‘The Cake is (Not) a Lie:’
Intertextuality as a Form of Play in Digital Games

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Abstract

Since Julia Kristeva’s first use of the term in the late 20th century, intertextuality has given rise to one of the literary theories most frequently applied in the interpretation of texts across different media, from literature to art and film. In what concerns the study of digital games, however, the concept has received little attention, in spite of the fact that the new medium offers a more than fertile ground for its investigation. The aim of the present essay, therefore, is to propose that digital games can be and, indeed, are intertextual in at least two ways. First, we argue, games deliberately refer to other games, which may or may not be a part of the same series. Secondly, they connect with texts from other media and specifically with literary texts. In both cases, the intertextual link can be a sign of tribute, a critical comment, or a means of self-reflection. Ultimately, however, these links are a form of aesthetic play that reveals new similarities between digital games and traditional media for artistic expression.

Keywords: intertextuality, aesthetic play, digital games, game criticism, game philology

First coined in the 1960s by Julia Kristeva, the concept of “intertextuality” was firmly rooted in literary theory and the

intellectual climate of mid-20th century Europe. However, it did not remain so for long. It extended from works of literature to spheres of philosophy, from texts to all forms of art, and well into the 21st century, where it was recently redeployed in media studies. Nevertheless, the idea of “intertext” has not yet been introduced to game studies, although the new medium of the digital game offers a more than fertile ground for its investigation. As such, it is the aim of the present essay to investigate the applicability of Kristeva’s theory to these games and to propose that the latter are, indeed, intertextual in a number of significant ways. To do so, we first explore the manner in which digital games deliberately refer to other titles, either as tribute or as a means to become critical of the medium itself. We then turn our attention to games that connect with texts rendered in other media, from literature to film, journalism, and public discourse, in order to show that far from merely creating meaningless, escapist worlds for their players, these titles engage prominent social issues and invite players to do the same. To illustrate our claims, we focus on Valve’s *Portal* (2007), 2K Games’ *BioShock* (2007), and Quantic Dreams’ *Detroit: Become Human* (2018).

Kristeva may have coined the term “intertextuality” in the late 1960s, but the origin of the concept itself is difficult to pinpoint with equal certainty. After all, Kristeva first used it in an attempt to translate Mikhail Bakhtin’s work into French. Furthermore, like most theoreticians of the *Tel Quel* group, her thinking was thoroughly influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure’s modern linguistics, which she attempted to blend with Bakhtin’s ideas of discourse and literature. It is for this reason that, in order to understand intertextuality, we must turn not only to Kristeva, but, at the very least, to Saussure and Bakhtin as well. On the one hand, the link between Saussure and intertextuality lies in the latter’s definition of the linguistic sign as arbitrary and, most importantly, as differential. For him,

in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the

difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system. (120)

In other words, the sign is not referential, as it had been thought of up to Saussure's "linguistic turn," but rather acquires meaning only in relation to other signs, with which it may be combined or associated. Similar to the linguistic sign, then, the literary sign is charged with meaning from its other, previous uses. When authors create, they "select plots, generic features, aspects of character, images, ways of narrating, even phrases and sentences from previous literary texts and from the literary tradition" (Allen 11). Their texts are, therefore, intertextual. On the other hand, across Europe, Bakhtin argued an analogous point, in that he believed that "all language responds to previous utterances and to pre-existent patterns of meaning and evaluation, but also promotes and seeks to promote further responses" (Allen 19). For Bakhtin, however, to focus on Saussure's *langue*, a synchronic, stable version of language, is a crucial error, since "language acquires life and historically evolves (...) in concrete verbal communication, and not in the abstract linguistic system of language, nor in the individual psyche of speakers" (Bakhtin, *Marxism* 95). According to Bakhtin, then, the word is intertextual because it can never belong to one speaker:

When a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is not as a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspirations and evaluations of others, uninhabited by others' voices. No, he receives the word from another's voice and filled with that other voice. The word enters his context from another context, permeated with the interpretations of others. His own thought finds the word already inhabited. (*Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* 201)

At any given time, language and the literary text are the site of the clash between different ideologies, as well as between the past and the present. This theory is further explored by Kristeva in one of her essays on Bakhtin, where she famously proposes that “any 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” (66). The consequences of such a statement are manifold. To begin with, following Kristeva’s notion of “intertextuality,” the literary work can no longer be viewed as “the product of an author’s original thoughts,” nor as a “container of meaning;” it becomes, instead, “a space in which a potentially vast number of relations coalesce” (Allen 12). In the words of Roland Barthes, who brought a vast contribution to the transition from structuralism to poststructuralism, the text can no longer be seen as “a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God).” It is “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture,” while “the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original” (146-7). For Barthes, then, one of the first consequences of the notion of “intertextuality” is the death of the Author, followed by the philosopher’s “celebration of plurality and the freedom from constraint of all readers” (Allen 4). Yet the theory itself is not limited to literary productions. It is, in fact, a means to subvert the very “notions of stable meaning and objective interpretation,” together with “assertions of objectivity, scientific rigour, methodological stability and other highly rationalistic-sounding terms” (Allen 3). Most importantly, when intertextuality is made obvious in a text, its function is most often that of “(re-) evaluation by means of comparison, counter-position and contrast” (Orr 7). In other words, the intertext is not neutral, but critical, and therefore carries socio-political and ideological significance.

Nevertheless, intertextuality is a generous concept, partly due to its somewhat ambiguous definition by Kristeva and partly due to its widespread applicability in postmodern and contemporary conceptions of art. In time, it lost its close association with the

written text and played a significant role in “discussions of cinema, painting, music, architecture, photography and in virtually all cultural and artistic productions” (Allen 174). In the early 1980s, for instance, when film and television shows increasingly began to “quote and reference other popular cultural artefacts,” critics redeployed the notion of “intertextuality” in order to describe this new phenomenon. Two meanings were then associated with the term, which described, at once, “both an interpretive practice unconsciously exercised by audiences (...) and a textual strategy consciously incorporated by media producers that invites audiences to make specific lateral associations between texts” (Ott and Walter 429-30). Moreover, according to Brian Ott and Cameron Walter, intertextuality as an “encoding strategy” circumscribed three specific stylistic devices, all of which continue to be employed to this day. Thus, a “parodic allusion” is a caricature of another text, which, unlike traditional parody, offers no commentary on the latter, “creative appropriation” functions by means of including fragments of another text in order to discuss its role in the larger culture, and a “self-reflexive reference” is a subtle gesture allowing the text to hint at its own cultural status, function, and history (Ott and Walter 435-9). In all of the above, the intertext becomes a form of aesthetic play, whereby audiences are challenged to recognize various references and are rewarded with the satisfaction of being able to do so. In addition, in the 21st century, “the game of intertextuality is not only a marker of cultural identity, but also an opportunity to participate in community” (Ott and Walter 441). Differently put, the ability to play this game singles one out as knowledgeable in a specific culture, while Internet communication allows for groups to coalesce around the latter. This is particularly relevant for digital games, which are predominantly experienced and discussed online.

Albeit a new medium, digital games are intertextual productions. Unlike the written text, however, a digital game is also defined through the concept of “intermediality,” the “medial equivalent of intertextuality,” which “covers any transgression of boundaries between different media” (Ryan 10). A digital game, in

other words, occurs at the intersection of narrative, visual and auditory representation, spatial and architectural construction, as well as the possibility of interactivity and player agency. As such, “the appreciator can directly see, hear, and maybe even interact with objects, and the imagination, relieved from the cognitive burden of simulating sensory data, can more easily immerse itself in the story” (Ryan 29). As we shall see, intertext in the new medium can and usually does occur on several of these levels, for various purposes.

With this in mind, an appropriate starting point for the investigation of intertextuality in digital games is Valve’s 2007 release, *Portal*, a puzzle-platform video game disguised as a first-person shooter (FPS), wherein the player assumes the role of Chell in order to explore an abandoned underground facility, the Aperture Science Laboratories. Chell wakes up in a stasis bed and is immediately greeted by GLaDOS, an AI that monitors and guides the player henceforth. Instead of a weapon, the player is equipped with a “portal gun,” which can create two distinct portal ends, thereby allowing passage through numerous puzzle-like rooms. The goal is to move through all of the rooms, while Chell is repeatedly promised cake and grief counselling at the end of her ordeal. A relatively short game, *Portal* became notorious not only due to its innovative game mechanics, but particularly due to the personality of GLaDOS. Indeed, while the AI is programmed to appear supportive and helpful, it actually regularly insults the player and shares no concern for their wellbeing. In fact, as the player soon discovers, GLaDOS has become defective in the many years since the facility was abandoned and is now obsessed with testing the viability of the portal gun, regardless of the dangers her subjects face. Chell is the AI’s last remaining subject, but certainly not the first. As the game draws to its conclusion, it becomes increasingly obvious that GLaDOS has sinister intentions for Chell, which culminate in the AI’s attempt to kill the character. When the player attempts to escape, they stumble across several, broken down, “backstage” rooms, the walls of which are covered in graffiti presumably left behind by another employee and test subject, Doug

Rattman. These include pastiches of poems such as Emily Dickinson's "The Chariot" or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Reaper and the Flowers," wherein Rattman seems to mourn the loss of a friendly AI, the "Companion Cube," the existence of which remains uncertain. More importantly, one sentence, "the cake is a lie," is scrawled time and again across the walls, suggesting the insincerity of GLaDOS' motives.

Initially designed as an amusing episode by the developers of *Portal*, this particular sentence became one of the most recognizable lines in game history. Its meaning became that of an empty, unattainable goal or a promised reward that would never be delivered, which, as we shall see while discussing *BioShock*, is all the more significant in the context of the new medium. Since *Portal*'s release in 2007, tens of other games have featured intertextual references to the former. In Arkane Studios' 2012 *Dishonored*, the character Piero Joplin draws portal symbols on the walls of his workshop for an experiment with "magic doors." In Spicy Horse's 2011 *Alice: The Madness Returns*, Alice must jump across several floating blocks, which, upon closer inspection, perfectly resemble Rattman's drawings of the Companion Cube. An achievement introduced by Blizzard Entertainment in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* is suggestively titled "The Cake Is Not A Lie," inviting the player to find the recipe for and cook a "delicious chocolate cake." In these and many other examples, intertextuality is manifest through what Ott and Walter referred to as "creative appropriation." In other words, these games include some form of representation from the original *Portal* in order to comment on its noteworthy place in the history of game development, as well as to recognize its immense influence. Players, in turn, are invited to spot and decode these hints, thereby demonstrating their affinity for game culture and their belonging to a virtual gaming community.

Most cases of intertextuality in digital games function in light of the pattern described above. Yet there are some titles that use intertext more meaningfully and specifically with the purpose of problematizing either the medium itself or a number of "real"

social, political or cultural issues. Such is the case with 2K Games' 2007 *BioShock*, a first-person shooter whose message offers a more serious take on *Portal*'s "the cake is a lie." In *BioShock*, the player takes control of Jack Weyland, a young man on a plane to England. As the game begins, Jack blacks out and his plane crashes into the Atlantic, leaving him as the only survivor. He makes his way to a nearby lighthouse structure where he is able to access an elevator and arrive in the underwater city of Rapture. Here, he is greeted by Atlas, who communicates with him through short wave radio and helps him survive his first encounter with a splicer. Atlas then promises to assist Jack to return to the surface provided that the latter, that is, the player, would kindly save his trapped family. It soon becomes obvious that another man, Andrew Ryan, is in charge of Rapture. His rule appears to be tyrannical, and he constantly attempts to hinder the player from achieving their objective. Thus, when Jack arrives in Neptune's Bounty, where Atlas' family should be found, he is met with a large number of splicers. Atlas' wife and child are seemingly killed in the ensuing fight, while Atlas himself manages to escape. He pleads that Jack rid the city of Andrew Ryan so that the player set out on a new mission to find and kill the tyrant leader. Eventually, Jack finds Ryan's office, but here, he also discovers clues pointing to the fact that he is Ryan's illegitimate son. Indeed, Jack was sold as an embryo by his mother and genetically developed by scientists working under ruthless businessman Frank Fontaine in order to become a sleeping agent. To defeat Andrew Ryan, Fontaine activated Jack, who then deliberately crashed his plane above Rapture. Throughout the game, Jack is controlled by Frank Fontaine, under the alias of "Atlas," specifically through the use of the phrase "would you kindly." When the player finally meets Andrew Ryan, the latter clarifies the above and demonstrates to Jack that he is nothing more than a slave. In the ensuing dialogue, Jack is forced by Ryan to murder his father by repeatedly battering him with a golf club. The player, at this time, has intermittent control over the protagonist, but is unable to stop the kill. As he begins to lose consciousness, Ryan continues to yell that while "a man chooses, a slave obeys."

The entire plot of *BioShock* thus becomes a self-reflexive comment on the nature of digital games and of first-person shooters (FPS), specifically. The chief issue problematized by the above is player agency, which is widely recognized as one of the differentiating factors between digital games and other media. After all, *BioShock* presents itself as any other FPS. The protagonist wields one or several weapons and is taught to eliminate increasingly powerful enemies. The tutorial is delivered in the form of text or, more commonly, by means of an assisting character, in this case, Atlas. Yet what *BioShock* makes painfully obvious is that the player actually has little to no control over their own actions. They are invited and, indeed, expected to display certain behaviours in order to progress through the game. They may have some choice in terms of how this progression occurs, but this is highly unlikely in the case of the FPS genre. The act of shooting and killing is trivialized. It happens automatically and for no particular reason other than the fact that the game itself dictates it so. It is, furthermore, as impossible for the player to arrest it as it is for the character Jack to resist his genetic programming when clubbing his own father to death. By forcing the player to witness such a scene and granting them only intermittent control, *BioShock* intertextually engages the defining characteristics of the FPS genre and of digital games in order to bring them into question. The message is, in many ways, similar to that of *Portal*. “The cake,” the promise made by a myriad of typical games to push the player to behave within certain patterns, may be a lie.

In addition, *BioShock* connects with discourses, phenomena, and texts rendered outside of the game worlds, especially through the history of its setting, the city of Rapture. On the one hand, these links construct a deeper, more verisimilar in-game universe by means of references to real-life events, characters, ideas, or historic timeframes. On the other hand, they engage players in community debates concerning “real-life” social, political, and cultural issues. Rapture, for instance, is an underwater city established by Andrew Ryan as a secluded colony on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. Its founder’s goal is to offer free-minded people, particularly the

“world’s best and brightest,” a place where social, religious, ethical, and political confinements of global, post-World War II societies are suspended. Unsurprisingly, however, the project fails to live up to its name. The pure form of capitalism developed on Rapture features no welfare system or publicly owned social programmes. Everything is private and the market is the only force responsible for determining business and employment practices. As such, unemployment and spreading corruption quickly become critical issues. Moreover, concomitant with the construction of the city, the community’s foremost genetic scientist, Brigid Tannenbaum, discovers ADAM, a stem-cell substance that naturally occurs in sea slugs, and that ultimately allows Rapture inhabitants access to genetic modifications and mutation. Unhampered by ethical concerns, Brigid and Yi Suchong, another gifted scientist, are contracted by Frank Fontaine to turn ADAM into marketable products. Together, they devise the first Plasmids or serums which give their users transhuman abilities, but which lead to insanity, zombification, and other unpleasant side-effects when overused.

Less than a decade from its completion, Rapture is overtaken by riots, which are catalysed by outrageous differences between the social classes of the metropolis. This hints at the on-going discussion of the global, uninterrupted rise of capitalism in the absence of social policies designed to care for those individuals marginalized by the market. The civil war that breaks out between Frank Fontaine and Andrew Ryan brings the colony on the verge of collapse, and this crisis defines the moment when the player is introduced to Rapture. Although the finer points of the city’s history are learned throughout the game, it is immediately apparent that the game draws on well-known features of 20th-century dystopian literature in the construction of its world. To begin with, the latter is an imagined place where dehumanization, environmental disasters, and the decline of society are the status quo. In fact, *BioShock*’s lead designer, Ken Levine, admitted to being influenced by George Orwell’s *1984*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and the film *Logan’s Run* (Perry 2-3) in his attempt to materialize philosophical ideals within the social dynamics of

Rapture's community. Plasmids and ADAM share similarities with Huxley's soma, while their existence as black market goods alludes to 1984. Furthermore, the desire to control human thought and behaviour, as well as oppressive, highly ideological political systems and propagandist messages appear in both texts and throughout Rapture. In fact, Andrew Ryan's city is an exemplary illustration of Margaret Atwood's coinage of ustopia. The utopia of the initial, almost perfect social configuration of Rapture transforms, over time, in its latent negative, the dystopia that the player is introduced to at the beginning of the game (Atwood 10).

Set in the 1950s, *BioShock* accommodates further connections with reality by means of the Art Deco style employed in the architecture of its buildings and interiors, a modern, French style that was imported over the Atlantic and dominated the American imaginary from the 1920s until the end of the Second World War (Glennon 1). Geometric patterns, symmetrical forms, highly contrasting colours, along with large, imposing structures were used in the construction of Ryan's utopian vision, all the while emphasizing the functionality of the space provided (Worth 4). Moreover, several, bronze-like statues scattered throughout the game, most notably those flanking the entrance to the Kashmir Restaurant in *BioShock* are a tribute to Lee Lawrie's *Atlas*, the statue placed in front of Rockefeller Centre in Midtown Manhattan. This particular, modernist approach to the visual configuration of the game evokes the distinctive atmosphere of the first half of the 20th century in the United States, a timeframe riddled with conflicting states of affair – unprecedented economic growth, but also economic crash, the Roaring Twenties followed by the Great Depression, and immense advancements in production lines and profits existing concomitantly with soaring unemployment and poverty (Vatter et al. 599).

Yet the most important aspect about these statues is not that they pastiche *Atlas* or the Art Deco movement. Their upright position, with hands raised to the sky, suggests their dispensation with the burden of the mythological figure, an emancipation cast in the distinct manner of Randian objectivism. With their perfect

physiques connoting the transhumanist project(s), the in-game statues represent the architectural locus wherein Ayn Rand's philosophy is embodied. Thus, *BioShock* also entertains a meaningful connection to the doctrine of objectivism, which is made obvious as soon as the player hears Andrew Ryan's first speech on the founding of Rapture. The latter discusses the ideal of "a city where the artist would not fear the censor. Where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality. Where the great would not be constrained by the small." Such an aim closely follows Rand's philosophy, according to which one must "embrace reason as an absolute," so that, "if one recognizes the supremacy of reason and applies it consistently, all the rest follows" (Rand 35). For Rand, capitalism is the most desirable administrative system because it does not impose any restrictions (ethical, social, religious, political) on individual freedom. Similarly, in Ryan's speech, Rapture is intertextually defined against Washington, which was controlled by the democratic majority, against the Vatican, under the authority of divine rule, and against Moscow, which was ruled in conformity to the tenets of communism. In fact, the character's ecstatic vision of a place where self-reliance, hard-work, and creativity are unbound closely reflect Rand's utopian project of Galt Gulch in her novel *Atlas Shrugged* (Kuhn 134). Without a doubt, however, these intertextual references are meant to provoke critical thinking on the part of the player. As the game gradually introduces some of the most resounding ideals and philosophies of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, it invites the player to take part in the potential outcomes of their implementation. Indeed, it may be improbable that an ADAM-like substance will be discovered outside of the game world, but the implications of capitalism in the Randian vein or of a fundamentalist approach to any ideology, for that matter, can be just as severe as the fate of Rapture. One must only consider a handful of the issues that currently define discourse on a global level, such as the progress of genetic and tracking technologies, the disproportionate distribution of global wealth, or the influence of social networks in the present-day context of biopolitics.

Due to its comment on both the medium of digital games and “real” social and political issues, *BioShock* is now part of a canon, and is reified as a prestige text that contributed not only to the development of the video game industry, but to culture itself (Parker 17). Yet it is not, by any means, a singular occurrence. Among contemporary titles, there are an increasing number of digital games that choose to engage public discourse by means of intertextuality. Quantic Dream’s 2018 *Detroit: Become Human* is one such example, whose main focus is perhaps more relevant to the present and future, rather than the recent past of humanity. *Detroit* is an adventure game centred on the lives of three androids, Kara, a housekeeper model, Markus, a caretaker prototype, and Connor, a police investigator. The story alternates between the three as the player is tasked with dictating their choices and moves in an increasingly expanding, branched narrative with a multitude of outcomes. Set in Detroit, Michigan, in the year 2038, the game world is highly intertextual. Thus, twenty years into the future, androids have become as ubiquitous and customizable as smartphones. The common belief, however, remains that since they are consumer goods, they can be controlled and manipulated without limits – they are inanimate. This element is the prime mover of the game’s plot, since each android is actually alive, their experiences witnessed first-hand by the player, but treated as insensate. Gradually, each of the three main characters, along with thousands of other androids, develops sentience and a form of consciousness that resembles its human counterpart. As such, a civil rights conflict and movement of national proportions takes shape.

Detroit is perhaps most obviously intertextual with other media through its central conflict of sentient AI. David Cage, the founder of Quantic Dream and principal writer for the game, explained that he was inspired by Ray Kurzweil’s *The Singularity is Near*, a 2005 non-fiction work wherein the author postulates that the development of AI will trigger an unprecedented, exponential growth in technology, often described as a *runaway reaction* (Simpkins 6). The threat of human extinction at the hands of AI is

currently listed as a possible risk for humanity's near future by Oxford University, as well as supported by renowned theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking (Stockley 4-19). Within the game, this evolutionary step is expressed through androids developing feelings, free will, and other features or abnormal behaviours they were not initially programmed with. Connor is tasked to identify and detain such "deviants" in order to de-activate and study them. Aside from witnessing moments of deviant behaviour through the protagonists' eyes, the player is informed of latest occurrences of the latter by means of magazines, collectible in-game items serving as news extracts regarding the possible world of the game. The deviant behaviour, the android re-call, as well as the authorities' attempts to deal with such en-masse disobedience feature in magazines no. 41 through 46, their tone evolving from the getaway of one individual to that of localized riot, city-wide chaos and terror, and, finally, to complete disobedience and civil war.

More importantly, the game confers a civil rights undertone to the entire conflict. From the perspective of the "defective" androids, the conflict is not a riot, but a struggle for liberation. The American 1960s civil rights movement is invoked through music, text, and certain mise-en-scenes. Androids are isolated at the back of the busses, which is a direct allusion to Rosa Parks' bus boycott, while in the second half of the game, players meet Luther, a black android who is first regarded with terror, but then is found to be nurturing, kind, and rebellious against the status quo. The song he and Markus perform in the game, *Hold On*, is a gospel song belonging to the enslaved African-American community. Together with many other similar folk songs, it was employed as a mechanism of resistance and endurance against oppression (Girardeau 10). Meanwhile, Kara's path has her meet Rose, an African-American woman who helps androids illegally cross the border into Canada, where they can escape their current oppression. Not only is the plot analogous to the Underground Railroad network established during the 19th century to help slaves escape into the free states, but Rose herself states that her "people were often made to feel their lives were worthless. Some survived but

only because they found others who helped them along the way.” To the extent that these references were intended to speak about the plight of black people throughout the United States, they are a reductive portrayal of a two-century-old, still on-going struggle. However, Quantic Dream’s purpose was rather to illustrate the common denominators of minorities’ fight for recognition, equal rights, and an ethical portrayal. To this end, *Detroit: Become Human* masterfully adapts powerful moments, songs, and discourses from American history and the present alike by means of intertextuality. The game’s assumed scope is not to revise the latter, or even to comment on them, but to incorporate them in order to convey more meaning through its story, as well as through the decisions that players have to make in order to bring the three interconnected narratives to a conclusion.

Throughout the past decade, and particularly through examples such as *BioShock* or *Detroit: Become Human*, video game designers have sought to engage with the tradition of discourses that defines the systems, codes, and traditions of literature, art, and human culture in general. Games have thus rapidly grown from simple forms of entertainment designed to showcase the possibilities of technology to intermedial and intertextual stories that allow people to engage with contemporary social, political, and ethical issues. The aesthetic play between creative appropriation and self-reflexive references acquires an entirely novel set of meanings in an interactive work of art. The frame narrative, the plot, and the mise-en-scene sometimes push players to act on behalf of traditions or ideas they do not hold, or even outright disagree with, all the while describing the character body of another, if not for the joy of play, then at least to see where the plot is headed. As such, contemporary digital games have become an appropriate and relatively safe environment for debates and the expression of contradictory perspectives on the more polarizing issues of our times.

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