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Visualizing Fantastika

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Fantastika, coined by John Clute, is an umbrella term which incorporates the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but can also include alternate histories, gothic, steampunk, young adult fiction, or any other imaginative space. This issue features extended articles from the 1st Annual Fantastika Conference: Visualizing Fantastika, held July 2014 at Lancaster University. The conference examined the visual possibilities of the fantastic in a wide range of arts and media.

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Will Smith, Lancaster University

Canadian and Torontonion Joe Shuster co-created Superman in 1938, drawing on his experiences at the Toronto Daily Star to define Clark Kent’s everyday life as a reporter. Despite Shuster’s Canadian co-authorship of the definitive American comic book superhero, John Bell suggests “Canadians are probably too wary of the uncritical portrayal of unrestrained heroism and power for the superhero genre ever to become a mainstay of the country’s indigenous comic art” (84). Bell’s comments express national scepticism towards American myths of heroism, perhaps best summed up in the equally iconic Canadian trope of the ‘beautiful loser’. Whilst comic books may heighten these distinct senses of a national narrative, they are also the potential sites of encounter for intersecting national cultural narratives. One such encounter can be seen in the recent “Justice League Canada” storyline of American publisher DC Comics’ Justice League United. Echoing its past connections with Canada, DC Comics’ Canadian cartoonist Jeff Lemire has created a superhero team storyline set explicitly in Northern Ontario, Canada, also introducing an Indigenous female superhero named Equinox to the DC comic book universe. Cree, and from Moose Factory, Ontario, the hero Equinox is in everyday life the teenager Miiyahbin Marten. Whilst the ‘DC universe’ is firmly a realm of the fantastic, Lemire’s storyline underscores how its characters provide real-life negotiations of American, Canadian and Indigenous identity. National boundaries, identities and sovereignties are potentially re-enforced and challenged through “Justice League Canada”, and particularly in the visualisation of Equinox. The mainstream storyworlds of American comic books are complicated by this negotiation of plural sovereignties.

Speaking the Unspeakable and Seeing the Unseeable: The Role of Fantastika in Visualising the Holocaust, or, More Than Just *Maus* 27-40

Glyn Morgan, University of Liverpool

This article argues for the representability of the Holocaust, or rather, it advocates the intention to represent. True representation is impossible and yet, despite the protestations of opponents such as Nobel prize winner Elie Wiesel, it is necessary. Due to the traumatic nature of the Holocaust, and the inability of those who have not experienced it to truly comprehend the terrors it entails, mimetic modes of representation are insufficient. As such, non-mimetic or fantastic modes have a vital role to play and this has been recognised from the earliest opportunity, as this article shall show. Non-mimetic Holocaust fiction begins in the camps themselves with Hurst Rosenthal’s *Mickey in Gurs* (1941) depicting Mickey mouse as a prisoner of Gurs camp, later in 1944 Calvo et al. used barnyard fable imagery to depict France’s role in the war and the brutal occupation. Both of these pieces act as precursor to the genre defining non-mimetic Holocaust piece: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986;1991). All three of these texts use animal imagery and metafictionality to elaborate on the mimetic historical record in some manner. The article will draw to a conclusion by examining a fourth text, or more specifically a single character

within a set of texts, Magneto from Marvel comics' *The X-Men*. Magneto stands as an example of fantastical fiction, in this case the superhero comic, appropriating the Holocaust to deepen and extend its own narrative, as opposed to Rosenthal, Calvo, and Spiegelman use of the fantastic to augment their Holocaust narrative. In doing so, Magneto's character offers us a different view point of the intersection between the visual fantastic and one of the most terrifying horrors on the 20th century.

Adapting George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*
Asami Nakamura, University of Liverpool

41-55

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon claims that "Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (7). If so, what does it mean to adapt George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)? According to Tom Moylan, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is a narrative of "anti-utopian pessimism" that "forecloses the possibility of any social transformation" (161-2). This is surely epitomised by the core image which the novel provides, that is, "a picture of the future" as "a boot stamping on a human face—forever" (NEF 280). Does adapting an anti-utopia further strengthen its myth of sheer closure, or does it create a kind of an anti-utopia with a difference? This article first aims to establish the theoretical position in adaptation studies while discussing Orwell's novel itself as an appropriation of several precursory novels. The second part of the article then focuses on adaptations which illustrate this theoretical perspective, that is, two film adaptations (released in 1956 and in 1984 respectively) and the recent theatre adaptation (released in 2013), while also discussing Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil* (1985) as an appropriation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The transition of adapter's focus from the content to the form is detected alongside the intensification of the level of irony. Through this analysis, this article explores the concept of adaptation as a critical device, which casts light on the nature of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an intertextual phenomenon, rather than a unitary object. Those adaptations reconfigure the network of meanings in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, revealing various faces of anti-utopia.

Simulation Frames: Young Adult Dystopian Cinema
Alison Tedman, Buckinghamshire New University

56-70

This article examines the ways in which Young Adult dystopian film *Divergent* (2014) successfully repurposes dystopia for a young demographic, making dystopia an aesthetically appealing space for heroic adventure. The film recombines Young Adult literary tropes with film conventions including those of science fiction. *Divergent* and other Young Adult dystopian films modify the potential for social critique associated with canonic dystopian fiction. The article's critical framework includes theories of dystopia and of Young Adult dystopian literature, the Freudian uncanny, studies of the post-apocalyptic film city and new media theory. In *Divergent*, the dystopian division of society into factions is made enjoyable through production design, particularly in 'Dauntless', the faction joined by heroine Tris. This extends to transmedia marketing. The book's violence is reduced to increase audience engagement, while lack of contextual detail precludes a critical dystopia. In *Divergent*, the spaces and ideologies of the post-apocalyptic film city are reframed as youth culture. Chicago is gamified, connoting an adventure playground. The space of the Dauntless 'Pit' offers symbolic rebirth, community and romance, yet its appeal is uncanny, as with communal spaces in *The Host* (2013) and *The Maze Runner* (2014). *Divergent's* mirror simulation foregrounds spectacle but other simulations construct immediacy, appearing dream-like not immersive. Like the visions in Young Adult dystopian adaptations *How I Live Now* (2013) and *Ender's Game* (2013), simulations convey individual awareness and supernatural communication. The film combines pleasurable classification and a divergence motif with its heroine's development, revising dystopian cinematic space. *Divergent* represents a new form of dystopian cinema.

The Monstrous Transformation of the Self: Translating Japanese Cyberpunk and the Posthuman into the Living World **71-85**

Orion Mavridou, Abertay University

Neon-lit noir and technology-driven body horrors, oppressive metropolises and vast industrial landscapes, and in the midst of it all a fragile humanity struggling to maintain a semblance of itself in a post-human future —the world of cyberpunk is as visually stimulating as it is disturbing. Within its own subgenre, Japanese cyberpunk indulges further into this liminal imagery; featuring an ostensible fetish for futuristic teratology, it embodies its central conflict of “man vs. machine” in its protagonists’ bizarre and monstrous metamorphoses. In 1997, *Final Fantasy VII* presented gamers with a unique entry point into the insular realms of both East Asian RPGs and Japanese cyberpunk. Considered by many as the quintessential example of the *Final Fantasy* series and the archetypal cinematic videogame, *Final Fantasy VII* paints its own brand of a dystopian future with an eclectic range of visual influences, from *Blade Runner* and shōjo manga to Victorian gothic and religious symbolism. This article will be presenting a textual analysis of the aesthetics and visual evolution of *Final Fantasy VII* within the context of the wider Japanese cyberpunk subgenre, as well as reflecting on the outcomes of a practical study on the fan-driven crossmedia adaptation of the game’s visual language into costumed performance (i.e. cosplay). For the purposes of this research, the author went through the process of recreating and performing the costume and character of Vincent Valentine; one of the many player avatars in *Final Fantasy VII*, whose narrative arc is a characteristic example of the techno-scientific body horror, dehumanization and psychosexual repression which lie at the root of the Japanese cyberpunk ethos. Alongside the author’s close reading of the media text, this article offers an illustration of the researcher/cosplayer’s allegorical metamorphosis from the mundane into the extraordinary, from human into posthuman.

Losers Don’t Play Videogames . . . Heroes Do: The Remediation of Videogames in 1980s Science Fiction Films **86-94**

Dawn Stobbart, Lancaster University

A decade before the first adaptation of a videogame to film (*Super Mario Brothers*, 1993), computer and arcade videogames were incorporated as subject matter in mainstream Hollywood films such as *War Games* (1983), *The Terminator* (1984), and *The Last Starfighter* (1984), presenting the new medium through a science fictional lens. While these films aired widespread anxieties about the ability of computers and videogames to start global wars and override human social structures and agency, at the same time, they offered a counterpoint to the traditional masculine hero, which this article will explore, situating the adolescent within the historical context of the 1980s, film, and videogames. The article will also consider the rhetorical questions raised by these films: the protagonist of *War Games* both inadvertently sets off and stops a chain of events that would lead to World War III. He does more than save the world from his own error, however: he teaches the government’s military computer to think and humanises the machine, rendering it less dangerous. When the protagonist of *The Last Starfighter* beats the arcade game for which the film is named, he is visited by aliens, who inform him that they planted the game in hope of finding a hero with shooting skills that can save the galaxy from its enemies. They transport him to fight that war, and he emerges a victorious hero. All of these films reinvent the adolescent as a hero, and at the same time, question the role of technology as a growing part of 1980s culture.

To Fatality and Beyond: The Deathsetics of Failure in Videogames **95-108**

Stephen Curtis, Lancaster University

From the early static ‘Game Over’ screens of 1980s videogames to the elaborate and snuff-like voyeurism of contemporary character death videos, the end of games has always held the potential for a final realisation of the

death drive that motivates the player. As technology has developed and enabled the increasing realism, or, more accurately, fidelity, of videogame visuals, a concomitant fascination with the death of the player character has arisen. My article examines the ways in which we can read the aesthetic nature of this development. The relationship between avatar deaths and visual fidelity is emblematic of the rapidly increasing economic aspects of the gaming industry. The constant deaths and restarts of the coin-op arcade games necessitated a killscreen as a financial imperative - 'Insert coin to continue' - but gaming's filmic aspirations, and the accompanying budgets, seem to have reversed this relationship. Instead of frustrating the player through constant deaths, modern games do not require such a transparent application of the economics of play. It is ironic, therefore, that recent games such as *Dark Souls* have become so unexpectedly popular because of their willingness to kill the player. My article argues for a notion of 'deathsetics' predicated on the idea that death is a necessary part of the pleasure of playing games. I provide a brief history of virtual death in games and offer some explanations as to why this aspect has continued to be so central to the gaming experience.

Professional Game Artists: An investigation into the primary considerations that impact upon their work, and the effects upon their creative practice **109-120**
Ken Fee, Abertay University

This article represents the author's preliminary research into an area of creative practice that he pursued for some 20 years, namely that of a full time professional computer game artist. Initially collaborating with academics as a part time lecturer and industrial consultant, for the past eight years his roles within academia have focused on developing pedagogical models of professional practice within games education. Through his interaction with students, employers and graduates, the author began to identify an area of keen personal interest – namely, the actual realities of being a professional game artist, and the potential consequences on creative practice. In identifying the constraints and influences that direct such an artist's work, it is the intention that a broader discussion may then follow, exploring how such artists can protect their creative muse, when the evidence would suggest that many aspects of the games industry are an absolute anathema to individual expression. In addition to his own experiences and research, the author has drawn on interviews with other professionals from games development, as well as artists who work in other areas of professional artistic practice (such as Fine Art, Illustration, and Comics). In this way his intention is to identify the areas of practice common to other areas of art, while highlighting any of the more unique elements present specifically within games development itself. While there is a large body of research into game design principles and technologies, there is very little discussion that focuses on the very people that make them. It is the author's hope that this article plays some small part in starting to redress this balance, and may help the reader to appreciate the challenges such artists face.

A note on the contributors

Brian Baker is a Lecturer in English at Lancaster University and was a keynote for the Visualizing Fantastika conference. He writes mainly in the fields of masculinities, science fiction and critical/creative writing. He has recently published the *Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism: Science Fiction* (2014), *Contemporary Masculinities in Fiction, Film and Television* (Bloomsbury, 2015), and the collaborative online narrative *The Barrow Rapture*.

Will Smith completed a PhD in Canadian Literature at the University of Nottingham in 2012. He is currently associate lecturer in the Department of English and Creative Writing and a 2014/2015 knowledge exchange fellow at Lancaster University.

Glyn Morgan has an MA in Science Fiction Studies from the University of Liverpool. He is currently researching his Ph.D thesis at the University of Liverpool on non-mimetic fiction and the Holocaust. He founded and has co-run the Current Research in Speculative Fiction (CRSF) conference for five successive years as well as conferences on alternate history, and classics and sf. He is the editor of *Vector: The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association*. For more information on his work see: <http://glyn-morgan.blogspot.co.uk/>

Asami Nakamura is a postgraduate research student in the department of English at The University of Liverpool. Her MA dissertation on dystopian fiction was accepted at The University of Tokyo in 2012. She has published essays such as "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Multidimensional Critique of Rebellion" in *The Journal of American and Canadian Studies*.

Alison Tedman is a Senior Lecturer at Buckinghamshire New University. She teaches Film and Media Studies and has written and taught many modules in Film, Media and Critical Theory at the University since the 1990s. Her PhD from the University of Kent theorised fairy-tale cinema. Young Adult dystopian cinema is among her research interests.

Orion Mavridou is a postgraduate student and part-time lecturer in the University of Abertay Dundee. After completing a BA with Honours in Computer Arts in 2012 and a Masters in Games Development over the following year, he received his first publication in a peer-reviewed journal on the subject of fandom and copyright. His academic interests revolve around cosplay, fan fiction, game design, and the relationship between amateur and professional creativity.

Dawn Stobart is in the final stages of PhD study at Lancaster University's English Department. She has a Ba (Hons) in English Literature and an MA in Contemporary Literature, and is currently focusing on the way that videogames function as a carrier for narrative and its role within this medium as part of her PhD study. She has an interest in contemporary Literature, and especially the way this translates to the videogame. Within videogame studies, she has conducted research into Gothic fiction, Posthuman fiction, folklore, and focusing on how videogames construct narratives for these genres. She is also interested in contemporary Gothic fiction, and is currently exploring Stephen King's fiction as a source for academic study.

Stephen Curtis is currently Assistant Director of the first-year World Literature course at Lancaster University. His doctoral thesis was entitled *An Anatomy of Blood in Early Modern Tragedy*, a project that is currently being adapted into a monograph. Although he specialises in Early Modern drama and literature, he has also written and delivered papers on contemporary Gothic, videogame theory and horror cinema. His research

interests, although chronologically varied, are linked by a fascination with the human body and the extremes to which artistic representation can take it.

Ken Fee is a Lecturer and Programme Leader at Abertay University in Dundee. Originally a games developer, his professional publications span 25 years, from *Grand Theft Auto* to children's games such as *Room on the Broom*. His primary areas of research are the fusion between technology and creativity, and the development of effective pedagogical models for professional practice within games development.

Introduction to the “Visualizing Fantastika” Issue of *The Luminary*

BRIAN BAKER

What is fantastika? It’s a term that doesn’t have the currency of science fiction, fantasy, or the Gothic. It was coined by John Clute, editor of the *Science Fiction Encyclopaedia*, a critic who has been working in the fields of science fiction and the fantastic since the 1960s. The definition in the *Encyclopaedia* reads like this:

A convenient shorthand term employed and promoted by John Clute since 2007 to describe the armamentarium of the fantastic in literature as a whole, encompassing science fiction, Fantasy, fantastic horror and their various subgenres. [...] Generic works written within the time-frame and overall focus of fantastika generally exhibit an awareness – on the author’s part, or embedded into the text, or both – that they are in fact generic; that stories within the overall remit are usually most effective (and resonant) when read literally; and that the pre-emptive transgressiveness of fantastika is most salutary within the context of the Western World, but when addressed “outwards” can seem invasive. (Clute n.p.)

‘Fantastika’ is an umbrella term of sorts, an attempt to provide a looser framework of generic inter-relatedness in fields which are beset by issues of definition.¹ Not least of those issues is the term ‘fantastic in literature’, which itself could be deployed as a kind of umbrella term (as in the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*) but brings with it the spectre of the work of Tzvetan Todorov, whose *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Genre* (1973) remains deeply influential on critical writings on the fantastic and of Fantasy literature more generally.² Todorov’s definition of the fantastic is useful but formally limited. He argues that fictions that contain inexplicable events or things which ultimately can be explained by rational means fall into the generic field of ‘the uncanny’; fictions that contain events of things which are ultimately not explainable rationally (such as in the use of magic) are ‘the marvellous’. The ‘pure fantastic’ are texts which maintain an ambiguity as to the status of these strange phenomena right up to the end of the text: they are ‘undecidable’ in a radical way. Very few texts fall into this category, of course; Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1899) is one of very few.

‘Fantastika’ is then a term which attempts to work around a Todorovian perspective on ‘the fantastic’. (Where to put science fiction in his scheme? Surely, sf works through what Suvin calls the ‘novum’, an invented newness which is not part of our world. But what if that ‘novum’ can be explained rationally and scientifically? Is sf part of ‘the marvellous’ or ‘the uncanny’?) What is particularly interesting about Clute’s definition given in the *Encyclopaedia* is in the centrality of a kind of self-consciousness: ‘Generic works written within the time-frame and overall focus of fantastika generally exhibit an awareness – on the author’s part, or embedded into the text, or both – that they are in fact generic’. Another word for this might be intertextuality, of course – that at a certain point in the development of a genre, one text will consciously *and unconsciously* draw upon and refer to other texts. This is why, one can assume, that the *Encyclopaedia* excludes ‘Proto-SF’ from ‘fantastika’, as it cannot

display the same degree of generic self-consciousness. Clute suggests that 'fantastika' can be seen to develop in the early 1800s: in the lee of first-wave Gothic, with texts such as *Frankenstein* (1818).³ 'Fantastika', then, seeks to work across generic divisions and sub-divisions, allowing scholars and writers working on sf, Fantasy, the Gothic, horror and hybrid texts to enter into dialogue, to see similarities and shared concerns across these fields. This is, of course, how genres themselves develop: by importation, stealing, hybridization. Genres are not 'pure'. When I teach science fiction to undergraduates, I often look at the generic boundaries rather than at 'classic' examples of the genre, because this enables us to see how sf texts work intertextually both within and without the genre: *Alien* and horror or the Weird; *The Time Traveler's Wife* and the romance; *Blade Runner* and the Gothic. 'Fantastika' is a means by which those connections can be made more visible, and the several fields that it encompasses made more rich.

In July 2014 *Visualising Fantastika* took place at Lancaster University, a one-day conference that drew on scholars working across the UK. I was privileged to be invited by Charul (Chuckie) Patel, the chief organizer, to give a keynote, alongside that of the graphic novelist Bryan Talbot. Grasping an opportunity (as I had long admired Talbot's work), I gave a talk called 'Zeppelins, Iron Towers and Brass Engines', which looked at how comic book writers and artists, in particular Talbot in his *Luther Arkwright* and *Grandville* books, and in the Alan Moore/Kevin O'Neill series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, used the form of the late 19th-century scientific romance to critique Empire, both in its pre-WW2 British and contemporary 'neo-Imperialist' forms.⁴ The three icons of the title I used to explore some of the pre-occupations of these comic-book neo-scientific romances, namely: war and global extensions of domination; utopia and 'nostalgia for the future'; and the hidden machinery of power. While I took quite a direct (even literal) approach to the idea of 'visualising fantastika', the methods and subject matter of other presenters was wide-ranging and plural, from literature to films to film adaptations to games. This issue of *The Luminary* collects some of the presentations from the conference together, and on reading, you will see how the dialogues *between* genres and modes and forms that is presupposed by the very term 'fantastika' were given voice by the articles and by the discussions that followed.

We have, then, eight articles, which I will introduce while suggesting some connecting threads and recurrent ideas that emerged both during the day and which become evident when reading the articles. The issue begins with Will Smith's reading of DC Comics' character Equinox and the sequence of *Justice League* which investigates her life, as Miiyahbin Marten, living in Moose Factory, Ontario, Canada. Smith identifies the problems of representation of indigenous peoples throughout 'comic storyworlds' as well as the history of Canadian female superheroes, in reading the Canadian writer Jeff Lemire's renegotiation not only of generic tropes but also of contemporary Canadian understandings of citizenship and nation. This is followed by Glyn Morgan's essay on representations of, or perhaps the unrepresentability of the Holocaust, and in particular Spiegelman's *Maus* and much earlier forerunners, such as Horst Rosenthal's *Mickey au camp de Gurs* (written in 1942 by the Polish-Jewish Rosenthal while interred at the same Gurs camp), or Edmond-François Calvo's *La Bete est Morte!* (1944). Also drawing on the *Uncanny X-Men* figure of Magneto, whose history as a concentration camp survivor becomes

increasingly important to the series, Morgan argues that these comics are able to ‘normalise the Holocaust without diminishing it’, and that (by implication) they do important cultural work.

This is a recurrent motif in the articles collected here. There is a focus on the *work* that the reader, viewer or game-player does in the experience of interacting with each particular text, and by extension the *affective work* that such experiences bring to bear on the reader/ viewer/ user. That is, reading a comic book or playing a game not only makes us *think* (which is the crucial aspect of Darko Suvin’s conception of science fiction as ‘cognitive estrangement’), but that it makes us *feel*. In particular, the essays by Stephen Curtis and Orion Mavridou very much focus upon the investments that *play* (game play, cosplay) encourages in the act of reception. (I won’t say consumption here, as the models that both use suggest a different relation between text and its reader/ viewer/ user than one of simple consumption.)

Both Asami Nakamura and Alison Tedman concentrate on dystopia: Nakamura on Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and its film and theatrical adaptations, and Tedman on the YA dystopia *Divergent*, in both literary and filmic forms. Both, understandably, are concerned with agency, with the protagonist’s freedom of choice (or otherwise), but both also explore the spaces of the text to fascinating effect. Utopia, of course, is very much a spatial form (in Thomas More’s 1516 text that names the genre, King Utopus cuts a trench that turns an isthmus into the island of Utopia), and its inheritors in both Utopian and Anti-Utopian modes or often suffused with imagery to do with enclosure: the glass walls of Zamyatin’s *We*, the Reservation in Huxley’s *Brave New World*, the Factions in *Divergent*. Where Nakamura argues that a theatrical adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* constructs a kind of utopic space or ‘no-place’, Tedman’s essay concentrates on images of the ‘gamified’ city and the motif of spatial agency as a ‘defiance’ of the regime.

Dawn Stobbart, in her essay on the 1980s Hollywood films *War Games* (1983) and *The Last Starfighter* (1984) that place the player of video games as the hero, also has issues of agency at its core, and articulate a wish-fulfilment at work not only in the heroism of the gamer/ hacker but also in an optimistic reading of the potentialities of technology. In a particular connection to Tedman’s essay, Stobbart also focuses on the idea of ‘coming of age’, but here the cultural work proposed is an acceptance of otherness, both of the new technologies and in oneself. In his essay, Stephen Curtis, in a fascinating exploration of the multiple deaths that game-players experience which are ‘a necessary part of the pleasure experienced while playing games’, argues that such ‘deaths’ themselves do a form of affective work: ‘in dying,’ he writes, ‘the player truly asserts that they are alive’. This assertion of an *affirmative* experience of failure and death recuperates game mechanics in a surprising and, to me, eye-opening way. The final essay, by Ken Fee, is a detailed examination of the culture and practices of video game authors and designers, which rounds out the more critical and textual approaches of both Curtis and (more obliquely) Stobbart.

I have left Orion Mavridou’s essay until last, a little out of its sequence, because I think its explorations of cosplay draw together many of the threads found elsewhere. Issues of costume can be found in Smith’s and

Tedman's essays; the centrality of *play* can be found in Curtis's and Fee's work. The model of fandom that Mavridou proposes, however, 'creative fandom, where the dissection of the media text serves to inform artistic practice', can almost be seen as a key to the various methods, approaches and (on the day of the conference) presentational styles of those giving papers. Mavridou provocatively characterises cosplay as 'posthuman drag', and academic writing or presentation as cosplay, 'a platform for introspection on matters of identity, creative expression and socialization'. The suggestion that, as scholars and academics, we are all involved in cosplay, in 'posthuman drag', is a fascinating and insightful one, where our critical performances are revealed as play and, most importantly, play is revealed as a critical act.

Visualising Fantastika drew upon the community of scholars at Lancaster who work in science fiction, the Gothic, horror, Fantasy, games; but the department of English and Creative Writing also is home to academics such as John Schad, who works with hybrid, critical/creative forms; Kamilla Elliott, who works on screen adaptation; and Jenn Ashworth, who writes and teaches (sometimes collaborating with myself) on experimental and digital narratives – when she's not writing novels and short stories. At Lancaster, interdisciplinary work is encouraged but so is reflection upon those transmissions and hybridisations, the crossings-over and negotiations between forms, genres, or technologies of writing and storytelling. Chuckie Patel's *Visualising Fantastika* conference entirely reflected this mode of critical inquiry, and the fruits of it can be read here. In 2015, the conference has expanded to become *Locating Fantastika*; in 2016, it will be *Global Fantastika*. At Lancaster and far beyond, it will continue to work as a forum for debate and scholarship within and across what John Clute called 'the armamentarium of the fantastic in literature as a whole'.

Notes

- 1 As I've explored recently in the *Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism: Science Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), one of the key things to note about the history of science fiction criticism is the many failed attempts to provide a comprehensive formal definition of the genre, one that doesn't simply rely upon a catalogue of sub-genres. The most widely cited is that by Darko Suvin, elaborated in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) which characterizes the genre as 'the literature of cognitive estrangement'. While very useful this formal approach itself has limitations.
- 2 See also Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981); and more recently, Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).
- 3 Brian W. Aldiss suggests a similar starting place for science fiction in *Billion Year Spree* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), as well as asserting its shared generic DNA with the Gothic. As with the definition(s) of science fiction, its generic history is also contested.
- 4 Bryan Talbot, *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* 2nd edn (Dark Horse, 2008); *Hearts of Empire* 2nd edn (Dark Horse, 2008); *Grandville* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009); *Grandville Mon Amour* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2010); *Grandville Bête Noire* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012); *Grandville Noël* (London:

Jonathan Cape, 2014). Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* volume 1 (Top Shelf/ Knockabout, 2000) (there are four subsequent volumes); I also referred to *Nemo: Roses of Berlin* (Knockabout, 2014), a spin-off title.

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Cree, Canadian and American: Negotiating sovereignties with Jeff Lemire's *Equinox* and "Justice League Canada"

WILL SMITH

Canadian and Torontonion Joe Shuster co-created Superman in 1938, drawing on his experiences at the *Toronto Daily Star* to define Clark Kent's everyday life as a reporter. Despite Shuster's Canadian co-authorship of the definitive American comic book superhero, John Bell suggests "Canadians are probably too wary of the uncritical portrayal of unrestrained heroism and power for the superhero genre ever to become a mainstay of the country's indigenous comic art" (84). Bell's comments express national scepticism towards American myths of heroism, perhaps best summed up in the equally iconic Canadian trope of the 'beautiful loser'.¹ Whilst comic books may heighten these distinct senses of a national narrative, they are also the potential sites of encounter for intersecting national cultural narratives. Intersecting national cultures also lay within Bell's sense of Canadian comic art. Bell's use of the term 'indigenous' here is also problematic. Might superheroes appear a more appealing genre for Indigenous comic art? Capitalising the term Indigenous removes an awkward euphemism for Canadian sovereignty and considers the role of First Nations as participants in sequential art. How might Indigenous superheroes make meaning in a cross-border cultural industry enmeshed in primarily American cultural power? Would such Indigenous visualisations necessitate a tie to First Nations authorship, or, as with Superman, might national narratives be framed by other national interests? These questions come to the fore in the recent "Justice League Canada" storyline of American publisher DC Comics' *Justice League United*. Echoing its past connections with Canada, DC Comics' Canadian cartoonist Jeff Lemire has created a superhero team storyline set explicitly in Northern Ontario, Canada. Lemire's border-crossing story also introduces a new, female, First Nations superhero named Equinox to the DC comic book universe. Cree, and from Moose Factory, Ontario, the hero Equinox is in everyday life the teenager Miiyahbin Marten. This article considers the depiction of Miiyahbin/Equinox within a wider cultural context, discussing the comic as *fantastika* within its culture and time. Whilst the 'DC universe' is firmly a realm of the fantastic, Lemire's storyline underscores how its characters can provide real-life negotiations of American, Canadian and Indigenous identity. National boundaries, identities and sovereignties are potentially re-enforced and challenged through "Justice League Canada", and particularly in the characterisation of Equinox. The mainstream storyworlds of American comic books are complicated by this engagement with the transnational and the explicit negotiation of plural sovereignties.

Historically, representations of Native characters in mainstream comic books have been problematic, to say the least. Fascinating articles trace the extent of Twentieth-Century depictions of Native characters in comic books, notably in the work of C. Richard King and Cornel Pewewardy. Focusing on mainstream comic book production in America, King asserts that "representations of Indians and Indianness in comic books have fostered

the construction of identity, history and community through the assertion of claims by Euro-Americans” (*Unsettling* 87). King goes on to cite a lack of diversity in the workplaces of comic book giants such as DC or Marvel as part of the problem in the depiction of Indigenous characters. Native writers and artists are less visible in the world of mainstream comics, and are often working for independent companies or publishers with a specific remit to support Indigenous cultural production.² Whilst the construction of Equinox as an overtly Indigenous character might be seen as continuing a tradition where “elements of Indigeneity become props in colonial discourse”, the presence of new Native characters and communities might also be seen as opening a door to a wider reflection of comic book audiences in the fantastic universes they depict (*Unsettling* 87). To distinguish between these critical positions it is useful to establish some of the problems with, largely non-Native created, Native representation. For King, the charges of prop-Indigeneity have specific indicators. Signifiers of Indigeneity in mainstream comics tend towards the creation of a generic Native character, erasing particularity and approximating what has been termed elsewhere by Daniel Francis as the ‘imaginary Indian’. Despite a familiarity with certain Native iconographies, Francis argues that “Non-Aboriginals still seem to be most comfortable when they can infantilize and spiritualize Aboriginal people, treating them as historic figures of legend and myth rather than citizens of the twenty-first century” (240). King’s survey of comic book representations echoes Francis’ view where a mass of generic depiction bears “the ascription of unspecified Indianness [and] functions to claim Indigeneity without the burdens of tribal affiliation, cultural tradition, and historical struggles” (“Alter/Native Heroes” 218). The erasure of particular histories and Indigenous sovereignties, whilst attempting to visualise Native characters, carries the sense of performing Indigeneity whereby vital and meaningful knowledge is sundered from the remaining aesthetic. Furthermore, outside of the social visualisations of the Indigenous superhero, the transposed storyworld of the comic book may also distort the particular connections to place and land which are a vital part of each Indigenous nation’s history and sovereignty.

Cornel Pewewardy suggests an overt sense of violence often accompanies the representations of Indigenous comic book superheroes. Through a sundering of national identity, Native characters often constitute pejorative representations of Indigeneity in comics. Here, the historical comparison is with the imagery of Anti-Semitism. Despite noting a shift towards ascribing Native characters with superpowers, these characters are for Pewewardy: “ideologically, not much different from the subhuman characteristics attributed to First Nations representatives in the 19th century. Both superhuman and subhuman portrayals serve to exclude, isolate, and deframe First Nations peoples from a common humanity” (1). Accentuating elements of unspecified Native identity runs the risk of disavowing everyday life for contemporary Indigenous peoples. Reflecting briefly on recent comic-book complexity within the mainstream, Pewewardy finds that “the depiction of First Nations peoples has not undergone a concomitant increase in sophistication” (6). Michael A. Sheyahshe highlights a number of examples that lack sophistication, discussing a detailed history of Indigenous characters in comic book narratives. A recent example discussed by Sheyahshe, with bearing on the legacy for Lemire’s *Justice League United* series, is Joe Kelly’s DC character Manitou Raven. Part of various Justice League storylines between 2002 and 2006, Manitou Raven appears in present day storylines but evades the attachment of a particular history

being “a North American Indigenous person [transported] from ancient pre-Columbian contact times” (Sheyahshe 77). This seems to serve as a pre-text to appropriate and merge elements of Apache and Algonquian cultural signification. Crossing national groupings more obviously, Manitou Raven transforms, and deploys shamanistic powers by shouting the phrase “Inukchuk” – an approximation of the more commonly transcribed Inukshuk which is Inuit for the formations of a rock-cairn in the shape of a human (“Nunavut”). Subsequently, the anachronistic gender-attitudes Manitou Raven expresses enable Native imagery to be deployed in the guise of what Thomas King terms, more forcibly, the “dead Indian” (64). King gestures to an American societal attitude congruent with C. Richard King’s sundering of specificity, whereby the imagery of Indigeneity is safely a part of distant history, that of the “dead Indian” (T. King 64). Drawing on select parts of various Indigenous histories in order to convey a kind of Nativeness actually creates an impossible and inauthentic shell identity. Whilst fiction might permit such creations it seems at odds with the narrative suggestion of authenticity in Manitou Raven’s pre-contact character. This idea of Nativeness writes over the identities of Indigenous peoples living today, or as Thomas King argues: “to maintain the cult and sanctity of the Dead Indian, North America has decided that Live Indians living today cannot be genuine Indians” (64). The representation of Manitou Raven is complicit with this imagery of the ‘Dead Indian’ ensuring the erasure of contemporary Indigeneity whilst enacting a surface appeal to a sense of contemporary subjectivity.

Manitou Raven and his wife Dawn represent the most recent introduction of Native characters into the DC comics storyworld prior to *Equinox*. Rather than deploying a temporal anomaly within the character biography, Jeff Lemire’s *Equinox* is very much born within recent memory, situated in the lived political realities of nation-states in North America. As such, there should be less narrative support for anachronistic stereotypes. However, within the DC storyworld each character shares the same framework of American cultural production and also shares a narrative premise with its own transnational, if not transplanetary, negotiations - DC Comics’ Justice League of America. The formation of various iterations of the Justice League consistently suggests diversity and yet, often, the sense of difference is contained within the bracket “of America”. As this group has developed, constantly being rewritten and redrawn, so too has the nationalistic frame. Not only has this admitted other national and extra-terrestrial characters but it has also shifted the collective to become aligned with the terms ‘International’ or ‘Europe’ before eventually removing any qualifier to become *Justice League* in 2011. Nationalistic bracketing may still form an implicit part of the comic book’s cultural and economic logic, but the essence of a Justice League storyline is grounded in intersocial difference and commonality.

A large part of Jeff Lemire’s 2014 relaunch of DC comics’ Justice League title centred on the narrative presence of Canada. Rumours persisted that the comic book title would be ‘Justice League of Canada’ and images were released that supported a dramatic rewriting of an American framework with a Canadian one. In August 2013, a news story published by the *Toronto Star* featured a range of recognisable DC superheroes in a tableau reminiscent of Joe Rosenthal’s famous World War Two photograph, ‘Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima,’ but here planting the Maple Leaf rather than the Stars and Stripes into a pile of rubble (Mudhar). The imagery was thus

explicit and trading on the anticipated subversion of nationalistic iconography. The discussion of the upcoming comic book also featured on the front page of the print-version of the *Toronto Star*, neatly recalling Joe Shuster's early career selling the *Star* on the streets of the city in the 1920s. Yet, as with Bell's notion of the uncomfortable fit of superheroes and the Canadian context, the visual promotion of the nascent story could easily have been interpreted as a parody. Jeff Lemire highlighted the dissonance, suggesting that a Canadian 'Justice League' title might have been a joke (Mudhar). To counterbalance this, Lemire suggested a key part of the project would be to establish a new Canadian superhero, a "character that reflects a real part of our cultural identity, who could be a real Canadian teenager" (Mudhar). Working with this brief, and after visits to Northern Ontario, Lemire created Equinox, an explicitly Cree and Canadian superhero.

The superhero Equinox, alias Miiyahbin Martin, is a sixteen-year-old girl living in Moose Factory, Ontario. The full extent of her superhero character has yet to be fully portrayed although significant elements have now been established. Appraising the character in its comic-book infancy allows for an examination of the archetypal superhero narrative, the origin story. Two key stories establish this, "Justice League Canada", a five-issue series, and its continuance in the single-issue story "The Midayo and the Whitago". The first transformation of Miiyahbin into Equinox is triggered by a domestic confrontation. In *Justice League United (JLU) #0*, having finished a school day, and left her friend Heather, Miiyahbin believes she will return home to find her grandmother, or as she is seen to call out, "nohkóm" (12/7). The deliberate visual mixing of Cree words with English establishes the marked difference of Miiyahbin's Indigeneity. However, instead of finding her grandmother, Miiyahbin encounters a strange presence, an Indigenous man sitting on the floor. Pleading that Miiyahbin recognise him, the man warns her that a Whitago is coming. Inferred in this exchange, and the plea for recognition, is that the man could be an absent father or another male family member. Nevertheless, with no recognition made explicit, the man begins to transform before Miiyahbin's eyes, with a distended jaw hinting at what is to come. Fully transformed into a tall, bare skulled and monstrous Whitago figure, the being appears other than human, but implores Miiyahbin to "Say it...you know what to do!" (*JLU #0* 14/1). Shown resisting this, Miiyahbin is eventually compelled to yell "Keewahtin!" (see fig. 1). With the word, a dramatic transformation is enacted, and Miiyahbin levitates, simultaneously being surrounded by a pale blue aura and becomes enrobed in a black, white and pale blue costume. The transformative word 'Keewahtin' is variously translated from the Cree as 'blizzard of the north,' north wind, or 'the wind that comes back' ("Cree"; "Collins"). This foreshadows the revelation of Equinox's full origin in "The Midayo and the Whitago" where her powers are explained to be derived from nature or, as Miiyahbin's grandmother suggests in the latter story, "the power of our land itself" (*JLU #5* 14/1).



Figure 1. The first transformation of Miiyahbin into Equinox (Justice League United #0 14/3)

Given the colour of Equinox's costume, alongside these naturally-derived powers, the new superhero seems to follow a tradition of female Canadian superheroes. Visual connections to prior female Canadian comic book superheroes seem clear, despite these figures inhabiting other storyworlds (those of Marvel or the independent Canadian publisher from the 1940s Hillborough Studios). Aspects of Nelvana of the Northern Lights, Snowbird and Aurora might all be seen in the characteristics of Equinox. In turn, comparing the new superhero to these prior figures suggests significant departures, each with a bearing on the notion of negotiating sovereignties. Firstly, Nelvana of the Northern Lights is a fascinating touchstone for Equinox. Created during the 1940s by Adrian Dingle and a member of the Group-of-Seven, Franz Johnston, Nelvana was arguably the first female superhero, drawing her powers from the Northern Lights (Dingle 327).³ In her origin story, Nelvana was the daughter of the King of the Northern Lights, but inspired by an Inuit myth heard by Johnston on his Northern travels. This aboriginal source material, and proximity to the natural world, met what would become a conventional Western approach to the female superhero form, with Dingle suggesting he had "tried to make her attractive" by costuming with "long hair and mini skirts" (Bell 60). Each of these lines of thought can still be seen to frame Equinox, considering the issues of her costume alongside her powers over nature and the invoking of Native narrative. However, as with Manitou Dawn, the writing of a new mythology in Nelvana was used to justify much borrowing and reworking of Native cultural symbolism. The Canadian comic artist John Byrne reconfigured a version of Nelvana as part of a Canadian team of superheroes, Alpha Flight, produced for Marvel comics in the 1980s. Snowbird is a female superhero and "a descendant of Nelvana, the Eskimo God of the Northern Lights" (Sheyhshe 171).

In the same team, Byrne created a second female Canadian superhero, Aurora, who can fly and control light. Though Aurora is from Quebec, her personal history of a forced and repressive religious education has resonance with real-life Native histories. In turn, Aurora's powers are still related to the North and to nature. If Equinox references these figures, it could be perceived as a nostalgic embrace, a reiteration, that Canadian superheroes exist because there is a national tradition to underpin the claim. However, Equinox's representation

of Indigenous identity within Northern Canada qualifies and builds on this by insisting that particular national narratives exist in tandem within the Canadian polity. Rather than a fixed narrative retread of Canadian nordicity, or the threat of the exotic “unspecified Indianness” put forward by C. Richard King (*Unsettling* 88), Equinox’s powers are represented as both located and dynamic with her command of nature changing with the seasons. Yet, “The Midayo and The Whitago” also dispels the notion that Equinox is a flawless vessel of the landscape. Equinox’s powers are rooted in human tradition, inherited from the “seven Grandfathers” of Cree spirituality (*JLU* #5 12). Furthermore, Equinox’s costume does not function in line with regular rules of clothing, visualising the spiritual inheritance of Miiyahbin’s powers by disappearing and reappearing alongside each utterance of the word “Keewahtin”. The transformation of her body, enrobed in blue, black and white, and imbued with seasonal powers, might either emerge from within or be bestowed from without. In either sense, the visual of Equinox’s costume becomes closely tied to an essential sense of physical being. Given that this might prove more troubling than previous heroes who ‘chose’ their costume, it is worth considering the visual of the costume in further detail.

Expectations of superhero costume are both affirmed and subverted in Equinox’s visualisation. Building on the work of comic book artist and theorist Scott McCloud, Peter Coogan suggests that the superhero costume functions by removing “specific details of a character’s ordinary appearance, leaving only a simplified idea that is represented in the colors and design of the costume” (79). Such simplified ideas are neither neutral nor apolitical as already implied by Dingle’s alignment of short skirts with Nelvana’s beauty. Refusing elements of simplification and abstraction, in creating the female superhero costume, may be just as significant. Coogan notes that this sense of costume has evolved from the design of earlier ‘pulp heroes’ who were drawn with less abstraction and where clothing was seen as less important than facial recognition in expressing identity (79). If the development of superheroes has not prioritised facial recognition then the face, and the covered face, has become a loaded part of private and public identity formation. Viewing the uncovered face of the superhero, linking the regular persona and the hero persona, is often posited as a danger to the everyday family, friends and community of the superhero. Masks, glasses and hoods, extend costumed abstraction across the face. At the same time, this masking signifies a public identity and hides a personal, private identity. Whilst Equinox follows in the tradition of bold and seemingly abstracted costume, this co-exists with a visible, unmasked face. Equinox is both a transformed figure and easily identifiable as Miiyahbin. That the reader, and other characters can still see Miiyahbin’s face may yet come to form a significant plot-point. In present usage, the close visual alignment of Miiyahbin and Equinox might indicate Lemire’s desire for communal signification to be taken from individual heroism, with each act reflecting back on the aspirations of the Moose Cree First Nation. The suggestion here would also be that Miiyahbin does not need to be freed from the constraints and obligations of everyday life, but rather maintains a complicated or heightened role within this everyday life. The role Miiyahbin’s unmasked face might play in future narratives is complicated by the co-created form of serial narratives. Given that different artists draw and ink characters from issue to issue, and as can already be seen in the first few issues of *Justice League United*, different interpretations of Miiyahbin’s face are possible. The opening between narrative

understandings of facial visibility and how the face continues to signify to readers complicates any one reading of Equinox.

Just as notions of the personal or the communal are opened up in the visibility of Indigeneity in Miiyahbin/Equinox's face, so to are they explicit in her costume. Richard Reynolds suggests that "costume is the sign of individuality" and that superhero costumes express this within and against "the structure of costume conventions" (26). Given that Equinox's costume appears to derive closely from her own grandmother's costume more affinity might be found in the notion of a superhero uniform. When Miiyahbin and her grandmother transform together in "The Midayo and the Whitago", both shift into coloured bodysuits with hemmed white capes (11/5). Equinox's introduction is then grounded as an inheritor of power, another Midayo.⁴ Her costume, as a variant of her grandmother's costume, inscribes this generational presence. The costume is an immediate performance of originality whilst suggesting succession and inheritance, visualising both individual and shared dimensions of identity. Few origin stories immediately gesture backwards to multiple generations, and so this is a departure from conventions of both superhero costume and narrative. Prior examples of Native comic book characters in superhero uniform emphasise any hybridity as a negotiation between the personal and the power of the heroic collective, what Marco Arnaudo terms "the public-collective-superheroic vs. the private individual-familial" (70). For Equinox, the public is also the private as the collective superhero identity is embedded in an organising concept of a lineage of Cree superheroes. Rather than adapting to an institutional identity with a collective uniform removed from the private and familial, Equinox's costume is both a public and private expression.

The costume makes broader extra-textual gestures, borrowing its colouring from the symbolic dress of a figure with individual, communal and national meaning. Lemire cites the influence of the late Native youth-activist Shannen Koostachin, from the Attawapiskat First Nation, in creating Equinox. Discussing this connection, Lemire has said of Shannen, "perhaps she'll almost be a guiding spirit in the creation of this character" ("New DC Comics"). Shannen was a teenager who advocated for equal education funding across Canada, essentially fighting for Native rights to education.⁵ A 2013 Alanis Obomsawim-documentary, *Hi Ho Mistahey!*, tells the story of Shannen's campaign, from the voices of the Attawapiskat First Nation.⁶ The final scenes of the documentary depict Shannen dancing in a stylised version of her aboriginal dress. The colours and tailoring of Equinox's costume also resemble Shannen's traditional dress, mimicking the flowing cape and dress regalia and perhaps some of the stylisation seen in Obomwasim's documentary. Sketches released by Lemire of the drafting stages of the costume also show chevron shapes across the front of Equinox's dress, again paralleling Shannen's own dance regalia ("Equinox"). The appearance of Equinox seen through the lens of Shannen's clothing and ideals reveals a potent symbolism to counter any charge of a lack of engagement with specific First Nations identity. However, there might also be a tension here, considering the mobilisation of highly emotive and traditional imagery.

Miiyahbin's origin story is as embedded in Cree culture as her costume. Perhaps the most significant element of this is the antagonist, the Whitago figure, which is eventually revealed to be the father Miiyahbin thought dead. The Whitago, as Margaret Atwood notes, exists in a variety of forms:

In their Indigenous versions, Wendigo legends and stories are confined to the eastern woodlands, and largely to Algonquian-speaking peoples such as the Woodland Cree and the Ojibway. The concept has many name-variations, including Weedigo, Wittako, Windagoo, and thirty-four others all beginning with W and having three syllables, as well as a number of forms beginning with different letters. (66)

Evading any singular authoritative narrative, the Whitago has a shared mythic base as a ravenous, cannibalistic presence with a distorted human body. Differing Indigenous cultures' narratives vary over the materiality of such a figure, or the impact of its spiritual manifestation. Some views hold that the seemingly Indigenous narratives are themselves products of colonial encounter and therefore carry in them the confrontations between Indigenous peoples and the settler-invader cultures. Whilst those same settler-invader cultures have considered belief in the Whitago as the psychological illness 'Wendigo Psychosis' or have struggled to acknowledge the particularity of fear within imposed systems of justice, public testimony combined with cross-cultural storytelling ensures that the figure has a long history outside of Native literature.⁷ Atwood also notes that non-Native literature is filled with references to this Native being (62). The figure appears in the writing of Stephen King, extends into contemporary fantasy television narratives such as *Sleepy Hollow* and *Grimm*, and has previously been a villainous character in Marvel's storyworld, fighting Canadian superhero Wolverine.⁸ Despite the danger of a re-enactment of appropriation of myth, Lemire's comic book depiction of the Whitago emphasises the particularity of the figure to the Cree community. When Alanna Strange describes the figure as 'The Abominable Snowman,' Miiyahbin is quick to clarify that the figure was instead The Whitago (*JLU* #5 2). The defence of some generalised Northern monster is apt, given that Lemire's Whitago seems to resonate with the Cree descriptions recorded by Morton Teicher, and cited by Sidney Harring: "His eyes are protuberant, something like those of an owl except that they are much bigger and roll in blood. His feet are almost a yard in length, with long, pointed heels ... His hands are hideous with claw like fingers and fingernails... His strength is prodigious" (76).

The visual of the Whitago seems grounded in the Cree perception of the figure. The distinctive red eyes are present in Miiyahbin's first encounter with the monster, and remain red whilst it attempts to shift forms to parody Equinox's costume. This haunting duplicity is more than a visual trick, and expands to the underlying spiritual reasoning in both Miiyahbin's powers and the Whitago's presence.

One of the key beliefs within each understanding of the Whitago narratives is a sense that it can originate and manifest in anyone. As an entity the Whitago is very often seen in close proximity, inhabiting friends, neighbours or family members. That the Whitago in *Justice League* is Miiyahbin's father is then in keeping with its usual narrative logic. In turn, that it attempts to manifest as a dark mirror of Equinox, but is still partially overcome, or banished, is a marker of the spiritual basis of the creature. Reading a Cree-authored depiction of a

Whitago in Steve Sanderson's comic book *Darkness Calls*, Dianna Reder suggests that Cree teachings serve as an important guide to understanding the Whitago. Instead of a Western or Euro-Centric villain, the Whitago is part of a sacred teaching and illustrates that "conflict must be faced not just in the physical but also the metaphysical realm" (188). Reder suggests that depictions of the Cree Whitago might invoke this metaphysical realm, and also the need to confront and overcome the same creature in order for the self to move on from the conflict. Through such an encounter the self in question would experience a "spiritual epiphany" (188). Providing answers to the threat of the Whitago established in "Justice League Canada", "The Midayo and the Whitago" concludes Equinox's origin story by gesturing to this spiritual epiphany.

Miiyahbin's grandmother counsels that the Whitago must be understood as a constant, not something that can be destroyed but rather overcome by understanding the "Seven Pillars of Cree Life" (*JLU* #5 12). These pillars resonate with the wider binary world of good and bad posited in superhero narratives, being "Love, Humility, Bravery, Truth, Respect, Wisdom and Honesty" (*JLU* #5 12). Following this instruction, Miiyahbin repels the Whitago as embodied by her father by first stunning him with her newfound elemental force and then displaying to him her love and sorrow. This frees the father from inhabitation by the Whitago force and appears to allow him to die (*JLU* #5 18). That Miiyahbin's teaching comes from a grandmother is also significant here. Jennifer K. Stuller remarks that in studying female superheroes, "there are few examples of women mentoring superhero women" (22). Stuller suggests that the absence of such figures disregards female knowledge in the formation of female superheroes, and thus that such heroes must inevitably adopt masculine tropes to enter the framework of superheroism. Miiyahbin's reliance on Nohkom insists not simply on women as a source of knowledge for other women, but also on the importance of Native knowledge. This double assertion ensures that Miiyahbin's character is actively rewriting comic book depictions of sovereignty and power relations. All the while, it is striking that Miiyahbin enacts a highly personal and collectively embedded spiritual quest given that this particular story about a Northern Cree First Nations girl overcoming physical and metaphysical issues, experiencing true-to-life development, takes place within the pages of a comic book series fighting alongside Animal Man, Supergirl, Green Arrow and the Martian Manhunter.

The use of the Whitago alongside such figures as the Martian Manhunter could threaten an exoticisation of Native beliefs under the guise of fantastic legends but rooting the story within a particular locale and people, whilst entering into the hybrid fantasy world of the DC universe, seems to be a positive movement. In doing so, Lemire gestures cannily to the reach of such a storyworld, and its cultural form as a transnational product. Entering into the logics of a Cree story under the guise of the fantastic realm of superheroes, ensures a narrative illustration of what Stuart Christie terms "the shared horizon of plural sovereignties [which are] a working political and cultural reality for many, if not most, active members of Indigenous communities" (10). The physical space of the comic book, and its transnational readership ensures that whilst a Native narrative is told to a non-Native audience, by non-Native creators, elements of specific Native culture are conveyed. Working at a variety of levels, the narrative, interwoven with a story of a nascent incarnation of the Justice League forming in Northern Ontario,

avoids the “homogenizing discourse on Aboriginal worldviews” that might be risked by such an endeavour by entering into particularity (Eigenbrod 445). Depicting the Moose Cree First Nation through the particular geography of snow-covered streets, using the Delores D Echum Composite School in Moose Factory as the visual for the local school, and the iconic Cold War architecture of an abandoned NATO Radar base, gestures to the broader mass of Northern Native communities with ex-military facilities nearby who share similar experiences. Accommodating a complex cross-national fantastic within this grounded setting seems to resist the homogenising discourses of popular culture oft-associated with superhero comic books. However, the challenges for ensuring the longevity of Equinox’s character lay ahead, in how teachings which might overcome a Cree antagonist can lead and guide approaches to extraterrestrial threats. Moreover, as part of the Justice League team, the inter-social dynamic between American, Canadian and other-worldly heroes will prove a fascinating context through which to discover the Native roots of Miiyahbin’s powers.

Lemire’s shift from creating a Canadian superhero to a Cree superhero demonstrates the extent to which contemporary Canadian understandings of citizenship might embrace the lived negotiation of sovereignty. Lemire’s own transition to a position within an American cultural industry permits this negotiation a fascinating cultural arena. The rubric of superheroes travels across nations and can often be adopted and adapted, but to experience a reverse flow, and to accommodate the diverse readership of such comics shows the decolonising potential of popular cultural industries. Indigenous visualisations need not necessitate a tie to First Nations authorship, but to embrace fully the agency and cultural gains possible from such representations, a sense of the history underpinning cultural narratives. Lemire’s goals seem to suggest something of a provisional representation, hoping to inspire Cree teenagers to themselves take hold of the narrative and consider comic books as a domain for their narratives: “10 years from now some kid from James Bay ends up writing or drawing [his or her] own comics, then...the project was worth it” (“Equinox”). However, the sense that such proxy representation is open to charges of violence is not easily disregarded. The narrative frame of the Canadian nation has its own freighted politics, and ones which may not appear communicable within what is still an American cultural product. How far the site of production will reassert influence on the continuing reshaping of a communal fantasy world remains to be seen, not least in the influence of powerful conventions of superheroism. The consistent redrawing of Equinox might also enable a continual negotiation, or a continual awareness that in every narrative the characters are all “*inside de/colonization* albeit in widely different locations” (Eigenbrod 443). Whether this means a symbolic externality such as interplanetary travel, or on the grounded terrain of Northern Ontario, the implications ultimately stem from the ongoing social signification of Equinox.

Notes

- 1 Following the publication of Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* (1966), this anti-heroic trope in Canadian culture was cemented by Margaret Atwood’s *Survival* (1972).

- 2 Remedies to Euro-American depictions can be seen in a Native American visual history of self-representation entitled 'Comic Art Indigene' which has toured museums and galleries across the USA since 2009.
- 3 Nelvana first appears in *Triumph-Adventure Comics* in August 1941, four months before Wonder Woman's debut in *All-Star Comics* in December 1941.
- 4 The Midayo here seems to share narrative similarities with the Ojibway sense of Manitou, see Basil Johnston, *The Manitou* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).
- 5 This battle has its own dark history in twentieth-century Canada, where residential schools set up by the government and church groups forcibly removed Native children from reserves. These schools were eventually closed but left behind a legacy of violent and often sexual abuse, and the attempts to eradicate First Nations culture. A formal apology was issued in Federal parliament by the Government of Canada in 2008 but reparations claims are yet to be fulfilled.
- 6 Shannen Koostachin's Attawapiskat First Nation school had been closed after the long-term effects of a fuel-spill led to mass-illness. Rehoused into temporary classrooms since 2000, the school has only recently seen work begin on a new permanent building. Shannen died in 2010 in a car accident, and in her memory a campaign group has continued her work under the name 'Shannen's Dream'.
- 7 Sidney Harring's survey of a range of legal discussion relating to manifestations of Whitagos in early twentieth-century Canada demonstrates how the figure becomes a site of negotiation between Canadian and Native sovereignty, see "The Windigo Killings: The Legal Penetration of Canadian Law into the Spirit World of the Ojibwa and Cree Indians", *Violent Crime in North America*, ed. Louis A. Knafla (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003) 75-104.
- 8 A recent study encompasses a number of these within a history of Whitagos in literature and culture, see Shawn Smallman, *Dangerous Spirits: The Windigo in Myth and History* (Victoria, BC: Heritage House, 2014).

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Speaking the Unspeakable and Seeing the Unseeable: The Role of Fantastika in Visualising the Holocaust, or, More Than Just *Maus*

GLYN MORGAN

Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed... Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honourable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal... Away with the Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross!

Newspaper article, Pomerania, Germany, mid-1930s. Quoted in Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, 164.

Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel has famously denied the possibility of creating art about the Holocaust.¹ Wiesel's doctrine of the inapproachable nature of the Holocaust can be found throughout his considerable oeuvre, but his essay "Art and the Holocaust" (1989) provides a condensed taste of the thesis: "Auschwitz represents the negation and failure of human progress; [...] it defeated culture; later, it defeated art, because just as no one could imagine Auschwitz before Auschwitz, no one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz". Wiesel pours particular ire over visual representations such as *The Night Porter*, *Seven Beauties*, and American mini-series *Holocaust*. He continues:

Why this determination to show "everything" in pictures? [...] the Holocaust is not a subject like all the others. It imposes certain limits. There are techniques that one may not use, even if they are commercially effective. In order not to betray the dead and humiliate the living, this particular subject demands a special sensibility, a different approach, a rigor strengthened by respect and reverence and, above all, faithfulness to memory.

The targets of Wiesel's essay are televisual, cinematic, and theatrical productions, yet the reference to showing things in pictures also calls to mind an art form which Wiesel doesn't reference in this essay (likely more out of neglect than implicit approval), the ninth art: comics.² This article will examine a selection of Holocaust representations from different periods of representation, paying particular attention to their use of the tools of fantastika to convey meaning and represent the Holocaust in a manner which is uniquely suited to the comic book form.

Despite Wiesel's objections, art and the Holocaust have been intertwined from the beginning. Just as survivors performed plays in the Displaced Persons camps, comics find their roots at the earliest moments in the

history of the Holocaust.³ One of the earliest surviving examples of a comic from the Holocaust is *Mickey au camp de Gurs* [*Mickey in Gurs Camp*] (1942) by Horst Rosenthal, a Polish Jew who was living in Paris when the Second World War broke out. After Germany invaded France he was captured and initially held at Le Stade Buffalo at Montrouge, before being moved between numerous French camps including the camp of Gurs, near Pau on the French-Spanish border. His journey would ultimately lead him to be deported to Auschwitz on 11 September 1942 where he was killed (“Plus qu’un nom dans une liste: Horst Rosenthal”). Rosenthal created three comics (that we know of) during his internment at Gurs. They survived by being donated to the *Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine* (CDJC, Centre for Contemporary Jewish Documentation), Paris, in 1978 by Rabbi Max Ansbacher who had served as camp chaplain at Gurs during Rosenthal’s internment. It is not known whether he created other pieces whilst at any other camps, if he did then they were not preserved. Of the three pieces, what makes *Mickey in Gurs* particularly fascinating, aside from the miracle of its survival, is its use of a fantastic trope to illustrate daily life in a concentration camp. The short comic depicts Mickey Mouse as he travels in France and is arrested for not having any papers. He is taken to Gurs where from the point of view of a newcomer and outsider he describes the bureaucracy, poor conditions, miniscule rations, and inmates. The art style is somewhere between Disney and Herge, but the subject matter belies the cute drawings, as one exchange demonstrates:

Après quelques minutes d'attente, une tête émergeait du tas. **After waiting a few minutes, a head emerged from the heap.**

Vote nom? demandait la tête. **Your name? asked the head**

Mickey

Le nom de votre père? **The name of your father?**

Walt Disney

Le nom de votre mère? **The name of your mother?**

Ma mère? Je n'ai pas de mère! **My mother? I have no mother!**

Comment? Vous n'avez pas de mère? Vous vous foutre de ma gueule!! **How? You do not have a mother? You're fucking with me!!**

Non, vraiment, je n'ai pas de mère!! **No, really, I have no mother!!**

Sans blague! J'ai comme des types, qui n'avaient pas de pères, mais pas de mères... Eu fin, passons - vous êtes juif? **No kidding! I know guys who do not have fathers, but not mothers ... In the end - you're Jewish?**

Plait-il? **Pardon Me?**

Je vous demande si vous êtes juif!! **I asked you if you are Jewish!**

Honteusement, j'avouais ma complete ignorance à ce sujet. **Shamefully, I confessed my complete ignorance of the subject**

[...]

Quelle nationalité? **What nationality?**

Heuh . . . Je suis né en Amérique, mais je suis international!! **Huh... I was born in America, but I'm international!!!**

International! INTERNATIONAL!! Alors, vous êtes commun..... Et avec une grimace horrible, la tête retraits dans son tas de papiers. **International! INTERNATIONAL!!! So, you are common..... And with a horrible grimace, the head withdraws into its pile of papers. (Mickey à Gurs 13-15)⁴**

The comedic outlandishness of a camp official literally being buried in paperwork is typical of the black humour that permeates the piece. There are layers of irony in this discussion being centred on Mickey Mouse: as a symbol of America, albeit an 'international' one, Mickey's 'complete ignorance' of the possibility of his Jewish heritage could reflect America's seeming ignorance of the suffering of Jews and others in Europe (or so it must have appeared to someone trapped in a camp such as Gurs). At the same time, the suggestion of Mickey's Jewishness has an added irony due to the reported anti-Semitic views of Walt Disney, his 'father', a member of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, an anti-communist, anti-Semitic organisation. Lisa Naomi Mulman writes:

In traditionally Jewish terms, Mickey's paternity would not matter since Jewish identity is determined matrilineally. In terms of Mickey's physical appearance, and how can he be anything other than Jewish, being that he appears to be a *mouse* (in other words, not human)? From Mickey's/Rosenthal's perspective, this must be some kind of mistake; he is not a mouse, he is *Mickey Mouse*, and thus his central identity is **American**, not Jewish. In reality, he is a work of imagination that mobilizes a vast constellation of overlapping and contradictory ideologies. (*Modern Orthodoxies* 97) [Emphases in original]

Mulman's point highlights the discrepancy between a possible perceived central self-identity (American, French, Polish) and that imposed from the external force of the Nazi racial system (Jewish), which over-rides any other factors. Similarly, whilst traditional or orthodox Jewish religious identity is passed matrilineally, the Nuremberg laws disregard Jewish custom and focus only on their perceived ethnicity. Furthermore, whilst it was probably not Walt Disney's intention to create a Jewish character who would come to represent his company and legacy, by choosing a mouse he overlaps with the Nazi perception of Jews as vermin, although it is worth noting that dehumanisation was not limited to Jews, and the Nazis extended similar forms of non-human status to other groups which they targeted for eradication including gypsies, homosexuals, and the physically and mentally disabled.

Dehumanisation is an essential strategy and marker in the process of genocide, part of a wider system of humiliation and, as Adam Jones notes, “it is difficult to find a historical or contemporary case of genocide in which humiliation is not a key motivating force” (394-395). Just as Tutsis in Rwanda were referred to as *Inyezi*, or cockroaches, so were Jews labelled by the Nazis as rats and vermin before them (Straus 158). Rosenthal harnesses this imagery, with all of its intrinsic fears of contamination and impurity, and ties it to one of the most sanitised images of a mouse it is possible to find.

The literalising of the metaphor of dehumanisation through the juxtaposition of words and images which is intrinsic to the comic book form is only possible through the deployment of fantastika. As Mulman suggests, Mickey can be read as a symbol of many things in the text, but he is more than simple allegory, he remains a walking, talking, whistling rodent. Fantastic, non-realist, techniques such as inserting a cartoon character into everyday life, allow Rosenthal to make more nuanced comments about Gurs than either of the surviving more realist comics he produced, comments given significant additional impact by the juxtaposition of non-realist imagery (not just Mickey, but also the cartoonish supporting characters) with the very real[ist] existence of Gurs and the reality of the Holocaust. Indeed, this is made explicit by Rosenthal employing a small photograph of the camp within the book which Mickey reacts to with shock as he describes the living conditions, “only a fictional character could even begin to cope with such a bitter reality” (13).

Metafictional fantastika is also employed with great effect in the final panel of the comic. Mickey is able to escape from Gurs, which he chooses to do because the air no longer suits him, “so since I’m only a cartoon, I removed myself at the stroke of an eraser. The police can always come and look for me in the land of liberty, equality, and fraternity. I’m talking about America!” (23). Mickey’s removal of himself by the stroke of an eraser mirrors the ease with which the Germans were seemingly able to erase Jews with the stroke of a pen. Above all, though, how tragic, this final sentiment of appreciation and admiration for a country which Rosenthal is clearly influenced by (his Mickey looks, after all, the perfect facsimile of the Disney original), yet will never see.

Ultimately, by employing fantastic techniques, Rosenthal is able to exploit a view-point which would otherwise be unavailable to him, especially in so small a space as a thirteen panel comic. Mickey is able to embody both the states of the Jewish inmate and the American outsider, simultaneously he is an intrinsically metatextual being and thus able to interact with the text and the situation in a manner unobtainable to a realist protagonist. This allows Rosenthal avenues of critique and darkly-comic parody which give *Micky à Gurs* a unique feel and importance, even amongst his other work, let alone the work of other contemporary chroniclers of life in a concentration camp.

Whilst occupying a significant position in the timeline of Holocaust comics for having been produced by a camp internee during the Holocaust itself, the work of Horst Rosenthal has had minimal impact on the medium of comics due to its relatively late discovery and status as unpublished and untranslated (until recently). Nonetheless, the spectre of the Holocaust looms over subsequent comics, as indeed does Walt Disney. Created by

a trio of artists and writers led by Edmond-François Calvo, *La Bête est Morte! Or The Beast is Dead* was published in Paris in 1944. Worked on secretly during the occupation, it has an astonishingly high quality of artwork and detail and, as with *Mickey in Gurs*, it also uses anthropomorphic animals to tell its story.⁵ Unlike Rosenthal's booklets, Calvo's work has been known since its creation, at least in French speaking countries, and is nominally treated as a children's book. As with Rosenthal's work, the art has as much to do with this classification as the subject matter or the writing. The French are cast as rabbits, Americans as Buffalo, and the British as Bulldogs, whilst the Germans are wolves, the Italians are hyenas, the Japanese are yellow monkeys, and Calvo uses the mechanics of the barnyard fable to tell the story of French history during the Second World War. It also replicates the moral naivety of the barnyard fable with its clear predator-prey dynamic and all sources of evil coming from outside of the borders of France; the issues of collaboration or sympathy for Nazi causes are not at all touched upon (Tufts 44). Incidentally, The Hitler-wolf was considered to bare such a strong resemblance to Disney's own Big Bad Wolf that the corporation began a lawsuit against Calvo which was only resolved when the design of the wolf was changed to distinguish him from the Disney counterpart.⁶

Whilst not ostensibly a Holocaust comic, *The Beast is Dead* contains an unflinching depiction of military occupation by a foreign power and its links to the genocide. With reference to "l'anéantissement total de ces foules inoffensives [the total annihilation of harmless crowds]" a single page has two panels, the first heart wrenching, the second gruesome. The first panel shows a child (a baby rabbit) being forcibly separated from its mother as she is bundled into a train freight wagon with other cowering rabbits, stars are visible sewn onto some of their clothes. The wagon is labelled "via Berlin" dispelling any possibility of blame being misappropriated by the animal imagery. The wolf carrying the child overlaps slightly, breaching the gutter (white border) of the panel, and so links the image of the child inexorably with the second panel. The second panel shows the gruesome execution of the "foules inoffensives", with rabbits and squirrels being machine-gunned down by laughing wolves, blood splattering into the air and onto the floor. On the wall to the right of the dead and dying mammals is a poster showing a yellow star (25).

Whilst a morally simplistic "jubilatory fantasy", *The Beast is Dead* is capable of moments of revulsion amidst the beautifully painted, large-format pages (Gravatt 58). When they touch on the crimes of the Nazis, Calvo's are non-flinching depictions which belie the cartoonish nature of the artwork and must be close to the limits of representation possible for the average Frenchman in 1944, considering that the true horrors of the camps were yet to be revealed to the general population or fully understood by the West until the liberation of Buchenwald and particularly Bergen-Belsen in April 1945. Certainly, the text's immortality in the Francophone world owes a measure of its longevity to its status as a work which is at times brutal but still, thanks to the barnyard animals, child appropriate.

The use of animal substitutes for human victims, and particularly the assigning of animal species based on nationalism, pre-empts Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a crucial pinnacle text which sets the high mark for comic book representations of the Holocaust, and indeed comic book memoirs and biographies more widely. Without a

doubt, it is the most written about Holocaust comic, if not the most written about comic of any genre or topic, and for good reason. *Maus* redefined the boundaries of what a comic was perceived to be capable of. It was serialised in *Raw* from 1980 before being picked up by Pantheon books and published, volume one in 1986, volume two in 1991, and later as *The Complete Maus*. From the beginning readers and critics have struggled with categorising the text. The *New York Times* initially placed it in the fiction bestseller's list, something which Spiegelman himself resisted, writing to the paper: "As an author I believe I might have lopped several years off the 13 I devoted to my two-volume project if I could only have taken a novelist's license while searching for novelistic structure" (*MetaMaus* 150). The *Times* ultimately acquiesced to Spiegelman's protest, admitting that both the publishers and US Library of Congress categorised the book as nonfiction, but not before one editor commented "Let's go out to Spiegelman's house and if a giant mouse answers the door, we'll move it to the nonfiction side of the list!" (*MetaMaus* 150). Incidentally, the Pulitzer Prize committee sidestepped the issue by awarding *Maus* a "Special Award" rather than an award for fiction or nonfiction.

The issue of *Maus*'s fictionality comes, not from anxiety about the authenticity of the narrative regarding the relationship between two generations of Spiegelman which forms one thread of the book, nor from questions about the authenticity of Vladek's Holocaust experience, which forms the second thread, neither is it the postmodern, non-linear intertwining of these two narrative streams; the problem of *Maus*'s fictionality comes from its mode of expression not just as comic, but as a comic with anthropomorphic animal characters. As in *The Beast is Dead*, Spiegelman adopts zoological ciphers to depict characters of differing races. Rather than following the principles of the barnyard fable, Spiegelman begins by literalising the Nazi propaganda about Jews and then works from there. Thus, the Jews are mice, and the Germans as their exterminators must become cats. The relationships become more complex when Poles are added as Pigs, and then Americans as dogs, by the time we reach British fish (driving jeeps) the animal allegory has perhaps run its course. Nonetheless, at least in its initial incarnations of Mice, Cats, and Pigs, the artwork of *Maus* presents Spiegelman's literal take on the dehumanisation process.

We are left, then, with the seemingly oxymoronic status of fantastical non-fiction, at the very least we have a text which employs a complex and layered fantastic allegory in its non-fictional narrative – for the cat-mouse (et al.) dynamic is taken further than simply animal fable. Unlike Calvo, if we were to substitute the animals for people the text would no longer function, at least not in the same manner. For example, Spiegelman weaves a meta-textual present-day narrative amidst the Holocaust story, he maintains the animal imagery in the present but it is weaker, prone to breaking down, most notably the scene in which he is interrogated by the press about the success of volume one of *Maus* (201-203). This scene, and the subsequent visit to the psychiatrist (himself a Czech Jew and a survivor of both Terezin and Auschwitz), show Spiegelman using fantastic, or non-mimetic, imagery to express his emotional state. In a written narrative this might be a metaphor: he's built his fame and career on the bodies of Holocaust victims, after the death of his father and his unexpected attention and success he feels vulnerable and uncertain. But by drawing these things into the panels, Spiegelman is making them

literally real: his artist's drawing table and chair are at the summit of a mound of emaciated mouse-headed human corpses (201); he shrinks to the proportions and size of a child, only growing again once the psychiatrist has helped him to gain new resolve and confidence (202, 206). In these ways, and others like them, the very form of the comic book enable these crucial and emotive moments of *fantastika* without detracting from the non-fictional narrative. We understand, as readers, that these things are not real, in the same way we understand that Mickey Mouse didn't really visit Gurs, nor does Art Spiegelman really have a mouse's head. These diversions from the "real", or the mimetic, allow *Maus* to access an emotional register denied to more conventional texts, even those which share the medium of comics:

[The Holocaust] is too vast to be limited to my one book, of course, but some of these projects strike me as if they were trying to set my work right by smoothing down the rough edges, by making a more didactic, more sentimental, more slickly drawn Holocaust comic book [...] This means they re-enter that maudlin sentimentalizing notion of suffering and how it ennobles and often insists on the primacy of Jewish suffering over other suffering, and so on. Some of them seemed to suggest, "Well, we'll do it with humans so we get rid of that whole stupid baggage of the animal masks". But I think it's those animal masks that allowed me to approach otherwise unsayable things. What makes *Maus* thorny is actually what allows it to be useful as a real "teaching tool", despite the non-didactic intent of my own book (*MetaMaus* 127).

Spiegelman considers "the whole stupid baggage of the animal masks" to be fundamental to the narrative he is telling. *Maus* is not necessarily able to tell us anything new about the Holocaust itself, but instead it gives us a unique insight into the people it involved and its effects on them and their families for generations to come. Just as the barnyard allegory allows Calvo to create distance in one respect (these are no longer human fighters and victims), but brings us closer in another (through the ability to depict otherwise too-graphic images of suffering, as well as its ability to reach a younger audience), so too by removing the human from *Maus*, Spiegelman has allowed us to actually get closer to the humanity of the victims. As Caroline Wiedmer points out, the use of the cat and mouse imagery in *Maus* "have a twofold effect: they circumvent the treacheries of Holocaust representation by purely *mimetic* means and thereby offer a solution that appeals to and indeed relies on the reader's interpretive involvement in the text" (14) [emphasis mine]. Thus, Spiegelman employs non-mimetic, or fantastic, techniques within what is ostensibly a realist, or non-fiction, narrative in order to cause us to re-evaluate not the fact of the Holocaust, but the wider issues of the way in which we understand history, the effect it has upon its participants (either perpetrators or victims), and the nature of relationships – particularly familial.

For example, Spiegelman explicitly makes clear that Vladek, his father, is not an easy man to live with. In a conversation with his father's second wife, Mala, Art remarks: "I used to think the war made him that way", which elicits a scoff from Mala who replies "I went through the camps . . . All our friends went through the camps. Nobody is like him" (*Maus* 134). On another occasion, Art, Françoise and Vladek are driving back from buying groceries when Françoise stops the car to give a lift to a hitchhiker (a black dog, thus a black American), Vladek complains about giving lifts to "a coloured guy, a shvartser", and that he "had the whole time to watch out that

this shvartsers doesn't steal us the groceries from the back seat". Francoise angrily condemns him for this racist stereotyping: "how can you, of all people, be such a racist! You talk about the Blacks the way the Nazis talked about the Jews". Vladek simply replies that he had thought Francoise smarter than this, and that "it's not even to compare the shvartsers and the Jews!" (*Maus* 259). Spiegelman's notebooks reveal that he was tempted with making the episode still more impactful by portraying the black man as a crow or a monkey, externalising the dehumanisation of blacks in the same manner in which the mouse motif realises the Nazi depiction of Jews (*MetaMaus* 36). That he withdraws from this, depicting the man as a black dog instead, is itself a commentary on race relations in the US, suggesting perhaps that the image of the crow or the monkey retains a power and impact which would have been harmful to the message of the book whereas the Jew-mouse is now a much more impotent by comparison.

Regardless, Spiegelman felt it important to include the moment which exposed his father's racism: "It is part of Vladek's impossible nature. It is also, though, what festered into becoming the Final Solution; and it is what allows our current immigration debates to take certain kinds of appalling coloration now [...] it seems to be a basic aspect of how tribes organize themselves" (*MetaMaus* 36-37). Importantly, however, by presenting an honest depiction of Vladek both in Poland, and afterwards in America, "just trying to portray [his] father accurately" (*Maus* 134), Spiegelman is able to complicate the moral simplicity of texts such as *The Beast is Dead*. Vladek is an "impossible character", he's flawed, and generally difficult. Being a Holocaust survivor does not imbue him with a saintliness, profundity, or greater insight into life, the world, or the difficulties of others. To all intents and purposes, *Maus* shows Vladek to simply be an old man with an interesting, if horrifying, story to tell.

It is ironic that by dehumanising the characters of *Maus* into animals, Spiegelman has simultaneously managed to expose their humanity. This is not to say that non-fantastic, mimetic comics are lacking in their humanity, but rather that by deploying fantastic tools, or ciphers, Spiegelman is able to approach the problem of the Holocaust and its representation from another angle. This is an avenue denied to other works such as Joe Kubert's *Yossel, April 19, 1943* (2003) which borders on alternate history, centring around what might have happened to Kubert's family had they not left Poland in 1926, but is otherwise completely mimetic; or Pascal Croci's *Auschwitz* (2000), which uses mimetic, realist black and white art to powerfully place in parallel the Jewish experience in the titular camp with the Bosnian War. Most significantly in its portrayal of Vladek, the mouse imagery helps to ameliorate some of the harmful impact of "the racist caricature of the miserly old Jew" which Art fears his father is too close to for comfort (133). At the same time, it allows him to employ narrative techniques which give the text more of the emotional "balance" that he confesses to be anxious about given the absence of his mother's side of the story (134).

An interesting comparison to Vladek can be found in a very different fantastic comic book source, and one which is certainly fictional: the X-Men, and particularly their some-time nemesis Magneto. For whilst the Holocaust has gradually become a greater thematic touchstone for post-war superhero comics as they develop, no major title has been so heavily influenced by it as the X-Men. Created in 1963 by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee for *The Luminary*. Issue 6. Summer (2015).

Marvel Comics, the X-Men are a team of mutants; genetically different from the rest of humanity which manifests as a superpower. Unlike most other super powered heroes the X-Men and other mutants are generally portrayed as societal outcasts who frequently have to battle not just evil mutants and supervillains but daily discrimination and constraints on their civil rights. Not for nothing did their slogan become “sworn to protect a world that hates and fears them”. Despite being heroes, the X-Men have a long history of being read as a cipher for persecuted groups, including ethnic minority communities in America as well as gay communities, with some mutants preferring to hide their powers and remain “closeted” in order to attempt to live a “normal” life.

A significant example of the Holocaust’s influence on the X-Men are the plotlines for *Days of Future Past*, published in *Uncanny X-Men* issues #141 “Days of Future Past”, and #142 “Mind out of Time!” (1981) written by long-standing X-Men writer Chris Claremont. *Days of Future Past*, from which the 2014 film draws inspiration, is a time-travel narrative which begins in a dystopian future where mutants, and their supporters and sympathisers, are being systematically incarcerated in concentration camps across North America, with the aim being to eliminate the mutant gene. Set in the futuristic year 2013, survivors must wear one of three letters on their clothing:

“H”, for baseline human – clean of mutant genes, allowed to breed.

“A”, for anomalous human – a normal person possessing mutant genetic potential ... Forbidden to breed.

“M”, for mutant. The bottom of the heap, made pariahs and outcasts by the mutant control act of 1988. Hunted down and with a few rare exceptions – killed without mercy. In the quarter century since the act’s passage, millions have died.

They were the lucky ones. (*Uncanny X-Men #141*)

Amongst the rubble of a ruined Manhattan, we are shown a world where Nuremberg-style laws have come into effect. In an effort to eradicate the mutant gene, humans have built and activated giant robot Sentinels with “an open-ended program, with fatally broad parameters, to ‘eliminate’ the mutant menace once and for all. The Sentinels concluded that the best way to do that would be to take over the country” (#141). Fearing the spread of the robots to their own nations, we’re told the other powers of the world are preparing a nuclear strike on North America to contain the destruction, and it is in this nuclear context that the word “holocaust” finds its sole usage. Yet, with its categorisation of peoples, eugenics program, extreme destruction and mechanised extermination (the Sentinels are super-modern machines for a super-powered problem), there can be no doubts that Claremont, himself a Jewish writer, is evoking the historic Holocaust more than he is evoking contemporary fears of nuclear war. The X-Men and other mutants in the Marvel Universe are constantly under threat from fascist registration laws, but the *Days of Future Past* storyline realises these laws and depicts their genocidal consequences. Ultimately, this possible future is undone when an adult (and, incidentally, Jewish) Kitty Pryde transfers her mind psychically into her younger contemporary-era body in order to prevent the assassination of a US Senator by a

mutant, a crucial landmark on the road to the imagined dystopia which mirrors the shooting of Ernst vom Rath, the German diplomat in Paris, whose shooting in 1938 by Polish-Jew Herschel Grynszpan was one of the pretexts for *Kristallnacht*.⁷

The leader of the resistance in the nightmarish 2013 of *Days of Future Past* is Magneto, the mutant with the most explicit Holocaust connection. Magneto was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby as the arch-nemesis to the X-Men and features as such in their very first issue in 1963. Like most comic book villains, particularly of the era, he began as a two-dimensional villain, even leading a team of mutants who called themselves “The Brotherhood of Evil Mutants”, a moniker which defies moral ambiguity. Yet, over the decades, Magneto has become a rare thing in superhero comics, he is a character who has actually grown and developed, he has become a less straightforward villain, more of an anti-hero, often now in uneasy alliance with the X-Men, at times even leading them; and this is largely because of the retrofitting of the Holocaust into his backstory.

Professor Xavier, the leader of the X-Men, and Magneto have a complicated on-again-off-again status as friends and nemeses. A flashback in a 1982 issue of *Uncanny X-Men #161* (1982) shows their first encounter being when Xavier visited a hospital for recovering Holocaust victims in Haifa, Israel, and found Magneto there as a patient (Claremont, “Gold Rush”). Over the years, Magneto’s story is expanded and added to, we learn that he survived Auschwitz where he “learned first-hand of man’s utter inhumanity to man – and it shrivelled [his] soul as surely as acute hunger ravaged [his] body” (Macchio, “...That I Be Bound in a Nutshell”). Indeed, as Sean Howe asserts, Magneto’s backstory makes explicit what was only implicit about the X-Men comics: “The shocking revelation that [Magneto] had been a child prisoner at Auschwitz ramped up the title’s long-present themes of bigotry and persecution [...] in which discrimination toward mutant characters was put explicitly in the contexts of racism and homophobia. (*Marvel Comics* 242) Whilst Grant Morrison highlights the character’s growth into a new level of complexity: “Claremont’s Magneto was a tragic, essentially noble survivor of the death camps, a man who had witnessed more than his fair share of sorrow and hardship and knew how to make hard choices. He had depth and dignity” (*Supergods* 357). Nowhere is this more obvious than in the origin story prequel comic, *Magneto: Testament* (2008). Whilst Magneto is often seen as Malcolm X to Xavier’s Martin Luther King, *Magneto: Testament* supplants the American Civil Rights analogy with an explicit origin rooted in internment in Auschwitz (Baron 48). Written by Greg Pak, It’s a gruesome and dark tale, as you’d expect, and despite being an X-Men comic the young Magneto’s powers are still latent and only emerge on a handful of occasions, often accidentally and subtly. Originally published in five issues, since collected into a single volume, the first two issues show the struggles of young “Max” trying to live normal lives in Nuremberg despite government sanctioned Anti-Semitism. Max’s father is a veteran of the First World War and mistakenly believes that this will protect him and his family from the worst. When it becomes obvious that life is no longer tolerable the family flee to Poland where they are trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto after the German invasion. The final two issues show Max’s existence in Auschwitz which he ultimately survives by escaping during the 1944 uprising of *sonderkommandos*.

As with many post-*Maus* Holocaust comics, Pak includes paratextual material to reassure the reader that the comic is heavily rooted in factual accounts insisting that ‘we deal with this unfathomably harrowing material in a way that’s honest, unflinching, human, and humane’ (Pak, “Afterword”). Some find the comic problematic not because of its faithfulness to history, but because it casts a villain (although he is rarely so cleanly distinguished as such these days) as a Holocaust survivor. Robert G. Weiner and Lynne Fallwell, for example, suggest it “crosses into anti-Semitic territory” by using “a Jewish Holocaust victim as a villainous character” (466). This is a questionable criticism because it not only denies Magneto the growth he has experienced over fifty years, but also implies that everyone who survived the Holocaust is by default destined to live a good and just life. In questioning this logic when applied to Magneto, *Testament* shares surprising ground with the honest and flawed portrayal of Vladek in *Maus*.

Whilst this article has presented a very select view of the fantastic and the Holocaust in comics, it has touched on texts from varying backgrounds, decades, and genres. In doing so, it has attempted to highlight a specific thread of reasoning, one which applies more broadly to interactions of the fantastic and traumatic events such as the Holocaust both within and beyond comics, but which is particularly prevalent in the comic book form: they normalise the Holocaust without diminishing it, by which I mean they allow the Holocaust to be placed on a scale of suffering and made comparable to other atrocities, rather than separate from it. At the same time, they allow narratives to be told in such a way that “unsayable things” can be expressed, normally complex emotional issues which are difficult to articulate.

Fantastic or non-mimetic Holocaust fiction, by its very nature, is in opposition to statements made by critics and scholars such as Alvin Rosenfeld in the introduction to his otherwise excellent book on Holocaust fiction – purely realist and mimetic Holocaust fiction, it should be noted – he theorises that Holocaust literature “occupies another sphere of study” compared to other topical literatures about “the family, of slavery, of the environment, of World War I or World War II” continuing that Holocaust literature “force[s] us to contemplate what may be fundamental changes in our modes of perception and expression” (12).

Mickey a Gurs uses Fantastika to explore the disconnect between American society and the camps, whilst also poking fun at the bureaucratic nature of the genocide, all from within the jaws of the beast itself. *La Bete est Morte* portrays a level of violence and brutality that would never have been acceptable were it humans being slaughtered, and certainly would not be treated a text for children, and thus encourages a search for empathy and understanding that would otherwise be denied to us. *Maus* asks questions our moral simplicity whilst also allowing for a far more visceral and nuanced insight into issues of race, segregation, and discrimination than an animal-less version would. These are narratives which employ the fantastic as a tool to better understand the Holocaust. The X-Men, particularly Magneto and *Magneto: Testament* is the inverse, it is the fantastic utilising the Holocaust to add depth and gravitas to its original universe. Like *Maus*, *Testament* normalises Holocaust survivors by suggesting that a Holocaust survivor is just as capable of repeating the crimes of his perpetrator as any other victim. Similarly, through their associations with other persecuted groups, the X-Men as a whole align the

Holocaust with a wider history of discrimination and bigotry, reminding us that the Holocaust was not only a Jewish catastrophe, and that it is not only Jews who need to be mindful of its lessons.

During Spiegelman's previously referred to conversation with his psychiatrist, the psychiatrist muses that "the victims who died can never tell *their* side of the story, so maybe it's better not to have any more stories". Spiegelman replies: "Samuel Beckett once said: "Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness" [...] On the other hand, he *said* it" (204). Elie Wiesel insists that "silence itself communicates more and better", yet as our connections with survivors loosen inevitably over time, we find ourselves less able to properly relate the silence to the event in a meaningful manner. We, like Spiegelman, yearn to fill that silence and attempt to bridge the impossible gap to understanding the trauma of the Holocaust. We can use every tool in our imaginative arsenal in this attempt at retrieving lost memories and all we can amount to is a whisper. It is, however, a necessary whisper that offers a better chance of being related to the horrifying truth of the Holocaust than an anonymous silence. Comics are a particularly potent tool because they "[force] the contemplation of the events into a transgressive real or medium, by calling for the unfamiliar, the unsettling" (Lipman 161), and this effect is only amplified by the inclusion of the fantastic. Neither the fantastic, nor comics, and certainly not the two combined, should be overlooked or underestimated in their potential to interrogate, examine, and explain aspects of history or the Holocaust.

Notes

- 1 This despite being himself the author of Holocaust fiction, in addition to his memoirs. Wiesel is of course to a certain extent responding to the oft quoted line from Theodore Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (Trans. E. B. Ashton. 1973) that 'poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.
- 2 Claude Beylie labelled comics the ninth art (after architecture, sculpture, painting, music, dance, poetry, and film and television), building on the original classifications of art by Ricciotto. See: *Letters and Doctors*, Mar 1964.
- 3 For an account of theatrical performances by Holocaust survivors in DP camps see: Feinstein, Margarete Myers. "Re-Imagining the Unimaginable: Theater, memory, and rehabilitation in the Displaced Persons camps" *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence*. Eds. David Cesarani and Eric J. Sundquist. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012. pp. 39-54.
- 4 Translation (in bold) my own. The original pamphlet of *Mickey in Gurs* is held by the CDJC, Paris. It has been published for the first time, along with Rosenthal's other two comics, in Kotek, Joël and Didier Pasamonik. *Mickey à Gurs: Les Carnets de dessins de Horst Rosenthal*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2014. All page references made are to this edition. Samples from the pamphlet, including the page containing this exchange, 'In the Camp's Office', can be found among the references of Rosenberg, Pnina. "Mickey Mouse in Gurs – Humour, Irony and Criticism in Works of Art Produced in the Gurs Internment Camp." *Rethinking History* 6. 3 (2002) : 273-292

- 5 The remaining two credits go to Victor Dancette and Jacques Zimmermann, but all editions of the comic give over-riding prominence to Calvo, the primary artist.
- 6 The irony continues, given that the Big Bad Wolf is often cited as evidence of Disney's anti-Semitic tendencies after he appears dressed as a stereotyped Jewish peddler, complete with Yiddish accent, in the short film *Three Little Pigs* (1933, part of the *Silly Symphonies*) in an attempt to force his way into the brick house of the titular swine.
- 7 According to the German press of the time, controlled by Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, the *Kristallnacht* pogrom was a spontaneous reaction to the killing. However, post-war documentary evidence shows that the violence was organised by Nazi officials including Reinhard Heydrich. See: Shirer, William L. *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. 430-435.

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Adapting Nineteen Eighty-Four

ASAMI NAKAMURA

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon claims that “Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication” (7). If so, what does it mean to adapt George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)? According to Tom Moylan, Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is a narrative of “anti-utopian pessimism” that “forecloses the possibility of any social transformation” (161-2). This is surely epitomised by the core image which the novel provides, that is, “a picture of the future” as “a boot stamping on a human face—forever” (NEF 280)¹ Does adapting an anti-utopia further strengthen its myth of sheer closure, or does it create a kind of an anti-utopia with a difference? This article first aims to establish the theoretical position in adaptation studies while discussing Orwell’s novel itself as an appropriation of several precursory novels. The second part of the article then focuses on adaptations which illustrate this theoretical perspective, that is, two film adaptations (released in 1956 and in 1984 respectively) and the recent theatre adaptation (released in 2013), while also discussing Terry Gilliam’s film *Brazil* (1985) as an appropriation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Through this analysis, this article explores the concept of adaptation as a critical device, which casts light on the nature of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an intertextual phenomenon.

Fidelity criticism

There was a proposal to adapt *Nineteen Eighty-Four* quite soon after its publication; an American writer Sidney Sheldon asked for a permission to adapt the novel to a Broadway stage play, towards which Orwell’s attitude was quite positive (although the plan itself was unfulfilled). Yet Orwell admitted his concern about “deformation” of his novel: ““What I was afraid of was that the meaning of the book might be seriously deformed, more than is unavoidable in any stage adaptation of a novel” (“Letter to Leonard Moore, 22 August 1949”, 158). Here “the meaning of the book” implies that there exists a single point of reference which transcends all of signifiers in the novel. Orwell seemingly clarifies this point in his famous statement, claiming that the novel is a satiric warning against the possible threat of totalitarianism, and “*not* intended as an attack on socialism or on the British Labour Party, but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralised economy is liable, and which have already been partly realised in Communism and fascism” [emphasis in original] (“Orwell’s Statement”, 135). By declaring that his fiction is first and foremost a cautionary tale, Orwell attempts to limit the ever-shifting signifiers of the text to a certain direction, hoping to avoid any misunderstandings or more deliberate “deformation” of it by readers.

This anxiety on the side of the author consists of fidelity criticism; In Orwell’s remarks mentioned above, it is presupposed that the author is the ultimate holder of the meaning of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and it is the duty of an adapter not to challenge that authority, the position which inherently undermines the potential of adaptation

to produce meanings other than the one intended. Besides the author, critics can also claim the “truth” of the text, in terms of textual properties such as themes or genre, and literary theory which one applies. Regarding two film adaptations by Michael Anderson in 1956 and by Michael Radford in 1984, previous criticisms have concentrated on fidelity discourse, criticising that they do not live up to the fundamental potential of Orwell’s work. Anderson’s 1956 film can be easily dismissed as a mere Cold War propaganda film which is devoid of the intricacy of the novel (Shaw 159; Sinyard 63). Meanwhile, Palmer and Gottlieb criticise Radford’s later film as a “museum piece” or merely commercial movie designed to exploit the year (Palmer 185; Gottlieb 91). Gottlieb goes so far as to argue that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a political satire is not suitable for film adaptation in the first place, since “the cinema—direct, essentially sensory rather than cerebral, offering us a sense of quick identification with the character and hence minimal chance for intellectual distance” is merely incompatible with “the genre of satire—a mode of literature that is indirect, more cerebral than sensory” (93). Here, it is surely ironic that here both the author and critics seem to be in the position of the “Thought Police” of the original text by insisting on the adapter’s responsibility to make his/her work as faithful as possible to the novel. As Christine Geraghty states, on the other hand, fidelity criticism has now become almost outmoded in adaptation studies:

The fidelity model, which relies heavily on notions of media specificity and which almost inevitably results in a comparison on terms dictated by the source text, has been under attack for many years in adaptation studies though it still persists as a default mode (94)

Re-evaluating adaptations beyond the confinement of the “fidelity model” and their derivative status it implies, is indispensable for adaptation studies to establish itself as a distinct field of research.

Adaptation and intertextuality: are all texts adaptations?

However, simply celebrating the value of adaptations against the source texts entails its own problem; namely it assumes that the adapted text and its adaptation are two separate entities. While Linda Hutcheon points out that “to deal with adaptations *as adaptations* is to think of them as [...] inherently ‘palimpsestuous’ works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts”, it should be noted that adapted texts are likewise not independent of other texts in general [emphasis in original] (6). In fact, all texts are intertexts in the sense that their meaning is overdetermined by various kinds of cultural and social discourses. Julia Kristeva claims that “[a]ny text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double” (*Desire in Language* 66), so that intertextuality should not be “understood in the banal sense of ‘study of sources’” (*The Kristeva Reader* 111); Leon S. Roudiez explains this by noting that intertextuality “has nothing to do with matters of influence by one writer upon another, or with the sources of a literary work” (*Desire in Language* 15). A text is “a mosaic of quotations”, in which each quotation obtains a meaning not in itself, but in relation to another (thus it is “read as at least double”). In this sense, an adaptation is an exemplary instance which foregrounds this relative, double nature of textuality and its generation of meanings by making an explicit reference to the

adapted text. Yet the adapted text is also nonetheless intertextual, only that its connections to other texts are not credited. Although the notion of intertextuality does not necessarily nullify the categorical distinction between the adapted text and its adaptation (because an adaptation more or less preserves its connection to the anterior text explicit, the element which requires a distinction from other texts), an adapted text can also be regarded as an adaptation/appropriation of prior texts.

This fluid and reflective relationship between these two categories is recognised by the fact that Orwell's novel can itself be considered as an appropriation (if not adaptation) of several pre-existing texts.² In his article entitled "Orwell's *1984*: Rewriting the Future", Michael Wilding draws a parallel between Winston's job and Orwell's writing:

Winston's occupation is rewriting news items to accord with changes in the society's political requirements. [...] Orwell's procedure in *1984* is a calculated, conscious rewriting of the political futures predicted in earlier utopian and anti-utopian novels (38)

He then goes on to trace the novel's thematic relationship with "major" works such as Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), H. G. Wells's *When The Sleeper Wakes* (1899), Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and Arthur Koestler's *Darkness At Noon* (1940) (39).³ James Burnham's theoretical work, *The Managerial Revolution* (1941), is also regarded as a critical text in terms of the similarity in political discourse. Besides, while the works mentioned above are within the category of the novel, adaptation/appropriation can occur between two different media; for instance, Charles Chaplin's film *The Great Dictator* (1940) should also be included in the list, considering its thematic and stylistic commonalities and the fact that Orwell himself praised it in a film column.⁴ An author can also appropriate him/herself; with the help of OCR scanning of all of Orwell's texts, Peter Huber proves that Orwell frequently self-plagiarised his own previous writings for the writing of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.⁵ As an updated news article (which Winston painstakingly rewrites) would replace the previous one without giving any credits, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents itself as a definitive account of the coming future, with its intertextual relationship with precursory texts submerged under the novel's disguise as one author's work of fiction, a separate, single product. Yet the notion of intertextuality disrupts the apparent dichotomy of the "source" text and its adaptation, rendering the derivative status of the latter inadequate. The distinction between adaptation and appropriation should also be assessed in this context; if adaptation is a readerly experience in that it declares itself as an adaptation (the adapter is presenting him/herself as a reader in the first place), it could be said that appropriation is more writerly, in that the author rewrites pre-existing materials: materials without providing credits.

Given this relative nature of these concepts, it seems almost impossible to specifically locate the field of adaptation studies and determine its core property.⁶ Therefore, rather than attempting to limit the potential of the concept by defining it too strictly, we should focus on the various problematics it entails. For instance, adaptation studies can not only challenge the supposed authority of the source text, but can also subvert the

distinction between a work of fiction and other modes of texts such as a critical commentary, interrogates disciplinary boundaries (such as literature and film studies), and accommodates rigorous discussion on growing new forms of media. Every author is always/already a reader, and an adaptation foregrounds this double position in regards to the production of the text. Adaptation studies is in this sense highly self-reflective. With this in mind, we are now able to consider specific questions of interpretation that adaptations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* present.

Adaptations/appropriations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Nineteen Eighty-Four was first screened on TV in the US by National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in 1953, and in December 1954, the BBC in turn broadcast its own adaptation (Rodden 274; Shaw 153-6). The first film adaptation was made by Michael Anderson (screenplay by Ralph Bettinson and William P. Templeton) in 1956, and the second by Michael Radford (director/screenwriter) in 1984. Stage adaptations have recently been made, the first by Matthew Dunster (2010) and the second by Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan (2013).⁷ Other adaptations such as radio dramas (in 1950 and 2013 by BBC) and the soundtrack to Radford's adaptation by Eurythmics testify to the strong inter-media potential of adapting *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Rodden 273, 286). While there are numerous films and novels which more or less appropriate *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (Screenplay by Terry Gilliam, Charles Alverson, Charles McKeown and Tom Stoppard, released in 1985) is arguably the most notable example of appropriation. Here, it is also worthwhile to mention Anthony Burgess's *1985* (1978) and Peter Huber's *Orwell's Revenge: The "1984" Palimpsest* (1995), which reworked Orwell's dystopia from their perspectives.

Theoretically speaking, the fact that Orwell's novel has been adapted to various kinds of media implies the possibility that an adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not that of the novel, but could be of a pre-existing adaptation of it (for instance, Michael Radford's 1984 adaptation can be an adaptation of Michael Anderson's 1956 adaptation as well). Although the adaptor's explicit credit to the novel appears to be a proof that the adaptation is only that of the novel, its status will inevitably stay unstable since the audience's response is also an essential part of it as an adaptation; it is theoretically possible to keep arguing over which text this or that adaptation adapted, or whether both texts were adapted. This is one of the reasons why defining the concept of adaptation remains a contentious issue.

Two Film Adaptations

After the opening credit declaring that it is "Freely adapted from the Novel *1984* by George Orwell", Michael Anderson's 1956 film adaptation starts with another opening credit: "THIS IS A STORY OF THE FUTURE—NOT THE FUTURE OF SPACE SHIPS AND MEN FROM OTHER PLANETS—BUT THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE". By framing the story with this didactic message, the film reminds the audience that it should be regarded as a representation of a possible future, which people must prevent from happening at all costs. The story begins with footage of a series of mushroom clouds, and the narrator explains that a nuclear war in 1965 let three super-states—Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia— arise. Here, unlike the novel, the film specifies the time setting (around "1965") so that its

immediacy to the contemporary will be foregrounded, as if “Orwell’s world seems to be just around the corner” (Shaw 160).

Although there are other notable scenes such as that of an air raid and how the telescreen checks and warns each citizen’s behaviour, the most unique visualisation in Anderson’s film is that of the office of the Records Department. In addition to the telescreen which looks like an eye, this office represents the panoptic structure in a more elaborated way than in the novel. Here, Jacques-Alain Miller’s short definition of Bentham’s panopticon seems to explain the exact appearance of Anderson’s visualisation of the Records Department: the structure (panopticon) “is a building. It is circular. There are cells around the circumference, on each floor. In the centre, a tower. Between the centre and the circumference is a neutral, intermediate zone” (3). Anderson’s Ministry of Truth instantiates this surveillance model, where a big screen is set in the centre and under it, high-rank officers are roaming to check their subordinates working in the surrounding cubicles; no windows are on the wall; there are no doors either between office workers, exposing every inch of their behaviour. The only moment when they assemble is during the ceremony called Two Minutes Hate, which takes place in the central space. By projecting the contrast of the revolutionist’s ugly and old face and Big Brother’s resolute and reassuring mask, the telescreen controls group psychology in a mediated, quite virtual way.⁸ After a collective frenzy of shouting “Long live Big Brother”, every Party member gets back to each place as if nothing had happened. Anderson thus seeks to evoke their inability to take any action to criticize the principles of the Party, and consequent succumbing to the state of abject resignation. On the other hand, Radford’s adaptation more literally reproduces the design of the office which is only briefly depicted in the novel: “In the long, windowless hall, with its double row of cubicles and its endless rustle of papers and hum of voices murmuring into speakwrites, there were quite a dozen people whom Winston did not even know by name” (see NEF 44). It is here notable that Anderson’s adaptation is still “faithful” to the novel, even if it puts original detail onto the novel’s description.



Figure 1. Modern Panoptic Office in Anderson's 1984

Meanwhile, Anderson's adaptation tends to ignore any of the complexity of Winston's psychological dimension (Gottlieb 87). For instance, Winston toasts their initiation of Brotherhood by declaring "Down with Big Brother", not "to the past" as in the novel (NEF 184). In this context, it is also striking that in Anderson's film, when Winston is leaving Charrington's store, he forgets to take his glass paperweight, which is "an image of an authentically English past" (Wegner 212). Winston's desperate nostalgia is simply omitted in Anderson's film.

What is foregrounded instead is the notion that private love is the epitome of freedom. When he obtained the book of revolution, Winston is persuaded by Julia that only love is a true form of rebellion. Yet when a sinister voice from the mirror is heard, Winston shatters it with the pot, only to discover the surveillance camera. A remarkable effect here is that he, in fact, throws it at the audience.⁹ This is the moment when we realize that the audience have been placed in the position of the Thought Police; it is the gaze from outside that crushes their romantic fantasy, breaking into their love nest. (See "The film poster depicting the Thought Police surveillancing Winston and Julia")

In the epilogue, the narrator says: "This then is a story of the future. It could be the story of our children, if we failed to preserve the heritage of freedom". Anderson's film, "American-financed [and] British-made", is made of this either/or logic—totalitarianism or freedom—forcing the audience to choose the latter.¹⁰ Regarding this, Tony Shaw points out that in the film "Oceania's currency [...] is changed from dollars, denoting American imperialism, to sterling" (161). In the novel, Winston buys a glass paperweight for four "dollars" in London, which allegedly cost eight "pounds" not long before Big Brother's regime (NEF 99). This detail implies, as Phillip E. Wegner likewise indicates, that Oceania is not "an extrapolation of a purely 'English' authoritarian state", but

rather, “the Oceanic superstate *is* a figure for the United States, in relation to which England, or ‘Airstrip One’, has been demoted to the status of a minor regional outpost” [emphasis in original] (212). By omitting this controversial feature of the novel, the film hides its aspect as a criticism of America. Freedom is only defined in terms of a private love-life, leaving any other stones unturned.

It should also be noted that, not only does Anderson’s film dismiss its protagonist’s sensibilities, but also the physical appearances of Winston, Julia, and O’Brien quite different from the description in the novel; in the 1956 adaptation, Winston (Edmond O’Brien) is a stout and determined revolutionist, Julia (Jan Sterling) is a fair blond, and O’Brien is now called O’Conner (Michael Redgrave; this is possibly because the main actor’s name is O’Brien), who is a thin and rather youthful officer. By contrast, Radford’s casting is successful in delineating those characters as “accurately” as possible; Winston (John Hurt) is exactly a “smallish, frail figure”, Julia (Suzanna Hamilton) a “bold-looking girl, [...] with thick dark hair”, and O’Brien (Richard Burton) “a large, burly man with a thick neck and a coarse, humorous, brutal face” (NEF 4, 11, 12). In addition, John Hurt looks exactly like George Orwell in the guise of Winston Smith (Gottlieb 87). And Julia’s unshaved armpit hair, which is not mentioned in the novel, is effective to intensify the lack of products in Oceania. (If razor blades are rationed even for men, it would be much harder for women to obtain them). Lastly, the fact that Richard Burton died shortly after the film finished shooting provides an ominous impression, if the audience is aware of this fact; his vacant-looking eyes and monotone voice while torturing Winston might indicate O’Brien’s resignation from his own body itself or his deadly will to perpetuate himself as an apostle of Big Brother.

Radford’s film adaptation was produced and released in 1984, boasting that “This film was photographed in and around London during the period April-June 1984, the exact time and setting imagined by the author”. Yet somewhat in contradiction to this, Simon Perry, the producer of the film, explains its basic concept as follows: “we wanted to do Orwell’s *1984*: that is, not a futuristic fantasy but a satire on his own world, an extreme vision of Britain in 1948 at the height of the Cold War” (Billington).¹¹ It might not be, however, a contradiction if the year 1984 is not regarded as the future, but as the future imagined in the past. Radford uses one of the most well-known dictums of Newspeak for the opening credit; “WHO CONTROLS THE PAST/ CONTROLS THE FUTURE/ WHO CONTROLS THE PRESENT/ CONTROLS THE PAST”. There is a notable antiquarian tendency when Radford even makes the telescreen look outmoded; the colour of the screen is sepia, while colour television had been introduced to the UK in the 1960s. In addition, Rodden notes that the scene of “[t]he Two-Minute Hate even included footage from a frightening anti-Nazi propaganda film scripted by Dylan Thomas” (286). But at the same time, although Radford himself insisted on using Dominic Muldowney’s orchestra sound track, it was decided by Virgin Films to employ Eurythmics’s “modern” music for the most part of the film to increase commercial demand (Rodden 286). All in all it could be said that, whereas Anderson’s film focuses on the future itself, Radford’s one is more concerned about the dialectic between the past and the future.

As an overall observation, it is evident that Radford focuses on Winston’s psychological landscapes. For Winston, writing a diary is a form of a political testimony as well as a release for his feelings. He does not choose

to write a critical document or political book like Goldstein's book of revolution. Yet the diary is not sufficient to be an outlet for his emotion, for he cannot find the right addressees. His repressed feelings are waiting to be found and liberated by someone else who can understand him and more importantly, love him. Radford's adaptation is quite effective in portraying this urgent need of Winston. The most distinctive point is that Radford deliberately conflates two figures, that is, O'Brien the torturer and Julia the lover by superimposing their images. It suggests that both of them can be regarded as the products of Winston's deranged mind. He has been waiting for a woman who gives him pleasure, and a man who gives him pain (both as a proof of Winston's existence). At some point, the film even depicts Julia almost as a double of O'Brien, the interpretation of which is also detected in the stage play adaptation discussed below.

In order to present the overall story as more or less produced by Winston's complex psychology, Radford uses the technique of cross-cutting, flashback and superimposition. Specifically, the scene of the Golden Country has dual role in itself; on the one hand, it is illustrated as a real, secluded place in Oceania when Winston commits the first "sexcrime" with Julia (NEF 319). On the other hand, the Golden Country becomes imaginative when being shown as Winston's psychological landscape. In his fantasy, "the door" to the pastoral utopian landscape is presented simultaneously as the entrance to the infamous Room 101. The image of a derelict city which appears as the landscape of his childhood memories is also connected to that of the Golden Country. In this way, Radford deliberately blurs the distinction between memory and imagination, and dystopia and utopia. (See "O'Brien and Winston in the Golden Country")

Another conflation also occurs between reality and Winston's dream. In one dream, he sees the Golden Country "before" meeting with Julia, and anticipates the later torture, which is signified by Radford's cunning addition of the images of Room 101 to it (see also NEF 32-3 for Winston's precognitive dream). Also in his childhood memory, before actually meeting him directly, there is already O'Brien in the landscape, serving to give reassurance to the little Winston in front of his dead mother; this gives a strong impression that O'Brien is as indispensable to Winston's fantasy as Julia. One man's personal dream and the reality he experiences are closely intertwined as in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*. It seems to be even possible to argue that what happens in Radford's 1984 is all contained within Winston's dream, which could be a locus of "release or oppression, wish-fulfilment or ultimate nightmare, a beautiful English landscape that might at any moment dissolve into Room 101" (Synyard 66). (See "Julia and Winston in the Golden Country")

Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan's theatre adaptation of 1984

To summarise, Anderson's 1956 adaptation is future-oriented and didactic, whereas Radford's 1984 adaptation is past-oriented and psychological. While these film adaptations provide their critical interpretations at the level of the content, the 2013 theatre adaptation by Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan rather concentrates on the form, providing a fresh look to adaptations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The most noticeable omission in those film adaptations is the Appendix entitled "The Principles of Newspeak". Although the Appendix

itself is not specifically mentioned, Orwell strongly objected to “alteration” to and “abbreviation” of the novel, for “[a] book is built up as a balanced structure and one cannot simply remove large chunks here and there unless one is ready to recast the whole thing” (“Letter to Leonard Moore, 17 March 1949”, 66). What is distinctive about the Appendix is the effect brought by its form; that is, the existence of the Appendix itself suspends the ending of the main story. It is written in the past tense, which could also suggest the demise of the Big Brother regime. Meanwhile, there is a footnote at the beginning of the main story which directs the reader to the Appendix. This implies that Winston’s story is a historical record, which is further validated by the third-person narrative in the main story and the academic, detached tone of the Appendix. The theatre adaptation represents this structure of the Appendix by staging this narrative frame, that is, by setting up the reading group of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the future, in 2050. (See “Members of the future reading group of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*”)

The attendees of the reading group discuss the work at the beginning and end of the play, and what is uncanny is that Winston is also present in this reading group; he is bewildered by the fact that the story about him is read aloud right in front of him. He does not know where he is and what time it is. This anxiety culminates in the scenes where he breaks the so-called fourth-wall. During the torture session, O’Brien forces Winston literally to give his humanistic message to the audience, considering them as the representative of the future. The scene triggers a tension between Winston and the audience, questioning whether a political fiction can ever send its message to the addressee, and if so, how.¹² The play also ends with Winston facing the audience saying “thank you”, not “I love Big Brother”. While the audience and Big Brother can be considered as the addressee, it is uncertain what exactly Winston is grateful for. His empty tone of voice and blank face only makes the remark ironical, implying his deep sense of resignation. Here, it should be noted that time-space compression is evident in this play. Oceania (the present/past) and the future after Oceania are superimposed by placing Winston (and O’Brien) in the future reading group, which makes the play rather ahistorical. The fourth wall effect which is mentioned above is one of the examples of space compression, and others can also be clearly seen in the way the place where the reading group is held is also shown as places in Oceania, such as Winston’s own room and Charrington’s shop. Another example is the large screen hung above the stage, which is effectively utilised for layering multiple places, creating a dreamlike space on the stage. (See “Members of the future reading group and Winston (rehearsal picture)”)

The central theme of this play is Winston’s sense of alienation; this is accentuated by the question—“Where are you, Winston”—which is repeatedly asked by O’Brien, Julia and members of the reading group.¹³ Winston continuously seeks for “hope” outside the dystopia he lives in; the idealised past, the underground rebel group, romantic love as liberation, and the people in the future. Yet the very problem lies in Winston’s position inside the present dystopia; rather than attempting to confront actual situations, he only clings to an abstract notion of freedom. Even Orwell as the author of the novel is alienated; having finished “reading” *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the host of the reading group maintains that Winston had never existed, and the author of the book is now uncertain. As opposed to the other members who finally dismiss the importance of the novel to their current

society, another member speculates that the Party “structure[s] the world in such a way that we believed that they were no longer”, although she discards this idea shortly (Icke and Macmillan 95). Seemingly, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ends twice, both when Winston is defeated by Big Brother and when Oceania ceases to exist. Yet this stage adaptation in fact problematizes the very *telos* of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by visualising its formal aspect.

Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil*

If Icke and Macmillan superimpose times and spaces to create a no-place, Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* conflates dreams and nightmares, rather than reality and dreams, as Jonathan Price (who plays the main character Sam Lowry) succinctly puts it.¹⁴ This is why the story is set “somewhere in the 20th century”, another no-place. The film was released in 1985 and its allusion to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* seems obvious, alongside the fact that one of the film’s alternative titles was *1984 ½* (Mathews 40), and that the film starts with the caption “8:49 P.M.” (which plays with the digits of “1984”). Richard A. Rogers notes that audiences can read *Brazil* in the context of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “because of the prevalence and strength of the 1984 vision in our culture” (41). This suggests that *Brazil* is an appropriation of a phenomenon or event called “Nineteen Eighty-Four”, rather than that of a single text. In *Brazil*, a timid lower official called Sam Lowry works in the department of Records, and like Winston he often fantasises about a lover in his dream. Sam later meets her in reality; she is now a truck driver called Jill (Kim Greist), who has the same look as the woman he dreams about. In one dream sequence, Sam manages to kill the evil Samurai in his dream to save Jill. Yet there is an eerie moment when Sam discovers that the face behind the mask of the Samurai is his; Sam’s fantasy is intruded into by a nightmare where he is the very monster which trapped a fragile fairy-like woman. Furthermore, if Sam is the monster, his object of love is his mother; at the end of the film, Sam’s mother turns into Jill, thanks to plastic surgery.¹⁵ The film starts from the TV commercial for ducts which are sold by Central Services; those bare ducts intrude into every place almost like nature, indicating the impossibility of obtaining a completely private space. In *Brazil*, reality is a nightmare in the sense that it keeps threatening to ruin the world of one’s pure imagination. (See “Ducts intruding a restaurant”).

The ending appears to be quite traumatic; it depicts an epic rescue by Tuttle (Robert De Niro) and his group of rebels and Sam’s happy reunion with Jill, only to make the audience realise that these are all in Sam’s dream. In comparing *Brazil*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Radford’s adaptation, Rogers and John Erickson argue that, while Winston is completely defeated by the totalitarian system and thus the latter is completely pessimistic, Sam defies it by escaping to his fantasy world; the torturer Jack (Michael Palin) and a Big Brother figure Mr Helpmann (Peter Vaughan) in fact “lose” him in reality (“He’s got away from us, Jack”), and Sam starts to hum the song, “Brazil” (Rogers 41; Erickson 32). The theme song entitled “Brazil” makes a contrast to the dark tone of the film, symbolising an ultimate escape into one’s own fantasy (Mathews, ix). Gilliam himself also remarks that “To me that’s an optimistic ending. Lowry’s imagination is still free and alive; they haven’t got that. They may have his body, but they don’t have his mind. The girl rescues him and takes him away and they live happily forever; it’s

only in his mind, but that's sufficient, I think. It's better than nothing, folks!" (Bennetts).¹⁶ Yet as I mentioned above, the film rather emphasises the ambiguity of fantasy, or the complexity of desire which keeps deflating itself. It illustrates how one's dream can easily deteriorate into a nightmare; the freedom of imagination is an illusion, and an absolute private space cannot even exist in one's imagination. (See "Link: Sam flying away from the nightmarish reality of bureaucracy?")

Conclusion

Despite its explicit authorial intention (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a cautionary tale), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a textual *topos* where vectors of meanings collide and conflict, refusing one-to-one reified interpretation between the novel and the author or genre. Adaptations/appropriations engages with the text closely by reinventing elements of it in their own manner, while exposing their suppositions or ideological positions. The transition in adapters' focus from the content (films) to the form (2013 stage play) is particularly remarkable in the sense that it sheds light on the complexity in the production of meanings in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which invites multiple ways of interpretation. Along with this, it should be noted that the level of irony has been intensified through the adaptations, culminating in Icke and Macmillan's theatrical adaptation, which deliberately subverts the aspect of the novel as a cautionary tale. Regarding this shift from the content to the form, the following quote on postmodernism by Fredric Jameson seems relevant here: "Time has become a perpetual present and thus spatial. Our relationship to the past is now a spatial one" (47). Whereas Anderson's film still served as a futuristic tale with its focus on the "message" of the story, Radford's adaptation concentrates on the image of the future as imagined in the past. Thus the aspect of the temporal is already faint in Radford, and both the 2013 theatre adaptation and Gilliam's *Brazil* present a no-place whose temporal dimension is abstracted, with the use of intense irony. Now, if we return to the question at the beginning of this article, it can be concluded that adapting *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not simply repeating the myth of "anti-utopian pessimism" in the novel; while reflecting on the social, cultural and historical context, it reconfigures the network of meanings in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a phenomenon, revealing various faces of anti-utopia.

Notes

- 1 From now on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* will be abbreviated to NEF.
- 2 While there is a debate over the distinction between adaptation and appropriation (see Sanders 26; Leitch 88), in this article, I will simply use the term "adaptation" for a work with an explicit credit to another, and "appropriation" for a work without such, while still evoking strong connections with other works. Adaptation and appropriation, however, share the property of being reworkings.
- 3 Here, I avoid using the word "influence" because it presupposes a text as a completely separate entity or product, the meaning of which is contained in itself. The word "version" is also avoided to designate an adaptation since it posits the superiority of the source text.

- 4 Neil Sinyard speculates on *The Great Dictator* that “Orwell was deeply moved by the film and ransacked its style, tone and ideas more than any other work of art when he came to shape his two most profound works, *Animal Farm* and *1984*” (61).
- 5 Peter Huber, *Orwell’s Revenge: The 1984 Palimpsest* (New York: The Free Press, 1944).
- 6 Thomas Leitch highlights “the fact that the field has been marked over the past ten years by a notable lack of consensus about the extent, the methodology, and the boundaries appropriate to its objects of study – except, of course, for the near-unanimous rejection of fidelity discourse, the bad object of adaptation studies – and an equally notable efflorescence of provocative scholarship” (103).
- 7 There is a stage play entitled *Orwell: A Celebration* by Dominic Cavendish which was performed in 2008 in the UK. It adapts various kinds of Orwell’s writings including a torture section from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
- 8 Instead of Goldstein, this revolutionist is called “Karador”. I have been not able to find the origin of this name.
- 9 This reminds one of a famous 1984 Apple commercial (directed by Ridley Scott), which was based on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Butler comments that “Apple relied entirely on the theme of liberation from dystopia to sell its new machine” by satirising IBM’s supposed tyranny (301). Yet Anderson’s film represents the fear that there could be a “telescreen” hidden under a screen, producing the effect of the infinite regress of the oppressive gaze.
- 10 Notably, the film adaptation of *Animal Farm* by John Halas and Joy Batchelor, which was released in 1954, had been financed by the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), while “hiding its American (not to mention CIA) origins” to produce “greater international propaganda potential” (Shaw 156).
- 11 Michael Billington indicates the aspect of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as “a metaphor for Prime Minister Clement Attlee’s austerity Britain of 1948 with its personal privations, rationed consumer goods and bomb-scarred landscape”. Likewise, in his essay on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (which is accompanied by the novella based on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the book titled *1985* [1978]), Anthony Burgess argues that “*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is no more than a comic transcription of the London of the end of the Second World War” (21).
- 12 Also, Winston started to cry for help to the audience during a torture session, blaming them that they are only sitting and observing in front of him. This is not scripted; I witnessed this ad lib in November in 2013 in Liverpool.
- 13 As in Radford’s adaptation, the figures of O’Brien and Julia are conflated; in this stage adaptation, Julia speaks to Winston in O’Brien’s voice, telling him that he has always known what is in Room 101 (Icke and Macmillan 76).
- 14 In a documentary titled “What is Brazil?”, Jonathan Price comments that “normally we have reality and dreams; but in this [film] you have dreams and nightmares”.

- 15** Also in the theatre adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, behind the mask of an officer in the Ministry of Love is Winston's face, while a woman who is possibly Winston's mother turns out to be Julia.
- 16** As is chronicled in details in Jack Matthew's *The Battle of Brazil* (1987), Universal Pictures demanded a more straightforwardly happy ending where Jill and Sam live happily ever after. It should be noted here that Anderson's 1956 adaptation also had the same issue; in a happy ending pressed by Columbia, Julia and Winston do not betray each other, and when both are going to be shot by the Thought Police, Winston shouts "Down with Big Brother!", praising the invincible power of love (Rodden 284). Sonia Orwell "unfilmed" or halted the circulation of this happy-ending version of Anderson's adaptation for the reason that it violates the author's intention (Rodden 284, 446).

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Simulation Frames: Young Adult Dystopian Cinema

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Like the novels on which they are based, Young Adult dystopian films primarily provide a space for heroic adventure. The films repurpose dystopia, de-emphasising the ideological critique associated with canonic dystopic fiction. Young Adult dystopian adaptations retain their source novels' hybridisation of fast-paced action with codes of teen drama, reformulating these within post-classical cinema targeted at a young teen demographic. This article examines the ways in which *Divergent* (Burger, US, 2014) reimagines the aesthetics and spatial relations of classic dystopic and science fiction cinema. The film, together with other Young Adult adaptations, constructs a cinematic analogue of Young Adult dystopian novels' metaphoric treatment of adolescent concerns, and their focus on subjectivity. Visual tropes from dystopian science fiction, war or drama genres abound in these films, but they are modified. Mise-en-scène coded to convey social organisation becomes pleasurable fashion; simulated environments enhance ability and self-knowledge, utopian and dystopian narrative spaces are defined by teenage communities and romances. The run-down city or the warring space-ship take on an educational and game-oriented function. *Divergent* is one of the first Young Adult films after *The Hunger Games* (2012) to bring dystopia, heroic adventure and teen development successfully to the screen. Despite the continuing success of *The Hunger Games* franchise, by 2013 there was speculation in the industry press that this genre was not financially viable. The year had seen the release of the less profitable dystopian science fiction *Ender's Game* and *The Host*, and post-apocalyptic *How I Live Now*. When *Divergent* made \$54.6 million at its opening weekend in America (*Box Office Mojo*), double the opening box office of *Ender's Game*, it was hailed by industry commentators as having broken 'the curse that has plagued every other YA film adaptation' (McClintock). While making only slightly over a third of *The Hunger Games's* \$152.5 million opening, its opening box office enabled it to be ranked directly below the latter franchise and those of *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* (2008-12) in a list of 'Young-Adult Book Adaptations' (*Box Office Mojo*). This success came despite the fact that the series' concluding book *Allegiant* (2013) was published to a negative reception from many fans.

Divergent is adapted from the first novel in a best-selling trilogy by Christian author Veronica Roth. The appeal of the novel for its fandom is based partly on its strong-willed heroine, and the central premise of the faction system, both of which are integral to the film's reworking of dystopia.¹ *Divergent* is set about 150 years in the future in a post-apocalyptic Chicago, sealed off by a guarded wall. Its citizens choose at 16 to join one of five factions based on virtues: 'Abnegation' are self-effacing with religious associations and take on caring and political duties; 'Erudite' fulfil intellectual roles; 'Dauntless' act as armed protectors; 'Candor' value honesty; and 'Amity' favour peace and harmony. An aptitude test, in the form of a simulation, provides guidance on faction choice. After a symbolic Choosing Ceremony, young people leave family behind to adopt the ideologies and social roles of

their chosen faction, following the doctrine of ‘faction before blood’. Beatrice Prior is born into Abnegation, but at her test she is warned that she is ‘divergent’, having traits that fit several factions, and so represents a threat to the system. She chooses Dauntless, renames herself Tris, and we follow her initiation process of physical and mental training, and her relationship with trainer, ‘Four’, whose original name was Tobias. Erudite leader Jeanine then disrupts the status quo by using a simulation to control Dauntless, who attack Abnegation.

As in other Young Adult dystopian fiction such as the book and film of *The Maze Runner*, Tris finds her identity in an enclosed, youthful community. Young Adult dystopian literature differs from canonical dystopian fiction in a range of ways which affect the novels’ transposition to film. It is a hybrid genre that “draws on...the *bildungsroman*, the adventure story, and the romance” (Basu, Broad and Hintz 6) in addition to science fiction (9), action films and games. The novels integrate intense love into the narrative (8), and crucially, may conclude with a sense of hope (2). Young Adult heroes develop as individuals in post-apocalyptic scenarios of war, alien invasion, climate change, over-population, disease, and future science. Basu et al suggest that Young Adult dystopian novels centre on ‘thematic threads’ that may include ‘conformity, which is often exaggerated for dramatic effect’ (3), as in *Divergent*. First-person narration is often found in the novels (1), as in Roth’s. The film’s subjective enunciation positions the audience to share Tris’s experience through voice-over, simulations, and subjective camerawork, including the circling pan that expresses Tris’s desire to join Dauntless, as she watches her peers jump off a train to arrive at school.

The film, *Divergent* constructs a pleasurable aesthetics of dystopian categorisation. In adult dystopian fiction such as Orwell’s canonical *1984*, the categorisation of the individual within society is visualised as part of a totalitarian nightmare. Threatening regimes are often found in Young Adult fiction, mitigated by teenage trust and bonding, but in the novel of *Divergent* there is no perceptible totalitarian authority. Tris accepts the faction system, although she is aware that ‘Faction customs...supersede individual preference’ (Roth, *Divergent* 9). Roth has spoken in interviews of her initial pleasure in the “personal...world-building” of the faction system, influenced by personality tests, and by *The Giver* and the *Harry Potter* novels:

I thought if I were creating a Utopia, maybe everyone would know where they fitted in and would be responsible for their own actions and focused on being good people. Well no one should put me in charge, because this is not a utopia – it’s a dystopia (qtd in Nicol 32)

The view that Tris’s world is initially pleasurable is shared by the film’s producers and fans, and deployed in creating the film’s aesthetic, its transmedia marketing, merchandising and fan sites. Like the world-building of other film franchises, *Divergent* lends itself to ‘spreadable’ and ‘drillable’ transmedia storytelling (Jenkins n.p.) intentionally based on the construct of the faction system. To quote production designer Andy Nicholson, whose work includes *The Host* and *Gravity* (2013), “one of the things we definitely tried to do with the creation of the factions was make them each appealing in their own way” (qtd in Egan 70). All faction headquarters use design and building materials to signify faction identity and ethics. White and glass connote the intellectual coolness of

Erudite. For Abnegation, square plaster houses appearing as concrete were built in the shadow of Chicago's Willis or Sears Tower (Egan 72), then digitally cloned and dressed. The floor of Tris's family home is made of tiny interlocking pieces of wood to convey frugal recycling. The grey interior is given warmth through the use of ash (74) and by DP Alvin Küchler's use of a small plasma light over the table, creating a painterly chiaroscuro. The glow in which the family are framed amidst darkness metaphorically suggests the spiritual illumination of the prayers described in the original novel (Roth 32), and, intentionally, a stronger sense of family warmth than in the book: "We were going for this warm feel but a certain starkness that went along with being Abnegation" (Burger).

For its designer, "Dauntless isan exciting and dangerous, dynamic place to be" (Nicholson qtd in Egan 70). Rather than the natural rock suggested by the novel, the cavernous Pit where Dauntless live and train appears to be constructed from industrial concrete blocks, and was based on a white marble quarry to convey luminosity (Burger). We are shown the initiates being introduced to a communal toilet area which is not in the novel. In Roth's book, Four has a modest bedsit in the Dauntless underground enclave, with a blue patchwork quilt and "Fear God Alone" on the wall (Roth 282). In the film this becomes a loft apartment, with a "hundred-foot window", and a secular, salvage-chic interior designed by Nicholson and by Anne Kuljian to "uniquely" reflect his identity (Nicholson qtd in Egan 86).

Divergent makes dystopia both recognisable and appealing to its intended demographic, through its use of style. Orange is used intentionally to create warmth in the mise-en-scene at the start of initiation, while an added scene of the initiates' crowd-surfing is both communal and intimate (Burger). By visually connoting the emotional warmth of the groups that share these communal quarters, Young Adult adaptations transform such spaces into a referent for the narrative trope that has been noted in the novels, whereby the teen protagonists adopt new communities rather than leaving home. By the end of *Divergent*, the viewer is intended to have invested in Tris's desire to succeed within this faction, and with the characters. The film positions its audience to feel loss rather than freedom as the faction and its defences break down, symbolised spatially by Jeanine's attack on Abnegation from inside Dauntless headquarters.

In the design of *Divergent*, faction identity is individualised, and used to market the film. Faction costumes are broadly coded by Roth, but minutely differentiated for the film by costume designer Carlo Poggioli. Unlike the unflattering state uniforms of the 1956 adaptation of *1984*, *Divergent* employs a wide range of looks, not only between factions but within them. Dauntless youth sport industrial jewellery, tattoos and black 'leather' (in fact a shiny stretch fabric), with different flashes of colour to denote affiliation. Burger steered Dauntless costume designs away from militarism, towards "something exuberant, youthful, cool, intense" (Egan 104). This tactic succeeded, since Poggioli explains in an interview that he was inundated with requests for the clothes by fans (*On Screen Style*). Faction jewellery, fake tattoos and Barbies are available for purchase. While an ethos of recycling informs its design, the film connotes sufficiency for those in factions; diversity rather than uniformity.

Although dystopia takes many nuanced forms, the label ‘dystopia’ that dominates reviews of *Divergent* is problematic. In its visual diversity and appeal, the design supports Burger’s aims to create ‘more of a communal utopia’ than in the novel:

In the book, everything is crumbling and you see the cracks in the system from the beginning. But for me it was important — because Tris...wants to be a part of the society — that the initial depiction of the society needed to be a positive one (qtd in Clarke)

Darko Suvin defines *eutopia* “as having socio-political institutions, norms, and relationships among people organized according to a *radically more perfect* principle than in the author’s community”, while dystopia is “organized by a *radically less perfect* principle” (189). We might struggle to apply this definition of dystopia to *Divergent*’s social organisation, narrative action or mise-en-scene. The faction system remains closer to Suvin’s “anti-utopia”, a flawed society masquerading as *eutopia*, than to an oppressive “simple dystopia” (189). Chicago’s inhabitants believe that the factions were designed to maintain peace, an explanation that is given believability by Tris’s voice-over at the film’s start. Although the film is coded as ‘dystopian’ and depicts a society rigidly organised for the greater good, Tris never critiques the system as Suvin’s identification figure in an anti-utopia might be expected to do (Ibid). Dauntless training enables Tris to reach her potential and she gains the physical skills to fight Jeanine’s threat to the status quo rather than the system itself.

Applying modes developed by Rob McAlear to Roth’s novel, Balaka Basu concludes that *Divergent*’s society was originally an “Anti-Dystopia of complacency” that has developed into “an Anti-Utopia”, a resistance to other societies, without having been a “true utopia” or “true dystopia”. Since the novel does not critique the assumed benefits of classification it fails to offer social transformation (Basu 29). Basu argues that Roth’s rhetoric supports the pleasure of knowing one’s identity through nostalgia for a valorised earlier period when the faction system worked properly: “the novel tacitly promotes the ideals of classification that have shaped its society, suggesting that its dystopia is the result of correctable corruption, not the product of a fundamentally misconceived idea” (20). The corruption of earlier faction ideals is less clear in the film, which avoids any concomitant nostalgia for a period when the faction system worked. The notion that Dauntless initiation practices have worsened is conveyed sporadically through dialogue but audiences are likely to relate this to hints of a threat to the status quo. The film exacerbates Tris’s pleasure in joining the faction, inviting us to share this through subjective enunciation. This perspective is enhanced by choices made in adapting the source material. In Roth’s novel, the corruption of Dauntless’ ideals is conveyed through her naturalistic descriptions of Tris’s pain and bruises and the witnessed tragedies of failed initiation that haunt her. Burger leaves out a death when an initiate misjudges the jump from train to rooftop, while a vicious eye stabbing in the dormitory was filmed but edited out. In interview he explains that after witnessing brutality, the audience would not understand or share Tris’s positive reaction (Clarke). Mark Fisher argues that *The Hunger Games*’ “political charge depends upon the surprising intensity of its brutality” (27). Burger constructs a less graphically violent scenario, making the Dauntless HQ a challenging yet appealing place.

This extends to the possession of the dystopian cityscape by Dauntless members as Tris joins in with initiation activities.

Divergent partly draws on tropes from the class of dystopian films set in post-apocalyptic known cities. Janet Staiger (1999) describes cities in future noir films as characterised by a postmodern combination of old and new architecture, darkness, ‘labyrinthine’ chaos and entropy, tropes that contribute to ideological critique (100). We can see this partly in *City of Ember’s* (2008) failing underground city, which offers a useful point of comparison with *Divergent*. The city has outlived its forgotten function, one of protecting residents from a post-apocalyptic earth. The film which is also a Young Adult adaptation, similarly offers a system in which social roles are prescribed but in which the heroine is proud to take her place as a city messenger. As in *Divergent*, corruption and violence stem from an official, the duplicitous Mayor who undermines the collective good by hoarding food. With its tangle of cables, plaster that drops on civic ceremonies, and exploding overhead lights, *City of Ember* also visually suggests Halper and Muzzio’s “retro” dystopian city (386) and their “city as chaos”, the first of “two opposing categories” of urban dystopia in American cinema, the other being “the city as under rigid, comprehensive control” (381). Although it resembles the “retro” city, however, *Divergent’s* Chicago is presented as functional rather than shadowy, disordered or entropic.

Gaps in our understanding of the city’s historical context in *Divergent* prevent the insight that is necessary for a critical dystopia. No detail is conveyed of the war mentioned at the start of the film. In pre-production the organisation of Chicago’s economy was teased out by Burger, who also questioned Roth about the city’s past in order to gauge the physical decline in the buildings, and to visualize its century-long lack of technology. He decided on external wind turbines on the buildings as a source of power (Egan 32-3), and shows the distribution of resources. As Roth admits in interviews (Ibid.), she had not focused on details of setting nor given much thought to the world beyond the fence. In Roth’s novel Tris comments on derelict areas with open sewers where factionless labourers have to live (25), but onscreen the factionless are presented as apparently jobless and homeless. Suvin argues of classical dystopias that a critique is enunciated through the point of view of the “discontented social class” (189). A scene in Roth’s novel in which a factionless male talks to Tris about her forthcoming aptitude test is replaced with Tris’s point of view of a dispossessed factionless woman, and an exchange of troubled looks (Roth *Divergent* 25-6). For Burger, this switch was to suggest a subjective “taste of the fear and the jeopardy of not fitting in anywhere” (Burger). Threatening males feature in Tris’s simulations in the book, reminding readers of her earlier encounter with the factionless man, but are omitted from the film. The factionless are foregrounded in Roth’s second novel, but in the adaptation of *Divergent* they exist to highlight the selflessness of Abnegation, and the consequences of failure on Tris’s part, lacking their own voice. The decision deflects attention from the systemic causes and problem of a factionless class.

Building on Roth’s affectionate use of her home city, Chicago is given a role that is both nostalgic and transformed.² Both novel and film use Chicago’s El railway, the Sears or Willis Tower and other landmarks. Helicopter shots and plates of Chicago locations are supplemented by practical and visual effects including

external wind turbines, cables, rust and weeds, while Lake Michigan becomes a swamp (Method Studios). As Theo James who plays Four puts it, the settings are “dystopianised” (Wikia Fangirl). Local press picked up on the pleasures of seeing a recognisable but altered Chicago, including the Mansuetto Library at the University of Chicago for Erudite, or the Navy Pier Grand Ballroom for the final simulations. Fan sites discuss the locations, while *Divergent-Lovers Guide to Chicago* offers visitors suggestions for an “authentic Divergent experience” (Sandoval). In *Divergent* we have, as producer Douglas Wick, puts it, “Chicago repurposed. You get the logic of the city and understand the trains that go through” (*Mob Scene*).

In *Divergent*, the dystopian cityscape is gamified, transforming the skyline. Contemporary cinema has incorporated a variety of tropes from games including camera movement and angle, editing, narrative structure and mise en scene. *Divergent* differs from other films that gamify the city, including *Run Lola Run* (1998) which uses the streets of 1990s Berlin as narrative space for differing plot outcomes (Grieb; Kallay), and *Gamer* (2009), in which cityscapes are designed for human avatars. Although there are scenes that connote computer games in *Divergent* there is a naturalistic physicality about Dauntless’s activities that returns these to earlier adventure literature or cinema. The derelict Ferris Wheel at Navy Pier is reinvented as a climbing frame which Tris uses to win a war game in a night sequence of red light and smoke flares. The John Hancock building becomes the starting point for ziplining and the train supports and other buildings are a focus for jumping and climbing – including Tris’s leap off a roof into the Dauntless HQ. The use of space such as the Ferris wheel reframes the association of height and depth with class or aspiration that film theorists such as Desser (1999) or Sobchak (1999) found in the earlier science fiction city. Here, the city is remade as an adventure playground. This emphasis on play distinguishes the film from the deadlier arena of *The Hunger Games*, while *Ender’s Game* includes war games in the form of gravity free play-offs. In its set design, *The Maze Runner* shares *Divergent’s* use of an industrialised landscape for physical adventure, and its enclosed, collective living space. *The Maze Runner* is discussed further below, together with *The Host*.

Film adaptations of Young Adult dystopian literature make cinematic references to contemporary youth culture and visually remediate prior cultural influences on the literature. As Hintz comments, ‘all utopias are hybrid genres’ (254). Laura Miller (2010) for example, notes the game influences and “hand-to-hand combat” in Young Adult dystopian novels that include Dashner’s *The Maze Runner*. *Divergent’s* reconfiguration of the organised city for ziplining, climbing and jumping offers parallels with Schweizer’s (2013) analysis of computer games that incorporate skateboarding and other urban sports. Schweizer refers to the urban sport of parkour, in which the city landscape is used for climbing or jumping. He notes the progressive connotations of parkour when it is depicted in video game narratives that depict “climbing buildings and moving along the rooftops as a form of defiance” (n.p.) in ‘Orwellian’ or repressive game worlds. The physical appropriation of the city heights by Dauntless fails to symbolise resistance to the faction system, however. The connotations of their traversal of heights in the film are closer to parkour’s original cultural meanings of “athleticism, balance, and control of the body” than to resistance (Ibid.). Such exuberant activities are an extension of Dauntless’s prescribed

peacekeeping role, as work or leisure, and despite their visual anarchy they are recuperated. These skills also enable Tris to fight the antagonist's threat to the system in the final segments of the film.

Dystopian mise-en-scene in *Divergent* has to be understood as Suvin suggests of any dystopia, "within the *historical space-time* of the text's inception" (189), but also as a product of the complex demands of translating Young Adult novels into a Hollywood text aimed at a young demographic. Applying the concept of the critical dystopia to sci fi, Peter Fitting suggests that a dystopian setting may function as "foreground", intrinsic to the narrative or less progressively it may become background due to its "narrative advantages", drawing on social fears without analysis or "collective solutions" (156). Fitting's division more readily applies to films such as *Metropolis* (1927) or *Elysium* (2013) where dystopian poverty and lack of human rights is designed to contrast ideologically with the utopian world above, but as Annette Kuhn notes, "the [sci fi city as] backdrop is never entirely neutral" (76). As a setting, the city in *Divergent* operates in a more complex manner than "background", in Fitting's terms. In the film of *Divergent*, dystopia is realigned, visualizing the ways in which, as authors and theorists have noted, apocalypse make real teenage life choices and tests redundant and opens up exciting and heroic opportunities (Westerfeld; Basu, Broad, Hintz 5-6). The dystopian city offers a combination of excitement, danger and familiarity, aimed particularly at a youth audience.

Although some dystopian films present the eventual desire to escape from the system through the protagonist's "alienation and resistance" as in the dystopian narrative structure given by Baccolini and Moylan (5), this is not the case in *Divergent*. The city is more pleasurable while it is organised. Reading British dystopian cinema, Aidan Power draws on Telotte and Sobchak to assess the ways in which the pleasure in post-apocalyptic fiction lies in the new but familiar, answering our desires for change, but also creating anxieties because it threatens what is close to us. In analysing Young Adult dystopian adaptations, it is apposite to draw on Freud's work on the uncanny, which he defines as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (340). This illuminates the ways in which dystopia is reconfigured in relation to the familiar.

The arena in which Beatrice is reborn as Tris is initially womb-like, leading to her development as a fearless, self-directed individual. To enter Dauntless headquarters, Tris leaps off a moving El train onto a roof seven storeys up, before being the first initiate to jump into a jagged hole over an unseen net below, an action defined by Burger as the belly of the whale in Tris's classic hero journey (Clarke). In Dauntless, "she feels like she's home, or...where she belongs" (Burger). Yet as initiation progresses, the director portrays Dauntless headquarters as fraught with threat. Tris trains to rise up the ranks and remain in her new home, but its appeal is a more unsettling, *unheimlich* one (Freud 363-4) entailing greater reserves of determination from her. This return to what was once familiar is underlined by Tris's later discovery that her mother was Dauntless, making Tris's sense of belonging explicable.

This combination of the homely and the uncanny is also conveyed by the visual design of other Young Adult dystopian films such as *The Host* and *The Maze Runner*. In the former film, alien 'Souls' have colonised human

minds, and the beleaguered survivors live in a sanctuary of caverns under a desert tor. A disguised moveable roof allows crops to grow and be harvested underground, in a surreal image reminiscent of the impossible exterior shot at the end of Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* (1983). These caverns offer hope yet bring threat from within the community, for both the heroine and the female 'Soul' inside her. Similarly, *The Maze Runner's* amnesiac protagonist joins a community of boys in a walled glade at the centre of a maze, after a rite of passage entrance from a subterranean elevator. The setting conveys communal warmth, reinvisaging the novel's kitchen and dining areas as a tribal campfire where the boys eat, drink, dance and fight. A wall where names of Gladers are added or erased creates a tangible expression of the fragile community. Like the Pit, the Glade is an *unheimlich* space, riven with threat from the nightmarish cyborg creatures known as Grievors. It is also a place in which Thomas, like Tris, prepares for a new identity.

To succeed in her initiation and remain in Dauntless, Tris must undergo mental training involving simulations. Dauntless are injected with a serum which together with nano/brain technology creates a virtual scenario symbolising their worst fears, through which they must calm their heart rate and control the action. Roth was influenced partly by exposure therapy as a means of self-improvement (2011), and partly by *1984* and *The Matrix* (1999) (Charaipotra). The film simplifies the novel's training stages, conflating simulations with fear landscapes in which narratives have been generated from previously identified anxieties (Roth 296). As a divergent, Tris is aware that simulations including entrapment in a water tank are unreal, as her reflection tells her in the adaptation, and she manipulates virtual reality, breaking the glass with a touch as in *Inception* (2010).

In the film but not in the novel, Tris's aptitude test begins with a simulated hall of mirrors. In Roth's novel, mirrors are used naturalistically to illustrate selflessness or personal alteration, since Abnegation's rules specify that Tris may look at herself only when her hair is cut. Reflections are deliberately used throughout the film as a motif of identity and to create identification. The mirror sim intentionally furthers Burger's experimentation on the 2011 film *Limitless*, with "psychotropic visual effects, using mirrors and infinity reflections" to convey mental states (Burger). In this visual effects sequence by Method Studio, Tris circles herself as the camera moves 360 degrees, while she is replicated into infinity, then addressed by a simulacrum that asks her to choose. The visual effects supervisor for Method Studios, Matt Dessero, explains that:

This was accomplished by setting up six Alexa cameras on a greenscreen stage and tiling the resulting imagery onto cards reflected into the scene. Full CG rotomation of Tris was required for the distant reflections (Method Studios). The resulting multiplication of Tris conveys her indecision about faction choice, and foreshadows the tester's revelation of her divergence. Here and elsewhere, simulations are part of the film's subjective enunciation, rather than functioning metaphorically as social critique as in dystopian science fiction.

It is useful in thinking about the fear simulations to draw on Bolter and Grusin's work on remediation (2000) and its application to immersive cinema by Tryon (2009, 71) and others. The simulations are intentionally

distinguished by an anamorphic lens, “languid” shots, and “seamless” transitions (Burger; Egan). Burger aimed for 80% of the film to be “real”, rather than simulated (Burger), and apart from the notable mirror sequence, visual effects are often used invisibly. The fear simulations fail to recreate immersion, for example by remediating immersive new technology, such as the Oculus Rift, which would create hypermediacy. Rather, transparent immediacy is conveyed. The simulations are realistic, yet in their use of darkness and unclear narrative space, at times reminiscent of psychodramas and dream films by Maya Deren or Jean Cocteau, as with the water tank against blackness. This makes narrative sense: they are intended as hallucinations, and while the mirror sequence is an attraction in trailers the plot is predicated on resistance to immersion as the mark of heroic difference. Unlike their peers, neither Tris nor Four are duped into mass killing through the use of virtual reality.

These fear landscapes function differently from the simulation of *The Hunger Games*’ arena, which Vivienne Muller argues, depersonalises violence and death since it “encourages the tributes to function as avatars....rather than subjects” (55). It is only when Jeanine appropriates simulation technology as a means of control that Dauntless become avatars, and the monitors showing the attack humanise their Abnegation victims, naming them with onscreen text. The fear simulations in *Divergent* uphold the good of the individual at narrative level, since they strengthen resistance to specific terrors. At the same time, they operate as part of the film’s subjective enunciation by conveying Tris’s awareness that she is in a simulation.

In canonic dystopian cinema, experimental techniques convey subjective shifts in the perception of reality and growing social awareness, as in the nightmare sequence in *Fahrenheit 451* (1966). In Young Adult dystopian novels and their adaptations, alternate realities, simulations or visions convey self-awareness and a mystical communication with others. Such visions are part of a journey towards confidence and physical action that may have wider social implications. In the film adaptation of *The Maze Runner*, the maze is frightening and unknown, yet uncanny flashes of memory suggest that Thomas was involved in constructing it. These fragmented flashbacks are visually coded as science fiction, and depict his past as less appealing than the glade, despite his amnesia. In the novel and film of *The Giver*, the hero gains personal and social awareness when he is chosen to receive memories of a past that once included natural and global diversity, a perspective that is emphasised by the use of montages in the screen adaptation. These social memories have been repressed in a diegetic world drained of choice, desire and colour. As in the novel, the house at the end of the hero’s journey is a place of sanctity in the film. Hanson draws on Bloch to analyse the longing that this creates for the novel’s hero when it is prefigured in his dreams: “a product of memory but also beyond memory, a something yet-to-be experienced, a future/past of utopian longing” (Hanson 53). In the film, tangible visual imagery takes the final image of this snowbound home further from the fantastic than in the novel. Although Jonas defines the house as “real” in a voice-over, however, its status as reality remains tenuous.

Young Adult dystopian cinema’s emphasis on subjectivity and shared visions of other environments can offset hostile dystopian narrative spaces in which the hero is forced back onto her or his own resources. In *Divergent*, simulated environments forward the romance narrative as they enable Tris to share Four’s fear

landscape. In *How I Live Now*, a film that Jonathan Romney aptly places in a tradition of “Apocalyptic British Ruralism”, American teenager Daisy falls in love with her English cousin Eddie before war separates them. In the novel, Daisy has a telepathic sense of Eddie’s presence if she is in “a certain state of mind” (Rosoff 96). The film puts this into visual terms, first in an utopian, idyllic vision of Eddie in the garden in which he tells Daisy ‘I’m home’ before the image fades to white, and later in an abject vision of Eddie buried in the earth, and calling ‘Help me!’. These visions give powerful impetus to her desire to return home to him.

Like *Divergent*, the critically dystopian film adaptation of *Ender’s Game* foregrounds the hero’s awareness of the virtual. Ender is a potential military genius chosen to lead a fight against alien Formics who once tried to colonise earth. Here, again, militaristic adults blur the distinction between virtual and actual combat scenarios. The adaptation situates tropes of military training narratives, such as communal living and testing, on a space station school with divisions into ‘houses’. The narrative culminates in a crucial withholding of reality that leads Ender to question ideologies of war and difference. The hero’s gaming ability also enables him to begin to make reparation, since a game enables the Formic to communicate telepathically with him. At the conclusion, he journeys to find them a new world. The potential for hope that distinguishes Young Adult dystopian fiction is expressed cinematically in *Divergent*, as in *Ender’s Game* and *The Maze Runner* by shots of the hero travelling toward a personal and communal future.

Divergent is successful in remediating dystopia for a young demographic. There is a dynamic tension in the novel between the heroine, the valorisation of classification, the psychological motif of divergence, self-development, and dystopian location. This tension is visualised through a reworking of conventional dystopian cinematic space. *Divergent’s* youth-oriented production design, extending to related transmedia and the commercial intertext is part of its appeal, supporting the key portrayal of Tris and her journey. The film shares motifs with other Young Adult dystopian films, including selection and game-oriented adventure. These are central to *The Hunger Games*, but Young Adult dystopian cinema may organise such motifs to more play-oriented effect than in the latter franchise. *Divergent’s* rendering of dystopia, like that of other Young Adult dystopian adaptations, is separate from the source novels and from canonic dystopian and science fiction cinema, yet it draws on all of these. This is not a simulated dystopia, but a repurposed one, with its own heroic configuration.

Notes

- 1 I analysed Tris as a Young Adult dystopian heroine in a paper that was presented at the *SF/F Now* conference at Warwick University, 22 August 2014.
- 2 A dissimilar dystopian aesthetic is established in the film’s sequel, *Insurgent* (2015). In this film, Chicago is coded as the city of post-apocalyptic science fiction. I discussed *Insurgent* with *The Maze Runner* in the paper, “Moving Mazes: Genre, Hero and Place in Young Adult Dystopian Cinema”. This was given at the conference *Brave New Worlds: The Dystopic In Modern & Contemporary Culture* at Newcastle University, 30th April 2015.

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The Monstrous Transformation of the Self:

Translating Japanese Cyberpunk and the Posthuman into the Living World

ORION MAVRIDOU

This essay offers an extended, tangential reading of the cyberpunk videogame, *Final Fantasy VII*. I will examine its literary and visual motifs, patterns and codes, putting these in dialogue with a participant study on cosplay and transformative fandom related to the game. The central philosophical questions that permeate the game will be examined in relation to one of the game's characters, *Vincent Valentine*. I will then outline the processes involved in reproducing and embodying this character in the context of cosplay. The essay is structured to partially mimic a line of thought commonly observed within creative fandom, where the dissection of the media text serves to inform artistic practice. The textual analysis of *Final Fantasy's VII's* mythos, plot and Vincent Valentine's character represent an integral part of the process involved in the conception, creation and construction of my cosplay performance.

Both the game and the character were chosen on the merit of their relevance to the cyberpunk genre and the cosplay community, as well as their narrative and artistic potential. At the time of its release, in 1997, *Final Fantasy VII* presented gamers with a unique entry point into the insular realms of both East Asian RPGs and Japanese cyberpunk. It is still considered the quintessential example of the *Final Fantasy* series and the archetypical cinematic videogame. Vincent Valentine is a player avatar who exemplifies the ontological problems and existential anxieties associated with the posthuman.

One of the most striking features of *Final Fantasy VII* is how far removed it is from the thematic roots of its predecessors. Inspired by the success of high fantasy contemporaries – games such as *Dragon Quest* (Enix), *Ultima* (Origin Systems) and *Wizardry* (Sir-Tech Software Inc.)- the world of *Final Fantasy* was originally conceived as a light interpretation of the Tolkienist tradition. Dwarves, elves and pseudo-medieval settings were a characteristic presence in early iterations. *Final Fantasy VII*, however, delves into the world of futuristic cyberpunk. Against a backdrop of claustrophobic neon-lit streets and cultural decay, its multi-layered media text engages a series of fundamental philosophical questions: life, evolution and the limits of the human.

World building in *Final Fantasy* has always operated under certain constraints. Characters and references are carried from setting to setting, providing a sense of coherence and continuity between otherwise unrelated narratives. For example, any person who has played more than one entry in the series will recognize “Chocobo” as a benevolent species or “Ifrit” as a deity which can assist the players in battle. In a similar manner, until the advent of *Final Fantasy VI* (Square Enix) and *Final Fantasy VII*, the employment of clear moral boundaries

between “good” and “evil” and the absence of technology in favour of magic usage, remained at the centre of the series’ narrative core.

As a critical media text, *Final Fantasy VII* specifically problematizes the philosophical position of humanism through a vast network of parallel plots, characters and arcs that repeatedly challenge the idea of humanity as the centre of all existence. As a piece of fiction, it resists a single metanarrative, instead lending itself to a number of interpretations and rhizomatic analyses. A metanarrative (or “grand narrative”), in this context, would be defined as the unifying theory behind the game’s storytelling aspects; aiming to create meaning by synthesizing individual discursive formations into a comprehensive, totalizing schema. Instead, *Final Fantasy VII* presents itself within a non-teleological model of thought, offering an array of horizontally arranged “petits récits” (or smaller, localized narratives) in archetypal postmodernist fashion (Lyotard 71). I argue that this flexibility, interpreted through tangential connections between different artistic and narrative threads is one of *Final Fantasy VII*’s most unique qualities, uncharacteristic in other games of the time. This transition into nuance and non-linearity sets the game apart from its contemporary peers, and makes it particularly appropriate for the type of rhizomatic, personal reading that can be observed in the foundations of the cosplay practice. “Cosplay” is itself a Japanese neologism, a portmanteau of the words “costume” and “play”. An umbrella term, it is used to describe multiple types of a crossmedia fan practice which involves adapting the clothes and appearance of a fictional character into costumed performance. It is characterised by a distinct subcultural ethos and primarily associated with pulp and pop culture, including comics, films and videogames. In academic terms, cosplay has been described as an internalisation of the media text and an embodiment of the fan’s personal reading in creative form (Lamerichs). Utilizing a wide range of skills, the successful performer is not only tasked with replicating the aesthetic, but with inhabiting the mental and physical space of the character. Pure craftsmanship is valued very highly, but cultural capital amongst cosplayers is primarily derived from notions of *authenticity* –the ability to bring a character to life and translate the essence of *Fantastika* into a tangible reality.

Postmodernist lines of sight understand identity as fragmented, complex and fluid. Cosplay, with its playful deconstruction of social (bodily and engendered) norms and constant negotiation between temporal identities, can be examined in the context of the cyberpunk ethos as a fundamentally postmodernist, posthuman practice. Posthumanism, a philosophical concept integral to the cyberpunk genre, is about transcendence and the utilization of technological means to overcome the natural boundaries of the body (Badmington, “Posthumanism” 9; “Theorising Posthumanism” 10). Within this thought movement, human nature is neither irrevocable nor sacrosanct. Instead, the human condition is seen as malleable and its current mode as transitional –a metaphorical larval stage, indicative of what humanity has the potential to evolve into, in terms of longevity and ability (Bostrom). Through technoscientific enhancement, the *transhuman* being is expected to continuously challenge the boundaries of the flesh, until all perceived notions of restriction have been lifted and the label *posthuman* can be applied. As Bainbridge and Norris assert (“Posthuman Drag”), the cosplayer’s desire to (temporarily) redefine their physical identity –to exaggerate their presence into larger than life dimensions and

assign to the self features which extend beyond race, gender, age and reality- elevates the simple act of dressing up into a form of posthuman drag. Situated between the postmodern theory of identity and the posthuman philosophy of embodiment, cyberpunk emerges as the unifying fictive space –and cosplay as a practical application of all the above.

The Japanese cyberpunk genre

Technological addiction, social isolation and erotomechanical body horrors; “cyberpunk” is the repeat tale of humanity’s struggle to maintain a semblance of itself, in a near-future where the size of its hubris threatens to swallow it whole (Brown, “Machinic Desires” 222). Building on the literary tradition of new wave science fiction, the term was first coined by Bruce Bethke in 1983, while the origins of the genre itself can be traced back to the works of Harlan Ellison, J. G. Ballard and Phillip K. Dick. The latter’s 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* served as the basis and inspiration (Kerman 69) for Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (Warner Brothers), almost fifteen years later. *Blade Runner’s* brand of neon-lit noir managed to garner a sizeable cult following over time, establishing the film as culturally and aesthetically significant despite its initial lukewarm reception. Alongside the filmmaking works of William Gibson (“Neuromancer”) and David Lynch (“Eraserhead”), *Blade Runner* formed the foundations of the cinematic movement that came to be known as “cyberpunk”.

A portmanteau of *cybernetics* and *punk* – the science of electronic control systems and the ideology of disruption, cyberpunk comes pre-equipped with a cynical view of the future and a call for resistance, as well as a pessimism not traditionally found in the wider science fiction genre. Based on a broad survey of texts, it could be generalised around the thematic concept of “low life, high tech” and society’s struggle with the anxieties that emerged from the end of modernism: privacy, security, integrity, and the status of the human subject in a posthuman world. Ambition, civilization and progress – all traditionally celebrated concepts – are filtered through the fear of *hubris*, the idea that certain things should remain out of reach and that the sinful act of pursuing them will only result in karmic destruction and punishment (Seaman 246; Thacker 72). Against a backdrop of unapologetic violence -physical, emotional and social- the cyberpunk dystopia serves as a ground of reflection on both the present and future. Brutal urbanization, social decay, the commodification of human bodies, capitalist oppression, and the consuming power of technology are all problems commonly engaged by the genre. The central arguments of its discourse tend to operate in dualities -human vs. machine, individual vs. system, culture vs. nature, change vs. status quo, self vs. other. Finding a place within this continuum is often the protagonist’s main source of conflict (Graham 1).

Japanese posthumanism having evolved under the influence of Confucian philosophy, comes with a historical emphasis on depersonalized harmony and productivity -the same values that drive cyberpunk’s characteristic obsession with technology, scientific progress and voluntary dehumanization (Napier, “The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature” 223; “Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle” 103). Unlike its Western counterparts, the Japanese branch of cyberpunk is particularly raw in its treatment of the human

subject, emotionally and physically. It shows a fascination with the painful and the uncanny (Brown, “Machinic Desires” 222). Body horror, psychosexual oppression, automation and teratology are common narrative patterns. Dehumanization, whether voluntary or forced, is a major recurring theme and the archetypal Japanese protagonist is often subjected to a torturous, monstrous metamorphosis which is unique to this cultural branch of the genre.

In Shinya Tsukamoto’s *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (Kaijyu Theatres), the nameless protagonist -a humble office worker- wakes up to find a metal fragment embedded into his cheek. What follows next is a savage and surreal series of events, culminating in his monstrous fusion with another character known only as the “metal fetishist”. The two merge into a grotesque biomechanical being set on destroying the world, in a symbolic rejection of heteronormativity and conservative societal values (Brown, “Tokyo Cyberpunk” 105; Conrich 95). Similarly, in Mamoru Oshii’s *Ghost in the Shell* and *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (Mamoru Oshii), Major Motoko Kusanagi sees her consciousness transplanted from her biological body into a series of artificial ones -all built to serve different purposes. Troubled by questions of embodiment, the validity of memory and her own cultural status as a transhuman subject, she completes her character arc by combining the essence of her being - her “ghost” - with a rogue AI to form an entirely new entity. The cultural and artistic influence of these examples is traceable in the narrative of *Final Fantasy VII* and Vincent Valentine’s character.

An overview of *Final Fantasy VII*

In contrast to earlier parts of the series, whose introductory sequences were typically arranged around narrative exposition, *Final Fantasy VII* opens with a view of the cosmos, privileging mood over information. The proverbial camera slowly guides the eye through a sea of stars, before fading out and into the image of a young woman bathed in an eerie green glow. An equally eerie sound effect, vaguely resembling a chorus of whispering voices and celestial white noise, fades in and out of focus before disappearing entirely. For a few seconds, the unknown woman appears to be looking directly at the viewer, a disembodied presence, floating in the middle of a green-tinted current that could be made out of constellations, water or both. Eventually the angle shifts and she is revealed to be examining a source of light in an otherwise unremarkable alley. She walks away, and the sound of her echoing steps builds up alongside the music. Her brightly-coloured dress and basket of flowers immediately stand out against the decaying urban surroundings, further establishing her as a figure of importance: an Other.

Once the main street comes into view, the camera immediately begins to zoom out, revealing to the audience a scene of rampant, neon-lit consumerism. The woman comes to a standstill under an endless array of posters, bright signs and billboards, while cars and pedestrians hurry past her. The people in the street are portrayed as faceless and unimportant – just a collection of moving parts and shadowy outlines, circulating through the veins and bowels of the city. The camera does not linger on them for long, instead zooming further out to present a majestic view of the megalopolis itself: Midgar, the mythological centre of the world. Around the monumental industrial complex, nothing else can be seen. Midgar simply dominates the horizon. Contrary to the

initial cosmic sequence, no stars are visible either, only the artificial lights and the towering reactors setting the night sky aflame. The city comes into full view and the game logo appears before it in a dramatic fashion, while the music reaches a climax. The majestic panorama is only interrupted by the screeching sound of a train coming to a stop, as the main hero arrives to the scene and the interactive part of the game begins.

Figure 1. The city of Midgar. Published under Fair Use. The original game is property of Square Enix.

Due to its complex storytelling and numerous subplots, *Final Fantasy VII* has several memorable and poignant narrative peaks. Unlike its predecessors, however, the game's cinematic intro eschews exposition for aesthetic ambience. Using a series of abstractions and a visual vocabulary directly lifted from filmic tradition, it establishes the setting and tone while directly referencing the plot's most climactic moments, as well as its main argument against the philosophical centrality of the human. Within the anthropocentric Cartesian system, "man naturally stands at the centre of things; is entirely distinct from animals, machines and other nonhuman entities; is absolutely known and knowable to 'himself'; is the origin of meaning and history; and shares with all other human beings a universal essence" (Badmington, "Mapping Posthumanism" 1345). What *Final Fantasy VII* does, is problematize and question each of these notions in sequence.

Buried deep within the monstrous womb of the megalopolis (Creed 214), people are shown to be of very little value; compared to the vastness of the cosmic universe, they matter even less. Additionally, in the game's introduction, Aerith (the mysterious Other and an important religious figure in the story) is deceptively framed as a representative of the human aspect. In an ironic twist, Aerith -the only figure in the introduction to possess any distinguishable features – is later revealed to be a nonhuman entity. Overall, the game invests a considerable amount of time into cultivating empathy for its human protagonists and their individual quests for deliverance, discovery and redemption. The human race in its entirety, however, is portrayed as ignorant and parasitic; inflated in its own sense of importance even as it hangs on the edge between survival and extinction.

Midgar's "abstract machines" (Deleuze 177) of control - social, political, economic, scientific - keep the population docile and divided, stratified into a strict and inescapable hierarchy, and dependent upon the megalopolis for survival. In that vein, it is not by accident that Shinra Inc. -the financial conglomerate which

asserts autocratic control over Midgar was conceived as an electric power company. Electricity is, after all, the lifeblood of the cybersociety. In *Final Fantasy VII's* dystopian future, it is also the literal lifeblood of the nameless planet everything resides on and which Shinra's reactors are running dry. Built on the exploitation of natural resources, Midgar acts as both a symbol of social oppression and a manifestation of the human ego. Despite the brutality it inflicts on the individual, it sits in the middle of the game map as an allegorical representation of the Cartesian man's achievements – a machinic meat grinder and a miracle of engineering in equal measures. Like the tower of Babel, it is portrayed as liminal and transcendent, free of any particular culture and described by a very eclectic mix of aesthetic references. The city is a symbolic extension of humanity's worst aspects, and is thus elevated into having its own personality in a way that no other game location is. The development of the city mirrors the same development cyberpunk protagonists undergo. Midgar's emergent character eventually undergoes its own painful transformation and it begins to collapse under its own weight.

A third of the way into the game, mankind takes a hit to its collective sense of control. From that point onwards, the city of Midgar is shown to change and evolve alongside the human animals that inhabit it. Forced to abandon any pretences of grandeur and power over nature, mankind can either adapt or accept itself as a liability for the survival of the planet. If this posthumanist message was not explicit enough, the ending's vision for the future ensures it is hammered into place: several hundred years after the events of the game, Midgar is shown consumed by foliage. In the radically changed landscape, all traces of humanity are ubiquitously absent and the only sentient creatures still there to observe the ruins are quadruped and decidedly non-human.

Throughout the game, the central narrative maintains refrains from overtly preaching about the morality of the situation unfolding. While it could be argued that the story eventually negotiates some space between the binary oppositions of its main argument – nature vs. culture, wild vs. tame, progress vs. conservation, hope vs. despair, human vs. inhuman (Badmington, "Posthumanism" 9; "Theorising Posthumanism" 10) – it is never really clear who the audience is meant to be cheering for and whether the fall of civilization is something to be celebrated or feared. Even in its state of ruin, however, the fallen megalopolis never ceases to function as the proverbial centre of the world. Throughout the original game and its direct sequels, the main characters revisit it again and again, and while its future - and the subsequent disappearance of mankind – is not directly foreseen, the shadow of extinction continues to hang on the horizon.

In this atmosphere of doubt and instability, the individual protagonists often wrestle with their sense of identity and purpose. Not all of them can be described as post or even transhuman, but the cyberpunk triptych of futuristic hybrids coined by Frenchy Lunning ("Mechademia 3" xi) – the "machine", the "creature" and the "network" - is represented in its entirety. In that vein, what makes the character of Vincent Valentine particularly interesting as an object of posthuman criticism is that he exemplifies all three archetypes. He is forced to examine the contours of his own humanity against three different types of corruptive force: mechanization, animalization and disembodiment.

Becoming less human - the tragedy of Mr Valentine

Like the archetypical cyberpunk hero, Vincent is trapped in a cycle of monstrous transformations and an ongoing struggle with the liminal nature of his existence. In theory, the average player could go through the entirety of *Final Fantasy VII* without ever meeting Vincent, since originally he was included as a secret character, unlockable only under very specific conditions. However, he became popular enough to warrant his own spin-off title, *Dirge of Cerberus* (Square Enix), which was incorporated into the wider compendium of *Final Fantasy VII* works. Eventually, what became known as the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* grew to encompass a number of sequels, prequels, films, novels and related media, effectively making the game into its own series. As a result of this transition, every named protagonist has undergone changes in both visual design and characterization. Some of them are meant to indicate a sense of progress and personal development, while others simply function as revisions (or “retroactive continuities”) and might directly contradict the original source material. After seventeen years and numerous rewrites, Vincent’s fictive persona is an amalgamation of different interpretations, both canonical and fan related. The resulting narrative can, at times, appear convoluted and inconsistent, but the storytelling core is maintained between adaptations. Vincent embraces isolation and resists social conformity, and the problem of identity in relation to his own posthuman status remains central to his character.

Vincent is portrayed as a tragic figure. Originally an employee of Shinra Inc. in one of the company’s most questionable departments, Vincent’s past suggests ambiguous morality. The concepts of “sin” and “repentance” have a strong presence throughout the entirety of his character arc, which is commonly interpreted as a quest for redemption. Interestingly, though, guilt never appears to be related to his former line of work, despite the fact that the latter would routinely involve violence, kidnappings, torture and murder. Instead, Vincent’s sense of moral failure revolves almost exclusively around his inability to protect a scientist named Lucrecia, who was determined to use her body for a highly unethical and dangerous project. During a heated argument, Lucrecia’s husband Hojo shoots Vincent through the heart. The entire incident is kept a secret and Vincent is imprisoned in a basement for an unidentifiable amount of time. He is subjected to a series of torturous procedures by both Hojo and Lucrecia, and resurrected as a bioscientific abomination. No longer able to age or die, he chooses to stay in that basement for over thirty years, until the party of heroes find him and convince him to leave his self-imposed purgatory to help save the world.



Figure 2. Artwork of Vincent Valentine, illustrated by Tetsuya Nomura. Published under Fair Use. The original is property of Square Enix.

Due to industry standards and graphical limitations, as well as deliberate aesthetic choice, the full extent of Vincent's torture is never described in detail. In that sense, despite the distant echo of cinematic influences such as *Death Powder* (Shigeru Izumiya) and *Rubber's Lover* (Shozin Fukui), which pioneered themes of scientific body horror in Japanese cyberpunk, *Final Fantasy VII* represents an unusually sanitised example of the genre (Player, midnighteye.com). Even so, the game's brand of fiction does not shy away from teratology motifs, that is narratives which pertain to the concept of the "monster". The monstrous aspect of Vincent's character is depicted in a very straightforward manner, as a series of literal demons that take over his body when he is pushed to his limits. The transformations are portrayed as bloodless and instantaneous, skipping most of the unsavoury details for the sake of content moderation. The act of transformation, however, places him firmly onto the opposing side of the ontological divide, as the archetypal nonhuman Other. Even within the context of his own fictional universe – with its myriad examples of brutality and violence – he is isolated as a monstrosity, something which other characters use to antagonise or taunt him.

Amongst the mixture of gamers and academics analysing the plot of the game, there is continuous debate about whether or not Vincent's monsters are meant to represent an inverted interiority – a physical manifestation of the metaphorical "demons" residing within each and every one of us. Considering the character's demonstrated moral ambiguity, it would not be out of line to assume so. Regardless of the overall pessimistic tone, however, *Final Fantasy VII's* narrative aesthetic is accentuated with a level of humour and self-awareness. From the very beginning, Vincent has a hyperbolic, almost parodic, element to him that balances and compliments the weight of his tragedy. When the heroes first meet him, he is found sleeping in a coffin, in what can be construed as both a heart-breaking portrayal of self-punishment and a playful allusion to vampire mythology. His name itself is a combined reference to the Roman Catholic Saint Valentine (patron of courtly love)

and serio-comic actor, Vincent Price who attained legendary status for his roles in films such as *House of Wax* (André De Toth), *Tales of Terror* (Roger Corman) and *The Mad Magician* (John Brahm). Further adding to the horror theme, each of Vincent's demons was conceived as an allegorical representation of fear of nature ("Galian Beast"), science ("Death Gigas"), society ("Hellmasker") and the spiritual world ("Chaos"). Where visual design is concerned, they are illustrated as a pastiche of horror cinema clichés with inspiration drawn directly from iconic figures such as *Friday the 13th's* Jason Voorhees (Sean S. Cunningham) and Boris Karloff's classic rendition of Frankenstein's monster (James Whale). This penchant for homage and self-satire is commonly observed in Japanese cyberpunk, but noticeably absent in later revisions of Vincent's character which drew more influence from contemporary manga and anime aesthetics.

While other characters struggle with the authenticity of their own thoughts and intentions, Vincent is forced to bear the entire weight of his perceived "sin", in a perpetual quest for redemption that is never fully concluded. As the story progresses and evolves, Vincent, Hojo and Lucrecia come to represent a triptych of posthuman martyrs, each of them sacrificed in turn to as an example of the cyberpunk dystopia's failing sense of morality. The triangular dynamic between these three characters lends itself to a number of cyberpunk readings, from issues of body ownership, to oppressed sexuality, mental fragmentation and disembodiment. The typical dichotomy of the posthuman argument is represented between Hojo and Lucrecia's contrasting ideologies and ethical positions: where the latter craves death, the former strives for immortality; while Lucrecia is eager to shed her human shell and dissolve into the collective spiritual consciousness, Hojo seeks to create a bodily vessel free of biological constraints; when the female love interest rejects the hero's feelings, the male villain proceeds to capture him and violate his bodily integrity in a manner that is often interpreted as rooted in latent homosexual attraction. Despite their differences, however, Hojo and Lucrecia never cease to function like two sides of the same coin. Both of them exemplify technoscientific hubris and self-abuse; both of them are eventually crushed by their bad karma and denied salvation. Most importantly, both are equally instrumental in stripping Vincent of his humanity.

Vincent's systematic dehumanisation manifests in ways which are characteristic to Japanese cyberpunk, and reference philosophical concepts on the nature of life and humanity frequently explored in the genre: in *Ghost in the Shell*, the essence of being alive is portrayed as ideologically connected to one's ability to die, as well as produce offspring. In *Final Fantasy VII*, Lucrecia and Hojo's combined work non-consensually removes Vincent's potential for death. Additionally, his left arm, which is encased in a golden gauntlet and heavily implied to be a biomechanical prosthesis, becomes another flesh offering in Vincent's continuous line of torture. While not directly affecting his reproductive capability, the needless amputation can still be read as a symbolic act of castration, very much in line with the erotomechanical horrors of *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*.

Where other characters are shown to visually evolve, in both design and thematic presentation, Vincent never changes out of his torn red cloak. Dramatic and perpetually fluttering, it comes to represent his inner turmoil, his wounded psyche, his physical torment, as well as the untamed beast(s) still residing inside him.

Without the option of death, his condition remains stagnant and unresolved until the very end. “I was frozen in time, but I feel as if my time is just beginning”, he muses at the end of the original game. While his crisis of subjectivity is ultimately unsettled, for this posthuman being - who continues to exist in the liminal space between mechanization, animalization and disembodiment - hope takes the form of a personal affirmation that the world continues to move forward and a new cycle of repentance is about to begin.

Cosplay: fandom participation, ownership and the narrative of the self

As referenced in the introduction, the textual analysis of *Final Fantasy's VII's* mythos and Vincent Valentine's character represent an integral part of the process involved in the conception, creation and construction of my cosplay performance. In academic terms, the same analysis helps formulate and frame the essay's argument, by clarifying the fundamental relationship between the source material and the cyberpunk genre, alongside the posthumanist and postmodernist theoretical and philosophical extensions the latter encompasses.

Methodologically, my textual analysis intended to partially mimic a common form of fandom participation, where the fans (individually or in groups) examine the source text in depth, carefully dissecting it for information that can later be appropriated into fan art, fan fiction, costume making and other creative endeavours. Common observations show this social act to be neither rare nor atypical. Usually encountered under the term “theorising”, it can be found on specialised discussion platforms, messaging boards and blogs, where ideas surrounding the fans' personal readings are shared for both the sheer pleasure of it and the desire to fuel creative output. This behaviour is not exclusive to cosplayers, and in itself functions as a form of meaning-making.

Active reading of the source text has been isolated as an essential component to the practice of cosplay. In her academic discourse, Nicolle Lamerichs (“Stranger than Fiction”) identifies four essential aspects of cosplay: a narrative, a set of clothing, a play or performance before spectators and a subject or player. The “narrative” mentioned here refers to both the canonical media text, produced by the original authors, and the smaller narratives emerging from the various readers' relationship with said text. The existence of the latter forms the basis of interpretation upon which the entire creative process resides. Earlier in this essay, I mentioned that one of the game's most prominent narrative qualities is the fluidity with which the text lends itself to a number of tangential readings. While not all fans will engage with their source of inspiration to an equal extent, the creation of a cosplay costume (and indeed, every kind of derivative artwork) is a very involved process. As my own practical research into this project has shown, the investment in time and effort required to bring a character to life is significant enough that a measure of dedication and affective attachment to the source material is expected.

For the purposes of this project, Vincent Valentine served as the subject of my personal cosplay performance. The character is one I have explored in a number of different media, both canonical and fan-driven. The set of clothes was produced entirely from scratch, without any previous experience in sewing or crafting, and

took a total of twelve weeks to complete. It was modelled at Dee Con 2k14, the local Dundee games and anime convention and photographed professionally. The construction process itself was documented in detail, generating a separate set of data to be used in later research. The costume has since been the subject of a number of small exhibitions and talks around Dundee and Edinburgh, with the most recent one being part of the Game Masters Exhibition in the National Museum of Scotland.

The methodological approach for this project is in line with a growing trend in academic discourse where fandom is examined not only as a narrative of culture, but also as a narrative of the self (Peirson-Smith 77; Hills 122). Contemporary scholarship has already pointed out that fan participation can be interpreted as a way of internalizing and owning the source material. In this case, by deconstructing and embodying the fictional persona, and capitalising on existing emotional connections, I observed that “costume play” exhibited a more literal ludic aspect and the performance of character became a platform for introspection on matters of identity, creative expression and socialization.

While it is practically impossible to package the entirety of the character’s aesthetic and narrative into a single wearable outfit or series of photographs, the textual reading helped prioritize the available visual information: the subtle eroticism of Vincent’s cinematography; the emphasis on the red eyes as an intentional evocation of the uncanny; the symbolic value of the red cloak; the golden claw as an allusion to emasculation, offset by the extremely phallic image of his weapons; and his liminal nature as both *beauty* and *beast*, formed the basis of my portrayal (Square Enix; Softbank 48).

Since I deemed realism important, I altered the costume to look more natural in the context of the real world. Imperfections, such as scratches and tears, I incorporated into the aesthetic, and I made the cloak to look dirty and worn, more so than it appears to be in the game. Instead of wearing a wig, I chose to cut and style my actual hair, while beauty lighting was kept to a minimum during photo-shoots. The project’s creative objectives gradually evolved into an attempt to bring the character as close to life as possible, which involved taking artistic licence with minor details that I deemed to exist too far into the realm of fiction to translate realistically.



Figure 3. The completed costume, modelled by the author. Photographed by Drew Cunningham.

Posing, posture and speech align with craftsmanship to complete this artificial image of personhood. In cosplay, lighting and creative post-processing (or even minor body modifications) are considered viable and fair means for achieving the final effect within cosplay practice. And while there are limits to how far a performer is expected to go, the entire process is comprised out of layers and layers of playful deceit – multiple sets of smoke and mirrors, there to create an illusion of humanity and embodied identity.

One thing my own practical engagement pointed out was the depth of investment required to participate in this practice, in terms of devotion, time and commitment. While different results, different artistic techniques and different levels of skill can all be encountered within the cosplay community, authenticity is measured on a social level and the demands of the fandom collective can put a lot of pressure on the individual. In the absence of a theatrical stage, improvised interaction with the cosplayer's peers is essential for confirming the value of the performance and craftsmanship. It is through the approval of the audience that the illusion is completed, and without the former, the fictive persona arguably does not exist.

In the case of Vincent, the design of the character – such as the mix of racial features, the ageless appearance, the unstable gender marking and equivocal bodily proportions - serves to emphasise his status as an ambiguous, temporal being. Amongst other things, my cosplay performance emerged as an exercise in practical androgyny, and achieving that level of transcendence in regards to presentation (especially engendered presentation) was identified early as one of the project's biggest challenges. In order to achieve a form similar to the character's, my body contours had to be concealed in layers of padding and binding to create the impression of a small waist, wide shoulders and wide hips. Aspects of my own presentation which I deemed too indicative of my birth sex or too reminiscent of the gender binary (for example, the shape of my jaw) were similarly disguised through aspects of the costume, creative lighting and makeup.

I found that the internalised meaning derived from the source text needs to be constantly negotiated with the emotional and embodied aspects of the costumed subject, as well as the expectations of the audience. Success and authenticity are often similarly determined against the performer's ability to balance the familiar with the uncanny. This redefinition of physical identity -and deconstruction of social identity into performative components – is very deeply ingrained into the practice of cosplay, and central to both postmodernist and posthumanist thinking (Lotecki 2012). From this perspective, cosplay can be identified as a safe space for ontological exploration, where the performer is allowed to challenge societal norms and the limits of the human. Within this frame of reference, the body is just another set of contours that can be retraced and blurred at will on a spectrum of expression that includes multiple forms of morphological play. The monstrous transformation of the self is, in the end, a form of playful meditation on ontological anxieties and physical boundaries (Lunning, "Cosplay and the Performance of Identity"; Gn 583).

In the critical discourse of *Ghost in the Shell* and *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, as well as *Final Fantasy VII*, the transcendence of physical boundaries (whether forced or intentional) is positioned as a fundamental component

of the posthuman subject. In the context of costume and ludus, the decentralisation of embodiment and materiality takes on an inherently posthuman -inherently cyberpunk- dimension. And as would be expected, negotiating a space between the fictive and the real; the Self and the Other; the human and the nonhuman, and finding a place in this continuum of systematic dualities remains the cyberpunk protagonist's main source of conflict.

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Losers Don't Play Videogames . . . Heroes Do!

DAWN STOBART

The 1980s was big; big shoulder pads, big hair, big muscles, and big films. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jean Claude Van-Damme, and Sylvester Stallone regularly appeared on cinema screens with their heroic achievements, superhuman ability to survive any peril, and unerring belief that they could triumph over all evil. The 1980s also saw the science fiction film move from being a niche genre to occupying a place in mainstream cinema, as it became clear that it was well suited for the blockbuster structure. In this article I argue that the rise of the computer system, both in the public and private sphere, caused filmmakers to consider how this new technology might be exploited and the dangers inherent with its use, alongside the more positive suggestions of progress. When first introduced in the 1980s, computer generated images (CGI), sequences, and animation in live action film was revolutionary. *Tron* (Lisberger, 1982) was the first film to feature large segments of CGI, and whilst compared to contemporary examples it looks cheaply made, at the time it was cutting edge technology and its introduction changed the way special effects were used in film production, and even the way film itself is created. One only has to look at films such as *Avatar*, *Avengers Assemble*, and *Inception*, to see its widespread and continuing influence. Computers and computer technology were beginning to be used to create the very stories that were commenting on their use in society, as well as on the people that used them, with *War Games*, (Badham, 1983) *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984), and *The Last Starfighter* (Castle, 1984) making this commentary explicit. This protagonist is a younger, broadly identifiable character, whose appeal does not rely on muscles and violence, but instead relies on an ability to use intellect and emotion to solve problems and resolve issues. Coming from a wide range of economic and social backgrounds, these heroes, whilst predominantly male, were often seen as geeks, nerds, and even losers, and were able to use their skills as gamers and hackers and the geeky qualities often derided by their peers to achieve their heroic status, rather than the techniques frequently used by the muscular blockbuster heroes.

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) (which was not a blockbuster on release, but later "achieved the status of blockbuster" (Whittington 169)), *The Terminator* (considered "James Cameron's first blockbuster" (Welsh 171)), and Robert Zemeckis' *Back to the Future* (1985) are just a small selection of the science fiction films that made their mark on the consciousness of filmgoers, becoming canonical examples of the science fiction blockbuster. Despite, or possibly because of, this change the 1980s also saw an upsurge in the creation of family oriented films, partly through "being able to address a 'family' audience [which] enabled makers of films to capture large audiences through the new forms of distributing and circulating films that have come to be of increasing importance since the early 1980s" (Matthews 123). These films often featured a younger protagonist who did not rely on the physical strength of the established blockbuster hero. This reflected the current concerns of the time, such as the use of technology as a theme, as well as containing critical commentary—themes and subtexts relevant to the key demographic: teenagers and young adults.

Media is used to provide social commentary, asking the viewer or reader to reflect on its content, and in turn to question events in the real world, something that the films considered in this article adhere to. Historically, the plight of the working class was extensively explored through the fiction of authors such as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell in the Victorian period, and can more recently be seen in the novels of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. Film too, has been a carrier for social commentary, almost since its inception. Early films, such as Charlie Chaplin's *The Pawnshop* (1916), "depict the squalor of slum life in the crowded city' and this can be seen throughout film history" (Gazetas 93). Daniel Franklin writes that "during the Second World War, films taught us how to act as patriots and why we should fight our enemies" (Franklin 16). The Batman films of the 1990s and early twenty-first Century also contain commentary that reflects and questions events of the time—including the War on Terror, which Marc DiPaolo considers to be one of the major themes of *Batman Begins* (DiPaolo 49). Therefore, I argue that the rise of the computer system, both in the public and private sphere, caused filmmakers to consider how this new technology might be exploited and the dangers inherent with its use, alongside the more positive suggestions of progress. Christine Cornea considers that "the emergence of the blockbuster represents a response that was very much bound up with political, economic, and technological changes that began to occur in the late 1970s and early 1980s" (Cornea 113). Furthermore, it is commonly acknowledged that science fiction plays a role in critiquing and exploring the way technology impacts on our lives and our acceptance of it; films that showcase or explore technology can have a direct correlation to the presence of similar technologies in the real world.

The critical commentary surrounding computers and computer technology began early in the 1980s, ranging from being recognisable to being speculative science fiction. In *The Terminator*, machines are indistinguishable from the humans they are targeting. In an imagined future, computers have become sentient. In establishing their dominance over humanity they unleash a nuclear holocaust leaving the remnants of humankind to fight the mastery of the computer system, Skynet. *The Terminator* stars Arnold Schwarzenegger as a cyborg contract killer who is sent back in time to stop a future revolutionary leader from being born. This film explicitly interrogates the expanding role of technology in American society, and posits that giving this new technology too much power could be catastrophic. However, rather than offering a muscular, male hero, this film also offers an alternative, feminine protagonist, Sarah Connor played by Linda Hamilton. She must defeat this Terminator in order to save her unborn son and, by extension, the human race. During the course of the film, Sarah has to use her intelligence and her emotional capacity to defeat the terminator. In deviating from the norm of muscular masculinity in the blockbuster, the role of Sarah Connor in *The Terminator* is both a precursor to, and contemporary of, the adolescent hero that became more prominent as the 1980s progressed. Interestingly, this role is embodied by John Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), as the future saviour of the world, whilst Schwarzenegger plays the more traditional blockbuster hero in the same film and Sarah has become the more recognisable version of the hero, her femininity hidden beneath a muscular, less emotional veneer, and her maternal role fulfilled through the birth of her son.

The young hero, whilst becoming more prominent in the 1980s, was by no means a new concept, stretching back to the 1950s. However, within the context of the Hollywood and science fiction blockbuster, the young hero is most famously found in *Star Wars* (Lucas), through the figure of Luke Skywalker. Christine Cornea considers one of the central themes of the *Star Wars* films to be “Luke Skywalker’s rite of passage into adult manhood” and posits that this “involves him leaving the domestic/matriarchal space of his youth to make his entrance into the public arena of aggressive, patriarchal, power politics” (Cornea 114). She furthermore demonstrates that this character representation marks the science fiction genre as beginning to consider the dangers that are associated with becoming an adult, and with the changing world, which is continued in many other films, including, *The Last Starfighter* (Castle), and *Terminator 2*. Alongside Lucas’s coming of age narrative, these films offer a damning view of American society in the 1980s. The youthful protagonists must defeat an antagonist that adults either cannot. In these films, adults represent failure, either through a lack of openness, absenteeism, or simply incompetence, and it is left to children and teenagers to rectify problems. This challenges conventional notions of childhood in western culture. This theme is repeated in many films as the perception of the nuclear family began to disintegrate. These films place the adolescent (or child) in the centrally responsible role of hero, seeking to restore, replace, and even to maintain their place within an imperfect society. The simple structure of these films allowed children and young adults to recognise their own culture and life in the cinema they were watching.

As well being more recognisable and offering a more realistic hero to viewers in the 1980s, several films used the theme of the alien to interrogate the place of young people in society, just as other films were doing. *The Last Starfighter*, for instance features encounters between young people and alien life – which Lincoln Geraghty suggests is because “the young are simply more open to wonder and therefore more able to accept the otherness of alien life forms” (Geraghty 70). I suggest that films that engage with the use of videogames and computers adhere to this same principle; just as Alex’s brother accepts the alien that has replaced his brother, so too do those characters dealing with technology. David Lightmann accepts the WOPR’s sentience in *War Games*, without significant questioning of the technology, or their own ability to interact with it. This technology, especially in the early and mid-1980s was as alien as any other science fiction topic to most of society, despite its basic grounding in fact. Films like *The Terminator*, *The Last Starfighter*, and *War Games*, as well as challenging the role of the muscular hero, tell stories that explore the growing, widespread use of computers and offer critical commentary on the perceived dangers of giving this new and unknown technology too much power. However, despite the depiction of computers as futuristic concepts in these films, computers themselves were not science fiction, they were real. Brian Johnston writes that “for the first time, science fiction was coming into your house...the computers were real, the technology was real, and you could program your computer to do almost anything” (Johnson 2). Indeed, computers *were* becoming part of everyday life; they were beginning to be found in answer machines, videogame consoles, telephones, and children’s toys to name just a few things, and their potential appeared limitless both in life and in film.

The presence of a young protagonist, computers, and social commentary coalesce in *The Last Starfighter*, which sees Alex Rogan (Lance Guest) as a young man who dreams of escape from his life at the Starlite Starbrite trailer park. Just like *Star Wars* before it, the film is a coming of age narrative that charts Alex's journey from child to manhood—leaving home and exchanging the predominantly female domestic arena for a place in the masculine intergalactic Star League. The opening sequence of *The Last Starfighter* shows the economic status of Alex and the people he lives amongst. M Keith Booker writes that:

Every detail [of the opening scenes] reinforces the dreariness of the working class roots of the residents of the trailer park. Every tiny trailer looks rundown, with tiny front yards packed with kitschy lawn ornaments and banged up furniture. The small dirt lane between the trailers is overrun with too many people crammed into such a tiny space (Booker 154).

The perception of imprisonment this creates is deliberate, as director Nick Castle explains. The film, he says, was originally set in a suburban environment reminiscent of *ET* and *Poltergeist* (Hooper), but he considered that this was “too derivative of these works” (Castle). He therefore changed the setting of the film to foreground Alex's feelings of imprisonment in his working class environment and economic situation. Furthermore, the first view of Alex is of him sitting in his bedroom, playing with a solar system model, with the window behind him and a wistful expression on his face. This is both a proleptic moment, foreshadowing his departure from Earth, and offers the viewer an insight into Alex's feelings of being trapped. He is inside; confined to the small space he shares with his brother, dreaming of freedom, whilst the viewer can see that freedom through the closed window. This setting furthermore allows audiences to feel sympathy for him and to empathise with his desire to achieve the American Dream. Here, we see the effects of the contemporary American economic situation within the film's setting. Reagan, according to Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, “promoted the American Dream relentlessly”, and Alex's ability to transcend his economic situation and achieve this dream signals an affinity to the political climate at the time (Benshoff and Griffin 192).

Despite Alex's youth he is responsible for helping his mother run the trailer park, taking on the role of father figure to his younger brother. As with *Star Wars*, Alex's father is absent throughout the film, and the opening establishes that Alex fulfils that role, despite his own desires. Early in the film, Alex has to forgo a group outing and must take care of maintenance work at the trailer park, as his adult responsibilities clash with his teenage desires. In the face of this role, Alex's principle relaxation and escape is to play an arcade game—*Starfighter*. Games are usually associated with childhood, and having Alex play the *Starfighter* game reminds the viewer of Alex's youth, despite his adult responsibilities. The opening welcome of the game: “Greetings Starfighter! You have been recruited by the Star League to defend the frontier against Xur and the Kodan Armada” allows Alex to escape from the demands of these responsibilities. These include his mother and neighbours, his paternal relationship with his brother, and the stress of being a working class American teenager, something the positioning of the game in the film's setting reminds the viewer of—and also subverts. In 1984, when the film was released, computers were not present in every home, or pocket, as they are today, and the

Starfighter game, in its huge arcade casing, is situated outside the trailer park's shop in a communal space. Locating the *Starfighter* game here offers a counterpoint to the initial presentation of the trailer park as a space to escape from in economic terms. Instead, the communal nature of the park is foregrounded. It is shown as a supportive and nourishing social environment, with Alex being part of a loving community. When he plays more skilfully than usual and completes the game for the first time, many of the park's residents gather round him in this public arena; as well as supporting and encouraging him as he plays, the technology is so new and exciting that the residents want to be part of it—even vicariously. However, almost at the same time as his gaming success, his mother brings the news that he is not eligible for the student loan he has applied for. Once again the viewer is reminded of the constraints Alex faces in trying to achieve social and economic mobility, and the hopes he has of being freed from his life in the trailer park.

Upon receipt of his rejection letter, Alex's future role seems fixed. He cannot escape his financial constraints and leave the trailer park. However, the arrival of an alien lifeform named Centauri, who takes him to join the Intergalactic Starfighters as a result of his skills as a gamer. Here the film suggests that financial mobility is available to everybody and presents an America that allows social and economic mobility for those who pursue it. In doing so, *The Last Starfighter* also offers an optimistic view of technology in the 1980s. At this point in history, videogames and computers were still a new and little understood medium and their use and application in films amounted to "some kind of magic, or a doorway to another galaxy" (Mason) and implied to the young people creating and using computers and videogames that this technology could change their lives, making the world a better place for everyone, regardless of the obstacles that need to be overcome. Like some other adolescent films of this time, *The Last Starfighter* suggests that you do not have to be the cleverest, the strongest, or even the bravest person to be a hero; you just have to be good at playing videogames. Like the themes of many other films throughout the medium's history, this is simply wish-fulfilment, albeit targeted to a very specific audience.

The wish-fulfilment narrative of *The Last Starfighter* explicitly draws parallels to *Star Wars* and central protagonist Luke Skywalker, especially in using an arcade game that involves an intergalactic rebellion. Howard Hughes explains "in the wake of *Star Wars*' mega-success, every kid wanted to be a star pilot and take on the Empire. *The Last Starfighter* was a tale of such wish-fulfilment, offering hope to those who spent their entire lives playing videogames" (Hughes 124). Often considered a clone of the *Star Wars* trilogy (episodes IV, V, VI), there are several similarities between *The Last Starfighter* and *Star Wars*. Both Alex and Luke leave their working class roots to become intergalactic pilots; both have absent fathers, although it must be said, that as *Star Wars* progresses, Ben Kenobi becomes a paternal figure in Luke's life (and revealing Luke's father's identity is a defining moment in that trilogy). Both also realise their own potential and save the galaxy in the process. Just like Skywalker, Alex must take control of his own destiny, and make his own choices, even when faced with certain death. Alex, with his humble working class roots, journeys to the stars on a grand adventure that mirrors those narratives of earlier adventurers such as Theseus and Odysseus. Just like the narratives of these heroes, *The Last Starfighter* demonstrates that the adventures heroes undertake are not the only important parts of a quest; in returning home, Alex is able to recognise the strength that comes from his upbringing in the trailer park, and in

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his ability as a gamer. Alex does not think of himself as a hero, he considers himself to be just “a kid from a trailer park” (Castle), and the film unfolds as a way to prove to both Alex, and to the audience watching him, that not only can a kid from a trailer park be a hero, but it is his childhood experience in that trailer park that gives him the ability to become a hero. During the course of the film, Alex is transformed from being a reluctant teenager who dreams of a life outside the trailer park, to being an intergalactic Starfighter, but more than that, he becomes the Last Starfighter, who will bring about a new breed of hero that the young viewers could more easily identify with, and be inspired by.

The Last Starfighter ends on a triumphant note. Alex and Maggie leave the economic and social confines of both the trailer park and earth, ready to create a new life for themselves. Alex leaves the matriarchal and domestic space that he has grown up in, and instead takes his place within the masculine arena of the Starfighters. More than this though, the trailer park itself loses the negative economic and social connotations it began with. In contrast to the opening shots of the film, which made it a place to escape from, the end of the film shows the park, and its inhabitants, to be a loving and supportive community, willing to “stand behind Alex and Maggie as they journey to the stars” (Booker 157). As Booker explains, “The trailer park is no longer a place where dreams die, but a home where dreams begin” (Booker 158).

Whilst *The Last Starfighter* shows a positive role for technology, offering its teenage viewers hope for a brighter future, films that featured videogames and computer equipment were not universally optimistic. *War Games*, following *The Terminator* and *Tron's* examples was promoting a more cautious approach to computers and technology. At the same time, it was suggesting that hacking and hackers were a positive force. In *War Games*, David Lightmann, “a computer geek, before most people really knew what a computer geek was” (Johnson 1) accidentally hacks into a state-of-the-art government computer system instead of a videogame development company. In doing so, he inadvertently nearly starts World War Three by initiating a computer simulation called Global Thermonuclear War. The film rests on the premise that the Government are unable to differentiate between the artificial intelligence (known as the WOPR) running a computer simulation and a real nuclear threat. The military begin to take real measures to counter this perceived danger. Unable to terminate the program and avert the American counterattack, Lightmann has to teach the artificially intelligent computer humanity just as the simulation he began reaches its apex, bringing with it the realisation that there is no winner in war. At the time, the film gave a fairly accurate representation of how a hacker accessed a remote system, placing a telephone receiver onto a cradle and dialling a number and in using this depiction, just like *Tron* before it, *War Games* romanticised hackers and hacking, seeming to condone breaking into computers and stealing or changing information, something that has subsequently touched most people’s lives detrimentally. Twenty-five years after the film’s release *Wired* magazine stated that *War Games* was “the geek-geist classic that legitimized hacker culture” and that “minted the nerd hero” (Brown). Rather than the contemporarily perceived hacker as a destructive force, David Lightmann is as a good character, part of the ‘phreaker’ culture that studies how telecommunications work, and that considers that all information should be freely available, a movement that has gone on to include hactivism.¹ The film simultaneously perceives hacking as a positive thing and yet questions the

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widespread use of computers and the potential for them to go wrong if machines are given too much autonomous power. The ramifications for the young audiences of these films was immense, just like Alex's brother at the end of *The Last Starfighter* who is inspired to play videogames, a generation of children and young adults "started programming, building games, and basically geeking out" (Johnson 2) as computing interests were acknowledged, explored, and even accepted through the films being released as mainstream cinema.

War Games offers viewers a hero similar to Alex in *The Last Starfighter*, an adolescent, game playing male. However, it is doing something substantially different in terms of theme and the exploration of computers and gaming. Unlike the *Starfighter* game, which is a training simulation, the machine in *War Games* is a sentient intelligence that has been given the power and ability to simulate and enact war. The WOPR is portrayed as a childlike individual; one who must be taught that winning is not everything. David likens it to the inventor's own son, Joshua, to the extent that it is even given that child's name instead of the acronym it is officially known by, explicitly connecting the innocence of childhood with this sentience. When Lightmann's interactions with the WOPR, fool the US military into thinking war is about to break out, it is he that convinces Joshua to end the simulation by teaching it that there is no winner in war. This makes him the hero of the film, despite the fact it was he who triggered the military incident in the first place! Where *The Last Starfighter* offers a positive image of technology as a means to escape and to achieve the American Dream, *War Games* instead questions the wisdom in giving computers too much power and control, as well as reinforcing the age old message that war is universally lost, no matter who wins.

30 years on, and the science fiction themes that the two films offer have in some respects become fact. The *Starfighter* game, an intergalactic military simulation that tests Alex's skill has gone on to become reality in the form of an international military training programme, *Virtual Battlespace 2*. This program offers "semi-immersive, experiential learning opportunities to familiarize and train soldiers in various tactical scenarios and environments" and is used by many countries across the world, including the UK and the US (Rundle). Hacking is no longer the romantic pursuit that *War Games* portrays, if indeed it ever was, but instead is part of everyday life, with news stories reporting the infiltration of multinational businesses such as PlayStation, and more than 10 million attempts to infiltrate the Pentagon every day (Bender). Hacking organisations are common and include the network Anonymous, a collective of unnamed individuals, which use 'collaborative hacktivism' to take action against what it perceives to be "corporate interests controlling the internet and silencing the people's right to share information" (Tsotsis). The friendly, harmless hacking Lightmann carries out has become an invasive, terrorist tool, and the power given to machines has become a threat. The warnings of technological dominance and reliance have been realised in the 21st Century, created by the viewers who watched these films in the 1980s, both as a force for good, and bad.

The films exploring computers such as *The Terminator*, *War Games* and *The Last Starfighter* offer two opposing views of computers and technology. *The Last Starfighter* shows the potential for computers to be a positive influence, whilst *The Terminator* and *War Games* are "cautionary tale[s] about the futility of war and the

dangers associated with giving computers too much control over our lives” (Johnson 2). Despite the seeming dissonance in the films themes, they all nevertheless were exploring the technology that was being brought into our homes, and our daily lives. The protagonists in these films are not the muscle bound heroes of the big blockbusters, but a more recognisable, more identifiable hero to the children and young adults that were using computers and playing videogames, and while these films were empowering and entrusting their protagonists in the 1980s with “the huge responsibility of representing earth, and defending it from hostile others” (Geraghty 2), such as aliens or computers, or even from humanity itself, they were also offering us the hope that this technology could bring about our salvation, both economically and socially. More than that though, these films intimated that the people using computers, programming them, and playing them were heroes, not losers.

Notes

- 1 Hactivism is a portmanteau of the two words, ‘hack’ and ‘activism’. This movement champions the use of computers and the internet to promote free speech, human rights, and information ethics and uses technology to as a method of political protest.

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To Fatality and Beyond: The Deathsetics of Failure in Videogames

STEPHEN CURTIS

To define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find, not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of aesthetics (Pater xxix).

If you leave your game, stay safe, stay alert, and whatever you do, don't die! Because if you die outside of your own game, you don't regenerate. EVER! Game over (*Wreck-It Ralph*, Rich Moore, 2012).

I'll never forget the first time I died. I was eight and after a successful bombing run across enemy territory I ran out of fuel before I could make it back to the aircraft carrier. Since that first fatal engagement in *Harrier Attack* (1983) on the Amstrad CPC464 I have died countless times in almost every conceivable way. Death is as inevitable in gaming as it is in life – albeit much more frequent and rarely as permanent. However, this in itself is not a mark of distinction from other media. For every Lara Croft being eaten by a marauding T-Rex in the original *Tomb Raider* (1996) there is an unfortunate lawyer sat on a toilet in *Jurassic Park* (1993); for every *Medal of Honour: Allied Assault* (2002) featuring the storming of Omaha Beach there is a *Saving Private Ryan* (1998); for every gas explosion caused by flatulence in *How To Be a Complete Bastard* (1987) – well, that's an exception. What makes dying in games distinctive is the phenomenological effect of ludic embodiment. When Hamlet dies at the end of the eponymous play we do not feel that we have died – despite the incredible psychological insights we might have gained from his soliloquies. When Boromir redeems himself through defending the hobbits in *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), we can be affected but it is still clearly the character that dies. Although videogames have clearly been influenced by the representation of death in film, as seen in the classic *Goldeneye* (1997) where the iconic blood descending was lifted straight from the film series' opening credits, the experience of player death is altered through its ludic elements. When we mistime a jump, fail to avoid a laser beam, crash into an obstacle, are eaten by a monster, or have our face melted by the acidic vomit of a Necromorph in *Dead Space* (2008), however, we say 'I've died again'. It is the construction of this 'I' that the neologism of deathsetics seeks to describe. In coining such a term, I do not wish to argue for a purely mechanical reading of death in games, although this is an important aspect, but instead hope to explore the aesthetic moment and effect of videogame death. As Jasper Juul has convincingly argued, the role of failure in games is perhaps more complex than we might at first assume:

It is quite simple: When you play a game, you want to win. Winning makes you happy, losing makes you unhappy. If this seems self-evident, there is nonetheless a contradictory viewpoint, according to which

games should be “neither too easy nor too hard”, implying that players also want *not* to win, at least part of the time (237).

This notion of ‘neither too easy nor too hard’ helps us to understand the ubiquity of the Game Over in videogames. Films do not explicitly test the viewer and end if answered incorrectly, and books do not require more than the manual dexterity of turning the page to be continued (although, obviously, there is a world of difference between simply parsing the words and understanding them), but games by their very design are resistant to completion to a greater or lesser degree. This necessity of failure (which will be discussed later on) has meant that the aesthetics of death have developed directly alongside the technological progression that characterises the history of videogames.

The notion of deathsetics is predicated on the idea that death is a necessary part of the pleasure experienced through playing games. There are obviously exceptions to this general rule but, over the course of gaming’s history, they are clearly in the minority. Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (perhaps the seminal discussion of the links between play and human life more generally) identifies the role that the risk of failure plays in the ludic experience:

The player wants something to “go”, to “come off”; he wants to “succeed” by his own exertions. Baby reaching for a toy, pussy patting a bobbin, a little girl playing ball – all want to achieve something difficult, to succeed, to end a tension. [...] The more play bears the character of competition, the more fervent it will be (29).

In this formulation, play is objective-lead and the implication is that when the stakes are raised, then the pleasure is increased. Videogames’ application of an avatar representing the player enables this risk to be taken all the way to fatality and beyond.

Towards Deathsetics

There are two main threads in what follows. The first is an aesthetic account of the development of game over sequences in videogames from their arcade beginnings through to the motion-capped, voice-acted, multi-million pound/dollar franchises – the so-called ‘AAA’ games – that dominate the medium today. The second, more theoretical, part will examine why we are so drawn to the death of the avatar and will hopefully suggest a fruitful way in which the cultural critic can read death in games. Throughout, the focus will be on single player experiences, although, as will become apparent, more recently the divide between single and multi-player fail-states has become blurred.

In analysing the development of the deathsetics of game over I am treating the relevant screen or sequences as literary texts, following Samuel Archibald’s identification of the effective ways in which literary theory can illuminate the process of playing games as a form of textual reading:

Applied to video games, literary theory invites a kind of *player-response criticism*, which would never allow players to be insulated from gameplay. That means never forgetting, while observing game dynamics, that gameplay isn't solely about what games make the player do, but about how and why he does it, what it does to him, and what he makes of it retrospectively. The opposition between heuristic and hermeneutic readings drawn by Michael Riffaterre in his 1983 book, *Text Production*, translates appropriately to gameplay, and clarifies the fundamental interplay of actions undertaken by the player while following the strictly logical nature of the game as a formal structure, and of actions informed by the player's thoughts and sensibilities about the game world, which he enters with his own set of ideas, values, and beliefs (361).

This approach results in a necessary fusion between the ludic and narratological elements of games – or, in other words, the mechanics and the storyline. Both of these elements converge in the embodied experience of gameplay, whilst the fail-state of death largely results in an unsatisfactory and premature caesura in the game.

Considering the experience of gameplay as a hybrid also allows for a classical aesthetic approach to criticism, an approach perhaps most clearly defined by Walter Pater:

The objects with which aesthetic criticism deals [...] are indeed receptacles of so many powers or forces [...] What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? (xxix)

It is through Pater's identification of the effect of the aesthetic object that the present study will examine the experience of death in games. This idea of the modifying influence of games ties in with Huizinga's seminal discussion of the ludic properties of human interaction. He argues that "Play is to be understood here not as a biological phenomenon but as a cultural phenomenon" (18). In analysing the phenomenological effect of gaming failure as well as the technical developments in representational fidelity, the new media of videogames can offer an important insight into the ways in which virtual dying is constructed and the experience it creates. The virtual nature of these fail-states is crucial, serving to invert Christopher Belshaw's statement that "death is in every case a biological phenomenon, but is not in every case a sociological, or cultural, or psychological, or whatever else phenomenon" (15). Playing with death, or, even, playing at death, in this way opens dying up as an aesthetic experience for the individual, enabling to a certain extent an otherwise unknowable moment to be lived through. Obviously, such virtual death is not commensurate with its biological analogue but its interactivity distinguishes it from the more static engagements with mortality to be found in traditional media. Gaming death can be a part of the gameplay itself, or a necessary developmental tool, whether in terms of narrative or player skill. The various ways in which this interactivity can be experienced will be discussed later.

Gaming, therefore, derives much of its distinct textual resonance from the synthesis of ludic structures and narratological drive. The comparisons to traditional media, however, are telling, as David Myers convincingly illustrates:

Playing is to games as reading is to books. Sort of. Games are designed to be played, just as books are designed to be read. Both playing a game and reading a book involve transforming a pre-determined set of rules into a more immediate phenomenological experience (45).

The importance of highlighting the technological aspect of normalised textual analysis cannot be overstated. It is too easy to accept the quotidian technologies of traditional media and forget their origins as new and other, as G.P. Landow reminds us:

Technology, in the lexicon of many humanists, generally means ‘only that technology of which I am frightened.’ In fact, I have frequently heard humanists use the word technology to mean ‘some intrusive, alien force like computing,’ as if pencils, paper, typewriters, and printing presses were in some way *natural* (26).

The idea of new technologies, therefore, is a problematic one, and it is no surprise that there has been a move towards breaking down this fear of the digital in contemporary humanities. The inclusion of videogames in media, cultural, or even literary studies, is perhaps the most visible sign of this epistemological transition. Having said that, it is also crucial to state the particular effects of gaming’s immersive, interactive experience; in other words, its explicitly ludic qualities. Myers likens this to the more playful lexical choices of poetry rather than the narrative thrust of the novel:

During video game play, the human body and the human experience are accessible only as these are represented and valued by the video game mechanics. Poetic language points us to an objective correlative: a prelinguistic state of direct and immediate experience. Video games, in contrast, point us to the more localized and individualized phenomena of the psychophysical: what we believe to be true (52).

Such an internal, experiential effect of videogames fits well with Huizinga’s identification of play’s cultural importance: “Even in its simplest forms on the animal level, play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a *significant* function – that is to say, there is some sense to it” (19). Both Myers and Huizinga highlight the temporal boundedness of the gamer’s interaction with the game. For Huizinga, this escape from ‘ordinary life’ is a key characteristic of the ludic nature of culture:

Play begins and then at a certain moment it is “over”. It plays itself to an end. While it is in progress all is movement, change, alternation, succession, association, separation. But immediately connected with its limitation as to time there is a further curious feature of play: it at once assumes form as a cultural phenomenon (Huizinga 28).

This ‘limitation as to time’ is the nexus from which deathsetics emerges. If we understand death to be the cessation of consciousness, then any interruption to the progress of play becomes a death within the game and, as such, creates an effect in the player. The general requirement to repeat at least some of the preceding

gameplay differentiates this caesura from an intrusion into the act of reading – a moment more closely analogous to pausing a game.

Perhaps the most fundamental explanation for the power of these moments of frustrated immersion is the quasi-carnavalesque nature of play:

Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it “spoils the game”, robs it of its character, and makes it worthless. The profound affinity between play and order is perhaps the reason why play, as we noted in passing, seems to lie to such a large extent in the field of aesthetics (Huizinga 29).

I define this escape from ordinary life as quasi-carnavalesque because its reliance on order distances it from the Bakhtinian idea of carnival as release – although a more nuanced reading of Bakhtin can highlight the strict order under which the hegemonic social structure allows carnival to take place. This classic definition of the experience of play, however, does not account for the distinct pleasures to be derived from the various ways of cheating, hacking, modifying or playing against the game that characterise gaming for many players.

A hybridised notion of the textual nature of videogames is continued in my identification of deathsetics – an aesthetic engagement with the affect and representation of virtual death. Of course, as outlined above, death is not unique to gaming but there is a distinctive deathsetic brought about by the immersive nature of gaming. Huizinga reminds us of the importance of the aesthetic aspect of play, arguing that “[Theories from psychology and physiology] attack play direct with the quantitative methods of experimental science without first paying attention to its profoundly aesthetic quality” (20).

What do I mean by aesthetic? I follow Pater’s influential definition of aesthetic as a process of critically identifying and analysing the factors that result in a given text (I deliberately use the term broadly here) having an effect on the individual assessing it:

The functions of the aesthetic is to distinguish, to analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture [...] produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced (xxx).

For the purposes of this definition, the text can have aesthetic value whether it is a painting, a poem, a play, or a platformer. However, this generalisation should not lead to the flattening of difference between what causes the ‘special impression of beauty or pleasure’ within each text. Juul argues that, in games, there is a clear correlation between aesthetic pleasure and the mechanical experience of playing:

[There is a] contradiction between players wanting to win and players wanting games to be challenging: failing, and feeling responsible for failing, make players enjoy a game *more*, not less. Closer examination reveals that the apparent contradiction originates from two separate perspectives on games: a goal-

oriented perspective wherein the players want to win, and an aesthetic perspective wherein players prefer games with the right amount of challenge and variation (238).

This notion of a necessary tension or challenge for true aesthetic appreciation is not new. Abstract art, modernist literature and surrealism have all famously sought to challenge the expectations and conventions of their form to make a statement whilst the tabloid praise of ‘a real page-turner’ when applied to a novel is often taken as a synonym for banal, middle of the road writing. Using this criterion, it is surely possible to equate *Dark Souls* with *Of Grammatology*, but in general, such a comparison is problematised by the inclusion of difficulty levels in videogames. In Juul’s definition of aesthetic enjoyment being dependent on an appropriate level of challenge, the player has the agency to adapt the game to suit their ability through a few button presses on a menu or option screen. The equivalent steps towards creating an easy mode for Jacques Derrida would involve many years of rigorous study into the context and stylistics of his writing. Working from this understanding of deathsetics, then, it is clear that the presence and possibility of death within games is a key, although not universal, factor in their achieving an aesthetic effect on the player.

A Brief History of Deathsetics

Death has always sold and gaming is no exception. Freud would put this down to the unavoidable action of the death-drive; the entropic compulsion to dissolution that exists within us all, whilst conservative social commentators – from the early modern Puritan William Prynne to Jack Thompson – have pointed to a violent and nihilistic strain attracting disaffected audiences to alleged sensationalist media, or recurrently, that such media creates and perpetuates this violence. There are ebbs and flows in deathsetics’ historical popularity however. Revenge tragedy dominated the early modern stage and then disappeared, Grand Guignol burned brightly before fizzling out, and the video nasty has a defined chronological relevance.

Somewhat oxymoronically, death has had a renaissance of sorts in popular media over the past few years. Television series such as *Game of Thrones* (2011) or *The Walking Dead* (2010), have seen death move into the mainstream. In these examples, the propinquity of death is a key part of dramatic tension and the constant drip-feeding of demise only serves to sustain the thrill rather than expunging it through a process of Aristotelian catharsis. The adaptation of both into videogames makes for a fascinating comparison, although tellingly the game versions feature alternative protagonists in order to avoid the determinism of their source material. In the beginning, however, death in games had a more prosaic function. Arcade machines needed to pay for their upkeep by ensuring that the player put more coins in. Therefore an explicit link between death and expenditure appeared in the videogame arcades of the 1980s.

What follows is not an exhaustive survey, but does instead point towards the general shifts in gaming’s relationship with death since the arcade machines of the 1980s. A more systematic examination is a project in and of itself, but one towards which I am hopeful the present study can be a step. Crucially, in one legacy of the punishing difficulty of gaming’s origins, it is not just the possibility of death that leads to an aesthetic enjoyment

of the game. Juul outlines the result of an experiment in which volunteers were asked to rate a game he devised as a test of their perception of difficulty in relation to pleasure:

By comparing the average game ratings with the performance of the players we can see an indication that *winning isn't everything*: the most positive players were the ones that *failed* some, and then completed the game. Completing the game without failing was followed by a *lower* rating of the game (243).

Juul's findings suggest that gamers enjoy failure as a part of play; and that overcoming a previously fatal challenge enhances their gaming experience. In gaming's arcade origins, however, the looming presence of death was a more pernicious one.

Coin-op (shortened form of coin-operated) arcade machines were the first mass-market videogaming experience. Legendary titles such as *Space Invaders* (1978), *Asteroids* (1979), *Pac-Man* (1980), and *Donkey Kong* (1981) were based purely on a compulsive high-score mentality with little attempt at more than the most cursory of framing stories. Early gaming death, therefore, owed much to the penny arcade or peep show machines that many of the early coin-ops replaced. Game Over meant a denial of visual stimulation, and this frustration for the viewer/player was enough to justify their spending more and more coins. This frustration was clearly visualised through ending sequences being little more than a static screen taunting the player with a stark notice of their failure, and a timer adding psychological pressure – ticking down the dwindling chances to insert more coins and continue playing.

When gaming moved into the home, this approach continued for a number of years, with many of the most popular games being conversions of arcade machines – although rarely displaying the arcade quality graphics that were so often emblazoned on the packaging. These conversions brought ludic death into the home, but with a crucial alteration in the financial imperative. Rather than paying per go/life, consumers were spending a more substantial sum upfront. Consequently the mechanic shifted from 'Insert Coin' to 'Press Start to Continue'. The Derridean difference at play here (the invisible difference/deferral between two seemingly identical terms or actions) highlights the ontological disconnect between the videogame console and its arcade predecessor. While ostensibly the same interaction is taking place between player and game, the experience is different. Having paid already for the whole game experience, consumers began to feel short-changed if they were unable to access much of this content. The technological solution to this consumer concern was the development of various mechanisms by which game progress could be saved or continued. Alongside such deferrals of death, developers distributed cheat codes that altered the parameters of games in order to provide infinite lives or invincibility. A parallel path in home computer gaming leads to developer modes (tellingly referred to colloquially as God modes), in which the game code could be altered.

As home gaming developed, the ability to save progress in a game simultaneously ensured that death was no longer the end and that games became much more sophisticated narrative experiences. The abuse of the F5 key began long before the desperate refreshing of emails near a deadline – with the built-in memory of personal

computers providing the ability to instantly save progress and consequently to potentially endlessly defer death. With the increased fidelity of home gaming the aesthetics of death shifted from the denial of visual stimuli towards a spectacle in and of themselves. *Resident Evil 4* (2005), although predating the HD generation, can be seen as a key originator of this trend. The multitude of ways in which the protagonist, Leon Kennedy, could meet his maker ensured that a slew of YouTube compilations swiftly appeared, each proclaiming themselves to be the most brutal. This trend perhaps reached its peak through the *Dead Space* series, all three of which delight in the gory deaths to which the game's central character, Isaac Clarke, is subjected. Without the spectre of the 'please insert coin to continue,' games adapted to make death an essential part of gameplay. Some games, such as the LucasArts adventures, were distinguished by not featuring death, although the modern enhanced version of the classic *Secret of Monkey Island* (2009) contains an achievement unlocked by allowing wannabe pirate Guybrush Threepwood to drown. More recently we have seen the rise of the so-called 'walking simulator' (defined by an absence of combat or peril), such as *Gone Home* (2013), *Proteus* (2013) and *Dear Esther* (2012), a genre looked down upon by a subset of gamers because of its refusal to include death and violence as a gaming mechanic, choosing instead to present an immersive narrative experience. It is telling that, to a vocal section of gaming fans, death is now fundamental to what makes a game a game. On the other extreme to the 'walking simulators' we have the 'maso-core' games (defined by extreme difficulty and frequent game deaths), such as *Super Meat Boy* (2010), *Spelunky* (2012), *1001 Spikes* (2014) and, perhaps most successfully, the aforementioned *Dark Souls*. These games incorporate the frequent, often unfair deaths of arcade classics like *Ghosts 'n' Goblins* (1985), and largely echo this nostalgic feel with a suitably retro visual style. *Dark Souls* owes its surprising popularity, I would argue, to its blend of classic hardcore gameplay and HD visuals. In general, however, the appeal of 'maso-core' games lies in the skill required to make it to the end. Death is unavoidable, but also didactic, serving as a learning tool in the development of the player's skills. As such, the emotional effect of death in these games is closely related to that of their arcade ancestors but in this case the player has paid up front for the privilege of dying.

In contemporary gaming, therefore, the notion of deathsetics has matured and dying provides a mechanical and aesthetic pleasure for the player. On the other hand, however, too much death is a bad thing and can negatively impact the enjoyment of a game. The frustrating echoes of repetition from the arcades are felt in the lurid cutscenes that now accompany in-game death. This barrier to player enjoyment is most egregious when the cutscenes are unskippable or prolonged by the intrusion of multiplayer gameplay mechanics into single player games, particularly through the overused AI companion revival trope.

Between the two extremes of walking simulator and maso-core, mainstream gaming uses death as a combination of punishment and learning tool but does so without a frequency that might put gamers off. Unlike in the early home computer days when films almost invariably had videogame tie-ins released, the exorbitant budget and time required to produce an HD title has seen the reverse to be more common. Indeed, many blockbuster movies have entire action sequences that have clearly been lifted from videogame conventions – even when no tie-in title is released. However, there is still a clear influence from films in many mainstream 'AAA'

games. Their reliance on cinematic exposition, usually through non-interactive cutscenes, and the unwillingness to prevent the player's progress too rigidly leads to many games almost playing themselves. The recent *Tomb Raider* reboot (2013) certainly faced this accusation, although it also displayed a ghoulish delight in inflicting painful death on the young Lara Croft. Whilst preparing this article, I rewatched a compilation of Lara's deaths and, without the context of the game surrounding them, many of these make for deeply unsettling viewing – not least because of a seedy elision between sex, torture and bloodshed. The deaths in these big franchise games, therefore, are now part of the spectacle (in direct contrast to the blank screens of early games) but the player is expected to be able to finish the games and receive their narrative payoff – and more crucially be prepared to buy the inevitable sequel the following year. Death is no longer a terminal ludic barrier but instead a discrete aesthetic experience that has found a new audience through YouTube montages.

Reading Deathsetics

The brief history outlined above illustrates both the continuing importance and shifting aesthetics of dying in videogames. With this history in mind, we will now examine the significance of ludic death and suggest a number of ways in which critics can explore such deathsetics. One of the most complex philosophical debates around death is how we can define it. Is it an event or a process – do we die; or are we always dying? Belshaw summarises the questions that surround this inevitable life experience:

What happens when someone dies? How can we tell whether a person is alive or dead? These are connected, but nevertheless distinct, questions. Many complex physiological changes are involved in human death. Most of us, including doctors, have no need of knowledge of them all. But some of us, especially doctors, need to be able to distinguish between the living and the dead (40).

In the world of the videogame, it is also important for the player to be clear when they are dead, and designers implement a range of indicators to alert them as to when they are at risk. Rapidly increasing heartbeat sounds (*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, 2011), bloodied onscreen avatar portraits (*Doom*, 1993), screens turning red or dark (*Mass Effect*, 2007), and specific danger music (*Super Mario World*, 1990) or warning tones (*The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*, 1992) are all employed. These signs serve to either panic or focus the player, resulting in a physical and emotional engagement with the avatar's peril. In these cases, the proximity of death is signposted but there is still a clear failstate at which death occurs. The psychophysiological effect of these aesthetic warnings accentuates the ludic enjoyment of the player and fits with psychological explanations of the motivation for playing:

Finally, this research points to another layer of complexity in player behavior. That failure and difficulty is important to the enjoyment of games correlates well with Michael J. Apter's *reversal theory*, according to which people seek low arousal in normal goal-directed activities such as work, but high arousal, and hence challenge and danger, in activities performed for their intrinsic enjoyment, such as games (Kerr and Apter cited in Juul 249).

Once again, more scientific modern approaches to the aesthetic experience of gaming match Huizinga's earlier philosophical insights. He poetically describes the corporeality of play: "In play the beauty of the human body in motion reaches its zenith. In its more developed forms it is saturated with rhythm and harmony, the noblest gifts of aesthetic perception known to man" (25). When engaged in this kind of 'in-the-zone' gaming, a precarious line must be drawn between the tension-enabling propinquity of death and its existence as an obstacle to aesthetic pleasure. Huizinga reminds us of the essential fragility of this aesthetic engagement:

The play-mood is *labile* in its very nature. At any moment "ordinary life" may reassert its rights either by an impact from without, which interrupts the game, or by an offence against the rules, or else from within, by a collapse of the play spirit, a sobering, a disenfranchisement (40).

Following Huizinga, virtual death results in an unwelcome removal from the escapist release of gaming. It is apparent, then, that the presence of death is an important part of the aesthetic experience of gaming, and that this deathsetics reveals much about the ways in which we as gamers are impacted upon by the games we are playing. What specific purposes, however, does death play within the hybridised ludo-narrative world of the videogame? I have identified five ways of categorising the role of death in games: didactic, voyeuristic, cathartic, inevitable/necessary, and existential.

Didactic death is more closely related to game mechanics than narrative, and most ably covers the trial-and-error gameplay that harks back to the arcades. This mode of death is concerned with punishing the player for a mistake but also enabling them to learn and, hopefully, to avoid repeating that mistake. In reality, what often happens is that the mistake is repeated many times until a solution is found. This can perhaps best be seen in the 'maso-core' platformer *Super Meat Boy*, in which the bloody stains left by previous mistakes remain on the level to serve as a warning and guide for the next attempt, and all lives lost on a level are replayed over each other upon completion, creating a palimpsest of death. This is perhaps the most traditional utilisation of death in gaming and, as such, is most represented in contemporary culture; in television with parodies such as the videogame episode of *Community* (Season 3:20, 2012), and in film with the recent *Edge of Tomorrow* (Doug Liman, 2014). The latter is a particularly striking commentary on the didactic nature of death since the central character, played by Tom Cruise, is trapped in a cycle of death and resurrection but is unique in being able to learn and recall the lessons of his previous lives and deaths.

The increasing fidelity enabled by technological advances in computing has seemingly always been accompanied by a sensationalist and voyeuristic deathsetics. The most infamous example of this representational mode is *Mortal Kombat* (1992). Now approaching its tenth iteration, the unsettling blend of cartoon violence and realistic characters (increasingly so) has proven to be equally successful in attracting fans and critics. The clearest illustration of the series' voyeuristic relationship with death is the trademark inclusion of gruesome finishing moves, carried out upon an unconscious opponent through an elaborate series of button presses. The clear way in which lurid death was held back as a reward for the most skilful or persistent player characterises the

voyeuristic deathsetic. This approach has proved influential, despite, or perhaps because of, its controversial nature, and therefore popular titles such as *Skyrim*, and *God of War* (2005) can be seen as clear descendants of *Mortal Kombat*. The most notable difference, however, is that in these games the gory finishing moves are either triggered randomly through invisible algorithms or brought about through immersion-breaking quick-time-events in which standard controls are temporarily replaced by a mini-game of reactively pressing the button illustrated on the screen, thus removing the element of skill and dexterity that characterises *Mortal Kombat's* fatalities. A direct evolution of this voyeurism can be seen in the increased fetishisation of the death of the avatar, described above in relation to *Resident Evil 4*, *Tomb Raider* and the *Dead Space* series. Here, the player is punished/rewarded for mistakes by watching their character be killed in startlingly gruesome ways. The line between character and player is blurred through the physical reaction to the tension within the game, and then reasserted by the witnessing of the avatar's death.

The emotional effect of watching the player character die can be read in terms of Aristotle's classical identification of the positive effects of tragedy upon the spectator. As Malcolm Heath relates in his Introduction to Aristotle's *The Poetics*, "the relief that *katharsis* brings is pleasurable" (Heath xxxviii). Moreover, the greater the psychophysiological effect of the game, the greater the potential for positive cathartic release:

The kathartic effect applies to someone watching a tragedy only to the extent that his or her emotional status is disordered; the more prone someone is to feel excessive or inappropriate emotion, the more benefit he or she stands to derive from *katharsis* and (presumably) the more pleasure (Heath xl).

In facing the physiological effects of anxiety and fear through the immersive embodiment of gaming, the player can release emotional and mental tension and, in Aristotelian terms, be restored through this catharsis.

The experiential contrast to this rejuvenating response to death is the unavoidably scripted death. Most famously present in *Final Fantasy VII*, this mode removes all agency from the player and, in doing so, prevents the emotional investment that is necessary for gaming catharsis. The result is more usually frustration and anger, particularly when the death is evidence of 'ludo-narrative dissonance', that is, it works against the accepted rules of the established game world. It is no coincidence that this mode of representing death is most closely related to its literary predecessors and also the most controversial amongst gamers. An alternative narratological approach to death is the trope of the player character having to die/lose within the game in order to enable supernatural or cybernetic development (*The Darkness*, 2007; *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, 2013).

Perhaps the most persuasive reading of the continuing appeal of virtual death would suggest that, rather than a cathartic release of emotions, the death of the avatar actively confirms the integral identity of the player. This existential deathsetics takes the necessary identification between player and avatar and reframes it within a violent assertion of self-definition. In what could be called the 'Cain effect' – named after the identification of the first murder as an integral moment of self-realisation through the death of the Other – the player undergoes the emotional experience of the character, and shares the frustration when progress is curtailed but, crucially,

witnessing the player-character's death does not involve a release of emotion but instead a confirmation of one's own existence as a living being. This way of reading videogame deathsetics can be seen as an evolution of Huizinga's celebration of play:

From the point of view of a world wholly determined by the operation of blind forces, play would be altogether superfluous. [...] The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation. Animals play, so they must be more than mechanical things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational (22).

Play confirms our existence as sentient beings, and surviving the death of the in-game avatar elevates us from the chimerical being represented on the screen to an integral and, vitally, alive corporeal one. This effect is enabled by the uniquely immersive quality of a player's interaction with the game world:

When the psychophysical—our perception of self—is asserted and confirmed during video game play, there is nothing to deny it other than some grotesque failure of the game mechanics (a power outage, for instance) or, through purposeful design, the end of the game. In the natural world, play provides a means to deny and therein explore the boundaries of our environment and our selves, yet these remain unassailably physical boundaries. There are no analogous physical boundaries—other than, perhaps, the physical exhaustion of the video game player—delimiting play within a virtual world. In the natural world in which our bodies and our play have evolved, experience is available to trump belief. In the virtual world of the video game, belief is given its own body of experience (Myers 60).

This elevated status of belief is responsible for a psychological state ripe for the affirmation of the self. The visceral separation from the avatar, especially in the more lurid examples above, brings about a sudden realisation of the corporeal body that survives the shattered avatar. In dying, therefore, the player truly asserts that they are alive.

Where can death go from here? Past experience would suggest that videogame designers will find either more realistic or more shocking ways of killing the player. With visual fidelity having reached such near-photorealistic levels, however, other avenues may have to be sought. Haptic feedback taken to its logical extreme would be akin to a version of the game 'Domination' played by Sean Connery's James Bond in *Never Say Never Again* (Irvin Kershner, 1983), in which the secret agent suffers electric shocks as a direct result of failure in the game. The resurgence of interest in 'Virtual Reality' through the forthcoming Oculus Rift VR device is perhaps the clearest potential route for innovation. In more tragic intrusions of virtual deaths into the real world, the occasional cases of individuals seemingly addicted to online games and dying through self-neglect are surely the most disturbing possible result of gaming's immersive nature; fatally inverting the existential deathsetics, as excessive association with the avatar results in the literal death of the self – here, the character outlives the player. Fortunately, such cases are rare, and the vast majority of gamers follow Sonic the Hedgehog's advice from

Wreck-It Ralph quoted in the epigraph above, 'if you die outside of your own game, you don't regenerate. EVER! Game over.'

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Professional Game Artists:

An investigation into the primary considerations that impact upon their work, and the effects upon their creative practice

KEN FEE

When considering what motivates an artist, it is easy to presume that their goal is to create something personal and unique. The work of millions of artists around the world may in truth be egoistic in nature; concerned only fleetingly with the appreciation of others. This would describe most amateur artists, who simply enjoy spending time away from the pressures and demands of everyday life within an intimately personal space.

Away from this recreational pursuit, other artists pursue more socially orientated goals. They are not necessarily seeking adulation - in fact they may prefer anonymity (consider the popular street artist 'Banksy') - but in some manner the recognition of others remains intrinsic to their artistic process. As distinct to egoistical artists, they may change their work in response to the audience – but still these choices remain under the artist's control.

A different form of creative animal altogether is the 'Professional' artist.

The label may suggest a higher level of ability or passion, but this is not necessarily the case. Rather, the key implication is that financial recognition plays a fundamental role within their practice. This in turn implies a reliance on others' approval of their work - and once the approval of others holds dominion over a work's perceived value, the artistic freedom is inherently compromised. Steve Morrison, Art Director at Kobojo studios considers:

I've done so much artwork that I can't stand [to look at]...for someone who has no concept of what is good. You realise it's not what you like that matters...it's not the style you like...you may not like it or feel it's good enough...but for some reason they latch onto that one. You just try and do the best you can. It's not enjoyable or fulfilling. It becomes a pay check at the end of the month (Morrison interview).

The Games Industry

For many who grew up playing games, their dream is to make games themselves, and the technology is now readily available for them to do so. In addition game clubs, societies, jams and competitions all serve to foster and support a keen and thriving amateur community of enthusiasts. However the Games 'Industry' – the domain of *professional* game artists – is something else entirely. It evolved from bedroom studios comprised of very young and predominantly male programmers, whose entrepreneurial skills would at best be described as naïve, to become the world's largest entertainment industry. Darren Baines started work at DMA Design in the

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early 1990s, and his summation of the early days is that “it was just fun. The industry was young and the environment light, naive and creative. It was an extension of college life for many years... but not anymore” (Baines interview).

Few professional developers seem in any doubt that the prime motivation within the industry is economic and while there are always exceptions – it is still possible for relatively small and innovative teams to make a mark – these are few and far between. Naturally enough, it follows that financial pressure pervades practically all areas of professional development, and the consequences on creative freedom are marked. As the industry becomes increasingly risk averse, a concern is that the sense of innovation that attracted so many fascinating characters and projects to games development all those years ago has waned significantly, to be replaced by soulless assembly lines.

In addition to this sense of sterility, the glut of ‘free to play’ models means that the public are becoming more and more reticent to the thought of actually *buying* games. Mark Ertle is CEO of Cobra Mobile, a very successful mobile game developer with world leading franchise titles within their portfolio. In a discussion with students at Abertay University in 2014 he recognised that:

The conversion rate from free demos of games to full purchase is incredibly low... 3-7% is amazing...0.5-3% is average. It is absolutely brutal. The developer then gets no money whatsoever - none - for their work, and if you ask for perhaps just 69 pence or a couple of pounds from the public after they have enjoyed quite a few hours of free gameplay, the reaction can be ‘fuck off!’ (Ertle interview)

In actuality, the challenge of simply getting your game noticed in the first place is becoming just as difficult as convincing players to part with their money to actually play it. Richard Lemarchand of Naughty Dog studios – possibly the premier development studio for console games in 2014 – commented that:

Basically it comes down to this...the rise of Mobile AAA studios with vast resources at their disposal for marketing make it near impossible to get any real traction on new IP's. Your discoverability is next to zero unless you have a rather large marketing budget...Now as traditional large scale companies tend to be somewhat risk adverse, aiming more for tried and tested games which ensure a return as long as they have enough marketing e.g. COD, Candy Crush, Clash of Clans, and the like (Lemarchand).

There are apparent exceptions such as Minecraft and Angry Birds - both recent and innovative financial successes – but these must be understood for what they are. These titles were small, independent and passion driven projects which happened to capture the imagination of the public. Neither company responsible for these titles have seen similar success before or since. These games were the magic escaping the bottle, the elusive bolt of lightning. However, once they became public hits, the large companies moved to acquire them in order to reinvigorate their own stagnating portfolios. Minecraft for instance is now owned by Microsoft, but they played no part whatsoever in the games development or success. It is widely expected – however fairly – that creativity

will now start to dwindle as they seek to make back their two billion dollar purchase cost. In the context of this article, of equal concern is how the original developers maintain their passion for their work, if they have quite literally sold control?

Games Development

The games development process itself is no better defined than the industry it serves, but is invariably a very complex collaborative and interdisciplinary exercise. The actual demands and influences placed upon developers can be broken down into five broad categories, which should be considered in turn:

1. Demographics

Originally the domain of a very small and select audience, the player demographic for games is now global and crosses all boundaries of creed, race and gender. While such social acceptance of games has removed much of the stigma once attached to developing them, it has not necessarily increased public awareness of the time, effort or cost required to make them.

Additionally, this broadening audience means that the demands placed upon developers become ever more complex, and all the while the behaviours or expectations of the 'average' player continually evolve. In the current 'digital renaissance' for instance, the majority of players seem far less willing to use their own imagination beyond what is on the screen. The majority focus on more superficial and instant 'spoon fed' gratification – a trend embodied in the explosion of 'casual games'. In contrast, the earliest audiences for many computer games warmly embraced text or icon based systems, seeing them more as a catalyst for their own creative interpretation rather than the complete solution. While games such as Pong and Space War were graphically simplistic affairs, ancillary creative play saw players often use their own imagination to visualise what that cube or block actually represented, and even build those games into a narrative sequence of play.

2. Technologies

Moore's law highlights why the exponential growth in game technologies is possible, and as each technology develops, new opportunities present themselves. Unfortunately, the market will quickly lose patience with developers if they do not appear to immediately demonstrate their use of them – but with no appreciation for how difficult or otherwise that may actually be to do.

In this context, it requires a great amount of diligence on the part of an artist to develop and maintain skills in any particular area, when the technology behind it is ever shifting. Anxiety can easily grow that the current project an artist is working on – which may last years – is leaving their skills gap further and further behind cutting edge industry developments. Patrick McGovern has twenty two years of experience in the industry and numerous development titles in his portfolio, yet he is very aware of the potential consequences of the projects he has worked on:

I feel quite out of touch with a lot of the new stuff actually. The work I've done has not needed me to learn new packages or pick up new techniques – I've been pretty lucky like that – but that means that if I wanted to move on and get a job at one of the big studios, which is where a lot of folk I know now work...well, I wouldn't have the skillset ready (McGovern interview).

3. Collaboration

Games development requires practitioners of multiple disciplines to work together seamlessly. Inevitably, each of these disciplines has its own specific focus, and relationships can become strained – but no developer will avoid compromise if they truly wish to be successful.

However, within the collaborative process some disciplines can work in relative privacy (it is hard for other disciplines to comment on code), but artists will find their work to be a source of commentary for everyone who walks past their desk. The effect on morale and team dynamics can become marked. In this sense, a thick skin is crucial for any artist who works in such an environment, not for those who expect to show their work only when they feel it is 'ready'. Steve Hodgson, a former artist at DMA and now senior artist at EEGEO is of the opinion that "it can be a complete pain. You can laugh it off but it can certainly annoy, it can get very frustrating and annoying when you're just trying to get on with your work and someone walking past will just feel the need to give some 'advice'" (Hodgson interview).

4. Commercial

Artistic or creative prowess will rarely triumph over business concerns. The market and contractual terms will dictate many elements, from how a game appears and sounds to how it plays and the technology it will be deployed to. In addition, new markets – or the closure of old ones – may suddenly require drastic changes with the development, from something as apparently benign as language translation for menus, to more substantial elements to ensure compliance with cultural or religious obligations.

In terms of movies or even television show licenses, which may appear to offer sound potential for transmedia development, the reality is often very different. Games development can take years, but typically will not be commissioned until mere months before a show's release – with the end game invariably seeming a poor reflection of its counterpart and furthermore if the show itself is a failure, the game's reputation will suffer as a result. In other areas of crossover the challenges can be just as marked. The singer Beyoncé is currently being sued for allegedly pulling out of a games development without warning, leaving millions of dollars wasted and dozens of developers out of work and while sports names such as Tiger Woods used to guarantee a certain level of public support for games they were associated with, if they fall from grace the impact on the development team and their work can be catastrophic.

5. Creativity and Expression

In all but the smallest projects and teams, an individual developer's creative fingerprint will be masked by the collaborative and commercial nature of the work. In a career which should last many years, it is very unlikely that every project a developer works on - or possibly even *any* – will actually align with an artist's personal area of interest. Matt Zanetti of Guerrilla Tea considers his own circumstances in this regard when commenting that "I trained as an architect, so probably environment art is what I am most interested in doing. I think in the last four years...I've made just one environment...one...in one week...the vast majority of time, you're just doing what needs done – whatever that is".

In this context the developer's own satisfaction with their work is unimportant. In an amateur setting personal satisfaction and fulfilment may be key, but in the professional world, little else matters beyond client satisfaction.

Even when clients seem satisfied and direction is established, projects will inevitably shift focus from their initial aspirations. The cause may be revised client demands, scheduling, budgets, staff skill, technology, or just bad luck will all play their part, and there have been nothing an individual developer or discipline could have done to prevent or protect against these pressures. It is common that work may need redone or even be dropped altogether, and this can be especially challenging to accept when such decisions or revisions are done by others, without the involvement (or even the knowledge) of the original author.

Game Artists: The Impacts on Creative Practice

It is now possible, having considered the definition of a professional artist, the games industry, and the games development process itself, to consolidate the discussion into a number of key impacts on a professional game artist's creative practice. Veteran game artist John Harrison expressed the sentiment to students in a visit to Abertay University:

Who am I, as a creative – where is my signature, my voice? I am not in control of the look, the feel or the purpose behind the art...I have to build my work to be perfectly in keeping the other styles and decisions - that I have played no part in making...so, creatively, how can I express myself? (Harrison interview)

1. Creative Ownership

In Game artwork, the artist is never the sole author. In truth this may be said of many artists. Very few sculptors actually source and refine their own clay, any more than watercolour artists make their own pigments or paper. Invariably, either consciously or unconsciously, most modern artists collaborate with others in their work process; it is the ways an artist employs such non bespoke elements that evoke their individuality.

For game artists, not only *must* they use others' products to make their art – computers, digital tablets and pens, and software – but their work is also translated through a variety of filters before anyone else will even see it. These filters may take the form of a game engine, a renderer, a TV screen or a headset – and these continue to evolve. The game artist's work can never be created or viewed in isolation from others' hands, nor can it even be seen or appreciated without that artist collaborating successfully with other disciplines and numerous external constraints.

2. The Project Focus

In games development artistic anonymity is often the key – being able to adapt to the overall project style is the requirement and while art usually plays a key role, of equal importance are controllers, audio, gameplay mechanics and level design (amongst many others). It can be compared to a volatile and unstable house of cards, where a single poorly judged decision will bring the whole structure crashing down. For artists this means that directions passed to them must be followed *exactly* in terms of all manner of considerations – with any frustration or attempt to deviate from them being regarded with the most critical eye. The focus of the project is not their muse, but the part they play in a bigger picture:

For us as artists, the art is the selling point...but at the end of the day the game is the purpose...so art, design and code are level pegging. Programmers get a say in terms of what they can't do...communication flow is direct, with tool requirements. We have had to make compromises...it can be a bit of a shock for those coming from other areas...what's all this technical stuff...I just draw things (Morrison interview).

3. The Fixed Purpose

In other areas of artistic practice, it is often a source of pride for an artist that their work is open to interpretation and can illicit an individual response from a viewer. However, Game art seeks specifically to *manipulate* players – from subtly directing them in their actions, to making them care about the consequences. It follows that any surrender of psychological or emotional control of the audience is usually to be avoided and that the art should not be open to any peculiarly individual interpretation. In fact within many areas of development the artist is actually tasked with very specific goals indeed, such as communicating an interface design without any ambiguity - and this may involve the artist in all manner of HCI principles that may be completely removed from their normal art practices.

4. The Interactive Artefact

Game artwork has to be designed and created with interaction in mind - where the interaction is designed and typically executed by others – and the consequences upon creative practice lie at the root of what it means to be a *games* artist. While illustrators, puppeteers, photographers, sculptors and animators will have a profusion of considerations factored into their work, skilled games artists need to consider many of these too, while at the same time working within their own unique technical and aesthetic protocols. Without such a broad and

comprehensive awareness of their craft, it is no more reasonable to expect an artist to succeed in game development than it would be to expect a person who merely has an eidetic recall of a dictionary to be a bestselling author.

5. Self-satisfaction is not the goal

Artwork created for games is designed to communicate the idea of some other party – for instance the game’s designers, directors or clients. As such, artistic ego must be absent from the process entirely. Morrison comments that “I realised a long time ago that my production work could and often does leave me creatively cold but satisfaction can be gleaned if it fits someone else's expectations” (Morrison interview).

6. Multiple Styles

In the case of other professional artists, they may demonstrate a few different styles in order to appeal to different markets – especially if they are freelancers, free to pick and choose their clients. However, a studio game artist is employed to realise a project, the choice of which is at the discretion of their employer. As such, the style they must work to may vary wildly from project to project and the artist will have no control over this whatsoever. For some this can be a very attractive element of the industry - Alex Ronald works in both games and comics, and considers that “an element of job satisfaction is that you are always needing to change in style and improve your approach, so it can always feel fresh, you continually want to outdo you previous work” (Roland interview).

However for those who can only work to a single style, a career in game art - or at least one that means being employed full time within a studio - may be very short indeed. The greatest fallacy widely heard today is when students or prospective artists specify that they are purely ‘2D’ or ‘3D’ - typically referring to their own limits in ability rather than those required of professionals, for whom these terms simply refer to toolsets or development pipelines they must use on any particular project.

7. Evolving technologies

The technologies utilised in games are ever changing and each will have an impact on the creative practices of the artist (and indeed of every discipline concerned with the game’s development). These may be positive, with the continual opportunity to develop new methods and techniques, but equally may be a source of frustration as artists must constantly keep abreast of these developments. It comes as a surprise to many aspiring game artists that 3D scanning replaces modellers, or that animators now find motion capture technology and animation libraries may relegate them to ‘clean up’ artists. The creation of textures and materials, previously requiring great skill on the part of the artist, will now many larger studios “will use procedural code to capture and apply stunning effects without the need for any artist input whatsoever” (Goodswen interview).

8. The Games industry is simply a collection of unstable individual companies.

The industry is a chaotic place, a result of exponential expansion built upon amateur origins and then compounded by the commercially driven nature of the products. There are no official qualifications, controlling bodies, or processes to follow in terms of how games are made or staffed – even the actual names given to roles have no fixed definitions. This makes career development and progression far more difficult than in other creative industries, with no inherent sense of seniority or growth. As an industry which thrives on irregular working hours and the constant acquisition of new knowledge, in many ways the career is more suited to younger staff, before family commitments and age make skills development and instability impractical. Baines agrees, commenting that “now as I have family my priorities are ensuring they are well cared for and any changes in my career path are well considered and not too selfish. I still enjoy games and nothing has been tarnished in that respect, however I prefer to play with my daughter” (Baines interview).

Game artists: The Survival of Creative Practice

Clearly then, the games industry – and games development – is an incredibly dynamic and challenging environment in which to work. It is now possible to make artefacts which sit comfortably within any discussion regarding visual aesthetics - as evidenced by titles such as Thatgamecompany’s ‘Journey’ or Moon Studio’s ‘Ori and the Blind Forest’. Yet while it is entirely possible to derive great satisfaction from involvement with a particular title or project – especially if it is renowned – external expectations and perspectives often seem to underestimate the inherent challenges.

Recent graduates from Abertay University such as Mike Cummings at Traveller’s Tales get to work on Games, TV animations and Movie projects due to the nature of licence they are attached to (Lego) – and “he enjoys each area tremendously” (Cummings interview). Stewart Graham of Tag Games reports that he derives most satisfaction from “the buzz of showing people what you did or hearing they play with your work results in their spare time...the respect you get...” “You worked on X,Y and Z!?!?!?” (Graham interview).

The question is though, what happens to Mike’s creative drive if he is *still* making just Lego titles in twenty years’ time (as that is all Traveller’s Tales do), and what if the public adulation stops – if the released titles are poor and no longer a source of admiration?

In reflecting upon the author’s own experiences and those still working within the industry, there are several recommendations which seem to be commonly viewed as sensible measures to take in order to protect against ‘burn out’. While not every artist may be interested in – or able to pursue – every recommendation, they do seem sensible aspirations:

1. Develop an Identity beyond your employer

Games artists should actively pursue outlets for their own interests and creative passions. While employed at Crytek Studios, Chris Goodswen is well known within the larger art community through his alter ego 'Tincow'. Under that pseudonym he can work without limitations or constraints, developing skills and networking in a manner that would be impossible through his employer.

Ian McQue, formerly an Art Director at Rockstar North, recalled in an interview with the author in May 2014 that "the best advice I was ever given was...that I had to do my own work on the side. Best advice ever" (McQue interview). Morrison also recognises the importance of other spheres of practice, away from one's employer", I've had to make my fun outside work and produce game art that will probably never see the light of day in a game purely for my own satisfaction...it keeps the fire alive" (Morrison interview).

2. Stay flexible and open to new opportunities

It is unwise for a games artist to resist new developments or avenues. McQue's initial response to the advice described above (which was actually from the author), was far less positive. He went on to recall that "at the time I hated you for it though. I fucking hated you. I was an artist, and everything I did should have been fulfilling and awesome. I had a very young and arrogant perspective back then...it was all about the 'art'" (McQue interview).

Some artists from the early days of games simply drifted away because as computer fidelity increased, the limits in their own abilities were highlighted and they did nothing to adapt them (the 'comfort zone' is a terrible place for any professional). It is one thing to be able to make a sprite with 16 by 16 pixels, but unfortunately that does not necessarily follow that you can make a lifelike model of a character for PS4. Morrison comments that "I suppose I've found that the biggest impact (on longevity) tends to be how flexible you have to be to maintain a consistent career. I have to be able to shift quickly into new ways of development or sometimes drive development based on previous experience" (Morrison interview).

3. Enjoy the task at hand

An amateur artist can survive when their best work is personally motivated, but a professional must produce flawless work no matter what level of engagement they feel behind the scenes. The challenge is to identify where the actual creative satisfaction comes from, if not from the subject matter. In the words of Morrison, "it's not rewarding at all [the art], but if the reviewers say it looks like what they wanted, the actual satisfaction from hitting that on the head...doing what you were asked to do" (Morrison interview). Hodgson expands on this, adding that "I get up to all sort of work I wouldn't do by choice, but I can do it all – whatever they ask – and that's very satisfying. They keep trying to give me people to help, but I enjoy doing all the separate elements myself" (Hodgson interview).

4. Work efficiently; plan your time and techniques

Mark Traynor of Warracle reflects this in his own practice, observing that:

Time is money, and creativity takes time...usually a lot of time! Therefore, more time eats up more money and the money is dictated by budgets. Deadlines, tech restrictions, budgets, they all effect the time given to a particular project. As you continue to work and grow within a creative industry, you begin to adjust your focus more on what is important to help yourself grow and the company / studio you work for...how can you do it quickly and more efficiently... If a time saving measure is there, we will use it (Traynor interview).

However, it is still important to remember within this context that, as Gareth Hector of Axis animation puts it:

Technology has not made the need for artists to retain a core skill set in the traditional medium of art, redundant. As a concept artist I still need to make choices regarding composition, lighting, colours, form etc. Technology is unable to tell me what looks good and what doesn't...the 'make it good' button does not exist! (Hector interview)

5. Be a 'People person', a team player.

In the early days of games development there were many staff who displayed what would today be termed 'eccentric personality traits', along with any manner of social issues. Such traits tended to be the consequences of the driven, fixated and proudly rebellious nature of the 'geek' subculture which gave birth to many of the early game development teams. These are no longer acceptable. Indeed, Abertay University's Master of Professional Practice in Games Development – now a highly successful and well respected programme within the industry – was designed in part to address a common request from industry regarding new graduates, eloquently voiced by Denki CEO Colin Anderson in a programme design meeting. When asked what the single most important change in graduate behaviours the new programme should seek to address would be, he responded, "that you stop sending us assholes" (Anderson).

Indeed, there are many talented developers who have become essentially unemployable through years of poor or ill-informed behaviour to team mates or peers. Frank Arnot is CEO of Stormcloud Games, with some 20 years of industry experience. In his words, "I'd much rather spend my day with someone who is good at their job and I get along with well, than with the world's best developer who is a nightmare to have in the office" (Arnot interview).

6. Lose the ego

The arrogance of youth is a well-recognised term, and is no different here. Jeff Cairns, formerly Art Director at Realtime Worlds in Dundee, reported that "while Art Director, I actually spent all my time in disciplinary

meetings. Every new artist had to show off and prove they were the best....they had no respect for anyone else, it was all about them and their ego” (Cairns interview).

The quieter artists, those that calmly get on with the work and happily help others, are perhaps the equivalent of the old gunslingers in cowboy movies. They are confident. They have nothing left to prove. They are professional. The ones that actually cause most concern are the ‘young bucks’, who arrive with no respect for their peers – and are just looking for a quick way to make a name for themselves. Once an artist becomes willing to accept the advice, support and direction of others it becomes far more of a satisfying collaborative effort. Every discipline within development requires specialist knowledge and expertise – respect these peers, and learn from them.

There is much to enjoy in working with peers in the creation of a game, and if not so concerned with being the focus of attention, a far calmer and more conducive working pattern is the result.

Conclusion

The intention of this article is not to suggest that games art is beset by insurmountable challenges and unimaginable difficulties, but rather to promote discussion that may begin to help ‘humanise’ the process of games development itself, away from the whimsical or escapist nature of the final artefacts themselves.

In a recent consultancy role, the author was asked by a leading international game school to list the four most important elements they should promote within their students, to best ensure success within industry. He identified the most critical as ‘Passion’, and the least important as ‘Technical Aptitude’ (with ‘Communication’ and ‘Creativity’ tying for second place). This seemed to somewhat alarm the school in question, for whom a technical emphasis was far more straightforward. The author’s rationale was simple, that while a developer must display a high level of aptitude in *all* these areas – their passion is what fuels them and drives the ceaseless desire to learn and grow. It is this very quality that must then be protected and nurtured as the day to day realities of commercial practice begin to close around them, and threaten to smother the enthusiasm that once burned so brightly.

It is the author’s hope that his continuing research will be of interest to those who share his assertion that creative people are the ones responsible developing games that best capture the medium’s full potential – not the mere technologies they employ – and that the better appreciated these individuals are and the pressures they face, the more sustainable their expertise will become.

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