcoholic machine operator' and 'a bipolar waitress', received little encouragement or, as Cline's short but suggestive exposition implies, financial or emotional security during his upbringing—an altogether very different upbringing from the well-to-do Gateses and Garriotts of the world.[350] Halliday ranges from the simple nerdy masculine wish fulfilment that, in operating outside of the putatively masculine ideals of the 1980s, always

[349] *Ready Player One*, p. 52.
[350] *Ready Player One,* p. 53.

turns to either money or mastery of a beleaguered pastime. He becomes a proxy father figure for Wade, an aspirational senior figure idealised all the way up to 'nerd über-deity' status.

Halliday's characterisation as an eccentric, reclusive, genius technology magnate is just as essential to Cline's nostalgia as he is a means to justify Cline's exclusionary lists. For the 1980s is where the combination of technological innovation, charismatic leadership, supernormal profits, and fetishist corporate individualism all coalesce to produce the celebrity CEO. Although the turn towards romantic individualism and the celebrity CEO can be traced all the way back to early 20th century industrial giants like Henry Ford, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and John D. Rockefeller, it is Microsoft's Bill Gates, Apple's Steve Jobs, and Intel's Andrew Grove, whose forays in Silicon Valley tech laid the groundwork for today's tech giant celebrities like Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, Tesla's Elon Musk, Amazon's Jeff Bezos and, indeed, Gregarious Simulation Systems' James Halliday. Gates, Grove and Jobs seem particularly important, as no decade possessed the plethora of corporately successful, technologically savvy, yet socially devious or awkward white men quite like the 1980s did. Couple this with video gaming's genuine subcultural status in the 1980s, when the act of video gaming was still the preserve of 'socially awkward, machine-obsessed males, lacking in personal hygiene', according to media outlets, and the idea that video gamer nostalgic for the 1980s may also come to revere these corporate pioneers who look like them, sound like them, who are so important to the video games that comprise their sense of self becomes unsurprising.[351]

But machphrasis then steps in to subordinate this reality and its media to 'the greatest videogame contest of all time', where Halliday's 'last will and testament' represents nostalgic obsession with 1980s cultural objects in spiralling free-fall down into the mechanics of a video game. Previously, machphrasis as play has operated as a kind of

[351] Graeme Kirkpatrick, 'Making Games Normal: Computer Game Discourse in The 1980s', *New Media & Society*, 18 (2016), 1439-1454 (p. 1446).

postpositional metaphor; writers backload whatever narratological development video games are assisting or moving along. In other words, both the video game as object and as narrative tool becomes clearer the longer the literature in question sits with it. This makes sense when considered alongside the process of playing video games themselves, as video games give up their secrets and build skills and knowledge by trickling, not all at once. However, by positing that 'an entirely new reality' transforms into 'the greatest videogame contest of all time', here machphrasis' 'reality hunger' runs rampant from the outset, cashing its ability to project and posit another reality literally by supplanting reality with a more luxurious, hospitable gaming space. This shift to an always-already gaming position changes what can be said to be machphrastic from a narratological standpoint. In the same way that observing a painting in a video gaming VR environment is different to observing the same painting in reality because of an extra perceptual frame, all media is here contaminated by 'the greatest videogame contest of all time', harkening back to Marie-Laure Ryan's forewarning that sophisticated VR games may result in the end of media history. Perhaps not all of media history, but the 1980s cultural moment comprising Halliday's final rippling effect on the world of *Ready Player One* is nestled in a pseudo-epistolary machphrastic frame—the process of world building and the solidity of specification is entirely given over to video gaming to the point where the discussion of any media is subject to the contextualising hunger of Cline's video gamified world.

Halliday inherits from the celebrity CEOs above a *laissez-faire* attitude to being with others. Halliday is Cline's synthesis of these two nostalgic privileges (the Silicon Valley white tech CEO and mastery of a lexicon of putatively undervalued cultural objects) converging into a single threat. This condensed privilege expresses as a single mode where corporate power provides the logic of alternateness a crucial edge in its battle against reality: the ability to convert a perceived lack of cultural capital or adherence to the 'truth' of these nostalgic sentiments into tangible economic precarity. Cline plays with this in passages

detailing the rise and rise of Halliday's technology company, where the alternate reality of one directly impinges the material reality of another:

> Halliday seemed to expect everyone around him to share his obsessions, and he often lashed out at those who didn't. He was known to fire longtime employees for not recognizing an obscure line of movie dialogue he quoted, or if he discovered they weren't familiar with one of his favorite cartoons, comic books, or videogames. (Ogden Morrow would always hire the employee back, usually without Halliday ever noticing.)[352]

By reducing the sum of being with others to his personal 'obsessions', Halliday models the endgame for the logic of alternateness. The expectation of hospitable, adaptive reception characterising Sullivan's white world-travelling benefits from the shamanistic reallocation of social resources here, and so may take up a more aggressive position against reality where appeasing alternate reality is the only means to maintain liveable reality. Cline seems partially aware of this abuse of power; the parenthetical apology that ends the paragraph walks back some of Halliday's malignancy, rhetorically hedging the sentiment's reception. Stylistically, Cline's hedge unnaturally hangs outside the rhetoric it hedges against.[353] Understanding the parenthetical aside as supplemental information, the apology chimes as essentially incomplete. As Morrow accomplishes this small act of mercy 'usually without Halliday ever noticing', Cline illustrates Halliday's relational quagmire as best business practice; just as Stark's research suggests, readers learn that life goes on at Gregarious Simulation Systems perfectly, profitably, when Halliday is at his exclusionary best. So Morrow's gesture and Cline's apology rings hollower than even the sentence's construction would encourage—just as Tristram Shandy received the Archbishop of Benevento's *Galateo,* finding 'the phenomenon had not been worth the parenthesis', so too here.[354] Cline

[352] *Ready Player One*, p. 55,
[353] Cline deploys this parenthetical straggler frequently and inconsistently throughout *Ready Player One*, sometimes appearing to be direct address (p. 36, p. 49) and sometimes appearing to be supplemental information as one may use a footnote (p. 33) and sometimes the two are combined (p. 49). This is made more stylistically idiosyncratic by Cline also deploying conventional footnotes (p. 3, p. 6).
[354] Lawrence Sterne, *The Life & Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 367.

has in Halliday a composite character of social privileges: power, genius, adulation and an obsession with video games. These are all things gamers can either relate or aspire to, and makes social privilege the natural by-product of exclusion, workplace harassment and social deviancy. In other words, Cline reshapes a narrowly defined, nostalgic and thus misremembered version of point 2 of machphrasis (video games literarily deployed as a mode of aesthetic experience) into a fantasy of point 3, where these experiences and predispositions reify as the supposed history of underdog social and economic success.

As bizarre a reason as this may appear to fire an employee, Halliday's fragile relationship with those keeping the lights on represents a penchant for firing uniting many celebrity CEOs. Executive turnover at Musk's Tesla reached 27% in 2019 according to *BusinessInsider*—high for the sector—but it is reports of Musk's telling senior stuff that 'I've got to fire someone today' that betrays the shoot first, ask questions never approach that corporate leaders can take.[355] The article goes on to report the firing of a young engineer who ran afoul of one of Musk's firing sprees. The confused engineer 'asked Musk to explain what he meant' by a machine not working, and after asking for further clarification, 'Musk called him a 'a f---ing idiot' and told him to 'get the f--- out of here and don't come back!'.[356] Note that perceptual differences that cause this clash. Perhaps Musk simply had to fire someone that day. Or perhaps Musk—an avid gamer—saw something that others did not, something so integral to his perception of reality that his truth became the fact of the matter. Truth, however, is not the matter of facts. Unless, of course, reality (or at least its primacy) can be done away with and replaced with another.

Therefore, relating to pieces of art would never be sufficient to Halliday or Wade. It becomes necessary to obliterate the object of knowledge itself by overextending gaming's

---

[355] Isobel Asher Hamilton, 'Tesla employees were reportedly told to not walk past Elon Musk's desk because of his wild firing rampages', (*Businessinsider*: 2018), {https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musk-reportedly-terrified-tesla-staff-with-his-firing-sprees-2018-12?r=US&IR=T} [accessed 27/08/2021].
[356] Ibid.

grip on other works of art. Cline accomplishes this, as mentioned above, by diminishing the works of literature to content for a game in a manner not dissimilar to paragonal ekphrasis' presumption of the arts' urge to subordinate one another. Another way Cline manages this is by disrupting the materiality of works of art themselves by positioning the gamer at the heart of other media's proceedings. The mimicry game Wade plays of the 1983 film *WarGames* is a machphrastic endeavour geared towards improving the realm of film by interposing the logics and rules of video gaming. Wade seems enamoured; he recounts during the experience that 'I started to feel giddy. This was incredible. I was totally *inside the movie*. Halliday had transformed a fifty-year-old film into a real-time interactive videogame', suggesting some touristic glee in inhabiting a film that only video gaming's interactivity will satisfy.[357] In the preface to *A Theory of Adaptation's* second edition, Linda Hutcheon notes that 'some acknowledge that video games adaptations of films will probably always be seen as derivative and secondary productions'; she hopes that adaptation will win the day and that optimism might be more appropriate.[358] Hutcheon is correct in spirit, but Cline's deployment of other media in machphrastic contexts possesses more bad faith than Hutcheon's more sympathetic adaptation arguments would wish to gloss. The world Cline envisions as utopian is only such for those who can expect adaptive hospitable reception, where the special voyeur may transform an aesthetic formal precondition to suit the passing of judgement from the vantage point of another, putatively better media standpoint. Yet, by universally applying the video game's formal qualities and any and all media in the guise of improving it, Cline in fact flattens and devalues video gaming by painting its form across the face of all media. Cline, perhaps the face of machphrastic writing, commits the ultimate regression: he has managed to transform machphrasis back into ekphrasis.

[357] *Ready Player One*, p. 110.
[358] Linda Hutcheon, Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed, (2013: Routledge, New York), pp. xxvii-xxviii.

Consuming and appreciating art and media products becomes more like wearing them as animal skins than distanced reflection. Wade channels via his mastery of the logic of alternateness (here explicitly the formal alternateness of *WarGames*) a fantasy of inhabiting the icons of 1980s nerd culture *in medias res*. Performance and the concept of performativity might appear salvific at first glance, but if performativity is worth anything as a framework, it surely cannot rehabilitate this reiterative shadow of what performing ought to be. Wade himself denigrates the performing process, stating that '[a]fter a while, I even discovered that I could earn bonus points by delivering a line in the exact tone and with the same inflection as in the film' conflating acting in films with agonistic point-scoring to aggrandise the latter.[359] However, it is at least permitted and often encouraged that the actor performing the character in the play embolden the character with personal idiosyncrasy and verve; this relationship between the difference of actors and the stasis of characters comprises much of performance's life, theatrically conceived. Wade's performance of performance is gaming at its most mechanical and ritualistic (which is where gaming is at its most actorly) confusing the values and skills of one kind of media product with another. Theatricality, performance, and mimicry may sometimes covet precision, but only bad theatre benefits from speedrunning.[360] If Ezra Pound's mantra was to 'make it new', then *Ready Player One*'s would be to make it exactly the same. Cline commits a machphrastic mix-up: the effort to complete video games—a definitionally limited endeavour—equates biliously to the limitlessness of performance.

It is at that juncture where a little machphrasis arrives again to soothe a crucial antinomy within the logic of alternateness. As Riley understands argues, even when simulating fantasies of power, the gamer themselves is not that power, and by misconstruing

---

[359] *Ready Player One*, p. 112.

[360] 'Speedrunning' is the process of attempting to complete a video game, or portion of a video game, as fast as possible. For more information (theoretical and concrete) about speedrunning, see Rainforest Scully Baker's 'A Practiced Practice: Speedrunning Through Space with de Certeau and Virilio', *Game Studies*, 14(1) (2014), {https://www.gamestudies.org/1401/articles/scullyblaker} [accessed: 21/02/2024].

a selective history of the 1980s and their reverence to corporate cults of personality as subversive cultural capital they are suddenly and violently beset by their have-nots; that is, the gamer's adherence to the status quo has not paid material dividends as it should. Therefore, when the logic of alternateness fails its adherents, an anonymity-powered scorched-earth policy may occur, leading to historically significant events like #GamerGate. Alternatively, the shamans may pick the ball up and go home. Usually, the shamanic social function ushers in changes to the status quo, but the logic of alternateness fails to distinguish itself from the normative ideological position at hand. The Capitol Hill riots mentioned earlier are one example of this. Rioters failed to understand that the very values they believed only they would uphold—freedom, democracy, American exceptionalism—required the dissolution of these self-same values. The ideological position that understands these values as distinctly American should value electoral legitimacy and that, since independence, American liberal democracy is insusceptible to insurrection, but apparently not. Alt-right extremism failed to deliver Trump back to the presidency, however, because despite their nostalgic urge to 'make America great again', their exceptionalism does not translate to exception. Those who extol alt-right political sentiment in America are more likely to be unemployed, lack college degrees, and live in the relatively impoverished South—as Stark's belief that *Ready Player One* represents didactic neoliberalism implicitly suggests, neoliberalism has successfully coerced many white Americans to vote against their best interests even when their social mobility and political power remains inert by political and corporate design.[361] The ability to manipulate reality suits those who are white and poor immeasurably because of this. Cline seems to understand this, as in the following quotation Halliday offers the ultimate alternate reality fantasy to Wade:

[361] George Hawley, The Demography of the Alt-Right, (Institute for Family Studies, 2018), {https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-demography-of-the-alt-right} [accessed 02/09/2021].

> "I call this the big red button," Halliday said. "If you press it, it will shut off the entire OASIS and launch a worm that will delete everything stored on the GSS servers, including all of the OASIS source code. It will shut down the OASIS forever." He smirked. "So don't press it unless you're absolutely positive it's the right thing to do, OK?" He gave me an odd smile. "I trust your judgement."[362]

Like Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the dead and their land provide the opportunity for the complete upheaval of a social space now tenuously and non-consensually possessed. This possession differs from simple possessing, as it envelops the set of possessions within it in a way that only possessing reality can accomplish. Although Wade 'earns' this possession by the novel's account, this kind of reality-ownership is too diffuse, too socially constructed, ever to be given. Remember that the vast majority of *Ready Player One's* civic and social world depends upon the OASIS. Education, entertainment, social media, and many other public spheres of life require the OASIS's continued existence, and so this built-in self-destruction becomes a global threat. Although all these things exist in some form as either private or public property, it is peculiar that a novel proposing the possibility of their wholesale digital destruction by a single private owner can be described as utopian. The same goes for the strange stakes of this allocation of power; even the quest for the holy grail that *Ready Player One* resembles enough to sustain Arthurian interpretations does not deify its heroes to quite the degree that Wade is exalted here. The correct allocation of honours and resources of Wade's mastery of the logic of alternateness is here expressed as more than all of them. Halliday's final mad qualifier, 'I trust your judgement', recalls Neuromancer's positioning against social values once more, with Halliday being the dead and the OASIS his land. However, where Neuromancer offered the ambiguous peace it could, here Halliday rests not in peace, but in the possibility of apocalyptic judgement. A judgement deferred from one shaman to another via shifting private property; Cline is insightful here, if only by imagining that politics under the auspices of aggressive privatisation and small-state

[362] *Ready Player One,* p. 364

economic dogma transforms social goods into leverage, into a ransom. Though as the safety net becomes the sword of Damocles, the disarmingly cartoonish 'big red button' and the jocular smirks encourage the readership to relate to the situation playing out. A simple, sympathetic reading of Halliday and Wade's psychic life in these moments suggests the novel ends happily.

Despite *Ready Player One* being the novel this thesis could not do without, it is a novel that, in truth, is primarily useful as an example of where machphrasis unveils the infelicitous thinking of some gaming communities. Overall, Cline's presumed utopian sensibilities, couched in nostalgia and coached by machphrastic rhetoric, arrive at far more dystopian conclusions for those who do not or cannot follow the shamanic logic of alternateness. From a reality hungry depreciation of fact to the aggressive social strategies this shamanism overplayed invites, Cline's novel inadvertently draws up a series of aesthetic infelicities that video games may exacerbate. Perhaps *Ready Player One* is an important text, then, because Cline manages via his machphrastic nostalgia to capture the similar self-aggrandising exceptionalism comprising both the nostalgic gamer and the contemporary moment's white man. It would be unwise to reckon that machphrasis, like nostalgia, is purely the tool of this social urge. It need not be this way, not necessarily; Cline's nostalgic machphrasis is but one direction novelists can take if they wish for video games to serve ideological positions in their prose.

Chapter 5: The Nail That Protrudes: *Warcross*, Gamelit/LitRPG, and New Possibilities for Virtuous Action

One of media ecological thinking's most important facets is that allows for interpretations of media's primary reconfiguring influence on society. Even if it cannot offer productive routes for solving ethical quagmires surrounding discrete media objects (illuminating the problem is often difficult enough), it can bring abstract, often elusive, systems of media into sharp relief. Take Darshana Jayemanne's pondering, after exploring nothing less than the tactile unconscious of gaming as expressed by Margaret Atwood's queasy *Oryx and Crake* characters, that he may yet go further into the very heart of the ethical and wonder 'whether "sins against videogame time" will need to be radically redefined'.[363] It seems a euphemism to say that video gaming's ethical discourse is problematic. At many turns, the quintessential ethical media problem, taken as problems posed to players in choices they make; as problems equally posed by the anti-utilitarian who may wonder if playing video games productively uses one'; as problems of violence, indecency, and desensitisation spill from games into players and, of course, as players become gamers, they may become problems themselves. Yet the land of problems has valleys low alongside mountains high; fractious, committal ethical spaces allow for the most decisive shifts in perspective.

I will frame Marie Lu's *Warcross* as a rare text thinking this radical transformation of ethical and civic life in the 21st century via machphrasis. Before doing so, I will take the time to explain the history of the genre *Warcross* belongs to: Gamelit, and its predecessor, now subgenre, LitRPG. I do so to bring discussions to bear on these literary genres in the anglophone world and, to machphrasis' credit, it is well positioned to relay these genres' complexities whilst also presaging their futures. Through *Warcross* specifically, I will make

[363] Darshana Jayemanne, *Performativity in Art, Literature and Videogames*, (Cham: Springer Nature, 2017), p. 219.

claims for Gamelit as a literary machphrastic genre possessing special tools for recontextualising various facets of video games and gaming culture in subversive modes. Some of this generic stopping power it owes to its complex history, yet much comes from the reconfiguring achieved in Lu's *Warcross*, where video gaming aesthetic fancies and computerised ideologies of gender, race, and disability creates a rarefied image of the gamer in photo-negativity. Ultimately, *Warcross* is a fitting final text to discuss in this thesis because it represents a beginning of the antithetical machphrastic dialectic proposed by point 3, that machphrasis can theorise ways of living with and through video games that oppose normative video gamer identity construction: it is the nail that protrudes.

This perhaps seems an overextension of *Warcross;* the reader is forgiven if they have never heard of the two genres from which Lu's text has made a radical divergence. This is not helped by the sparse academic material on the subject. Generally, the most comprehensive definitions of both Gamelit and LitRPG come from publishers invested in authors or readerships comprising the commercial community. Although Annelise Farris suggests in her thesis *The Boundless Self: Disability in Virtual Reality* (likely the most comprehensive and sustained discussion of LitRPG in the academic anglophone world to date), that LitRPG 'seems to have been first coined by Joseph Bottum' in 2016, she is only half right.[364] Bottum is certainly early to the party amongst English speakers, but LitRPG is the product of three Russian writers: Vasily Mahanenko, Ruslan D. Mikhailov, and Dmitry Rus, brought together under the LitRPG genre in August 2013 by Eksmo, Russia's largest publishing house.[365] Best to start at the beginning, then, in Russia. As Conor Kostick explains, the Russian origin accounts for the reason why the portmanteau LitRPG rings slightly unnaturally to anglophone ears; in the English-speaking world, 'RPGLit' would

[364] Anelise Farris, 'The Boundless Self: Disability in Virtual Reality' (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Idaho State University, 2019), p. 4.
[365] Eksmo, Book Series: LitRPG, (2013) {https://eksmo.ru/series/LitRPG-ITD460/} [accessed 04/10/2021].

have been the more appropriate choice.[366] Eksmo understands LitRPG to be a 'fantasy genre that describes events and characters in the virtual game world', with South Korean author Heesung Nam's 2007 *The Legendary Moon Sculptor* and Japanese author Reki Kawahara's 2009 *Sword Art Online* the foundational texts for Russian LitRPG writers.[367] Both aforementioned texts are isekai light novels: short in length, often serialised and illustrated novels where the main character transports to a fantasy or science fictional world.[368] Isekai and the light novel are particularly popular amongst Japanese young adults, but it is a successful genre across East Asia. Isekai, with its baked-in conceits that produce worlds for characters to portal between, proved an especially useful touchstone for early Russian LitRPG writers, who took the tale of two worlds and ran with the digitalised, ludic one. Now that the LitRPG's 'when' and 'where' have (for now) been addressed, I will turn to its 'what'. What the LitRPG is, is a relatively straightforward triangulation of the following definitions, supplied by LitRPG writers, publishers, and academics respectively:

> 'LitRPG is an emerging genre of fiction that combines the experience of digital role playing games with traditional narrative plotlines. It weaves a story around a protagonist that consciously immerses themselves in a virtual world to follow the quests and challenges set by the game realm.'[369]
>
> 'LitRPG is a subgenre of science fiction and fantasy which describes the hero's adventures within an online computer game. LitRPG books merge traditional book-style narration with elements of a gaming experience, describing various quests, achievements and other events typical of a video game.'[370]
>
> '[in LitRPG] the basic mechanics of tabletop role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons (1974), these days almost entirely remediated through their video game versions, return to novelistic fiction, which then organizes its narratives around the scaling of levels and abilities, the acquisition of weapons and characteristics, and so on, that define those game modes.'[371]

---

[366] Conor Kostick, What is LitRPG?, [LevelUP: n.d.] {https://www.levelup.pub/what-is-LitRPG} [accessed 04/10/2021].
[367] Eksmo, {https://eksmo.ru/series/LitRPG-ITD460/} [accessed 04/10/2021]; Heesung Nam, *The Legendary Moonlight Sculptor*, (Seoul: ROK Media, 2007); Reki Kawahara, *Sword Art Online*, (Tokyo: ASCII Media Works, 2009).
[368] Robert Ciesla, *Game Development with Ren'Py,* (California: Burkeley, 2019), p. 87.
[369] The Urban Writers, LitRPG: The Genre That's Revolutionizing Fiction (2020), { https://theurbanwriters.com/blogs/publishing/LitRPG-genre-that-s-revolutionizing-fiction} [accessed 04/10/2021].
[370] Magic Dome, LitRPG, (2020), {http://md-books.com/genre/LitRPG} [accessed 04/10/2021].
[371] Eric Hayot, 'Video Games & The Novel', *Daedalus*, 150(1) (2021), 178-187, p. 181.

All seem to agree that the interpellation of some of video games' formal qualities—the damage systems, the crafting mechanics, the respawning, levelling, and so on—are essential to the LitRPG genre. The question of the LitRPG genre, therefore, is the very question of machphrasis: the conventions of expressly video gaming flavours of the role-playing game inform how LitRPG organises narrative, characterisation, and intertextuality. Wilfully taken to an extreme, the LitRPG displays remarkable rigidity as a way of writing fiction. Unlike fantasy fiction, for example, which relishes the indeterminacy of a 'fuzzy set' to model its finite area yet infinite perimeter, the LitRPG instead functions with Shannonian Booleans—a 1 and a 0, a yes or a no.[372] As with Shannon's binaries, however, this inflexibility does mean that 1 + 1 sometimes equals 1. LitRPG describes a genre of contemporary machphrastic writing very well but fails to express the shades of grey inherent in applying machphrasis at the scale of genre. For example, during their protagonist's clash with goblins, it is not clear how far the writer should go in order to convey the prerequisite LitRPG genre conventions and still write a readable novel. When the goblin takes 10 damage from a sword attack, several mathematical processes may occur to bring about this consequence. At the level of the games themselves, the goblin's weaknesses and strengths, armour, condition of the weapon, various buffs and debuffs, and suchlike will usually impact the numbers churning out of player combat. A critically immersive LitRPG experience, insomuch as it would highlight the interconnectedness of things, might overcompensate and lose in their adherence to gaming process too much of gaming as experience. This means that *Ready Player One*—an immensely important text for creating a community of LitRPG readers—is not technically a LitRPG novel, missing too much of the numerical 'crunch' the genre insists upon. The spirit, then, is clearly not enough to appease the community: numbers, gear, levelling must all be present and foregrounded. But even here, it is not lost on writers like

[372] Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1992), pp. 11-12.

Hayot that we derive these elements from older tabletop games. The conditions of putatively machphrastic prose, therefore, is already modelled by its ludic predecessors.

Comparing these definitions, a distinct bricolage manifests between the needs of two audiences. The LitRPG genre (at least the strand finding success in western Europe and America) is clearly indebted to the novel form and role-playing games alike. Where this genre receives role-playing inspiration from, however, is a matter of debate amongst the definitions. Where Urban Writers and Magic Dome publishers stress the decidedly digitalised, computerised origins for LitRPG, Hayot seeks to posit a lengthier list of influences by turning those 'basic mechanics of tabletop role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons' into LitRPG inspirations. Despite conceding that D&D rules and systems are 'these days almost entirely remediated through their video game versions', by accounting for the genre forming across two tales of ludic role-playing, Hayot focusses the LitRPG's contested heritage and its essentially imbricated form. Despite appreciating this added complexity, it is important not to understate the unambiguously computerised video gaming influences on LitRPG when paying due diligence to the tabletop systems alive in LitRPG. For most LitRPGs, D&D comprises the source of the source. D&D, then, is to the LitRPG what D&D is to machphrasis itself: an interesting, though usually not perfunctory, textual system outstripped in its influence by more overt video gaming logics within contemporary fiction.

Strict focus on the 'Lit' aspect of LitRPG brings scant order to the problem of genre. Describing LitRPG as a subgenre of either science fiction or fantasy fails to nuance the issue, for different reasons. Taking science fiction first, a specificity issue emerges. Although many of science fiction's thematic concerns, such as the role of mediating technology in society, the limits of human embodiment, the dangers of evangelised logical positivism and so on do present themselves in LitRPG, it is also important to acknowledge that the immersive

technologies allowing players to play are as much a narratological means as a thematic or ideological end. What I mean is, narratologically speaking, a blended technological and video gaming conceit is necessary for almost all LitRPGs to perform their formal purpose of immersing a protagonist in a game-world, but this contrivance itself is often undercooked *mise en abyme* at best, incongruent at worst alongside a secondary yet focal game-world setting. In short, sometimes science fictional frames meet science fictional game-worlds, but when they do not, declaring said fiction science fiction appears quite arbitrary. Conversely, I am sympathetic to Farris' aligning of LitRPG with cyberpunk as 'the larger subgenre that LitRPG is housed in', because cyberpunk has, as this thesis argues, always been interested in interrogating the nature of video games with machphrastic techniques.[373]

Fantasy runs into a slightly different issue. Generally speaking, a text becomes a fantasy text when the settings and events do not adhere to our own understanding of reality. Many fantasy definitions deploy this line of thought; for example, Kathryn Hume defines fantasy as 'any departure from consensus reality […] manifested in innumerable variations, from monster to metaphor' which, taken literally, would embrace much of LitRPG.[374] Taken literally, it would also embrace much of science fiction, weird fiction, and memoirs like *Gamelife* as well—perhaps taking Hume literally is not the point (though Hume defines Fantasy more broadly than many). But even if we understand the spirit of Hume's argument, that fantasy is conceivable in any thwartwise direction of reality, then we must also appreciate the difference between realities that can be anticipated and ones which cannot be. As soon as fantastic events become horizontalized, become products of anything other than the imagination, then they definitionally cease to be fantastic. This is to fantasy's great benefit and deserves protection, at least in theory. Without this distinction, fantasy becomes co-opted by a brand of ironic fantasy, whereby the literary fantastic tropes reify as lines of

[373] *The Boundless Self*, p. 26.
[374] Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, (London, Routledge Revivals: 2015), pp. 20-21.

code, player agency and choice, or, sometimes, simple spectacle. Consider the previous goblin example: forgetting the crunchy numbers for a moment, it seems important to maintain some distinction between the sincere goblin-ness of the armies of Sauron, for example, and the representation of goblins in game-worlds which are, in turn, represented in fiction. Against Hume's grain, LitRPG's easy explanation of fantastic events means that, despite its 'innumerable variations' some fantasy breaks the rules enough to be discountable.

Disregarding my contentions regarding the LitRPG and its space within other genres, these definitions also espouse conflicting temporal tenses; it is not clear whether LitRPG is more appropriately classified as an 'emerging' or 'returning' genre of fiction. If LitRPG's footfall within contemporary literary culture recurs as opposed to sets off straightforwardly, the question then becomes what in 'novelistic fiction' guides this retracement. If by 'return' Hayot is gesturing to LitRPG sparking renewed interest in titillating, swashbuckling, male-oriented adventure fiction such as Alexander Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, or perhaps the pulp fiction sword and sorcery popularity in pre-war America, where Robert E. Howard's *Conan The Barbarian* underwent mass production in cheap magazine form for large male audiences alongside Margaret Brundage's illustrated scantily-clad women and muscular men, then it is easy to sympathise with Hayot's belief that LitRPG is returning to pulpy adventures. This makes for queasy reading in the 21st century. Just as Mary Kenny Badami admonished (amongst more esteemed science fiction writers) 'the sickies in sword and sorcery', whose writing and reading 'play right into bondage fantasies and sadomasochism' which, for Badami, fostered 'a rape mentality' amongst the young audience Badami presumes are the target audience, so too does the LitRPG's overtly male gaze suggest it is picking up where sword and sorcery left off during the 1920s and 30s.[375] That is not to say

[375] Mary Kenny Badami, 'A Feminist Critique of Science Fiction', *Extrapolations,* 18(1) (1976), 6-19 (p. 8); Illustrative of LitRPG's niches is the 'Harem LitRPG', a genre of erotic machphrastic writing centred on a male protagonist's journey in a game and his retinue of hypersexualised feminine avatars. I omit an analysis of erotic machphrastic texts for brevity's sake.

there has been nothing between now and then to fill this capricious niche. Although it strains credulity to return to 30s pulp fiction's oeuvre for inspiration, the LitRPG does, however, appear especially capable of singing the songs of angry men.

This renewed interest in mass produced, male facing pulp fiction comes with an economic semblance as well. Both Mark McGurl and Sergei Shickarev frame LitRPG's success within growing self-publication online services, particularly those offered by Amazon's book branch. For McGurl, the Kindle in particular drives a more open relationship with perversion, particularly an 'alternating patriarchal and matriarchal, Oedipal and pre-Oedipal eroticism' evident in contemporary pulp (albeit digitalised) fiction, the manipulation of which presents the Kindle as 'nothing short of epochal in its significance for Amazon's relation to contemporary literary life'.[376] Note that this perversion does not rely upon or simply refer to the fetish, the kink, or specific sexual orientations. Instead, it is a market phenomenon whereby the gross inundation of a literary space with diminished barriers to entry (and nowhere could you diminish these barriers more emphatically than to renounce traditional publishers—as with the Kindle Direct Publishing service), balloons the possibilities of all texts existing within that space. This leads to genre becoming a 'browsable infinity of enjoyments, a vast range of objects and services, tastes and textures and images—and narratives—that meet our immediate demand', and an infinity of enjoyments contains much that may offend prudish sensibilities.[377] It is a truism of the internet that even the most peripheral ether of the internet's interest will, given enough time, create pornography in its likeness.[378] McGurl describes Aleron Kong, 'self-described 'father' of the popular new genre called LitRPG' as one producer of 'crowd-pleasing generic forms', whose genre fiction, alongside many published by Kindle Direct Publishing, encourages critics to dismiss

[376] Mark McGurl, 'Unspeakable Conventionality: The Perversity of The Kindle', *American Literary History,* 33(2) (2021), 394-415 (p. 395).
[377] Ibid.
[378] KnowYourMeme, Rule 34*,* (America: 2021) {https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rule-34} [accessed 11/10/2021].

‘blanket prejudices against popular forms’ and ‘[get] with the program of shamelessly pluralised perverted pleasures’.[379]

But it should be clear this argument makes LitRPG both a return to pulp but also an emergence from the Amazonian Forest of contemporary self-publication and literary inundation. Whereas McGurl provides a descriptive account of LitRPG in this respect, Shickarev’s framing of LitRPG as mere ‘market segment’ and ‘more a market phenomenon than a literary movement’ leads the discourse back to prescriptivism.[380] In some sense Shickarev is correct. Just as Hayot remarks upon LitRPG novels as being of ‘dubious literary value in the usual sense’, meaning that in his view those thinking about the contemporary novel can ‘afford to ignore the texts in question’, and as Badami’s weariness of pulp fiction’s penchant for denigrating women may extend to LitRPG novels, Shickarev keeps older reservations alive about policing the difference between radical, sincere genre fiction and those written to sell, not say.[381] In truth, whether they use LitRPG to shrug at new genre formulations or bring it along to show the effects of corporatist publication strategies, what all theorists are, *pace* Farris, is brief. That much of the scholarship mentioned above deals with LitRPG in mostly off-hand, single entendre remarks as opposed to sustained analysis betrays that, even amongst emerging genre fiction, LitRPG rarely falls into discourse surrounding machphrastic writing despite representing prime real estate for such thinking. Why this might be the case is that the LitRPG as modelled here is perfect for easy, illustrative judgement of aesthetic or ethical grounds, yet few texts warrant anything other than blanket statements about the genre in question: there is no nail that protrudes.

This is a shame, because the LitRPG, broadened ever so slightly, possesses radical potential hitherto unprecedented for machphrastic research going into the future. By moving

---

[379] *Unspeaking Conventionality*, p. 399.
[380] Sergei Shickarev, ‘High Waves, Quiet Backwaters’, *Russian Studies in Literature,* 52(3-4) (2016), 209-234 (p. 232).
[381] *Video Games & The Novel*, p. 181.

away from the dogmatic descriptions of LitRPG, Gamelit can encompass its spirit and disavow its zealotry. Gamelit is a far more inclusive genre than LitRPG. Gone is the need for meticulous, processual descriptions of various game systems and gone is the explicit character progression. Most Gamelit will lean to some extent on these LitRPG conventions, but the form is looser, less obligated to produce viable playable characters, less keen to display a character literally progressing in favour of more conventional novelistic character progression. Gamelit only requires three things: immersion in a game-world, this world to have rules, and an interest in exploring the nature of video games.[382] Doing so opens the door to other origins, particularly in writing by women; it is important to prefigure the dominant history of LitRPG described above with voices waylaid yet central to the formation of Gamelit. Andre Norton (penname of Alice Andre Norton), for example, writes the first novelisation of D&D with *Quag Keep* in 1978, followed in the 1980s by D&D publishers TSR officially producing fiction in D&D settings, with series such as Dragonlance and the Forgotten Realms commenced in 1984 and 1987 respectively.[383] Norton begins the reasonable history of Gamelit, but from the point before machphrasis. Here the source of the source seems more pertinent than before: Norton provides both the literary and ludic inspiration taken as one, as opposed to being derived from remediation. Taiwanese writer Yu Wo's omission from the list of influences Eksmo provides seems remiss; Wo's *½ Prince* book series takes place predominantly in a video game, yet she fails to be name checked with Kawahara and Nam. Perhaps Eksmo can be forgiven, as Wo's light novels are more popular in her native Taiwan and other East Asian countries, but this highlights how thinking about LitRPG and Gamelit in western-centric terms fails to appreciate their world literary potentials.

---

[382] Conor Kostick, What are the Best Gamelit Books?, (LevelUp: 2021) {https://www.levelup.pub/best-Gamelit} [accessed 11/10/2021].

[383] Ester MacCallum-Stewart, Jaakko Stenros and Staffan Björk, 'The Impact of Role-Playing Games on Culture' in *Role-Playing Games Studies,* ed. by José P. Zagel and Sebastian Deterding (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 172-187 (p. 177).

Gamelit has a tumultuous history itself. Gamelit comes onto the scene in 2017, four years after LitRPG is established in Russia, but also one year after Kong registers 'LitRPG' as a supplemental trademark with the United States Patent and Trademark Office.[384] This would prove a source of much consternation for the American LitRPG community, and so Gamelit became the way writers like 'R. M. Mulder, Zachariah Dracoulis, Dustin Tigner, and John Ward' would begin describing their fiction.[385] By doing so, LitRPG writers could protect themselves from potential legal claims against their work by Kong and allow greater machphrastic fluidity in their writing. Together, these writers decided upon the following definition:

> A story with gaming elements essential to the plot. Often includes features of Science Fiction, Fantasy, or Science Fantasy. While all LitRPG books fit within Gamelit, not all Gamelit books fit within LitRPG. This is an open genre. There are no official groups, gatekeepers, or rule-makers.[386]

Taken at face value, this definition allows writers to tell stories with video games with greater flexibility. Greater flexibility means that more marginalised voices can make themselves heard, and so the idea that Gamelit constitutes 'an open genre' is more palatable than the LitRPG genre. Nonetheless, Gamelit is still best understood as a more flexible LitRPG; the greater attention paid to fleshing out that space bleeds through despite Gamelit being the encompassing genre. One might question whether there can be 'no official groups, gatekeepers, or rule-makers' when Gamelit is the product of groups of Americans fighting

---

[384] Aleron Kong, 'LitRPG' (2018) {https://trademarks.justia.com/871/93/litrpg-87193675.html#:~:text=LITRPG%20Trademark%20of%20Aleron%20K,Number%2087193675%20%3A%3A%20Justia%20Trademarks&text=041%20%2D%20Education%3B%20providing%20of%20training,entertainment%3B%20sporting%20and%20cultural%20activities.} [accessed 12/10/2021]; Trademarking a financially strategic word in the world of online self-publication is nothing new; see Devon Fitzgerald Ralston, '"Cockygate": Trademark Trolling, Romance Novels, and Intellectual Property' in *The 2018 Intellectual Property Annual* ed. by C. Ratliff (Urbana, IL: Intellectual Property Standing Group of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2019), 21-32 {https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5p79427f} [accessed 12/10/2021], for an exploration of a similar instance of trademarking trouble and how it effects the self-publication ecosystem.

[385] R. M. Mulder, Gamelit is Not Synonymous with LitRPG, (2018) {https://indieilluminati.wordpress.com/2018/03/07/Gamelit-is-not-synonymous-to-LitRPG/} [accessed 12/10/2021].

[386] Ibid.

over the usage and ownership of a Russian term, but as Haraway reminds, cyborgs can be exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Gamelit, therefore, may be retrievable. Time will tell if this division will constitute a success for Gamelit, but for now, it opens up machphrasis to an important dialectical opportunity. For this schism at the heart of American writing about games represents the first synthetic moment for a thoroughgoing machphrastic writing mode—machphrasis has its first organised disagreement about how it ethically conducts itself at the scale of genre. I hope that at this juncture machphrastic analysis can posit an optimistic future for Gamelit in particular. This is because Lu's 2017 young adult (YA) novel *Warcross* begins a new chapter for machphrasis, whereby the very question of what ethical conduct may be in the 21st century presents itself, a century where video games percolates through many of the civic and social avenues where citizens conduct themselves. Lu, as I will explore, is early to this party; she accomplishes through the inversion of a variety of machphrastic tropes previously discussed what may be a prescient coding of virtue in videoludified society.

One of the ways Lu begins thinking the virtuous gamer is by reconstituting how gaming literacy concepts such as hacking will function as they become more readily available. Traditionally in fiction, hacking has been the preserve of white males and occurs in service of either white male individualism (such as with *Neuromancer*'s Case) or ideologies crucial to propagating the status quo (as with *Ready Player One's* Wade Watts). However, *Warcross* captures in Emika Chen a less normative hacking body, exploring how hacking may be refigured in lieu of more proportionally representative computing and gaming. Doing so extends the reach of, say, a Molly Millions character, who was subject to the penetrative (though playful) hacking by Case and so became more like a game, to becoming autonomous in a space equally under threat from digital interlopers. Take 'Annie Pattridge' who after 'a boy working on a group project with Annie manage to snap a photo of her showering in the privacy of her own home' becomes the non-consenting subject of a

decidedly male technological gaze, subject to 'the taunts. The printouts of the photo, all cruelly drawn on. The death threats', all of which have become disappointingly customary when a woman's private life opens up for scrutiny by the internet.[387] Stine Eckert and Jade Metzger-Riftkin found that 'women are more likely to have certain types of private information posted online and to receive higher amounts of unwanted, vitriolic messages', and are particularly susceptible to 'revenge porn', the act of circulating pornographic images of a person online, as with Pattridge here.[388] Revenge porn indicates the especial vulnerability of women in online spaces. Eckert and Metzger-Riftkin advise that 'doxing uniquely highlights the urgent need for comprehensive policy, law enforcement, and cultural changes', with current practices often coding the act of protecting oneself from civil impingements native to the 21st century as summarily defensive and victim-facing; it is the victim's responsibility to ensure they do not fall afoul of revenge porn, mirroring some of rape culture's backwards rhetoric that implicates what woman say, wear and do in assaults against them.[389]

Chen's gaming literacy affords her a different strategy, however. After Annie leaves school a week after, Chen deploys her digital skills offensively:

> I got the data of every student (and a few teachers) who'd shared the photo. School admin systems? As much a joke to break as a PC with the password *Password*. From there, I hacked into every single one of their phones. I downloaded all of their personal info—their parents; credit card data, Social Security numbers, phone numbers, all the hateful emails and texts they'd sent anonymously to Annie, and, of course, most incriminating, their private photos. I took extra care to get everything from the boy who had taken the original picture. Then I posted all of it online, titling it: "Trolls in the Dungeon"[390]

What Lu describes here is hardly ethical, but the wish fulfilment fantasy transpiring here highlights some key assumptions currently facilitating online harassment. Complicit

---

[387] Marie Lu, *Warcross* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), p. 72.
[388] Stine Eckert and Jade Metzger-Riftkin, 'Doxxing, Privacy and Gendered Harassment', *M&K Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft*, 68(3) (2020), 273-287 (p. 275).
[389] 'Doxxing, Privacy and Gendered Harassment', p. 285.
[390] *Warcross*, p. 73.

teachers represent the apathy that comes with institutionalisation, and the porous, complacent systems typified by a *Password* password discourage the idea that even well-meaning social structures adequately safeguard their systems, be they pastoral, educational, or otherwise. Nothing is safe from Chen's vengeful voyeurism; vulnerabilities are laid bare in familial, financial, and social spheres of public life, and whatever is 'most incriminating' about those 'private photos' alludes to a compromising peripeteia where revenge porn is concerned. Most importantly, Chen dissolves the communal anonymity so crucial to deviant online assaults such as revenge porn. By appending a face to the transgression, Chen establishes rarefied accountability in the context of online anonymity. One of the great challenges of ethical conduct in online spaces and video games is the essential facelessness afforded to the dissemination of information. Incriminating visual artefacts like photos circulate effortlessly in a globalised forum without any ethical hinge, save for the one only tenuously connected to the actor themself. A similar logic exists politically: beliefs adhering to status quos benefit from being able to renounce the existence of belief itself. It is an argument modelled after the logic of alternateness that video games do not espouse beliefs or make statements because their beliefs and statements flock in such monocultural swarms that they present themselves as true—a problem of too many shamans naturalising too much normative politics. Anyone who has sat with art for any reasonable length of time knows this to be nearly impossible. What Chen accomplishes, then, is a little more than wish fulfilment for those assaulted from online anonymous vantage points. By unveiling these perpetrators through hacking ability, Lu through Chen experiments with how a proportionally represented gaming literacy can empower communities of women non-consensually surveilled by contemporary institution/agent systems.

Despite downloading 'all of their personal info' Chen is, however, unable to strip away the luxury of the crowd, save for the 'extra care' taken for the original instigating boy. Having disrupted the distinction between computerised and physical bullying, Chen recalls

the aggressions of the crowd who 'lunge at you because they see a vulnerable body. Or a different skin color. Or a difficult name.'[391] Chen's Chinese-American heritage marks her as an outsider and mirrors her author's experiences as a Chinese-American citizen in the US, arriving on American soil in 1989 from Wuxi. In this sense Chen models the consequences of representing as a non-normative body that, generally, does not bend to the conventional wish fulfilment fantasies of LitRPG or Gamelit. Where *Ready Player One* affords the normative American body many rhetorical strategies to outstrip consequence, *Warcross* grapples with the reality of vulnerable bodies as they negotiate offline oppression with online abilities. Laying claim to a space where vulnerability exists in a different language and is exploitable with a different literacy, Chen takes up a shamanistic position 'standing in exactly the right position wielding exactly the right weapon to hit back' against responses to a girl's body online.[392] Only after Chen processes the situation herself, 'with nothing but the language whispered between circuits and wire' can hypocrisy manifest itself in the affective mode manifest in 'crying students' and 'furious parents'.[393] It is reminiscent of the 2012 Steubenville rape case, where a 16 year old's rape by high school football darlings Trent Mays and Ma'lik Richmond would have been swept under the rug were it not for hacker collective Anonymous hacking social media networks such as Facebook to post incriminating videos of a group boasting and joking about raping her.[394]

Warcross imagines an online environment where physical, sexual, and psychological assaults against vulnerable bodies become visible and are, sequentially, subject to a new formulation of justice that deposes inadequately reparative and gaming illiterate institutionalised processes. This functions as a literary ballast for hacking's ongoing

---

[391] *Warcross,* p. 73.
[392] Ibid.
[393] *Warcross,* p. 73-74.
[394] Heather Suzanne Woods 'Anonymous, Steubenville, and the Politics of Visibility: Questions of Virality and Exposure in the Case of #OPRollRedRoll and #OccupySteubenville', *Feminist Media Studies*, 14(6) (2014), 1096-1098.

theorisation as an intersectional activity capable of democratising and disrupting online and offline spaces. The YA literary scene leans on young hackers to 'represent individuals who find ways around government and corporate restrictions and, therefore, perform *acts of resistance*' that digitally native young readers relate to as they negotiate hacking (using online libraries such as Library Genesis, or VPN software to access area restricted content) and being hacked (including the impingements above but also more benign instances such as cheating in video games).[395] A natural conclusion, given that the 'technicity' or 'the interconnectedness of identity and technological competence [...] brought about by a set of cultural processes through which meanings are generated and contested' expresses acutely in video gaming and gaming literacy, where the distinction between identity and technological competence blurs in gamers, cyborgs and hackers alike.[396] Despite technicity in gaming being produced by agents who are by design non-identical with themselves, by being literate in the languages that produce this non-identicality and the means to negate the negation of technological non-identicality, a move towards the ethical and away from the political becomes imaginable. Only this kind of hacking seems capable of producing ethical subjects by rendering private information public: a gaming literacy comprehends that privacy is impossible, but the process of horizontalizing privacy across vulnerable and less vulnerable bodies allows ethical discourse to begin from a point of more complete information.

This relative informational completeness, as Chen found out after the legal battles she became embroiled in after her vigilantism, is doomed to a concept with a mutating ethical *sens*: failure. States of failure and the consequential—sometimes equally failed—cleaning up after them take on various valences informing game and computer studies. They can be

---

[395] Debra Dudek, Nicola F. Johnson, 'Return of the Hacker as Hero: Fictions and Realities of Teenage Technological Experts', *Children's Literature as Education,* 42 (2011), 184-195 (p. 189).
[396] Jon Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy, *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011), p. 65.

historical, such as 'the new interest in girl coders draw[ing] on a long history of both coding for children and women as coders that reach back to the beginnings of modern computing', where women like Ada Lovelace return as figures who modern computing history has failed to appreciate; or as the works of Jesper Juul and Jack Halberstam attest, they can be concerned with contemporary video gaming failures, what they mean, and what they are like.[397] Halberstam finds great reconstructive potential in 'the "queerness" of the art of failure, the art of failing that depends on the resilience and fortitude of abject subjects or rejected people who turn their failure into style', as Chen does when her own abjection pushes her to resolve the unethical conduct above through illegality. As an act of resistance this was inevitable, but with gaming literacy, some knowledge of the faulty relationship between digitised informational systems and the institutions policing them, Chen problematises the link between ethical conduct and the law enough to question who exactly failed here. Chen is machphrasis' Antigone, but where Antigone called upon creeds divine to oppose dishonourable rule, Chen relies upon the gross unfairness of the imperfect information and mob collusion brought upon abject Annie, too small to succeed in a system too large to care, by her male abusers. Chen, like Antigone before her, is an avatar for speculative new forms of moral activity that arise from forms of abjection perpetrated by authority, expressed in Creon's regency and, today, a crowd's anonymity.

In this sense, it is fitting that Chen's narrative would change as the result of a glitch. Failure in video games finds a complex partner in the glitch. As an unexpected event, the glitch is an interloper, usually a bad omen. Crashes, distortion, insecurity, caesura, splitting: all comprise the phenomenological import of encountering this unwelcome infelicity. And yet they are all the same brought about by players constantly to warp the systems they inhabit

[397] Brittany Knoxx, 'Programming Girlhood: Digital Labor and the Twenty-First Century Girl Coder in the United States', *Journal of Children and Media,* (2021), 117-133 (p. 120); Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013); Jack Halberstam, 'Queer Gaming: Gaming, Hacking, and Going Turbo', in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. by B. Ruberg and A. Shaw (Minnaepolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2017), pp. 187-199.

to their benefit. Speedrunning, when the community allows it, will frequently deploy glitches to bring about what ought not to happen. It is a saving grace of video games that what they ought to be can be so enjoyably detachable from what is, and they owe much of this to glitches. Halberstam interprets Disney's 2012 animated film *Wreck-It Ralph*—a kind of machphrastic cinema—as using glitches to envision the eponymous Wreck-It Ralph as 'a kind of Nietzsche-like figure whose role as destroyer is constitutive of the newness to come' through his refusal to accept his lot as a destructive video game antagonist.[398] Wreck-It Ralph's questioning of the Manichean ethics that video gaming relishes can only come when the game in question runs to excess or ceases to function entirely. As a material example, protests delivering halts are glitches in this ideal sense, or what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls hacking, the 'refusal as a mode of engagement […] mov[ing] to transfigure "woman" […] to deface her, and release her to accomplish what she alone can perform' is perhaps better thought of in terms of a defacing glitch pausing, refusing, the attempts to get past itself: an argumentative softlock.[399]

But this is all very serious business. The glitch can also be a place where a work can rupture into grotesque parodies of itself. Glitchy entertainment, or audiences that anticipate and delight in the glitch, highlight how even critical failure can sell. Take Griffin and Justin McElroy's highly successful YouTube web series *Monster Factory*, a show that delights in churning out weird and wonderful player characters incongruent with their settings. The McElroy's treatment of *Mass Effect 2* protagonist Commander Shepard, transforming him via console commands into 'Truck Shepard', whose explosive, splashy physiognomy against the backdrop of deadly serious intergalactic warfare brings Truck himself and Bioware's choreography to spectacular failure.

[398] *Queer Gaming*, p. 192.

[399] Denise Ferreira de Silva, 'Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism and Refusal Beyond the Limits of Critique', *PhiloSOPHIA,* 8(1) (2018), 20-38 (p. 22).

Figure 2. Truck Shepard and Jacob Taylor converse whilst under fire from Cerberus security. David Zhou, digital screenshot, Twitter, {https://twitter.com/dz/status/623013852897222656} [accessed 19/10/2021].

The McElroy brothers used third party software to misalign Commander Shepard's facial features along the X and Y axis.[400] Truck's monstrosity, undercut by the McElroys' jocularity as they guide him through *Mass Effect 2*'s first level, speaks to how becoming gaming literate is sometimes a case of realising untapped potential in games to posit an impossible other. Although video games would have been far from Emanuel Levinas' mind when he wrote that 'when man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history', Truck's 'face' represents the extreme challenge that is a game for some and for others, like Levinas, deadly serious: it is of great ethical import to remember that the face is not ideally unified (for that would simply replicate a Kantian ethics of faces progressing towards a universal face—an idea of dubious ethical value at best in the 21st century) but is instead characterised by a multiplicity of faces breaking from the historical (tantamount to the non-other) face. Gaming literacy can be vitally important to this, as Truck above epitomises, but

[400] Polygon, Monster Factory: Exploding Shepard's Face Bones in Mass Effect 2, Online Video Recording, YouTube (2015) {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn4x_BRqIpI&ab_channel=Polygon} [accessed 19/10/2021].

also to phenomena such as avatars, anonymity, and to understand the blurring lines between digital and non-digital subjectivities. Faces fracture as they are accepted, with more radical instances proliferating to keep the ethical task from ever being complete. Machphrastic glitches offer novels a way to explore this in prose, as another facet of glitch aesthetics is that it reveals hidden potential in bodies to be functional yet non-normative, which brings the digitalised nature of contemporary bodies into jagged relief. Debra Benita Shaw, writing the glitch's artistic function in popular culture, imbues the phenomenon with an emancipatory urge towards abject bodies:

> Glitch then marks out a space for dissensus where the configurations of data and their relationship to the real is made visible. In troubling those configurations it also troubles the ontologies to which they refer. It disturbs the sediment of what is forgotten or ignored; the remains that constitute the archive and which hold the promise of a different kind of retrieval and, just possibly, a different way of life.[401]

A kind of digitalised *aletheia,* the glitch clears the gap between the computer and user, making a spectacle of abortive disobedience. This is quite common-sensical; glitches sometimes close off evergreen digital exits routes and so the user may find their solutions in the computer's hardware, not software. Turning it off and on again may be required to proceed, but this is indicative of the glitch making generally docile instruments or systems rear up and become visible as unconventional solutions. When interfaces stop responding to a user's commands, the computer is suddenly there as an object, disabled and belligerent. Panic may rise. Save files, codes, settings, personal information: all can be subject to a glitch's spreading corruption as 'the remains that constitute the archive' makes the digital archive contingent, a ghost that may not survive 'the promise of a different kind of retrieval'. It is their diminished corporeality that comes when it wants, how it 'disturbs the sediment of what is forgotten or ignored' and makes a superb ontological case for itself in the process that galvanises the glitch's imposition. Personal computers, when subject to this home

---

[401] Debra Benita Shaw, 'The Aesthetics of Retrieval: Beautiful Data, Glitch Art and Popular Culture', *Anthropocenes,* 1(1) (2020), 1-10 (p. 3).

invasion, transform into haunted houses that frighten or beguile depending on their purposes and whims. As such, glitches can be figured as affective failed intensities that disable on the one hand, or deliberative, functional ideological performances that enable on the other. This makes them perfect muses for machphrastic writers seeking destabilising metaphors of rupture, rapture, revelation—ready made for 21st century video gaming culture. In many ways, machphrasis is a glitch.

Negotiating the enabling video gaming glitch in fiction, the glitch as the inversion of disability into ability, involves machphrasis at a fundamental level. As Chen watches the Warcross tournament through her 'neurolink', *Warcross*' haptic interfacing headgear, she spots a lucrative power-up sellable on the black market. Chen, like the rest of the crowd, is rendered invisible whilst games of Warcross play out. A 'tiny glitch when a user is about to use an item' offers her the 'split second' of insecurity she needs to warp the game to her benefit. Recounting the affective intensity in staccato syntax, Chen's 'fingers tremble. Before me, Jena reaches for her new Sudden Death power-up. In her inventory, I see it flash a quick gold. Now's my only chance. I suck in my breath, wait—*don't do it*—and then type a single command just as Jena's item leaves her hand.'[402] Chen's hesitation, here acknowledged by her internal rationalisation, '*don't do it*', arriving a split-second too late, highlights the wider affective promise glitches make to players who use and abuse them, the promise of an unexpected event flowing out of control. In their instability, glitches propose anti-intentional responses between themselves, being without and the human comprising the intentional aspects of gaming. Having glitched the game, Chen describes herself mimicking the glitch's stasis as 'a tingle shoots through my body. I freeze. In fact, everyone in the game seems to freeze.'[403] Asher Wing, the Phoenix Riders' team captain participating in the game, looks to Chen 'like he can *see me'* foreshadowing the unintended visibility Chen's glitch

[402] *Warcross*, p. 45.
[403] Ibid.

brings upon her, because 'somehow, successfully capturing the power-up has glitched me into the tournament'.[404] Materialising by mistake, Chen's interaction with the corporatised game functions as an allegory of ethical (or at least, plausibly reparative) gaming literacy manifesting as a vulnerable body; Chen's ability to manipulate games makes her subject to the anti-intentionality *of* glitches but also transforms her into an interpolating alien face *as* a glitch.

Language itself falls prey to glitches here: if filling the space too ably leads to something so grossly overextended from the human conditions of language that now, in Derridean fashion, the circuit closes and recurs, and in doing so infinitely refers but cannot say, then perfect ability in language is in fact terminally disabled in abstraction. I will illustrate this point with a thought experiment. Suppose a computer program solves chess (unlikely but with quantum computing, perhaps not impossible). It is not clear if with perfect play chess is a draw or if white, with its small tempo advantage, can win. It is most likely a draw though, and this computer can play God and draw. There must be only one way to play chess perfectly from move one onwards, and so there would be no reason to deviate from this line. Humans could undoubtedly observe this game between the chess program and God and memorise the line taken. This, however, completely disables chess; chess players would know the outcome from the beginning and anyone who memorised the line could play someone much worse or better and receive this outcome. Therefore, the only way to play chess would be to deviate from this objective perfection, because this perfection has made chess arbitrary and pointless. The same could be said of language. The abstract perfect language speaker could not communicate if they insist on communicating perfectly and, given they would have no reason to deviate from perfect communication, they will fall victim to recursion. This perfect use of language, then, fails to communicate because it cannot fail

[404] Ibid.

to communicate, and the nature of communication requires the possibility of failure. What this suggests is that disability is a far more crucial mode for systems of communication and play than is usually presumed, and understanding this logic within the glitch—communing as it does with this sense of conceptual disability—is a crucial element of gaming literacy.

Another aspect of machphrasis intervening in a new digital ethics would be how video game points would lend themselves to arbitrating being with others in a presocial sense. Before discourse, before conversation, before 'the face' lies a mathematically constructed countenance of your public and private life: the score. Given these scores are often digital, naturally agonistic, and subject to meta-social strategies and tactics, then it should come as no surprise that these are intensely ludic systems. *Warcross* represents its physical world as a highly mediated space, as is customary of Gamelit. The neurolink interface projects an augmented reality out onto relevant urban and social spaces, some of which are attached to specific people and their level. As Chen makes her way through Tokyo, 'a person on the street with **Level 80** and **♥ 3,410,383** over her head' makes their way through the city 'smiling as several people who give her high fives and congratulate her on her high rank'.[405] Although Lu represents Tokyo's appropriation of these highly visible social scores as extreme, the system itself is globally tracked and enforced. As should be clear, this kind of pre-social adjudication possesses great dystopian potential. Charlie Brooker's Black Mirror series explored the concept in its *Nosedive* episode, and machphrastic writer Cory Doctorow's *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* is a novelistic account of social currency

[405] *Warcross*, p. 77; Lu experiments with various typefaces, emboldening and formatting to produce an affective AR experience for the novel. These often include centralisation for the social score system (p. 33, p. 77, p. 79), full word capitalisation for news bulletins (p. 5, p. 284), and during games of Warcross the player's lifebar resembles a depleting segmented bar (p. 215, p.216). These coincide with Lu representing her characters' communicating via text using a left-right display on the page in a manner reminiscent of Facebook instant messaging service (p. 9, p. 206). These are probably best understood as machphrastic word specific instances of comic writing, or 'words providing all you need to know, while the pictures illustrate aspects of the scene being described' as explained by Scott McCloud in *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), p. 130.

systems replacing fiat currency.[406] As mentioned in chapter 3, there is also the Chinese social credit system, an example of techno-social arbitration happening at governmental levels. Above all, these systems encourage citizens to process their ethics relative to the systems of rules imposed by social credit. Simply, citizens transform into players, and ethical conduct ceases to be ethical in any deontological sense. This is because, despite the model being deontological insomuch as the institution decrees behaviours that will as universal laws, the consequences of the action become gamified numerical emblems that disrupt a citizen's own morality. Therefore, the nature of the act gives way to the numerical consequences of the act almost entirely in this system.

As a rule, in fictional representations the ethics of social credit systems generally impinge upon the protagonists' life. In *Nosedive* and *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, it is difficult to argue that the characters beholden to social credit models—social capital and social currency respectively—become more ethical or happier because of their exposure to this brand of ethics. Falling from grace, from a high to a low score, sums up the protagonist's usual primary predicament in these fictions. Importantly, these social programs rarely allow the concerned citizen to opt out. It is unlikely that many citizens would want to; to omit oneself would be to implicate oneself in an ethics against the status quo, one considered socially inferior by most others. Therefore, the only way to win, for most, is to play. I say for most because Chen succeeds in separating the quality of her person from the quantity of an institutional score. Before her glitchy visibility thrusts her into the spotlight, the Warcross neurolink greets her with 'welcome back [null]' flashing across her haptic interface. Chen explains that '[null], of course, isn't actually my name' and that 'in my hacked account, I'm able to wander around as an anonymous user.'[407] Represented as null, Chen becomes a willing valueless entity within cyberspace. She cannot forego the consequences of her

---

[406] 'Nosedive', *Black Mirror* (Netflix: 2016) {https://www.netflix.com/watch/80104627} [accessed 01/11/2021]; Cory Doctorow, *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* (New York: Tor Books, 2003).
[407] *Warcross*, pp. 35-36.

actions entirely, however, as the score attached to her null account remains stable. As Chen explains that 'other players crossing my path will see me as a randomly generated username', she functions as a point of resistance within Warcross' gamified social matrix, and as a randomly generated username her identity is not simply hidden, but fractured and shuffled depending on other player perspectives.[408] Her knowledge allows her to glide freely in a place where gaming enthusiastic but illiterate subjects flounder under surveillance and sanctions.

What Chen has accomplished, machphrastically speaking, is to become the equivalent of a social 'smurf'. Smurfing occurs when 'a high-skilled player who creates a new account to be matched against inexperienced players for easy wins', usually in order to demoralise newcomers or play with lower ranked friends.[409] This aligns with Chen's motivation to stay anonymous and resist classifications by surveillance techniques, as both gaming smurfs and Chen share the wish to play under the guise of an ancillary identity to disrupt systems creating 'fair' games. Where they do not align, however, is how these actions are framed ethically. Smurfing in online video games 'inevitably ruins the matches for the players in [lower] skill brackets', and so the act is unethical, with developers making provisions to stop players pursuing such deviancy, sometimes through tracing credit card details across a multitude of players, and sometimes by monitoring suspicious IP address information.[410] Where Chen's case deviates from smurfing's immorality is that she does not convert this literacy into subjugating power. Where much of a player's fun when smurfing resides in wreaking misfortune upon others who are less skilled than themselves, Chen uses her gaming literacy prophylactically, to protect herself against personal attacks by other players and institutional surveillance by Henka Games, headed by eighteen-year-old Hideo

[408] *Warcross*, p. 36.
[409] Mauro Conti, Pier Paolo Tricomi, 'PvP: Profiling Versus Player! Exploiting Gaming Data for Player Recognition', *23rd International Conference on Information Security,* ed. by Willy Susilo, Robert H. Deng, Fuchun Guo, Yannan Li, Rolly Intan (Bali: Springer, 2020), 393-408 (p. 405).
[410] Ibid.

Tanaka. Disregarding the fact that *Warcross*' world builds gamified information directly into mundane reality, it is true of our world that a player is a web of various snippets of information split across a wide variety of games and platforms. Despite enjoying playing Warcross, Chen understands that her skill and job as a bounty hunter tackling illegal gambling in the game are, in fact, detrimental to her digitalised and physical safety. What Lu's machphrasis explores is the extent that players may wish to shield an avatar from the world when digitalised social currency makes targets of players, creating a useful distinction between being good at gaming and being good at comprehending gaming systems.

This difference between video games themselves and comprehending gaming helps to draw a further ethical distinction between the anonymity Chen adopts and the anonymity of the abusive crowd previously discussed. Despite Chen eventually using this anonymity to steal a power up from the Warcross game, Lu provides enough affective framing to encourage the reader to interpret this as an anti-intentional response to her relative poverty. However, it would be remiss to discount the fact that Chen's anonymity enables her theft here; hers should not be framed as a purely defensive anonymity. This requires too much good faith to be anything more than naïve; not all can or should attempt to hack ethically and anonymise as Chen tries yet, tellingly, fails to do convincingly. Despite this, Chen's anonymity functions in opposition to a crowd-like anonymity, differentiating her tactics. Where the crowd ensures the safety of the individual through dispersed informational noise, Chen has incorporated a multitude of aliases that irritate attempts to understand her online persona in singular terms. As a machphrastic anonymity, this would appear innocuous were it not to arrive after Wade Watts, through whom the logic of alternateness flows so freely in part because he presents as such a unified, untroubled identity. Comparing Wade to Chen in these terms leaves Chen a more complicated character: instead of using her gaming literacy to display mastery and knowledge as Wade does, Chen weaves for herself a void in the digital space where her mastery, her knowledge, is a secret only the reader can know.

Comparing the two protagonists invites a small crisis into the heart of what it means to be gaming literate and marks an essential divide between *Warcross's* sense of video games and most Gamelit or LitRPGs. No doubt, both characters are enormously more gaming literate than their novel's supporting characters; neither could be said to misunderstand games and, in Chen's account of her bounty hunting deeds, where she describes how she can 'take in a scene like a photographer might take in a landscape', Lu highlights that Chen is not above a little of Wade's self-aggrandising gamer exceptionalism.[411] Yet even here Chen's awareness of the relationship between video gaming ability and functioning in the world shines through. By looking 'for the break in the pattern, the nail that protrudes', she announces a critically immersive style of gaming literacy.[412] That is, her gaming informs and enhances her ability to process information and make decisions when not at play. These decisions may be ones about herself as well; Chen comes to understand her fractured online identity as an extension of her equally fractured self offline. Wade never quite reaches this meta-cognitive self-reflection because his drive to become the perfect neoliberal subject in a gamified world keeps his goal singular, his motives single entendre. Chen is much more like the subjectivity encountered in *Gamelife*'s pages, where video games arrive as tools for navigating an imperilled life. Machphrastically, this appears a much more cyborgic construction of self than a gamerly one; video games imbed themselves in Clune and Chen not just as knowledge, as with Wade, but as circuitry taken in the world's image, as a metaphor for thought itself. If virtues against video game time need to be radically redefined, then it is because the virtuous action increasingly occurs within spheres of public and private life with the video game's imprint upon them. This not only includes ethical actions within video games (such as forms of smurfing, hacking, cheating and suchlike—these are merely

---

[411] *Warcross,* p. 7.
[412] Ibid.

building blocks), but also the decisions subjects make with respect to gamified structures and events.

Video games, fortunately, are more than capable of encouraging ethical reflection, both during play and after the game over screen. Whether via the critical immersive mode they can engender, or the way they create spaces for players to interact with others, video games are an integral means for rehearsing and searching for a good life in the 21st century. However, although discrete actions taken in games cannot and should not be commensurate with their offline counterparts (for all the media panic, few would posit that violence in video games should be evaluated as the *same* as violence in the streets, however much the link between the two surfaces), then the same must surely apply to virtuous conduct as well. Although it is a truism of gaming that we tend to displace any guilt about killing players in games, the fact that we create long-lasting relationships via games means that the same cannot be said of our putatively virtuous activities. This seems crucial for ethically understanding video games and gaming. Despite understanding that video games inform and enrich our lives, this generally does not translate to our own conduct *in* games themselves. The magic circle—Huizinga's term for play's transformative perimeter, that like a spell changes the nature of what happens within, offers a reprieve: when the player's experiences are bounded, they have distance enough from their actions to extricate themselves from their thieving, their murdering and, even worst, their griefing, their cheating. The magic circle has failed to convince in this respect since 2009 however, when Mia Consalvo rightfully concluded the magic circle degrades as a framework against player knowledge and playing with others—'there is no innocent gaming' in Consalvo's formulation of play.[413]

Despite their relatively 'low' cultural appraisal by scholars, genres like Gamelit and LitRPG are important genres for following and critiquing the magic circle's guilty rupturing

[413] Mia Consalvo, 'There is No Magic Circle', *Games & Culture,* 4(4) (2009), 408-417 (p. 415).

into wider contexts. Just as McGurl places the LitRPG within a suite of deviant genres, I would encourage using machphrastic analysis to reveal how these genres manifest the kinds of deviant play Consalvo explores or envisions new deviant ways to play games. This is important because, despite play wearing an ameliorative countenance today, there are still kinds of play that ought not to be pursued. Usually, these kinds of play occur when a knowledge difference between player and observer exists; it would be remiss of the adults in the room to allow children to play with fire, or allow children to abuse each other physically, psychologically, or sexually in the name of play. The same prejudgement could apply to video games, or at least to the direct application of video gaming principles to other playful arenas. Consider dating simulators. Players may be very good at recognising their mechanics (showering your dates in gifts; saying the right, not necessarily true, thing; learning large amounts of information about your date, by any means necessary), and as such they could be considered very gaming literate in this kind of game. Applying these techniques during actual dates, however, would be ethically illiterate.[414] Taken in a vacuum, this would not be an ethical concern, but considering how dating apps like Tinder have gamified dating, from curating profiles as cards to offering algorithmic privileges for payment, and the space between dating simulations and actual dating begins to close. This is but one instance amongst many where the spaces citizens interact are increasingly modelled after video games, encouraging those ludic tactics and strategies in places where the magic circle threatens to overextend.

This makes ethical critique an imperative for the stories we tell about video games. As video games' imprint upon social orders grows, they deepen their impact on the way we are with others. This is video gaming's blessing and its curse. Rosy Nardone, by highlighting that 'in a historical era such as ours, characterised by the virtualisation of the economy,

[414] It is no coincidence that Neil Strauss' 2005 book on chronicling dating techniques learned from pickup artists such as 'negging' (a backhanded compliment given to women) and 'peacocking' (wearing fancy/garish clothing to produce talking points), is called *The Game*.

politics and social relations, videogames act as an emblem of the complex weave of technological models, communication processes and social and cultural matrices of the mediatic system', points towards these areas (all of which are within the purview of ethics) as spaces where video games persuade players how to behave.[415] Given that video games offer ample means to relate to others even without videoludifying forces at play, it is only logical that ethical decisions will increasingly rely upon video games to determine the driving values behind decision-making. This extends beyond the rote moral panics: video games cause violence, video games are escapist wastes of time, video games weaken our grip on reality. These objections misunderstand that video games are, in fact, remarkably subtle models for fashioning spheres of life. Machphrasis can outline the imprint video games make upon these systems in varying degrees of concealment and highlight, as per point 1, but machphrasis also possesses its own imprint, and can, as with Chen, experiment with how to conduct oneself in new ethical spaces, or how video games and their attending culture have necessitated change in how certain activities like hacking, doxxing, and anonymity should be ethically appraised. Video games are in so many spaces an *éminence grise*; it falls to machphrasis to expose the video game's invisible hands at play in the ethical contexts they change and produce.

[415] Rosy Nardone, 'Videogames between Ethics and Politics', *Journal of Theories and Research in Education*, 12(2) (2017), 41-55 (p. 42).

Conclusions: Machphrasis and Theorising the Ludic Century

'[T]o be truly literate in the Ludic Century […] requires gaming literacy. The rise of games in our culture is both cause and effect of gaming literacy in the Ludic Century.'[416]

Climate change. Fracking. The BP oil spill. The Fukushima nuclear disaster. Mass extinction. Brexit. The Great Recession. Austerity. The Cost of Living Crisis. Stagflation. Food banks. Warm banks. The banking crisis. The gig economy. The privatisation of public services. The Grenfell Tower fire. 9/11. 7/7. The Iraq War. The War in Afghanistan. The Syrian Civil War. The War in Ukraine. Drone warfare. Al Qaeda. Boko Haram. The Westboro Baptist Church. COVID-19. The death of Mark Duggan. The death of George Floyd. The death of Breonna Taylor. Donald Trump. The Proud Boys. Jordan Peterson. Nigel Farage. Alex Jones. Rupert Murdoch. The rise of the Alt-Right. The Capitol Hill insurrection. The Sandy Hook shootings. The crimes of Harvey Weinstein. The crimes of Jimmy Saville. The crimes of Jeffery Epstein. Roe vs Wade overturned.

If the 21st century is the Ludic Century, then why is it so little fun?

To give Zimmerman his credit, his manifesto on the 21st century's complexion and design does not include much resort to the concept of fun. There are a few near-misses, although even in the 'playful system' of society, Zimmerman's emphasis lies in its reflective and didactic qualities where 'we think about thinking and we learn to act in new ways' as we amble about in their play.[417] Or perhaps instead, the fun lies in the humanity of video games, that 'like other form of cultural expression, games and play are important because they are beautiful'.[418] Of course, as with Picasso's *Guernica*, not all that is beautiful is fun,

---

[416] Eric Zimmerman, 'Manifesto For a Ludic Century, in *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications,* ed. by Sebastian Deterding, Steffen P. Walz (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014) pp. 19-22 (pp. 20-21)
[417] *Manifesto For a Ludic Century*, p. 20.
[418] *Manifesto For a Ludic Century,* p. 21.

and as with drunkenness, nor is all fun beautiful. Nonetheless, it seems odd that a claim—in manifesto form no less—that a form is appropriate for naming 100 years of human history would not boast of that form's simplest and most naively positive aspect: playing video games can be great fun. Video games can be more than fun, and they can even be less if they are addictive or persuasive enough, but it is fair to assume that the video game as form aspires, in the main, to fun. That this aspirational essence may transpose to the century bearing its name and design is not unreasonable, and yet the 21st century began with deadly seriousness, apocalypse, and fear, and appears to have started as it means to go on. I do not think Zimmerman was wrong to argue that the 21st century is essentially ludic; if we are to read 'ludic' as Zimmerman's pithier replacement for the more informative 'video gaming' century, anyway. Instead, I think the conspicuous lack of fun within the manifesto belies an anxiety surrounding the role of human actors within a social environment that, as Zimmerman often asserts, is incredibly systematically complex. To be literate in the ludic century (which is to say, gaming literate), is to work against many of the video gaming systems emulated at the institutional level. In other words, just as succeeding in video games has always taken competitive airs (bosses are 'defeated', games are 'beaten'), the ludic century puts its citizens to play in similar antagonistic terms against the institutions they inhabit (manifesting in both revolutionary and reactionary ways), and how gaming literate one is often determines success. Across the literary spectrum, this manifests as differently as it does politically; for all of *Ready Player One*'s success, there is a *Gamelife* quietly accomplishing good stories told through video games, and for every Wade Watts taken in by the ludic century, there is potential for an Emika Chen who draws from their gaming literacy a new way of railing against it.

Living in the ludic century successfully will require *theorising* the ludic century, for the phenomena video games produce ripples through almost all forms of the contemporary. Theorising the ludic century, I think, will be one of game studies' greatest collective tasks

in the coming years, to make sense in every way it can of the interconnectedness of video gaming things while treading the fine line between celebrating them when they discretely delight, educate, and inspire, and holding them accountable when they systematically impoverish, radicalise, and dehumanise. I say this because within that way of narrating the ludic century in cogent terms, a more eudaemonic sense of the ludic century, a truly ludic century, one where living under the auspices of videoludifying forces is fun, may become recoverable. Machphrasis is a small contribution to the literary efforts needed within this grander project, a project that will require theorising across disciplinary lines. Machphrasis, however, can go a long way in appraising the video game's cultural impact, for machphrasis hauls from concealment a ludic imaginary within fiction that is colourful in its metaphors, brave in its critique, and roguish when attempting to convince: the literary video game to accompany, shape, and be shaped by the ludic century.

Specifically, the key findings have been as such. At the largest scale, the thesis introduces machphrasis to video gaming and literary scholarship, contributing to the gap in our understanding expressed by Freyermuth regarding the relationship between video games and literature. When compared to its contemporary siblings—namely Jupin's gamic fiction and Stark and Condis' ludic fiction—machphrasis builds a system capable of theorising video gaming literary inclusions in broader terms. I hope that machphrasis, being a mode of engaging with contemporary writing more so than a writing genre, will speak better to the literary video game across genre lines and literary/non-literary divides; machphrasis is about aboutness, not about of-ness, in Ricoeur's fashion. As such, machphrasis is designed to inaugurate better descriptors for describing video games through novels and, at its highest level, give this sense of video games back to video games demystified or transformed under the auspices of literary fiction. To squeeze as much analytical juice as possible from these texts, included within machphrasis is a suite of critical vocabulary like critical immersion, shamanism, and the logic of alternateness, which I hope afford readers with new ways of

challenging escapist rhetoric, rethinking vertiginous experiences with video games and the novel, and critiquing the video game's role in right-wing mobilisation in the west, respectively. Implicit within all analyses developed in this thesis is the fact of gaming literacy's importance in navigating contemporary life, in understanding the persuasive mechanisms that keep you working like gamification, the sociological urges to replicate the video game in our systems of social surveillance, punishment, and organisation like videoludification, or the culture we create in its wake, like machphrasis.

Having said that, there are some significant limitations to the thesis, some of which arise from rote problems regarding its method of literary criticism, and some of which are expressly down to myself and my chosen approach. For example, a general issue with poetic models of fiction is that they can too grossly delimit their object of enquiry. Whilst the thesis contributes answers to questions concerning prose fiction's relationship to video games as objects, it has done so for brevity's sake. As mentioned in the literature review, machphrasis possesses a potential for alighting upon other forms of literary culture, forms that were not explored here. Theatrical pieces and musicals, machphrastic poetry anthologies, and hypertext fictions of old and new could all find life in machphrastic frames, but that has not been the case here. I am less worried for poetry's lot, as Jon Stone's recent foray into examining contemporary poetry within video games and without, *Duel Wield: The Interplay of Poetry and Video Games*, is an excellent start in this direction—though I wonder if Stone's focus on 'interplay and hybridity' might have been better split into two studies, one with the video game in expressly poetic contexts (machphrasis, this thesis' version at least, could help here), and poetry in expressly video gaming contexts (which machphrasis, happily and unambitiously a category of literary phenomenon, could reduce and misunderstand when off its formal stomping ground).[419] I believe theatre and theatrics to be a perfect place to examine

[419] Jon Stone, *Duel Wield: The Interplay of Poetry and Video Games* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), p. 2.

contemporary literary culture given how it shares with video games a keen interest in interactivity and performance, and the latter has received insightful attention by Kelly Aliano in her 2022 exploration of the subject, *The Performance of Video Games: Enacting Identity, History, and Culture Through Play*.[420] However, Aliano suffers from the same issue as Stone; before the performance itself is a body of text serving as precondition to the performance, and I wonder if a machphrastic analysis of theatre texts could buttress the more conceptually complex field of performance and video games. With Stone and Aliano's explorations being so recent, however, I am confident that both research areas will continue to grow, and hopefully machphrastic analysis can contribute to this future growth.

I do, however, fear that my own intellectual formulation, weary of broad media ecological analysis exploring an essentially double entendre relation, may not be sufficient in understanding video games in contemporary literary culture. For example, as much as I have strived to disinter an explicitly video gaming imaginary from the texts analysed, a media peripheral looms, resistant to expunging efforts. Analysis made in service to cyberpunk's machphrastic shape drew upon virtual reality extensively, and subsequent texts like *Ready Player One* and *Warcross* take place in settings reasonably conceived as primarily virtual reality spaces. Understanding this infelicity charitably might involve championing the thesis' resilience against dogmatic theoretical approaches, arguing that machphrasis, despite its systemic approach to fiction, possesses flexibility enough to produce composite images that accentuate and clarify the video game amongst many media. However, my approach does risk devaluing the assemblage that video games are. Two future approaches that might rectify this theoretical issue are an even more atomised framework, one that breaks down the literary phenomena in question into a wider litany of writerly urges and readerly schemes, and the other might go in the other direction, freeing machphrasis of some

[420] Kelly Aliano, *The Performance of Video Games: Enacting Identity, History, and Culture Through Play* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company 2022).

of its structure in service of a wider net to catch the video game in its more slippery literary forms. For now, I hope machphrasis is, at present, a happy middle ground between the potentially dreary reductionist topology and the idiosyncrasy (perhaps dubiousness) of a reading that it could have been.

However, discourse on the deployment of video games in literature today—with or without machphrasis—are likely incomplete regardless, as the best of what authors can write and think about video games in the novel is probably to come. To paraphrase Hayot, who writes that 'no one has ever imagined the Great American Video Game', the 'Great Video Game Novel' seems destined to be such because it will frame video games in ways machphrasis cannot anticipate.[421] What machphrasis comprises, as I hope to have demonstrated, is a variety of urges, techniques and images endemic to late 20th/21st century writing that are testable and negotiable with respect to the deployment of video games in contemporary literary culture. As with any theoretical contribution, machphrasis needs to prove itself in the field through its applications within literary and game studies. However, I am confident the literary material under machphrastic purview will grow in quantity and sophistication as videoludifying processes multiply, as video games further entrench themselves as aesthetic objects, and as comprehending video gaming logic, sensibility, and influence becomes an increasingly important element of contemporary literacy.

It is fitting that machphrastic writing would, in the end, be so indebted to ghosts. From Buckles' underappreciated thesis to the dead gamer; the auto-hauntological Neuromancer and Frissen *et al*. rejigging Karl Marx's famous opening in *The Communist Manifesto*; Caillois' ilinx, which shamans used to bring about spirits; and Guillermo himself who I call upon to give the name: perhaps it could be said that a spectre is haunting literature—the spectre of video games. Spectres in western literature are commonly products

[421] Eric Hayot, 'Video Games & The Novel', *Daedalus*, 150 (1) 2015, 178-187 (p. 178).

of necessity. King Hamlet dies asleep, and so could only dream of that injustice while Denmark's sovereign rot awakens him.[422] In 'an intense hush in which the sounds of evening dropped', Peter Quint came to the Governess, his arrival dividing nature from its hubbub, but nature recedes here in ceremonial, complicit fashion.[423] Or Jacob Marley's ghost, brought 'on the wings of the wind' to unnatural Scrooge, whose miserliness and sin so deeply offended the universe that it enlists the elements to change him.[424] My point is this: wronged worlds raise ghosts. It makes sense that a world defined by its videoludification, a world in its ludic century, would raise ghosts in the video game's image. Literature, in creating worlds about our own, would surely follow suit, with inflections and designs upon video games which challenge preconceived notions of what they are, what they mean, and how they change us and the world they inhabit. Machphrasis is one way of generating productive discourse about the video game's ghostly footfall in contemporary literary culture.

---

[422] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Barbara A. Mowat (London: Simon and Schuster, 2003), I. 4. 67.
[423] Henry James, *The Turn of The Screw* (Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publishing Group, 2016), p. 25.
[424] Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (Delaware: Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Press, 2016), p. 24.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aarseth, Espen, 'Computer Game Studies, Year One', *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 1(1) (July 2001) {http://gamestudies.org/0101/} [accessed 04/10/2019]

Aarseth, Espen, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997)

Abadie, Karine; Catherine Chartrand-Laporte, 'Paper and Screen: The Inter-Art Work, Interactions and exchanges between literature and cinema', *Interférences Littéraires, Literaire interferenties*, 11 (2013), 17-24

Adorno, Theodor, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1981)

Adorno, Theodor, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991)

Alexander, Jonathan, 'The Uses and Abuses of Pop Culture in *Ready Player One* and *Grandmother's Gold*', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 53 (2020), 525-546

Alexander, Vera, 'The Relational Imaginary of M. G. Vassanji's *A Place Within*', *Life Writing*, 13(2) (2016), 221-236

Aliano, Kelly, *The Performance of Video Games: Enacting Identity, History, and Culture Through Play* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2022)

Arduini, Tina, 'Cyborg Gamers: Exploring the Effects of Digital Gaming on Multimodal Composition', *Computers and Composition*, 48 (2018), 89-102

Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, trans. by James Hutton (London: Franklin Classics, 2018)

Aronstein, Susan and Jason Thompson, 'Coding the Grail: "Ready Player One's" Arthurian Mash-Up", *Arthuriana*, 25 (2015), 51-65

Artaud, Antonin, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958)

Attebery, Brian, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1992)

Atwood, Margaret, *Oryx and Crake* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003)

Auden, W.H., 'The Shield of Achilles', *Poetry*, 81(1) (1952)

Badami, Mary Kenny, 'A Feminist Critique of Science Fiction', *Extrapolation*s, 18(1) (1976), 6-19

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1984)

Barr, Jason, *Video Gaming in Science Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2018)

Barr, Matthew and Alicia Copeland-Stewart, 'Playing Video Games During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Effects on Players' Well-Being', *Games and Culture*, 17(1) (2021), 122-139

Barr, Matthew, 'Video Games in Higher Education', *Annual University of Glasgow Learning and Teaching Conference* (2013) {http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/78490/1/78490.pdf} [accessed 02/09/2019]

Barthes, Roland, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text* (Glasgow: Harper Collins UK, 1977), pp. 142-149.

Bean, Anthony M., Antonious J. van Rooij, Rune K. L. Nielson and Christopher J. Ferguson, ‘Videogame Addiction: The Push to Pathologize Videogames’, *Professional Psychology*, 48 (2017), 378-389 {https://doi.org/10.1037/pro0000150}

Bean, Anthony M., *Working with Videogamers and Games in Therapy: A Clinician’s Guide*, (New York: Routledge, 2018)

Benoit Carbone, Marco, Paolo Ruffino, Stéphane Massonet, ‘Introduction: The Other Caillois: The Many Masks of Game Studies’ *Games and Culture,* 12(4) (2017), 303-320

Berlyn, Michael, ‘Suspended’, *Softline*, 2 (May-June 1983). {http://www.cgwmuseum.org/galleries/index.php?year=1983&pub=6&id=11}

Bernstein, Charles, ‘Play It Again, Pac-Man’, in *The Medium of The Video Game*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), pp. 155-168

Bezio, Kristin M. S., ‘Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a precursor to the rise of the alt-right’, *Leadership*, 14 (2018), 556-566

Bissell, Tom, *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010)

Black Isle Studios, *Planescape: Torment* (1999) Microsoft Windows

Bogost, Ian, *How to Do Things with Video Games* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2011)

Bogost, Ian, *How to Talk about Videogames* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2015)

Bolter, Jay David, ‘Ekphrasis, Virtual Reality, and the Future of Writing’ in The Future of the Book, ed. by Geoffrey Nunberg (Berkeley, CA: California UP, 1996), pp. 253-272

Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT UP, 1999)

Bonsignore, Elizabeth, Derek Hansen, Kari Klaus and Marc Ruppel, ‘Alternate Reality Games as Platforms for Practicing 21st-Century Literacies’, *International Journal of Learning and Media*, 4 (2012), 25-54

Bould, Mark, ‘Language and Linguistics’, in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 225-235

Boulter, Jonathan, ‘Postmodern Melancholy - Digital Gaming and Cyberpunk’, in *Beyond Cyberpunk: New Critical Perspective*s, ed. by Graham J. Murphy and Sherryl Vint (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 135-155

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984)

Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1996)

Braben, David and Ian Bell, *Elite* (1984) BBC Micro

Brosch, Renate ‘Ekphrasis in the Digital Age: Responses to Images’, *Poetics Today*, 39(2) (June 2018), [https://read.dukeupress.edu/poetics-today/article/39/2/225/134103/Ekphrasis-in-the-Digital-AgeResponses-to-Image] [accessed 02/07/2019], 225-243

Bungie Software Products, *Marathon* (1994) Mac OS

Burke, Kenneth, *Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (California: California UP, 1974)

Cadora, Karen, 'Feminist Cyberpunk', in *Beyond Cyberpunk: New Critical Perspectives,* ed. by Graham J. Murphy and Sherryl Vint (London: Routledge, 2010) pp. 157-172

Caillois, Roger, *Man, Games and Play*, trans. by Meyer Barash (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 2001)

Calleja, Gordon, 'Digital Games and Escapism', *Games and Culture,* 5 (2010), 335-353 {https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009360412} [accessed 10/11/2020]

Calleja, Gordon, 'Revising Immersion: A Conceptual Model for the Analysis of Digital Game Involvement' in Situated Play, *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference* (Tokyo: 2007), pp. 83-90

Carras, Michelle Colder, Antonius J. Van Rooij, Donna Spruijt-Metz, Joseph Kvedar, Mark D. Griffiths, Yorghos Carabas and Alain Labrique, 'Commercial Videogames As Therapy: A New Research Agenda to Unlock the Potential of a Global Pastime', *Frontiers in Psychiatry,* 8 (2018), 1-7 {10.3389/fpsyt.2017.00300}

Cavallaro, Dani, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture* (London: Athlone Press, 2000)

Chambers, Ray (@RaymondChambers) We're at a crucial moment in defining outcomes of this pandemic. Games industry companies have a global audience - we encourage all to #PlayApartTogether. More physical distancing + other measures will help to flatten the curve + save lives. March 28th 2020 {https://twitter.com/raymondchambers/status/1244011120551022594?lang=en} [accessed 09/04/2020]

Chess, Shira, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2017)

Ciesla, Robert, *Game Development with Ren'Py* (New York, NY: Springer, 2019)

Cline, Ernest, *Ready Player One* (New York: Random House, 2011)

Clune, Michael W., *Gamelife: A Memoir* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015)

Clune, Michael W., *White Out: The Secret Life of Heroin* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 2013)

Cohen, Stanley, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2011)

Condis, Megan Amber, 'Playing the Game of Literature: *Ready Player One*, the Ludic Novel, and the Geeky "Canon" of Toxic Masculinity', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 39 (2016), 1-19

Connelly, Thomas, Mark Stansfield and Thomas Hainey, 'An Alternate Reality Game for Language Learning: ARGuing for Multilingual Motivation', *Computers & Education*, 57 (2011), pp.1389-1415

Consalvo, Mia, 'There is No Magic Circle', *Games & Culture*, 4(4) (2009), 408-417

Conti, Mauro and Pier Paolo Tricomi, 'PvP: Profiling Versus Player! Exploiting Gaming Data for Player Recognition', in *23rd International Conference on Information Security*, ed. by Willy Susilo, Robert H Deng, Fuckun Gui, Yannan Li, Rolly Intan (Bali: Springer, 2020), 393-408

Cooper, James, 'From Reykjavik to Fulton: Reagan, Thatcher, and the Ending of the Cold War', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies,* 14(4) (2016), 383-400

Corrigan, Marianne, 'Hard-boiled simulacra and cybernetic cartographies: other virtual worlds in the fiction of Salman Rushdie and Haruki Muakami', *Textual Practice,* 29(5) (2015), 801-824

Crogan, Patrick, *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation and Technoculture* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2011)

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (London: Random House, 2002)

Cunningham, Valentine, ‘Why Ekphrasis?’, *Classical Philology*, 102(1) (2007), 57-71

Daya, Shari, ‘Words and Worlds: Textual Representation and New Materialism’, *Cultural Geographies*, 26 (2019), 1-17

de Wildt, Lars H., Thomas Apperley, Justin Clemens, Robbie Fordyce and Souvik Mukherjee, ‘(Re-)Orienting the Videogame Avatar’, *Games and Culture,* 15(8) (2019), 1-38

Deleuze, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (London: Bloomsbury, 2014)

Deleuze, Jory, Jiang Long, Tie-Qiao Liu, Pierre Maurage and Joël Billiux, ‘Passion or Addiction? Correlates of healthy versus problematic use of videogames in a sample of French-speaking regular players’, *Addictive Behaviors*, 82 (2018), 114-121

Derrida, Jacques, ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1978), pp. 278-293

Dickens, Charles, *A Christmas Carol* (Delaware: Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Press, 2016)

Doctorow, Cory, *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* (New York: Tor Books, 2003)

Doctorow, Cory, *For the Win* (New York: Random House, 2010)

Donawerth, Jane, ‘Feminisms’, in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction,* ed. by Mark Bould, Andrew Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 214-224

Dovey, Jon and Helen W. Kennedy, *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media* (Maidenhead: Open UP, 2011)

Drotner, Kirsten, ‘Dangerous Media? Panic Discourses and Dilemmas of Modernity’, *Paedagogica Historica,* 35(3) (1999), 593-619

Dudek, Debra and Nicola F. Johnson, ‘Return of the Hacker as Hero: Fictions and Realities of Teenage Technological Experts’, *Children's Literature as Education*, 42 (2011), 184-195

Eakin, Paul John, *How our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1999)

Eckert, Stine and Jade Metzger-Riftkin, ‘Doxxing, Privacy and Gendered Harassment’, *M&K Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft*, 68(3) (2020), 273-287

Eco, Umberto, *The Infinity of Lists* (London: MacLehose Press, 2009)

Eksmo, *Book Series: LitRPG* (2013) {https://eksmo.ru/series/litrpg-ITD460/} [accessed 04/10/2021]

Elvery, Gabriel, ‘Parasocial Phenomena in Video Games’, in *Encyclopaedia of Computer Graphics and Games*, ed. by Newton Lee (Cham: Springer, 2021), {https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08234-9_463-1} [accessed 19/01/2022]

Engles, Tim, *White Male Nostalgia in Contemporary North American Culture* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Ensslin, Astrid, *Literary Gaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014)

Erard, Michael, ‘2 Decades Later; Let Down by Academia, Game Pioneer Changed Paths’ *New York Times*, 6 May 2004, {https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/06/technology/2-decades-later-let-down-by-academia-game-pioneer-changed-paths} [accessed 01/06/2022]

Farris, Anelise, ‘The Boundless Self: Disability in Virtual Reality’ (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Idaho State University, 2019)

Ferguson, Christopher J, Anastasiia Gryshyna, Jung Soo Kim, Emma Knowles, Zainab Nadeem, Izabela Cardozo, Carolin Esser, Victoria Trebbi and Emily Willis, ‘Video Games, frustration, violence, and virtual reality: Two studies’, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 61 (2022), 83-99

Ferrara, John, ‘Games for Persuasion: Argumentation, Procedurality, and the Lie of Gamification’, *Games and Culture*, 8(4) (2013), 289-304

Ferreira de Silva, Denise, ‘Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism and Refusal Beyond the Limits of Critique’, *PhiloSOPHIA*, 8(1) (2018), 20-38

Fickle, Tara, *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (New York: NYU Press, 2019)

Fisher, Mark, *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014)

Fisher, Mark, ‘What is Hauntology?’ *Film Quarterly*, 66(1) (2012), 16-24

Fjellestad, Danuta, ‘The Ludic Impulse in Post-Postmodern Fiction’, in *Ludics: Play as Humanistic Inquiry*, ed. by Vassiliki Rapti and Eric Gordon (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 293-315

Frey, Mattias, *The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2015)

Freyermuth, Gundolf S., ‘Video Games and Literature’, in Encyclopaedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf, 2nd ed (Santa Barbara, CA: ABO-CLIO, 2021), pp. 1109-11

Frissen, Valerie, Jos de Mul and Joost Raessens, ‘Homo Ludens 2.0 : Play, media, and identity’, in *Contemporary Culture: New Directions in Art and Humanities Research*, ed. by Judith Thissen, Robert Zwijnenberg and Kitty Zijlmans (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2013), pp. 75-92

Furedi, Frank, ‘Moral Panic and Reading: Early Elite Anxieties About the Media Effect’ *Cultural Sociology* (2016), 10(4) 523-537

Fuller, Matthew, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005)

Galloway, Alexander, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2006)

Gee, James Paul, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

Gibson, William, *Neuromancer* (London: Orion Publishing Group, 2016)

Golumbia, David, ‘Games without Play’*, New Literary History*, 40 (2009), 179-204

Goodreads, *Ready Player One* {https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/9969571-ready-player-one} [accessed 22/03/2021]

Goodson, Ivor F., *Developing Narrative Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2013)

Goya, Francisco, *The Drowning Dog* (Madrid: Museo del Prado, 1819-23)

Gracia Bravo, Cara, Alicia Cuesta-Gómez, Raquel Campuzano-Ruiz, María Jesús López-Navas, Joaquín Domínguez-Paniagua, Aurora Araújo-Narvánada-Copete, Cristina García-Bravo, Mariano Tomás Flórez-García, Javier Botas-Rodríguez and Roberto Cano-de-la-Cuerda, ‘Virtual reality and

video games in cardiac rehabilitation problems. A systematic review', *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 43(4) (2019), 448-457

Gray, Kishonna, Gerald Voorhees and Emma Vossen, *Feminism in Play* (London: Palgrave, 2018)

Griffiths, Mark, Antonius J. Van Rooij, Daniel Kardefelt-Winther, Vladan Starcevic, Orsolya Király, Ståle Pallesen, Kai Müller, Michael Dreier, Michelle Carras, Nicole Prause, Daniel L. King, Ellias Aboujaoude, Daria J. Kuss, Halley M. Pontes, OIatz Lopez Fernandez, Katalin Nagygyorgy, Sophia Achab, Joël Billieux, Thorsten Quandt, Xavier Carbonell, Christopher J. Ferguson, Rani A. Hoff, Jeffrey Derevensky, Maria C. Haagsma, Paul Delfabbro, Mark Coulson, Zaheer Hussain and Zsolt Demetrovics, 'Working Towards an International Consensus on Criteria for Assessing Internet Gaming Disorder: A Critical Commentary on Petry *et al.*', *Addiction*, 111(1) (2016), 167-175 {https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13057}

Guillermo, Kawika, 'The Art of Machphrasis: Stories Inspired by Video Games', *Medium*, 14 October 2016, {https://medium.com/anomalyblog/the-art-of-machphrasis-stories-inspired-by-video-games-11261e9087d9} [accessed 22/10/2019]

Gutiérres-Jones, Carl, 'Stealing Kinship: *Neuromancer* and Artificial Intelligence', *Science Fiction Studies,* 41(1) (2014), 69-92

Halberstam, Jack, 'Queer Gaming: Gaming, Hacking, and Going Turbo', in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2017), pp. 187-199

Hamilton, Isobel Asher, 'Tesla employees were reportedly told to not walk past Elon Musk's desk because of his wild firing rampages', *Business Insider* (2018), {https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musk-reportedly-terrified-tesla-staff-with-his-firing-sprees-2018-12?r=US&IR=T} [accessed 27/08/2021]

Hansen, Mark B. N., 'Media Theory', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23 (May 2006), 297-306

Haraway, Donna, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-183

Haraway, Donna, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2016), pp. 5-90

Harper, Todd, Meghan Blythe Adams and Nicholas Taylor, *Queerness in Play* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Hawley, George, The Demography of the Alt-Right, (Institute for Family Studies Blog: 2018), {https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-demography-of-the-alt-right} [accessed 02/09/2021]

Hayles, Katherine N., *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1999)

Hayot, Eric, 'Video Games & the Novel' *Daedalus*, 150(1) (2021), 178-187

Heffernan, James A. W. 'Ekphrasis and Representation', *New Literary History*, 22 (1991), 297-316.

Heidegger, Martin, 'Letter on Humanism' in *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977)

Heineman, David S., 'Porting Game Studies Research to Virtual Reality', *New Media & Society*, 18(11) (2016), 2793-2799

Hett, Benjamin Carter, ‘Op-Ed: The Trump Insurrection was America’s Beer Hall Putsch’, (LA Times: 2021), {https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-01-16/donald-trump-insurrection-capitol-beer-hall-putsch} [accessed 11/02/2021]

Holy Bible Containing The Old and New Testaments, Authorised King James Version (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984)

Hume, Kathryn, *Fantasy and Mimesis* (London: Routledge Revivals, 2015)

Hutcheon, Linda and Siobhan O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013)

Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty* (2003) Microsoft Windows

Infocom, *Suspended* (1983) Commodore 64

Ivory, James, ‘A Brief History of Video Games’, in *The Video Game Debate: Unravelling the Physical, Social, and Psychological Effects of Digital Games*, ed. by Rachel Kowert and Thorsten Quandt (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1-22

Jagoda, Patrick, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 2016)

James, Henry, *The Turn of The Screw* (Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publishing Group, 2016)

Jansen, Dennis, ‘Ludic Cyborgism: Game Studies, Cyborgization, and the Legacy of Military Simulations in Videogames’, *Press Start*, 6 (2020), 36-53

Jayemanne, Darshana, *Performativity in Art, Literature and Videogames* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

Jiang, Min and King-Wa Fang, ‘Big Data, Big Brother, Big Profit?’, *Policy and Internet*, 10(4) (2018), 372-392

Johnston, Jeanne D., Anne P. Massey and Rickie Lee Marker-Hoffman, ‘Using an Alternate Reality Game to Increase Physical Activity and Decrease Obesity Risk of College Students’, *Journal of Diabetes Science & Technology*, 6 (2012), 828-838

Joshua, Judy, ‘Information Bodies: Computational Anxiety in Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash*’, *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 19(1) (2017), 17-47

Jupin, Tanner, ‘Gamic Fiction: The Intermediation of Literature and Games’ (Unpublished doctoral thesis: UC Davis, 2014)

Juul, Jesper, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013)

Kadar, Marlene, *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice* (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1992)

Kant, Immanuel, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. by Robert B Louden (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006)

Kaplan, Sidney J., ‘The Image of Amusement Arcades and Differences in Male and Female Video Game Playing’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 17(1) (1983), 93-98

Kawahara, Reki, *Sword Art Online*, (Tokyo: ASCII Media Works, 2009)

Keats, John, ‘Ode on A Grecian Urn’ in *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats* (New York: Random House, 2009), pp. 238-240

Kent, Steven L., *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokémon and Beyond–the Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001)

Keogh, Brendan, 'Hackers and Cyborgs: Binary Domain and Two Formative Videogame Technicities', *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, 2 (2016), 195-220 {http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/58/106} [accessed 07/10/2020]

King, Stephen, 'The Jaunt', in *Skeleton Crew* (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), pp. 287-321

Kirkpatrick, Graeme, 'Making Games Normal: Computer Game Discourse in the 1980s', *New Media & Society*, 18 (2016), 1439-1454

Knoxx, Brittany, 'Programming Girlhood: Digital Labor and the Twenty-First Century Girl Coder in the United States', *Journal of Children and Media*, 16(1) (2022), 117-133

Kocurek, Carly A., *Coin-Operated Americans* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2015)

Kostick, Conor, What are the Best Gamelit Books?, (LevelUP: 2021) {https://www.levelup.pub/best-Gamelit} [accessed 11/10/2021]

Kostick, Conor, What is LitRPG?, (LevelUP: n.d.) {https://www.levelup.pub/what-is-LitRPG} [accessed 04/10/2021]

Kücklich, Julian, 'Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry', *The Fibreculture Journal,* 5 (2005)

Kuo, Lily, China Bans Children from Late-Night Gaming to Combat Addiction, (*Guardian*: 2019) {https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/07/china-bans-children-from-late-night-gaming-to-combat-addiction} [accessed 02/04/2023]

Lean, Tom, *Electronic Dreams: How 1980s Britain Learned to Love the Computer* (London: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2016)

Lu, Marie, *Waycross* (London: Penguin Books, 2017)

Luis Borges, Jorge, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. by Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin, 2000)

M. Kelly, Nicholas, '"Works like Magic": Metaphor, Meaning, and the GUI in Snow Crash', *Science Fiction Studies*, 45 (March 2018), 69-90

MacCallum-Stewart, Esther, Jaakko Stenros and Staffan Björk, 'The Impact of Role-Playing Games on Culture', in *Role-Playing Games Studies*, ed. by José P. Zagel and Sebastian Deterding (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 172-187

Magic Dome, LitRPG, (2020), {http://md-books.com/genre/LitRPG} [accessed 04/10/2021]

Makichuk, Dave, China Imposes New Videogame Restrictions, (Asia Times: 2019) {https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/11/article/china-imposes-new-video-game-restrictions/}

Markey, Patrick M., and Chris J. Ferguson, 'Teaching Us to Fear: The Violent Video Game Moral Panic and the Politics of Game Research', *American Journal of Play,* 10(1) (2017), 99-115

Martin, Jonathan, The Game, (Seattle Times: 2008) { https://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/the-game/} [accessed 11/04/2021]

Martinovic, Dragana, Christie I. Ezeife, Rob Whent, Jonathan Reed, Gerald H. Burgess, Chantal M. Pomerleau, Yuqi Yang and Ritu Chaturvedi, 'Critic-proofing of the cognitive aspects of simple games', *Computers & Education*, 72 (2014), 132-144

Mason, Sarah, High Score, Low Play: Why the Gig Economy Loves Gamification, (*Guardian*, 2018) {https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/nov/20/high-score-low-pay-gamification-lyft-uber-drivers-ride-hailing-gig-economy } [accessed 01/01/2019]

Massanari, Adrienne, '#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's algorithms, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures', *New Media & Society*, 19 (2015), 184-200 {https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419879918} [accessed 11/02/2021]

McCaffery, Larry, 'An Interview with William Gibson' (1986), in *Conversations with William Gibson*, ed. by Patrick Smith (Jackson, MS: Mississippi UP, 2014), pp. 24-46

McCloud, Scott, *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels.* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011)

McFarlane, Anna, Could the Climate Crisis Spell the End for the 'Punk' in 'Cyberpunk?, (*Deletion*: 2018) {https://www.deletionscifi.org/episodes/episode-14/could-the-climate-crisis-spell-the-end-for-the-punk-in-cyberpunk/} [accessed 16/11/2018]

McGurl, Mark, 'Unspeakable Conventionality: The Perversity of The Kindle', *American Literary History*, 33(2) (2021), 394-415

McLuhan, Marshall, 'At the Moment of Sputnik the Planet Becomes a Global Theater in Which There Are No Spectators But Only Actors', in *Marshall McLuhan: The Man and His Message*, ed. by George Sanderson and Frank Macdonald (Colorado: Fulcrum, 1989), pp. 70-80

Mead, Corey, *War Play: Video Games and the Future of Armed Conflict* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013)

Moberly, Brent and Kevin Moberly, 'Gay Habits Set Straight: Fan Culture and Authoritative Praxis in Ready Player One', *The Year's Work in Medievalism*, 31 (2016), 30-44

Moldovan, Rares, 'The State of Play: Geektopia in Ready Player One', *Caietele Echinox*, 32 (2017), 242-251

Mortensen, Torill Elvira, 'Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #Gamergate', *Games and Culture,* 13(8) (2016), 787-806

Mukherjee, Souvik, *Video Games and Storytelling* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

Mulder, R. M., Gamelit is Not Synonymous with LitRPG, (2018) {https://indieilluminati.wordpress.com/2018/03/07/Gamelit-is-not-synonymous-to-LitRPG/} [accessed 12/10/2021]

Murakami, Haruki, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (New York: Vintage Publishing, 2001)

Muriel, Daniel and Garry Crawford, *Video Games as Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2018)

Murray, Janet, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997)

Muse Software, *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein* (1984) Commodore 64

Nam, Heesung, *The Legendary Moonlight Sculptor* (Seoul: ROK Media, 2007)

Nancy, Jean-Luc, *Corpus*, trans. by Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham UP, 2008)

Nardone, Rosy, 'Videogames between Ethics and Politics', *Journal of Theories and Research in Education*, 12(2) (2017), 41-55

Nath, Trevir, Investing in Video Games: This Industry Pulls In More Revenue Than Movies, Music, (Nasdaq: 2016), {https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/investing-video-games-industry-pulls-more-revenue-movies-music-2016-06-13 } [accessed 03/06/2022)

Newman, Michael Z., *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017)

Nicholls, David, 'What's Real is Immaterial: What are we Doing with New Materialism?', *Aporia*, 11 (2019), 3-13

Nieborg, David B. and Joke Hermes, 'What is Game Studies Anyway?', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11 (2008), 131-147

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, trans. by A. K. M. Adam (Oxford: Quadriga, 2019)

Night Mind, Jack Torrance In-Field Investigation: Stage 1 Report (See Description for Info), Online Video Recording, YouTube, (2018) {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c09UZSMMCrs&t=1549s&ab_channel=NightMind} [accessed 11/04/2021]

Nintendo, *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) Nintendo Entertainment System

Noguchi, Yukio, 'The "Bubble" and Economic Policies in the 1980s', *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, 20(2) (1994), 291-329

Nordstrom, Justin, '"A Pleasant Place for the World to Hide": Exploring Themes of Utopian Play in Ready Player One", *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 18 (2016), 238-256

Northfield, Rebecca, 'Gaming's Golden Age', *Engineering & Technology Magazine*, 13 (2018), 30-33. {https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?tp=&arnumber=8722610} [accessed 29/03/2021]

Ottosen, Rune, 'The Military-Industrial Complex Revisited', *Television & New Media*, 10(1) (2008), 122-125

Oxford English Dictionary, 'Ekphrasis', *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online] {www.oed.com/view/Entry/59412} [accessed 25/10/2019]

Paul Gee, James, 'Video Games and Embodiment' *Games and Culture*, 3 (2008), 253-263

Penix-Tadsen, Phillip, *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016)

Petry, Nancy M., Florian Rehbein, Rouglaas A. Gentile, Jeroen S. Lemmens, Hans-Jürgen Rumpf, Thomas Mößle, Gallus Bischof, Ran Tao, Daniel S. S. Fung, Guilherme Borges, Marc Auriacombe, Angels González Ibáñez, Phillip Tam and Charles P. O'Brien, 'An International Consensus for Assessing Internet Gaming Disorder using the new DSM-5 Approach', *Addiction*, 109, (2014), 1399-1406 {https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13057}

Pietschmann, Daniel, Georg Valtin, and Peter Ohler, 'The Effect of Authentic Input Devices on Computer Game Immersion', in *Computer Games and New Media Cultures*, ed, by Johannes Fromme and Alexander Unger (Heidelberg: Springer, 2012), 279-292

Pimentel, Ken and Kevin Teixeira, *Virtual Reality: Through The New Looking Glass* (New York: Intel/Windcrest McGraw Hill, 1993)

Plato, *Plato Republic*, trans. by G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D.C Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992)

Polygon, Monster Factory: Exploding Shepard's Face Bones in Mass Effect 2, Online Video Recording, YouTube (2015) {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn4x_BRqIpI&ab_channel=Polygon} [accessed 19/10/2021]

Postman, Neil, *The Humanism of Media Ecology* (New York: Fordham University, 2000)

Proust, Marcel, *On Reading Ruskin*, ed. by Jean Autret, William Burford, and Phillip J. Wolfe (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1987)

Punday, Daniel, *Writing at The Limits: The Novel in The New Media Ecology* (Lincoln, NE: Nebraska UP, 2012)

Purdon, James, 'Literature-Technology-Media: Towards a New Technography', *Literature Compass*, 15 (2018), 1-9

Quinn, Zoë, *Crash Override* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2017)

Rak, Julie, 'Life Writing Versus Automedia: The Sims 3 Game as a Life Lab', *Biography*, 38(2) (2015), 155-180

Ralston, Devon Fitzgerald, '"Cockygate": Trademark Trolling, Romance Novels, and Intellectual Property', in *The 2018 Intellectual Property Annual*, ed. by C. Ratliff (Urbana, IL: Intellectual Property Standing Group of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2019), 21-32 {https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5p79427f} [accessed 12/10/2021]

Ramsey, Hayden, 'Philosophers on Play', in *Reclaiming Leisure* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 9-25

Ricoeur, Paul, *Time and Narrative*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL, IL: Chicago UP, 2008)

Riley, Alexander T., 'The Theory of Play/Games and Sacrality in Popular Culture: The Relevance of Roger Caillois for Contemporary Neo-Durkheimian Cultural Theory', *Durkheimian Studies*, new series, 11 (2005), 103-114

Rockwell, Geoffrey and Keiji Amano, 'Pachinko: A Case Study in Hybrid Physical and Virtual Interface', *Journal for the Japanese Association for Digital Humanities*, 4 (2019), 72-89

Romualdo, Sofia, 'Curating The Arcade: Strategies for The Exhibitions of Videogames', *International Journal of Film and Media Arts*, 1 (2017), 24-37

Rüggemeier, Anne, 'Beyond the Subject – Towards the Object? Nancy K. Miller's What They Saved: Pieces of a Jewish Past (2011) and the materiality of Life Writing', *European Journal of Life Writing*, 5 (2016), 36-54

Ruotsalainen, Juho and Sirkka Heinonen, 'Media Ecology and the Future Systemic Ecosystem', *European Journal of Futures Research*, 3 (2015), 1-10

Ryall, Emily, Wendy Russell and Malcolm Maclean, *The Philosophy of Play as Life* (New York: Routledge, 2019)

Ryan, Marie-Laure, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001)

Said, Edward, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004)

Salas, Hugo, 'The Dead End of Representation: Suzanne Césaire Discusses Roger Caillois' *Research in African Literatures*, 53(4) (2023), 160-172

Scalzi, John, 'Ready Player One' (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), back cover

Schaubert, Vicky, ‘My disabled son’s amazing gaming life in the World of Warcraft’, BBC, (2019), {https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/disability-47064773} [accessed 03/11/2020]

Scruton, Roger, ‘Representation in Music’, *Philosophy*, 51(197) (1976), 273-287

Scully Baker, Rainforest, ‘A Practiced Practice: Speedrunning Through Space with de Certeau and Virilio’, *Game Studies*, 14(1) (2014), {https://www.gamestudies.org/1401/articles/scullyblaker} [accessed: 21/02/2024]

Shachtman, Noah, ‘Sci Fi Fans are Called Into an Alternate Reality’, New York Times, (2004), { https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/04/technology/circuits/scifi-fans-are-called-into-an-alternate-reality.html} [accessed 11/04/2021]

Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*, ed. by Barbara A. Mowat (London: Simon and Schuster, 2003)

Shakespeare, William, *Macbeth* (New York: Macmillan, 2016)

Shaw, Debra Benita, ‘The Aesthetics of Retrieval: Beautiful Data, Glitch Art and Popular Culture’, *Anthropocenes*, 1(1) (2020), 1-10

Shickarev, Sergei, ‘High Waves, Quiet Backwaters’, *Russian Studies in Literature*, 52(3-4) (2016), 209-234

Shields, David, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Group, 2010)

Shin, Haerin, ‘Unlocking the Mindware: The Responsibility of Building a Solipsistic Universe in Murakami Haruki’s *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and The End of the World’*, *Positions*, 26(4) (2018), 749-780

Shteyngart, Gary, *Super Sad True Love Story* (London: Granta, 2011)

Slayton, Joel, *Media Ecology: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005)

Slovin, Rochelle, ‘Hot Circuits: Reflections on the 1989 Video Game Exhibition of the American Museum of the Moving Image’, in *The Medium of the Video Game*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), pp. 137-154

Smith, Alexander, *They Create Worlds: The Story of the People and Companies That Shaped the Video Game Industry, Vol. 1: 1971-1982* (Florida: CRC Press, 2019)

Snodgrass, J., H. J. Francois Dengeh II, Micheal G. Lacy, Andrew Bagwell, Max Van Oostenburg and Daniel Lende, ‘Online Gaming Involvement and its positive and negative consequences’, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 66 (2017), 291-302 {http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.09.025}

Soderman, Braxton, *Against Flow: Video Games and the Flowing Subject* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021)

Squire, Kurt, *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011)

Stark, Doug, ‘Ludic Literature: Ready Player One as Didactic Fiction for the Neoliberal Subject’, in *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies*, ed. by Sascha Pöhlmann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 153-173

Stark, Doug, ‘Video Game Novels, in *Encyclopaedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf, 2nd edn (Santa Barbara, CA: ABO-CLIO, 2021)

Stephens, Niall ‘Towards a More Substantive Media Ecology: Postman’s Metaphor Versus Posthuman Futures’, *International Journal of Communication*, 8 (2014), 2027-2045

Stephenson, Neal, *Snow Crash* (London: Penguin Books, 2011)

Sterne, Lawrence, *The Life & Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (New York: Penguin Books, 1967)

Stone, Jon, *Duel Wield: The Interplay of Poetry and Video Games* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022)

Sullivan, Shannon *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of White Privilege* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2006)

Swanstrom, Lisa, 'Capsules and Nodes and Ruptures and Flows: Circulating Subjectivity in Neal Stephenson's Snow Crash', *Science Fiction Studies*, 37 (2010), 54-80

The New London Group, 'A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures', *Harvard Educational Review*, 66.1 (Spring 1996), 60-93

The Urban Writers, LitRPG: The Genre That's Revolutionizing Fiction, (2020), { https://theurbanwriters.com/blogs/publishing/LitRPG-genre-that-s-revolutionizing-fiction} [accessed 04/10/2021]

Thoreau, Henry David, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1985)

Tramell, Arron, *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023)

Turkle, Sherry, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984)

Turner, Bryan S., 'A Note on Nostalgia', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4 (1987), 147-156

Van Rooij, Antonius, Christopher J Ferguson, Michelle Colder Carras, Daniel Kardefelt-Winther, Jing Shi, Espen Aarseth, Anthony M Bean, Karin Helmersson Bergmark, Anne Brus, Mark Coulson, Jory Deleuze, Pravin Dullur, Elza Dunkels, Johan Edman, Malte Elson, Peter J Etchells, Anne Fiskaali, Isabela Granic, Jeroen Jansz, Faltin Karlsen, Linda K Kaye, Bonnie Kirsh, Andreas Lieberoth, Patrick Markey, Kathryn L Mills, Rune Kristian Lundedal Nielsen, Amy Orben, Arne Poulsen, Nicole Prause, Patrick Prax, Thorsten Quandt, Adriano Schimmenti, Vladan Starcevic, Gabrielle Stutman, Nigel E Turner, Jan van Looy and Andrew K Przybylski, 'A Weak Scientific Basis for Gaming Disorder: Let Us Err on the Side of Caution', *Journal of Behavioural Addictions*, 7 (2018), 1-9 {https://doi/10.1556/2006.7.2018.19}

Veale, Kevin, *Gaming the Dynamics of Online Harassment* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)

Wagner, Richard, 'Art and Revolution', in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. by William Ashton Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895), pp. 23-65

Wark, McKenzie, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007)

Weiss, Gilbert and Ruth Wodak, 'Introduction: Theory, Interdisciplinarity and Critical Discourse Analysis', in *Critical Discourse Analysis: Theory and Interdisciplinary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 1-35

Welsh, James M. 'Introduction' in *The Literature/Film Reader*, ed. by James M. Welsh, Peter Lev (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2007), pp. xiii-xxviii

Whitton, Nicola, *Learning with Digital Games: A Practical Guide to Engaging Students in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2009)

Williams, Dimitri, 'The Video Game Lightning Rod', *Information, Communication & Society*, 6 (2003), 523-550

Williams, William Carlos, ‘Landscape with the Fall of Icarus in Pictures from Brueghel’, in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume II: 1939-1962* (Cambridge, MA: New Directions, 1962) p. 385

Wisecup, Kelly, ““Let’s Get Semiotic”: Recoding the Self in Neal Stephenson’s Snow Crash (1992)”, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 41(5) (2008), 854-877

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. by P.S.M Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009)

Wiwe Vilmar, Therese, ‘Literature’s listening spaces: Representations of music listening in two contemporary novels’, *SoundEffects*, 10(1) (2021) 57-70

Wolf, Mark J. P., ‘United States of America’, in *Video Games Around The World*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf (London: MIT Press, 2015), pp. 591-607

Woods, Heather Suzanne, ‘Anonymous, Steubenville, and the Politics of Visibility: Questions of Virality and Exposure in the Case of #OPRollRedRoll and #OccupySteubenville’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 14(6) (2014), 1096-1098

World Health Organisation, International Classification of Diseases for Mortality and Morbidity Statistics, 11th edition. (Geneva: World Health Organisation, 2018) 6C51, Gaming Disorder. {http://id.who.int/icd/entity/1448597234} [accessed 20/03/2023]

Wright, Joe, ‘Nosedive’, *Black Mirror* (Netflix: 2016) {https://www.netflix.com/watch/80104627} [accessed 01/11/2021]

Zendle, David, ‘Beyond Loot Boxes: a variety of gambling-like practices in video games are linked to both problem gambling and disordered gaming’, *PeerJ*, 8 (2020), 1-26 {10.7717/peerj.9466} [accessed 02/11/2020]

Zialcita, Paolo, ‘China Introduces Restrictions on Videogames for Minors’, NPR, (2019), {https://www.npr.org/2019/11/06/776840260/china-introduces-restrictions-on-video-games-for-minors} [accessed 09/12/2020]

Zimmerman, Eric, ‘Gaming Literacy: Game Design as a Model for Literacy in the Twenty-First Century’, in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2009) pp. 23-32.

Zimmerman, Eric, ‘Manifesto for a Ludic Century’, in *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*, ed. by Sebastian Deterding and Steffen P. Walz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014)

Žižek, Slavoj, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation for Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014)

FIGURE LIST

Figure 1. Francisco de Goya, 'The Drowning Dog' 1820-1823, mixed method on mural transferred to canvas, room 037. Courtesy of the Museo del Prado { https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-drowning-dog/4ea6a3d1-00ee-49ee-b423-ab1c6969bca6} [accessed 18/08/2020]. 145
Figure 2. Truck Shepard and Jacob Taylor converse whilst under fire from Cerberus security. David Zhou, digital screenshot, Twitter, {https://twitter.com/dz/status/623013852897222656} [accessed 19/10/2021]. 207