

**Cathartic Moments or Spatial Liberty:  
Variations of the interplay between fiction and games**

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**1. Introduction**

This essay does not pinpoint a specific region in Denmark, or anywhere else in the world, for that matters. It does not bear the stamp of national impact. What we have instead floats; it is time-less (although the technology that produces it is certainly not), and our subject is of the virtual, immaterial kind: computer games. Our focal point will be digital zeroes and ones that tell stories using ludic scenario – ‘story games’, one might say, or, to borrow a seminal phrase from Jay David Bolter, ‘topographic writing’, which is ‘not the writing of a place, but rather a writing *with* places, spatially realized topics’ (Bolter 1991: 25).

Such reterritorialization of fantasy does not come unchallenged. The following pages evolve around the tension between control and freedom exemplified through literature (‘codex signs’) and computer games. Can the hermeneutic materiality of words be linked to the interactive world voyaging of games; or are they forever separated? Literature, one could argue, is about constrained string of words, sequential fixations that despite the historic claim for the supremacy of the reader place the author as a controlling designer-God. Digital games,

contrary to this, exist (mostly) in spatial realms that act as a framework for the player's choices and actions. Yet, rather than a tragic mêlée between fixation and framing – which has also led to the undercurrent 'ludology-narratology debate' – one might ask whether 'fiction', instead of being foremost assigned to writing, is actually something that resides on an even deeper level than that of computers, books and films. In the following, I will investigate what a 'game' is; how we may understand the straightforward yet complex notion of 'gameplay'; and whether it is possible to play *Hamlet* – neither on stage, nor as adapted cinema, but hammering keyboard commands. Are computer games and prosaic heartbreak incompatible? Rather than scrutinizing the tools of literature and games I will contemplate on the *axiomatic* attributes of fictional media, games *and* literature combined. After these theoretical investigations I will provide a reading of the Danish videogame *Blackout* paying close attention to cathartic moments and/or spatial freedom. Although Deadline Game's *Blackout* with a storyline by Michael Valeur is by no means a recent game (it came out in 1997), it is indisputably a canonical work of art blending schizophrenia, film-noir, and the interactive capability of the adventure game genre. A brief note follows the *Blackout* section concerning the third person shooter slash adventure classic *Max Payne* (Rockstar Games 2001). Now, let us dig into the concept of fiction in which we will also meet a special character – the joker.

## **2. Fiction**

Literary theory, media studies, and, most recently, computer game theory (today known as 'ludology') have long struggled with obnoxious terms such as "fiction" and "fictionality". In its purest form we could say that fiction involves an experiential framing. We do it all the time, make up worlds. In order for a fiction to be trustworthy, we need to set up boundaries and believe in them. Some have perfected this enterprise of world making and boundary installment and raised it to a professional level that is unattainable by the rest of us. If one is a creative mind and wants to write a novel or direct a movie, the key is to decide what to put inside the

edges of the frame and what to leave out. For a long time, at least since Immanuel Kant's infamous accent on 'de-interestedness', in his third *Critique*, scholars of literary theory have highlighted de-personalization, that is, the generalization of intimate affairs, as a pivotal factor in the triumphant transformation of the mind, especially those of geniuses. The morale of New Criticism is that readers should enjoy the complexity of T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland* without scrutinizing the poet's literal life using it as a lens with which to spot the truth of the artwork. The art of making fiction becomes a matter of differentiation – inclusion and exclusion – and subsequently to master the cover-up mechanism so that the whimsicalities of a sole creator are instead crafted a mirror for the many. Images of fiction arrive in a multiplicity of forms, although they all demand that we venture into alien spaces, ranging from crystal clear realism to distorted atrocities, from the codes and norms of literature, to the projected worlds of cinema, and on to the interactive motor skills of the computer game.

According to the literary scholar Thomas Pavel, the frontiers of fiction separate it on the one side from myths, on the other from actual history. 'Fiction', he claims, 'is surrounded by *sacred* borders, by *actuality* and by *representational* borders' (Pavel 1986: 87). Inside these flexible borders, the confine of fiction is variously organized. For instance, in the ludic experiments of modernist literature the fictional arrangements are often such as to maximize the distance between the real and the imagined world. Think about Jorge Luis Borges or the openly playful inventions of the seventeenth-century French novel; the purpose of 'establishing these fictional spaces is not to increase the trade in conventional wisdom, but to expand our perception of fictional possibilities' (ibid, 88).

A well-known theorem tells us that we 'read for the plot', but suffice to say here that 'plot' is a trajectory through projected time and space. Borrowing a visual metaphor from modern physics, one might think of a plot as a journey through valleys and mountain peaks, basins of unsolved business followed by densely knitted regions where it all falls into place. In the meantime, the protagonist tries to unveil the conspiracy, solve the murder case, and redeem a fragile romance.

Therefore, world making consists of *differentiation*, *depersonalization*, and *trajectory*. Something is differentiated from something else; it is encircled; and depersonalized. These three modes count as rules to be obeyed, played with, read, or enacted, whether the world one is dealing with is or seems made up or not. Fiction and cinema establish, and necessitate, a contract between the virtual representation and the real and tangible reality of viewers and readers. Similarly, games require a magic circle. Otherwise they would not come into existence. Without the magic circle, no one would play games.

Recently the so-called ‘narratology versus ludology’ debate has arrived at the – perhaps more ideologically biased rather than theoretically informed – conclusion that narratives are about world manufacturing and temporality, whereas the ludic realm, computer games, are grounded in imperative rules set in complex worlds and secured by discrete mechanics (Frasca 2003). Games take place within a spatial, mostly three-dimensional environment in which interactivity and decision-making perform on a much more physical, hands-on level than the passive, hermeneutic universe of literature that resides inside the head. I think at least part of this polarization of codex fiction and games is naïve: First, the ludologists adopt an understanding of fictionality mostly reserved for pre-modernist literature that seldom toyed with time, space, and composition, or simply did not have the mental or cultural tools to ‘hypertextualise’ the literary form. Second, the ludologists’ critique of narratological formalization turns into a peculiar counter argument against their own methods: hardcore ludology typically ravel in formalist thinking. Third, embedded within the dichotomy of narration versus gameplay a transcendental notion of ‘story’, or some otherwise minimal reminiscence of ‘configurable space’ or ‘structured chain of events’, must prevail simply in order to ground the dichotomy in the first place. Convinced ludologists know exactly what they are *not* looking for.

Let me introduce the concept of ‘the joker’. There is a large and quite interesting history of jokers in European literature and philosophy; however, the most recent study of the joker’s role is arguably Michel Serres and his account of ‘the parasite’. For Serres the parasite is a

change agent, changing human relations (Serres 1982). The parasite is also a quasi-object that marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject, and thus the quasi-object creates the subject. Without the quasi-reality of fiction there would be no reader-believer; and without the quasi-imitation of the user's play-space there would be no player-immersion into the world of the game in the first place, with its semantic combination of fiction and simulation. Although different identifications of the quasi-object are possible, once identified, the quasi-object proceeds with irreversible, parasitical logic. Serres compares the quasi-object to the joker in a deck of cards; intrinsically, the joker has indeterminate value. However, once identified, the joker is critical to the game.

The point here is that a similar joker inhabits the threshold between reality and non-reality and he personifies 'Fiction'. The joker looks both ways, to the exterior of reality and to the interior of imagination. Think of the young man in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, the movie by Terry Gilliam, where the audience is tricked into believing that whatever goes on behind the mirror on the stage is, as it were, unreal but highly seductive and fascinating. We soon learn, however, that these wonderful, imaginative worlds are, in fact, real. And yet the joker is impossible to identify without disrupting our observation of what counts as respectively fictional and non-fictional. Fiction needs a border much more than content. Hence, the joker performs a very important and delicate task. He (or 'it') must convince us that the fiction is 'real' (meaning that it *really* is to be trusted), and at the same time he reminds us that there's no such thing, really, as an un-real real world. This double delicacy of the joker is the only *certain reality* of a fiction or a game. It is there because it is not there.

In the tradition of sociologists like Gregory Bateson and Niklas Luhmann the central mark of 'play' is the participants' ability to invest in something that is both real and, at the same time, not real. Bateson's own prime example is monkeys fooling around (Bateson 1979). They bite, and they do not bite. In fact, monkeys are good at 'not-biting', producing that particular bite which is simultaneously a bite and not a bite. Monkeys take fun very seriously: they bite the not-real bite for real. The distinctive cognition here, *pace* Bateson, is neither the

predicative nor transformative quality of the bite (the bite ‘is’; the bite ‘stands for’ ...) but rather the word ‘not’ – as in ‘this is *not* a bite’ and ‘this is *not* a non-bite’, at the same time. Empirically speaking, a monkey’s playful bite should not be hard, but not too soft; not soft, but not too hard.

The monkey illustration is analogous to the whereabouts of human players. One *really* puts an effort into killing foes in *Counter-Strike*; and yet one is closely aware, since this is part of playing’s tacit knowledge, that *in reality* those teams are merely pixels and virtual trickery. Once players lift the illusion of gameplay out into reality and violently transgress the confines of the magic circle, two things happen: Either the game turns into a ‘serious’ game, a meta-game, a game about what it means to play a game, or it vaporizes into no game at all. The same can be said about the joker and fiction. Once he is exposed, fiction turns into (speculative) meta-fiction, or fiction becomes untrustworthy and therefore loses fictionality (Walther 2007). When contestants fervently argue over a referee’s decision in a game of soccer, then their quarrel is definitely part of the game and a way of keeping track of the rule system. But to insist that the absolute goal of soccer is *not* to win would be a poisonous abortion of the very reality of the magic circle’s ontology.

In play, the deep fascination therefore lies in the oscillation between play and nonplay, which is the ‘other’ of play usually considered to be ‘reality’. In the playing of games, we are more fixated on progressing in the prior structure that is the game (Kirkpatrick 2004a: 74). Gaming presupposes the tension or the initial transgression in which we constantly resist falling out of the fantasy context of play. Furthermore, gaming also presupposes focus on a second, higher transgression in which success and failure is measured against our achievement of defined objectives. Thus, in playing a computer game, we work in a second simulacrum, an ‘as if structure’ overlain on top of the first initial transgression that makes play possible in the first place.

We can paraphrase this from a gamer’s point of view, claiming that as long as any communication on teleological concerns (the purpose, rights and wrongs of this and that) is

enacted within the ontology of the game, it's acceptable. If the communication takes place outside of this 'sacred' being, it immediately becomes obscure, dangerous and, exactly, beside the point.

As one commentator on an Internet war game forum puts it: 'A game where peace is the ultimate objective would not be fun at all. What would be the thrill of sitting in a room full of the world's leaders and negotiating a treaty? What would motivate people to bring more peace? People want action and adventure, not to pore over volumes of text and watch people NOT die'.

Fiction is a framing technique that projects instances over time and in which one can place – and has to play in accordance with – rules. The existence of the 'joker', for one, is an all-necessary, transcendental rule of fictionality. The fact that, when the joker is caught in the act, and made visible the subtle threads of fiction disintegrate is a further evidence of the Kantian nature of the joker. Kant believed that space and time were the underlying tools with which to grasp the world, but he also said that space and time were in themselves unfathomable. Besides being the transcendental base of the production and reception of other worlds, the joker also marks the unintelligible, *transcendent* realm of reason. And yet, there are what could be called *binding rules* and *mission rules*. Binding rules exist in order to keep the fictional world together, to unify it, to locate the alien world within our familiar world while also claiming the same world to be entirely different, thus requiring a simultaneous agenda of transgression and familiarity and of differentiation and unification. Mission rules demand the player to act, to perform, and, ultimately, to reach a more or less clearly defined goal. Thus, mission rules go hand in hand with the socio-semantic aspects of competition.

The joker must be aware of dangerous assertions such as 'is this for real?', or 'why do I play this?'. The joker installs these implicit utterances as the part and parcel of the ontology of 'other worlds'. The very anxiety of a negative affirmation of these questions is, simultaneously, the fabric of our repeating attempts to transgress the domain of non-play and non-fiction. This means, essentially, that we should acknowledge these questions while also trying to prevent

them from grapping too much of our attention amidst the alien space. We know that the joker is there; but we do not want him to be part of the story. We know that the referee is present in a game of soccer; but we resent him if he decides to kick the ball himself and score goals. But what is a game?

### 3. Gameplay

We will build a game bottom up. Forget about actual games such as Monopoly, chess, and checkers, or videogames like *Counter-Strike*, *The Sims*, and *Grand Theft Auto*.

First, we define parameters by conveying specific qualities to the game world we are developing, and as a whole the process is called *parametrization*. We scan our surroundings and create transitions from one place to another. We delineate, set up frontiers and build bridges. The world becomes a board. And now we can pretend as if the earth beneath our feet is poisoned, and we should probably ask if there's a sniper hiding somewhere. Second, we allocate values to the fields – remember, we are gradually moving from a continuous 'world' to a discontinuous 'board'. The world, once open and insignificant, is now closed and significant and full of meaning. This we call *valorization*, which further constitutes the need for rules signaling what can and cannot be done. For instance, we are only allowed to touch the ground two times, otherwise it's 'game over', and we may locate an 'ammo dump' where we recharge our weapon and gather strengths. Thirdly, we define our goals, as in *teleology*. Our game is all about winning. How do we win? By acting efficiently on the playing deck, knowing the values and meaning of the fields and mastering the space ('edges') around them.

Congratulations. We have designed a game in its most abstract form. It could be chess, or it could be *Counter-Strike*. What is required to play this game? The answer lies in the combination of game and play, ie. game-play. The word 'gameplay' is often deployed as a qualitative measure. Some think the action in *Counter*, in which terrorists and anti terrorists fight each other in a 'map', is a cool gameplay, while others instead enjoy adventure games

where the tempo is reduced and there is ample time to contemplate both narrative and fancy graphics. More elaborate definitions point to gameplay as the player's complex experience of the systemic, semantic, and structural features of the game, ie. game rules, game world, and game mechanics.

The most important feature of play, which is one half of the term game-play, is to *be* there, that is, to be present. One has to invest in the activity of play. The other players mock those who do not take the immersive phenomenology and the 'flow' of play seriously and eventually the latter group will be banned from play. The arena that encircles play is known as a 'magic circle'. By stepping into this circle one abandons reality or, strictly speaking, non-play. Almost, at least. The practices of everyday life, work, leisure, family duties, and so on, threaten to obstruct the ontology of the magic circle; and yet, a set of unique rules, even natural laws, exists within the domain of play. The worst thing about playing is without a doubt interruption because it is a termination of the 'sacred' duration of the circle. So, the best thing about play is when it just goes on and on. Play is *presence*.

A chessboard can serve as our archetypical example of games. The board is divided into sixty-four discrete fields with no continuous transitions between them. Either one is on one or the other field since one cannot be in the middle. This is gaming in a nutshell; play has become discretized; the free space of play is transformed into the fixed structure of the game board. Games are *progression*. You should not ask why you play but, rather, how to get from A2 to F4.

We can rewrite Martin Heidegger's term *Dasein* for our purposes. While play is *DaSein*, emphasizing the present sense and the phenomenological quality of being, games are *DaSein* that highlight the quest for progression as a particular mode of existence – not the 'beingness' of being-present, as in play, but the 'being-*there*-ness' of games. Hence, gameplay translates into an equation:  $\text{Gameplay} = \text{progression} + \text{presence}$ .

#### 4. Hamlet revisited

Is it possible to play *Hamlet*? There is a catch to this: we are not only asking whether '*Hamlet: The Game*' would be a blockbuster but also if Hamlet as player-avatar is recommendable. The answer is no. Shakespeare's initial cliffhanger evaporates once the player is situated on a wrong level, that is, if she arrives too soon or too late to face Hamlet's sudden experience of deceit and domestic intrigue. The literary strength of *Hamlet* is precisely the plot control, that is, the way that the trajectory through events in time and space is vigilantly orchestrated. It is crucial that Hamlet discovers, *in a specific moment*, what goes on around him and subsequently decides to act insane. This moment and this willful act are the *peripeteia* of the narrative, the reversal of circumstances, and the turning point of the story. In other words: The kind of freedom enjoyed in a computer game in which character and reader-player melts together to create a story of her own is indeed powerless when it comes to the ordered sequentiality of epic fiction. Hamlet's catharsis counts for nothing if undiscovered. The Norwegian novelist Jan Kjærstad reflects on this in an autobiographic book about the future of writing:

"[When] the sequential order of the text is highly predetermined by the reader (and by coincidence), and not by the author – even though the author decides which words and paragraphs should contain links – we lose what is essentially the goal of a literary work: to create insight, recognition [...] We lose the possibility of the moment of catharsis" (Kjærstad 1999: 209f.).

According to game theoretician Gonzalo Frasca games and fiction – or *ludus* and narrative – disclose similar structures in the sense of a game 'session' being equal to the fixed 'sequence' of a narrative. "However", he goes on, "that does not mean that they are the same thing. For an external observer, an adventure videogame *session* will look like a group of narrative sequences" (Frasca 1999). But while observers are passive, the player is active, and if she does not act, there will be no game – at least in the articulated and not purely virtual sense – and therefore no session at all.

Moving back to the dilemma of catharsis the hitch is that one cannot interact with a cliffhanger that has already taken place, and, likewise, one cannot directly interact with a cliffhanger that one is already aware will take place. This ‘taking place’ impinges on the temporal and spatial set-up of the story, whether session or sequence based. In a game, either to know all too well in advance or to be ignorant of a specific moment after the event challenges the temporal structure of an otherwise organized narrative; and, furthermore, to be present at the location, the *place* where something is bound to happen according to the internal arrangement of the story, becomes downright boring if nothing of interest happens here. A vital trade, therefore, of the joker is to merge the organization of time and the occurrence of space into one and doing so by authorizing control of a narrated sequence. It is exactly this merger that is broken in computer games.

### **5. I am Gabriel (and Max Payne)**

“My name is [Bo] or, at least, that’s what I think it is. I’m not so sure of what I wake up from. The last I remember is that I sat down in front of my computer. I feel like a stranger yet in the meantime the space around me feels familiar. I feel my toes against the floor, sense the well known smell in the room. I hear the sounds outside. Where am I? – Have a peculiar taste in my mouth. As if I haven’t talked in a long time. Who am I?”

This is how the Danish adventure game *Blackout* (1997), produced by Deadline Games and designed by artist and writer Michael Valeur, begins. Following the opening sequence, an endless array of avatars, each sitting by a computer, multiplies across the screen, fading into each other and vanishing leaving our screen ego to investigate a dark and bloody apartment. In there we find a woman’s body with a severed head. Right after this grotesque discovery we suffer a blackout and are thrown out into the streets in the suburban area that is one of four boroughs of the game world.

It is quite obvious that *Blackout*, in an effort to suck the player into the story, adopts a culture anxious to comment upon its own construction behind the told story. Among other

things, *Blackout* is meta-textual since the linear succession is constantly suspended. The player is explicitly misguided; and yet she willingly allows the deceit.

If a game breaks the illusion – if it fails to indicate its unity through its difference from its other and itself – one is likely to be thrown back into a kind of futile and diffuse play. In *Blackout* the user takes on the role of Gabriel who suffers from severe schizophrenia (he has no less than four split personalities) and amneses. The plot within the game is both traditional, in that it carefully peels off layer after layer of hidden psychologies, and allegorical: the fact that our alter ego (Gabriel) is a schizophrenic can be read as a figural dissemination of what would be the starting point of most computer games: I am and am not the character I am playing. In a similar fashion, Gabriel's memory loss might be interpreted as a kind of meta-fiction that point towards a common game feeling. One has to complete the game in order to 'remember' what happened. One must proceed to the end of the line to fully grasp the offspring of the line. This is the detective novel with an interactive catch-22 effect.

All of this is good, and it surely puts the game on the high side of industrial tricks. But on one occasion, *Blackout* – perhaps inadvertently – cuts short the imperative illusion. In a particular scene we are asked by an old fortune-teller to 'click' on a symbol on the screen. Abruptly, we are thrown back to square one, unintentionally recollecting the initial hocus-pocus – that we made a contract in order to play, and that we adapted and interacted with the structural complexity in order to game (in the active sense). Therefore, at this point there is a profound focus on playing, i.e. being present rather than being present *there*. We are forced into making a crossing operation stepping from the structural progression of the game into the frail realm of play and non-play.

However, as it happens, rather than treating the represented game world as a detached object within the play environment (i.e. a screen instead of a game element), we can compete *against* the game. *Blackout* is organized as a complex series of interchangeable choices and levels of proactive interactions. While we think we are "reading" the machine (meaning its scripted actions), the machine is also "reading" the composition of our choices. But once we get

the sense of this (to what extent do our interactions influence the path that the machine is directing us into?), we are able to "foresee" this action pattern and thus play "against" the machine – as if we were given the chance to re-design the map underneath the very landscape we interacted with. This is gaming, then, and actually on a higher level. We are not just completing the game's mission; we are also challenging the organization that frames this mission.

Such desire to read the code that reads and directs the player is a sign of the cynicism of digital epistemology. Ultimately it is a desire to gain freedom in order to regain control. The player that continuously searches for the underlying atlas and machinery of the game is the quintessential hacker, the digital penetrator, as elaborated by tech philosopher Graeme Kirkpatrick:

In essence, the hacker is someone who is disrespectful of the rules that are codified into the machine interface and which attempt to regulate the course of interaction with it. The hacker sees through the interface and knows it to be a cynical mask on the underlying machine (Kirkpatrick 2004b: 6)

Evidently, *Blackout* needs a joker to protect the boundary between the fictional layer of the game and the immersion of the player within that layer. According to Michel de Certeau stories perform an important function in everyday life by setting limitations. By describing space they arrange and order cultural domains. As such they do not only set limits but also alter boundaries: '[...] one can see that the primary function is to authorize the establishment, displacement or transcendence of limits' (De Certeau 1984: 123). To describe this paradoxical quality of boundaries, he distinguishes two narrative figures in every story that respectively have the power to fix boundaries and to revise them, namely the frontier and the bridge (Lammes: 2008).

Frontiers, de Certeau suggests, create spatial forms such as regions and empires. Bridges, on the other hand, point to alien exteriority, the 'other' of what has been demarcated by the frontier, such as other nations, unconquered territories or no-man lands. However, the relation

between the two is dynamical. The frontier has a ‘bridging’ quality because it is the point of contact between the two entities it separates. In itself it does not belong to either entity (De Certeau 1984, 126-28). Frontiers are in that sense twilight zones.

Frontiers seem to bear resemblance to the concept of the joker as mentioned above. A game like *Blackout* invites a continuous transgression from the space of the player to the space of the game, and vice versa; and at the same time it blocks this contact by a sudden reference to the game being played, and not the game being told. The delicacy of the joker, as well as *Blackout*’s intricate meta-fictional dimension, point to the simultaneous existence of frontier and bridge. This paradoxical simultaneity splits in two directions: as an invitation to be a part of the game’s fiction *and* as a blockage from merging completely into the *modus operandi* of this fiction. On a deep level, stories are playgrounds of delineated domains, and the trick – carefully supervised by the joker – is to jump into and out of the playground, *while remaining in the playground*.

Many games seem to disrupt the unfolding of narratives within game worlds in order to assist the player in how to control the keyboard, how to set up the buttons on the joystick, etc. One example (Juul 2006: 158f.) among many is the GameCube game *Pikmin* in which our avatar is a scientist stranded on an unknown planet. In the course of gameplay, the scientist takes notes in a diary that is displayed on the screen, including notes about the handling of the controller. According to Juul there is nothing ‘artistic’ about this deliberate mix of fictional representation and game control commands. In fact, this confusion even strengthens the fiction: since the player ‘is’ the avatar, notes about the controller is “exactly the kind of thing we would write down if we were to take notes about our playing of the game” (ibid., 159).

Another example, however, tells us that the reference system of games is not always that straightforward. In the adventure based first-person-shooter *Max Payne* we are, as noted by Søren Pold (Pold 2005), caught in a stratified maze controlled by drug lords and corrupt police on the level of the plot and the cybernetic game engine on the

structural level. More than allocating the in-game story as a motivation for gameplay, which is typical of the genre, *Max Payne* designates the narrative as a cliché; the Hollywood signs “point towards narrative structure in general rather than support the particular narrative” (Pold, *ibid.*). Pold continues:

[...] the game could be interpreted as a self-conscious intervention in the ongoing debate about the roles of narrative in computer games. Narrative becomes an effect that the game self-consciously alludes to and puts on but does not fulfil in the deep Aristotelian way imagined by the proponents of interactive narrative. This is narrative surface or skin that does not attempt to become hegemonic, covering all aspects of the game, but like postmodern novels and cinema alludes to narrative, quotes it, without fully enacting it (Pold 2005).

In a graphic novel sequence in the drugged opening of the third act, Max Payne finally realizes and reveals to the player that he is nothing but a pixelated avatar in a computer game. Suddenly, Max Payne, as a pre-condition for the game’s plot, questions the initial and vital transgression of play. Consequently, through the meta-fictional confession we are thrown into play-mode. Why play if the character that is supposed to glue together playful praxis and structured game space is genuinely untrustworthy?

Payne’s existence serves only the endless repetition of the game, which is the at once dull and sophisticated blend of ‘realism to the max’ and ‘max pain’, advertised through the graphical user interface with its weaponry, red bar, and bullet time on-off-button. Pold concludes by categorizing *Max Payne* as “illusionistic media realism” (Pold 2005), a realism that simultaneously engages in illusion and can be viewed as a self-reflexive exploration of its own representational techniques and media.

## **6. Playability: Closing remarks**

Even though games and non-interactive media copy from each others domains – which nowadays is natural evidence for the much celebrated media convergence (Jenkins 2006) – there are still dictating differences. First, the codex sign in its traditional form, as non-interactive materiality, is a realized action (or string of actions); whereas games frame or scaffold actions. This difference between realization and framing is a simple yet crucial difference. Second, literature may envision or invent stories that play with the potential of interactivity, but it can never materialize this potential. To a certain degree, literature is inspired by space and spatial modalities (ancient literature was oral, and classical rhetoric stressed the physicality of narration), and literature may further borrow elements from the structure and dynamics of games; but it does not for that reason become games, ontologically speaking. In a similar vein, games may *adopt* certain hermeneutic expressions and artistic qualities; but it happens in order to support a cultural teleology that chiefly has to do with immersing oneself as an auxiliary alter ego – or a schizophrenic ‘I’ proliferating across the interface, as in *Blackout*.

Ludology is quite right in postulating a genuine and unsurpassable difference between the fixed causalities of books and movies as opposed to the interactive user friendliness of computer games. Codex literature and cinema are for the mind; computer games are for the fingers. This insight should not, however, block investigations into the rich intercrossing of rules of fiction and rules of gamespace. How else should we explain the artistic beauty of *Memento* or *The Matrix* if not through the style and history of videogames? Rather than to continue to polarize methodologies focusing on either ‘fiction’ or ‘interactivity’, claiming an unbridgeable gap between narratology and ludology, it would be much more rewarding to consider a number of media forms – the ones we have, and the ones we will see in the future – as more or less reflected derivations of differentiated framings. Between a stiflingly traditionalist and a wildly expansionist approach ‘narrative’ can be scrutinized as ‘avatars of story’, i.e. cognitive constructs with an invariant nucleus of meaning that can however mold into a variety of shapes (Ryan 2006: xviii). There are many similarities between undertaking a mission and thrusting a narrative; and there are many ways in which the binding rules of a

fiction may be transformed into the exact edges of a discrete game-space. As an ancient mode of culture, ‘to tell a story’ might share distinct features with the invention of the game board as well as with the phantasmagoria of quests and their narrated/playable travels from A to B to C. There would be no strategy games without *The Holy Grail*, and there would be no adventure games without *The Odyssey*.

‘Playability’, hence, signifies the ontology of framed experiences at its most basic or indeed naïve level; it merely states that the material at hand (a book, a movie, a game) demands a linear journey along its paths, a confirmation of its binding forces (so that one is not bored or alienated into asking the ‘why do I play?’ question), and a desire to continuously reterritorialize the open ‘play’ into the more rigid and striated ‘game’. In fact, this is an anti-Deleuzian claim; rather than the call for a ‘Body without Organs’ that thrives like a madman amidst the open-ended autonomy of nomadic anarchy (Deleuze 1987: 149ff.), the underlying thesis here is one of an inevitable return to a ‘striated’, grid-fixed game universe. Ultimately, ‘flight lines’ becomes telic lines; not necessarily unmovable guidelines, but guidelines nonetheless. There’s nothing wrong with reading a game, and having a fun time doing it.

## **Literature**

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