# Unknowable Protagonists and Narrative Delirium in *American Psycho* and *Hotline Miami*:

## *A Case Study in Character Engagement Across the Media*

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**Abstract**. Empathetic perspective-taking is one of the main psychological mechanisms behind audiences' engagement with narrative (Coplan 2004; Eder 2006). What happens, however, when a story confronts us with a character whose emotions, motivations, and beliefs we fail to understand? This paper examines the phenomenon of "unreadable minds" (Abbott 2008) from a transmedial perspective: how do audiences relate to a character who defies all attempts at making sense of his or her identity despite being the main focus of a narrative? My case studies – the novel *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis and the video game *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games 2012) – foreground two such characters: by calling attention to the opaqueness of their protagonists, they heighten the audiences' interest in – and puzzlement at – their identity. In my comparative analysis I explore two dimensions that contribute to audiences' sense of unknowability of the protagonists: the hallucinations and delusions experienced by both characters (an instance of what Bernaerts [2009] calls "narrative delirium"); and their extreme violence, which raises unanswered ethical questions. While bringing out the continuities between *American Psycho* and *Hotline Miami*, I also highlight how the interactivity of *Hotline Miami* makes the central paradox of relating to an unknowable character even more salient for the audience. In this way, I show that the video game medium has reached a level of interpretive complexity that can stand the comparison with literary fiction.

**Keywords**: fictional characters, empathy, mind-reading, mental illness, unreliability.

More than other narratological categories, "character" seems easily transposable across the media. Such flexibility depends on the ways in which the concept of character is bound up with notions of person, subjectivity, and consciousness, which audiences effortlessly transfer from everyday interactions to a broad range of media

engagements (Herman 2011). Yet fictional characters can also challenge audiences' understanding of other minds, providing models for behaviour and mental patterns that may strike us as radically strange, unacceptable, or incomprehensible.[1] One of the most interesting examples of these defamiliarizing effects of character is the phenomenon studied by Porter Abbott under the heading of "unreadable minds," characters who remain frustratingly opaque and unknowable because they "[defy] all efforts to read [them]" (2008, 449). My paper picks up on Abbott's notion in order to contribute to a transmedial approach to character, exploring two media artefacts – Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* (1991) and the video game *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games 2012) – whose protagonists remain opaque and unknowable to the audience despite orienting the narrative perspective through, respectively, first-person narration and internal focalization. The recipients of these texts are thus given a paradoxical sense of being internal to – and yet barred from – the protagonist's subjectivity. Investigating this paradox will allow me to advance a few hypotheses regarding audiences' engagement with characters in two media, literary fiction and video games. My main concern, however, will be the affordances of the video game medium, and particularly the role of physical interaction with the medium – which I call, following Aarseth (1997), ergodicity – in guiding audiences' responses to character. The more standard forms of character engagements provided by *American Psycho* will offer a counterpoint to my analysis of *Hotline Miami*, shedding light on how our attitude towards characters can change at the intersection of narrativity and ergodicity.

Video games often present us with characters who are shaped in key ways by our gameplay choices: we can determine their name, look, skills, class, and even moral orientation.[2] The avatar's identity can be more or less predetermined (in classic point-and-click adventures), it can depend on the player's moral choices (in games such *The Witcher* [CD Projekt RED 2007] or *The Walking Dead* [Telltale Games 2012]), or it can be completely up to the player, as in some, mostly online, role-playing games which invite us to come up with our avatar's "backstory." In all these cases the avatar's beliefs, emotions, and values are accessible to the player – indeed, they are even more accessible insofar as they are shaped by his or her decisions.

By contrast, in *Hotline Miami* the real nature of the protagonist remains open or undetermined: the text calls attention to the protagonist's identity while at the same time frustrating any attempt at making sense of it. The unknowability of the

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1   For recent discussions on this point in narrative theory, cf. Mäkelä (2013) and Caracciolo (2014a).
2   Jørgensen (2010) has explored the intersection between narration and characterization in video games.

character's mind thus becomes an engine of interpretation, where interpretation is defined as the player's construction of thematic meanings distinct from the more immediate, ergodic forms of involvement that characterize gameplay (cf. "kinaesthetic" and "ludic" involvement in Gordon Calleja's [2011] model). This turn to interpretation may look like a concession to traditional, non-ergodic narrative media, and may seem to reflect a hybridizing attitude typical of experimental video games, where medium-specific boundaries are often challenged. But this foregrounding of interpretation also hints at the power of narrative blanks and gaps and at how they may be used to generate interest in ergodic media, particularly when such gaps concern the identity of the avatar the game asks us to control. Thus, this essay will examine how players relate to a character whose identity remains ambiguous and in some important ways unreadable, and can be negotiated only in interpretation – that is, outside of in-game interactions.

In this way, I aim to show how the video game medium has reached a level of interpretive complexity comparable to that of literary fiction. In 2006, Marie-Laure Ryan remarked that "literature seeks the gray area of the ambiguous, while games […] thrive in the Manichean world of 'the good guys' versus 'the bad guys' […]. If players had to debate the morality of their actions, the pace of the game, not to mention its strategic appeal, would seriously suffer" (2006, 196). My sense is that the situation has changed significantly in recent years, partly thanks to the efforts of independent developers whose games cater for the tastes of smaller, but much more sophisticated audiences than in the past.[3] Independent games like *Hotline Miami* are often less technically impressive than mainstream productions, at least from a graphical perspective, but they move beyond conventional plot trajectories and focus on the exploration of psychologically and existentially relevant themes. This is the assumption behind my comparative analysis of *American Psycho* and *Hotline Miami*. I will stress that the interpretive complexity of games such as *Hotline Miami* does not side-line the ergodicity of the game medium itself; on the contrary, it emerges from a clash between players' control over the avatar's physical actions and their being barred from understanding the avatar's mental states, motivations, and past experiences. What is more, this lack of understanding is thematized by the game itself: we realize that we are controlling a character whose identity defies our interpretive abilities.[4]

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3    Cf. Ciccoricco (2007): "it is clear that some forms of game design and production are growing in artistic – and indeed, literary – sophistication and complexity."

4    Ismail (2012) has made a similar case for the thematic complexity of *Hotline Miami*: on his interpretation, the game questions morality and violence "through methods only videogames can employ."

This paradox reveals what Berys Gaut (1999) has called the "aspectual" nature of audiences' engagement with characters – a dimension that literary and cinematic storytelling have long exploited (Eder 2006; Caracciolo 2014b), but that is not usually foregrounded in video games. According to Gaut, relating to characters can invite us to mentally take on the character's perspective through an empathetic, identification mechanism. However, such engagement is never an either/or phenomenon but always involves a specific "aspect" of the character's perspective.[5] We may distinguish between perceptual, somatic, emotional, epistemic, and axiological perspective-taking. ("Somatic" is my addition to Gaut's original distinction; it includes empathy for bodily states – for instance, pain – as well as for bodily gestures and movements – so-called kinaesthetic empathy.)[6] As my analysis of *Hotline Miami* will demonstrate, audiences are likely to empathize with the protagonist kinaesthetically but are unable to relate to him emotionally and epistemically. This asymmetry in players' engagement with the protagonist forces them to contemplate his unreadability. My close reading of *American Psycho* will serve as a foil in this respect: Ellis's novel also invites us to imagine an unreadable mind, but through its lack of ergodicity it encourages a more consistently external, third-personal stance towards its narrator. The central paradox of *Hotline Miami* is, therefore, felt less strongly in Ellis's novel, thus demonstrating how productive the interaction between ergodicity and more traditional strategies of characterization can be in video games.

A few preliminary words to introduce my case studies. *Hotline Miami* is a 2D top-down action game designed by Jonatan Söderström and Dennis Wedin. As pointed out by many commentators, this game draws inspiration from the film *Drive* (2011) by Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn, who is even thanked in the game's credits. Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) is the 400-page-long monologue of a yuppie whose life – as we gradually find out – is entirely devoted to rape, torture, and murder. A reviewer of *Hotline Miami* (Meer 2012) has already called attention to the similarities between these two texts, and I will pursue this parallel in the following pages by focussing on three dimensions of their protagonists' minds. First, both characters appear to suffer from hallucinations and delusions,

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5    Along similar lines, Coplan (2004, 144) argues that empathetic perspective-taking always preserves the "self-other differentiation."

6    The other aspects should be self-explanatory, but here's a brief outline: when taking a character's perspective at the perceptual level, audiences imagine the character's perceptual experience; at the emotional level, they feel something akin to his or her emotions; at the epistemic level, they imagine holding his or her beliefs about the world; at the axiological level, they imagine sharing his or her values and goals.

which result in unreliable narration[7] and a generalized sense of epistemological instability; second, they both perform shocking (and completely gratuitous) acts of violence. Third, unreliability and violence jointly contribute to the perceived opaqueness and inaccessibility of the protagonists' identities.

## 1. "All of This Is Not Really Happening:" Epistemological Instability

Lars Bernaerts (2009) has used the term "narrative delirium" to refer to situations in which a character's psychotic hallucinations and delusions become the engine of narrative progression. Bernaerts's example of narrative delirium is *Fight Club* (1996), a novel in which one of the main characters, Tyler Durden, is revealed to be a projection of the narrator's own self, who suffers – as the text explicitly spells out – from multiple personality disorder. Neither *American Psycho* nor *Hotline Miami* lead to a revelation along the lines of *Fight Club*: they offer cues of narrative delirium, but this is bound to remain an interpretive hypothesis, one partially (but never completely) supported by textual data.

In *American Psycho* the reality of the narrator's extreme brutality is never directly questioned; however, frequent cinematic references and parallels undermine the reader's confidence in the reliability of the narrator's account: the narrator, Patrick Bateman, thinks of his life, and even of the situations he is reporting (the novel is entirely in the present tense) in terms of cinematic techniques. Cinema functions as a distortion filter superimposed on the narrator's reality, one that – because of its stereotypical nature – can be readily detected by the audience, thus functioning as a cue of narratorial unreliability. Here is how Patrick himself puts it: "I am so used to imagining everything happening the way it occurs in movies, visualizing things falling somehow into the shape of events on a screen, that I almost hear the swelling of an orchestra, can almost hallucinate the camera panning low around us, fireworks bursting in slow motion overhead, the seventy-millimeter image of her lips parting and the subsequent murmur of 'I want you' in Dolby sound" (1991, 265).

Another reason why Bateman's account of his atrocities is implausible is that he always manages to get away with them, without ever worrying about hiding

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7    Hansen (2008) has addressed some of the challenges that arise when theorizing unreliable narration in a transmedial context. I will not expand on these issues here, but it should be stressed that the label "unreliable narration" can only be applied metaphorically to *Hotline Miami*, which strictly speaking has an unreliable focalizing character, not a narrator.

his tracks. The one scene in which he does face the police is so rich in cinematic cues that it becomes difficult *not* to think that this is the work of the narrator's delirious fantasy. This chapter reads like a sequence in an action movie, with the perspective switching from the first to the third person in mid-sentence, as if to heighten the cinematic effect – topped off here by Patrick's largely conventional one-liner as he compliments himself on his reckless driving: "Racing blindly down Greenwich I lose control entirely, the cab swerves into a Korean deli, next to a karaoke restaurant called Lotus Blossom I've been to with Japanese clients, the cab rolling over fruit stands, smashing through a wall of glass, the body of a cashier thudding across the hood, Patrick tries to put the cab in reverse but nothing happens, he staggers out of the cab, leaning against it, a nerve-racking silence follows, 'nice going, Bateman,' he mutters, limping out of the store, the body on the hood moaning in agony, Patrick with no idea where the cop running toward him across the street has come from" (1991, 349).

As he is about to shoot the officer Patrick even feels the need for a musical soundtrack: "Patrick keeps thinking there should be music, he forces a demonic leer, his heart thumping, and manages quite easily to bring the gun up to the cop's face, two pairs of hands holding it but Patrick's finger pulls the trigger" (1991, 349). All these stylistic and thematic devices work towards undermining the credibility of the narrator's account, thus reinforcing the interpretation that Bateman's monologue is in fact an instance of narrative delirium. A confirmation of this comes when Bateman visits the apartment of one of his victims, Paul Owen, finding no trace of the horrible atrocities he claimed to have committed there. The narrator expresses his surprise at the mysterious disappearance of the mangled bodies he remembers having left in the apartment: "There has been no word of bodies discovered in any of the city's four newspapers or on the local news; no hints of even a rumor floating around. I've gone so far as to ask people – dates, business acquaintances – over dinners, in the halls of Pierce & Pierce, if anyone has heard about two mutilated prostitutes found in Paul Owen's apartment" (1991, 366–367). Finally, when Bateman decides to confess to a friend that he has murdered Owen, his interlocutor takes it as a joke because, he remarks, he has "had… dinner… with Paul Owen… twice… in London… just ten days ago" (1991, 388). However, since these clues of narrative delirium appear only towards the end of the novel, it is impossible to disentangle reality from hallucination in a retroactive way, establishing whether Bateman's narration is delirious through and through, or whether some of the brutalities he reports are true. The effect is therefore different from the "mind-tricking" (see Klecker

2013) narration of novels such as *Fight Club*, where the sudden perspective shift (finding out that Tyler is a product of the narrator's imagination) leaves nothing to be explained: after this kind of plot twist, we know what was fabricated and what was real in the narrator's monologue. In *American Psycho* we do not have this privilege, and are left in an epistemic no man's land.

Narrative unreliability is also used in an epistemically ambiguous way in *Hotline Miami*. Unlike the narrator of Ellis's novel, the protagonist of *Hotline Miami* does not have a name: he is often referred to as "Jacket" in online discussions of the game because of the letterman jacket he wears throughout the story. The game begins with Jacket's encounter with three mysterious masked characters in his living room. The masks' words revolve around the protagonist's identity, thus setting the stage for one of the main themes of the game. One of the masked figures, Richard, asks whether the protagonist remembers him [Fig. 1]. Through a flashback, the game follows Jacket's memories to April 3. This move clearly associates the narrative perspective with the protagonist; though we have no indications of its unreliability, we at least know that the game world is filtered through the protagonist's consciousness.[8]

The game proper begins on April 3, with Jacket answering a phone call which instructs him to eliminate everyone at a certain location and retrieve a briefcase. All the missions involve breaking into a building and killing everyone in sight: the game's scoring system rewards multiple, gruesome kills with short-range weapons such golf clubs, hammers and even a power drill (the same weapon used by the narrator of *American Psycho* in some of his murders). After successfully completing each mission, Jacket goes into a store (bar, pizza place, video store) and picks up his order at the counter.

In itself, this set-up leaves little room for questioning the reliability of what we see: the phone calls punctuate the game in Grand Theft Auto fashion, and even the appearance of the masked figures is somewhat conventional, given the game's genre (and the intermedial reference to the movie *Drive*, where the protagonist also wears a mask in the final sequence). It is only much later in the game that the first clues of the protagonist's narrative delirium begin to emerge. At the end of chapter 8, Jacket goes into a store for his usual post-mission stopover. This time, however, a headless body is lying on the floor: the player may recognize it as the body of Biker, the mobster boss killed by Jacket in chapter 7. The protagonist's conversation with the store employee takes an unprecedented direction: "This… all of this is not really happening," he says [Fig. 2]. After the words "allow me

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8    For more on focalization in players' engagement with characters, see Vella (2013).

to demonstrate!" the corpse disappears, leaving only a pool of blood behind – a sudden revelation accompanied by static-like distortions on the computer screen, as in a disturbed TV transmission. This sort of visual overlay is used by some video games – for instance, *Mass Effect* (2007) – to convey a cinematic "feel," but in this particular context it takes on a different meaning: by reminding the player of the mediated nature of the video game, it provides a visual (and remediated) stand-in for the unreliability of the protagonist's perception of the game world. The visual noise is metaphorically blended with the character's distorted experience, and will continue to serve this function throughout the game.

This surreal scene passes by without any further comment, but the player's confidence in the reality status of the events told by the game is likely to be shaken: is this the game world's baseline reality, or is it rather the product of the character's narrative delirium? Several bizarre – and mostly grisly – visions recur in the following chapters, but it is only in the conclusion that the unreliability of Jacket's perception of the game world takes centre stage, and with a deeply unsettling twist. At the end of the game's allegedly "final" chapter, Jacket confronts and kills the boss of the Russian mafia. Not much of the game's plot is explained, however, and as the end credits roll it is easy to wonder whether Jacket's story makes sense at all. But when one hits the "Esc" key to quit the credits, the game – surprisingly – goes on. A new section of the game is revealed, featuring four chapters which did not even appear among the game's levels before playing what was supposed to be the finale. In the first of these chapters, a caption signals a flashback by "rewinding" the game to an earlier time point, with the usual static effect in the background. Here the player is asked to control a different character, not the Jacket of the game's first part but the motorcycle-helmet-wearing Biker killed by Jacket at the end of chapter 7. It turns out that this character too is receiving the mysterious phone calls. And at the end of chapter 18 – one chapter away from the game's real finale – we are given the chance to replay the same fight between Jacket and Biker from the latter's perspective [Fig. 3].

This time, however, Biker wins the fight, and in a disconcertingly easy way – almost as if this was a cinematic cut scene rather than part of the real game. Hence the question: are Jacket's exploits after killing Biker – in chapters 8 through the supposedly "final" one – real, or are they rather a hallucination experienced after having been knocked out by Biker, as it has been suggested in online fan sites?[9]

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9    Cf. Damuel (2013): "Remember the fight with the [Biker]? He bashes in Jacket's head in his story. [...] Hence, everything we see after the fight with the Biker is unreliable. From Jacket's side anyways. The Biker's story is the correct side of things."

The storyline of *Hotline Miami* seems to dissolve into two different interpretations, focalized by Jacket and Biker respectively: according to the first, Jacket kills Biker and pursues his quest until his final encounter with the Russian mafia boss (the second part of the game, where the player controls Biker, is thus taken as an alternative storyline); according to the second interpretation, Biker wins the fight against Jacket, and the first part of the game reflects Jacket's comatose delirium. Although Biker's perspective is foregrounded because it is – in a sense – final, its positioning after the game's "official" ending makes it difficult to evaluate its reality status vis-à-vis the game's first and main part. This device adds a layer of (counterfactual) complexity, contributing to making the game world – and hence Jacket's identity – opaque to the player.

## 2. "You've Done Some Terrible Things:" Engaging with Violence

Both *Hotline Miami* and *American Psycho* are characterized by extreme violence, but the audience's responses to it are likely to be radically different. At this level – more than vis-à-vis the epistemological instability examined in the previous section – the ergodicity of the game medium seems to shape profoundly the audience's experience, making players less likely to feel physical or moral disgust while engaging with *Hotline Miami*. This game is indeed full of blood and gore, and as I pointed out above its scoring system rewards multiple, spectacular killings. However, several factors contribute to making the violence of *Hotline Miami* less horrifying than in *American Psycho*. First of all, Jacket's brutalities are never portrayed with the degree of particularity of Ellis's novel. Patrick Bateman favours individual murders, lingering on the obscene details of severed limbs and crushed skulls, and most of his tortures are of a shockingly sexual nature. Such profusion of hyper-realistic violence explains why the publication of *American Psycho* stirred up so much controversy, with publisher Simon and Schuster refusing to print the book after a few excerpts had appeared in magazines. Indeed, as Namwali Serpell (2009, 48–49) argues, the unreliability of the narrator – and in particular the argument that the described violence is imaginary, not real – have often served to redeem the novel in the eyes of the public opinion, undermining the charges of immorality levelled not just at the narrator but at its author. Even for a reader who does not share this moral condemnation of the novel as a whole it is difficult not to feel a mixture of physical disgust for the narrator's graphic descriptions, moral disgust for his extreme brutalities, and sympathy for his

helpless victims. All this will encourage readers to distance themselves from the narrator, blocking out empathetic tendencies and possibly resulting in what has been called "imaginative resistance" (Gendler 2000), or the complete rejection of the character's moral perspective (see Caracciolo 2013).

By contrast, *Hotline Miami* asks the player to become more complicit in the protagonist's violence. One of the masked figures tells Jacket, "as of lately [sic] you've done some terrible things" [Fig. 4], a statement that may increase the audience's awareness of the ethical stakes of the violence. Yet, unlike Patrick Bateman, Jacket is a gangster, not a serial killer, and most of his victims are violent thugs. Moreover, the player's familiarity with the conventions of action video games may take the edge off their ethical condemnation through a process of habituation: we come to expect violence in some video game genres, and we even come to enjoy it because of the way it is "cordoned off" from real-world violence. In this sense, what Gordon Calleja (2011) calls "kinaesthetic involvement" clearly plays an important role in modulating players' responses to the violence. What players enjoy is not so much, or not predominantly, the violence, but rather the skilful interactions with the medium that enable them to "choreograph [their] way" – as one reviewer puts it (Onyett 2012) – through the levels. The game rewards fast and expert kills, encouraging players to knock down the highest number of enemies in one fell swoop. As psychologists Hayes and Tipper (2012, 56) explain, "action fluency evokes positive affect in the performer as well as in those who merely observe the action." In this case, of course, the player is *both* the observer of the avatar's fluent actions (as displayed on the screen) and a performer who is able to skilfully interact with the game controls.

Following again Calleja (2011), kinaesthetic and narrative involvement seem to go hand in hand here: the close integration between the player's skill and the avatar's virtuoso actions turns into kinaesthetic empathy *for the character*, thus increasing players' closeness with him and possibly giving them an illusion of access to Jacket's consciousness. Yet such access is bound to remain partial, because the protagonist's identity is concealed and as if opaque to the player. Thus, the empathetic bond between the audience and Jacket only makes the unknowability of the latter's beliefs, emotions, and motives stand out. And this, of course, is example of where the ergodicity of the game medium does impact the player's engagement with the protagonist: it fosters rather than inhibits an empathetic relationship and thus marks a radical departure from the non-ergodic *American Psycho*, where the violence is likely to result in an increased distance between the audience and the narrator.

# 3. "Myself Is Fabricated, an Aberration:" Unknowable Identity

What are the motivations of the protagonists of *American Psycho* and *Hotline Miami*? What are their attitudes and emotions towards their victims? Where does their narrative delirium end, and where does the reality of the fictional world begin? Not only are these questions left unanswered, but they are explicitly thematized by both texts – a strategy that only increases the audience's awareness of the unknowability of the protagonists.

In *American Psycho*, a number of passages hint at the impossibility of making sense of Patrick Bateman, as in the following remarks by Bateman's girlfriend: "'Oh god, Patrick,' she sobs, blowing her nose into the handkerchief I've tossed her. 'You're so lousy. You're… inhuman.' 'No, I'm… ' I stall again. 'You… are not… ' She stops, wiping her face, unable to finish. 'I'm not what?' I ask, waiting, interested. 'You are not' – she sniffs, looks down, her shoulders heaving – 'all there. You' – she chokes – 'don't add up'" (1991, 341–342). As a person, Patrick Bateman can only be understood in negative terms: he is inhuman, he does not add up – hence, it is impossible for his girlfriend as well as for the reader to form a coherent image of who he is.

Bateman's lack of moral conscience is also a lack of human consciousness, an unrecognizability of the narrator *as* human: in Bateman's own words, "if I were an actual automaton, what difference would there really be?" (1991, 343). Eventually, this turns into an unsettling acknowledgement on the part of the narrator of the blank slate of his own identity: "There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I simply am not there. It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent. My conscience, my pity, my hopes disappeared a long time ago (probably at Harvard) if they ever did exist" (1991, 366–367). The character's unknowability is the upshot of the illusory, fabricated nature of his identity, which here almost hints at Bateman's realization of his own character status – his being a textual function, a bearer of pure "heartlessness" rather than a flesh-and-blood human being. This suggestion of metalepsis complicates the epistemological instability highlighted above, thus further obstructing the reader's access to the

narrator's identity. The irony here is that, despite the apparent lack of mediation of first-person narration, which seems to put us face to face with a (fictional) subjectivity, we can engage with a 400-page-long monologue while remaining in the dark as to who the monologist really is.

The strategy employed by *Hotline Miami* to problematize the protagonist's identity is more polyphonic, but works to a similar effect. The game does not rely on the character's voice, to the extent that in interacting with other characters the protagonist never speaks a single line. Rather, it exploits an ensemble of voices – the masked figures that introduce all of the game's parts – to convey a sense of the protagonist's unknowability. The protagonist's identity is already called into question in the game's intro sequence by a masked figure known as "Don Juan" [Fig. 4]. At first, Don Juan suggests to "leave it at that," refusing to reveal anything about the protagonist's identity. He then draws a connection between acknowledging the "terrible things" done by the protagonist and knowing him, as if engaging with Jacket's violence (which is what the game invites the player to do) could shed light on his identity. This statement is ambiguously suspended between two interpretations: on the one hand, it may seem to promise that after acknowledging the character's actions – by re-enacting them – we may find out who the character is. On the other hand, it can be taken to mean that violence is the protagonist's true nature.

The game thus teases the player with the possibility of a revelation that will never come, as stressed repeatedly throughout the game by the masked figures. Consider, for instance, Jacket's last meeting with Richard [Fig. 5]. Coming home after one of his missions, Jacket sees what looks like his own corpse in a pool of blood on the floor; Richard, seated on the sofa, cryptically remarks that "you will never see the whole picture… and it's all your own fault" before shooting Jacket. The story is destined not to make any sense, not even after having played through Biker's interpretation of the events in the game's last part.

In sum, the masked figures repeatedly call attention to the gaps in the narrative; they highlight the impossibility of reaching an understanding of the protagonist's emotions as well as of the reasons for his involvement with Miami's underworld of crime. We may even speculate that the masked characters are projections of Jacket's disturbed psyche: these are, after all, three of the masks that the player can choose to wear before each mission. Through the mediation of these personas, Jacket may be looking back at recent events until his fight against Biker (remember that the protagonist's first encounter with the masks resulted in Jacket "remembering something" and a flashback to April 3). In a sense, then, it

is Jacket himself who is questioning his identity, in a way that is at least partially similar to Bateman's explaining that his "personality is sketchy and unformed" in *American Psycho*. The paradox is that Jacket's narrative delirium grants us direct access to his distorted experience of the game world while at the same time frustrating the player's desire to know more about him. The unknowability of the protagonist is made even more evident by the kinaesthetic empathy we develop for him by enacting his violence through the game levels: the player can relate to Jacket kinaesthetically but not emotionally or epistemically – an asymmetry that increases our discomfort as we engage with the game's narrative.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have examined some of the strategies through which narrative media can frustrate our attempts at making sense of characters' mental lives and identities, exploiting the "aspectual" nature of our engagement with characters. One of the upshots of this discussion is that the portrayal of non-ordinary states of consciousness – for instance, hallucinations and delusions – is a powerful tool for giving audiences an illusion of access into characters' consciousness while challenging their everyday understanding of mental life (or "folk psychology," as philosophers call it; see Churchland 1991). Further, the sense of epistemological instability created by what I have called, following Bernaerts (2009), narrative delirium is an engine of narrative interest because it encourages audiences to attend to ontological boundaries between perception and imagination, truthfulness and falsification – all of which are central to our cognitive faculties and our interactions with the physical and socio-cultural world.

Combined with the ethical and emotional salience of the representation of violence, such narrative interest is likely to intensify the audience's engagement with a character, leaving them wondering about the character's emotions, values, and motives. However, when their questions remain unanswered, and the character's unknowability is openly flaunted, audiences are caught in an interpretive loop: they retain a sense of sharing a character's experience through internal focalization, but at the same time they are forced to contemplate the character's radical otherness, without being able to resolve or conventionalize it. This discrepancy becomes even more paradoxical in ergodic media such as video games, where the player's kinaesthetic and ludic involvement is likely to create an empathetic connection with a protagonist whose emotions and motivations are bound to remain opaque. In this way, I have explored continuities and

discontinuities between strategies of characterization and character engagement in ergodic and non-ergodic media, showing how video games' potential for eliciting narrative interest and interpretive meaning-making is not inferior to that of literary storytelling. Indeed, my analysis of *Hotline Miami* suggests that ergodicity and narrativity can work in tandem in creating the puzzles that I have investigated here, paving the way for complex interpretations that hinge on the thematization of identity and irreducible otherness.

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**Figure 1.** Jacket's first encounter with the masked characters.

**Figure 2.** Narrative unreliability in *Hotline Miami.*

**Figure 3.** Two contradictory accounts of the events: Jacket kills Biker (chapter 7, on the left), Biker kills Jacket (chapter 18, on the right).
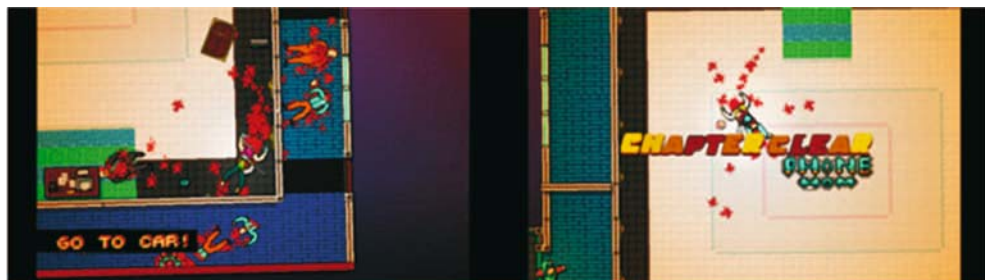


**Figure 4.** Don Juan asks questions about Biker's identity.

**Figure 5.** Richard on making sense of the story.