Books, Libraries, and (Deep) Reading in Video Games

A Conversation between Miglena Nikolchina and Enyo Stoyanov

Abstract: The text presents a discussion on the conditions enabling video games to incite "deep" reading. The conversation attempts to highlight the textuality of video games. Reading is often included in video games with various degrees of functionality, and the conversation tries to trace this multiplicity by commenting on various examples and cases. Among the more significant uses of reading in games is the inclusion of pieces of literature as interactive items. This is considered in the discussion as a significant way in which video games present literature as a determining dimension of their own operation. The literariness of video games has often been overlooked in the analysis of video games, and the discussion attempts to define some of its aspects: the way gameplay experiences are temporalized, the way they connect to narrative and other game systems in a figurative way, and the significance of interruptions of actions by the demands of reading.

Keywords: Video games, deep reading, interaction, textuality, literariness, temporalization, figurativeness

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M.N.: My initial idea was to limit the problem to a phenomenological description of the presence of books, bookshops, and libraries in video games rather than try to cover all the various situations presupposing, requiring, or simply providing opportunities for reading in *and* out of the game itself (in-game dialogues, descriptions, guidelines; out-of-game forums, wikis, commentaries, booklets, etc). It is a fascinating topic. Some games like the *Mass Effect* series[1] provide a huge fictional encyclopaedic background to their worlds; in the case of the *Assassin's Creed* series, the fictional is intermingled in databases with more or less clearly delineated historical facts. In *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*, the protagonist can find, buy, sell, and arrange on his bookshelves over 400 volumes, which tell their own story about authorship, publishing, distribution, pedagogy and the overall pragmatics of literature in all the realms of *The Elder Scrolls*.[2] So there is the problem of the nature and function of books and texts in (and out of) games. But there is also the problem of reading and its nature and function, and now I am inclined to suggest we include this in our discussion.

In spite of the obvious enormity of the presence of books, reading, and various forms of textuality in video games, there is a predominant feeling that this veritable "fetishism of literature"[3] has been overlooked theoretically. Thus, in the introduction to a comparatively recent collection of *Video Game and Book*, the editors claim that "For a long time now, the connections between video games and the cinema have provoked the interest of academic circles but the relations, exchanges, and points of transitions between books and videogames constitute a field of research which is still a wasteland."[4] This preponderance of the cinematic might be especially visible in francophone culture where, as early as the 1990s, studies of video games began to appear in leading cinema journals;[5] there are, on the other hand, influential approaches which

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[1] The ludography is provided after the bibliography at the end of the text.

[2] For an excellent discussion of the status of literature in these games, see Hélène Sellier, "Les représentations et les effets de la littérature dans *The Elder Scrolls*," *Jeu vidéo et livre*, ed. Björn-Olav Dozo and Fanny Barnabé (Liège : Presses universitaires de Liège, 2015), Kindle edition.

[3] Benjamin Peuch, "Livré à soi même: interfaces et interférences textuelles dans *Amnesia: The Dark Dissent*," (*Jeu vidéo et livre,* Op.cit.).

[4] Fanny Barnabé and Björn-Olav Dozo, "Introduction: un dialogue intermédiatique fructueux," (*Jeu vidéo et livre,* Op.cit.).

[5] Cradle of the French New Wave, the notion of mise en scène, and the "politique des auteurs," the famous and vastly influential journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* welcomed video games with open arms in the mid-1990s. The journal's first leading article devoted to the video game medium was written by Alain Le Diberder in 1996 and designated video games a "new frontier of cinema." Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard

would exclude the cinematic proper (cutscenes) as extraneous and not properly ludic. The cinematic, hence, is not that secure in academic circles, either.

The video game is a synthetic work of art: so yes, it is related to both literature and the cinema. However, there is a fundamental difference between these two relationships. I will put it like this: cinema and the video game meet on a phenomenological level, while the conjunction with literature is ontological – and I say ontological in the traditional philosophical sense, not in the sense used in computer science or in the sense employed by Espen Aarseth in his praiseworthy effort to elaborate a theory that would include all kinds of video games while excluding everything else.[6] Both literature and video games create worlds out of languages, while cinema – I will bracket here the invasion of video game procedures in its technology, or its own relatedness to literature – emerges from technologically mediated metamorphoses of light. Signs, in the case of literature and video games; the most baffling physical phenomenon, in the case of the cinema. With video games, however, below the language there are zeroes and ones, i.e. mathematics, which according to some, is also a language; above it – the phenomenology of moving pictures, the cinematic. Consequently, literature is, ontologically, right at the heart of the video game – its middle, its core.

E.S.: I am inclined to both agree and disagree with your suggestion. Video games share fundamental features with literary texts, and this similarity shows itself in the way they are used. The pragmatic similarity between video games and literature boils down to both engaging the user in an interactive manner,[7] something that is less prominent in the cinematic experience. On the other hand, I am a bit sceptical whether we should attempt to assign a simple single "origin" or "source" for the world making in video games. As you rightly claim, video games may be described as synthetic works of art, i.e. they produce meaning through the intersection of different modes of artistic organisation. If we decide to agree that language and textuality may be considered as a primary ontological register, there are ways to describe even the cinematic as dependent on a special type of visual language, as many narratologists tend to do.

Perron, "Introduction," *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003), 8.

[6] Espen Aarseth, "Ontology," *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014), 484-492.

[7] On the interactive character of the reading process in literature, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

Currently, I feel more inclined to attempt a different framing of negotiating the relationship between games and literature – they both involve a level of *play*. Since Kant and Schiller, play has defined modern notions of the aesthetic experience. Later on, the concept acquired a prominent role in the poststructuralist takes on the process of meaning-production. Famously, Roland Barthes proclaimed play as essential for the process of literary reading (and his work remains relevant in the current debates around the so-called "deep reading"). Play in video games does not involve only the relationship between the gamer and the software; it is fostered by interactions between the game systems themselves, each with its own peculiar artistic organisation. We may probably even consider the gamer simply as one of the interacting systems, together with everything he or she brings to the table (all the out-of-game contexts you mentioned, for instance, become relevant and start resonating with the systems of the video game through their being 'opened up' by the player). This function of the player is already defined from within the game code, since its algorithms necessarily reference his or her actions – something very similar to the functioning of Iser's famous "implied reader" in literature.

M.N.: I guess we are both trying to ground the nexus of our passion for literature and our passion for video games. I probably did not make myself sufficiently clear, but I will try again in a manner which brings together your viewpoint and my viewpoint. We are told that "video game history was made in 1978 when the ideas behind the all-text game *Adventure* by Will Crowther and Don Woods inspired Warren Robinett to write a graphical adventure program for the Atari 2600, which he also entitled *Adventure*."[8] Woods and Crowther's *Adventure* was an all-text game and the players had to type their commands in order to move around and do things. Robinett had the fantastic idea to give a graphical form to the textual interaction: he provides fascinating lists of the problems he faced and was the first to resolve.[9] Code, language, playing, interaction, and image all come together in this origin myth: the genesis has, nevertheless, code as its starting point – as the "engine" of the whole line of creation, while cinema, in spite of sometimes being declared a language or even a universal language, begins as, to put it in Platonic terms, a reflection of a reflection. However, I will take this issue no further here because we risk never getting to the question of books and reading.

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[8] Warren Robinett, "Forword," *The Video Game Theory Reader*, vii.
[9] Ibid., vii -xx.

As I mentioned above, *The Elder Scrolls* series is an example of incorporating, in the world of the game, not just separate books but a whole "world literature" with its various genres, authors, applications, and its own history, intertwined with the history of the game world. *The Elder Scrolls*, however, recreates medieval settings with dragons, magic, vile deities, and the undead, which raises the question of whether books and literature do not appear in this line of phenomena. Elsewhere[10] I have pondered the video game junction of high technology with nostalgia for the archaic, for the cyclic temporality of myth, and for the "naïve" in Schiller's sense: a junction, which in itself might not be a new phenomenon, as it has been noted with regard to Wagner's total work of art and its predecessors. At one extreme end, hence, books may appear as opaque magical objects: ancient, difficult to find, shrouded in mystery, possessing dangerous attributes, potent and hazardous if in the wrong hands: another brand akin to rings of power, soul crystals, witches' concoctions, wizards' staffs, etc. In *Heretic 2*, for example, the crucial artefact is a "tome of power" which has to be put in its proper place in a circle with other tomes: this resolves the final battle, cures the plague pestering the realm, and ends the game. In the brilliant 1999 tour de force *Drakan: Order of the Flame,* the protagonist, Rynn, needs to find and read a legendary book (the reading is done by an off-screen narrator) before she gets hold of the "soul crystal," which will bond her soul to the soul of the dragon Arokh. In this case, the book, as magical as the soul crystal, marks the inciting incident rather than the finale of the game. Those are early examples, but the trend persists, as in the recent example of the old tablets in *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, which provide no text but immediately grant skill points ("Ancient writing: from the Old Kingdom" is all we learn about them, something like the *Graeca, non leguntur* of Medieval manuscripts).

In the *Elder Scrolls*, with their rich and heterogeneous literature (let us note in passing the title of the series), most of the books are for (non-obligatory) reading: they give greater depth to the game's world, and some of them have their autonomous literary charms. "Skill-books" are a special case: they still contain a story to read but, in fact, just opening them is enough for the protagonist to become more skilful in a specific area. Having to open them still makes them function like (text)-books. I have come across at least one forum in which a player had such dread of opening the books, which he would simply collect and sell that he went to the trouble of

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[10] Miglena Nikolchina, "Time in Video Games: Repetitions of the New," *differences* 28, no. 3 (2017): 19-43.

writing his question of whether he actually needed to read the books. After that, he had to go to the additional trouble of reading the instructions other players gave him… Not surprisingly, in many games the opening is altogether bracketed: the "book" is consumed, sometimes even "eaten," granting its various effects. No opening of the book and, God forbid, no reading involved.

So although the situation with books and reading is heterogeneous, complicated, and in many ways exciting and inspiring, there is nevertheless the question that the magic utilizations of "books" raise: the question whether the book in video games is not undergoing a transformation into a an "elder scroll," a *graeca non leguntur*, a residue of myth and legend, a figment of the imagination, and ultimately a thing of the past.

E.S.: The question as to the way video games thematise other, earlier media and art forms is very interesting. The fact that they are able to incorporate and represent them, as well as the practices they involve, is often neglected, as if it is nothing more than an indistinct feature of the general representational capabilities of digital media. Yet, there is (at least potentially) an added functionality to this mode of engaging a "text within the text" relation – a possibility of video games to engage in self-reflection. At least one of the modes of this indirect self-referentiality produces meaning effects akin to what you describe: the paradoxical knot between the technological form of presentation with its dimensions of implied progressivism and the counterpoint of the presented – the magical, mystical book, often unreadable and cryptic, given to the player to interact with in an almost ritualistic manner. Of course, this functionality of texts within the structure of video games is heavily dependent on genre and setting (it often comes up in games with "fantasy" elements), and there may be other functionalities, other modes. Nevertheless, some of the applications of this incorporation of "second order" narration by the incorporation of books acquires a radical edge.

The Elder Scrolls series presents a special case in this regard, a case that illuminates the strange forms that the relationship between the world building functions of the in-game books and the overall operation of the video game narrative may take. The books that inhabit the interactive list of virtual items in these games are there to serve as elements that contribute information about the background of the game narrative and (by simply being there) to flesh out the simulation of the game world. Thus, through their existence, the game world becomes

defined not only by events, but also by communications about events, reflections, and explications. Furthermore, the general narrative logic of the in-game books is heavily slanted in favour of their functioning as an "unreliable narrator" – different books often produce conflicting accounts of the same events. The destabilisation of the the surety of what happened reflects on the plurality at the base of the actions proposed to the player. The development of *The Elder Scrolls* demonstrates this folding of the gameplay that generates parallel narrative series into the world building itself through the in-game books. Books in the series appear for the first time in the second game (*Daggerfall*); their authors were often fans of the first game, to whom the designers turned for help. The second game has many mutually exclusive final states. These mutually exclusive endings themselves became the subject of a book in the third part of *The Elder Scrolls*: a book that presents these exclusive outcomes paradoxically, as though they have really happened simultaneously. Here, heterotemporalities converge into a simultaneity, and unreliable narration presents the unpresentable. Through the in-game books, the openness of gameplay itself becomes a narrative event.[11] Thus, the indeterminacy of the player's gameplay itself enters the fabric of the narrative construction of the game world, and the books it is populated with start to comment indirectly on the status of the player's actions. We may probably go even further – the "unreliable narrators" of the books start to operate as a reflection of the *condition* of the gameplay in the video game – beyond the experiential temporal linearity, a paradigmatic potentiality, a reversible virtual simultaneity of times, ensured by the game code before its activation by the player. Ultimately, this return to a "prehistoric," mythological time, narrated in-game, starts to resonate with the form of digital media itself. Not only the books in video games, but the video games themselves start to partake in the mythical reversibility of time.

M.N.: Do you mean that not only something *in* the games but ~~also in~~ the video game medium per se invites the enactment of mythical temporality? I agree. This is the exact opposite to the overexposed claims about players' freedom as a unique feature of video games. You have

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[11] This type of event even has a name in *The Elder Scrolls* series: "A Dragon Break, sometimes referred to as an un-time, is a temporal phenomenon that involves a splitting of the natural timeline which results in branching parallel realities where the same events occur differently, or not at all. This results in a return to the non-linear timeline of the Dawn Era." (https://elderscrolls.fandom.com/wiki/Dragon_Break, accessed 22.05.2109).

returned several times to the paradox involved in these claims because, no matter how many options are given, including procedural generation, one is ultimately constricted by a rather simple mechanism, an algorithm.[12] There is, nevertheless, a meta-reflexive level regarding both aspects, freedom and predetermination, which some games introduce. *The Talos Principle* presents a fascinating case in this respect. The reconstruction of a narrative by collecting textual fragments is a feature of many games, which consequently involve a lot of reading. Here, this reconstruction acts as a synecdoche for the summa of human civilization rescued helter-skelter by digitalization. You play as a robot in a simulation. While solving various puzzles – in *The Talos Principle* they have a hypnotic poetic quality as well as engineering ingenuity – you piece together the history of an extinct humanity and the story of the creators of the simulation. The fragments belong to various genres – the epic, drama, poetry, philosophy, diaries, letters – and are structured – or punctured – by interventions from an obnoxious virtual mentor (the "Maker," or Elohim, God) and an assistant called "Milton" (an obvious reference to the one who, as Blake famously put it, "was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it"). Ultimately, the various tough solutions (of puzzles) and decisions (as to the advice of Elohim and Milton) lead to three outcomes in the vein of three major worldviews. Firstly, there is "transcendence": you can gain "eternal life" by following the advice of the divine mentor, which amounts to staying forever in the "cloud" of simulation. This pious "monotheistic" ending returns you immediately to the beginning of the game. It means you have failed the test for independence, which the whole experience turns out to have been. This ending is sublimely beautiful, and some players are perplexed as to why the most beautiful is the easiest one to get. The second outcome is, so to say, Buddhist: you become a "Messenger" and will linger on in the game like a Bodhisattva to help players coming after you. This is also the toughest end to achieve – a wry comment, I think, on the extra effort involved in altruism and a joke on completionism. Finally, there is the 'materialist' option: the simulation is destroyed, and the protagonist gets a real (robotic) body and faces the ugliness of a dead world. Reality, uncomfortable as it may be, but also open-endedness, the unknown, flesh of a sort… The Talos principle from the title is expounded in one of the many texts in the game as "Even the greatest philosophers can't live without their blood,"

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[12] Cf. Enyo Stoyanov and Miglena Nikolchina, "Наратив, алгоритъм и 'многодействие' при видеоигрите." Разговор между Еньо Стоянов и Миглена Николчина (Narrative, algorithm, and "multiacting" in video games: a conversation between Enyo Stoyanov and Miglena Nikolchina), *Пирон* 15 (2018)

thus raising the question, which AI makes us face today, of whether we can speak of disembodied thinking.

Since one plays a virtual entity solving puzzles in a simulation and, if successful, the entity acquires a body at the end, *The Talos Principle* offers a transparent meta-reflection on virtuality and playing. There is repetition, so typical of games, the mythic cyclic temporality of the transcendence ending. With the materialist "reality" finale the protagonist's acquisition of a robotic body redoubles the player's return to their human body: this ending foregrounds the specific hybridization – way beyond simple interaction – between player and machine during the game, of which we spoke in our previous discussion and for which I suggested the term transubstantiation.[13] This term is transposed from Julia Kristeva's study of Marcel Proust and his search for "an 'embodied' imaginary, a space where words, along with their unconscious and obscure emergences, knit the unbroken flesh of the world."[14] Finally, *The Talos Principle*, no matter how one ends up, is structured around the question of free choice and resisting or yielding to manipulation: the interactive freedom for which games are so much praised.

The game also singles out one of the choices as proof of freedom. Should we regard this as ironic, since this choice is as much part of the algorithm as the others? I do not think so. Firstly, the question, or rather, the urgency with which questions are asked in video games, matters more than the concrete options for answering: this is where the thunderbolt of freedom, the demand to think, strikes. I have tried to argue this in connection with the much-discussed endings of *Mass Effect 3*. You can keep reading or watching without answering the questions a book or a film asks; you *have* to answer in order to keep playing or, as the case may be, get to the end of the game. So much about the algorithm. Secondly, the very combination of puzzles and textual queries in *The Talos Principle* imposes a sort of reversal of the "Talos principle": "Even the greatest engineers cannot think without a language." Simply solving the puzzles would never raise the questions *The Talos Principle* tackles: the puzzles, on the other hand, exemplify the transubstantiating involvement in video games; together, they illustrate a specific ludic literariness, which transcends the strictures of code.

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[13] Enyo Stoyanov and Miglena Nikolchina, „(Анти)утопично въображение и трансхуманизация във видеоигрите." Разговор между Еньо Стоянов и Миглена Николчина (Anti/utopian imagination and transhumanization in video games: a conversation between Enyo Stoyanov and Miglena Nikolchina). *Пирон* 18 (2019) http://piron.culturecenter-su.org/stoyanov-nikolchina-anti-utopian-imagination/.

[14] Julia Kristeva, *Time and Sense: Proust and the Experience of Literature*, translated by Ross Guberman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 169.

E.S.: What you outline here is, I feel, rather crucial: the way video games, by way of encasing narrative within their digital interactive framework, open themselves up to a certain dimension, which we may as well call *anthropological*. Since they engage an intersection between digital and cultural codes, they attain the capacity to present themselves as commenting on the human condition. We may even risk saying, in somewhat Marxists terms, that video games are in their essence a mirror of the modes of digital production that has defined our age.

The other significant point you raise is the question of freedom, a question that has gained renewed urgency in times when software algorithms constantly extract data from the most mundane or even unconscious traces we constantly project over the information highways we find ourselves traversing, only to try to define us in terms of our wants and desires that are thus supposedly discovered. A difficult question, perhaps, especially since video games themselves increasingly participate in this "data-mining" process due to the increased hold over them of market forces. My take on the issue is to consider the interactivity beyond a simple alternative between freedom and control. Digital media designers program not only a predetermined result, but also an indeterminate space for emergent effects, at least due to the increased complexity of the interactive systems they set in motion. The same holds for literariness – much of academic literary theory has been devoted to attempts at defining the emergence of meaning in reading in relation to literary codes. However, I am more sceptical about the emphasis you place on the question and answer dynamic and the "demand to think" in video games. It is true that often games pose questions to the player and they do not proceed until an answer is given. Yet there are modes of answering that do not acknowledge the question – one may easily click mindlessly, without any recognition of the significance of what has been asked. You often see gamers vigorously clicking through dialogue-heavy portions of games without paying them any heed. The difference regarding this aspect from books and films, I think, comes about through the fact that player actions have their consequences *later*, and the question *necessarily* gains its significance only in retrospect. The question, the "demand to think," as you put it, can be resisted, and this resistance itself may appear as freedom ("play as you like"), yet it only serves to *determine* a game state that only "could have been" otherwise. This once again puts questions of temporalisation at the forefront. What I describe here is irreversibility in interactivity: player input determines variables, defines a situation with the restrictions of which the player must now

comply. However, games often give to the player other, meta-game interactive tools to compensate for this irreversibility – most notably, to return to a previously saved state. Rarely is reversibility experienced from within the game, except indirectly, by evoking mythological time in the narrative, or by presenting the outcome in the form of the closing of the narrative loop, as in the first ending in *The Talos Principle*, etc. Yet the meta-game "freedom" to reverse the gameplay events goes precisely against the kind of freedom you seem to indicate. What you seem to be describing is a kind of event in which the game experience steps out of itself from within its own structure. The meta-game perspective, on the other hand, views the game from the outside – as simultaneity of code, as time in abeyance, a purely potential temporality that always subtends linear gameplay experiences. Games can allude to this time by presenting mythic themes in their narrative, but can they present this *ontological* time directly?

I do not think so. You mention that *The Talos Principle* produces a synecdoche. I agree. What games can do is engage in some form of *figurative* representation. This is conditioned by their double coding: algorithmic and cultural (including purely linguistic). This double coding opens up a space, a gap between gameplay and narrative representation, from which figurative meanings of actions emerge – for instance, the act of clicking the "W" key on the keyboard "means" the act of moving the gameplay avatar forward in the simulated space of the game. From the point of view of the machine, the software, there is no figuration; there is only the command that is recognized. However, the immediacy of the feedback on the screen turns the action of the player into something other than what it is *for him/her*. Video games constantly lead players to misread their own actions. Thus, a rhetoric of video games is urgently needed.

M.N.: The anthropological dimension, the way you put it, might bring together a plethora of divergent perspectives and demand a re-conceptualization of what we call reading and, indeed, literacy. How many of us today would count as literati if literacy were understood as mastery of both programming and cultural codes? Would such a mastery ever become the rule of the day, or are we sliding, as the fears behind the topic of this conference suggest, towards new forms of illiteracy and a decay of "deep reading"? In the face of such anxieties – but also challenging views which oppose reading to video game playing and regard reading as an interruption of playing – I would claim that video games present various new forms of reading. There is, to begin with, the collusion between player and avatar as readers. Could we conceptualize it as a

figuration of the duality between the implicit (I am thinking of Tzvetan Todorov rather than Iser at this point[15]) and the empirical reader? In *Skyrim*, for example, what functions as 'realism' for the avatar would be fantasy for the player. What do we call this hybrid experience, its stereoscopic effects, the depth it creates? On the basis of *Amnesia: A Dark Descent*, with its profusion of various texts, Benjamin Peuch elaborates his idea of an "interface" of playing and reading understood as a common border, a membrane between the two.[16]

A recent (and very different) 'interfacing' of game and book would be *Divinity Original Sin 2*. To begin with, there is a narrator who reads a text appearing on the screen in a separate box: "The lizard turns about with the graceful ease of a dancer – or a duellist." The text might look like stage directions, but it is read in an epic tone, as if part of a larger text; the dialogue options introduced by the narration for the avatar are mute and appear as the narrator's (?) suggestions to – the avatar? To the player? ("Tell him you were glad to be of help.") The words of the other characters are both spoken by them (very theatrically) and appear as writing in the box. Combat, furthermore, is turn-based and demands careful strategizing: the further on one is in the game, the more interesting the strategizing becomes. The space and time of action (moving around, sneaking, finding stuff, etc.) is as a result constantly interrupted by either the text boxes (which, in themselves, present a sort of dialogue between narration and stage performance, epic and theatre, but also between game-creator and player), or the frozen moments of deciding the next combat move. It would seem that the creators of the game deliberately emphasized the specificity of each medium: literature, theatre acting, and cinema of course, with the various possibilities of the camera, and game in the classical sense, with battles where one moves figures in a definite order according to strict rules, as on a chessboard. The point is that the unity, the flow of the game, is produced through the very distinctiveness of these elements, through the accrual of "interruptions," which are hence not interruptions but the very fabric which will weave the story with its multiple possibilities.

Can one skip the text, as you pointed out earlier? Yes, technically. But one can also skip when reading a book: the skipping will not excise its textuality. I used to skip a lot as a child; my imagination was running faster than the text; this impatience made me a reader. I believe the

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[15] Cf. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to A Literary Genre*, tr. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 31.
[16] Peuch, op.cit.

same is true about reading in games: it is simultaneously their deepest, most hidden layer, and the drive, which is always ahead of what is actually happening on the screen.

E.S.: I fully agree that, for instance, skipping dialogue in a video game is similar to skipping passages while reading literary texts. What I tried to outline was the similar difficulty involved in both forms in terms of interactive freedom. Skipping reading in games does not efface its functionality as a mode of meaning-production.

We may even acknowledge some subtle ways in which interaction with games is enabled by language. Before one can attempt any action through the digital interface, the way it ties to the physical actions of the player is necessarily mediated by linguistic descriptions.[17] Games need to instruct their users in, their use. That is why the familiarisation with the interface introduces not only linguistic mediations, but also the *awareness* of the digital code. The game in essence states to the player, "I am a game"; it necessarily describes the effects of its coding *as* effects of coding, as mappings of representations to actions, before setting them to operate in the direction of the game narrative. I am not sure that 'mastery' is required for (digital) literacy, especially in the sense of having full competence about the conditions of generation of digital effects. The situation is similar with cultural codes, since one can recognise and reproduce cultural forms and meanings without being fully aware of the factors involved in their production.

Then again, is the introduction of readable texts after this self-presentation necessary for video games? I think it depends on the design and the genre. For instance, do sports games effect an interactive 'membrane' between reading and playing? Doubtfully so. Yet video games that attempt to engage the player in the construction of a narrative seem to need such interactive openings in order to produce meaning. As we discussed, in-game reading often serves as a figuration of playing, but playing itself is already figuration, already literary. Narrative games tend to foreground this quality of playing, not only by acts of narration, but also through the dynamic convergences and divergences between doing and showing, between playing and narrating.

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[17] Nowadays the way user interfaces are designed depend heavily on established convention, based on the criterion of elements being "intuitive," though this "intuitiveness" is in fact manufactured, constructed, and ultimately language dependent, at least at the outset.

As mentioned earlier, Barthes was the forerunner of the notion of deep reading, but we should not forget he also defined the texts that are open to its "pleasures" "writerly" [*scriptible*].[18] Unlike the straightforward "readerly" text that fully controls the production and recognition of meanings, the "writerly" text requires effort on the part of the reader. So, are video games capable of enticing their users into some form of "deep reading"? In literature, deep reading depends on the writing, in video games – on design. The conditions of video game design are in principle sufficient for stimulating the player's efforts in the formation of meaning, and when narrative is included among the systems of a video game, such a stimulus becomes necessary – and it should be considered a priority for both players *and* designers.

M.N.: Still, there is the question of textuality per se. I generally like the direction that has been taken by the latest *Assassin's Creed* games, *Origins* (I really think we should have a special conversation focused on the obsession of video games with "origins") and *Odyssey*. With them, Ubisoft has succeeded in keeping the series alive by introducing new approaches and avoiding both the repetition of their earlier accomplishments and the various temptations of the market, which wrecked BioWare, for example. Visually and in terms of reconstructing the material culture of former epochs – a strong aspect of all *Assassins* – the new games, especially Egypt in *Origins*, are just stunning. Nevertheless, there is the interesting question of the role of reading in the earlier and the later games. *Assassin's Creed* began as an adaptation of a literary work – another topic for further discussion – the novel *Alamut* by the Slovenian writer Vladimir Bartol. From the start, the game introduced a *mise en abyme* effect: a contemporary character is launched into the past with the help of a machine and the people operating it. He thus re-lives the lives of his ancestors – lives which have already taken place in a definite way and which the protagonist is expected to repeat *exactly* or, as it is called in the game, achieve *synchronization* between his actions and the actions of his ancestor. This setting reduplicates, of course, the situation of the players who, like the contemporary protagonist, are "hooked" to their machine in order to transubstantiate into the virtual avatars. It is hence a meta-reflection on video game playing with an invisible script – a scenario – acting as the relay between the various ontological levels: player, contemporary protagonist, protagonist's ancestor.

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[18] See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Seuil: Paris, 1970).

The ludic component appears here in stark contrast to multiple choices as *differentia specifica* of video games: the toughness of the game comes from the task of synchronization, of strictly following the scenario. Later games introduce the option for the synchronization to be total or partial; i.e. we might say that the freedom of the contemporary character and respectively the player emerges as a margin of error with respect to the perfect repetition of the "script" of the past. This places the scenario, the literary aspect of the game, in a curious position: it is linear and fixed (a habitual misconception in video game theory regarding literature), yet achieving this predetermined literary linearity is precisely what constitutes the agonistic, playful task, which, nevertheless, being difficult to achieve, foregrounds the game as the possibility for deviation from predetermination. To play is hence simultaneously to stick to, and to deviate from, the 'letter' of the scenario.

With a tendency to make the world of the *Assassins* ever more open, the games preserved synchronization as their essential feature for a time. Each next game, however, found it more and more difficult to sustain the interest in the contemporary character who was from the start in the shadow of the ancestral story and tended to be devoured by it. Synchronization, with its philosophical and aesthetic implications, has practically become redundant in *Origins* and *Odyssey*: this is accompanied by a diminishing of the science fiction aspect up and against fantasy (having to fight mummies, for example), a change I am not quite sure I like. As part of this tendency, the unreadable magically skill-granting text makes its appearance in *Origins* ("Ancient writing: from the Old Kingdom" is all that we learn about these texts). By comparison, we have the technological genius of Da Vinci in the Italian Renaissance games to explain similar acquisitions of skills.

My point of concern here, however, is what happened to the textual aspect proper of the *Assassins*. The earlier games had a database which would pop up at precise moments and which one could stop to read immediately, or later, or not at all, and which contained both historically accurate information about objects and persons, and fictional elaborations. Although in a different manner from *Divinity Original Sin 2*, the earlier *Assassins* were also structured through various interruptions: synchronization gaps, database pop-ups, as well as advice and other forms of interference from different temporalities. These interruptions would sometimes be veritable rifts in an action that has to be quite unified and… synchronic in order to be synchronized. One brilliant example comes from *Brotherhood*. Your task is to rescue an actor from being murdered

while playing on stage. To do so, you, as a video game player, play the contemporary character Desmond, who is "synchronized" with his ancestor Ezio, who is disguised as a Renaissance Italian actor performing as an ancient Roman soldier… five degrees of playing! The problem is that you, as a video game player, are given only minimal instructions at the outset of the adventure so, while trying to get onto the stage and rescue the poor guy, you have to simultaneously follow the semi-helpful instructions which pop up on your monitor. On top of everything, these instructions run parallel to what you overhear from the acting on the stage. Thus, you have to simultaneously read, try to ignore what you hear, and move around with the utmost care: the slightest misstep and all the roles crumble and lay bare your poor you, which has to begin the whole thing again… In this episode, reading exemplifies the nature of the scenario in the earlier *Assassins*: strictly following it is the only way to proceed, but it also makes the process so difficult.

An important feature of the *Assassins* is that books and textuality are rendered in their relevance for this or that historical period. *Unity*, the game about the French Revolution, which had a rather mixed reception, and which is, perhaps, my favourite in terms of brutally immersing you in a turbulent epoch, can serve as an illustration here. Apart from its (controversial) perspective on the revolution, which it provides through both the action and the database, it includes, as many games do, letters, notes, diaries, pamphlets, etc., but also drastic scenes of books lying in heaps in the streets and being sold in strange places or publicly burnt, which adds to the powerful reconstruction of revolutionary Paris. With all their novel and enticing beauties, *Origins* and *Odyssey* seem to be a step back from this ambition not only to recreate the material culture but also to offer an in-depth interpretation, however controversial, of the spirit of an epoch. The disappearance of the database feature in *Origins* and *Odyssey* seems to me to be part of this change.

In sum, *Divinity Original Sin 2* and the two latest *Assassins* seem to be going in two divergent directions with respect to the role of textuality. The ludic, literary, cinematographic, and theatrical aspects of *Divinity* are all emphasized in their unique quality and then blended by constantly interrupting each other. The latest *Assassins*, on the contrary, have all but purged the interruptions characteristic of the earlier games, subduing the textual aspects in the search for a fluid cinematic integration of open world and plot. However, since games can include texts rather easily, some of them will probably always do so. Reading will remain an unalienable

aspect of video games: from the structural levels we tried to address here to the rather funny example of the player who, in order to avoid the deadly risk of opening a virtual book, joined an Internet forum.

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