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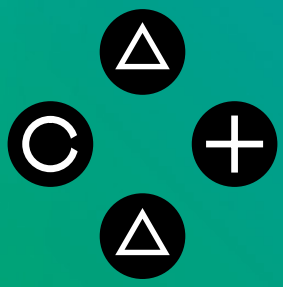

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Special Issue 2024
Games and Language

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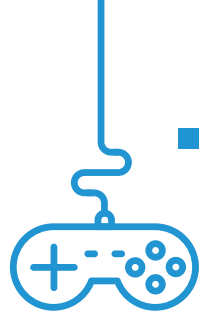

Acta Ludologica is a scientific journal in the field of games and digital games. The journal contains professional scientific reflections on digital games; it also offers academic discourses on games, especially media and digital competencies, creation, design, marketing, research, development, psychology, sociology, history and the future of digital games and game studies.

Acta Ludologica is a double-blind peer reviewed journal published twice a year. It focuses on theoretical studies, theoretical and empirical studies, research results and their implementation into practice, as well as professional publication and scientific reviews of digital games.

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Editorial

Commands and Silences: Language at Play in Digital and Tabletop Games

At their core, all digital games are conversations. Be it pressing a button or typing a command, the fundamental allure of all gaming experience is the continuous interaction between player and machine. This holy grail of interactivity, naturally, presupposes the existence of some kind of language to facilitate it. From programming languages as codes to human languages as the basis of narratives, large language models, as recently emerging technologies, are increasingly utilized in game development, further complicating the already nuanced relationship between games and language. A notable recent example was when mods for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* integrated ChatGPT as an interactive tool, creating the illusion that NPCs are now able to unscriptedly communicate with players in real-time. Artificial or human, descriptive or prescriptive, highly abstract or matter-of-fact in nature, language is the means and milieu of all in-game interactivity; even nonverbality is put forward as the silent or primordial Other of a world based on texts and language.

This special issue of *Acta Ludologica*, "Games and Language", explores how language shapes and is shaped by games, how it sets up the social, cultural and critical context of games, and how games, in return, challenge the conventions of communication, storytelling, and meaning-making.

In the beginning was the word – and the word had to be very specific as one tried to interact with old-school text-based adventure games, like *Zork*: you could not just *use* a lantern, you had to be very specific about *light*ing it. In a more recent example, *Cryptmaster*, you had to type out the letters of skills and spells so that the characters you were in control of, would use them. The word of code, in this sense, becomes a means of command, and in a broader context a word with magically performative powers. Any virtual world is bound by the code, meaning that language, in certain cases, is an indisputable tool of control – literally and metaphorically too.

The 2019 indie game *Baba Is You* taps into this magical, creative capacity of language. Imre Horváth traces poetic defamiliarisation in the gameplay, presenting a possible typology of intersections between referentiality and what he coins 'intraprocedurality'. The problem of referentiality and functionality lies at the heart of the analysis of in-game fictionality and factuality by Tamás Csönge, identifying the core problem with descriptive language.

At the same time, language, even in-game language use is inherently tied in with narrativity – a concept much challenged and transformed by game studies since its conception. Certain games, despite it being self-contradictory, include for instance a narrator, such as the aforementioned *Zork*. Early on in the game, this narrator draws the player's attention to a doorway with Gothic letters on it. If the player wants to inspect it, it will turn out that the engraving says, "This space is intentionally left blank", as a goofy metatextual nod towards the player. The idea of such metareferentiality (metafictional and metaludic alike) is in the focus of Aylin Pekanık. Her study offers a taxonomy of metagames, arguing that their evolution demonstrates the maturity of the medium.

Language, then, both as the magic of coding and as narrative control, shows the natural and unavoidable cultural context in which any playing experience can emerge. This is why some games seek to offer a uniquely ludic experience precisely by avoiding language – written and spoken alike. The 2011 docugame *The Cat and the Coup* does just that, considering a transcultural context and audience in presenting a local, personal but ludic instance of counter-microhistory, as Mohammadreza Golshani suggests in his study. Similarly, Imola Bülgözdi focuses on the wordless world of the game *Journey*, focusing instead on the music, the nonverbal interactions and the affective qualities of connecting with someone through playing.

Even more so than digital games, tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPG) are dependent on language as the primary means of communication. András Hlavacska presents an experiment that was conducted to scrutinise intra- and extraludic interactions during TTRPG campaigns. Proceeding with this idea, Orsolya Nagy explores the intersection of TTRPGs, cosplay, and transmedia storytelling through a case study of *The Wayward Wanderers* by the TikTok-favourite team Somewhere Bound. In this case a transmedia-specific 'language' is then developed to comment on, forward, and challenge canon narratives. Finally, the contrasting perspective on the topic is presented by Ana Arán Sánchez, who applies games and playful approaches to foreign language learning.

From the poetic mechanics of *Baba Is You* to the silent vernacular of *The Cat and the Coup*, from non-verbal connections in *Journey* and transmedia storytelling in tabletop RPGs to using playful approaches in foreign language learning, this special issue explores the many ways language shapes and is shaped by games. Language, in commands or silences, becomes both the medium and the message, defining how we play, connect, and create meaning.

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GAME STUDIES

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Ludopoetic Interplay in *Baba is You*

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ABSTRACT:
The study investigates aspects of ludopoetic interplay in *Baba is You*, a digital puzzle game that radically reimagines the relationship between language, gameplay, and meaning-making. Through a close reading of selected game levels, we identify several features that render the game poetic: its use of emotive linguistic markers, its emphasis on verbal creation, and the player's engagement with and enjoyment of linguistic play. By analysing the game's unique mechanics of rule manipulation, we examine how players interact with language as both a procedural system and a poetic medium. The study identifies five modes of interaction between referential (metaphorical) and intraprocedural (metonymical) transfers of meaning, including exclusion, diversion, and mutual support. We argue that the game achieves its poetic quality especially by prioritising metonymy over metaphor, foregrounding the materiality of language and the performative power of words. By enabling players to dynamically reconstruct game rules through linguistic manipulation, *Baba is You* transforms gameplay into an act of linguistic creativity.

KEY WORDS:
Baba is You, ludopoetic interplay, lyric address, lyric poetry, procedural figurativity.

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Introduction

While the narrativity of digital games has been discussed since the birth of the medium, little attention has been paid to the lyricism of digital games. Some have focused on formal features, discussing digital games in connection to lyric genres and traditions (Montfort, 2005; Asad, 2011; Grace, 2011; Papa, 2014). Although the word *poetics* is often used to describe game mechanics, relatively few (e.g. Harrell, 2013; Sezen, 2015; Kubiński, 2017) have drawn clear parallels between actual lyric poetry and digital games. Ensslin (2023) has provided a theoretical framework for interpreting digital text-based works of art which she calls 'poetry games'. She notably contends that poetry games "seek to defamiliarize and innovate the gaming experience through highly idiosyncratic ludonarrative mechanics" (p. 13). *Defamiliarization*[1] through form as a mode of poetic expression is central to further research, for example, in the concept of poetic gameplay: "gameplay that is deliberately made strange, or defamiliarized, to create a poetic effect, drawing attention to the form of the work as a way to encourage reflection" (Mitchell et al., 2020, Abstract). Furthermore, Magnuson (2023) describes poetry as a "form of intervention [that] explores the tension between signified meaning and material meaning present in a given context" (p. 95) and then applies this to the mechanics of various digital games.

The tension between signified meaning and material meaning plays an important role in the puzzle game *Baba Is You* (Hempuli, 2019). It was released in 2019 by Finnish

1 Remark by the author: The concept of defamiliarization (ostranenie) was coined by Russian formalist literary critic Viktor Borisovich Shklovsky (see Shklovsky, 1917/1965). The term was applied to the study of digital games by Pötzsch (2017).

developer Arvi Teikari (Hempuli) for PC and Nintendo Switch, with an expanded version available for iPhone and Android in 2021. The game became a great success: it has an "overwhelmingly positive" rating on Steam ("Baba is You", n.d.), with over eighteen thousand positive reviews. *Baba is You* is unique feature is that the player can dynamically manipulate the rules of the game space by moving words on the screen in order to solve puzzles in radical and surprising ways. The player is constantly confronted by the performative power of language: she is taking control of the diegetic reality of the game space by creating new sentences, as well as breaking up and rearranging existing ones. Sentences, therefore, have ludic functions (they are game rules), but they also have rhetorical power. They are figurative: meaning is transferred between the words placed next to one another, often evoking the experience of reading a poem. The levels have several poetic features, such as emotive language, titles, rhythm, and lyric address. The ludic and poetic dimensions of the gameplay exist at the same time and place. They relate to each other in different ways, alternating between affirmation, distraction, indifference and divergence. This study explores this field of relationality by close reading the game levels of *Baba Is You* as spaces dedicated to simultaneous puzzle-solving and meaning-making.

Grammar and Performativity

The game has maze-like levels, consisting of various components, displayed in a top-down view. Components include objects (stones, walls, flags, grass, water, etc.), characters (e.g. Baba, a creature resembling a sheep or a rabbit), and words, some of which stand for objects, characters, empty fields and other words. All components (i.e. objects, characters, and words) are the same size, and all of them can be manipulated (they can be traversed and moved, and some of them can be transformed, produced, and destroyed) if the rules on the map allow it. The words themselves act as objects, they are physical parts of the puzzle. The rules are brought to life by sentences made out of the words. At least three of them must be arranged vertically or horizontally to form a sentence that is meaningful to the game. To do this, the player needs a word that acts as a noun (BABA, ROCK, FLAG), a verb (IS, HAS, MAKE), and a word that completes the statement (this can be a noun or a property, but not a verb or a conditional operator like FACING or NOT). Almost all the words included are existing English words, and although the syntax used in the game does not necessarily follow the rules of English grammar, sentences must adhere to the fixed word order of the English declarative sentence (the verb comes after the subject, and the other parts of the sentence come after them). A rule is binding as long as the words are connected in the way described above: if the connection is broken, the rule no longer applies.

The linguistic information in the game space can be thought of as pseudocode, that is, a textual representation of an algorithmic process, a feedback loop (Manovich, 2002). It is structurally similar to artificial languages used in programming: if one looks at a piece of code written in C#, Javascript or Python, one also sees instructions consisting of English words that differ from the morphological and syntactic features of natural English texts. In digital games, the player has no direct access to the code during gameplay. In other words, she has no say in how objects behave in the game space: she moves the player character around, she uses keys to open locks, she is stopped by walls etc. In *Baba is You*, however, some of the text that acts as code is practically put on the screen. The words decide which character is controlled by the player, which object opens the door (or possibly another object), and which object performs the function of the wall (if any is needed). The words placed in the game space as rule-making components complicate the typology

that ludologist Aarseth (1997) has devised for digital games and other cybertexts. These texts are composed of scriptons ("strings as they appear to readers") and textons ("strings as they exist in the text"), linked by a "traversal function – the mechanism by which scriptons are revealed or generated from textons and presented to the user of the text" (p. 62). Words in the *Baba is You* levels are scriptons (sequences of signs that can be interpreted by the player), but they are also textons, since they affect the behaviour of the objects in the game space.

While most digital games simulate aspects of reality (e.g. walls are hard), the gameplay of *Baba is You* entails the constant reconfiguration of the rules that govern the diegetic reality of the game, which often creates completely unrealistic situations. In the level "Sorting Facility", for example, the sentence ROCK + ON + WATER + IS + KEY turns a stone that has been pushed into the water into a key. Although most of the time the player controls the character named Baba, any component, in fact, can be the player's avatar as long as the word that represents said component is combined into the sentence [component] + IS + YOU. The player can even impersonate multiple components at the same time, including words. During gameplay, the sentence [component] + IS + YOU must be intact at all times: if nothing is being impersonated, the game is lost (although all moves can be reversed and all levels can be restarted). To solve the levels, three conditions must be met: the sentences [word representing component A] + IS + YOU and [word representing component B] + IS + WIN must be put together, then component A must touch component B; by default, Baba must touch the flag. This state is hindered by the other rules and components, but the sentences must typically act together for the puzzle to be solved.

The ability to manipulate the rules of the game this way gives the player considerable agency. The introductory video before the first level thus depicts the act of creation, more specifically, creation with words. In the background, there is a chaotic arrangement of floating grey tiles, stones and wall segments, then a flower appears and turns into the word BABA, and the iconic figure leaps out of nowhere. From another flower, the word WALL emerges, and two walls appear on the screen, one below Baba and one above it, forming a frame. From the third flower, the word ROCK is created. Three rocks block Baba's path, dividing the space enclosed by the walls into two parts. Finally, we witness the creation of FLAG, which is placed beyond the rocks. Further flowers give rise to further words, creating rules: WALL IS STOP (walls are hard, they stop moving components, including us), ROCK IS PUSH (rocks can be moved), FLAG IS WIN (the flag becomes the goal). Finally, the words BABA and IS are joined by the word YOU, and we are given instructions on how to control Baba. At this point, the intro seamlessly turns into the first, tutorial level of the game. To solve the puzzle, the player needs to push one of the rocks out of the way and then touch the flag. Right on the first level, the game makes it clear that the behaviours of the objects are defined by the bits of language in the game space.

Configurability and Uncertainty

It is not linguistic omnipotence over the created world that players of *Baba is You* experience, however, but the wonderful interconnectedness of its world. The second and third levels "Where do I go?" and "Now what is this?" are still tutorials. "Where do I go?" teaches the player that if she dislocates the first word of a sentence, the rule that the sentence was formulating no longer applies. By taking apart the combination

WALL + IS + STOP, Baba can go through the wall because it will not stop it. The player experiments with the game components, moves things around, destroys things, learns the specific language of the game. The naming of the character Baba is related to this infantile position: the labial sounds 'b' and 'a' evoke the early phase of language acquisition, when the cooing infant is trying out basic elements of language. According to the developer, the name Baba (and Keke, another character in the game) were inspired by the bouba/kiki effect (r/NintendoSwitch, 2019). Experiments show that the majority of people (even at a few months of age) associate certain speech sounds with the same visual shapes: they associate the phoneme sequence 'bouba' with rounded shapes and 'kiki' with pointy shapes (Ozturk et al., 2013). The infantilisation of the player is further reinforced by the charming, *cute*[2] characters of the game.

It is in this infantile position that the player's relationship to language is constantly evolving. "Where do I go?" teaches the player to use the undo option, which is important right from the start because sentences pushed to the edge of levels typically cannot be taken apart (as on most levels, the player cannot pull words, only push them). To make certain rules unchangeable, some sentences are placed on the edges of the levels. The edges, therefore, also mark the boundaries of the diegetic reality of the levels. "Now what is this?" makes it clear that referentiality in the game space works differently from the spaces outside of it. Although the word WALL refers to the wall object, it only carries the known property of real walls (i.e. we cannot go through them), if a sentence in the level explicitly states WALL IS STOP. In "Now what is this?", the player controls a piece of wall as a character while a set of flags act as a de facto wall. To solve the puzzle, the player is to compose the sentence FLAG + IS + WIN and then, controlling the wall object as a character, she is to touch the wall of flags.

The configurability of game rules suggests existential questions. The game levels are mostly barren, but they give a sense of completeness of existence. Even the simplest levels contain a living creature (usually Baba), some kind of obstacle (usually a wall), a tool (words, stones, etc.), and an end point (usually a flag). In the level "Out of reach", water separates Baba from the flag. The sentence WATER + IS + SINK is placed beyond a wall, so that if Baba touches the water, it sinks. Baba can die, but its death always depends on the arrangement of words in the level. In "Still out of reach", an impenetrable wall of skulls separates Baba from the flag. Beyond the skulls, however, there is also the sentence SKULL + IS + DEFEAT, which creates the rule that when the player touches a skull (the universal symbol of death), she loses the game. However, the puzzle can easily be solved by trying to move, instead of the skulls, the words of the sentence that makes the skulls dangerous. Death in *Baba is You* is thus a linguistic construct, not the inevitable end of existence. The same is true for change in a broader sense. In "Changeless", the sentence ROCK + IS + ROCK creates the rule that rocks cannot be transformed into another object (if the same two words are joined by IS, the object they represent cannot be transformed using another sentence). The stone must regardless be turned into a flag to solve the puzzle. In order to make the sentence ROCK + IS + FLAG take effect, the sentence ROCK + IS + ROCK must be broken down. The title is thus an ironic comment on rock, a symbol of stability: it is an illusion created by language.

The game makes the relationship between the player and his avatar similarly ambiguous. The claim that the title of the game makes is put into question early in "Now what is this?", as the player here controls a rock, not the title character. Apart from Baba, the characters Keke and Me also appear as characters, but since the player can take control of any object, the prior category of characters becomes meaningless: we can only think

2 Remark by the author: For the emergence of cuteness as an affect in digital games, see Bódi (2023).

of Keke and Me as characters because they both have faces, and because the sound 'keke' is not a real English word, and 'me' is a personal pronoun. The singular, independent attribute of "character" is also called into question, since several objects can perform this function at the same time. In "Volcano", for example, a lava flow separates Baba from the flag. By assembling the sentence LAVA + IS + BABA, the lava flow turns into a swarm of Babas that, astonishingly, start moving together to reach the flag.

Although only components with the YOU function attached can be controlled, other components can also be made to move by forming the sentence [component] + IS + MOVE. The components animated this way can push other components in the game space. Besides Keke, robots and ghosts are most likely to come to life this way, expressing this semi-autonomous role symbolically as well. In "Further fields", the dichotomy of animate/inanimate is further complicated: in order to solve the puzzle, nothing performs the function of YOU for a short time (it appears that the player has failed), and then the characters with the MOVE attribute attached push the player character into a position where the sentence KEKE + IS + YOU is activated, and the player is in control of Keke again. The levels "Horror story" and "Security check" invite the player to think about her avatar in radically different ways. In "Horror story", the sentence EMPTY + IS + YOU allows the player to take control of the empty black space.[3] In "Security Check", the sentence NOT + BABA + IS + YOU allows us to control all objects in the game space, with the exception of Baba, simultaneously.

Emotion and Rhetoric

While the game makes the player enjoy the relativism of its objects, it also creates affective meanings to involve the player emotionally. In "Affection", a heart, signified by the word LOVE, takes on the function usually fulfilled by the flag object. The player controls Baba, who cannot touch the heart because of the algae surrounding it (ALGAE + IS + DEFEAT). The player must send Keke, who is not affected by the word DEFEAT, to get the heart using the MOVE attribute. Love, signified by its universal symbol, is therefore the goal of the two characters, which they achieve together. In this way, the game not only guides the player towards the goal of solving the puzzle but also makes a general statement: love is a value in itself, a victory. It encourages the player to imagine Baba and Keke as beings in love with each other, and their feelings fulfilled by them reaching the heart. (This remains meaningful even in the not directly related levels: in "Blockade", the player controls the moon and must reach the star, as they belong together like Baba and Keke.) The fact that Keke also has object-like qualities (he is pushed here and there, transformed, etc.) is not even different from the romantic (lyric) tradition that often objectifies the beloved. In "Double moat", for example, Keke acts as a key, bringing into play the old metaphor of the key to the heart.

To make sense of the examples above, Bogost's (2010) concept of procedural rhetoric is useful: it is "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (p. ix), or "a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created" (p. 3). In "Seeking acceptance", a claim about the nature of love (it being an important goal to be achieved through collective effort) is

3 Remark by the author: For a discussion of the gap between the absence of the signified and the presence of the signifier in the semiotics of zero, see Rotman (2016).

created by the gameplay (the procedure). The fact that Baba and Keke's joint effort is needed to pass the level argues for Baba and Keke's commitment to each other. Something similar happens in "Double moat": it is through the other that one achieves victory. However, meanings are not created via procedures exclusively. The word LONELY, for example, which occurs repeatedly, has considerable affective force. As a conditional operator in the game, it denotes an object standing alone in space, that is, a state in which the object does not overlap with any other object. However, in "Floaty platforms", the sentence LONELY + BABA + IS + DEFEAT, quite like the sentence LONELY + BABA + IS + YOU in "Shuffle", is impossible to interpret non-referentially: the game suggests that loneliness (in general) is defeat (in general), and that the player is lonely, regardless of the ludic function of the LONELY attribute. The player finds herself in a similar situation in "Love at first sight". Here, she controls a heart due to the sentence LONELY + LOVE + IS + YOU. The goal is to separate two birds adjacent to each other, then push one of them into the water (destroying it), so that the other one can eventually fulfil the function of the goal, which suggests a story of love and intrigue.

In addition to their emotional connotations, there are other qualities that motivate the player to interpret the levels as poetic works. As mentioned, each level has a title, which is displayed in large letters in the middle of the screen when a level is loaded. Sometimes they suggest a solution (the title "Double moat", for example, suggests building a moat), or they put the puzzle in context (as in the case of "Affection"), similarly to the title of a poem. The level, of course, does not look like a poem in the traditional sense, but when the player presses the Escape key, the rules (sentences) that apply to the level appear in the menu screen vertically arranged, as if they were lines of poetry. The short words give the sentences considerable power. In English-language poetry, single-syllable words, typically of Germanic origin, are of great importance, as they can make complex statements about the world in condensed manner, and they also contribute to the naturally iambic thumping of English. All words in the game are one or two syllables long in order to fit a single square. The game also takes advantage of zero derivation in English (words can be changed from one category to another without changing its form): certain words that acts as a noun can simply be placed in the position of the property (where typically adjectives are placed) to function as one. The interchangeability of words gives the player a sense of repetition, which is an important feature of lyric poetry.

The central role of the singular second person pronoun (YOU) is another such feature. The player must connect this word to a noun in order to control the object it signifies, and at the same time, she creates something like lyric address: the game "speaks" to the player through an object that is "addressed". Culler (2015) describes lyric address as a fundamental parameter of lyric poetry, central to the lyric tradition. Lyric address, according to Culler, has three agents (triangulated address): the speaker of the poem addresses the reader indirectly by addressing another addressee. Lyric address is one of the pillars of Culler's model of lyric: "Disrupting narrative, invocation, or address makes the poem an event in the lyric present rather than the representation of a past event" (p. 8), which is a fundamental difference between lyric poetry and prose. In this respect, lyric present is similar to what we call simulation: it is not a representation of past events, but a continuous occurrence in the present.

Magnuson (2023) discusses games with lyrical qualities and identifies lyric address as a basic property of such games. The three agents of address are the creator of the game, the player, and the game/character: in the digital games *Passage* (Rohrer, 2007) and *The Graveyard* (Tale of Tales, 2008) (Magnuson calls them game poems), "there exists an implicit question of how 'you' as the player are positioned in relation to each game's respective author(s) and the ambiguous 'enacted utterance' of each game"

(Magnuson, 2023, p. 42). *Baba is You* does not perfectly fulfil the criteria of a game poem as Magnuson defines them (for example, while the levels are short, the game itself is not), but it still gives lyric address an important role. It is a necessary feature in all of the levels, it is constantly present to mediate between the player, the avatar and the game space. The title (and the rule/sentence BABA + IS + YOU) suggest both the lyricism and the interactivity of the game.

The level titled "Poem" is a game version of a Valentine's Day poem. Here the word YOU, which allows the player control over Baba, becomes associated with 'you', the person addressed in the love poem. In the level, words are arranged side by side and underneath each other to produce a regular, rhyming, rhythmic poem. The original, oft-parodied, well-known poem is the following: 'Roses are red, / Violets are blue, / Sugar is sweet, / And so are you'. The poem makes use of a simile: you are as sweet as sugar. Roses and violets are used as parallels: the colours red and blue are natural, familiar attributes of flowers. Therefore, the poem implies that it is a well-known, obvious, natural fact that you are sweet. The puzzle, however, disrupts the clarity of the original, and reinterprets the naive, kitschy poem. In order to solve the puzzle presented in "Poem", the player is to think metonymically, not metaphorically. The flowers around the poem (and Baba, the flag, the wall) are not illustrations: if the words RED and BLUE are switched (ROSE + IS + BLUE, VIOLET + IS + RED), the flowers change colour. One of the solutions is to push the word VIOLET to the left, then push the words from up from the bottom. This turns the flag blue (FLAG + IS + BLUE), BABA becomes the goal (BABA + IS + WIN), and the nine roses are controlled by the player (ROSE + IS + YOU). The player must then touch Baba with one of the roses to win.

The three agents of triangulated address are, from another perspective, text and the two readers it 'addresses': the computer and the user. They both interpret the sentence ROSE + IS + YOU, yet the metaphorical reading is created only by the user. It may be useful to interpret the game as a special case of codework. Cayley (2002) defines codework as "literature which uses, addresses, and incorporates code: as underlying language-animating or language-generating programming, as a special type of language in itself, or as an intrinsic part of the new surface language or 'interface text,' as [he] call[s] it, of writing in networked and programmable media" (para. 3). The starting point for these experimental texts is that computer code and literary texts are composed of the same signifiers. Their aim is to reveal the code that is usually hidden from users in our digital world. The basic assumption of critical code studies is that computer code is meaningful and can be interpreted (Marino, 2006). In this respect, an important question is whether codeworks can be run: it is rare that these texts can be simultaneously read and decoded not only by humans but also by computers (Cayley, 2002). If we interpret *Baba is You* as an example of codework, it clearly falls into the latter category. Cayley (2002) calls the distinguishing feature of codeworks that can be run on a computer an *ambiguous address*: the work is read both as code and as text. The sentence ROSE + IS + YOU, for example, is read by the computer as code, not as text. In other words, ROSE + IS + YOU is interpreted metonymically, as meaning is transferred on the basis of the proximity between words and not the similarity of their meanings.

Procedural Figurativity

There is a fundamental difference between referential (metaphorical) and intraprocedural (metonymical) transfer of meaning: the former refers to something within the universe outside of the game, while the latter refers to objects in the game space, it has

to do with the rules of the game and the solution of puzzles. De Man (1979) makes a distinction between metaphor as a paradigmatic structure based on the logic of substitution that presupposes a real unity between the agents of the metaphor, and metonymy as "a syntagmatic structure based on contingent association" (p. 15). He criticises the Romantic idea that metaphor is superior to metonymy. In his reading of Proust, he stresses that metaphors are also metonymies: "precisely when the highest claims are being made for the unifying power of metaphor, these very images rely in fact on the deceptive use of semi-automatic grammatical patterns" (p. 16). In *Baba is You*, the referential (that is, metaphorical, universal, rhetorical, text) and intraprocedural (that is, metonymical, ludic, grammatical, code) transfer of meaning[4] can relate to each other in several ways.

a) Only intraprocedural meaning is created

In this case, words and objects may represent phenomena from the world outside the simulation, but the sentences put together have no poetic value and do not prompt referential interpretation. They only make statements about things in the game space. In the level "Lava flood", the sentence LAVA + IS + MORE + AND + HOT causes lava to start flowing from the four corners of the level. However, the sentence BABA + IS + HOT makes the lava harmless and Baba can walk on it. The task here is not to preserve the character's health, but to preserve the goal (the sentence FLAG + IS + MELT makes it vulnerable), which the player can do by pushing the word IS onto it. It would be difficult to attach any referential meaning to this act. In some cases, the level does not even try to imitate outside reality. In "Keep out!", for example, the sentences TREE + IS + HOT or FUNGUS + IS + MELT cause the mushroom to melt when touched by the hot pine tree. Of all the categories of meaning transfer, this one is the most common and the most unimaginative. Since this does not produce general statements, Bogost's (2010) notion of procedural rhetoric does not apply to this category.

b) Only referential meaning is created

"Lonely Flag" presents a female character with a heart above her, the sentence ANNI + IS + BEST below her and a few stars scattered about randomly. The name Anni is clearly a reference to the woman, but the words ANNI nor BEST do not do anything, their presence is not relevant to the puzzle. They have a purely referential / poetic function: after the completion of the game, the credits give thanks to a certain Anni Leskelä for her "encouragement, feedback and support throughout the project" ("ANNI", n.d.). The sentence ANNI + IS + BEST is thus a confession or dedication disguised as a game rule in a playful context, and in this respect can be considered an Easter egg (for more details see Mago, 2019). As far as we know, this is the only example of this category in the game. We cannot speak of procedurality here, so Bogost's (2010) notion of procedural rhetoric cannot be applied to this category either.

c) Intraprocedural and referential meanings are created simultaneously, but the latter merely hints at something outside the game

Even though the puzzle does not actually bring these referential meanings into play, the association provokes some thought in the player. The sentences with the operator HAS are examples of this. The English verb 'has' expresses possession, yet the function

4 Remark by the author: This dichotomy is similar to Magnuson's (2023) distinction between signified meaning and material meaning. Signified meaning refers mainly to the metaphorical meanings of poems and game poems, while material meaning refers to formal features such as rhythm, rhyme, line breaks, as well as the interplay of image, sound and interaction. We cannot apply Magnuson's terminology to *Baba is You* because the words are placed in the game space.

of the word HAS in the game is different: when an object is destroyed, it is replaced by another object. For instance, if the sentences KEKE + HAS + KEY and KEKE + IS + SINK are active, KEKE will become a key if it is placed on water. The meaning that Keke is in possession of a key is merely associative. In "Tunnel Vision", the player transforms Baba into a rock, then assembles the sentence ROCK + HAS + ROCK, and pushes the rock into the water by controlling Keke. The rock disappears but is immediately replaced by another rock. The player is to repeat this three times, then touch the flag with the thusly preserved rock to win. In the meantime, the player might ask, if one possesses only oneself, does one remain oneself after one is destroyed? This philosophical question is in no way addressed by the game. A similar train of thought is induced by the combination of the sentences BABA + IS + YOU and BABA + IS + WIN: if one takes oneself as their goal, what else is needed but oneself? Even so, it would be ridiculous to treat these as serious revelations. Bogost's (2010) notion of procedural rhetoric may apply to this category, but the claims being made are trivial.

d) Intraprocedural and referential meanings are created simultaneously in a way that the referential meaning diverts the player's attention from the intraprocedural meaning

To solve the puzzle, the player must ignore referentiality in favour of intraprocedurality. Besides "Poem", "Bottleneck" can also be put into this category. In this level, there are three components next to each other that seem to form a sentence: SKULL + IS + [the actual skull object]. This is, of course, not recognized by the game as a valid sentence. When read as a line of poetry, it is a meaningful sentence (the skull is the same as the picture of the skull), but when read intraprocedurally, it is an incomplete sentence consisting of two elements and an obstacle (the skull). The player solves the puzzle by connecting the word DEFEAT to the skull object, which also connects the sentence FLAG + IS + WIN indirectly. It is important to note that although intraprocedural meaning is the dominant one in this category, referential meaning is certainly brought into play as well, and it is part of the puzzle. Bogost's (2010) notion of procedural rhetoric can be applied at the meta-level: the puzzles argue for the primacy of intraprocedural meaning. It is the category most closely related to what Mitchell et al. (2020) call poetic gameplay: the game draws attention to formal particularities, thereby defamiliarizing the player and creating rhetorical meaning.[5]

e) Intraprocedural and referential meanings are created simultaneously, and they have a mutually supportive relationship

Referentiality adds to intraprocedural meaning, which in turn brings into play referential meaning. In "Love is out there", Baba is surrounded by a wall, outside of which is the goal/heart (LOVE + IS + WIN). The title can therefore be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, the heart object is literally beyond the wall in the game space, and on the other hand, love is available in the world, it is just a matter of finding it. There is no strong contrast between the two statements, they do not cancel each other out. In fact, "Love is out there" encourages the player to see herself as Baba enclosed within the loveless walls and ponder her way out. The level can be read as a ludic adaptation of life wisdom as well. In "Heavy words", the sentence TEXT + IS + FALL causes the words to 'fall' (move)

5 Remark by the author: Mitchell et al. (2020) identify five categories of techniques (interaction, gameplay, agency, time, and boundaries) for the defamiliarization of player expectations. "Poem" and "Bottleneck" defamiliarizes gameplay. Like in the game *Akrasia* (Team Aha!, 2008), the game objective is not what it first seems. There, "the player initially thinks the goal is to collect all the 'pills', but these pills, while keeping the player in the 'high' state, actually negatively impact the character's life. The 'true' objective is to stay 'sober' by avoiding the pills" (Mitchell et al., 2020, para. 32).

downwards when they are pushed. The words certainly seem to be affected by gravity, yet at this point it is very clear to the player that the words have a symbolic weight, that is, they determine the way the level (and our world) works. The sentence TEXT + IS + FALL thus applies to the game space and to the world outside the simulation too. Bogost's (2010) notion of procedural rhetoric applies to this category, moreover, the game reflects on its own procedural rhetoric.

Conclusion

With the above typology, we would like to show not only the possible ways referentiality and intraprocedurality can relate to each other, but also that *Baba is You* emphasises its preference of intraprocedural meanings: the concrete to the abstract, metonymy to metaphor, code to text, simulation to representation, and, overall, a preference of play to the lyric and lyricism in the conventional sense. The abstract associations, the metaphors, the lyricism, the referentiality provide much needed colour, without which the game would be dry and boring. The dominance of intraprocedurality is, however, very appropriate, both from a ludologist point of view (which is sceptical about the territorialism of literary studies [see Eskelinen, 2001]) and the point of view of literary pedagogy.

Baba is You, after all, is undoubtedly a poetic game: it uses emotive linguistic markers, it imagines language as performative, it assigns importance to the way the player engages with language, and the pleasure she takes from playing with language. But above all, it is poetic because it draws attention to the materiality of language, quite like codeworks that reveal the hidden computer code. It does not allow the player to ignore the bearer of meaning, primary meanings, and puts emphasis on the signifier. These are important steps in learning to appreciate lyric poetry. Students who find it difficult to engage with poetry in school tend to see poems as puzzles to be solved, in which the figurative meaning of the encoded text has to be deciphered. Ironically, in *Baba is You*, the figurative meaning is often found when the player is not actively trying to solve the puzzle, but when she is contemplating and being playful.

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Objects Really Matter: Ludo-Representationalism and the Reality of Digital Games

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ABSTRACT:
The aim of this paper is to identify the reasons for the contradictory conclusions of the fictionalist and the realist theoretical positions on the ontological status of digital game objects. First, the applicability of the Waltonian notion of fiction regarding digital game objects and events is challenged. The paper clarifies that the debate contains a categorical misunderstanding, and that it is not really about the discursive quality of fictionality (or factuality), but about an ontological opposition between represented and real objects. It is then demonstrated that digital game objects belong to a special category of non-physical informational entities that realists rightly consider real because they exhibit systemic behaviour, but fictionalists are also correct regarding their function as signifiers of non-real, represented objects. Following Aarseth, a distinction is made between represented, simulated and real objects. It is argued that simulated digital game objects are real objects, but not necessarily the same kind of objects as those they represent: a virtual library is a library, but a virtual kitten is not a kitten. Finally, it is suggested that the main reason for the confusion about the existential status of game elements is an issue of descriptive language: a confusion between signifier and signified and the uniform designation of heterogeneous phenomena.

KEY WORDS:
descriptive language, digital games, fictionalism, realism, representationalism, simulation, virtuality.

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Introduction: Is This a Real Game?

The paper aims to contribute to the debate between ludo-fictionalism and ludo-realism, where representatives of the more widespread former position such as Atkins (2003), Tavinor (2009, 2012), Meskin and Robson (2012; Robson & Meskin, 2016), Willis (2019), and Nader (2022) claim that, despite their interactivity, the content of digital games are essentially fictional because they "represent fictional characters, places, and events: that is, a fictional world" (Matsunaga, 2016, p. 89). In opposition, researchers leaning towards a realist approach such as Frasca (2002), Juul (2005), Aarseth (2011, 2014, 2023), Coppock (2012), Chalmers (2017), Matsunaga (2016), and Klevjer (2019) dispute this claim and argue that our relationship with digital games, even if they do not have a physical realization, is still very different from our relationship with fictional worlds and entities.

It is useful to start with the idea that most of the debate is not really about the applicability of the quality of fictionality (understood here as an aesthetic category or communicational device),[1] because the adjectives of *fictional* and *real* are not in fact opposites,

1 Remark by the author: Fictionality is understood in this text as a distinct autonomous quality, a widely used rhetorical device and mode of sense-making, rather than as a literary or artistic form/genre. For a conceptual distinction between fiction and fictionality, see Walsh (2007) and Nielsen et al. (2015). For the difference between rhetorical and other approaches, see Zetterberg Gjerlevsen (2016).

but lie at categorically different levels. We will therefore refer here only to some of the essential features of the specific concept of fictionality that we consider to be the most viable for our purposes.

The primary aim of this paper is to demonstrate – without relying on the over-mystified and diversely understood notions of *player experience* or *immersion* – that the two theoretical positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that both positions are valid about the referents of their claims, but that these referents are simply not the same. Digital games often contain representations of objects (most fictionalist arguments discuss this aspect), and that these representations are not the same as the digital game objects that act as their signifiers (often called props), but are at the same time objects in themselves. In this sense, digital games are real-time systems that can be manipulated by the player and therefore contain real events and objects (realist approaches tend to focus on this aspect of digital games). These objects belong to a special category: they are information-based (non-physical and software-generated) objects that can exhibit systemic behaviour in a virtual environment. Their properties and behaviour can be described by well-defined rules, and unlike mere representations of characters or objects in a novel, their properties can be tested and explored by the player, so they are never accidental or inconsistent. Together with other elements of the game, they form a system where they usually have a ludic function: they help or hinder the player's progress in the game.

It is in this context that the much-problematized concept of simulation as machinery with a dual nature can be situated and defined: in this sense, it is the execution of an interrelated set of operations that utilizes the actual behaviour of a rule-based system (the ludic aspect) while generating analogies in a semiotic process to model real-word phenomena (the representational aspect).

The final point of the reflection is to demonstrate how differences in theoretical commitments have led to the seemingly coherent and logical arguments for the fictional or real nature of game content in both approaches. It is assumed that the main reason for the confusion about the reality of game elements is an issue of *descriptive language*: more precisely a confusion between signifier and signified and the uniforming designation of heterogeneous phenomena. The issue with naming and describing game elements is that, often, their representational content is referenced, so that descriptions lump together very different types of objects, simply because they express similar figurative elements. If we describe a game scene in which a knight opens a chest with a key and finds some gold inside, many things will be left out that are crucial to understanding it as a game, such as: which element is interactive, functional, and which is not: the chest, the key, the gold, or the character? Does the player control the knight? Is the gold just decoration or does it have a specific in-game value? Can the player collect the gold and use it to buy useful equipment for her character?

The argument that sparked our interest in the subject is Aarseth's (2007) claim about the ontological heterogeneity of games, pointing out that a source of many theoretical misunderstandings is the fact that complex software programs are called 'games', which are usually more than just games: they contain algorithmic and representational elements as well. According to Aarseth (2007),

> computer software is a kind of metamedium that is able to emulate the older media of text, image, and film. But they also contain items that are different from the elements we recognize from older media. These elements are ontologically different, and they can typically be acted upon in ways that fictional content is not acted upon. (Aarseth, 2007, p. 36)

As they are extremely heterogeneous in terms of their structure, it is not easy to give a common, all-encompassing definition of electronic chess games, *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011), *SimCity* (Maxis, 1989) and *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020), not to mention

that this heterogeneity also exists within the diverse palette of non-electronic games. Games can contain different types of elements, both within and across genres: simulation, representation, narrative, fiction.[2]

The term „fictionalism" is increasingly used in the context of game studies by scholars, often from the field of analytic philosophy. Sometimes called 'virtual fictionalism', 'virtual irrealism' (Chalmers, 2017), or 'ludo-fictionalism' (Aarseth, 2023), but of course related claims appear in many more works in the field. Tavinor (2019) clarifies that it most often refers to *gameworld fictionalism*, meaning "that the worlds depicted in games, where they exist, are fictional" (p. 1).

Here, realism is also used in a more general sense, following Heim (1998), as a way of asking about the ontological specificity of a particular object, in this case the realness of certain aspects of digital games. The term is not used in the aesthetic sense of a movement or an artistic style as used by many scholars. For example, Atkins (2003) describes realism as a stylistic type of fictional mode. Matsunaga (2016) talks about "realism in simulation" and "realistic simulation" (p. 101), which are also non-ontological categories for him. That is, by realism we do not mean some artistic or cultural codes of truthful, authentic depiction (of which Madame Bovary in literature or the paintings of Gustave Courbet are prime examples), but we try to characterize digital game content as *part of* reality. It also follows that this ontological realism does not refer to a discursive mode of factuality either, whether understood as a conceptual framework concerning the status of references or as a 'communicative resource' (Nielsen et al., 2015). So the realist position does not assert that game objects (as signifiers) refer to real objects (as signifieds) or are a mechanical imprint of reality (like footage from a documentary), but emphasizes that they are real objects themselves (just like virtual money in a bank account).

In what follows, we argue that many of the discussions about the realism of digital games are often (overtly or unconsciously) not really about the nature and question of fictionality (even if the term is used), but about representation, so that it can be pointed out that the ludo-fictionalist position is actually a ludo-representationalist one.

Ludo-Fictionalism: Is This Just Fantasy?

Walton's (1990) definition of fiction is enduringly popular among fictionalist approaches related to the analytic tradition (Meskin & Robson, 2012; Robson & Meskin, 2016; Nader, 2022; Ricksand, 2020; Tavinor, 2009, 2012; Wildman & Woodward, 2018; Willis, 2019). Since ludo-fictionalism as a theoretical stance has been largely shaped by Walton's theory, it is worth briefly discussing its nature and how it has been applied to digital games. Walton's (1990) starting point is to relate representational art forms to children's games. For him, paintings, plays, films, and novels can be best understood if they are compared to

> dolls, hobbyhorses, toy trucks, and teddy bears. The activities in which representational works of art are embedded and which give them their point are best seen as continuous with children's games of make-believe. ... [Walton] shall argue that representational works serve as props in such games, as dolls and teddy bears serve as props in children's games. (Walton, 1990, p. 11)

2 Remark by the author: Hungarian game scholarship has reflected on this kind of internal heterogeneity and hybridity of digital games in a wide range of ways. See for different approaches: Kiss (2013), Pólya (2020), Orosz-Réti (2021), and Jancsovics (2022).

Or, as one interpreter puts it: "fictional content belongs to those things that function as props in games of make-believe" (Willis, 2019, p. 50). We would stress that in the Waltonian view, a prop is a material object which functions as a sign vehicle in a conceptual (more specifically representational) discourse, and which, in the appropriate context of reception, is endowed with the rhetorical power to refer to a meaningful element of that discourse. That is, the prop is not an element of a particular semiotic code, or the abstract form of a sign, but its physical manifestation. Any natural or man-made object can be a prop that encourages an act of imagination to "generate fictional truths" (Walton, 1990, p. 21), it need not be specifically designed for this purpose.

As Meskin and Robson (2012) point out, the Waltonian approach is not concerned with the referentiality of fiction, because "it has nothing to do with the existence or non-existence of the situation that [an] object depicts (or otherwise represents)" (p. 205), but rather, as one interpreter, Friend (2008) puts it: "Walton is interested, not in our everyday concept of fiction, but in those works that prompt make-believe, however we pre-theoretically classify them. Such works he labels as *fiction* or, equivalently, *representational art*" (p. 154). Friend points out that Walton's definition is therefore not appropriate for exploring the conceptual *distinction* between *fiction* and *non-fiction*. So, when Meskin and Robson (2012) "argue that videogames are artefacts which have a function of serving as props in games of make-believe" (p. 201), the authors acknowledge that "Walton's non-standard account of depiction implies that all pictures – including photographs – are fictions" (p. 205). The consequence of using such a broad definition of fiction is that "almost all videogames – merely by virtue of being pictorial – will count as fictions in Walton's sense" (p. 205). On the basis that "one role of videogames is to mandate imaginings" (p. 207), they are content with the conclusion that digital games are fictions in the Waltonian sense, although they stress that this is not their primary or most important feature.

For Walton (1990), a kind of game develops in the subjective relationship with different objects, representations and works of art, which is – while based on so-called "principles of generation" (Meskin & Robson, 2012, p. 138) – a more open, individuated and spontaneous cognitive activity that mobilizes the imagination. Aarseth (2011), following Roger Caillois, calls this type of 'game' *paideia*, and distinguishes it from *ludus*, another type based on fixed rules and skills. However, the 'game-like' nature of digital games is not related to the imaginative activity associated with them or their representational character, but to their ludic aspects: that is, they contain rules that cannot normally be bypassed during gameplay. Although for most players it is undoubtedly important, several commentators have noted (Newman, 2002; Aarseth, 2004; András, 2019) that some truly dedicated, hardcore gamers can completely detach themselves from the representational, aesthetic, and narrative aspects of digital games in order to focus on the game mechanics. Aarseth (2011) gives an extreme example of two games that differ only in their appearance – *The Suicide Bomber Game* (fabulous999, 2002), also known as *Kaboom!*, and *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game* (Persuasive Games, 2004) –, although unique as aesthetic objects (they evoke different conceptual associations, imply different narratives, and convey different ideologies), are in fact identical as *games* because of their shared mechanics. Again, we stress that the term game is used in a narrower sense here. While in one you must act as a suicide bomber, and in the other you have to recruit voters for the titular democratic political actor by holding up signs, you have to perform practically the same game actions to achieve your goals.

Like all cultural representations, 'Waltonian fictions' can be created while playing digital games, but this broadly applicable concept will not be able to distinguish them from other types of playful activities or representational systems and point to their medium-specific possibilities, unique mode of operation, and rhetoric.

Other representatives of fictionalism try to escape from this Waltonian trap by using fictionality in a more specific sense. Tavinor (2009) underlines that "Walton uses the term *fiction* in a rather wider stipulated sense. ... [Tavinor] want[s] to employ the term *fiction* in a more robust sense" (p. 50), therefore, by capturing the discursive nature of the concept, he defines the fictional mode as something "referring to imagined states of affairs" (Tavinor, 2012, p. 192). While most contemporary digital games "simulate the material modality of our primary world to make believable facsimiles" (Makai, 2021, p. 72), Tavinor (2012) argues that some digital games do not require the imagination of fictional worlds, for example, *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1984) or computerized chess games. Therefore "a weakened form of the videogame as fictional thesis might state that while videogames often involve fictive elements, they do not necessarily do so. Videogames are sometimes works of fiction, and sometimes not" (Tavinor, 2012, p. 187). The definition prompts us to take a closer look at the different ways fiction can be defined in this context.

Fiction as Ontology vs. Discourse: Caught in a Categorical Slip

Descriptions that do not attempt to homogeneously define all digital game content as fiction tend to oppose fictionality with two conceptual fields: 1) systematic behaviour (also called virtuality, simulation, algorithmicity), which is often identified with *realness*, or 2) *factuality* (documentary nature). In our view, the first is a false dichotomy, or at least results in a categorical slip, which also occurs in Aarseth's (2007) argument when he contrasts the real (and simulated) elements of games with the fictional. According to Tavinor (2012), the fictionality of games is problematic because while "the non-existence of objects in literary fictions is abundantly clear, in the case of videogames there does seem to be *something* there with which [the player is] interacting" (p. 190). But here he does not contrast the characteristics of the category of fiction with those of real entities, because the contrast remains true in non-fictional discourses: a written factual account of a historical event or a documentary film does not allow us to interact with its characters *through the reception of the work*, but this does not mean that the objects of the representations in question are imaginary. The places, events, and people *depicted* in a factual discourse are just as absent as those in fiction, meaning that the example is in fact opposing qualities related to presence and absence. Literary and transmedia scholar Ryan's (2018) definition of fictionality also operates on similar semiotic assumptions: "a text is fictional when it passes as something other than what it is, but without deceptive intent from its author" (p. 38). Although it is clear from the context, the statement itself is ambiguous as to what it refers: the text as object or as signifying system?

The concept of fictionality in literature always emerges in relation to the ontological status of the signified, while in relation to games, it can concern *the game itself as an object or process* (the elements of their structure and their functioning). In this regard, Aarseth (2023) also makes a comment in line with our conclusion that, following Juul (2005), "much of the later claims of game fictionality seem to conflate the notions of fiction and representation" (p. 14). Whichever position one adopts on the nature of digital games, it is clear that representation is the broader category, encompassing both fictional and factual discourse, which can be validly contrasted with the supposed realness

of game objects. The real question at the heart of the debate is therefore not whether the content of games is fictional, but whether they are *merely* representations.

Since fictionality is a conceptual discourse, it can be properly contrasted with other conceptual discourses, such as historical or documentary-type representation. In these, the question of reality will always be a question of reference, and there is no ontological difference between them and fictional discourses, only a rhetorical one. But if we contrast representation with an object that produces a systemic functionality and can be manipulated by the user in real time, there will indeed be an ontological difference between the entity represented and the entity that functions instrumentally. It could be said that the question of fictionality (as rhetoric) can be understood in terms of the status of the signifieds of representations, while the ontological question of realness applies to "phenomenological objects" (Aarseth, 2011, p. 65). It is a quite different thing to claim that the objects and events of a game represent real objects and events (referential signs) than to claim that they are real objects and events. The debate is therefore largely not about the rhetorical difference between fiction and non-fiction, but about the ontological difference between absence and presence, or reference and existence.

Tavinor's (2009) comparison is revealing about the representationalist approach to digital games. He suggests that "the stage gun is *simply real and not fictional*" (p. 47), and from this, we can conclude that certain aspects of plays are simply real. By analogy, it could be said that certain aspects of digital games are similarly real. "But – he claims – the stage prop gun is simply not the gun represented in the fiction, no matter how much it might appear to be a gun, indeed even if a real gun loaded with blanks is used" (p. 47). That is, he correctly points out the difference between signifier and signified in the way representation works, and that when referring to a weapon 'in the fiction', it is really the latter that we are referring to. Then he draws the conclusion: "What is real in this case is the prop, and the events that involve the prop, and not the fiction that it is used to represent" (p. 47). Tavinor takes the Waltonian concept back to its theatrical roots, but in doing so he also indicates that the realness of the 'prop' is of little importance: its only function as a signifier is to communicate a signified, so we can say that *in the play* the weapon is actually present even when the actor is holding a banana in his hand or shaping the object with his fingers.

Tavinor (2009) examines games along these lines, concentrating on their representational (sign-like) aspects, assuming that all other 'material (in this case virtual) aids' are not essential aspects of the game. This is based on the premise that games operate in a similar way to plays, novels, and films, in which mainly the signifieds of representation deserve to be examined in particular. This assumption is well reflected in statements such as "virtual representations can present real *and* fictional things" (p. 49). Here, Tavinor is explicitly discussing the capacity of digital games to *represent* real and non-real referents in specific, unique ways. That is, despite the implication that digital games contain some kind of real, but virtual objects, their role and significance are secondary to the fact that these objects serve to represent other objects. Tavinor (2009) thus concludes that the algorithmic operation in digital games is also a mode of (fictional) representation, although, he argues, more 'robust' (since it conveys more aspects/properties of the signified object) than a static, traditional representation. Moreover "the stage drama gun is even *more* representationally robust than the videogame gun, but equally as fictional as the gun depicted in the movie and the story book" (pp. 46-47). So, while the physicality of the prop gun makes it more 'robust' for Tavinor, his focus is still on the process of semiosis and the status of its ('fictional') referent. It follows that anything that is considered to be a real object in a digital game (just like a stage prop gun) is only a vehicle, even if it is 'functional', because it is not the same as the object it represents.

As much as fictionalists consider the virtual object to be real (equivalent to the set of information that is necessary and exists in the form of code), since it is not the same as the object that the game 'makes you imagine' by its appearance or behaviour, *as a weapon*, it is only represented. Here, the doubly problematic assessment of fictionality arises in part from the *difference*, the *non-identity*, of the object depicted and the virtual object that exists as its signifier. This argument is self-fulfilling in its commitment to representation as a framework (see Meskin & Robson, 2012, p. 206), for how can we contest that the signifier of representation is not the same as the signified, when this gap is the essence of all semantic relations? The assumption arising from the position is that the virtual object in the digital game is not a real gun, since a gun (which is only invoked here as a referent by the game object) is tangible, capable of firing a bullet and capable of injuring living beings.

This discursive framing of ludic content where every element is approached as a sign, a representation, is by no means invalid, it is logical and plausible, but it pays too little attention to the non-representational aspect of digital games where objects that are only referred to as props in the spirit of other representational media, are diverse in their functioning as actual tools of actions and events.

Ludo-Realism: No Escape from Reality

What most realists focus on are the objects and processes generated by the digital game's algorithms, the gameplay and its events created by the operation of the system and the player's activity. Their key feature is that they are not merely representations utilizing perceptual and behavioural features of external models, but are elements in connection with which we execute, operate, shape, and manipulate a system. Aarseth (2014) vehemently attacks the validity of the Waltonian thesis by arguing that:

> there is no need for make-believing when players shoot at each other in *Counter-Strike* ... they are manipulating nonphysical, informational guns that shoot nonphysical, informational projectiles and when their avatars are hit, they do not have to make-believe that they are eliminated. (Aarseth, 2014, p. 491)

In other words, he rejects the idea that a game object is *only* a prop, since it "is a functional object that will directly support the player's operational play, and not (merely) prescribe imaginings" (Aarseth, 2023, p. 19). Although he uses the notion of fictionality to describe positions different from his own, his argument also points to the fact that it is the notion of representation that should be contrasted with the category to which the game object belongs, as, he argues "it does not represent; it is, in the most basic sense, *useful*" (Aarseth, 2023, p. 19).

Although wavering in his definitions, he takes a moderate realist position, which could be better described as anti-representationalist, in that he proposes the introduction of a third ontological category in relation to games: "games are not fictions, but a different type of world, between fiction and our world: the virtual" (Aarseth, 2007, p. 39). He later justifies this by saying that:

> just because 'fiction' is a poor conceptual fit, it does not follow that 'real' has all the analytical power needed, especially if we are experiencing genuinely new material constellations of human construction, such as the current revolution of artificial intelligence. (Aarseth, 2023, p. 21)

It is to this position that the proponents of the stronger realist thesis respond, stressing that the problem with the escape route of virtualism is that it can only describe its own position in a negative or circular way: "Virtualism has a fault in that it itself explains nothing. … What is videogame interaction? Virtual one. Then what is it to be virtual? To be capable of interaction!" (Matsunaga, 2016, p. 91). In contrast, the stronger view is – as Chalmers (2017) explains – that "virtual reality is a sort of genuine reality, virtual objects are real objects, and what goes on in virtual reality is truly real" (p. 309). The difference lies in the fact that Aarseth (2023) tries to refine the category of reality, separating its significantly distinct versions in terms of human experience and perception, warning us that "the ludo-fictional thesis fails to grasp the most crucial ontological turn of our time: from material to informational reality" (p. 15). In this sense, the only essential difference between what are traditionally called real and virtual objects is their physicality: "The game object … is not a material entity, but a phenomenological one … why must 'real' always mean 'physical'?" (Aarseth, 2011, p. 65).

Aarseth's (2007) other argument against the representationalist view is the systematic nature of digital game simulations (which is the basis of all game mechanics), in contrast to which "fictions do not have to be logical or consistent, as long as they make us project mental images, happenings and notions" (p. 36). In a digital game system, there can be no contradictory states. This is why the mechanics and the representational layer of the game are well separable, the latter of which, as Aarseth (2023) also notes, is often arbitrary in its relation to the former.

Klevjer (2019) draws attention to an important distinction in the context of the temporality of digital games. While representation is not 'real-time', all events it displays are pre-coded (although their reception in certain media is time-bound), in gaming, we can talk about "screen-based real-time environments" and "real-time virtual objects" (p. 733), whose state can be precisely determined at any moment, their operation unfolding in the present time. The game may indeed generate event-like representations, it may contain 'scenarios', but their occurrence is subject to the same conditions of realization, meaning that they are part of a causal chain, they always have antecedents and consequences as any event in the simulation. According to Klevjer (2019), "during play, we are, via the screen, able to experience real-time modeled objects and environments" (p. 733), the states of the former and the creation of the latter are real events, not just a representation of a situation.

The realist position's strength lies in its attention to the differences between a digital game and other semiotic artefacts and representational media, as well as its focus on the internal diversity of game elements. However, it sometimes misses the object of its critique, since no theoretically sound position would deny the systematic nature of a simulation or the freedoms and possibilities that come from being a real-time process. For representationalists, the problem with the approach relates to the naming of game objects. According to them, it is misleading, for example, to describe (and thus identify) a game object as a gun, because although it has a real function in the game, it is incapable of injuring flesh and blood creatures. This issue has given rise to quite distinct theories of how virtuality can be conceptualised.

Virtuality and Simulation: Open Your Doors

To distinguish between 'fictional' and 'virtual' game objects, Aarseth (2007) gives the example of two types of doors in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (Gray Matter, 2001): one is an element that looks like a door, has the texture of a door, but cannot be opened and walked through – it is a mere decoration. The other not only looks like a door but also works like a door: you can open it, close it, your avatar can pass through it, and enter a previously enclosed space. In Aarseth's definition, this is a functioning virtual door.[3] Tavinor (2012), on the other hand, places virtuality again within the domain of representation as a possible (digital game specific, medium-specific) mode of it, and from this perspective criticizes Aarseth's distinction:

> The genuine difference that Aarseth refers to between merely decorative doors and usable doors does not amount to a difference between fictional and nonfictional doors as he contends, but to a difference between fictional doors depicted in a nonvirtual way, and fictional doors depicted in a virtual way. (Tavinor, 2012, p. 197)

For Tavinor (2009), then, virtuality is posited as a mode of representation (and a 'fictional' mode of representation in most games), the specificity of which "is their richly contingent representational media, their responsive nature, and their consequent interactive opportunities" (p. 50). Aarseth (2007), in comparison, emphasizes the fact that it is *an* object with a real mode of operation and behaviour, which *also* represents another object.

For a more precise definition of this quality, it is worth distinguishing between broader and narrower senses of virtuality. Aarseth, for example, uses the term for objects that have no physical existence but behave according to fixed, predetermined rules. However, when he identifies their operation as a (digital, computerized) type of simulation, he adds a model-like and thus sign-like aspect to the formula. This is clear from the definition he adopts from *Encyclopedia Britannica*, according to which, a simulation is the representation of "the dynamic responses of one system by the behaviour of another system modeled after it" (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024, para. 1).

It is important to clarify that the simulated object is *usually* not another individual instance (token) of the same class of objects (type) as the one it models, so if it has only similar characteristics, it can be *interpreted* as a representation, *but at the same time* the simulated object is a real digital object. What if the simulation reproduces all the characteristics of its target system? If having an impact on physical reality is one of the properties of the target that the digital model cannot achieve, then it is not really a perfect reconstruction of the phenomenon, entity, or process. What really lends itself to complete virtual simulation are inherently conceptual or digital systems (such as the game of chess), but if the created system is identical to the source in all aspects, it is no longer a simulation: the act of copying something entirely does not constitute representation; rather, it is a reproduction.

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3 Remark by the author: The philosophical point-and-click computer game *Doors* (Gualeni & Van de Mosselaer, 2021) was created as a response and critique to Aarseth's (2011) claim that virtual objects are not fictional, and fictional objects cannot be interacted with. The game contains several types of doors (non-interactive, interactive, meta-representational, referential, secret, implied, magical, etc.), which, as signs and representations, stand in different relationships to their referents. In our opinion, however, the game does not demonstrate the possibility of interacting with the represented objects (the different type of doors) or the fictionality of the functioning game objects but rather points out that the represented and the real object are not identical in the case of game doors, even if they appear as a single complex, simulated object.

Interestingly, Tavinor's (2012) definition is very similar to Aarseth's, when he states that "*virtuality* refers to the fact that one object can serve as an interactive proxy for another kind of object because it replicates the functional structure of the target object" (p. 195). Virtual objects understood in this way are usually also sign-like (by referencing an external model), but this is not theoretically necessary, even in a digital game, since the element can function without any intentional, recognizable analogy, simply functioning by the system's own internal laws. A classic example of this is the shapes and mechanics of *Tetris*, which does not aim to model any real-world functionality, yet works in a systematic way, its objects can be manipulated and produce recognizable patterns of behaviour.

Hybrid Ontologies: Little Real, Little No

A theoretical confusion arises for Aarseth (2007) when he tries to conceptualize the 'not purely representational' content of a game, sometimes calling it real, sometimes as a separate category, virtual. Compare these two claims, which are a few lines apart: "When we play games, in real or virtual environments, we really win or lose, and the events in the games are real ... The bullets in a game of *Counter-Strike* ... are not real bullets, but neither are they fictional" (p. 39). "Non-fictional doors are virtual, a mode of existence that is neither fictional nor real" (p. 42).

The uncertainty is caused by the following situation: although the virtual object 1) has its own autonomous existence, 2) and imitates a real object, but 3) it is not identical to this imitated object. Some may therefore feel the need to introduce a third ontological category. But it is not really necessary to assume, as many do, following Juul (2005) or others, a 'mode of existence' halfway between the 'fictional' (or more precisely represented) and the 'real', with an ambiguous or hybrid status. As we have already argued (see Csönge, 2023), this is simply a complex object that is both a (non-physical but) real object *and* a vehicle for the representation of another object. Representation here works on two levels: through the formal (static) and functional (dynamic) properties of the game object, what we have called perceptual and procedural iconicity,[4] partly to allude to Bogost's (2007) concept of "procedural representation" (p. 9).[5]

4 Remark by the author: The notion essentially corresponds with Eco's (1976) take on "functional representations" (p. 209), but procedurality perhaps more specifically expresses the algorithmic nature relevant to the medium. Perhaps it is questionable on our part to use the term iconicity (in the sense of an iconic sign), as it carries a strong connotation of visuality or sensory impression, but we still think that the icon as a technical term is adequate, because it emphasizes the mimetic aspect of the representational nature of the process. This does not actually change the semiotic meaning of the term, because when Peirce (1994) introduced it into the discourse, he used it in a broader sense, in connection with any similarity of qualities, and this sense is still used today:

> An Icon is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it possesses, just the same, whether any such Object actually exists or not. ... Anything whatever, be it quality, existent individual, or law, is an Icon of anything, in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it. (Peirce, 1994, p. 368)

5 Remark by the author: András (2021) uses the Bogost-inspired term *procedural aesthetics* (Bogost, 2007) to draw attention to unique game rhetorics, such as those in the extremely slow game *The Longing* (Studio Seufz, 2020), in which a game is not simply represented by its mechanics and does not pretend to claim something about our reality outside the game. Instead, it offers a particular aesthetic experience, thus the emergence of a new reality of perception and action for the player.

Indeed, the fact that Aarseth's (2007) conceptual system depends on this factor (the identity of the object in the game and the object represented) for "granting" realness is demonstrated by the fact that the objects that he claims to be real, even in contrast to the virtual ones, differ from other non-physical objects in precisely this respect: in this case, the game object in question *categorically* coincides with the object represented by its simulational qualities. He gives the example of a labyrinth, which he considers to be a real labyrinth, even in a simulation: "a 3D virtual labyrinth in a computer-simulated world is a real labyrinth, since it can be navigated by the same rules" (Aarseth, 2007, p. 41). The reason that a real labyrinth can actually be created in the simulation is that Aarseth (perhaps controversially) interprets the labyrinth not as a physical object, but as a conceptual category that does not include the parameter of physicality. Perhaps a more striking example is the distinction made by Chalmers (2017) between kittens and libraries, in which he argues that while a virtual kitten is not a real kitten, a virtual library is a real library, because it is a conceptual entity, and we would venture to say that its non-computerized version is also essentially digital. It is not hard to see that a virtual library is not a simulation of a library, if it functions exactly like the physical version. What Aarseth obscures in his example, but Chalmers (2017) points out, is that virtual objects are real even if they do not correspond to the object they represent in a model-like way: "importantly, virtual kittens are still real objects. ... virtual kittens at least in principle can be just as rich and robust as nonvirtual kittens and play corresponding causal roles in virtual worlds" (p. 326).

The real difficulty, which we suspect leads Aarseth to define virtuality as a separate ontological category and Tavinor to define it as a representation, is the fact that virtual objects in digital games that represent other objects are in most cases *not identical* to the object they represent (if they are, this essentially removes the representational character), *yet in naming them,* we *hide this difference* or describe the former as a signifier of the latter. Aarseth uses the adjective 'virtual' to save the name of the represented object, to stress the connection between in-game objects and their real-world counterparts, while acknowledging their difference. Note that Chalmers is careful to say that a virtual kitten is a real *object*, not that it is a real *kitten* which is a biological entity that cannot be fully reproduced digitally. When the digital entity is labelled as a kitten, we inevitably invoke the representational layer of the game, and this move can cause confusion. It is not inconsistent with either the fictionalist or the realist position that this object merely represents a kitten, but at the same time exists and functions as another kind of dynamic object. The present framing suggests that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive but merely highlight different characteristics of digital games.

Descriptive Language: Mama, Just Killed a Man

Matsunaga (2016) argues that the specificity of digital games is that they create and display 'symbols' in their game events that "are *individuated in accordance with their fictional contents*" and "described by using ... expressions originally for describing f ictional contents" (p. 98). In other words, he indicates that the virtual object or event is named in terms of the representational referent of the simulation: "I drank the elixir", "I planted the flag on the castle tower", while a more literal description of the game events

behind them would be "I replenished my health points" and "I completed the main task required to finish the level".[6]

Tavinor (2005) poses the question of realism with examples of criminal activity from *Grand Theft Auto III* (DMA Design, 2001): should shooting an innocent bystander in the game be considered real murder? Or are we pretending to kill them in a purely Waltonian sense? However distressing it may be for some people, the player is certainly not burdened with the responsibility (criminal or moral) that would be involved in committing these acts outside the game, so according to the fictionalist view one must consider these acts to be mere representation.

Tavinor (2012) also detects that this problem is related to the difference between the language of description (which emphasizes representations) and the real game events. He acknowledges that in digital games "there exists *something* with which to interact" (p. 190), but to describe this something, it is tempting to use a signified of the representation, for example, of an obviously fictional goblin. This should lead to the paradoxical situation in which a real player interacts with fictional objects and characters, and where „there seems to be an ontological gap between the space in which we locate performed actions as individual events ... and the space in which we locate the agent who performs the actions" (Matsunaga, 2016, p. 89).

There is a simple solution to the problem, to use Aarseth's door example: the virtual doors manipulated by the player are very *real objects* (of a non-physical kind), but *not real doors*. Their behaviour and formal properties simply represent doors. Their behaviour mimics relevant functionality (procedural iconicity) and their audiovisual features (e.g. texture) imitate formal characteristics (perceptual iconicity). The reason for the misunderstanding is that when interpreting the game and describing the game element, the represented object, the door, is named.

A common way of describing these objects is to add distinguishing adjectives to the name, but this does not really resolve the linguistic difficulties. When we say 'virtual door' or 'virtual kitten', the names of familiar concepts and the adjective attached to them (coupled with the imitative relationship and the lack of physicality) reinforce the idea that we can and must define the game object, which has been relegated to a much lower status, only in relation to an original and primary object. It is, of course, a misconception that the adjectives ('virtual' or 'simulated') denote a distinct ontology, referring to a door or a kitten existing in a parallel dimension (or possible world). In fact, they refer to a real game object, and it is only common practice (perhaps to facilitate its conceptualization) to describe this object based on the representational analogy. Matsunaga (2016) concludes that sentences describing games refer to real but institutionally constituted objects and actions:

> Such actions as ... *hitting a home run* and *striking out* in baseball, would all never exist if there were not the rules of ... baseball. Of course, without any rule, you can perform the action ... of clouting a ball far away with a wooden club; but some rule is required for those behaviors to be *counted as* a move or a home run: that is, a gameplay action. (Matsunaga, 2016, p. 98)

6 Remark by the author: Patridge's (2017) distinction between "self-involving language" of the fiction and "indirect, ludic language" (p. 182) is very similar to our conceptualization of the problem. In both models, the first case refers to situations in which digital game objects and events are named after their representational referents. In the second case, where we use ludic language, we refer to in-game concepts that make sense and function within the mechanics of the game, not in the 'fictional world' of the game, such as health points, experience points, damage parameters, etc. The reason for using the language of representation for description, Patridge (2017) argues, is that "self-involving language is more aesthetically pleasing due to its directness and simplicity and so seems more natural" (p. 182).

Institutionality means that an action or event acquires its meaning and significance through a social norm, a community agreement, whose "existence depends on our recognition and acceptance" (Saftescu-Jescu, 2013, p. 149). In his example, this means acting in the right place, at the right time, in the right way, cooperating with your teammates, and the acceptance of the rules of the game by all participants. This statement may be true for some non-digital games, but not for digital games, where the 'constitutive rules', that is, the institution is the algorithmic system itself, which operates more like the physical laws of the real world with coercive force than our actions with symbolic force. Within the given framework of a game, it is simply not possible to act in a way that is not a gameplay action. Therefore, we do not believe that these game actions "are ontologically the same as institutional facts" (Matsunaga, 2016, p. 100), or any different from any other real-life event except that they are (partially) non-physical.

Lastly, the problem of homogenization through the utilization of descriptive language must be addressed. On the one hand, this occurs in the context of identical names for a wide variety of mechanics in different games, and, on the other hand, in the context of linguistic homogenization of heterogeneous elements of individual games.

It is worth noting that when teaching someone how to play a (digital) game, we often have to explain what the concepts and expressions used in everyday language mean in the game. Aarseth's (2011) example is illuminating here: because *The Suicide Bomber Game* and *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game* associate different representations with the same functions, different descriptions ('to blow up a bomb' in one game and 'to hold up a sign' in the other) are used to refer to the same game mechanic. To complicate matters, it is not always necessary or possible to refer to game elements in figurative terms (referring to the representational layer): this is least necessary in cases of 'almost pure' games, such as the abstract *Tetris*, where the representational layer is minimal or insignificant. In some cases, the game activity or situation is named (more or less) in its literal (ludic) sense, even if the game has a rich representational aspect. Concepts such as winning, losing, stalemate, fighting, getting ahead, taking risks, escaping, etc. Sometimes we mix the ludic and the representational categories. An event in the 2D sandbox game *Terraria* (Re-Logic, 2011) can be described by saying: my avatar (describing the game element) climbed down (describing the representation) to the bottom of (the spatial dimension is virtual, so this is also partly a representation) the level (describing the game element), and there I found (here they refer to themselves as the player because of the first person) a sword.[7]

To return to the example of murder: it is clear that a virtual murder is not a genuine one, but as an event it is not fictional, it is a real in-game event that also represents another type of event: a murder. For the sake of simplicity, players describe the in-game event as 'murder' because of the representation associated with it. However, this single term may cover different types of game events, specific game situations or mechanisms from game to game. When the executor is the player, different forms of action and skills (reflexes, memory, dexterity, attention, intellect, strategic planning) may be required depending on the genre, there is no single virtual concept of 'killing' as there is in reality, where murder involves a single definable action. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that individual names for specific mechanics are not entirely unmotivated: they often cover a similar type of event, and usually involve the deactivation, removal, or elimination of a game object and the fulfilment of a player objective. Thus, despite genre schemas and well-known game mechanic topoi, a given expression and its meaning can therefore only be considered consistent and predictable within a single game, as this seems to be its standard scope.

7 Remark by the author: This is a representation, but the description of the game element could be: a digital object for offensive action to help the progress of the player in the game.

At the same time, there are clearly identifiable game mechanics ('ludemes') with associated technical terms (not always or consistently linked to corresponding representations), but these are less used by the average digital game player.

The difficulty comes from the fact that by naming the representational aspect (which is standard practice), the nature of the element becomes ambiguous, or different kinds of objects and events become difficult to distinguish. There may be an impassable wall surface that looks like a door, a functional object that can be opened and resembles a real door, and a secret door that appears as a window in the game. Chalmers (2017) rightly acknowledges that a single term can imply two different layers: "if an avatar in virtual reality plays the role of Gollum stealing the ring, the event of Gollum stealing the ring is fictional, but this is consistent with the underlying avatars and movements within the virtual realm being real" (p. 316). He suggests that there is both a represented and a real event in this case. His assumption is valid, if there is a combination of representational (narrative) and ludic elements in the situation, which is not entirely clear from the description. If the action of Gollum's avatar is the result of a pre-determined, built-in narrative segment (which may still require the active involvement of the player to trigger it), then it is only the representation of the theft of the ring. And if it is a functional and meaningful state of the simulation, then alongside this representation, there is a real in-game event, which is of course not theft, but some other kind of action that can be useful or harmful to the player's progress in the game.

Conclusion: Objects Really Matter?

To conclude the discussion, when game elements are referenced by their representational content, the same terms are often used to describe very different types of components: sometimes real game events, sometimes representations of events and objects, sometimes actually fictional narratives. That is, the names can be the same for denotations with different ontological status. Take the example of the third-person shooter *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment, 2001), which combines narrative and ludic elements in a spectacular way. If we say that the character we control, the game's protagonist, "Max has been killed", we are basically naming a real in-game event with a representational dimension (the character collapses on the ground), which happens as often and in as many ways as the character runs out of life energy during the game. If we say, "Max's family was murdered", we are describing a fictional event that is part of the game's storyline (which, unlike the previous case, cannot be repeated or undone), but which does not represent a specific gameplay situation or simulation configuration. The two similarly named 'events' cover a very different type of game element.

In many cases, it is much easier to name the representational referent of a game element or game object than to elaborate on its exact status and function in the game. For a specific game, however, this is not a problem at all in communication between skilled players: an internal language is established so that all parties understand what is meant by the given expression. For theorists, however, the homogenizing use of language can be misleading, and they can easily adopt views that concentrate on a single aspect of structurally, semiotically and functionally complex digital games.

On the one hand, fictionalism (or representationalism) rightly draws attention to the non-reality, the sign-like nature of objects, characters and events used in the descriptions

of mimetic digital games. On the other hand, the merit of the realist approach is that it clarifies that alongside (or sometimes without) this representational character, there is a real eventfulness and genuineness to the mechanics of the game. Taking all this into account, we conclude that in the case of digital game simulation the same game element acts both as a signifier of something else and functions as a tool, an object itself, and that although purely conceptual objects may be an exception, the represented and the real object are not usually identical.

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"Insert Your Soul to Continue": The Self-Reflections of Metafictional Digital Games

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ABSTRACT:
Metafiction is a self-reflective narrative form that examines and critiques its own themes and structure, serving as a mirror that reflects both its creator and its audience. Within this context, metafiction in digital games breaks through the artifice of narrative to address the players directly as the facilitators of the story and collaborators whose play patterns, personal experiences, expectations, and habits shape game narratives. With the application of both game theory and literary analysis, this paper will examine a selection of metagames: Lovecraftian horror game *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* displaying meta-mechanics as a form of disempowerment, satirical walking simulators *The Stanley Parable* and *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe* deconstructing the established game tropes, self-aware characters of games *Pony Island* and *Inscryption* presenting the developer as a metaphorical adversary, and fictional nonfiction *The Beginner's Guide* dissecting the parasocial relationship between developers and players, and the mentally taxing nature of game development. This paper will showcase the meta mechanics and disruptions in such games as wholly unique forms of metatextuality. Ultimately, this paper aims to establish a metagame canon, suggest a typology, and acknowledge metafiction's place as an essential and inseparable mirror for the storytelling medium of digital games.

KEY WORDS:
deconstruction, digital games, fourth wall, metafiction, metagame, self-reflection.

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Introduction

All well-established traditions of storytelling eventually turn inward to examine their own machinations and engage in self-reflection. As experimental anti-novels with such reflections gained traction in the world of literature in the 1970s, Gass (1970) coined the term *metafiction* to refer to this new, introspective narrative form, defining it as "the capacity of fiction to reflect on its own status as fiction" (Neumann & Nünning, 2014, p. 204). These narratives "pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality ... providing a critique of their own methods of construction" (Waugh, 1984, p. 2), achieved through *defamiliarization* as "the laying bare of literary devices in metafiction brings to the reader's attention those formal elements of which, through over-familiarization, he has become unaware" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 24). This unmasking is facilitated through the deconstruction of not only narratives, but also the specific language and building blocks of mediums, the tools through which stories are told such as metafictional literature which pulls the focus "away from the story told to the storytelling" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 35), metatheatre which "break[s] the imaginary fourth wall" (Bell, 2008, p. 38) to call attention to the fabricated division between the performers on stage and the audience, and metacinema which utilizes "the showing of the process and machinery of film production and presentation" (Siska, 1979, p. 286). These metanarratives do not simply dissect the stories told, but also how they are told.

The medium of digital games has also engaged in similar forms of self-reflection to create metagames which present "an increasing awareness of their own mediality, their inner workings, and how they function" (Schubert, 2021, p. 212). It is important to note that the term *metagaming* has been widely used as a verb to refer to "the consideration of other players' habits and previous play styles in the strategy decision making process" (Carter et al., 2012, p. 3) in competitive games or the distinction between "what a player and what a player's character does or does not know" (p. 4) in role playing games. However, we will be interpreting the term as described by Waszkiewicz (2024) pertaining to *metareferentiality* that utilizes the specific language of digital games to create unique iterations of metatextuality. Similar to the specific machinations of metafictional literature, metatheatre, or metacinema, metagames also achieve metatextuality by not only deconstructing their narrative but also their unique language of game mechanics, the very structures and codes that make up the game itself, in order to "produce a self-reflexivity specific to their medium, a metatextuality distinct from the achievements of postmodern art" (Fest, 2016, p. 9). In order to achieve this, metagames also engage in defamiliarization, which Mitchell (2016) refers to as *poetic gameplay*:

> that draws attention to the form of the game, and by doing so encourages the player to reflect upon and see that structure in a new way [while] working both within and against structural constraints, with the player engaged in a process of discovery and interpretation. (Mitchell, 2016, pp. 2-3)

This method disorients players, dismantles expectations, and provokes visceral emotionality and self-reflection through a unique breaking of the fourth wall by dismantling the magic circle that constitutes both the game playground and the shield that protects "the fantasy world from the outside world" (Castronova, 2005, p. 147).

These metagames utilize such disruptive and defamiliarizing mechanics to explore certain themes specific to their medium. They examine not only narrative traditions, tropes, and the culture surrounding games, but the players themselves as "thematized parts of the narrative situation, acknowledged as having a co-producing function" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 35). Such games acknowledge players as collaborators, as essential parts of the narrative, as facilitators without whom the narrative literally would not progress. In doing so, they dissect the play patterns, habits, and expectations of players as fundamental parts of the emerging narrative. Lastly, metagames include creators and developers, reflecting upon themselves, examining the creative process, the difficulties of game development and the relationship between creators and players. They are the players who absorb what gaming culture has to offer and transform it into a self-reflective metanarrative.

These meta experimentations have borne fruit to countless metagames within the gaming landscape. Early examples offered brief nods towards the players but did not comprehensively interact with the game mechanics. For instance, Sonic impatiently taps his foot while waiting for the player to move him in *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sonic Team, 1991), Cranky Kong references the old single-screen games he used to play in *Donkey Kong Country* (Rare, 1994), and Lara Croft shoots the screen to prevent the player from seeing her in the shower in *Tomb Raider II* (Core Design, 1997). The metagame boom, starting in the 2010s, brought along games that built their foundations on metatextual gameplay, such as *The Magic Circle* (Question, 2015), *Undertale* (Fox, 2015), *CALENDULA* (Blooming Buds Studio, 2016), *IMSCARED* (Ivan Zanotti's MyMadnessWorks, 2016), *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (Team Salvato, 2017), *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* (Draw Me A Pixel, 2020), and *Alan Wake 2* (Remedy Entertainment, 2023).

In this paper, we will analyse a specific selection of metagames within this massive and ever-growing genre; *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (Silicon Knights, 2002),

The Stanley Parable (Galactic Café, 2013), *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe* (Crows Crows Crows, 2022), *Pony Island* (Daniel Mullins Games, 2016), *Inscryption* (Daniel Mullins Games, 2021), and *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited, 2015), with each example selected for its unique and specific take on metatextuality. We will be applying a three-pronged approach that encompasses ludic analysis that situates gameplay mechanics as the language of gaming, narratological analysis that explores the story elements, and a form of formalist analysis that emphasizes the "aesthetic experience that emerges from playing a game [that] allows the player to make a meaningful connection between the work and their own lived experience" (Mitchell & Van Vught, 2023, p. 108). The paper aims to establish a canon of metafictional digital games and showcase a wide range of metacritical instances. The primary examples include *Eternal Darkness,* which utilizes metagame mechanics as a form of disempowerment within the horror genre, *The Stanley Parable* and *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe,* which deconstruct the established tropes and expectations of digital games, *Pony Island* and *Inscryption* both of which present the developer as a metaphorical adversary within the narrative, and *The Beginner's Guide*, which comments on the potentially parasocial relationship between the players and developers. With the examination of these games, we aim to create a thorough account of meta-reflective games that demonstrates that this collective metagame canon has emerged from the need to reflect upon digital games as an ever-growing medium of storytelling. This established canon mirrors the evolution of the digital game landscape itself, thus becoming an essential part of the medium.

Terror Beyond the Fourth Wall

While metagames may utilize metatextuality for various effects such as humour, empowerment, or cynicism, one of the most striking effects that can be accomplished through the use of meta-aspects is disempowerment. Games are often perceived by players and constructed by developers as a medium of empowerment that grants players miraculous abilities and places them in wish-fulfilling scenarios where they can use these abilities to their fullest. As such, dismantling these game conventions by taking players' powers away in stressful moments and engaging in defamiliarizing poetic gameplay by "undermining player expectations for control" (Mitchell, 2016, p. 1), directly questions the prevailing idea that digital games serve as power fantasies. In fact, one of the first prominent games to utilize metagame mechanics does so in order to disempower players. In *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami, 1998), the mind-reading boss Psycho Mantis' abilities are showcased with his ability to read the player's PlayStation Memory Card and list the players' other Konami games if they do have any save files on their card. He then proceed to utilize the rumble on the controller to showcase his psychic abilities. Furthermore, the boss battle with Psycho Mantis becomes impossible due to the establishment of this psychic link and the only way to overcome this battle is to plug in a different controller to sever the link. This early example of metatextuality in digital games not only emerges as a significant step towards the incorporation of game mechanics into the metanarrative, but it perfectly displays metagames' potential to unsettle the player by interfering with their control of the game.

However, the example of Psycho Mantis is but a brief meta moment of disempowerment in an otherwise action focused game. As such, a genre that allows for raw vulnerability, such as the genre of horror, would prove more conducive to the creation of

a more comprehensively disempowering metagame experience. According to Krzywinska (2015), horror is extremely compatible with the defamiliarization aspect of metafiction as it "play[s] with, and against, game media's normative expectations of mastery" (p. 293), actively taking power and agency away from players in order to isolate and terrorize them, "generat[ing] a strong and direct sense of loss and vulnerability" (p. 296). While meta disruptions in digital games may be considered "a risky effect to use, because [they] will either remove control or perception from the player" (Haahr, 2018, p. 201), this disorienting and unexpected effect transforms them into powerful methods of disempowerment or defamiliarization in horror, as they allow the game to assert its own autonomy and control. They contest the conventional perception of a piece of software as "a docile and pliable entity" and the assumption that "we are in control ... that machine has no personality or consciousness of its own" (Conway, 2010, p. 149). Breaking the fourth wall in a horror context removes the final barrier that shields players against the terrors of the narrative by creating the illusion that the source of horror can acknowledge and even affect real life.

This potential of metafiction is utilized deftly in the Lovecraftian horror game *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*. One of the many horror elements the game makes use of is the Sanity Meter, which tracks the player character's health and exposure to monsters and causes hallucinations if the meter is too low. Many of these effects break the fourth wall to directly distort not only the reality of the character, but also the reality of the player, such as a message alerting the player that controller one is not connected, volume decreasing as the game mutes itself, the screen going black while the sounds of the game continue, the game pretending to reset and displaying the starting screen, a blue error screen imitating an operating system, the player character shooting the screen, the game pretending to abruptly finish by displaying a screen that suggests the story will continue in a non-existent sequel, and the most notorious effect, the game going to options, selecting the player's save file and pretending to delete it. These metamechanics create "a palpable sense for players of helplessness, their hands no longer able to enact will through the suddenly lifeless controlling device" (Krzywinska, 2015, p. 294). The fact that these effects are not solitary examples but repeatable patterns that are directly connected to the player's ability to manage their sanity makes them a fundamental and consistent part of the game mechanics.

Furthermore, these meta mechanics are harmonious with the game's narrative of cosmic horror. Rooted in Lovecraft's (1987) distinction between "literature of cosmic fear" and "the literature of mere physical fear and the mundanely gruesome" (pp. 367-368), cosmic horror is a grander spectacle that examines the inconsequential and irrelevant nature of humans in the face of unknowable entities. These tales often feature a protagonist who, upon seeing horrors beyond comprehension, is driven mad by the realities their mind cannot contain. This particular strain of horror is rife with the potential of meta referentiality with characters teetering at the edge of forbidden knowledge which may lead to the realization of the artifice of the fictional world. Within this context, *Eternal Darkness*' narrative emphasizes "the loss of a controlling grasp on the nature of reality (nothing is what it seems) and the concomitant 'reality' of occulted forces" (Krzywinska, 2015, p. 295). As such, meta disruptions of game mechanics become a vital part of both the story and the disempowering atmosphere of the game. The incomprehensible awareness of absolute reality leads to the metatextual awareness of constructed reality to reveal the terror beyond the fourth wall, and the consequent state of insanity reveals the border crossing, jarring nature of metatextual realization. While *Eternal Darkness* emerges as an early example of this type of reach through the screen via consistent meta mechanics, many later games followed in its footsteps and utilized the foundation established in this game to build further transgressions of the game mechanics. Meta disruptions of the game

mechanics can be found in many later entries into the horror genre such as *IMSCARED, Doki Doki Literature Club!, Inscryption,* and *Alan Wake 2.* Furthermore, the through line of peering into the unknown and discovering absolute reality has continued to be a major part of later Lovecraftian digital games such as *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (Headfirst Productions, 2005), *The Sinking City* (Frogwares, 2019), and *Dagon: by H. P. Lovecraft* (Bit Golem, 2021). All of these elements of disempowerment, which have become a popular method of horror not simply in metagames but in the larger genre of survival horror, owe their development to the revelations derived from the internal reflections of metafictional digital games that were able to acknowledge their conventions and carve a path for their deconstruction.

A Game That Plays You

In her examination of metanarratives, Waugh (1984) posits the question: "Why do metafictional [narratives] so frequently concern themselves with the problem of human freedom?" (p. 119). At the base of the concept of metafiction lies the desire to break the rules, free oneself from the entrapment of the narrative and see behind the curtain, stemming from "a concern with the idea of being trapped within someone else's order" (Waugh, 1984, p. 120). While all forms of metafiction may concern themselves with such ponderings, metagames in particular have a vested interest in a possible examination of this entrapment as a play medium featuring platforms and adventures with specific, predetermined designs hidden under the illusion of choice. Although *Eternal Darkness* certainly invoked the feeling of such entrapment to horrify players, its metatextuality was more of an examination of fictional cosmic forces. As more and more self-reflections accumulated, the landscape of gaming was gearing up for a more comprehensive examination of common gaming conventions, possibly examining multiple genres and determining the larger expectations of players and developers alike.

The Stanley Parable, created by Davey Wreden and William Pugh, and featuring a character named Stanley, who finds himself in an empty office only accompanied by a narrator guiding him with his instructive narration, hinges on Waugh's (1984) idea of being entrapped under the watchful eye of an overlord. The game's branching, massive narrative "draws attention to the digital, procedural materiality of digital games ... a complex, historically self-aware metafiction that dwells critically on the generic, formal, and cultural conventions of digital games" (Fest, 2016, pp. 1-2). This overt examination of player patterns is distinctly separate from the meta elements of *Eternal Darkness* which simply acknowledged the fact that it is a game while *The Stanley Parable* starts the trend of acknowledging gaming culture, from the expectations of players, to game mechanic models. The existence of a narrator in an interactive medium is already a problematic framework as "it would subvert or hinder the player's decision-making process in the game world, as well as their individualised emergent experiences" (Ensslin, 2015, p. 60). As such, it is crucial that *The Stanley Parable* creates a narrative voice which is engaged in an ever-present conflict with the player. Thus, the friction between the narrator's instructions and the player's decisions "exposes the problematic combination of coherent narration with a player's freedom of choice" (Herte, 2016, p. 30), allowing the game to explore the concept of predetermined paths, linear narratives, and intended play that make up traditional digital game narratives and the player's urge to break these rules.

Under this friction and disobedience lies the illusion of choice. If the player was truly rebelling against an oppressive, rigid set of rules, these decisions would result in errors

or game crashes. However, while the Narrator berates the player for not obeying him, the game does account for these decisions as it reveals new paths, dialogues, and narrative beats after each supposed divergence from the suggested path. Critic Dan Olson calls this contradiction *intentional disobedience*, stating: "If there is crafted content on the other side of your misbehavior, then it's not actually misbehavior" (Folding Ideas, 2017). This disobedience lays bare the dissonance between predetermined and necessarily limited options offered by digital games and the increasingly ambitious expectations of accounting for players' every whim, good or bad faith decision, or habit. As these claims of endless play and content increase, players may become more judgmental and suspicious, eager to poke holes in such narratives. *The Stanley Parable* emerges as a probable culmination of this culture of abundance. While it is initially presented as a game with seemingly endless paths, as the narrative collapses in on itself, it becomes apparent that such promises are either impossible or incredibly draining on the developers. This friction allows a complex relationship to emerge between the narrator and Stanley which becomes the crux of the narrative. This is a type of relationship that will eventually become a familiar pattern in further metagames; the specific ways developers connect to and are influenced by players. The game demonstrates "an experimental battle between would-be omniscient narrator and player-character" (Ensslin, 2015, p. 61) as the narrator's overwhelming directions inform Stanley's erratic behaviour and his erratic behaviour informs the creative decisions of the narrator in return. The narrator is presented as the creator of the story who is agitated by Stanley's specific methods of navigating his story, asking, "Was it worth ruining the entire story I had written out specifically for you?", and constantly trying to decipher "these strange and unknowable desires of yours" (Galactic Café, 2013), what the player may want out of his game. There are also instances where the narrator abandons the role of the anxious storyteller desperate for approval to assert his authority: "You're only still playing instead of watching a cutscene because I want to watch you for every moment that you're powerless, to see you made humble. This is not a challenge. It's a tragedy" (Galactic Café, 2013). He mocks the player's completionist efforts in chasing all endings such as spending a significant amount of time in a broom closet, jumping to their death in the hopes that something different might happen or staying in rooms with nothing to do in search of more dialogue. The narrator sees these efforts as futile attempts at creating a meaningful narrative, ultimately stating: "[Stanley] needs me. Someone who will wrap everything up at the end, to make sense out of the chaos, and the fear, and the confusion" (Galactic Café, 2013). However, the game also demonstrates the mutual nature of this relationship, stating: "How they wish to destroy one another. How they wish to control one another... Can you see how much they need one another?" (Galactic Café, 2013). The notion that a narrator needs an audience to receive his stories, and a story needs a witness to experience it in order to be complete becomes especially crucial in digital games which need players to progress their narratives. Thus, players in *The Stanley Parable* become "inevitably part of the game world" (Ensslin, 2015, p. 63) as collaborators and essential, non-negotiable parts of the story. No matter how much the narrator bemoans the player's unpredictability, and the players might bemoan the frustrating presence of the narrator, they are locked in an inevitable bond.

This complex relationship returns in full force in the DLC continuation of the game, *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe*. While the original game weaves a narrative that critiques larger trends and patterns in the world of gaming, it also inevitably becomes a part of these larger trends and as it gains fame, its metanarrative is reworked into the larger gaming world. *Ultra Deluxe* explores this legacy, as the original game's immense popularity and acclaim place the expansion in a unique position to reflect on itself as an important and groundbreaking part of gaming history. In this new narrative, the narrator takes the

player on a nostalgic journey through the development process of the original game, followed by positive reviews by high profile digital game critics, only to be confronted by negative player reviews on Steam. Disheartened by these critiques, the narrator proceeds to change the game, trying to add what the players found lacking in the original game in order to appease them, such as a jumping mechanic, a skip button that skips his own narration, and even an object called the Reassurance Bucket which becomes an object of affection through the narrator's intense personification as a direct reference to the similar use of the Companion Cube in the game *Portal* (Valve, 2007). Trapped between praise and criticism, the narrator slowly transforms the game to fit all possible game genres to the point that it barely resembles *The Stanley Parable*, dismantling his own narration in the process in a critique of modern game development trends that favour maximizing content and playtime instead of distilling the narrative into perfected mechanics. The expansion takes on nine years of discourse and critique of the original game and the growing gaming culture as a whole, self-reflecting from every imaginable angle and ultimately creating, as the Narrator exclaims while repeating praising reviews, a game that embodies "Every game ever created!" (Crows Crows Crows, 2022). While the mechanics of *The Stanley Parable* do not reflect the vast variety of existing gameplay options, the way it reflects on the pitfalls of gaming conventions and player expectations creates an all-encompassing, layered, and evergreen metacritique that successfully simulates the feeling of playing every game ever created.

The Developer as the Adversary

While *The Stanley Parable*'s self-aware character was a well-meaning but rigid guide through the narrative, developer Daniel Mullins' self-aware characters in his games *Pony Island* and *Inscryption* are direct adversaries, transforming the gaming space into a terrifying prison from which player characters are desperately trying to escape. While *Pony Island* starts off as a simple platformer with a cheery disposition, it soon becomes apparent that the game itself is designed by Satan himself, toying with the player character who is a trapped soul with dreams of freedom. The core mechanic of the game is the way various game settings refuse to work as they are supposed to, forcing the player to dig around the code and make changes to progress. As Mullins states in an interview: "A big part of what *Pony Island* was, was about taking the expectations you have about games...and flipping them upside down" (Muncy, 2016, para. 17). Such deconstruction of the game's interactive language "empower[s] the player to move through 'cracks' in the façade of the fictional world by acting as a metaphorical programmer, manipulating game files" (Edrei, 2018, p. 112). This unravelling of the game's inner workings is accompanied by the game becoming more and more corrupted and unstable, raising suspicions regarding possible damage to the game's code or even the player's hardware. This mechanic "alienate[s] the player from the cybernetic system that makes up gameplay" (Barkman, 2021, p. 2), disrupting the players' conventional perceptions to put the player in a constant state of uncertainty, but also invoke a sense of mischief and rebellious progression. The truly unsettling metafictional elements of the game take inspiration from *Eternal Darkness* but adapted to a modern setting such as the game sending a fake friend message on Steam or displaying a fake crash screen, blurring the line between "what takes place inside and outside the game's diegesis" (Barkman, 2021, p. 10). The game also

establishes itself as a game within a game, with ever-present visual elements such as the screen presented as a monitor and the player character's hand shown. However, these elements are gradually rendered near-invisible by their constant presence as the players are drawn into a false sense of security.

Pony Island utilizes the player instinct to dismantle game codes as an essential part of the mechanics. Paired with the presentation of the developer as Satan intent on trapping souls, the game creates a dynamic that is much more contentious than the relationship between Stanley and the Narrator, casting the developer of the game as the ultimate adversary and asking: "What's the role of the creator in his own creation?" (Muncy, 2016, para. 8). At the same time, the game utilizes the same intentional disobedience *The Stanley Parable* uses as Lucifer constantly orders the player to cease their efforts while the game needs to guide the player towards disobedience, creating "the feeling of playing something that feels like I wasn't supposed to play it" (Couture, 2016, para. 4). Ultimately, through the use of metafictional narrative and mechanics, the game perfectly achieves that sense of forbidden peeking behind the curtain.

With these reflections in mind, it is easy to recognize that Mullins' next game, *Inscryption*, is a culmination of these themes, taken to higher extremes and woven into a metagame experience that is mechanically and aesthetically much more complex. On the surface, *Inscryption* is a roguelike deck-building game where the player competes against a mysterious rival. In reality, the game exists on multiple layers: 1.) the card game, 2.) the mysterious cabin the player character is trapped in where they are playing the card game, 3.) the character of Luke Carder, a streamer who finds the game on a buried floppy disk and starts playing and recording the footage we are watching as players, and lastly, 4.) the players themselves in the real world. Interweaving all of these layers is the true crux of the story, self-aware characters in the game toying with the player and trying to escape the confines of the game, creating games within games and layered realities within the game universe. Similar to *Pony Island*, the opening title screen establishes the meta elements right away, with the new game selection greyed out and the player only being able to access "Continue Game" as a sign of the game's second-hand status. Upon continuing, the player will find themselves in a cabin where they will be playing the card game with the option to occasionally get up and explore. Despite this limited interactivity that might give the initial impression of freedom, the player character is indeed trapped here at the mercy and amusement of their opponent in the shadows which "turns the 'magic circle' into a 'magic prison', whereby the notion of voluntary, rule-bound, separated play becomes threatening" (Ford & Thorkildsen, 2023, p. 2). Players will need to free themselves from the cabin to physically find the New Game option, restore it to the main menu, and progress in the hopes of eventual freedom.

The exploration of the cabin and the revealing of further, distinct games establish the games-within-a-game dynamic while the existence of *Inscryption* as a game in this universe is established through live-action sequences that tell the story of Luke Carder acquiring the game. It is eventually revealed, through certain interruptions in the gameplay such as camera effects or Luke's voice reacting to certain thresholds and victories, that the player's playthrough is in fact Luke's recording of his own playthrough which positions the player as Luke. His entanglement with this powerful piece of software leads to initial intrigue, further obsession, and eventual death in his efforts to uncover the truth. The game also utilizes meta-malfunctions that directly interact with the player's reality as one boss utilizes the player's Steam friend list to name cards, while another accesses the player's actual hard drive, listing their real files, asking the player to choose personal files, even threatening to delete them if the player fails in a boss battle. Here, instead of a meta effect that happens on the screen without the player's control, *Inscryption* forces the

player to become an accomplice in their own terrorization. The uncertainty over whether the size of the file would be a benefit or a detriment to the player or if the game would actually be able to delete the file further enhances the effect. These meta game mechanics which "directly comment on the idea of how a game interacts with the lives of those who play it" (Howard, 2024, pp. 37-38) paired with the eventual murder of the player stand-in character of Luke serve as the ultimate culmination of the ever-present threat of a self-aware digital game reaching through the screen and affecting real life.

Narratively, the use of a competitive card game between two players in an intimate and isolated space invokes the trope of "playing chess with Death" (Caldwell, 2021, para. 14). Much like Lucifer in *Pony Island*, *Inscryption* also presents the player with characters who both construct the game and play it against the player. However, while these characters put the player through a harrowing gauntlet, the game also creates a complex dynamic between the player and the adversary they spend hours trying to beat. The opponent in Act 1, Leshy, starts as a terrifying captor and slowly turns into a more nuanced entity. The very last card game with Leshy has a nostalgic and bittersweet atmosphere with the game acknowledging the strange kinship that develops between him and the player during their hours of play as Leshy laments and begs: "Shall we play one more game? ... For so long I thought I would never play again" (Daniel Mullins Games, 2021). Compared to the strictly adversarial dynamic between the player and the developer in *Pony Island*, *Inscryption* takes a more nuanced approach, finding a balance between the necessary antagonism of a fight and the bonding experience of a common goal; the player and the developer trapped in the universe of the game together, but this time allowed to occupy the same space, sit at the same table, and see eye to eye.

The Developer as the False Ideal

While the metanarrative may cast the creator of the narrative as the ultimate gatekeeper that withholds the truth underneath, it may also take the opposite stance and present the creator as a seeming friend and confidant with whom the player assumes a connection. Developed by Davey Wreden, the creator of *The Stanley Parable, The Beginner's Guide* utilizes a games-within-a-game approach to examine this false and potentially dangerous narrative through the eyes of an unreliable narrator. The story features creator Davey Wreden as himself, guiding the player with his narration through a series of mini-games made by a developer named Coda. These experimental games vary in genre, mechanics, and aesthetics with the emerging narrative showcasing Coda's evolution as a developer. The player navigates these games under Wreden's guidance and analysis as he constantly posits the question: "What was going through [Coda's] head as he was building this?" (Everything Unlimited, 2015). The game's unconventional presentation and narrative have led to speculations regarding its nature, sparking various definitions such as "a game-flavored monologue" (Moulthrop, 2020, p. 91) and a "ludographic essay" (Fassone, 2018, p. 67). These interpretations emphasize the game's nature as a reflective, nonfictional narrative, established by Wreden's open identification of the narrator as himself. Naturally, this identification is a half-truth as developer Wreden creates "a fictionalized author narrator, or autofictional narrator" (Backe & Thon, 2019, p. 14) by interweaving his personal feelings with an embodiment of fandom culture. This hybrid fictional nonfiction narrative "represents its own production and the idea of game designer

as 'auteur'" (Jørgensen, 2017, p. 1), highlighting both the internal workings of the medium in general and the internal workings of its creator and narrator in specific.

The only information about Coda and how their games came to be is provided by Wreden himself. As Fejes (2021) argues: "while the implied player is interacting in some way with Coda's 'persona' and the works he made, this interaction is only illusory as the implied player can only gather narrative information through the narrative acts of Davey" (p. 255). Wreden's sole, unchallenged voice as a constant presence, his authoritative interpretations, and his assurance that he is personally acquainted with Coda all serve to manipulate the player's own impressions by encouraging them to absorb his assertions as absolute truths. In his overbearing analyses, "fuelled by an urge to define a coherent, stable identity of both Coda's work and person" (Backe & Thon, 2019, p. 16), Wreden takes certain themes too literally or tries to ascertain Coda's life from the art they produce. He does so by constantly asserting assumptions about Coda's artistic vision ("Coda believes his games are connected somehow"), the presumed intentionality of bugs in the games ("Coda identifies something about [the glitch]"), their thematic intentions ("weird for weirdness sakes") and most importantly, their inner psyche ("I think it's awful to watch this, to see a person basically unraveling through their work") (Everything Unlimited, 2015). As the game's narrative becomes increasingly overwhelmed by his interpretations, it soon becomes apparent that Wreden is an unreliable narrator.

Wreden's initial self-presentation as an aspiring developer and friend at the beginning of the game grows ever more inconsistent, slowly revealing that he is not as close to Coda as he initially claimed to be. He misinterprets not only Coda's perspective as a developer, but the true nature of their relationship and Coda's mental state as his ever-present commentary starts to evoke "an unpleasant feeling of emotional colonialism … as though something owed has not quite been delivered" (Hudson, 2015, para. 7). In addition to these interpretive transgressions, Wreden also begins to force his own interpretations into the games' codes, not content with simply speculating. He modifies a game about slowly crawling up stairs so that the player can go up at a normal speed. He removes walls from a puzzle game to show the assets on the other side. The most egregious example of this is the lamp post seen at the end of every game, which Wreden initially claimed was Coda's signature, only for the story to reveal that it was Wreden himself who inserted this asset into the games. In hindsight, his explanation of the lamp post that he himself put into the game is very telling: "[Coda] wants something to hold onto. He wants a reference point, he wants the work to be leading to something. He wants a destination! Which is what this lamppost is" (Everything Unlimited, 2015). As the false nature of Wreden's insistent interpretation is revealed, the game's "initial assumption– that a work allows the recipient to know the individual who created it – is exposed as a romantic hermeneutic power fantasy tantamount to imprinting a work with one's own projected meanings" (Backe & Thon, 2019, pp. 18-19). Wreden's interjections, clearly rooted in projection, create conflicting feelings in players who have been relying on his commentary and identifying with his perspective, leading to doubts regarding "not just what [the game] means, but whether [they]'ve been looking for meaning in games in the wrong way altogether" (Hudson, 2015, para. 3). Even the personal information Wreden shared about Coda becomes dubious. Coda may be a confidant or a stranger, a man as he claims or a different gender altogether. While Coda and their artistic vision are seemingly the focus of this narrative, the player has no means of truly getting to know Coda as Wreden is the true focus and protagonist of the game.

All of this culminates in Coda's final game, filled with impossible obstacles that can only be overcome by changing the game's code as Wreden has been doing. This final game ends with a striking level, a simple room with walls covered in personal messages from

Coda: "Would you stop taking my games and showing them to people against my wishes? Violating the one boundary that keeps me safe? Would you stop changing my games?" (Everything Unlimited, 2015). This finale lays bare the true parasocial nature of Wreden's relationship with Coda. Defined as "the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215), parasocial relationships are an ever-present part of all mediums that tell intimate stories and invite spectators to engage with them, creating the misconception that the creator has a close relationship with the audience. While this connection is genuine to some degree and crucial for art, the phenomenon of parasocial relationships specifically refers to overbearing and false perceptions which may reach critically dangerous levels depending on the fame of the creator. *The Beginner's Guide* explores this concept within the context of gaming culture, with fans distorting the original intent of their favourite digital games and projecting their own personal problems onto creators who do not know them. Through Wreden's interactions with Coda's work, we can see him engaging in what Camus (1992) calls "the inauthentic fictionalizing of others" (p. 226) as he is trying to use Coda's art as a way of accessing the person themselves, stating: "I want us to see past the games themselves, I want to know who this human being really is" (Everything Unlimited, 2015). This approach is rooted in Wreden's personal interactions with fans of *The Stanley Parable*: "I had emails from people who told me I had forever changed the way they saw the world [and] from people who wanted me to know I was a spineless coward who should hate himself" (Wreden, 2022, para. 3). *The Beginner's Guide* weaves these anxieties into the narrative, projecting them onto Coda with Wreden positioned as the enthusiastic fan who transforms his excitement into a codependent, one-sided relationship. As the character of Coda is fictional and their games are indeed created by Wreden, it is easy to recognize that the dynamic between the implicitly metaphorical entity of Coda and Wreden embodies a "psychomachia, the struggle between halves of a divided self" (Moulthrop, 2020, p. 93). Wreden fictionalizes the artistic part of himself as Coda while the character who shares his name becomes a conduit through which he attempts to process the anxieties and ambitions of his fans.

In addition to this intimate character study, Coda's final words also touch on larger gaming trends such as "the relationship of videogame players and videogame authors" (Backe & Thon, 2019, p. 18) through the examination of an intimate and contentious connection between a developer and a fanatical player. Fans' constant demands shape the content of games as the open channel of communication facilitated by social media amplifies their voices. Horton and Wohl (1956) argue that "the more the performer seems to adjust his performance to the supposed response of the audiences, the more the audience tends to make the response anticipated" (p. 215). As such, just as the Narrator reconstructed his games to please Stanley and critics, so did Coda alter their own games, stating: "You've so infected my personal space that it's possible I did begin to plant 'solutions' in my work somewhere, hidden between games" (Everything Unlimited, 2015). This amplification of parasocial interactions extends beyond demands for content changes to include expectations of personal validation and emotional intimacy. As Coda states, "You desperately need something and I cannot give it to you" (Everything Unlimited, 2015), it becomes apparent that Wreden has used this camaraderie between him and Coda not only as a professional connection, but a personal one, seeing Coda as a reflection of and a solution to his personal struggles. As Coda leaves Wreden with a final message that exudes both best wishes and a finality, Wreden's fictionalized self-narrative crumbles, resulting in a passionate plea that is both poignantly introspective and toxically presumptuous:

> I'm the reason that you stopped making games, aren't I? ... when I took your work and I was showing it to people...It felt as though I were responsible for something

> important and valuable. ... Please start making games again ... Give me some of whatever it is that makes you complete. (Everything Unlimited, 2015)

As Wreden takes his own anxieties to their worst conclusion possible, putting himself in the shoes of his parasocial fans, he also lays bare the contradictory nature of storytelling, the freedom and burden it brings, and the power it has to draw others in for better or worse.

Conclusion

As the medium of digital games has accumulated a substantial body of work, metafictional games have emerged as a way of reflecting on decades of repeated patterns, tropes, and conventions, creating a reflective voice that has become an inseparable and permanent part of the gaming landscape. These metagames utilize both narrative reflections and meta disruptions of game mechanics to critique gaming conventions, player expectations, and the specific hardships of developing games. *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*'s defamiliarization effect directly challenges the notion that empowerment is the ultimate aim of digital games. By utilizing meta disruptions of game mechanics, it disempowers players and invokes a deep sense of vulnerability and fear which is befitting of the Lovecraftian cosmic horror of the unknown that the game's narrative invokes.

After such early meta referential attempts, *The Stanley Parable* emerges as a more comprehensive exploration of digital game conventions as the game is presented as an experience with countless paths and endings under the guidance of an ever-present narrator. The presence of narration in interactive medium lays bare the illusion of freedom and the predetermined nature of even the most abstract and avant-garde gameplay decisions. Within this context, the narrator and Stanley are positioned as figures in conflict and harmony, collaborating on the creation of the story together. This complex relationship between developer and player continues in *Pony Island* and *Inscryption* which establish the two figures as direct enemies. The self-aware developers of both games become adversaries who manipulate players to escape the game world, their influence reaching beyond the universe of the game and into real life. *Pony Island*'s fictional developer is a direct villain with the visage of Satan while *Inscryption*'s Leshy occupies a more nuanced position, with the common goal of an intimate card game being utilized to bring the two figures to equal footing.

Lastly, *The Beginner's Guide* engages in a further deconstruction of this dynamic with its unreliable narrator putting the developer figure of Coda on a pedestal as the idealized confidant and weaving a manipulative narrative for the players. The fictional nonfiction character of Wreden utilizes this constructed self to comment on the parasocial relationship between players and developers, putting himself in the shoes of his fans whose reaction to his previous game *The Stanley Parable* was overwhelming and at times, intimidating. Through a divided self, Wreden and Coda, the developer is able to present a complex and nuanced metacritique that both acknowledges the dangerous nature of such a dynamic and the intimate realities of storytelling. Ultimately, while this selection of corpus provides commentary on specific aspects of digital games such as game design, narrative, player interaction, and the relationship between players and developers, the constant search for subversions signifies that the storytelling medium of digital games and its growing canon require and generate an ever-present voice of self-reflection.

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Paws and Politics: A Postcolonial Reading of *The Cat and the Coup*

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ABSTRACT:
The paper presents a close reading analysis of the digital game *The Cat and the Coup*, a documentary digital game that explores the historical narrative surrounding the 1953 coup in Iran. The game uses a unique perspective by placing the players in control of Mohammad Mosaddegh's cat to explore a pivotal moment in Iranian history: the nationalization of the oil industry and subsequent foreign intervention. This independent game utilizes a distinctive visual style inspired by Persian miniature drawings and creates a transcultural experience, integrating traditional and contemporary symbolism of both East and West embedded in the medium-specific features of digital games. The research combines the insights of regional game studies and post-colonial studies to conduct an in-depth close reading analysis of the game's narrative structure, visuals, and artistic choices. It argues that the game serves as a counter-narrative to dominant Western portrayals of Iran by focusing on the cultural and historical significance of the events depicted. Furthermore, the paper suggests analysing game design as a form of digital vernacular and scrutinizes the potential of independent games to challenge hegemonic narratives.

KEY WORDS:
counter-history, coup, documentary digital game, Iran, miniature, Mohammad Mosaddegh, Persia, postcolonial studies, regional game studies, tapestry, *The Cat and the Coup*.

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Introduction

The 2011 Iranian documentary digital game *The Cat and the Coup* (Brinson & ValaNejad, 2011) is a unique exploration of microhistory, which challenges the notion of historical objectivity, especially when history has been written by Western powers during their path of colonialism. Even the concept of documentary "has been fiercely contested and ... continuously expanded to refer to an ever more extensive corpus of works" (Thon, p. 269, 2019). The game puts players in control of the cat of Mohammad Mosaddegh, the famous Iranian prime minister who nationalized the country's oil industry – considered to be one of the most important steps toward the country's economic and political independence. Through the eyes of the cat, the game lets players witness Mosaddegh's tormented life after his success in the 1950s, culminating in the 1953 coup d'état that overthrew him. Although led by the Iranian military, the coup was later, in 2013, acknowledged to have been instigated by American and British intelligence agencies under the code names "Operation Ajax" and "Operation Boot", respectively, significantly affecting Iran's international standing and the advancement of democratic values in the country. The game's 2011 release predates the official reveal by the U.S. and is based on local Iranian sources and the general local consensus about the different factions, such as the monarchy and the clergy, being involved in the coup.

The Iranian game development scene is not any less complicated than the historiographical one, as it does not have a rich variety of vernacular games, but the grand

majority of locally developed games are funded by the country's government, seeking to promote Islamic values, and representing the state's official take on history. That is why it is relevant that *The Cat and the Coup* was made outside Iranian borders by Kurosh ValaNejad, an expatriate Iranian game developer, and Peter Brinson, a British developer, hence introducing a narrative perspective that transcends traditional historical ones about Iran. Furthermore, it also goes against the Orientalist media stereotypes that are dominant in games such as *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Blacklist* (Ubisoft Toronto, 2013) and *The Prince of Persia* (Broderbund et al., 1989-2024) franchise and moves toward a subversive narrative that will be examined in detail in this research. By utilizing postcolonial, multicultural gaming, and regional game studies frameworks, the present paper seeks to offer a close reading analysis of the digital game *The Cat and the Coup*, arguing that it offers a personal, patriotic and independent approach to this sensitive historical period through its game mechanics, two-dimensional Persian miniature backdrop, and symbolism to ultimately explore how the game formulates meaning without any dialogue lines or specific language in a decidedly intercultural context. In the following paragraphs, we contend that the game uses an intercultural combination of symbolism and gameplay elements to subvert both the Iranian and the US-informed version of history, to create a more personal, unique and imaginative take on Iranian history.

Although Iran has never been officially colonized by Western powers, traces of coloniality can be witnessed through time, and have led to different aspects of postcolonial thinking. As Mukherjee (2016) puts it, these approaches "tie into each other in framing the perception, both external and self-reflexive, of the post-colonial subject" (p. 3) In the context of postcolonial studies, the concept of the subaltern is significant in this study. Coined by Gramsci (1992) to describe colonial populations who are socially, politically, and geographically excluded from the hierarchy of power of an imperial colony, and from the metropolitan homeland of an empire, the concept was further elaborated on by Spivak (1988). She argues that a core problem for the poorest and most marginalized in society (the subalterns) is that they have no platform to express their concerns, and no voice to affect policy debates or demand a fairer share of society's goods. Mukherjee (2016) uses Guha's (2003) definition of the term subaltern as "history from below" (p. 2) and he continues with how the subaltern tries to find its voice to articulate its narrative. In order for this to happen, one possibility is to use the empire's own narrative devices against itself (Mukherjee, 2016).

Due to the rapid growth and availability of computers, the game development scene has become more of a democratic area for independent developers to create whatever they imagine, and digital games as digital artifacts have become an expression tool for the subaltern. As Swalwell (2021) writes, this trend started in the 1980s when "everyday users first had the opportunity to create cultural products digitally" (p. 20). She also adds that "the adoption and use of these first-generation home computers marks the beginning of a vernacular digitality" (p. 20). The emergence of the digital vernacular gave rise to independent games and small developers to give life to whatever they could imagine in the form of games, and to publish them via different means. As Šisler (2013) writes, in accordance with this trend, many independent producers present their own, often quite different concept of identity. Unlike government games that adhere to the official communication policy of the Islamic state, the concepts of identity constructed by independent designers reflect their personal experiences, values, and beliefs. Subsequently, the subaltern finds their chance to create a more subjective form of expression and in some cases to make efforts to preserve their values while promoting their culture.

The Cat and the Coup can be considered as such an attempt. The game was initially made for American students with the aim of introducing them to an event in Iranian

history while representing Persian culture and art (Pormehr Yabandeh & Ghazizadeh, 2024). Having this target audience in mind, the game uses creative design choices such as putting the players in the control of a cat which itself resembles the shape of modern Iran, and through gameplay mechanics prompts the player to intercept the success of Mosaddegh in his mission of nationalizing Iranian oil. This idea will be elaborated on later thoroughly in the close analysis section of this paper.

In line with the game's objectives, its visual style includes elements that mediate between traditional Persian symbolism and images with a broader, international significance. This can be seen through the backdrop, characters, anthropomorphism, and other various design choices of the game. In this sense, it can be claimed that *The Cat and the Coup* provides a transcultural gaming experience – the interaction and blending of different cultural elements within the context of digital games. This concept emphasizes how games can serve as a medium for cultural exchange and understanding across diverse backgrounds. Pandey et al. (2007) state that "we observe the role gaming plays in developing literacies and in accessing the codes of cross-cultural citizenship in the mediated world" (p. 38). The quote describes how transcultural gaming "can be an important venue to acquire and immerse in cultural literacy" (p. 47), and it serves as a platform for players to engage with and learn from diverse cultural experiences, improving their overall literacy and understanding of different cultural contexts.

Regional game studies are another key approach that formulates a basis for our inquiries. For Liboriussen and Martin (2016) this includes inquiries "that have been developed in non-western epistemologies and social formations" (para. 20). Through this approach, scholars "investigate games and gaming cultures at a range of scales and identify connections across and between these scales; [the method] highlights and addresses unequal global relations within gaming culture and within the academic study of games" (Abstract). This paper tries to situate *The Cat and the Coup* in a web of references pertaining to the Iranian art style, symbolism, and cultural artifacts.

Methodology

In order to analyse the game in a transcultural context, a rigorous close reading methodology will be applied, as it allows for a more intersectional approach that can attend to the nuances of representation across identity markers, creating opportunities to examine internal contradictions, ironies, and polysemy generated through interpretive gaps (Reay, 2021, p. 47). It also involves analysing the gameplay experience, focusing on the interplay between player and game, which can reveal deeper meanings and cultural critiques (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011). We find this approach most suitable since throughout the research we have tried to cast an analytical eye on the game elements, visual or game mechanics, and how they may be interpreted as the player is experiencing them.

Using the discussions about what role gaming has in people's struggle to learn the grammar of living, learning, and working in cross-cultural spaces by Pandey et al. (2007), we have tried to reach a more robust understanding of gaming's interrelationship with learning in a broader sense. The study provides an in-depth analysis of intercultural symbolism and tries to interpret the purpose they serve.

The Cat and the Coup: Visual Storytelling in a Transnational Setting

As shown in Picture 1, after the launch of the game, the first thing that catches the player's attention is the background, consisting of detailed paintings with vivid colours. The art style draws on Persian miniature painting, a traditional style that originated in Iran during the 13th century. This form of art is highly detailed and intricate, characterized by the use of bright colours, fine brushwork, and delicate patterns to create small-scale paintings on paper, parchment, or silk (Binyon et al., 1971). These paintings typically depict scenes from Persian literature, history, and mythology, as well as everyday life and nature. The Persian miniature style, with its unique level of skill and craftsmanship, stands as a highly refined and sophisticated art form that has been passed down through generations of Iranian artists and is recognized as one of the most important cultural Iranian traditions (Binyon et al., 1971).

Picture 1: The backdrop and the implication of Persian miniature painting in the game The Cat and the Coup
Source: the author's screenshot from the game The Cat and the Coup (Brinson & ValaNejad, 2011)

To Iranians, Persian miniature painting serves as a source of national pride and a symbol of their rich cultural heritage. It is deeply ingrained in Iranian culture and has played an important role in shaping the country's artistic and intellectual traditions. Abdollah and Bolkhari Ghehi (2014) explain how alongside the form, colours also play a significant role in achieving the style's prominent status. They argue that colours should be interpreted according to the cultural and spiritual climate of the era, between the 14th to 17th centuries, which involves a mystical symbolism mapping the cosmic journey of the soul.

The Cat and the Coup, defining itself as a documentary game and targeting a Western audience, puts the players in control of the cat which is coaxing Mosaddegh to his

downfall. This can be interpreted as a representation of not only objective history but also some form of commentary on how Western authorities played a role in undermining Iran's opportunity for independence. The game begins on the day of Mosaddegh's death, when the cat awakens his soul and leads him back in time to the moment when the events leading to his downfall and death began. The narrative's progression along the backdrop, from the top right corner to the bottom left, evokes yet another artistic style, that of tapestry storytelling. Tapestries, these large, woven textiles often depict detailed scenes and serve as a form of visual storytelling. Across different times and different regions, these textiles functioned as a means of communication, conveying stories through visual imagery and sometimes featuring small woven inscriptions to explain or comment on the depicted scenes (Mallory, 2014). Tapestries conveyed messages in three main formats: armorials (depicting coats of arms), verdures and landscapes (scenes primarily comprising plants or landscapes), and narrative scenes (featuring human and/or animal figures to tell a story). Each of these formats served as a possible way to comment on the surrounding world (Mallory, 2014).

The game employs animal figures in its first half to tell its story. The use of anthropomorphic animals sets the atmosphere, reflecting both the characters they represent and the world around them, aligning well with the traditions of tapestry storytelling. The blend of these two different visual art forms, namely, Persian miniature and tapestry, where neither relies on verbal language but instead conveys meaning through visual elements, make the narrative appealing to international audiences. This approach also creates what might be considered as a postmodern pastiche. As Hoesterey (1995) states, "confronted with the vast archive of the artistic tradition, the postmodern writer, visual artist, architect, composer consciously acknowledges this past by demonstratively borrowing from it, particularly from the classical archive" (p. 496). Thus, by juxtaposing Persian miniature tradition and ancient tapestry storytelling, the game synthesizes artistic elements, paying homage to historical roots while simultaneously reinterpreting them in a contemporary digital medium. This intentional blend of these different artistic traditions serves as a postmodern commentary on the fluidity of cultural narratives and the evolution of storytelling across different ages. This way, the game becomes a visual and narrative pastiche, blending Persian miniature heritage and tapestry storytelling into its own distinctive visual backdrop. The game includes six different stages that we will analyse by the order of presentation in the game.

The First Stage – Liminal Time and Space

Previously we discussed how the cat serves as a symbol representing, on the one hand, Iran due to the country's shape, and on the other hand, Iranians working against Mosaddegh, knowingly or unconsciously assisting Western powers in his downfall. The game targets Western players and uses the ludic features of the medium to put the player in control of the cat. Just as the Western powers used Iranians to execute the coup, throughout the game, the (Western) player uses the avatar – the cat – to assist the West in accomplishing their goals. The visuals of the game, utilizing elements from the aforementioned forms of art and storytelling, Persian miniature and tapestry, are considered to follow the ludic tradition of two-dimensional platformer games. The first scene shows Mosaddegh on his deathbed with the cat curled at the foot of the bed. The bedroom is

depicted in a square shape. A square symbolizes "honesty; straightforwardness; integrity; morality. It is the fixation of death as opposed to the dynamic circle of life and movement" (Cooper, 1987, p. 157.) There are two angels at the top of the square in the clouds.

The opening scene is dominated by the ticking of a large mechanical grandfather's clock that shows 11:59. As Landes (1983) explains, the mechanical clock is "one of the great inventions in the history of mankind – not in a class with fire and the wheel, but comparable to moveable type in its revolutionary implications for cultural values, technological change, social and political organization, and personality" (p. 6). Midnight in literature has diverse symbolism. For instance, in fairy tales, midnight marks the transition from reality to fantasy and vice versa, if we take Cinderella's tale for example. Rushdie's (1981) depicts it as a liminal temporality, where personal and national narratives intertwine (see Sari & Adiguzel, 2023). Similarly, in *The Cat and the Coup*, midnight once again marks a liminal area, which is aligned with what has happened to Mosaddegh and how we are about to witness the steps that led to this frame. Using the square shape with angels at the top, the anticlockwise movement of the clock's hands, underscores the inevitability of Mosaddegh's fate, emphasizing what the player is about to witness – and the actions they take – cannot change the course of history. As the cat touches the clock, it rings at midnight and then starts moving anticlockwise, signalling that we are going back in time.

The Second Stage – Patriotism and Isolation

After the midnight hit, Mosaddegh's soul rises from his body and starts following the cat to the second stage of the game. The second stage is a rectangular room with blue walls balancing on the tip of a fountain pen. Across the entire wall, a famous poem attributed to Ferdowsi is repeatedly seen. The verse translates to: "If Iran is no longer, my body is (I am) no longer either". The quote is not directly in the Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* [The book of kings] (see e.g. Ferdowsi, 2016) and how it became a well-known and cultural remark from Persian literature is not traceable. But it signals the patriotic and nationalistic beliefs that Mosaddegh had. He starts writing a text in the middle of the room. The cat can change the room's angular balance to left and right. There is a window to the left side of the room and when the cat moves to the left, the shadow of an oil stand worker can be seen:

> The windows, as a material feature of the home, helps us grasp the lived reality of class inequality and how such inequality shapes people's day-to-day experience … [it also] symbolically charged objects, existing at the border of the domestic and public world. (Hirsch & Smith, 2018, p. 224)

This can symbolize Mosaddegh's isolation from the public world and the class inequality in society. The cat's mission is to spill the ink and stop Mosaddegh from writing his thoughts, allegedly to silence him (Brinson & ValaNejad, 2012). The game uses its ludic feature both in the form of the playfulness of a cat and as a puzzle. The player and their cat avatar should spill the ink and then run to the side of the room to open the door and let the inkpot roll out. Mosaddegh will follow the inkpot and fall off through the door to the next stage.

The Third Stage – The Symbolic Fall

From now until the point that the cat and Mosaddegh reach the bottom of the tapestry, all the transitions between stages are followed by Mosaddegh falling, which holds a gameplay mechanic purpose along with the idea of Mosaddegh's more general fall. Since the game takes a turn and becomes chronological when the narrative reaches the bottom of the tapestry, on the way down we see a foreshadowing of the events that are revealed later in the game. All through the backdrop angels are visible, symbolizing the morality of Mosaddegh's actions. When the cat reaches the third stage, it is hidden behind a red theatre curtain, an indication that what is about to be revealed is just a show, a performance.

Through an interaction, the curtains are pushed to the side and the stage is revealed. The note below the stage reads "The Shah of Iran asks mercy for Mossadegh's life" (Brinson & ValaNejad, 2011). The stage shows a courtroom with Mosaddegh and a judge with a ball as his head. There is also a window to the left side of the room through which a humanoid peacock with a royal outfit symbolizing the Shah can be seen. The peacock, originally an Indian symbol that symbolizes royalty in Western culture (see Hawkins, n.d.), represents the entrance of the heavens, sun, and rulers in Iranian culture (Foroghi, 2015), hence a telling representation of the Shah. The way the peacock is looking at the trial through a window, not taking part in the court itself, indicates his manipulation of justice. This idea is further suggested by the puzzle on this level. The cat has to play with the judge's head which, as previously stated, looks like a ball. The ball becomes a wrecking ball and rolls on the ground until Mosaddegh, who is trying to find his defence notes from the scattered pile of paper on the ground, trips over it. The moment that the judge's head is dropped, a balloon made of peacock feathers is inflated. This implicates the influence of the Shah over the court's decision and the player's action signifies, as described by the developers Brinson and ValaNejad (2011), 'undermining justice'. After a few attempts to trip Mosaddegh over the judge's wrecking ball head, he finally falls towards the next stage. On the path of falling, for the first time, we see foreign agents in their anthropomorphic animal forms: A bulldog with a hat that has the Union Jack on it clearly suggests UK intervention by Winston Churchill, a toad with a tie with the USA's flag's colours on it, and on the other side of the screen a horse, in the animal's real form, with an American flag as the saddle. The American flag's presence in itself may reinforce narratives of dominance over indigenous populations and territories. Through the transitional portal to the next stage, the cat reaches a street where a riot is in progress, and there are two tents at the top of the image. The following analysis refers to Picture 2. The tent on the left shows a torture scene which is a reminder of the Mongol conquest of Iran, since the characters are portrayed with traditional 13th century Mongolian appearances. The Mongol conquest of Iran, occurring in three stages under different khans, significantly reshaped political dynamics, leading to the decline of the Khwarazmian dynasty and establishing Mongol control, which facilitated trade and cultural exchange across the vast empire (Manz, 2022). The second tent shows the peacock (Shah) and the toad (Roosevelt Jr.) sitting together, plotting a plan. And a third tent is being set up. Kermit Roosevelt led the CIA's involvement in the coup, claiming credit for mobilizing crowds and military forces to facilitate the overthrow of Mosaddegh (Bayandor, 2012). Using a toad for the representation of Roosevelt Jr. offers room for different interpretations. The first thing that might come to mind when thinking of an American character named Kermit as a toad is the resemblance to the famous American Muppet, Kermit the Frog. In the series, Kermit is represented as wise and others

often turn to him for advice. In literary tradition, toads have been used to symbolize moral decline or evil, as seen in Milton's (1667) *Paradise lost*, where Satan's transformation into a toad reflects his degradation (Danielson, 1979). The symbolic representation of Kermit Roosevelt Jr., an American CIA agent, as a toad is indicative of him being a stereotypical American just like Kermit the Frog, and symbolizes the foreshadowing of his malicious plan for Iran and the Iranian reservoir of oil.

Picture 2: The transitional phase between the third and the fourth stage of the game The Cat and the Coup
Source: the author's screenshot from the game The Cat and the Coup (Brinson & ValaNejad, 2011)

Above the tent, a dark creature is leaning on the Shah's side. This creature is called Div, a malicious, monstrous being, a demon deeply rooted in Persian mythology. It translates to monster and as Leoni (2012) puts it,

> *divs* were not casual pictorial hodge-podges, but reflected well-rooted cultural ideas and preconceptions about what was deemed evil in the pre-modern Persian world. This aspect greatly enhanced their anti-heroic role in the context of an epic such as the *Shahnama*, permeated by the idea of the clash of Good and Evil. (Leoni, 2012, p. 102)

The concept of Div can also be interpreted as whatever that decreases morals in humans, for example, Div-e-tanbali, which translates to "The Monster of Laziness", hinders people's efforts from being productive or successful. Therefore, it is not necessarily understood as a literal monster, it can also be used to describe mental processes that sabotage self-growth and personal improvement, a culturally coded embodiment of procrastination and other maleficent ideas. Having a Div holding on to the tent on the Shah's side indicates that he is being possessed by the evil idea of selling out his country's most precious source of income to the Western powers to keep his throne. The way these three tents are located in a line can be interpreted as various invasions of Iran in a timeline, and all of them serve as a representation of different means by which external forces influenced the country. The first tent, with imagery of the Mongol invasion of Iran, represents war that brought brutal violence to the country and placed it under an occupation that was maintained by means of cruelty by a foreign power, with Roosevelt and the Shah being in the second, this tent symbolizes external influences achieved through soft war, and the country's leaders and figureheads acting with greed and according to foreign interests.

Meanwhile, the third tent is being set up as a pessimistic prophecy for future invasions of Iran, which could be interpreted as the 1979 revolution, since its leader Ruhollah Khomeini's picture is shown later in the game, and many interpreters acknowledge the coup as the first flames leading to the Islamic revolution.

In front of the tents, in the protest, the player can see different creatures on the screen. On the left side, some people are portrayed as Divs, holding a sign which resembles Islam's holy book, the Quran. On the right side, another group of Divs can be observed holding a sign of a silver vase. The former represents protestors under the heavy influence of the religious clergy and the latter shows the staunch supporters of the monarchy since silver vessels often have inscriptions that indicate royal ownership and provenance, linking them to Achaemenid customs of certifying precious metals (Zournatzi, 2000). Mosaddegh faced numerous adversaries, notably the clergymen and the monarchy of the Shah. The conservatives and religious clerics were allegedly influenced by Roosevelt to employ religious sentiments to mobilize opposition against Mosaddegh. Conversely, the Shah resisted the establishment of a democratic parliament to retain control over the country and the military. Ayatollah Kashani and other clerics mobilized public sentiment against foreign domination, aligning with various societal groups, including merchants and the lower middle class. The armed forces, particularly loyal to the monarchy, also played a pivotal role in the coup, reflecting a broader societal division between modernists and traditionalists. Both parties were under the direct or indirect influence of Roosevelt Jr. (Mokhtari, 2008).

Between the two parties in the game (religious and monarchist protestors) stands a humanoid pig wearing the Shah's military outfit, and from his hat a tank gun emerges, pointed at the religious protesting party. Pigs are often associated with impurity, sin, and gluttony, reflecting cultural and religious beliefs (Sillar & Meyler, 1961). A notable instance of pig symbolism is found in Orwell's (1945) *Animal farm*, where pigs represent political leaders. Initially symbols of resistance, the pigs eventually give in to corruption, illustrating the potential for power to erode ethical principles. This theme is echoed in *The Cat and the Coup*, where pigs represent Iranian generals controlled by Western powers. On the hat the pig is wearing, there lies a bald eagle, and a bulldog, symbolizing the USA and Great Britain respectively, showing within the game how they are occupying the thoughts of the general. This mirrors the corruption depicted in *Animal farm*, where ordinary individuals from the working class become corrupted by the power they gain and turn into new tyrants. In both cases, pigs serve as symbols to critique how power can lead to moral decay. In the Iranian cultural tradition, being deeply rooted in Islamic customs, the pig is also considered as a symbol of filth.

The Fourth Stage - Hidden Agendas

After a significant fall, as part of the fourth stage, the player finds Mosaddegh sitting desperately under a telephone. Above his head, there is a shelf with the two already elaborated symbols of the Quran and the silver vase. The cat's mission is to alter the balance of the room and have each item on the shelf thrown to one side. Outside the room, there are faceless people in the form of shadows, and the moment they receive one of the two items, more faceless people fall from the sky and start pushing the room that Mosaddegh is in from both sides, putting pressure on him. This act symbolizes the two parties he had

to fight with after he nationalized oil. The room gets smaller until he no longer fits in it, and he starts falling again toward the next stage.

On the way down, a toad appears again in two distinct forms, one hidden beneath an Islamic hijab in the middle of the frame, and the other posing as a superhero with the American flag as a cape, tearing his shirt off on the right side, under which a red star surfaces. The former can be interpreted as Kermit Roosevelt Jr.'s sneaky strategy to disguise himself as one of the Iranians and make them believe that foreign interests represent their needs. The latter, as it conjures the image of the red star, a symbol of communism and the Soviet Union in particular, unfolds the political motivations of the USA behind the coup, namely the concern that the changes and reforms made by Mosaddegh might draw Iran closer to the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. The U.S. perceived a significant threat from communism, particularly after the Azerbaijan Crisis in 1946, which shaped its containment strategy in the Middle East (Chapman, 2023). American officials believed that Mosaddeq's policies could lead to economic instability, making Iran susceptible to a communist takeover (Gasiorowski, 2019). Between the two images with the toad, there is a bald eagle which is taking a hunted rabbit, foreshadowing the next stage.

The Fifth Stage – Unveiling Manipulation and Obedience

The fifth stage shows Mosaddegh and Harry S. Truman meeting in the Blair House. They are sitting opposite each other and having a conversation. Harry Truman avoided being part of the coup and he is depicted as a rabbit. According to American symbolism, rabbits represent innocence (Torosyan & Lowe, 2013). During the game's events, Truman was engaged in the Korean War and didn't want to get involved in conflicts with Iran and the UK. Therefore, his administration sought to support Mosaddeq in Iran to avoid a coup, fearing that driving him out could empower Ayatollah Kashani and increase the Tudeh (communist) Party influence. British stubbornness over compensation hindered negotiations, leading to Mosaddeq's eventual political weakening (Painter & Brew, 2023). However, Dwight Eisenhower, who was in favour of the coup, took office and America officially became involved.

On the wall two pictures can be seen, one is Truman (in the form of a rabbit) on the end wall, and on the main wall, a picture of Winston Churchill (depicted as a bulldog) is hanging. Having the main wall occupied by the bulldog can be seen as the British will that influenced Truman's decision. On the shelf to the right, the famous Cyrus Cylinder can be seen. The Cyrus Cylinder is an ancient artifact inscribed with a declaration by Cyrus the Great, emphasizing his policies of tolerance and repatriation of displaced peoples. It is considered a symbol of human rights in classical history (Waters, 2022). There's a samovar on the shelf with hot tea inside but the colour of the tea is very dark, so much so that it resembles that of oil. The key to the puzzle of this stage is to have the cat curl up on Mosaddegh's lap and scratch him. He loses balance and is about to fall on his back, but the rabbit holds his hand and doesn't let him fall. Then the player has to move the cat to the shelf and make the hot tea in the samovar leak on Mosaddegh's hands that are held by those of the rabbit. When the hot tea drips on Mosaddegh's hands he falls backward. The cat has to repeat this action several times until Mosaddegh finally falls from the back door to the final stage of the game and the cat follows him.

In the transition between two stages, many different oil barrels with a specific design can be seen. After the advent of Islam, due to the prohibition of using animal and especially human motifs in artworks, the designs of *Eslimi* gradually replaced them as the fundamental and conventional patterns of Iranian decorative arts. According to the Moein Dictionary, Eslimi designs are templates used in Iranian visual art and are a combination of many curves and lines which all intended to imitate nature (Rajaei et al., 2023). These patterns continued to be prevalent in subsequent periods, particularly during the Islamic era, and received significant attention. The use of Eslimi designs in Persian miniature art is very common, the design of oil barrels uses Eslimi motifs to embellish, beautify, and emphasize their importance for Mossadegh and the Iranian people. The cat falls right into the hands of the bulldog who holds it in its arms and starts petting it. Meanwhile, Mosaddegh is opening a valve from an oil barrel. On the right side of the screen, there is a black dragon. According to Middle Persian from the Sasanian Empire, if a dragon is not killed, it will destroy the entire world of light (Gholizadeh, 2008). The dragon is depicted in the corner of the frame in black, with fire spewing from its mouth towards the oil barrels. In Iranian culture, black is a negative symbol associated with grief and mourning. Furthermore, in Iranian art and culture, dragons are considered symbols of evil, of untamed nature, and fighting them is seen as a quest for the life-giving fountain (Asgari & Eghbali, 2013; Kafshchian Moghadam & Yahaghi, 2012). Here, the black dragon, during the period of oil nationalization, refers to an understanding of the movements and struggles, highlighting the negative aspect of this symbol, and its reference to foreign enemies such as Britain and the USA. The leadership of the national movement by Mossaddegh and his fight against colonialism is a powerful force in the game's narrative.

After Mosaddegh opens the valve, he walks to the room. The toad appears next to the bulldog and opens a sack, putting the cat into it. This action could be interpreted in several ways. First, the cat, which resembles Iran, was treated well for a few moments before they threw it in the sack where he would be blind. Second, it might be seen as confining the cat to a cell and conditioning it to obey the commands of foreign powers. Third, after this final stage, the timeline of the game becomes chronological, and the secrets are revealed. This scene could also remind the player of the phrase in English: "The cat is out of the bag" (Brinson & ValaNejad, 2011).

The Final Stage – Drowning in Oil

In the final interactive stage of the game, Mosaddegh is walking around a room while his famous speech after the nationalization of the oil industry is being played. In his speech, he points out the fact that the decision made for nationalizing oil was based on Iranians' will, and how it will cut down the exploiting hands of Western powers. An ironic act of the player/cat's mission, which represents Iranians, is to swing on the chandelier, jump down, and land on Mosaddegh's head, causing him to lose his footing and fall, showcasing the fact that Mosaddegh made the effort for Iranians to reach what they desired and how they tried to put him down. Each time he falls, it results in cracks and holes in the ground and his speech is interrupted until he stands up again. Oil erupts from the holes made by him and it starts filling the screen to a point where Mosaddegh drowns in it.

The Ascent

After the final stage, the player reaches a turning point in the game's narrative where the lens widens, and the player can see more of the intricate backdrop to the game. Mosaddegh is dead, lying on the surface of oil which takes him to the top of the backdrop. The cat is also curled up on him. By this point in the game, the player has seen the events in reverse order while navigating to the bottom of the tapestry and now goes up, with the player following the events chronologically. From this point on, the player has no more chance for interactions, their agency is limited to observing the ascent, and instead of the anthropomorphized animal forms, the politicians now resemble their ordinary selves.

The written texts are all new and they are descriptive of the symbols the player has encountered. On the way to the top, three religious figures are presented, Ayatollah Broujerdi, Ayatollah Kashani, and Ayatollah Khomeini. Broujerdi was a key figure in Iranian Shia Islam, commanding significant respect and influence among the populace, which he leveraged to oppose secular reforms proposed by Mosaddegh. He mobilized religious sentiments against the nationalization of the oil industry, aligning with conservative factions that viewed Mosaddeq's policies as a threat to traditional values (Šćepanović, 2018). The initial alliance between Mossadegh and Ayatollah Kashani was rooted in a shared nationalist and anti-imperialist agenda, which later deteriorated due to political and economic strains.

Kashani's eventual betrayal of Mossadegh, aligning with U.S. and British interests, was pivotal in the coup's execution (Kressin, 1991). While Khomeini was not directly involved in the 1953 coup, the ideological currents he represented and the actions of other clerics significantly shaped the political landscape of Iran, ultimately leading to the 1979 revolution. This highlights the complex interplay between religious authority and political power in Iran's history. The game concludes by picturing Mosaddegh's body afloat on the surface of the oil, going toward the top of the tapestry and the real faces of the figures keep being revealed, as seen in Picture 3. Almost at the top, there's a scene of a protest where it shows pro-Mosaddegh students protesting against his isolation. One of the protesters has a book for a head and is wearing modern, Western-style clothes, jeans and a shirt. Above the wall, other people are wearing traditional Iranian cloth, representing their conservative stance, and they are holding books like hammers to hit people with. This scene shows the struggle between Mosaddegh's followers who were well-educated modern people, and the old traditional conservative scholars who were against modernity. Finally, Mosaddegh's soul reaches his body, the cat disappears and Mosaddegh ascends into the clouds, symbolizing his demise. As the creators justify the order of the events in the game, they mention: "Moving from a tragic day to a triumphant one – while providing the player with increasing violent influence – emulates the player's realization that they are not an incidental character in this story, but an essential catalyst of the tragedy" (Brinson & ValaNejad, 2011). When players discover the United States' direct involvement in Mossadegh's downfall, they realize that the cat's actions are symbolic of a manipulative America. The players, though they may feel secure in their magic circle, might find that their connection to the subject is deeper than anticipated, even beyond the game. *The Cat and the Coup* is not merely about Mohammed Mossadegh; it also explores the American player's relationship with him, revealing connections that may have been previously unrecognized.

Picture 3: Mosaddegh is lying dead on the rising oil in the game The Cat and the Coup[1]
Source: the author's screenshot from the game The Cat and the Coup (Brinson & ValaNejad, 2011)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the game *The Cat and the Coup* as a form of digital vernacular, presents a narrative that aligns with local Iranian consensus about the events leading to the coup in the 1950s. By following Mohammad Mosaddegh through the game, players discover his national significance, particularly for the nationalization of the oil industry. The game showcases unique design choices, such as using a cat as the main playable character, to give voice to Iranians as subalterns, presenting a counternarrative of a major event in Iranian history. As a piece that is distinctly and deliberately transcultural, the game scarcely uses any specific language; all the visual elements mediate between traditional Persian symbolism and those that are widely accepted internationally.

This paper, rooted in regional game studies and employing a close reading methodology, analysed the game's visual and narrative elements, including its Persian miniature-inspired aesthetic, incorporation of geometric shapes, symbolic objects like the mechanical clock, and the use of anthropomorphic animals in storytelling. These choices not only honour Iranian culture but also serve to create distinct visuals. The game manages to establish an immediate connection with players, particularly international ones, and promotes a better understanding of the cultural context surrounding the events.

By employing a postmodern pastiche, blending different artistic styles and narrative techniques, the game also creates a unique form of storytelling. The narrative invites players to reflect on the implications of colonialism and the subaltern voice within the medium specific features of video games.

The six stages of the game were scrutinized, with particular attention to the role of the cat as the playable character in delivering a subversive narrative. Each stage of the game presents a different aspect of Mosaddegh's life and the forces that conspired against him. The cat's missions are all symbolic, reminding Western players that they, as western powers, control the cat representing Iran, and that they are using the cat to weaken the nation's future.

The game manages to portray a more accurate version of Iran and its culture due to its artistic endeavour, and serves as a significant source of inspiration for aspiring game developers with a similar vision.

1 Remark by the author: Real images of the figures are substituted.

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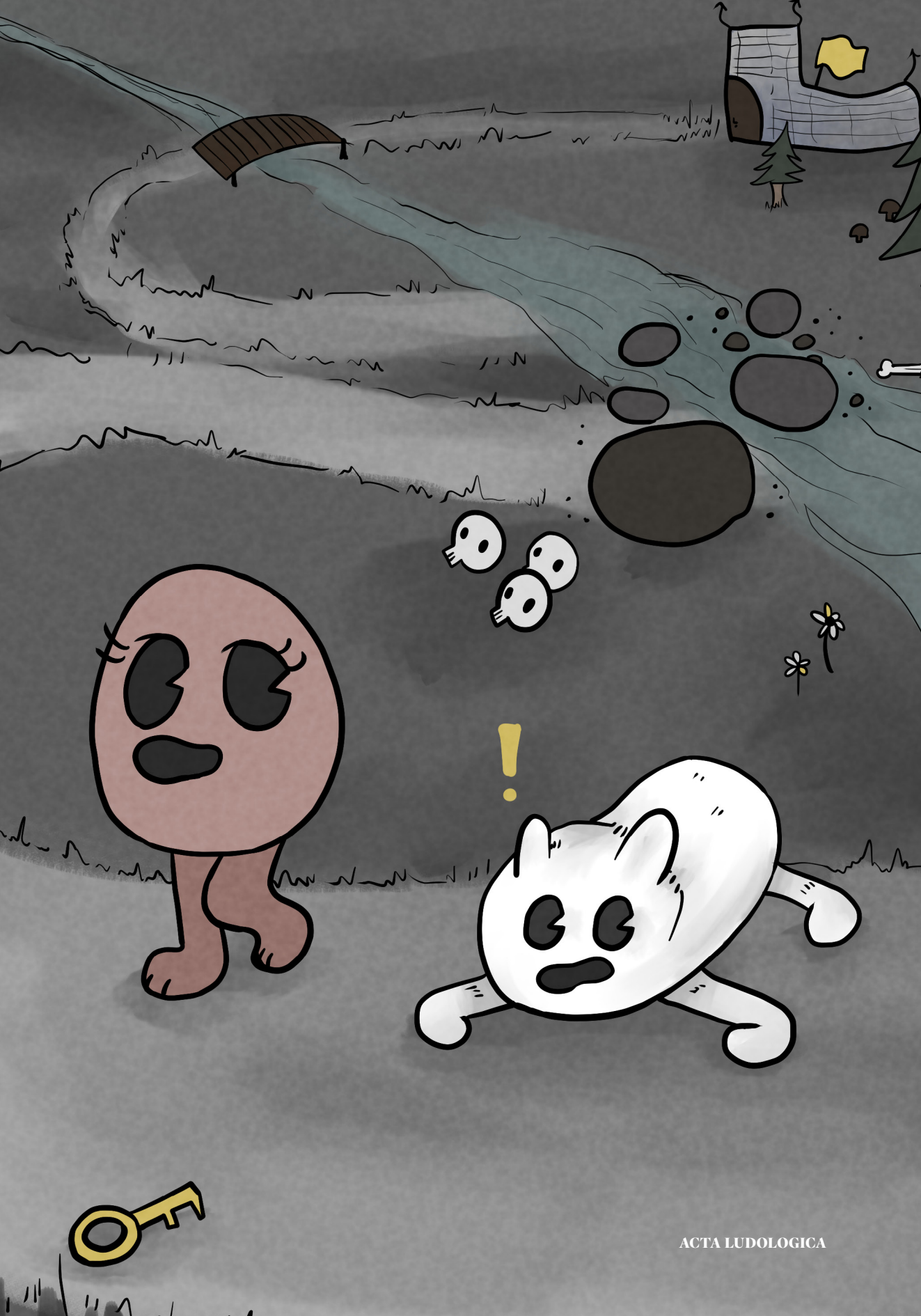

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A Wordless World: The Circulation of Affects in *Journey*

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ABSTRACT:
This article explores the communicative possibilities in the third-person walker *Journey* by Sony Computer Entertainment, which eschews verbal communication between player and game, and does not offer a channel for metagame interactions between players, despite the creators' claim to provide entertainment that inspires human connection worldwide. The game has been praised for its innovative use of the online multiplayer option that only allows for chance meetings and a very limited repertoire of oral communication, leaving room for experimentation in a world lacking human language but rich in ambient sound beds. Although minimalist regarding player-initiated communication, *Journey* provides an exceptional atmospheric experience due to its Grammy-nominated and BAFTA Games Awards winning musical score, which foregrounds the affective potential of digital games. The soundscape encourages players from all over the world to travel together and share an adventure not only modelled on Campbell's 'the hero's journey' but also on Everyman's. The decade-long continued interest in the game allows the article to focus on the circulation of affects involving the creators, the non-diegetic interpersonal communication between players, and the formation of a uniquely positive and supportive online fandom, which remains, in turn, an inspiration for the creators.

KEY WORDS:
affect theory, digital games, game studies, immersion, *Journey*, third-person walker, Zen games.

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Introduction

> Experience the wonder in this anonymous adventure where you travel on a life's passage, with the chance to connect with companions along the way. (Journey, n.d.-b)

Upon release, *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012), from the independent developer thatgamecompany, was hailed as an innovative art game, scoring over one hundred industry and media awards over the years, of which the five awards at the BAFTA Games Awards[1] and the first Grammy nomination for a digital game in the category Best Score Soundtrack for Visual Media ("Austin Wintory", n.d.) drew attention to it beyond the gaming community. The Original Score and Audio Achievement BAFTAs, coupled with the award for Best Game Design, stand witness to the impact that the lack of language and the prominent role of music had on players, justifying a closer look at a more than a decade-old game. Although removing language, the most versatile channel of human communication, may seem counterintuitive for a game that aims to foster human connection worldwide, several interviews with game designer Jenova Chen attested to the fact that this

1 Remark by the author: *Journey* won in five categories at the BAFTA Games Awards 2013, namely Artistic Achievement, Online – Multiplayer, Audio Achievement, Original Music, Game Design, and earned nominations in Game Innovation and Best Game categories ("British Academy Games Awards", 2013).

goal acts as the organizing principle of the whole game. Talking with Ohanessian (2012), Chen clarified that he intentionally tried to avoid the usual feelings evoked by competition and winning, on which many games and sports are based:

> there is actually a whole spectrum of feeling that games are capable of creating, but not a lot of them are on the market. And we wanted to ... extend the depth and the width of the emotional spectrum that games can communicate ... I started to realize there is an emotion missing in the modern society, and of course missing in the online console games. *It is the feeling of not knowing, a sense of wonder, a sense of awe, at the fact that you don't understand, at the fact that you are so small and you are not empowered* [emphasis added]. And so our focus for *Journey* was to make the player feel small and to feel wonder, so when they run into each other in an online environment, rather than thinking about how am I supposed to use my gun on the other player, we wanted them *to feel a connection to another player* [emphasis added]. (Ohanessian, 2012, paras. 2, 4)

In contrast with the ever-popular online first-person shooters (FPS), which, according to Chen, focus on freedom and empowerment (Ohanessian, 2012), *Journey* achieves a sense of awe and lack of empowerment partly by not providing instructions or a map of the world for the player to orient themselves, there is no scoreboard, no loot to pick up, and no options at all to personalize one's avatar. The quote above also emphasises that the game's main aim is to evoke feelings, including some that are specific to the interactive medium of digital games.

The past decade has brought far more variety to both the affects that digital games set out to convey[2] and research linking *affect theory* and game studies, which continues to shed light on the complexity of the medium. Yet, the perception of the matter is very slow to change: Hayot (2021) still declares that digital games in general are hampered by the structural constraint of the need to win, making it "difficult for games to fully represent, as can novels and films, the full emotional and social range of human life" (p. 184). These views are contested by in-depth research, such as Anable's (2018), which constitutes the framework for the analysis of digital games as affective systems on which this paper relies. The broadest definition of affect "as the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected by one another" allows for the joining together of "bodies human and nonhuman, organic and machine, material and conceptual" (Paasonen, 2018, p. 283) and led to the theorization of *networked affect* in new media studies. This notion encompasses the medium-specific interconnections that Paasonen (2018) sums up as "the circulation and oscillation of intensity in the framework of online communication that involves a plethora of actors, ... users, more-or-less emergent collective bodies, human and non-human and thus also devices, platforms, applications, interfaces, companies, files and threads" (p. 283). Anable (2018), who posits digital games as affective systems, details in the following concise list the various actors and 'forms of relation' that typically affect each other in digital games. When opening a digital game program, the circulation of affect starts via the player's relations

> to the game's aesthetic and narrative properties, the computational operations of the software, the mechanical and material properties of the hardware on which we play the game, ideas of leisure and play, ideas of labor, our bodies, other players, and the whole host of fraught cultural meanings and implications that circulate around video games. (Anable, 2018, p. xii)

2 Remark by the author: See some examples covering a variety of digital game genres: *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios, 2013), *Depression Quest* (The Quinnspiracy & Lindsey, 2013), *Orwell: Ignorance is Strength* (Osmotic Studios, 2018), *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* (Dim Bulb Games & Serenity Forge, 2018), *Neo Cab* (Chance Agency, 2019), *The Longing* (Studio Seufz, 2020), *The Life and Suffering of Sir Brante* (Sever, 2021), *Twelve Minutes* (António, 2021), *Venba* (Visai Games, 2023).

In order to make sense of the emotions and feelings a game aims to evoke, the place occupied by digital games in the cultural imaginary must be borne in mind, as they engage and entangle players "in a circuit of feeling between their computational systems and the broader systems with which they interface: ideology, narrative, aesthetics, and flesh" (Anable, 2018, p. xii). Due to the human-technology assemblage created at such times, Anable (2018) argues that digital games can be regarded as expressions of the new affects called to life by the technosocial conditions of the 21st century, which Chen also approached from the perspective of affects circulating while playing: "We really wanted to have a real social experience. We talk about social games today, but most people think social games are just games on Facebook. But really, social means emotional exchange between people" (Ohanessian, 2012, para. 5), in this case made possible via an online multiplayer game. The initially formed fan groups, forums, and the more recently established communities on Discord and Steam attest to the game's enduring social appeal even twelve years after its release, and provide ample material for a case study that also investigates less immediately observable affects of digital games: the types that may play out over several years. The circulation of affects will be approached by means of shedding light on the genre-specific emotional impact of *Journey*, the components of the in-game affects of presence and connection experienced by the players and then will extend to discussing how in-game affects transfer to the real world of both players and creators.

Genre, Atmosphere and Affect

The fact that feelings evoked by and associated with digital games depend on the genre to a considerable extent is hardly surprising, given that audiences partly extrapolate based on the familiar generic conventions of film and television, and many developers rely on the very same conventions to reach audiences. The difference in affective impact between old and interactive new media has been one of the most widely discussed issues of the new millennium, usually fuelled by fears of addiction and social isolation, as well as the ever-present allegation that digital games are responsible for aggressive behaviour. In contrast, Chen set out to create a game

> where people felt they are connected with each other, to show the positive side of humanity in them. A lot of games today have a list of quests, places to go, items to collect and rewards to receive... We just ignore each other. So in order to make players care about each other, we have to remove their power, and remove their tasks. (Smith, 2012, para. 7)

The appearance of new digital game genres has definitely helped counter the one-dimensional, more often than not negative public perception: as pointed out by Penabella (2015), in the first half of the 2010s, *walking simulators*, for instance, were a direct response to FPS games, mostly held guilty of the charges above. He recommends *first-person walker* to avoid the condescension he feels is inherent in the term walking simulator, because it "misattributes the act of walking as a perfunctory, emotionless action to be simulated rather than identify these games' treatment of it as a complex and meaningful form of expression" (para. 5). While *Journey* shares some characteristics with the category of platform games, if played as one, it is neither challenging, nor very satisfying, as attested by reviewers who rushed through in one and a half hours and subsequently complained about the game being insubstantial. The avatar's limited capabilities and the crossing of

vast expanses definitely remind one of Penabella's (2015) description of the first-person walker: "stripped down of complex gameplay mechanics in favor of decelerated movement and the basic act of seeing" (para. 2), consequently "encouraging a contemplative, participatory mindset over guided directness" (para. 5).

While the term walking simulator persists and has a secure place in common parlance – though it continued to be contested for several reasons (see Juul, 2018; Muscat, 2018) –Penabella's (2015) claim that these games act as an "entrance towards sensations and experiences often overlooked" (para. 10) is echoed by Juul (2018), who draws attention to the fact that they not only limit interaction with the game world but also reduce the player's feeling of responsibility for the outcome. A few years later, van Dam (2022) already takes the genre's existence for granted and focuses instead on the affective potential of first-person walkers, underscoring the "particular kinds of pleasure that differ from the addictive thrill that is often associated with videogames" (para. 9) and contends that they foster player reflexivity both towards the game and the real-life world, hinting at the transfer of in-game affects beyond the gameworld. This aspect is well documented by Flanagan (2021), who demonstrates that digital games with specific narrative mechanics have the potential to shift beliefs and biases.

Based on the continued academic interest in the player experience provided by walking simulators, Andiloro's (2023) approach to the genre is a particularly appropriate lens to scrutinize the affective experience of players of *Journey*. Andiloro proposes an experiential perspective, "attentive to the embodied and affective lived-experience of players," which he captures with the term *atmosphere*, defined as "a wholistic [*sic*] affective and embodied experience arising in-between player and videogame" (p. 560). The idea of genres as meaning-making frameworks is not new, however, bringing their emotional impact to the forefront is a result of the affective turn and "marks a shift in thought in critical theory through an exploration of the complex interrelations of discursive practices, the human body, social and cultural forces, and individually experienced but historically situated affects and emotions" (Zembylas, 2021, para. 1). Andiloro (2023) convincingly argues that "genre texts are, to an extent, designed to achieve a certain embodied emotion … they afford specific types of embodied experiences" (p. 561), and points out that current conceptualizations of atmosphere bring together effect and spatiality to denote the assemblage of people and things present in a space.

The above are the exact same components that Chen lists in layman's terms in the previously quoted interview, but his choice to make a multi-player walking simulator expands the affective possibilities offered by the genre. It is also important to note that *Journey* diverges from first-person walkers that "privilege the habitation of a singular consciousness in a cerebral space, often filtering our experience of the world through solipsistic voiceover narration" (Penabella, 2015, para. 9). By eschewing verbal input, the game removes the limitations that narration would pose on the player's perception of their surroundings, and the same stands for abandoning the POV perspective: in third-person walkers the game world is experienced less passively, as detailed by Swain (2013), who uses *Journey* and *Bientôt l'été* (Tale of Tales, 2012) to tease out the characteristics of the then-new subgenre. The third-person perspective, in his view, shifts the focus from passively observing the world to the dynamics of traversing space and the significance of "the avatar's place in relation to the objects around them" (Swain, 2013, para. 5),[3] which also explains the platformer-like elements in *Journey* and is hardly surprising given the game's title.

3 Remark by the author: For an in-depth discussion of the affective potential of a narrative-adventure game that is also a third-person walker, see Bülgözdi (2023).

The other category *Journey* is often placed in is known as *Zen games*. As Navarro-Remesal (2016) summarized, the genre is typified by "the pleasurable, individualistic and relaxing experience, built around an almost complete absence of stress factors and effort demand" (p. 1), pointing out that this conception does not have much to do with the theory and practice of Zen but can be roughly equated to the Western trend of non-religious mindfulness and focus on one's well-being. Regardless of the misnomer, these games are very much based on the experience of flow, the theory of which Chen's (2007) design has embodied since the very beginning, and virtually all of his games fit this label. Navarro-Remesal (2018) cites *Flower* (thatgamecompany, 2009) as one of the first widely advertised games that transformed Zen from the alternative, stress-free gameplay mode available in some earlier games, where scores, time limits, and other obstacles were removed, to become the centre of player experience. Characterized by "a combination of mental flow states and pleasing sensorial inputs" (Navarro-Remesal, 2018, para. 23), the Zen genre's main aim is to affect the player's state of mind by providing immersion without the competitive element, but *Journey* also avoids the level of detachment inherent in the minimalist gameplay of first-person walkers, altogether being more aligned to Zen as a practice of "sensing the present and its constant change" (Navarro-Remesal, 2016, p. 5). Thus Chen's design unites components from two genres that enhance an atmosphere geared towards novel affects leading to immersion, as well as the possibility for more than one individual to be involved in this experience.

The Circulation of Affect in *Journey*

Andiloro's novel definition of genre is based on Cremin's (2016) premise that players actively "compose and liberate affects contained within the game design, actualizing a previously virtual assemblage" (Andiloro, 2023, p. 564). The brief comparison in the previous section demonstrates that the game mechanics and affordances of even third-person walkers are not identical with those of first-person ones, which results in a different foundation for the construction of the atmosphere and the circulation of affect in *Journey*. This is all the more apparent when the multiplayer option is available, though it must be noted that it is not compulsory; Chen emphasizes that the environment does not force cooperation on the players, but if they "choose to cooperate, then that is the real essence of connecting two players" (Smith, 2012, para. 10). Besides the flow experience of Zen games, which Owen (2017) posits as an integral part of immersion in general, he identifies two major medium-specific aspects of how digital games affect players: on the one hand, through the presence of *compelling narratives* to be discovered by the player through their actions, choices, and exploration, and on the other hand, via an *immersive environment* that provides visual, aural, and tactile feedback for the player's actions to unfold. Immersion depends significantly on experiencing the affect of *presence*, that is the feeling of being *live* in a space during the gameplay, heightened by the co-presence of other players (Owen, 2017). Even though it is the immersive environment that is mainly regarded as being responsible for a game's atmosphere, due to the lack of language and the emphasis on the rest of the sonic experience, the player's narrative and sonic engagement take place via a similar process in *Journey*: players are active participants, co-constituting both the narrative and the acoustic ecology, comprised of the game's soundscape, its acoustic environment, and player-generated sound (Grimshaw-Aagaard, 2012), all the more reinforcing the affect of presence.

The circulation of affect, however, is not restricted to presence, happening in the period of active play. Collins (2013) clarifies that cognitive/psychological interactions are constantly present "alongside all other types of interactions in games. These interactions include the conscious or unconscious emotional and cognitive activities that take place before, during, and after gameplay" (p. 9), which draws attention to the fact that digital games affect players in a variety of ways when not actively playing. Collins (2013), in fact posits psychological interactions as the prime mover for all others, which encompass a variety of interactions between the player and the game, and the interpersonal and sociocultural metagame interactions that actually extend beyond the game, thus justifying the inclusion of gamer fan cultures into the charting of the circulation of affect. As the most widely researched aspect of digital games, the narrative elements will be the starting point for the analysis, since the title itself raises the first salient questions: what sort of journey does the player embark on and where does it lead?

Journey contains both embedded and emergent narratives; while traversing the gamespace, first of all, the fall of an ancient civilization takes shape, signalled by mysterious ancient ruins and also conveyed by murals and by white-caped ancestors in cutscenes that are not easy to interpret at first sight, given that they lack any form of verbal information. The completion of the game reveals another layer: the player enacts the archetypal journey of birth, life, and death, followed by rebirth, an aspect that Chen (n.d.) considered important enough to include in the very brief description of *Journey* on his own website. With the cycle automatically restarting after the credits, the player is invited to enter the gameworld again, but this simple narrative pattern is continually personalized by the player's in-game trajectory, exploration, and the chance meetings with other wayfarers, making for a different experience every playthrough.

Michelmore (2021) underscores that the composer's task, beyond composing musical responses to highlight aspects of the gameplay, like the avatar's success or failure, the environment, or the plot, is to "predict and imagine how the player will engage with the game, and create music to reinforce and amplify the emotional journeys they undertake" (p. 69). The affective power of music is implicitly assumed here, but the musical score of the game adds yet another layer: the composer, Austin Wintory consciously aimed at using music as an active story-telling device. More specifically, he named as one of his main inspirations the archetypal narrative widely referred to as the hero's journey (Wintory, 2012a, 2012b, 2018), originally espoused by Campbell (1949).[4] Several song titles on the soundtrack are identical to the stages specified by Campbell, while others closely correspond in meaning as indicated by the titles (Table 1), but at the same time, the score also outlines Everyman's journey,[5] which include birth, death, and rebirth beyond the elements related to the hero's adventures. The double nature of the narrative coded into the song titles is also supported by the fact that the avatars are not outstanding heroes, but are all nameless and identical in appearance, except for the small pixel-art style glowing symbol on their chest. The plain red cloak receives a line of new pattern after completing the first three runs, then, when the player collects all the glowing symbols in the game, they receive the option to wear a white cape. These visuals only reveal how much experience a player has, there is no other differentiation between the wayfarers.

4 Remark by the author: It is a highly influential work of comparative mythology, whose inherent Eurocentric bias was since recognized. A variety of shortened versions of Campbell's (1949) elaborate, seventeen-stage trajectory are in circulation and are often mentioned in analyses of well-known pop culture protagonists, like Luke Skywalker from the *Star Wars* saga.

5 Remark by the author: The term Everyman, coming to denote all humans, derives from the eponymous 15th-century English morality play on death and the fate of the human soul, in which the protagonist attempts to justify his time on earth (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019).

Table 1: Journey original soundtrack song list

No.	Song titles	Campbell's (1949) stages	Everyman's journey
1	Nascence		Birth
2	The call	The call to adventure, Refusal of the call	
3	First confluence		
4	Second confluence		
5	Threshold	The crossing of the first threshold	
6	Third confluence		
7	The road of trials	The road of trials	
8	Fourth confluence		
9	Temptation	Woman as the temptress	
10	Descent	The belly of the whale	
11	Fifth confluence		
12	Atonement	Atonement with the father	
13	Final confluence		
14	The crossing	The crossing of the return threshold	
15	Reclamation		
16	Nadir		Death
17	Apotheosis	Apotheosis	
18	I was born for this		Rebirth

Source: own processing based on Campbell (1949) and Wintory (2012a)

These seemingly contradictory aspects, the heroic and the everyday are also present in the only song that has lyrics, titled "I was born for this" (No. 18), though virtually no one would be able to understand it without doing some research, as illustrated by Table 2. The song is performed in five languages, the first three of which are dead, with the quotes harkening back to the heroes of old: Aeneas, the legendary forefather of the Roman people, Beowulf, the monster-slayer, and the greatest Greek hero of the Trojan War, Achilles. The French sentences are attributed to Joan of Arc, a peasant girl turned military leader and uttered during her trial preceding her execution for heresy, whose fate demonstrates that ordinary people are capable of heroic deeds. The Japanese haiku,[6] however, stands apart, since it describes the individual's life journey, as explained by Asano (2017): it "reflects many key Buddhist elements with one of the most prominent being the feeling of loneliness. We are all alone on this path through life which eventually leads to death (autumn eve)" (para. 7). Even though Wintory's (2019) text commentary accompanying the soundtrack identifies the quotes as inspired by the hero's journey, a closer look reveals that they do not elevate feats of heroism above the drudgery of everyday life. In my view, the quotes ensure the two perspectives intertwine in the score, implying the heroic aspects of accomplishing a life's journey, as well as presenting heroes not as distant figures

6 Remark by the author: Several English translations are available. The rough translation in the Table 2 is a close approximation of the one by R. H. Blyth: "Along this road / Goes no one, / This autumn eve" (Asano, 2017, para. 7).

of perfection, but as individuals who need to cope with life's ordinary aspects and are exposed to similar affects as all humans. This is also supported by Wintory's (2012b) choice to subtly alter the pitch of the two musical notes the avatar can emit as the game progresses. His decision to change them from an animal-like chirp to a lower, more human-like sound[7] brings to mind the universal learning process that forms the basis of every individual's socialization through interaction and communication.

Table 2: Lyrics of the final song of Journey, "I was born for this", playing during the credits and parallel rebirth

Original text	Phonetic transcription	Translation	Language	Source
Stat Sua cuique dies Stat Sua cuique dies		To each his day is given To each his day is given	Latin	*The Aeneid* (Book X, verse 467)
Maél is mé tó féran		'Tis time that I fare from you	Old English	*Beowulf* (verse 316)
Ὤλετο μέν μοι νόστος Ὤλετο μέν μοι νόστος	Oleto men mi nostos Oleto men mi nostos	Lost is my homecoming Lost is my homecoming	Homeric Greek	*The Iliad* (Scroll IX, verse 415)
C'est pour cela que je suis née		I was born for this	French	Attributed to Joan of Arc
此道や 行く人なしに 此道や 秋の暮	Kono michi ya Yuku hito nashi ni Kono michi ya Aki no kure	On this road Goes no one On this road Autumn sunset	Japanese	Matsuo Bashō
C'est pour cela que je suis née Ne me plaignez pas C'est pour cela que je suis née		I was born for this Do not pity me I was born for this	French	Attributed to Joan of Arc

Source: own processing based on "I was born for this" (2018)

Although figuring out the embedded narratives based on the visual and musical clues can lead to exciting revelations, neither these, nor the platformer aspect explain why many players return to *Journey* again and again. Based on the countless reviews and thank you posts, it is the music and the personal experiences with randomly paired-up unknown wayfarers that keeps them hooked, consequently broadening the *Encyclopedia of video games*' placement of *Journey*, along with the rest of thatgamecompany's output, under the heading "spirituality" (Hayse, 2021), and demonstrating that Chen's main objective to connect people has been successfully put into practice. These affective aspects, which contribute immensely to the atmosphere, need to be analysed in detail to tease out more about the circulation of affect in the game.

Affect and Communication

As noted earlier, the other major factor impacting players besides the narrative is the immersive environment digital games create, but in *Journey,* player immersion based on attachment to unique avatars is out of the question due to the completely identical and nameless cloaked wayfarers. This aspect, too, is the exact opposite of the affective potential

7 Remark by the author: Timeframe 29:02–30:11.

of another highly popular genre: in MMORPGs, immersion is also facilitated by the appeal of and the strong cognitive-affective bond between players and the highly customizable avatars they may spend hundreds of hours with, as detailed by Wilde (2024). The lack of such an avatar, however, allows wayfarers to focus on engagement with the rest of the game. Even though this game has player interaction at its centre, *Journey* offers very limited means to communicate compared to most online multiplayer games: no text or voice chat is available, and every avatar can only emit the same two musical notes, whose volume and frequency they can slightly modulate. In essence, it feels like trying to communicate with someone whose language is absolutely unknown, and what is more, facial expressions and hand gestures are also unavailable, given the avatars' body structure. With the exception of the first and last levels, two players can connect when sufficiently close to each other, then may use chirps and infinite combinations of the simple actions available, like jumps, flying, sitting down and standing up, or running away and returning to indicate which way they would like to go, to get their companion to follow them. Staying close to one's companion is encouraged by game mechanics until players find all the symbols and can equip the self-charging white cloak, but benefitting more than occasionally from recharging each other's energy in very close proximity is easier said than done. For instance, flying long distances side-by-side could be theoretically accomplished, but it would take a lot of coordination and practice.[8] The connection, however, can be severed if players stray too far from their companions or do not move on to the next level at the same time, underscoring the effort necessary to maintain the relationship, yet again contrasting the game with more typical player versus player scenarios of conflict. Relying on the affect of presence stemming from the experience of *virtual liveness* in multiplayer mode for immersion is not that straightforward, once language, the most versatile means of communication is removed. Getting across to people becomes a much more demanding task, therefore, players have to be really committed to making the connection Chen wished to set the stage for. This may also be the reason why only two players and not more can connect at the same time: the interpretation of a combination of sounds and the whole-body motion of an avatar is far from straightforward, and in a group this would only lead to missed cues and ensuing frustration.

Interactivity in games ensures that music and sound in general have a far more complex role than simply setting the mood or characterisation, both typical of cinema, because, as Kamp (2014) points out, in games "what we hear and how we listen is determined by our goals and intentions, and our relation to our environment" (p. 235). While the whole score was composed with utmost care to convey the mood and emotions Chen envisioned, as emphasized in the composer's commentary (Wintory, 2019), it is also responsible for providing the foundation for immersion, as claimed by Collins (2013). The diegetic sounds emitted by the player are integral to their sense of immersion and telepresence, owing to the fact that this process is analogous to real-life sonic interactions: they extend one's sense of self into the virtual world (Collins, 2013). This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that players contribute to digital game soundscapes by interacting with the game world, for instance, with sounds as simple as an avatar's footsteps. *Journey* surpasses this by rewarding travelling with a companion via altering the soundtrack to make the effort worthwhile: when wayfarers pair up, the score becomes fuller, with new instruments added, the music swells and has more depth, turning the time spent together into an even more outstanding sonic experience. Thus, immersion is reinforced on two levels: players not only co-create their own narrative during their joint travels, but also literally enhance the musical score, changing the whole soundscape.

8 Remark by the author: Beyond the basic actions described above players have discovered that a variety of practice-intensive tricks, like sliding or fancy flying can be performed, as described under the "Expert mode" entry in Journey Wiki at Fandom (see "Expert mode", 2024).

This is only achievable if players do communicate despite the constraints placed on them, but maintaining this connection takes patience and ingenuity. Metagame interactions without a shared language are unable to convey much information, consequently, the affective aspect of communication is foregrounded instead of meaning-making. Under these circumstances players have to get creative: for instance, when reaching the mountain, some used the snow as their canvas to write a few words or draw a heart with their tracks, and a plethora of comments and fan artwork reflect the supportive attitude of companions. To this day, the vast majority of reviewers praises the atmosphere and the connection they felt to their companions,[9] attesting that the game has accomplished its goal and confirming Andiloro's (2023) claim: many players, such as Jess (2024), whose well-articulated review on Steam is reproduced below, describe their journey first and foremost as an affective and embodied experience:

> Somehow, without a single word, Journey provided the most profoundly emotional gaming experience of my life. I went in about as blind as I could for a game that came out over a decade ago, and that's absolutely the way the first play through should be. I found this to be a game where I often forgot I had a controller in my hands, multiple times IRL distractions broke my concentration and made me realize I was just witnessing the game with my jaw dropped, mouth open. As my final companion and I pushed through the last act, I realized I was actually crying. Just weeping as I pushed the joystick forward. There was a shocking level of catharsis for me, and I absolutely never expected that from this experience. (Jess, 2024, para. 1)

Players are also impressed by how well the music is matched to the game world and the narrative, the complexity of which is explained by music scholar Grasso (2020), who investigates how music and narrative can enhance each other in digital games. She coined the concept of *ludomusical narrativity* to denote "the potential for music to shape *ludic* actions of play to fit *narrative* affects of story", creating affective zones, defined as "spaces in which potentials for meaning and perception are shaped by these musical differences" (p. 127). Her analysis of *Journey* also points to how the affects experienced in-game are linked to the real world, because the affective zone, when paired up with a companion, may expand to virtually "crossing continents to create a connection" (p. 96).

The only information about companions can be gleaned during the credits: for a brief period, the PlayStation tag or the Steam profile name of the players one met shows up on the "Companions met along the way" screen. The powerful affective responses elicited by the in-game connection with random strangers are memorialized in thank-you threads identifying the player either by the places visited together and joint activities, or the profile name from the credits, the latter of which can entail real-life communication. It is the emergent narratives blossoming from chance meetings that bring players back again and again, and spark both diegetic and non-diegetic communication. The lack of verbal communication in the game causes players to experiment with combinations of sound and motion to invite companions to follow; more experienced players help newbies and pass down knowledge of secret places and beautiful views, how to find glitches and how to reach the vast out-of-bounds areas that were not supposed to be accessible to players.[10] Another form of very popular metagame interaction is just hanging out with a companion: many players report engaging in playing hide-and-seek and tag, flying together, playing

9 Remark by the author: Based on the summary of the *Journey*'s most helpful reviews in the past 30 days on Steam as of August 24, 2024 ("Journey", n.d.-a).

10 Remark by the author: Out-of-bounds are "bigger than the normal level and contain beautiful scenery, unexpected dangers, weird objects, rendering glitches and other surprises. The game's art style makes [out-of-bound] exploration a dream-like experience which many players enjoy" ("Out of bounds", 2022, para. 1). See video by Tara's Sky Journey (2019) for visuals of *Journey*'s out-of-bounds.

with cloth creatures, and enjoying the views. In fact, the 'wordless' game design goes beyond Western mindfulness and manages to approximate the purpose of Zen:

> Philosopher Ueda Shizuteru warns that "we only consider real what can be understood through words" (2004), whereas he defends an "infinite openness" that cannot be expressed through language, where one lets go of the self without removing it, a way of accessing reality and the others through a deep, non-personal knowledge. And it is this kind of knowledge, and not calmness or relaxation, what makes Zen be Zen. (Navarro-Remesal, 2016, p. 3)

The lack of verbal communication in the game turned the affective experiences related to flow and virtual liveness into the main means for immersion: the limited metagame communication ensures that the emergent narratives of paired wayfarers are experienced, that is they are seen, heard, and felt as they happen. Consequently, by eschewing chat options, Chen managed to remove a major obstacle from connecting with players from any cultural background, and the anonymity and the uniform appearance of the avatars fosters an unbiased attitude. This is also backed by the multiple sources the architectural style drew upon: to achieve a space "that was exotic, yet familiar; an alien space, with ancient civilization" (Leo, 2012, p. 7) the game operates with a new Eastern-Western mixed structure, an amalgam of ancient Egyptian, Greek, Chinese, and Middle-Eastern architecture.

Furthermore, *Journey* also fulfils another requirement Navarro-Remesal (2016) identifies to be characteristic of games truly inspired by Zen philosophy: they "should affect our relationship with reality, changing the way we see the world and ourselves after we stop playing, illuminating the dependent nature of everything" (p. 11). The powerful affective response to in-game experiences of connection dominates fan art and is transferred to real-life interactions within the fandom, demonstrating the workings of networked affect. The thank-you threads are full of awe, gratefulness, and shared joy, often followed by extra-diegetic communication to set up planned meetings in the game. This process is not that straightforward either, as the cloaked avatars are anonymous, thus, the effort to connect with people is yet again foregrounded, reminding players not to take human connection for granted. The uniquely positive and supportive community that grew around the game is very well showcased by Salenius (2021), whose journey started in 2013. Although disappearing in a world of beautiful visuals and music could be regarded as escapism at first sight, the daily companionship experienced in the game and on the forums, followed by real-life friendships that blossomed after chance meetings, gave Salenius a different perspective on chasing goals largely imposed by society, taught her to focus on life's journey instead of failures, and finally, the impetus to turn her life around while suffering from depression:

> I developed from an inexperienced pupil to a confident and trustworthy teacher. I became a mentor and taught these new journeyers what I had been taught by the ones before me. With that in-game confidence, daily companionship and the positivity of the *Journey* community, I actually started feeling better about myself and about my life outside the game. (Salenius, 2021, paras. 14-15)

In conclusion, the sonic experimentation and unconventional gameplay successfully communicate the positive affective response of the majority of players and their willingness to share the journey, turning the game into a safe haven instead of the often toxic online spaces Chen explicitly had in mind when planning an online multiplayer game (Leo, 2012). It is these affects that spill over into real-world interpersonal and sociocultural interactions, which, in turn are carried over to subsequent journeys, as explained by Salenius (2021). It must be noted though that the circulation of affect in this case is not unidirectional, from developer to game to players, partly owing to the fact that the soundtrack took

on a life of its own beyond the gaming community. Wintory (2015) received invitations to perform the music all over the world with various orchestras and ensembles, which let him experience the game's enthusiastic reception at first hand. He credits his insight into how *Journey* and its score affected individual people with a profound impact on the principle he follows as a composer: since then his main objective is to make something that "people take into their lives" because "it's about them finding meaning through it as a vehicle and enriching their own life in a genuine way" (Wintory, 2015).

Though Wintory seems to be the most vocal among the creators about his experiences regarding the circulation of affects related to *Journey*, he is not the only one: in a recent interview (thatgamecompany, 2024) Chen credits player feedback on his experimental game back in graduate school with encouraging him to focus on instilling positive emotions via games and changing people's lives. He reveals that the over 1,600 emails they received from *Journey* players who wanted to share their stories and insights helped them improve the design of their next game, *Sky: Children of the Light* (thatgamecompany, 2019).[11] Besides fond reminiscences, the volume *The art of Journey* by art director Nava (2012) features more than his own concept art: it also includes a curated section of fan art, which may have served as inspiration for Wintory to use fan art as background visuals for his 2019 commentary on the soundtrack, but his homage to the community has manifested itself on a far more grandiose scale on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the game's release. He rewrote the original score as a symphony for the London Symphony Orchestra, recording and producing the album *Traveler – a Journey symphony* (Wintory, 2022), which he dedicated to the community: "I hope the people who hopefully find the album recognize that it is for them and wouldn't have been possible without them" (Kain, 2022, para. 9).

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11 Remark by the author: Described as a puzzle-adventure game, a peaceful MMO, where one can create enriching memories with other players, this game is another testimony to the long-lasting circulation of affects both in and outside of the game, owning the official Guinness world record for the "Most users in a concert themed metaverse hangout" (10,061) on August 25, 2023 ("Most users in a concert themed", 2023).

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Preparing a Tabletop Role-Playing Game Experiment: Methodological Notes for Studying the Immersion of Tabletop Role-Playing Game Participants

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ABSTRACT:
The study aims to contribute to the research that seeks a better understanding of the language of tabletop role-playing games through the analysis of video recordings of game sessions. In the autumn of 2021, the Tabletop Role-playing Game Research Group at the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the University of Debrecen performed an experiment, the aim of which was to analyse the communication of role-playing participants through video recordings. During the experiment, the research team recorded 38 hours and 47 minutes of video footage of the games played by participants with no previous role-playing experience; a text transcript was made of the recordings, in which different types of utterances were marked with colour codes. In this study, we present the preparation and execution of the experiment, paying special attention to preliminary proposals for similar experiments in the future. The experiment served as a basis of a subsequent quantitative and qualitative analysis, the purpose of which was to make the role-play participants' immersion the subject of a closer examination. It is important to emphasise that this study does not discuss the results of the analysis due to the partial processing of the video recordings. However, it scrutinises the methodological possibility of examining the immersive experience of role-players through their communication.

KEY WORDS:
ergodic media text, focus group discussions, immersion, language, speech type categories, tabletop role-playing game, team psychological safety, video recording.

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Introduction

The scientific study of tabletop role-playing games (hereinafter referred to as TTRPGs) goes back four decades. As early as 1983, Fine's (1983) pioneering work, the *Shared fantasy – Role-playing games as social worlds* laid out the methods by which this interactive media text can be subjected to social scientific investigation. Following Fine's (1983) research, three distinct paradigms for the analysis of TTRPGs have emerged over the past decades: 1) examination of written documents related to TTRPG (rulebooks, fanzines, novels, etc.); 2) examination of TTRPGs through interviews with the participants of the game; 3) examining TTRPGs as a participant observer (either as a player or as a game master). Just as Fine combined these methods in his research, there are also studies today that mix these approaches. A good example of this is the work of Dormans (2006), focussing on the rules of TTRPGs:

> In this article I will examine the gaming element of roleplaying; I will try to expose the role played by dice in these games. In doing this I have drawn on the study of existing texts on roleplaying, the rule-set and descriptions of published roleplaying games, lengthy interviews I conducted with players from different groups and my own experience as a player of these games. (Dormans, 2006, para. 2)

However, it is more typical that authors choose one of these three methods during their research. What these methods have in common is that they do not examine the TTRPG

as an ergodic media text (Aarseth, 1997), but instead they analyse the role-playing culture through intermediary channels. A tabletop role-playing session, similar to a theatre performance, is unrepeatable and not accessible to analysis like a film, book, or comic book. At the same time, in recent years there have been studies that attempted to preserve the unfolding games for later analysis by making video recordings. For example, de los Angeles (2016) based his research on live action role-playing games documented with "point of view (POV) and handheld cameras" (p. 22). This study presents an experiment using a similar method. Its purpose is to present preliminary proposals for similar experiments in the future.

The Tabletop Role-playing Game Research Group at the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the University of Debrecen conducted an experiment in the autumn of 2021. During the experiment, video footage of the university students participating in TTRPGs was recorded, and transcripts were made of these video recordings. From the data collected, the research group set a number of speech type categories based on the transcripts with the aim of analysing the immersion of the participants. In this paper, we present a description of the preparation phase, of how the experiment was conducted and the main methodological considerations of the experiment in addition to the speech type categories that we found typical of the verbal communication of the participants. It is important to emphasise that this paper – due to the partial processing of the experimental material – does not yet discuss the insights gained during the research about the immersion of new role-playing participants.

In the following, we will rely on the work of Zagal and Deterding (2018) to define TTRPGs. In their review of various types of role-playing games, they define the prototypical TTRPG as follows:

- A group of players sits face-to-face around a table to play together (co-located and synchronous);
- Players create, enact, and govern the actions of individual characters in a fictional game world;
- A referee determines the game world, manages and communicates it to the players, and enacts all NPCs;
- Players and referee collaborate towards a shared enjoyable experience;
- The game world, including PCs and NPCs and their actions, are constituted by talk between referee and players, often with supporting props, like character sheets, miniatures, rule books, or maps;
- The game world is usually some form of genre fiction: fantasy, science fiction, horror, etc. or a mixture thereof;
- Attempted PC actions are limited by the imagination of players;
- The abilities of characters and the outcomes of their actions are usually determined by a quantitative-probabilistic rule system, with extensive rules for combat resolution;
- The game is open-ended and can be played over multiple sessions;
- In-game events may be guided along a pre-planned plot through the design of the game world and referee steering or emerge from player initiative;
- Player characters improve over time via systems for progression. (Zagal & Deterding, 2018, p. 31)

From the point of view of the research, the most important part of this detailed definition is the fifth criterion, which considers verbal communication as an essential element of a TTRPG.[1] This aspect of TTRPGs is highlighted by other definitions, Montola (2008), for example, puts it this way: "In tabletop role-playing the game world is defined predominantly

1 Remark by the author: Although there are border areas of TTRPGs without verbal communication (card or text message driven, silent or solo TTRPGs), the prototypical TTRPG is based on verbal communication.

in verbal communication" (p. 24). Although it is possible to imagine a TTRPG where the participants rely exclusively on non-verbal communication, in the fifty-year history of modern role-playing games, the game has been primarily organised around verbal communication. Our research aimed at a better understanding of this special communication situation, as well as whether players' immersion into character can be examined through their utterances.

TTRPG and Immersion

Although recipients of any media text, such as books, movies or comics, can experience immersion, the concept has a privileged position in understanding games – especially TTRPGs. Some researchers consider immersion to be the most essential part and primary goal of role-playing games (Pohjola, 2003; Fine, 1983). While theorists on the subject agree that immersion is a common experience of TTRPGs, the perception of the concept has changed a lot in the last four decades. In the following, we summarise the different approaches and the most controversial areas of the topic, also presenting the model used during the research.

Game reviews (whether about board games, video games or TTRPGs) tend to refer to the state of consciousness experienced during the game overall as immersive. However, it is important to emphasise – and we founded the experiment on this assumption – that games can trigger several types and degrees of immersion depending on their subject matter, game mechanics, goals and components. In recent decades various models have spread, on the one hand, about the extent of immersion, and on the other hand about its quality. Regarding the extent, we find more general divisions, but also taxonomies developed specifically for each type of immersion. For example, Brown and Cairns (2004), distinguish three levels of immersion: *engagement* ("the lowest level of involvement with a game and must occur before any other level"), *engrossment* ("when game features combine in such a way that the gamers' emotions are directly affected by the game") and *total immersion* ("at this point in the scale of immersion the game is the only thing that impacts the gamer's thoughts and feelings") (p. 1297-1300). Turkington (2006) illustrates immersion into character by using a theatrical metaphor, and distinguishes four levels:

> As a marionette, where the player does not inhabit the object, but dances it through the fiction with a directed will ... As a puppet, the player inhabits the object only partially, all decisions are unmitigated by the puppet ... As a mask, the player maintains a distinct identity within the character object, but has established an emotional, often empathic connection with the object ... As a possessing force, the player abandons a personal identity and surrenders to the character object as a goal of play in order to directly, experience the full subjective reality of the character. (Turkington, 2006, paras. 5-8)

Similar descriptions can be found when differentiating between various aspects of immersion too. Therrien (2014), for example, follows Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) in distinguishing three types of immersion: *sensory*, *challenge-based* and *imaginative*. The first type is related to the number of attached sensory organs and the extent of their occupation; the second can be related to the flow experience described by Csíkszentmihályi (1975): its essence lies in optimised challenges; and the third represents the feeling that the recipient experiences by 'transporting' into an imagined world. Another popular theory by Bowman (2018) adapted and applied Calleja's (2011) immersion model to role-playing games, distinguishing between six types of immersion: immersion into activity, immersion

into game, immersion into environment, immersion into narrative, immersion into character and immersion into community. This approach is characterised by a high degree of media awareness, considering the specificities of the TTRPG medium; in addition to the types of immersion, it also takes those factors into account that are responsible for triggering it – therefore, we chose this model to study immersion during the experiment.

Bowman's (2018) categories not only describe types of immersion, but also direct attention to the game components responsible for triggering different kinds of immersions. Although it may seem self-evident that a speech containing in-game events elaborated in detail and effectively presented by the game master can help the participants immerse themselves into the narrative, or that printed and digital maps can be responsible for immersion into environment, in fact – since the various immersions overlap during a game session – a single game component can be suitable for triggering several types of immersion.

During the experiment conducted in the autumn of 2021, we based the examination of player immersion on the insight that the immersion of the participants into character can be closely related to their verbal communication during the game. In order to experience immersion into character during TTRPGs, it is necessary for the players to identify themselves as much as possible with the character played in the diegetic world. The identification is presumably manifested in the player's verbal communication. Based on the analysis of the text transcripts made from the recordings of the game occasions, we determined eight types of speech of the participants, of which we identified in-character utterances as signs of immersion into character. During the analysis, we focused on whether there was a change in the participants' speaking in character during one game, as well as during successive games. We were also interested in which game components could help the participants speak in character. In the focus group discussions that followed the experiment, the participants reported that they had also experienced other types of immersion during gaming sessions in addition to immersion into character (e.g. immersion into narrative, into game or into community), however, we did not see their verbal communication as suitable for their identification, so we did not examine them. For similar reasons, we rejected the examination of the degree of immersion among the participants.

Preparation of the Research

The primary goal of the research was to examine whether the players' immersion into character can be analysed through the verbal communication of participants with no previous primary TTRPG experience during the game. We also paid special attention to whether it is possible to identify game elements that are more suitable than others to induce immersion into character.

The experiment conducted for the purpose of the research consisted of four stages: 1) selecting the students participating in the experiment, 2) preparing the selected students for the experiment, 3) conducting TTRPG sessions, 4) and finally, a short discussion of the players' experiences in focus groups after the last experimental session. We recorded audio and video footage of the second, third and fourth experimental stages for subsequent analysis.

Before the game sessions, we considered the environmental factors that could make immersion into character difficult and during the designing phase of the experiment, we tried to reduce them. In TTRPGs, players can identify with an imagined character and, to a greater or lesser extent, shape the chosen character through their behaviour during the game.

> In some groups the players may actually stay "in character" during the whole session: they act and speak like their characters the whole time, sometimes even changing their voices, adopting fake accents and wearing costumes. Most groups mix "in-character" and "out-of-character" conversation, seamlessly switching from one mode to the other, or staying "out of character" the whole time. (Dormans, 2006, para. 12)

Shaping the character is a form of behaviour different from the everyday attitude of the players – many environmental elements can help or hinder the realisation of this. One of the biggest obstacles can certainly be the feeling of alienation. In order to reduce this, when preparing the experiment, we strove to create an environment as homely as possible for the participants. The goal was to achieve a state of team psychological safety, which – according to Edmondson (1999) – "is defined as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (p. 354).

Although, prior to conducting the experiment, informal discussions with the students of the Communication and Media Studies master program made it clear that another experiment could also be implemented in which we would involve students with more tabletop role-playing experience, ultimately we decided to design the experiment for participants with no prior tabletop role-playing experience. We based our decision on the assumption that, for routine players, a media environment different from the usual one – mainly the constant presence of a camera, microphone and research assistant – would have a stronger influence on their verbal and non-verbal communication than in the case of new players. Routine players associate the experience of tabletop role-playing primarily with a closed, private space, which – as Huizinga (1949) put it – functions as a kind of "magic circle", "the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" (p. 28). The transformation of this private space can strongly influence their behaviour.

> Role-playing language is different from everyday language, because the worlds created in role-play are not merely a reflection or extension of everyday life; they are fictional. The essence of role-playing lies in the endeavour to be someone else, and/or at another place, and/or at another time, and quite often that necessitates a simulation of a world very different from the everyday one. (Ilieva, 2013, p. 28)

We assume that the effect of the media environment created in the experiment for new players is – although by no means negligible – smaller than in the case of regular players: for participants with no previous gaming experience, the environment of the experiment becomes a familiar one. After the final game sessions, the majority of the participants in the focus group discussions reported that they could easily ignore the presence of the technical apparatus. For example: "Several times I noticed that the camera was almost facing me, but it was not disturbing at all" (ASZJK-12]);[2] "I wasn't really bothered by the camera at all" (ASZJK-14); "I completely forgot about such technical devices, both the microphone and the camera ceased to exist for me halfway through the first time. The only thing that bothered me was ... that sometimes you had to push them like that, and it was a bit distracting" (ASZJK-15).

Also, in order to achieve a state of team psychological safety, we decided to select participants for the experiment exclusively from a single department and a single year of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Debrecen. Otherwise, by involving students from several domestic universities, several majors or several cohorts, there would have been a risk that the players would show more restrained behaviour towards strangers than if they were playing with friends. For similar reasons, we decided to exclude first-year students

2 Remark by the author: In order to anonymize the participants of the experiment, we provided the players with a unique identifier, which follows the ASZJK-'number' pattern.

from the experiment: in the case of students who spent at least one year in the university environment, there was a higher chance of forming groups of close friends and acquaintances than among freshmen. When designing the research, it was considered that the role of game master should be taken on by an instructor or a person not affiliated with the university in any way. Being aware that both solutions can have an alienating effect,[3] we finally decided to involve an instructor. We based this on the assumption that the students selected for the experiment feel more comfortable participating in an adventure performed by a person they already know (even if as an instructor) than in the story of a complete stranger. During the small group discussions following the final game sessions, the majority of the players did not mention the person of the storyteller as a hindering factor; the reactions were mostly about the game master's expertise in the field of tabletop role-playing rather than about them being instructors. For example: "It gave me reassurance that the management of the game was in safe hands. ... It was strange, but I got used to it very quickly" (ASZJK-15); "It didn't really bother me. ... I felt like an equal party within the game" (ASZJK-14); "I felt that I was in a safe environment. If I didn't know something, I felt free to ask" (ASZJK-07); "He [the game master] really got into it himself, and because of that we were able to get into it as well" (ASZJK-03).

Despite all efforts, not all of the alienating circumstances could be eliminated.[4] We must mention the selection of the location. When planning the experiment, it was suggested that it should be carried out at an external location, independent of the university, thus enhancing the impression that they are taking part in a distinctly extracurricular event.[5] Eventually, the availability of the technical apparatus necessary to conduct the experiment did not allow the change of location. During the focus group discussions, the majority judged the experimental site as neutral. For example: "The location itself was neutral for me, I can't imagine what would have been a better location" (ASZJK-07); "In fact, the location was neutral for me, ... it neither added nor took anything away" (ASZJK-14); "We weren't ... in a room where we've been before in classes ... so it wasn't like I was connecting courses to it" (ASZJK-06).

Selection and Preparation of Experiment Participants

Taking the above into account, we finally selected the students participating in the second-year communication and media studies bachelor's program in the autumn of

3 Remark by the author: The involvement of a storyteller not connected to the university can be alienating due to the lack of personal acquaintance, and the involvement of an instructor due to the students meeting a person they know in a different role than they are used to .

4 Remark by the author: We must mention the austerity measures due to the coronavirus pandemic. We did not exclude from the experiment those who, for any reason, did not have a vaccination certificate in the autumn of 2021, but in order to minimise the chance of infection, we made it mandatory for them to use face shields during the experiment. Based on the analysis of the video recordings of the games, it can be concluded that the verbal communication of the players was not significantly affected by wearing a face shield (it did not impair the intelligibility of their speech). However, based on the feedback after the last game, it can be said that wearing the face shield for several hours involved a certain degree of discomfort, but this was evaluated by the participants as an acceptable solution (for example: "This face shield was very good for me .... It is also a hundred times more comfortable than a mask." [ASZJK-03]).

5 Remark by the author: The participants of the experiment completed an optional university course, which, being an obligation, could make it difficult to immerse themselves in the game in any way, but it helped to minimise the number of absences and prevent dropouts. This is proven by the fact that a participant was only absent from the nine games a total of two times.

2021.[6] First, we organised an information session for the groups, where, in addition to sharing with them what they were undertaking by participating in the experiment, we also assessed the ratio of routine tabletop role-players and those who had not yet had prior tabletop role-playing experience. At the end of the information session, we registered the applications for the experiment from students who had no prior experience in playing a TTRPG. Of the seventeen students who applied in this way, fifteen were finally selected for the experiment – afterwards they could register for the university course that accompanied the experiment. We considered that it is ideal for the experiment if the number of groups is the same and the number of individual groups does not exceed five people, so that individual players have sufficient opportunities to express themselves.

As a second step, on September 24, 2021, we held a four-hour training session for the participants of the experiment. During the session, we informed the participants about 1) the schedule of the experiment, 2) the scenario of each experimental session, 3) the specifics of the TTRPG, 4) the most important details of the TTRPG rule system (*Pathfinder Roleplaying Game*) chosen for the experiment, 5) the world serving as the location of the adventure module chosen for the experiment (Golarion / Osirion), 6) the background of the adventure module which was the *Mummy's mask – The half-dead city* (Groves et al., 2014), 7) the characters that can be selected during the experiment, and 8) the starting situation of the adventure. After a theoretical lecture, we tried to deepen the introduction to the TTRPG genre with two short interactive exercises. During the first, the research leader and the research assistants acted out a situation in order to demonstrate how tabletop role-playing actually works. In the second exercise, the participants in the experiment had the opportunity to try out the genre of the TTRPG in three groups led by the research assistants as game masters. During the short test games, the participants could get to know game mechanics such as the description of actions, the narration of the game master, the use of the abilities of the characters, dice rolls and the effect of their results on the adventure. At the same time, we did not want the game with the research leader and the research assistants to serve as a strong model later in the experiment, which is why we designed the time frames to be relatively short (10 minutes).

As an administrative part of the training, we recorded the basic data of the participants and divided the participants into groups, who could then decide with which premade character they would participate in the adventure. The participants were divided into three adventure teams of five. The students were sorted into the groups based on who had worked with the others in previous group projects (e.g. created a podcast together as a course assignment). When forming the groups, we tried to create parties with approximately similar gender composition and prior knowledge of the tabletop role-playing genre. Finally, the composition of the three groups was as follows:

- First group: 3 women, 2 men, number of people with prior knowledge of the tabletop role-playing genre: 1.
- Second group: 3 women, 2 men, number of people with prior knowledge of the tabletop role-playing genre: 2.
- Third group: 4 women, 1 man, number of people with prior knowledge of the tabletop role-playing genre: 1.

6 Remark by the author: Although, on a theoretical level, nothing in the composition of a university year precludes the possibility of students of different ages attending the same year, only young people between the ages of 18 and 20 took part in the experiment.

Conducting the Experiment

As will soon become clear from the following, some of the preparatory operations described in this chapter preceded the selection and training of the participants. Nevertheless, it is still worth discussing them here, because these decisions are more closely related to the implementation of the experiment.

The experimental sessions took place between October 8, 2021, and December 10, 2021, on eight Fridays and one Saturday. During the experiment, the three five-person experimental groups played a TTRPG three times per team. We tried to schedule these occasions in the experimental period in a proportionate fashion with three weeks passing between two sessions of the same group. However, the pacing of the academic year and the individual circumstances of the students did not allow this schedule, so changes were made during the experiment compared to the ideal schedule (Games of the first group: October 8, October 29, November 26.; Games of the second group: October 15, November 20, December 3; Games of the third group: October 22, November 19, December 10).

Bearing in mind that the implementation of a TTRPG is always unique and unrepeatable (the same adventure module cannot be played the same way twice), the experiment was designed by incorporating constant and similar factors. Our goal was to observe patterns regarding immersion into character, which could serve as starting points for a later experiment with more participants. Therefore, the conditions of the three groups were the same in many aspects during the experiment. The players could embody the same five pre-made characters per group (human warrior, half-orc ranger, elf wizard, half-elf rogue, dwarf priest): the ability scores, skills, feats, equipment, and alignment of the characters were the same for each team; the gender, name and appearance of the characters could be chosen by the players.

Players took part in the same pre-made adventure. The adventure had the same background story and starting point (a group of friends visiting the city of Wati in hopes of getting rich, where they participate in a lottery for exploration sites), and the adventure also included milestones that were practically unavoidable for the players (for example: meeting Remus, the mysterious treasure map seller; arrival at the Tomb of Akhentepi; spirit summoning in the trap-equipped corridor). In addition to these, however, because "in a tabletop RPG, there are many points at which the players need to make decisions that affect what happens to their characters in the follow-up" (Weiner, 2018, p. 21), the game of the three groups resulted in vastly different narratives and playthroughs.

During the adventures of the three groups, the research leader as game master narrated the adventure each time. Apart from him and the players, only one research assistant was present in the experimental room, who supervised the operation of the technical apparatus and ensured that the preliminary time frames were adhered to. During the game, the same technical equipment was available every time, the recordings were always taken from the same angle, and the interactive surface of the adventure was always projected onto the same wall surface.

When designing the research, specific attention was paid to choose the right TTRPG rule system. On the one hand, we wanted to choose a system of rules that would ensure a complex game experience for the participants, on the other hand, the time to learn the rules was limited by the fact that the participants in the experiment were taking part in an optional university course. Strongly positive effects of the latter factor can also be discovered, but the motivation to learn the rules was not increased by the fact that the

participants had to utilise the acquired knowledge within a planned time interval.[7] Ultimately, we ended up using a simplified version of the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* rule system published by Paizo Publishing in 2009, which turned out to be a less than ideal choice afterwards: due to its complexity, several of the participants did not show sufficient confidence in their rule expertise up until the final game session of the experiment, and the explanation of the rules made up a significant part of the playing time. For example: "There are so many abilities, modifiers, etc. that even the third time around it was always hard to find them" (ASZJK-13); "The system of rules was quite complex ... and it is not possible to fully understand everything in such a few sessions" (ASZJK-15).

The experimental sessions were based on the same scenario. The participants started the game at 10:00 a.m., took a 10-minute break every 50 minutes, a half-hour lunch break took place from 1:00 p.m., and the game ended at 3:30 p.m. The only cases when we deviated from the strict time schedule was when a break would have interrupted a fight in the game world. We initially assumed that interrupting the fight in these cases would negatively affect the immersion of the participants – a hypothesis which was later confirmed by the players' reflections. Undoubtedly, the time schedule used during the experiment is not how regular TTRPGs are usually played – where, most often, during longer games, the players divide the time they spend in-game and out-of-game – but for the sake of participation rates, we found this solution to be the most suitable. However, it is important to note that breaks were mentioned by several participants as factor hindering the immersive experience. For example: "of course, there was no immersion in the break" (ASZJK-12); "and the break was there, too, that broke the illusion" (ASZJK-15).

Focus Group Discussions

In the week following the last game, focus group discussions took place with the three experimental groups, moderated by two research assistants and the research leader. The main topic of the conversation was the immersive experience of the participants: the analysis of player feedback was not aimed at identifying game components suitable for triggering different types of immersion, but the mapping of whether it is relevant to investigate any kind of immersion in connection with the experiment. During the conversations, we were also interested in whether the decisions made in order to achieve a state of team psychological safety during the preparation of the experiment were effective.

The participants of the conversation reported different degrees of immersive experience, and several of them could also recall specific game episodes. They implied that their experiences can be related to immersion into character. For example: "For me, I think [the most immersive moment] was when I got scared ... I wanted to pay attention and concentrate so much that I completely forgot about it, and I was really scared, so I think that was the moment when I really got into it" (ASZJK-14); "It was much more immersive when we were in the city, so when there were speech-based situations and we talked ... I really forgot about everything there" (ASZJK-09). Mixed feedback was received regarding whether the game components help or hinder immersion. The maps, character and monster representations visually displayed during the game serve as a good example for different judgments about the game components. While some participants attributed great importance to these in creating an immersive experience, others reported the opposite.

7 Remark by the author: Although in theory nothing precluded the participants of the experiment from engaging in tabletop role-playing even after the experiment, the feedback revealed that this activity was not continued after the end of the trial period.

For example: "It was easier to imagine, for example, the wooden puppets, battle, things like that" (ASZJK-07); "Perhaps this was one of the things that made the immersion difficult, because I was watching this as a player, I mean from the outside" (ASZJK-12).

The Speech Type Categories of TTRPGs

We created a text transcript from the 2,327 minutes of video recordings of the experiment conducted in the autumn of 2021, in which we marked eight types of utterances identified during the research with colour codes. Transcription and colour coding prepared a subsequent quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantifying the utterances of the players can help assess the proportion of different types of utterances present in the verbal communication of new TTRPG participants; and whether these ratios change as participants' experience with the game increases (for example, does the rate of discussion of game rules decrease after several playing sessions).[8] The focus of the qualitative analysis was on in-character utterances that show a connection with immersion into character – analysing their context can help identify game components that trigger immersion into character. During the research, we identified eight types of utterances that the participants used:

1. *In-character communication*. Utterances by role-playing game participants that are made by players clearly impersonating their character or by the game master clearly impersonating a non-player character. A reference to the world of the adventure or to the speech situation can help identify this type of utterance. For example: "GM: [impersonating a city guard] 'Good morning, you are the first. The early bird catches the worm, right?'. ASZJK-15: 'That's right, my friend! ... Then don't run into any ghouls'. ASZJK-15: 'Into what?'".
2. *Describing actions*. Utterances that describe an action or event that has been implemented or is intended to be implemented. For example: "ASZJK-15: 'I'll shoot one in the middle of the mirror'. GM: 'Will you take out your longbow?'. ASZJK-15: 'I'll shoot one'. GM: 'You aim and shoot'".
3. *Describing conditions*. Participants' utterances that describe the condition of environmental elements (for example, buildings, streetspace, objects) or a physical state. For example: "GM: 'Imagine a dome-like building covered with all kinds of marbles, greenish, whitish, a bit milky'".
4. *Technical communication*. Utterances that refer to the rules of the game and the abilities of the characters. For example: "ASZJK-12: 'It's just that I have perception'. GM: 'Yes, perception is a skill that everyone has, so that anyone can perceive'".

8 Remark by the author: The quantitative analysis of the recordings will be detailed in a later study. Based on their partial analysis, the following observations can be made: 1) the most dominant speech types of the verbal communication of the players participating in the experiment (except for the game master) in descending order are non-character player communication, ambiguous utterance between non-character player communication and in-character communication, describing actions and technical communication. The most dominant speech types of the verbal communication of the game master participating in the experiment in descending order are non-character player communication, technical communication, describing actions and describing conditions. Based on a partial analysis of the recordings, it can be concluded that the verbal communication of participants with no previous tabletop role-playing experience is more strongly influenced by the genre of the adventure being played (e.g. a socially interactive adventure, exploring and fighting in a dungeon, creating an action plan), rather than the routine gained game-to-game in the field of tabletop role-playing.

5. *Non-character player communication*. The utterances of the participants in which they are clearly not impersonating a character, do not describe an in-game action or event, and do not refer to the game technique. Its purest form is the exchange of information between two players or one player and the game master. We also list here statements that refer to the possibility and planning of an action or event – but not to its realisation or execution. For example: "ASZJK-14: 'I also thought that they are such rich people, maybe they are interested in something about such eternal life'. GM: 'So the assumption is that they might be interested in something like ancient secrets or occult science. You don't know, you don't know that much about the family's history'".
6. *Out-of-the-game communication*. The statements of the participants that clearly refer to events and information outside the game situation. For example: "GM: 'Sorry [ASZJK-15], I have to ask you to put your mobile away'".
7. *Ambiguous utterance between non-character player communication and in-character communication*. In cases when it is not possible to clearly decide whether they belong to the category of non-character player communication or in-character communication. It most often occurs when players are talking to each other, but do not make clear references to either the adventure or the players' world. For example: "ASZJK-07: 'Maybe we'll come back there later, but I think we're halfway to our goal now'. ASZJK-15: 'I think so too. We discussed that…'. ASZJK-07: 'Straight there'".
8. *Ambiguous utterance between describing actions and in-character communication*. The utterances of the participants in which it cannot be clearly decided whether they describe the actions of the characters or make a statement by shaping a character. For example: "ASZJK-12: 'Okay, come on then!'. ASZJK-07: 'I'll go then'". The answer of ASZJK-07 falls into the ambiguous category because it is not clear whether she is answering her partner or describing her actions.

Conclusion

In table role-playing games, the immersion of the participants requires a state of team psychological safety. In the tabletop role-playing experiment conducted at the University of Debrecen in the autumn of 2021, several solutions were aimed at creating an environment that supports the immersive experience of the players. Without control groups, we cannot draw conclusions about whether one solution is more effective than an emerging alternative. Nevertheless, several preliminary proposals for similar experiments in the future can be identified based on the focus group discussions following the experiment:

1. The experiment was designed for participants who had no prior experience with TTRPGs. Our hypothesis was that the media environment of the experiment quickly becomes comfortable for them, since – unlike routine players – they have no previous experience of the activity. During the focus group discussions, the participants reported that they got used to the presence of the technical apparatus in a short time.
2. Due to the accessibility of the technical equipment, the experiment took place at the university. It can be argued that a location independent of the university results in a more relaxed atmosphere, but based on the feedback, the university office was also an acceptable choice, the majority of the participants considered it neutral.

3. The role of the dungeon master was played for the participants by a university instructor . It is possible that with a storyteller, a complete stranger to the players, they would have immersed themselves into character more efficiently than with an instructor. However, based on the feedback, it was not the person of the storytellers but their experience and expertise that was important to the participants – this was uniformly judged positively.
4. Second-year university students were selected for the experiment. The experiment groups were made up of students who had already worked together in their previous university courses. It is possible that the experiment could have been carried out with freshmen as well, but it was hypothesised that having worked together before, the participants would adapt to the role-playing environment more effortlessly.

In retrospect, two solutions proved to be less effective: the chosen TTRPG system and the choice of time frames. In the case of the former, the complexity, and in the case of the latter, the frequency of breaks became a factor hindering immersion. Regarding the ideal time frames, the participants of the experiment formulated a proposal in the focus group discussions: "I would have rather played for two hours at a time, and then we take a break of say half an hour" (ASZJK-09).

The video recordings made during the tabletop role-playing experiment and the method developed for their processing paved the way for a quantitative and qualitative analysis, which can lead to a better understanding of the language of role-playing games. The analysis can help to understand which game components encourage players with no previous primary TTRPG experience to immerse into character, and how this immersion changes over several consecutive play sessions. By examining the context of the participants' in-character utterances, game elements that increase immersion into character can be identified. Although a significant amount of footage of game occasions were recorded during the experiment, due to the small number of participants, the results of the analysis cannot be considered representative in any way, but they can help to describe patterns, which can be verified by a later experiment with a larger number of participants.

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The Transmedial Connection of Tabletop Role-Playing Games and Cosplay in *The Wayward Wanderers* Campaign

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ABSTRACT:
The present paper focuses on the transmedial relationship between cosplay and tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) in a specific case study: the analysis of *The Wayward Wanderers* campaign played online by an international tabletop role-playing team. The purpose of the research is to point out the diversity of cosplay storytelling in social media as well as to study its transmedial characteristics. To achieve this, it is first necessary to clarify the concept and definition of cosplay, tabletop role-playing and transmedia storytelling, and then to introduce the role-playing team as the subject of the analysis, which was founded by cosplayers. The central question of the research is how the narrative of *The Wayward Wanderers* campaign is retold or modified through the character portrayal and cosplay storytelling content created and published by the players on their TikTok accounts. For this research we use content and profile analysing methods: we examine in detail how much cosplay content the cosplayers created with the characters they played in the role-playing campaign, over what period the content was published, what different methods were used to create content (individual or group videos, etc.) and how they relate to the canon role-playing narrative.

KEY WORDS:
cosplay, cultural studies, fan studies, game studies, social media, tabletop role-playing games, transmediality.

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Introduction

Somewhere Bound is an international tabletop role-playing group of eleven people (however in the chosen campaign there are only six players present). Our research focuses on the team's very first campaign, *The Wayward Wanderers* (hereinafter referred to as TWW), and within that the first episode of the campaign, titled "A sea of trouble" (see Somewhere Bound, 2020a). The team plays by the rules of fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (hereinafter referred to as D&D) in a fictional world created by the dungeon master. The group plays online, and they use Twitch to live stream the game sessions, recording them at the same time so that they can upload them later to their YouTube channel. It is important to note that the first live stream episode of the campaign was preceded by a few private sessions (the contents of which we will refer to as the 'prologue'), during which members of the team who were new to tabletop role-playing games (hereinafter referred to as TTRPGs) had the chance to learn the rules of D&D, creating their characters and a basic storyline.

It is also worth mentioning that the members of the team playing this campaign also happen to be cosplay content creators, who are actively cosplaying their characters of the TWW campaign on TikTok.

In this analysis, we study the short video sharing application TikTok from the aspect of transmedia expansion/modification of the TWW campaign. During the research, the main focus is on how the content created with the players' characters relates to the canon narrative

of the campaign, and in what way the events of the prologue appear in them. By canon role-playing narrative, we mean the plots and storylines that game participants have constructed during play sessions. We consider this narrative to be the source text for TWW campaign, which can undergo various changes in players' cosplay storytelling content. We also examine in detail how much cosplay content the players/cosplayers created on an individual level with the characters they played in the campaign (for this task the TikTok playlists were especially useful), over what time period the content was published, what different methods were used to create content and how they relate to the canon role-playing narrative.

In the case of the TWW campaign, we examine the cosplay content related to the role-playing narrative of the five players and the dungeon master, and grouped them according to different categories. We will also partly discuss how the (visual) language used in tabletop role-playing sessions and the language used on TikTok relate to each other. Before proceeding to the actual analysis, it is essential to first clarify how this research defines the terms TTRPGs, cosplaying and transmedia storytelling.

Defining Tabletop Role-Playing Games

A role-playing game (hereinafter referred to as RPG) is a rather complex concept that contains a lot of possibilities for association. Its definition has been continuously developed and shaped in the academic discourse of the last few decades, among others, by sociologist Fine (1983) and ludologist Juul (2003). The umbrella term, as Zagal and Deterding (2018) point out, includes "TRPGs, computer RPGs (CRPGs), (massively) multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPGs), live-action RPGs (LARPs), and more" (p. 19). Although the authors capture the various versions of role-playing from the perspective of the media that convey them, if role-playing is defined as a genre, the listed practices can even be categorized as subgenres. Although there are many types of role-playing through different media, the phenomenon is based on the same principle: „any game which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment" (Lortz, 1979, p. 36). Since role-playing naturally generates some kind of story in almost every case, it is clear from a narrative approach that the player is not a passive recipient of the story but plays an active role in shaping it by controlling a specific character, and even pretending to be them (Bokody, 2002).

TTRPG is a role-playing genre or medium in which, as the name suggests, the players engage in a game while sitting around a table, similar to traditional board games. White et al. (2018) consider TTRPGs to be the common ancestor of all RPG forms. The players create a character that they individually control during the game in a specific (fictional) world, the foundations and rules of which are provided either by a module created by the producer or publisher of the game or designed by the dungeon master or game master. These worlds are usually inspired by sources or genres originating from fiction, fantasy, medieval history, or mythological stories from different cultures (Zagal & Deterding, 2018). TTRPGs are also commonly referred to as pen-and-paper RPGs (see Kabát et al., 2022), as players keep the most important information regarding their characters (such as health, special abilities, equipment, etc.) on a character sheet. Since the abilities of the characters usually have a quantified value (e.g. damage, defence, magic level), and since different actions that directly affect the adventure are carried out by rolling a die, serious calculations are sometimes necessary during the game, for which the character sheet is essential.

In the age of new media, the TTRPG has also been transformed: in many cases, it is the online space that represents the 'table'. It is important to consider the possibility that instead of a transformation, we are actually witnessing the birth of a new role-playing form, medium or subgenre, considering that Zagal and Deterding say that one of the main characteristics of traditional TTRPGs is that „players sit face-to-face around a table to play together (co-located and synchronous)" (Zagal & Deterding, 2018, p. 31). Today, there are many online platforms (websites, applications)[1] which, in terms of their function, are responsible for the virtual extension, development and expansion of TTRPG tools. These online platforms, in addition to instant image and sound transmission, can have dice-rolling and map-making programs, virtual rulebooks and character sheets, with an offer of background music and sound effects, so the complex system of the presence-based RPG is adapted to the online space, thereby providing the opportunity for players who live far away from each other to play together. The virtual space sometimes also fulfils the function of recording or immediate sharing, so the game session can become available to anyone in the form of a live stream or as a recording that can be played back, for example on YouTube.

The members of the role-playing group Somewhere Bound discussed in the study also use a similar technique during their gaming sessions: the group plays in the online space, and instead of specific role-playing platforms, they use Twitch to live stream the game, recording it at the same time so that they can upload it later to their YouTube channel.

Cosplay as a Form of Participatory Culture

Cosplay is a practice where an individual dresses up as a fictional character using a costume and other accessories (e.g. wigs, contact lenses, armour etc.) The character is usually tied to popular culture: films, series, books, comics, and digital games can all be sources of cosplay. However, it is not uncommon for the cosplayer to dress up as an original character: a character they have created themselves, who is not officially included in an already existing media text or canon (Winge, 2006). The subjects of the research invariably cosplay such original characters, since their playing characters in TWW campaign are not parts of any already existing D&D module.

In the international academic sphere, researchers have mostly studied cosplay in relation to the issue of identity, i.e. how the personality of the cosplayer and the character relate to each other (Lamerichs, 2011; Rahman et al., 2012; Bainbridge & Norris, 2013; Scott, 2015). In this study, however, we interpret cosplay as an active component of participatory culture, and as an important tool for content creation.

The concept of participatory culture is associated with Henry Jenkins, who introduced and studied the phenomenon through case studies that were relevant and colourful in the given era (see Jenkins, 1992, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2013). The basic assumption is that the audience and specifically the fans of media texts, while consuming the text, break away from the receptive standards towards which the media industry would direct them, and interpret the texts in a specific and unique way. They also have the capability to extend, correct or rewrite the narratives entirely, depending on their interpretation.

1 Remark by the author: For example, see roll20.net or trpgline.com.

As interpreted by Jenkins (2008), the traditional, passive audience transforms into an active, content-creating agent, and such content can include fanfiction, fanart and cosplay as well.

Conroy (2015) describes the relationship of fans to the original media text by presenting two different kinds of fan communities, called *fandoms*. One is the curative fandom, which typically assumes fans and fan practices that are aimed at preserving the original canon. Fans in this category are usually satisfied with the original narratives of media texts, and their activities do not aim to change them, but rather reinforce them. In contrast, the creative or transformative fandom assumes fans and fan practices that are aimed at rewriting and changing the original canon (Conroy, 2015). Thus, the typical text-rewriting practices of participatory culture, such as fanfiction or fanart, fall into the latter category.

The practice of cosplay is special as it can be a tool for both the curative and the transformative fandom. In the former case, cosplay could be interpreted as an extension of canon media texts, since it primarily strives for fidelity and recognizability at the level of appearance. Creative cosplay content production – photoshoots, skits, cosplay music videos – however, does not always involve changing the canon, as in many cases it is precisely the means of replaying canonical narratives. Cosplay becomes a practice of transformative fandom when the cosplayer introduces some kind of change compared to the original media text or character, for example, changing their appearance or gender (e.g. gender-bend cosplay), and the creative content makes some decisive change in the narrative (e.g. introducing an alternative universe or a non-canonical love story, etc.).

It is important to note that in the present study, the cosplayers themselves are the authors of the original narrative, as in the case of TTRPGs, the players create the story together through conversation. At the same time, their cosplay videos shared on TikTok on the one hand confirm and expand the canon role-playing narrative into another medium, on the other hand, they sometimes rewrite the original text. This type of content creation shows a great resemblance to fan activities that are characteristic of both curative and transformative fandoms. An important aspect of the research was whether the cosplay content aimed to preserve or rewrite the canon role-playing narrative. As these types of narrative extensions and modifications happen in another medium, it also follows the logic of transmedia storytelling.

Transmedia Storytelling

According to Jenkins' (2007) classic definition, "transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels to create a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" (Jenkins, 2007, para. 2). Many 20th and 21st century franchises use this strategy, providing certain information and details of a complex story or an expansive fictional world through various mediums. As Ryan (2013) suggests, these franchises are based upon a hypernarrative that cannot be covered by a single medium. It is also common that an extensive world or universe has the potential to generate an infinite number of potential stories, which also contribute to the production of newer (sub)narratives. For example, a minor character of a story can turn out to be the main character of the next one; or a fictional geographical area, which was considered a peripheral region in the case of one story, can become the centre of another one; but it is not uncommon for authors/producers to play with the

dimension of time either: prequels and sequels are born, empty time periods, that may have been skipped during the creation of a previous story, are filled with new plots so the new story can be based upon a (formal) lack of information.

In summary, the sub-narratives belonging to a larger narrative are told on different channels, so the information is systematically distributed between media. That is why it can be claimed that one of the most important effects of transmedia storytelling is that it generates consumption (Jenkins, 2003). Since the information of the fictional world is constructed in the form of an ordered network – or as an illusion of it – in various media, as a result, being familiar with a single media text never answers all the questions, and in fact, usually raises even more that can only be answered by analysing additional media texts. As a result, a new type of audience has appeared, which finds pleasure in gathering information about media products from various sources like a treasure hunter, and they sometimes fill in the missing information in the form of independent works, for example, fanfictions, or as in this case, cosplay content on TikTok.

Not entirely related to transmedia storytelling, but most definitely related to transmedia logic is the question of transferring medium-specific language and user techniques across multiple media platforms. During the episode "A sea of trouble", it can be observed that certain slang and poses typically used on TikTok and also references to popular TikTok trends appear at the level of both the verbal and non-verbal communication of the players. At the level of visual language, it is important to note that the players use lighting techniques and colours similar to their cosplay videos published on TikTok. During the live stream, the application of colourful backlighting or the transformation of the background using a screen or curtain are also characteristics of cosplay content creating on TikTok (see Petrovic, 2023). The mixing of and transferring of medium-specific language naturally affects how the audience receives and interprets the story. Although the vast majority of TikTok-specific slang and poses are not used in-character, these expressions still reflect on canon role-playing events: the players themselves use these techniques to interpret and translate information regarding the narrative.

Since the players are cosplay content creators on TikTok, and have also met each other on the app, the use of TikTok-specific language during game sessions does not cause tension within the role-playing team. Likewise, in the case of members of the audience who are familiar with TikTok and may follow the players on the app, transferring language and medium-specific techniques should not interfere with the interpretation process, but for those who are not familiar with TikTok-specific language and user techniques, properly understanding story-related information may be more difficult.

The Research Subject: Somewhere Bound

Somewhere Bound is an international tabletop role-playing group of eleven people, most of whom happen to be cosplayers as well. They officially started live streaming their game sessions on Twitch in November 2020, and later they also uploaded the content to YouTube. In *The Wayward Wanderers* campaign, which is the first campaign of the team, there are one game master and five players present. The campaign currently has twenty-four episodes. While the adventure is not over yet, the team has not been live streaming since June 2022, so the campaign is currently on hiatus. The game is set in a fictional world created by the dungeon master (for its map, see Somewhere Bound, 2020b). Our

research focuses on the first episode of *The Wayward Wanderers* campaign, as well as the cosplay content related to the episode and the prologue of the campaign. Since during the episodes the players' nicknames, their TikTok usernames and the names and classes of the characters are all on display under the players' camera screen, we identify the members of the campaign based on these variables as well:

- Hulda (@ahobbitstale), dungeon master;
- Kai (@vampirethembo), Valakas, bard;
- Blue (@leftmybabyblue), Coraline, bard;
- Stevie (@stevie.bones), Cadaver, rouge;
- Rhi (@rhilentless), Gwendolyne, paladin;
- Vain (@vain.virgo), Saint, bloodhunter.

Since the first live stream episode of the campaign was preceded by a few private sessions, the world and narrative built during the first game sessions remained hidden from the audience. For this reason, during the live stream of the first episode, a solution was needed, something that summarized the missing information so that the audience could also interpret the plot of the actual game session and get to know the world and the characters. In the end, the solution was a written prologue that summarizes the team's previous adventures at the beginning of the first episode. The prologue reveals that during the early games, the team formed an alliance with a magic-using princess, Liliana, whom they helped overthrow her father's rule, which was necessary due to his anti-magic measures. Eventually, the team resorted to regicide, which forced them to flee the kingdom. The first episode is set a few weeks after their runaway (see Somewhere Bound, 2020a).

Since the players are primarily cosplay content creators and not professional role-players, it was obvious that the characters would also appear on their individual, cosplay-focused social media platforms, like TikTok and Instagram. However, since the pilot episode of the campaign was preceded by many more private game sessions (which included worldbuilding, character and cosplay creation), by the time "A sea of trouble" was aired, the characters had already been introduced via cosplay music videos on the players' TikTok accounts. That is why the focus of this analysis is on the cosplay content that appeared on the players' individual social media platforms, which also helps fill the narrative void caused by the private sessions and expand the canon story of the campaign with some kind of additional information.

Findings and Discussion

While the written prologue of the TWW campaign at the beginning of "A sea of trouble" attempts to fill the narrative void and serve as an introduction to the campaign, it still leaves many questions unanswered and possibilities unexplored. On the one hand, this gives freedom to the audience as they can reconstruct the events of the prologue using their own imagination, but on the other hand, it gives the option to the players – in this context also the creators/producers – to use transmedia storytelling.

In this analysis, we studied the short video-sharing application TikTok from the aspect of transmedia expansion/modification of the TWW campaign. During the research, the main focus was on how the content created with the players' characters relate to the canon narrative of the campaign, and in what way the events of the prologue appear in them. We also examined in detail how much cosplay content the players/cosplayers created on an individual level with the characters they played in the campaign (for this task the

TikTok playlists were especially useful), over what time period the content was published, what different methods were used to create content (individual or group videos; fan art; posts, etc.) and how they relate to the canon role-playing narrative.

In the case of the TWW campaign, we examined the cosplay content related to the role-playing narrative of the five players and the dungeon master, and grouped them according to different categories. It is important to note that the description (caption) of the videos played a significant role in establishing certain categories, and in some cases the comments section as well. Although there were still cases for which the classification could not be clearly decided, the context-creating descriptions and comments proved to be a great help. The categories created for the players' and the dungeon master's TikTok profiles are as follows:

a) Cosplay showcase/transitions

In the case of the videos in this category (Table 1), the intention is clearly not to create or initiate a story, as their main function is to present the costume and the character's appearance in detail, using different camera angles, lights and effects. The audio used for these types of videos is usually some piece of music, the lyrics or style of which relate to the character in some way, but there is not necessarily a narrative intent behind its use. For instance, Stevie is presenting the complete outfit of their character, Cadaver (see Stevie Bones, 2020d).

Table 1: Cosplay showcase/transitions

	Rhi	Blue	Vain	Kai	Stevie	Hulda
Cosplay showcase/transitions	13	1	0	1	9	3
All TWW content	45	31	3	26	100	22

Source: own processing

One of the most popular ways of introducing a newly created cosplay or character is using the transition technique. The term 'transition' refers to the practice, when at one moment of the recording, one can see the person out of cosplay and then dressed as the character when the tempo changes. Due to the precise editing, the clips create the illusion that the movement is continuous, and in fact the transformation takes place in one clip (see rhilentless, 2022). The purpose of the transition videos is on the one hand to present the costume in greater detail, and on the other hand, to indicate that the content uploaded in the near future will revolve around the character in question.

Compared to Rhi, the fellow players uploaded only a few videos in this category, at the time when they were finished with the costume. In their cases, once they introduced their new character, the focus shifted from the detailed presentation of the costume to the storytelling. Since Hulda has an anthropomorphic form as the dungeon master during the live streams, and she has created some videos cosplaying as the dungeon master, her videos were also included in this category.

b) Character-focused content

In this category, ranked videos provided additional information on the characters, such as explaining their background story in greater detail. Although the audience learns some information about the characters' backstory during the episodes, so far, no arc or quest has been built around the detailed past or family background of any of the characters, so the players use TikTok as a tool to introduce their characters in more detail (Table 2).

Table 2: Character-focused content

	Rhi	Blue	Vain	Kai	Stevie	Hulda
Cosplay showcase/transitions	12	13	1	4	45	0
All TWW content	45	31	3	26	100	22

Source: own processing

Blue, Rhi and Stevie were especially eager to use this transmedia solution, sometimes answering questions that may have been raised by the audience during certain scenes of the episodes, but which were never explained or answered during the live stream. For instance, Stevie teased the audience with Cadaver's backstory (Stevie Bones, 2020c).

It also includes videos in which the cosplayers use a monologue or a dialogue, a recording from an existing media product (movie, TV show, etc.) instead of a piece of music to portray the character in this category. The videos created with this type of technique are suitable for exploring how the character would behave in a fictional situation, with fictional characters or NPCs (non-player characters), so with characters who are not part of the canon narrative of the campaign. But there are times when the players – especially Rhi – use their own voices for their characters in the cosplay videos, further deepening the relationship between the character and the audience (see rhilentless, 2021).

Looking at the numbers, it can be said that the players are enthusiastic to create content in this category. Above all, this can be traced back to the fact that in the medium of TTRPGs, it is the players themselves who possess the most information about their own characters, but sometimes it happens that it is not possible to transfer all information into the gameplay. The player may have created a detailed backstory for their character, but no quest during the campaign reflects more on the character's past. Since the player does not always have the opportunity to fulfil a character arc or reveal a complicated past during the role-playing session, they choose another channel or medium for this purpose.

From the perspective of participatory culture and fan activities, character-focused cosplay content both reinforces the canon and expands it with further information and detail. The characters' personalities and backstories remain unchanged, but the audience has more opportunities to learn about their motivations, values and personalities. Therefore, this kind of transmedia expansion helps to bring individual characters into the spotlight, and shifts the narrative focus, but does not change the narrative itself.

c) Replaying (and telling) canon events

This category describes the videos in which the players are replaying, reenacting a canon, finalised scene of the campaign with their characters in cosplay. It is important to point out that this category includes content that adapted the canon events in their original narrative style and atmosphere, as well as funny, meme-like creations, since the narrative and information-transmitting properties are not impaired in case of a parody (see Stevie Bones, 2020a). We also established a subcategory for duets, because, unlike in the case of the previous two categories, replaying canon events can happen with the contribution of fellow players. It can be seen from Table 3 that the players uploaded content in this category in quite different proportions: almost a third of Stevie and Vain's TWW related content deals with canon scenes, while only a quarter of Hulda and Kai's content focuses on replaying canon events.

One of the advantages of replaying canon scenes – beyond the fact that the audience can now consume the story on an audiovisual level – is the change of perspective: the viewer experiences the scene from a specific character's point of view.

One of the most important questions of the research was that in the case of replaying canon events, how much and what kind of content appeared on the players' profiles, which are adapting the events of the very first, private game sessions, i.e. the prologue at the beginning of the first live stream episode.

Table 3: Replaying (and telling) canon events

	Rhi	Blue	Vain	Kai	Stevie	Hulda
Replaying canon events	6	6	1	8	31	6
Events of the prologue	1	6	1	8	26	2
Memes	3	3	1	6	13	1
Duets	0	3	0	0	1	0
All TWW content	45	31	3	26	100	22

Source: own processing

Replaying the prologue is particularly important for the analysis. It can be seen that for all other players in the category, except for Rhi, most of the replayed canon scenes present the events from the prologue. This result leaves room for several interpretations and conclusions. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as a tension between the private nature of the first gaming sessions and the enthusiasm of the players: although before November 2020 the team was not able to broadcast the gaming sessions, the players definitely wanted to share not only the appearance of their characters and their main characteristics, but also the adventures they had encountered during the private games with their TikTok followers. However, since after November 2020, one can only come across content reflecting the time and narrative of the prologue in the form of flashbacks or throwbacks, it is also clear that the players did not use the strategy of transmedia storytelling consciously.

Since the events of the very first gaming sessions were only known to us at the level of the prologue, in addition to comparing the plot of the prologue with the story of the videos, we also paid special attention to the time and date the videos were uploaded. According to our understanding, the content uploaded before November 2020 always relates to the events and narrative of the private gaming sessions played before the first live stream. In the case of the videos uploaded after November 2020, we compared the content with the information learned from the live streams, and in addition, we also studied the description and the comment section, which also helped to distinguish the events of the prologue and the later-on narrative.

During the analysis, the frequency of the TikTok duets in the case of replaying canon scenes was also taken into account. It can be seen from Table 3 that there were only a few examples when the players are replaying the given scenes together (either recorded in the same physical space or by reacting to each other's videos with their own footage); this value is the most significant in the case of Blue. The main reason for this lies in the fact that the players quite often used the solution of replaying the given scenes by including characters that were not originally their own. For example, in one video, Blue clearly wanted to play this dialogue with Kai's character, Valakas. They indicated this intention by using subtitles, highlighting Valakas' name and using colour codes, but Kai did not respond with their own visual material (see leftmybabyblue, 2020).

Finally, we also classified in this category videos of the game master, in which they specifically thematise the construction of the narrative of the TWW campaign, as well as

those short clips that were cut from the live stream to promote the campaign by highlighting some humorous scenes (see A Hobbits Tale, 2020).

The videos in the "Replaying (and telling) canon events" category – as the name suggests – remain faithful to the original text, do not distort the plot, do not change it, modifying at most their tone style in the case of parody videos. Cosplay videos that process canon scenes outside of the prologue could also be interpreted as adaptations, since the narrative migrates from one medium to another. In the case of the prologue, however, there is no existing media text that is adapted on TikTok in cosplay form, since the first game sessions were not recorded. Thus, cosplay content that processes the prologue serves as transmedia extensions that also function as the prequel to the TWW campaign. In this category, cosplay content is therefore responsible for introducing and presenting the canon.

d) Alternative scenes

This category includes videos in which the characters of the players are placed in some alternative situation compared to the canon narrative of the role-playing campaign (Table 4). Within the category we also distinguished two subcategories according to the various functions the videos may take. In the first subcategory, it is clear that the main goal of the content was the implication of romance between the characters, and we labelled these as 'ship-contents'. In fan studies,

> 'shipping', is a term in fandom that is derived from the word 'relationship'. A ship refers to a romantic relationship between two or more characters. An individual can ship characters whose relationship is canon compliant, or in many cases the ship can be not represented or only marginally represented within the canon. (Bothe, 2014, p. 5)

Table 4: Alternative scenes

	Rhi	Blue	Vain	Kai	Stevie	Hulda
Alternative scenes	1	6	1	6	5	0
Ship-contents	0	0	0	4	3	0
Death of characters	0	0	1	1	0	0
Duets	1	2	0	0	3	0
All TWW content	45	31	3	26	100	22

Source: own processing

Although in later episodes of the TWW campaign, certain characters do romantically fall for each other and get together as a couple, in the canon narrative, at the beginning of the campaign it is quite uncertain which characters are going to end up together. Ship-contents were particularly common during this time period with Kai and Stevie. It can be interpreted that the players were trying to live out their own fantasies, playing with the idea of certain characters forming a couple. Still, it is also possible that these types of videos provided a kind of fanservice for the audience of the role-playing campaign.

The other subcategory consists of videos that tell a specific alternative story, the possible death of the given characters. It is important to emphasize that on the level of the canon narrative of the campaign, each player's character is alive and well even in the twenty-fourth episode, which is the most recent, so these scenes are clearly not retellings of an incident that actually happened during one of the game sessions. A total of two videos were created in this category by Vain and Kai (see Vain Virgo, 2020; Trashmouth King, 2020). Considering that both of them created such a video, moreover during the

same time period, at the end of 2020, and they also used the same audio for the video, it can be assumed that they joined a heartbreaking trend that was popular at the time among tabletop role-players and cosplayers on TikTok.

Another important aspect was how common duets were in this category. Similar to the replaying canon events segment, this form of interactive cosplay storytelling was not common here either. Although while in the former category this was due to the fact that the players sometimes replayed scenes by including characters that were not originally their own, in the latter category it is more about the fact that players mainly initiated duets, but rarely responded to each other's 'invitations' with actual duets. The videos were created with the specific goal of the targeted player responding with their character, but this only rarely happened later on, thus there are only potential duet videos left. For instance, in one video, Stevie clearly wanted to act out this dialogue with Kai's character, Valakas – the player outlines the context of the dialogue between the characters in the video description – but Kai did not respond with their own visual material (see Stevie Bones, 2020b).

It is also important to highlight the phenomenon of self-duetting, the practice in which the user duets their own previously published video. This technique was used by Stevie, who in one of their videos envisioned a conversation between Cadaver and his younger self, (cos)playing both characters (see Stevie Bones, 2020e).

The lack of duets and the appearance of self-duets indicates that while during the tabletop role-playing sessions – due to its genre – it is evident that creating the story happens through collaboration, the players prefer to tell the story on TikTok mainly on their own, cosplaying only their own player character. While the construction of the narrative is done by a team, on TikTok, the originally shared storytelling is reduced to individual, character-focused narratives, even when acting out alternative scenes.

The number of videos representing alternative scenes in all the players' cases is low compared to the total number of videos related to the campaign. This result suggests that players are not particularly motivated in creating cosplay content that makes excessive changes compared to the canonized role-playing narrative. However, they are motivated in creating content that further introduces the character and shows in detail how they would react in a fictional situation, to the approach of fictional characters (i.e. characters that are non-existent in the canonized role-playing narrative), as we established in the category of "Character-focused content". But these short, dialogue-oriented alternative scenes do not particularly disturb the flow of the canonized role-playing narrative. All of this suggests that the players are basically satisfied with the stories created in the medium of the TTRPG, and their goal is not to change the story in another medium, but to further explain, supplement, and tell it from a different perspective.

Cosplay videos classified in this category make radical changes to the original narrative through ships and character deaths, which clearly evokes the content production techniques of creative or transformative fandoms. Although the subjects do play with alternative possibilities, with monologues or actions that differ from their characters' personalities, as Table 4 shows, only a few such contents were created, and mostly without collaboration as duets. Although cosplay videos could be efficient tools for rewriting the canon text, in this case study the subjects used it more to reinforce and supplement the canon narrative.

e) Unidentified content

As mentioned earlier, it was not possible to decide to which category some videos in the examined corpus belonged, even if the date of the upload, the description of the video and the comments were taken into account. As can be seen in the table below, only three of the two hundred and twenty-seven analysed videos fall into this category. Two of these occurred with Blue: it was not clear whether it was a scene showing the character's

backstory (character-focused content) or whether it adapted an event of the canonized role-playing narrative (replaying canon events) since the content of the video in question could be matched to both categories. In the case of Rhi, it was a live duet, during which it was not clear whether the rogue character appearing together with Gwen belonged to another role-playing campaign or personified an NPC from the TWW campaign.

Table 5: Unidentified content

	Rhi	Blue	Vain	Kai	Stevie	Hulda
Cosplay showcase/transitions	1	2	0	0	0	0
All TWW content	45	31	3	26	100	22

Source: own processing

Conclusion

The cosplay content shared on TikTok clearly supports the fact that players are particularly motivated to share narratives related to their characters outside of the RPG sessions as well. They proved to be especially active in sharing the events of the prologue, the very first private game sessions. However, during the research it also became clear that the systematic distribution of information in different media was not necessarily consciously applied.

Examining the phenomenon from the viewer's side, the cosplay content shared on TikTok perfectly fits the definition of transmedia storytelling/expansion: the viewer is invited to look for and interpret additional content available on several different media platforms to reconstruct and fully understand the entire narrative. Of course, the source text, i.e. the narrative of the TWW campaign was understandable to begin with, but since the events of the prologue are only represented via a written summary at the beginning of the first episode of the campaign, it is clear that the cosplay content shared on TikTok telling the story of the prologue can be seen as a prequel to the TWW campaign, or the prequel to "A sea of trouble".

At the same time, it is also clear that the primary function of the cosplay content is not replaying or retelling canon role-playing narratives, but to present the characters in more detail and depth, and to share more information about them and their relationships, as was seen in the category of "Character-focused content". Of course, this can also be traced back to the technical aspects of TikTok and its offered options. While Twitch, which is the main medium of role-playing sessions, allows players to appear in the same online space at the same time, TikTok is not able to do this, only by the duet function, but in this case, the production of the cosplay content does not take place at the same time. In comparison, advancing the narrative of TTRPGs (execution of missions, inclusion of NPCs that have a great impact on the story, etc.) requires the joint presence of the members. In the absence of this, the cosplay content uploaded on TikTok mainly represents the easily replayable narratives of the campaign: a dialogue between characters, a short scene presented from the point of view of a specific character, etc.

As the data suggests, although the subjects of the case study used content production strategies typical of transformative fandoms (alternative storylines, ship-contents, character death AUs), their cosplay videos mainly reinforce and complement the canon role-playing narrative and communicate it in a medium outside of the recorded play

sessions. Therefore, their cosplay content in this case can be interpreted as an activity typical of curative fandoms. However, it is also important to see that cosplay content uploaded on TikTok also provides an opportunity to transfer these characters into different role-playing campaigns, to create alternative/parallel universes and crossovers (as when interacting with characters present in other campaigns), thus not only enabling transmedia storytelling, but also expanding already existing narratives, creating crossovers, therefore, it is potentially suitable for content production typical of transformative fandoms.

All of this confirms the storytelling role of cosplay in social media and points out that with sufficient planning and coordination, cosplay content can even function as part of an extensive transmedia universe in the future.

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Playful Learning Approach in an English Class in a Rural Normal School

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ABSTRACT:
Using playful learning methodologies in foreign language learning among adults has gained more attention in recent years, due to the advantages and benefits that students receive from it. The results of an action research intervention with a mixed-method approach are presented, which was conducted in a Rural Normal School, a public federal higher education institution located in the state of Chihuahua, north of Mexico. This research was implemented in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course, involving 90 second-year students pursuing bachelor's degrees in elementary education and preschool education, during the 2022-2023 school year. The purpose of the study was to design and implement a program using a playful learning approach to develop the cognitive, affective, and sociocultural aspects of the students. The instruments used included participant observation, a teacher's diary, and a structured questionnaire to identify students' experiences in the English class. The results show strong development in the cognitive and affective aspects, and a lesser degree of development in the sociocultural element.

KEY WORDS:
English teaching, higher education, learning process, normal rural schools, playful approach.

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Introduction

When we play, we are engaged, relaxed and challenged – an optimal state of mind for learning through play. We can explore social relationships and experiment with language (Solis et al., 2017). Accordingly, there are numerous studies about the benefits and advantages of using play-based pedagogies with young learners, as it is well established that play during the early years is a central activity for children that is also beneficial in terms of learning and development (McInnes, 2019). However, there has been little research into playful learning in adulthood (Nørgård et al., 2017). Whitton (2018) states that this is an emerging field in higher education, adding that "there is a dearth of research evidence as to its applicability and effectiveness, and a lack of understanding of the underpinning mechanisms that support the hypothesized links between play and learning, creativity, and innovation" (p. 2). Nevertheless, according to Rice (2009) there are various benefits to learning and teaching through play for adults.

In particular, the use of games in foreign language teaching has several advantages, such as increased motivation and engagement in learning (Cruaud, 2018). Similarly, Lucena Romero (2020) makes the case for using this approach as an important resource in foreign language teaching, where professors integrate learning components through educational games or activities that require students to solve tasks using specific language and vocabulary. He states that it increases learners' concentration levels, helps create a relaxing and productive environment, and improves the use of cultural expressions, while decreasing fear of making mistakes. In their study with Uzbek English learners, Jaxongir qizi and Bo'tabayeva (2024) emphasize the critical role that playful methods play, specifically in strengthening English vocabulary and increasing engagement and retention.

In the Latin-American context there is a vast corpus of recent research dedicated to exploring the benefits of playful learning with children and young students. For example, the study by Nury (2019) with elementary school children in Venezuela, or Cevallos-Triguero and Palma-Villavicencio (2022), as well as Chimarro Reinoso (2023) in Ecuador. However, in higher education the studies are less abundant. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning the research done by Cordero Badilla and Núñez et al. (2018) with undergraduates in Costa Rica, Montoya Muñoz (2022) in Peru, Suárez Vera (2013) in Colombia, Alcedo Salamanca (2020) in Venezuela and Narváez Sarango et al. (2023) in Ecuador. To continue in this line of research and contribute to the area in the Mexican context, the purpose of the following study is to design and implement a program using a playful teaching approach to develop cognitive, affective, and sociocultural aspects among learners of an English course. They are 90 young women, students at a Rural Normal School located in the north of Mexico, who during the 2022-2023 academic year were studying to become preschool or elementary school teachers.

Theoretical Framework

According to Kangas et al. (2022), the term 'play' describes a level of engagement in an activity that is enjoyable and is carried out for recreation, rather than having a practical or serious purpose. Additionally, Rice (2009) highlights the four principles of play: it is an experience, has intrinsic motives, focuses on the process rather than the outcome, and involves being engaged. On the other hand, Mora Márquez and Camacho Torralbo (2019) emphasize different characteristics of play, such as the qualities of being rule-governed, fictitious, and non-productive, among others. Play has the potential to provide rich, interactive experiences that can foster learning, as well as cognitive and skill development (Haliuk, 2022). It helps individuals become acquainted with their environment and interact with their surrounding reality, gradually integrating into it (Andrade Carrión, 2020).

Play is an activity that includes emotional, social, and cognitive features, which is why it is a powerful medium to support learning (Mardell et al., 2021). Caon (2020) agrees with this principle, stating that it is "the vital charge in which strong intrinsic motivational inducements become integrated with affective-emotive, cognitive, and social aspects of the learner" (p. 447). Similarly, Garay (2021) states that both children and adults derive intellectual, psychological, and social benefits from play.

Caon (2020) maintains that this methodology is based on two concepts: game and play. As stated by Lucena Romero (2020), when we play, we learn and develop skills. Plass et al. (2014) explain that it is "an activity by the learner aimed at constructing a mental model, designed to include one or more elements of games to enhance the learning process" (p. 6). This teaching approach includes practices and routines that support children's play and learning in education (Kangas et al., 2022).

Accordingly, this methodology is characterized by key features of play, such as being self-rewarding and engaging the whole person (Heidari-Shahreza, 2024). Solis et al. (2017), characterize this approach as joyful, meaningful, iterative, and socially interactive. Playful learning occurs when individuals are active, involved and connecting with their peers (Alsina Tarrés & Farrés Cullell, 2021). For Whitton (2018), examples of tools used in this approach include games, toys, simulations, and puzzles, while the techniques involve pedagogies that facilitate play, such as role-plays, performances, and problem-solving. Plass et al. (2014) propose an integrated design framework of playful learning that includes three basic elements:

- *Cognitive engagement.* Learning based on games is a cognitive activity that contributes to generating mental models by selecting information, organizing it as visual or verbal representations, and integrating this with prior knowledge (Plass et al., 2014). According to Helme and Clarke (2001), it is the thinking process that students engage in while participating in academic learning tasks. On the other hand, Daher et al. (2021) state that cognitive engagement reflects the level of students' involvement in a task in terms of how they approach it. Finally, Rotgans and Schmidt (2011) understand cognitive engagement as a state in which students put a considerable amount of effort and time into understanding a specific topic.
- *Affective engagement.* This aspect is related to students' experiences with emotions, attitudes, motivation, and interest. It is based on the premise that games create higher affective engagement with the learner, leading to increased cognitive engagement and thus facilitating effortless learning (Plass et al., 2014) or flow, where an individual is deeply involved in an activity, experiencing enjoyment and cognitive engagement (Helme & Clarke, 2001). Manzano-León et al. (2021) further delve into this idea by connecting it with intrinsic motivation, arguing that when students enjoy the mechanics of a certain game, learning becomes associated with a pleasant situation. According to Daher et al. (2021), affective engagement pertains to students' emotions (positive or negative) towards the learning process, classmates, and teachers. Additionally, Garay (2021) suggests that this term encompasses the beliefs, feelings, moods, and attitudes that students experience, as well as how the game environment impacts their engagement.
- *Socio-cultural engagement.* Given that learning is socially constructed, games can foster social engagement by providing peers with interaction opportunities (Plass et al., 2014). According to Garay (2021), this term focuses on finding ways for learner participation within groups, utilizing collective knowledge to achieve goals, relating learning to cultural standards and identities, and utilizing social and cultural influences as motivation for learning. Furthermore, Vartiainen et al. (2024) cite Alcock (2013), stating that play is mediated by various socio-cultural elements, such as language, gestures, signs, materials, and actions.

These cognitive, affective and socio-cultural engagement aspects, in turn, involve other essential elements, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The three pillars of playful learning

Cognitive Engagement	Affective Engagement	Socio-cultural Engagement
situated in context	motivation and interest	social context
transfer of learning	emotional design: representation	social aspects of agency
scaffolding and feedback	emotional design: interactions	observational learning
dynamic assessment	goal orientation	relatedness/self-perception
information representation	self-efficacy	
gestures and movement	self-esteem	

Source: own processing based on Plass et al. (2014)

Research Methodology

This study is based on the socio-critical paradigm, which aims to create social transformations in the context where the intervention is carried out (Melero Aguilar, 2011). According to Corona Lisboa (2016), as cited by Loza Ticona et al. (2020), data collection instruments of both an interpretative and positivist nature can be used in this paradigm. Consequently, this research employs a mixed-methods approach, since it "gathers and analyses quantitative and qualitative data in the same research" (Guelmes & Nieto, 2015, p. 24). By using this approach, a significant amount of evidence was collected to better comprehend the phenomena in question and to strengthen theoretical and practical knowledge (Pereira Pérez, 2011).

The participatory action research method provides concrete answers to the issues identified by both researchers and participants (Guevara Alban et al., 2020). It is an innovative methodological alternative capable of creating profound social changes (Melero Aguilar, 2011). The following research phases were implemented: planning, action, observation, and reflection, as established by Sequera (2014). This author defines the first stage as the decision-making process to establish the action plan according to the context being analysed. The next step is to implement the plan, taking into consideration that it must be flexible and can be adjusted according to the emerging needs of the context. Subsequently, the researcher evaluates the action plan by systematically recording the observations. The reflection process follows, which is not considered the final phase but rather a closure of the research cycle where advancements and areas for improvement are reviewed.

Table 2 presents examples of the activities that were implemented as part of the English course with second-grade students. It is worth mentioning that all activities were assessed by the teacher-researcher using the teacher's diary format and participant observation technique.

Table 2: Action plan for an English course with second-grade students

Topic	Content	Activities	Materials/Resources
Family	possessive pronouns and possessive form, family vocabulary	*Go Fish* card game with family members, *Family Feud*	cards, PPT, computer and projector
Games	games vocabulary, imperative form, words related to order	play different board games (*Bingo, Jenga,* memory, *Parcheesi etc.*) and make a tutorial	board games
Food and recipes	verbs related to cooking vocabulary, food vocabulary, countable and uncountable nouns, adjectives to describe fruits and vegetables	countable and uncountable nouns memory game, *Go Fish* card game with restaurant menu, waitress and client role-play, 20 questions	memory cards, *Go Fish* cards, restaurant menus, pretend plates, silverware and food, plastic fruits and vegetables
Countries	countries and nationalities vocabulary, Wh- questions and answers	*Rock Paper Scissors* with nationalities, tourist board game	pretend passports and visa stamps, board game, dice, tokens and question cards
Clothes	numbers and colours vocabulary, Wh- questions	*Barbie fashion parade, paper dolls dress-up, customer and shop assistant role-play*	Barbie dolls and Barbie clothes, paper dolls and paper clothes
Describing myself	parts of the body vocabulary, verb to be	body parts dominoes, *Guess Who?,* past and present memory game	*Dominoes, Guess Who?,* board games, memory cards

Source: own processing

The instruments used in this research are the teacher's diary, participant observation, and a questionnaire. The teacher's diary promotes the expression of pedagogical reflections and experiences regarding performance in their teaching practice. Furthermore, it is a tool that facilitates teachers' understanding of their daily tasks and reflection on how to handle conflicting situations in the classroom. It involves a systematic record of incidents to promote positive change. The format used is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Teacher's diary format

Of the Teacher	Of the Student	Didactic Communication
activity	individual behaviour	organization and space distribution
sequence	involvement/ participation	organization and time distribution.
normative/regulatory behaviour	behaviour with their classmates	class work
emotional behaviour	behaviour with the teacher	class-related events
		non-class related events

Source: own processing

Another technique used was participant observation, which enabled the researcher to collect information by actively participating in the events under study and gaining insights into the reality perceived by the study's participants (Rodríguez-Gómez et al., 1996). The format employed was based on the components of cognitive, affective, and socio-cultural engagement proposed by Plass et al. (2014), as shown in Table 1.

Lastly, a structured questionnaire designed by the researcher, based on the proposal of Plass et al. (2014), was administered to 23 key informants selected from the 90 second-year bachelor students using a convenience sample. This instrument is considered the primary method for collecting quantitative data in a standardized manner, which is coherent for analysis (Roopa & Rani, 2012). The questionnaire was divided into four sections: affective engagement (3 questions), cognitive engagement (6 questions), social/cultural engagement (4 questions), and open-ended questions (2 questions). The methodology used to analyse the information was divided into three phases: description, conceptual organization, and theory. In the first stage, data from the three instruments were combined and organized into different categories, which constitutes the second step. Finally, the data obtained were linked to theory and background research to explain the results.

Ninety second-year undergraduates participated in this research, who were students in the bachelor's degree program in preschool or elementary education during the 2022-2023 school year. As part of their syllabus, they have English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course during the first three years of their studies. The main purpose of this subject is for students to develop their foreign language speaking skills in communicative acts, as well as to enhance their awareness and knowledge of English culture, according to the Mexican Ministry of Public Education (Revista Voces, 2018).

The participants of this study are from the Rural Normal School "Ricardo Flores Magón" (ENRRFM), located in the municipality of Saucillo, state of Chihuahua, in northern Mexico. This is a public higher education institution catering to low-income students, founded in 1931, and it functions as a boarding school exclusively for women. It has an enrolment of approximately 400 students and offers two bachelor's degrees: preschool education and elementary school education.

Research Results

The three elements of the framework of Plass et al. (2014) were used to analyse and present the results of this intervention, which are described in the next section:

a) Affective engagement

Due to the extensive amount of data that was collected, the analysis from the participant observation and teacher's diary will focus on the most relevant contents seen in class that are related to each pillar of playful learning, as established by Plass et al. (2014). For the topic of clothes, the learners were enthusiastic about the Barbie dolls. Besides dressing them, they developed their creativity and exercised their fantasies by brushing their hair, naming them, and inventing their background stories. Initially, they had to follow specific instructions to dress the doll in a certain way. They displayed confidence, saying, "this is too easy" and applauding when they got it right; thus showing positive emotions toward the learning process.

The second part of the activity was more open-ended. They were free to dress the dolls however they wanted and then describe what they were wearing. Some organized a fashion parade, making the dolls walk, while others recorded them using their cell phones. They later edited the video with music and shared it with their classmates on social media. This is considered an example of effortless learning, or flow, as the learners were deeply involved in the task, and showed signs of joy and cognitive engagement. During the activity, one of the students started to cry. When the teacher-researcher asked her if she was okay, she answered: "You never know when is the last time you will be able to play".

With the paper dolls task, the teacher-researcher was uncertain whether they knew what they were, but it became clear that they did. They began reminiscing about how they used to play with these types of dolls when they were young. They expressed excitement about designing the dolls' clothes however they pleased, but a couple of them complained about colouring and designing clothes, because they found it boring and time-consuming.

In terms of the topic of family, students experienced a degree of frustration when playing the card game *Go Fish*. This happened because the teacher-researcher used famous families from sitcoms and reality shows, and not all of the learners were familiar with those characters. Nevertheless, some of them showed empathy by helping out their classmates, and those who were confused tried to complete the game, even if it was clear that they had lost some interest.

The *Family Feud* game was a more successful activity since the idea of competing against each other motivated them, even though there were no prizes for the winners. Because there were only two teams and the groups consisted of approximately 25 students, the teams were large, so some did not get involved in the activity and opted to use their cell phones instead. Those who were interested showed a high level of engagement, discussing the best options for the answers. Several questions posed a challenge for them, and in some cases, showed negative emotions such as anger for not guessing the most popular answer. Even if the emotions that they experienced were not positive, it still shows affective engagement of the students with the activities involved in the learning process. After one of them guessed an answer that gave her team many points, she exclaimed, "Now I am ready for the final exam" as a joke, much to the delight of her classmates.

Additionally, Table 4 contains the questionnaire answers that the key informants gave regarding their affective engagement during the English class activities. By analysing the replies that the participants gave to this set of questions, it can be concluded that the program was successful in fostering affective engagement in the learners towards the subject's topics.

Table 4: Affective engagement

Statements	Answers		Percentage	
	Yes	*No*	*Yes*	*No*
The task is motivating for the learner because of the presentation, challenge, curiosity or fantasy development.	23	0	100%	0
The task promotes positive emotions, which generate learning.	23	0	100%	0
The task favours a positive attitude towards the topic that is being taught.	23	0	100%	0

Source: own processing

b) Cognitive engagement

Regarding the topic of food, students engaged with visual data in the memory game, auditory information with the role-play, and kinesthetic learning with pretend food. The scaffolding began with the *Go Fish* card game and menu activities in teams. Then, they practiced vocabulary words and grammar structures in a more complex waitress-client role-play scenario, which required fluent communication and acting out of roles. The transfer of learning was achieved through two different activities with the same purpose: the restaurant card game and the role-play. The students integrated movement into their learning process by identifying pairs in the memory game and acting out roles in the role-play. This activity resembled a real-life scenario, thus situating it within context.

Concerning the unit of countries and nationalities and regarding situated learning, students practiced grammar structures and wh-questions that are similar to real-life situations, such as when traveling outside their country. They were able to transfer their learning because they repeated the skill of asking and answering questions many times, each time the students interacted and played with their classmates. Scaffolding was implemented by having them first work in teams for the tourist game and then individually with the passport activity. They used different gestures and movements in the game of *Rock Paper Scissors*. They interacted with aural and kinaesthetic data with the passport activity, and visual information with the tourist game.

Table 5 contains the questionnaire answers that the key informants gave regarding their cognitive engagement during the English class activities. By analysing the replies that participants gave to this set of questions, it can be concluded that the program successfully fostered cognitive engagement in the learners towards the subject's topics.

Table 5: Cognitive engagement

Statements	Answers		Percentage	
	Yes	*No*	*Yes*	*No*
The information and problem of the activity resembles an everyday real situation, which facilitates transfer of learning.	23	0	100%	0
The task favours automatic learning through repeated practice of one skill in different contexts.	23	0	100%	0
The activity assesses the acquisition of skills that need to be learned.	23	0	100%	0
The activity is assessed in a precise and continuous way, and is centred on the students' process.	23	0	100%	0
The activity is presented using more than one mode (visual, aural, tactile or kinaesthetic)	23	0	100%	0
The activity involves motor skills, movements and gestures.	23	0	100%	0

Source: own processing

c) Social/cultural engagement

When the topic of games was taught, the students had to collaborate to follow the rules and reach agreements. When one of them tried to cheat, her teammates would reprimand her to stop that behaviour. The teacher-researcher brought some games that the students were not familiar with, like *Jacks*. In this case, they employed observational learning, since those who did not know how to play studied their classmates and tried to follow their example. Also, they formed connections with other players to achieve a common goal, such as not letting the tower fall in *Jenga*. During these activities, students mediated their interactions using language, materials, and actions.

Additionally, regarding food, the role-play required students to collaborate and interact socially within a shared, pretend context. A social aspect of agency was identified when one of them decided to use a sweater as her apron, and others followed her example. Students were also able to learn by studying their peers, since they played as clients and observed their classmates acting as waitresses, learning new vocabulary words they had asked for, and integrating them into their play. Afterward, they had to reverse roles, giving some of them a model to follow. This role-play activity helped them learn and reinforce cultural standards and identities.

They participated individually in the *Go Fish* card game. When it ended because one of the team members had collected all the menu items she wanted, they expressed interest in playing longer because they were enjoying the game and wanted to win. Due to the available card sets, students had to work in large teams, which had a positive outcome in terms of relatedness, as some of them were used to working with the same two or three people and now had a chance to connect with other classmates.

Table 6 contains the responses to the questionnaire that the key informants provided regarding their socio-cultural engagement during the English class activities. The answers reveal that this aspect needs to be strengthened further, as a small percentage of students did not believe that they benefited from peer collaboration, social interaction**,** or establishing a sense of connection with their classmates.

Table 6: Socio-cultural engagement

Statements	Answers		Percentage	
	Yes	*No*	*Yes*	*No*
The task produces a benefit for the student through peer collaboration and social interaction.	22	1	95.7%	4.3%
The task involves individual and group work, favouring interaction amongst classmates.	23	0	100%	0
The task helps develop observational learning, as well as the involvement of all participants.	23	0	100%	0
The task favours a sense of connection with the other players, which creates satisfaction, motivation and desire to continue playing.	21	2	91.3%	8.7%

Source: own processing

Discussion and Conclusions

The data collected through the students' questionnaire as well as the teacher's diary and participant observation format reveal a high level of affective engagement with the participants in this study. The learners considered that the class's activities were motivating, promoted positive emotions, and fostered a favourable attitude towards the content as well. The teacher-researcher observed students experiencing effortless learning (Plass et al., 2014) or flow (Helme & Clarke, 2001) when they were deeply involved in the topic of clothes, as well as a wide range of emotions (joy, anger, frustration, delight) during the theme of family. In particular, they exhibited affective engagement and positive emotions toward the learning process, as established by Daher et al. (2021).

Regarding cognitive engagement, both the students' responses and the data obtained from the teacher's diary and observations were positive. The learners maintained that the activities in the class resembled real-life situations, the content was practiced repeatedly in different contexts, and the activities were centred on them. The teacher-researcher identified that students were able to select important information and organize it to represent (Plass et al., 2014), as exemplified by the passports activity during the unit on countries. Also, they clearly invested a considerable amount of time and effort in activities like the waitress and client role-play during the unit on food, to understand the lexical and syntactic content and to be able to apply them in a practical way (Rotgans & Schmidt, 2011).

Evidently, an area that needs improvement is socio-cultural engagement with the students: some of them perceived that the activities did not promote a sense of connection with their peers and that social interaction was not adequately achieved. Nevertheless, the teacher-researcher observed that the learners were able to use language, materials, and actions to mediate their social interaction (Alcock, 2013, as quoted by Vartiainen et al., 2024), especially during the unit on games. Also, the students had the opportunity to interact with their peers and develop social engagement (Plass et al., 2014). The social and cultural aspect is an essential element not only of the playful learning approach but also of learning a foreign language, as the Mexican Ministry of Public Education (Revista Voces, 2018) states. As Tantaleán and Ascoy (2013) note, acquiring a foreign language should include familiarising its cultural elements to promote tolerance of and respect for individuals from different contexts. Thus, future research can explore how to integrate this aspect into playful activities by using resources such as films, music and literature.

A limitation of the study is related to the number of key informants who answered the questionnaire, since a larger sample could generate significant results that could be generalized to other educational contexts. However, the data collected and analysed during the implementation of this study contributes, to a modest extent, to the existing literature on the use of playful learning approaches in the Latin American context, specifically in Mexican higher education. Similarly, implementing Plass et al.'s (2014) proposal for an integrated design framework for playful learning in a different background helps test and assess the authors' program.

The playful learning methodology in foreign language learning in higher education has, as previously stated by Cruaud (2018), Lucena Romero (2020), and Jaxongir qizi and Bo'tabayeva (2024), numerous advantages and benefits for learners. The results obtained by these researchers, as well as the evidence gathered in this study, may act as an incentive for English teachers to try this approach in their classes and to explore their students' opinions about it. As Manzano-León et al. (2021) highlight, the significance of identifying students' perceptions regarding the implementation of playful activities in the classroom can help teachers improve students' acquisition of curricular and social competencies.

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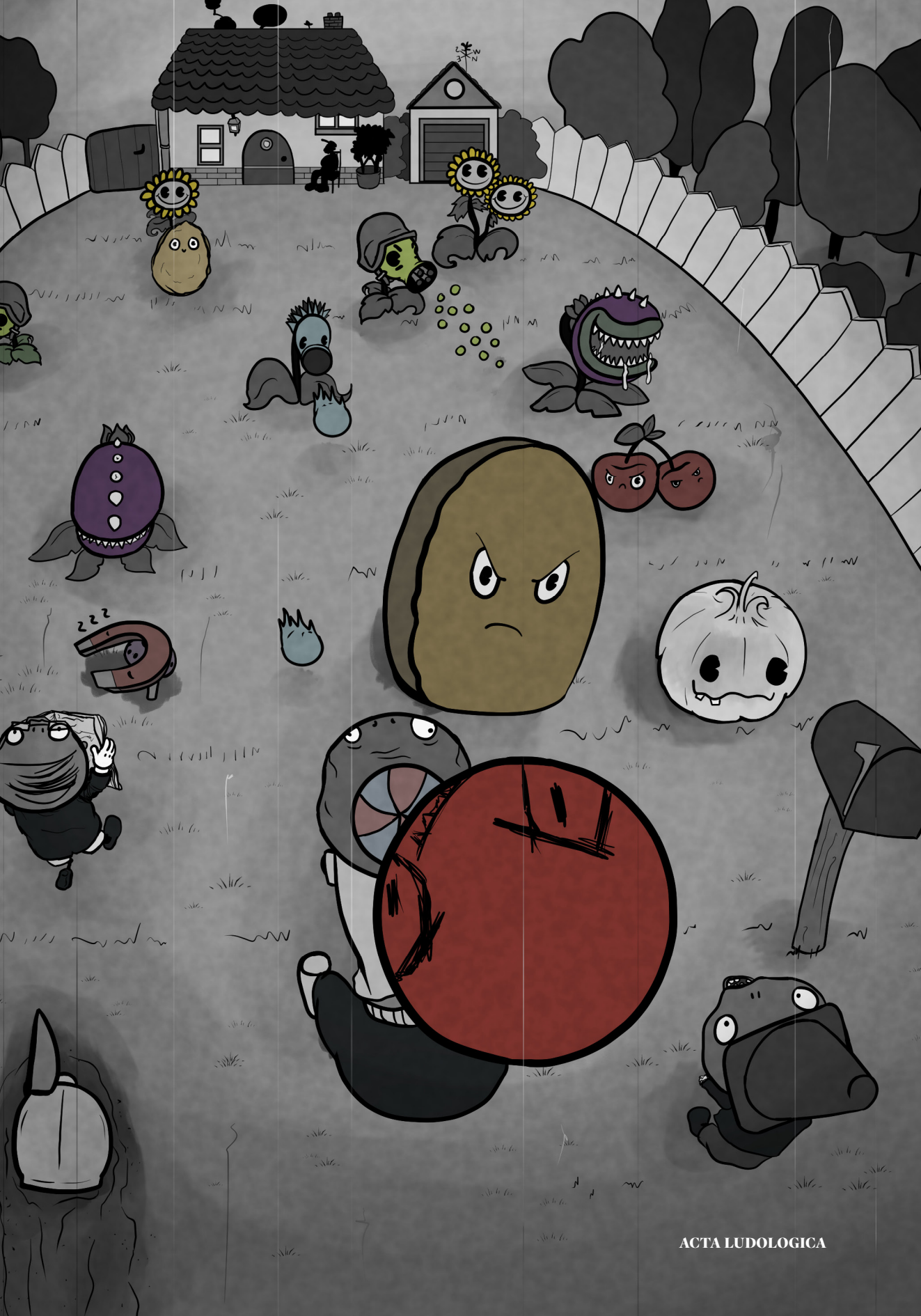

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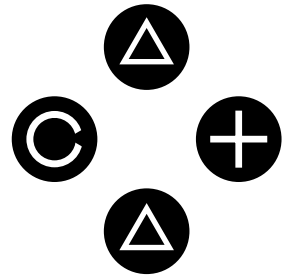

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