

Machphrasis: Towards a Poetics of Video Games in Contemporary Literary Culture

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Abstract

This article develops Kawika Guillermo's 'machphrasis' (2016) as a theoretical contribution to discourse considering the deployment of video games in contemporary literary culture. After presenting machphrasis' academic stakes, I propose that machphrasis can give explanations for some techniques and images endemic to late 20th/21st century writing with regards to video games represented in prose. By appending Guillermo's conceptual work with three additions, I work towards a reproducible poetics of the video game in prose writing. I will show that machphrasis may be used to understand video games in literature as proxies for anticipated technologies, as discursive tools for reckoning with new subjectivities indebted to play, and as the means for generating new ideological positions for those who play games but are excluded from the normative 'gamer' group. This contribution prepares current academic discourse for a future literary landscape increasingly beholden to machphrastic themes, ambitions, and language.

Keywords

machphrasis, Literature and Video Games, Gamic Fiction, Ludic Literature, Digital Culture, Ekphrasis

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It is fitting, after literary scholars caused game studies to stall in 1985, when they ‘balked’ (Erard, 2004) at Mary Ann Buckles’ thesis *Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame Adventure* (1985), that the discourse surrounding the deployment of video games in fiction would be haunted by the spectre of false starts. For example, Tanner J. Jupin’s thesis *The Intermediation of Literature and Games*, a discussion of ‘gamic fictions, fictions that both tell stories of life within gamic worlds and utilize the components of video games and online games as part of their narrative structure’ (Jupin, 2014, p. 2) has failed to stick its landing; ‘gamic’ did not quite catch on. Doug Stark is to Jupin what Espen Aarseth – whose seminal *Cybertexts: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997) indirectly inaugurates this preoccupation with video games in literature – was to Buckles, reviving gamic fiction for a moment to serve Stark’s own formulation: ‘Ludic Literature’, which ‘tells stories within video game worlds or about video game playing’ (Stark, 2019, p. 153). Megan Amber Condis, alongside Stark, opts for ‘ludic’ to describe novels ‘that [are] not only about game playing but they also require game-playing and puzzle-solving’ (Condis, 2016, p. 2). Both Stark and Condis’ work is excellent, but both belong to the academic conversation disinterring video game imaginaries from the pernicious ‘nerdgasm’ of Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One* (2011). Their focus becomes an issue when constructing a poetics; a single writer’s style will inevitably prove too idiosyncratic to explain general rules regarding the literary video game metaphor. Long-form publications have produced little consensus on terms for discussing literary video game deployments, either. Astrid Ensslin’s *Literary Gaming* leverages her contribution: the literary-ludic or ‘L-L spectrum’ (Astrid Ensslin, 2014, p. 13) towards literary games as opposed to games in literature, and Jason Barr’s *Video Gaming in Science Fiction* (2018) limits itself, predictably, to science fiction. Finally, Eric Hayot’s *Video Games & The Novel*, which argues that ‘any consideration of what the novel is today, and any true understanding of what narrative aesthetics are doing in general, is impossible if we do not also understand the work video games are doing’ (2020, p. 187), enlists none of these aforementioned attempts to augment this argument, foregoing the very bibliography which may enable others to turn his *cri de coeur* into their research interests.

I bring these scholars, whose works can all be said to be preoccupied with video games in contemporary literary culture, together to contextualise how efforts to engage fiction along ‘ludic’ or ‘gamic’ lines could be bolstered by a general poetics of the phenomenon converging their interests. Doing so can establish a critical language for a subfield of literary studies currently defined by rich individual thought but systemic lack. Despite Stark’s impressive Foucauldian analysis of *Ready Player One*, which lays bare the ‘seduction of neoliberalism’ amongst ‘the joy of playing games’ (2019, p. 164) in Cline’s writing, it is only to be inferred that Stark’s ludic literature analysis could also apply to more generalised literary contexts beyond *Ready Player One*. The same goes for Condis; her powerful analysis implicates *Ready Player One* in ‘the exclusionary practices of the literary cultures’ (2016, p. 8) of the old-fashioned literary canon through its own self-determined canon of the 1980s,

but does not seek to go further and posit this exclusion as a lamentable function of video games in novels generally. Neither should be blamed for this: a poetics of the video game in contemporary literary culture was neither of their problematics. However, I hope the more general principles expressed here make researching this literary phenomenon simpler and more teachable by providing an appropriate generalised poetics for Condis and Stark's extant specific research. It meets Hayot's proposition head on by clarifying how and why literary representations comprise generative lifelines for thinking video games today and tomorrow. Such a contribution shifts away from blocks of 'ludic' or 'gamic' fiction towards appreciating deft use of video games in fiction as, foremost, the property of sentences, metaphor, and as Hayot writes, 'narrative aesthetics'.

I hope machphrasis can help ballast the unequal research dynamic between video games and literature. Studying video games stories has often meant recourse to some literary concept or tradition. This is not unexpected; the literary tradition influences all stories told today, and video games should be no exception. As such, research focusing on the video game's indebtedness to literary technique, mode of address, theme, and narrative is plentiful and robust. However, this is not a one-way street. As Gundolf Freyermuth suggests in his encyclopaedia entry 'Video Games and Literature' in the *Encyclopaedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming*, 'the reverse case—the influence of video games on contemporary literary storytelling—is harder to assess, and research is still required' (2021, p. 1111). Ultimately, this article continues where Freyermuth leaves off, in the research gap left between this media exchange. The rest of the article defines machphrasis appropriately, but for introductory purposes, machphrasis is a systematic poetics of video games in contemporary literary culture. It is the article's primary contribution to the knowledge gap Freyermuth bemoans. What I am calling machphrasis is a distinctly literary phenomenon. The analytical resources it can offer focusses on the metaphorical sense of video games and gameplay, not actualised games or play. Machphrasis understands video games as affording contemporary fiction a system of meanings derived from public responses to video games – ones that do not necessarily map to actual play – and writerly symbolic expression, where this system of meaning coagulates into literary meaning. This delimits machphrasis' scope to contemporary literary culture specifically. A machphrastic video game analysis, for example, is beyond the theoretical scope of machphrasis as I understand it, not because video games cannot use other video games to do their artistic job in a metafictional sense, but because machphrastic analysis caters specifically to literary form and the ways literary form engages the world with video games. Machphrasis contents itself with exploring a singularly literary problem – as Freyermuth explains, the inverse relationship is well stocked with ideas and thoroughgoing discourse, anyway.

Before discussing machphrasis, I will present the adjacent concepts that highlight its particular stakes. Just as the novel dominated 19th century European culture (Williams, 2013, pp. 3–7) and gave way to the moving image in the early to mid-20th century (Zielinski, 1999, p. 19), the late 20th and 21st century's grand medium appears to be

the video game. Many methods are available to brute force this argument. The rise in video gaming since the 1980s, or video gaming's economic supremacy relative to other media (Nath, 2016) often suffice, but I argue video games are the most prominent driver for a larger 'ludic turn' experienced by many academic fields. Eric Zimmerman's manifesto on 'the ludic century' ends with emphatic aesthetic notes, that 'games and play are important because they are beautiful' (2014, p. 22), suggesting delight in games and play resonates with delight more broadly conceived today. Media theory seems equally enamoured; recent attempts to understand both media systems and identity-making evoke video gaming contexts. Invoking Marx and displacing communism, Frissen et al. consider how 'a spectre is haunting the world – the spectre of playfulness' (2015, p. 75), becomes embodied – becomes 'material' – in video gaming's ubiquitous allure. Although these celebratory framings are sometimes critically opposed, such as in Patrick Jagoda's more concerned *Experimental Games: Critique, Play and Design in the Age of Gamification* (2020), play, clearly, is central to contemporary aesthetics, periodisation, media, and humanistic method. Although suggesting today's academic fascination with play is solely because of video games would be reductive, to do without play's most explosive manifestation seems equally silly. Video games are only ever a stone's throw from any sincere cultural analysis. The ludic turn also brings into relief a different strategy for evaluating the video game's cultural impact, one less interested in the video game's cultural becoming than culture's becoming the video game. These works propose the contemporary moment can be figured through its videoludification, describing 'the process by which everyday life is permeated by the logic of video games, including, among others, the fields of economy, work, leisure, education, health and consumption' (Crawford & Muriel, 2018, p. 188). It stands to reason, then, that it was only a matter of time before the novel transposed the video game as cultural image into a literary one.

Writers doing this transposing work require knowledge of video games and opinions regarding their social, cultural, and aesthetic effect on the world and their art. This is true of any prose-object, but video games in literature are special. They mark the collusion and collapse of conventional literacy, and 'gaming literacy'. I mean gaming literacy in Zimmerman's sense, as comprehending 'how playing, understanding, and designing games all embody crucial ways of looking at and being in the world' (2013, p. 30) and, presumably, deploying this comprehension to become a better citizen, protect oneself from civil impingement, and negotiate social and cultural possibilities native to the 21st century. Gaming literacy encompasses direct comprehension of video games, like knowing how to play and design them, but also encompasses the systems they penetrate, the industries generating them, and their place alongside other aesthetic objects like the novel. Generally, video games do not give up this knowledge without a fight. For example, understanding gamification seems an important facet of gaming literacy, but gamification is most successful when it makes the unpalatable palatable, a dubious ethical practice when applied to work (Ferrara, 2013). Just as comprehending play today requires some comprehension of

video games, it seems a waste to go without conventional literacy when understanding new ones. Heeding Zimmerman's call for wider gaming literacy via direct engagement with games may not be enough; understanding the video game requires fiction's comprehensive attempts too, especially as it grows increasingly gaming literate itself.

To bring these concepts together, I borrow a term from writer Kawika Guillermo (matrilineal name of cultural and literary theorist Christopher B. Patterson), that celebrates literature's efforts to reckon with video games. Guillermo defines machphrasis as 'prose inspired by the machinations of video games, their universes, their puzzles, their social and physical systems of logic, their rules and boundaries, and their emotional responses' (Guillermo, 2016). Machphrasis unveils his own inspirations as much as posits them for others. After having 'to hide the fact that [his] short story [*The Last of its Kind*] [...] was first based on a video game' (Guillermo, 2016), that game being Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), he choose 2016 as the right time to unfurl how video games informed his prose. Hiding one's influences puts Guillermo in good company, as he himself explains that 'historically, writers have always had to hide their less-respected influences' (2016) for fear of upsetting literary fiction's rarefied critical centre which does not always abide meaning-making with putatively 'low' forms. Guillermo partially accepts this and relishes the position where 'in an age where literature has replaced the sacred, to say that one's main source of inspiration comes from video games has a heretical imprint' (2016). The torch passes from heresy to machphrasis as a contemporary mode of resistance and subversion. Given Guillermo's belief that machphrasis can 'break past the screen and into experiences of personal prejudice and assault', and that 'political subtexts in video games can mirror the real world in haunting ways' (2016), Guillermo is clearly optimistic about machphrasis' poltergeist-like ability to disrupt naturalised narratives regarding video games, literature, and the reality they haunt.

Machphrasis' laser focus on video games allows it to tap various humanistic methods within literary studies; what machphrasis lacks in breadth of objects of inquiry, it hopefully makes up for in depth of analysis when the object is video games. By attending to video gaming's 'social and physical systems of logic, their rules and boundaries, and their emotional responses' within contemporary fiction, it announces affective and aesthetic ambitions as well. A little of Zimmerman's gaming literacy rears up as Guillermo tasks machphrasis to capture 'experiences that broach into new ways of seeing and appreciating the 'machinations' of the outside world' implying Zimmerman's aesthetic and didactic imperatives. Moreover, I am sympathetic to Guillermo's decision to align machphrasis with the broad field of 'prose'. This guards against machphrasis locking to genres, as Barr attempts with science fiction, or individual texts, as with Condis and Stark's discussion of *Ready Player One*. Doing so also allows machphrasis to scuttle between narratological and syntactic interpretations. Video games can move narrative time, space, and characterisation along, but their arrangement in sentences also shapes how there are perceived. Consider the following sentence: 'Francis' desk was covered in video games, novels, and records'. This sentence does its narratological job by characterising Francis, but

here video games belong to a suite of artistic objects. Change ‘novels’ and ‘records’ to ‘weed’ and ‘beer bottles’, and the narratological and grammatical function remains the same: it still characterises Francis with a list, but video games become syntactically co-opted by another suite of objects with a radically different family resemblance. Video games are in literature’s employ as themes, yes, but they are also ludic metaphors borrowed as literature strives for effect. Literature returns them altered; it cannot help it.

Machphrasis has enjoyed little to no academic attention. A reason could be its humble beginnings within a Medium blog, outside of traditionally privileged academic spaces. Also, despite my aforementioned praise for its link to prose, Guillermo’s definition bars verse from the machphrastic table, an infelicity given its literary heritage in ekphrasis, which originates in poetic discussion. I discuss here long-form prose for brevity’s sake; there is no reason machphrasis would not suit verse or could not move in theatrical or experimental literary conversations. Guillermo is also brief with machphrasis. Much of machphrasis’ analytical application is deferred because his is a writerly machphrasis, composed to inspire tomorrow’s literary efforts, not necessarily to understand current machphrastic contexts. Where Guillermo’s machphrasis foresees a gaming future tense in literary culture, a poetics of machphrasis can bridge the gaps towards this future, offering the praxis-based machphrasis a literary history, and, if it is worth anything as a poetics, examples of effective practice. Therefore, alongside Guillermo’s praxis-based definition, I now suggest three additions that couple machphrasis more tightly to its literary and media heritage; trace the varying complexions of the literary machphrastic gesture; and move towards a systematic poetics. Although these three additions comprise the article’s chief theoretical contribution to machphrasis, they are steps towards fuller characterisation and not a comprehensive set. They merely function to specify and refine the parameters of academic discussion regarding Guillermo’s machphrasis. I will present and defend these additions point for point, additions arrived at through commonalities between the machphrastic texts and theoretical touchstones analysed hereafter:

1. Machphrasis occurs when the video game is deployed as a proxy technology to anticipate future technologies.
2. Machphrasis occurs when the video game or gaming is deployed as an aesthetic mode of experience.
3. Machphrasis occurs when the overdetermined history of the video game and its attending cultures are negotiated to explore ideological positions associated with gamers

Point one refers to instances where the video game’s status as the most widely accessible computerised entertainment medium grounds descriptions of anticipated technologies. As their *prima facie* referent is the technological, hence ‘video’ aspect of video games, these deployments begin with futuristic technologies, then posit the video game as a precursor to what said technology is or does. Cyberpunk fiction deserves an

honourable mention here, despite my wish to disentangle machphrasis from genre, because point one's most obvious example is the video game's conflation with sophisticated virtual or augmented realities. Technology and media scholars have debated the relevancy and usefulness of the hierarchy implied here, with some suggesting that 'computer games can be understood as a particular form of virtual reality' (Pietschmann et al., 2012, p. 282) while others express the inverse, that 'very little critical scholarship in the game studies space has addressed VR as anything but an abstract, deferred technology whose future possibilities are understood to be more intriguing than its present' (Heineman, 2016, pp. 2793–2794). Despite academic discourse surrounding games and VR becoming increasingly practical and intriguing, particularly in clinical contexts (Ferguson et al., 2022; Gracia Bravo et al., 2019), the abstract conversation's ongoing presence in game and media studies suggests VR's relationship with video games remains unresolved. Importantly, the technological relationship here described is but the brightest star in a constellation of machphrastic technological anticipations, such as gamified social media in *Super Sad True Love Story* (Shteyngart, 2011) and parity between virtual and fiat currency in *For The Win* (Doctorow, 2010), which all also seem equally unresolved. What machphrasis charts is how prose explores this relationship – that the novel can rely upon the video game to characterise certain imaginary technologies.

Although this is the simplest addition, respecting its rhetorical power can recontextualise how scholars relate video games to technological imaginings. This is nowhere more pertinent than to William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and its celebrated cyberspace. The following quotation will be familiar to those interested in cyberspace, computational matrices, or the internet:

'Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts [...] A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding ...' (Gibson, 1984, p. 59)

This is one of science fiction's most famous passages, and the digitalised, Cartesian technological future it foretold was pivotal in launching Gibson's decorated science fiction career. And yet, this passage, so often the islet around which Gibson scholarship sails, is separated from its machphrastic context. For the matrix and cyberspace itself 'has its roots in primitive arcade games' (Gibson, 1984, p. 59), and with this, Gibson's technological future becomes the prolepsis of a video gaming genealogy. Where television's static triumphed in *Neuromancer's* sky (Gibson, 1984, p. 1), the video game shimmers as the ancestor of its most lauded technological conceptions. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Gibson described 'the video arcades' and the 'physical intensity' of children playing, which produced the 'feedback loop with photons... neurons... electrons' (McCaffery, 2014, p. 226) that informed his ideas of cyberspace. This allowed scholars like Martti Lahti to treat 'video games as the *paradigmatic* site

for producing, imagining and testing different kinds of relations between the body and technology in contemporary culture' (2003, p. 157) where Gibson's rhetorical anticipation of futures allowed Lahti to reckon with video games as the centre of technology and relation. Yet this part of Gibson's passage – integral to understanding his world-building – often escapes the equation, as if a kind of culturally encouraged skimming, what Roland Barthes called 'tmesis' (1975, p. 11), emanates from mere 'primitive arcade games'. I believe this to be erroneous: the novel possessed an appetite for historicising with video games before game studies would even try in Buckles' thesis. Granted, to say that *Neuromancer* is straightforwardly a novel about video games is wrong, but only as wrong as arguing Gibson's famous passage here (and all those concepts and characters subsequently derived) is not contingent upon machphrasis' ability to ground literary techno-futures. This is one example of machphrasis recovering the literary sense of the video game as it emerged from the mid-1980s in texts like *Neuromancer* and Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (1985), delivering insight into the potential forms and focusses these writers saw the video game possessing in the future.

Point two refers both to literary depictions of video games as conventionally aesthetic objects and the depiction of video gaming as an aesthetic mode of experience. The first instance focuses on video gaming's materiality: cartridges, controllers, hefty arcade machines, carpal tunnel syndrome, glitches, code, and suchlike, presenting them in an ameliorative or pejorative mode in keeping with ekphrasis. Unlike point one's often proleptic function, by relying on some presumed commonality in a reader's past the first aspect of point two is generally analeptic, trading on a nostalgic past when video games and gaming were sub-cultural artefacts and activities. However, nostalgia is just as much a forgetting as a remembering, as Rares Moldovan (2017) knew of *Ready Player One*. Nostalgic writers reveal a great deal about their views on the present, and laying claim to video gaming's misremembered past can produce false utopian futures that exclude in both temporal directions, as *Ready Player One* does. The second facet of point two presents the video gaming subjective experience and hence is machphrasis' most play-facing element. If 'the form of the digital game is an allegory for the form of being', as McKenzie Wark (2009, p. 225) proposes, then machphrasis experiments with how play influences subjects who identify with this allegory of being. It lends itself to a faux autobiographical mode of writing where authors deploy the act of video game playing as an allegorical substitution for spaces where subjects become. The playground or the home would be examples; think Card's virtual gamic playgrounds in *Ender's Game*, or young adult fiction's penchant for gaming settings, as in Marie Lu's (2017) novel *Warcross*.

Given play's importance to point two, game studies' own sophisticated senses of play enrich machphrasis here as much as literary forms of play. In fact, game studies dominates and for good reason; analysing play-focused machphrasis invites a critical dialogue between postmodern play (where play flourished as literary descriptor and lens) and play as thought by game studies old or new. Game studies, offering an expressly video gaming play, prunes some roundaboutness from postmodern play.

Johan Huizinga (1950), Roger Caillois (1961) and Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) remain the primary forebears of play studies writ large, but Nieborg and Hermes rightly differentiate between philosophies of play advanced by these figures and game studies '[coming] into being with electronic, video and computer games as cultural form' (2008, p. 135), where thinkers of play have included Espen Aarseth (1997), Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003), and Mary Flanagan (2013). These six thinkers of play form possible focal points for theorising machphrastic efforts directed at play, providing broad theoretical strokes about play's embeddedness in culture, and conceptualisations directly linked to play's particular contemporary manifestations within the video game. Here, video gaming's play may interrupt literature's play.

Yet one interruption stands out. Caillois' contribution to machphrasis is his understanding of a certain kind of play that surfaces disproportionately in contemporary literary culture: *ilinx*. For Caillois, *ilinx* is one of his four forms of play: 'agon', 'alea', 'mimicry' and 'ilinx', and is characterised by 'a rapid whirling or falling movement, a state of dizziness or disorder' (2001, p. 12). It appears a state of play easily conjured by children spinning themselves to vertigo, but one adults chase in drink, drugs, and danger. Caillois ascribes *ilinx* a prognosticative quality, what he calls the 'professional hyster[ia]' (2001, p. 90) of the 'shaman, the man possessed, transformed by vertigo and ecstasy into an official, mandarin, or master of ceremonies, watchful over protocol and the correct allocation of honors and privileges' (2001, p. 101), simultaneously aligning play with the serious business of a culture's spirits, laws and customs, and its psychedelics, intoxicants, and putatively undesirable social acts. Therefore, when examining machphrastic efforts through point two's lens, deference to Caillois' play equation helps to explain how writers imbed the playful into the spiritual and then the spiritual into the techno-cultural. However, this deference must be contextualised by Aaron Trammell and Tara Fickle's efforts to decolonise play. Fickle critiques Caillois' 'self-legitimizing fictions', whereby the categories of play he self-determines to discover behave according to a colonising 'recursive dynamic' (Fickle, 2019, p. 131), and Trammell rightly asks 'why it is that competition and chance are lauded [...], while mimicry and vertigo are decried?', regarding how Caillois links the former with westernised cultures and the latter with supposedly 'primitive' cultures (Trammell, 2022, p. 242). This context is necessary to remember, as the deployment of video games as shamanic conduits, as facilitators of vertiginous, intoxicating play, or as a home for playful spirits, is a machphrastic trope explored vivaciously by western authors.

To illustrate point two, it is tempting to return to *Neuromancer*, particularly *Neuromancer* itself. Although point two could be demonstrated using the auto-hauntological aspects of an AI who both is and inhabits cyberspace; who assumes, wilfully, a boyish form performing 'a handstand in the surf' (Gibson, 1984, p. 269), that most vertiginous, perceptive-shifting form of play that children love; who is both 'the dead, and their land' (Gibson, 1984, p. 270), watchful over privilege, protocols and honours as the novel closes. For variety's sake, I suggest another tack. Paul Ricoeur in volume two of *Time and Narrative* distinguished between novels 'of time', that deploy time (nearly all novels are 'of time'), and novels 'about time' (Ricoeur,

2008, p. 101) that inaugurate new forms of time which profoundly influence how temporality is perceived. Similarly, pertinent literature can be ‘of’ or ‘about’ video games. What makes literature ‘of’ video games is referential and thematic, but classifying literature ‘about’ video games, literature that may inaugurate new forms of video games, is trickier, though perhaps more fruitful and interesting. Going Aarseth’s route, for example, may mean establishing how texts represent concepts like multicursality and ergodicity, the ‘nontrivial effort [...] required to allow the reader to traverse the texts’ (1999, p. 1), in ways delightful or interesting enough for video games to ‘reborrow’ these concepts somehow changed by literature. Alternatively, a novel could be ‘about’ video games in a discursive sense: they inaugurate new language which profoundly influences how video games are perceived. Video game life-writing, like Tom Bissell’s *Extra Lives* (2010), Michael W. Clune’s *Gamelife: A Memoir* (2015), and Zoë Quinn’s *Crash Override* (2017) deploy ilinx-based descriptions of playing that suggest impassioned play is different in kind to escapism and addiction, vindicating scholarship suggesting escapism flattens a phenomenon richer than prescriptivist accounts would care to admit (Calleja, 2010) or that escapism can shed negative connotations, particularly in times of difficulty (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021, p. 11). The more gaming literate literature becomes, the more appropriate machphrasis becomes for reckoning with these properties of video gaming experience, and indeed, if current discursive tools remain up to the task.

Point three, that machphrasis occurs when the overdetermined history of the video game and its attending cultures are negotiated to explore gaming ideologies, is different yet linked to point two. Neither excludes the other because the aesthetics principles of play are not ahistorical, and video gaming ideology advances aesthetic principles. However, in literary terms, we can differentiate between prose concerned with video gaming as experience and video games as ideological objects. When cross-referencing Stark’s and Condis’ analysis of *Ready Player One* this becomes evident, as their arguments eventually converge on its machphrastic efforts being ideologically – not experientially – compelled. Stark, finding that the ‘neoliberal reality principle – ubiquitous self-affirmation via competitive value accumulation in line with market rationale – has profound ludic resonances’ (2019, p. 161), charges *Ready Player One* with nurturing neoliberal sensibilities as ‘didactic fiction’ (2019, p. 153). Amongst other ills, this reifies gaming knowledge, skill, and taste into something accumulable, tradable, and tied to the novel’s economy of affect in reality. Condis explores the novel’s exclusionary techniques, from its canonical lists with nary a woman or person of colour in sight, to the performances of white male masculinity that pepper the narrative to bring ‘systemic requirements of identification with a white, male perspective to participate in gamer culture’ (2016, p. 13) into focus. Via video gaming’s neoliberal allure or its white masculine vested interests, both scholars implicate the video game in wider historical, economic, or social architectures that provided the borders within which a dominant video gaming subjectivity – the gamer – became.

Where point two is insular, experiential, and perhaps limitless, point three takes for granted a social group emerging from the late 20th century and, by representing it,

stands to be corrected against the overdetermined history of the video game. In other words, it begins with the 'gamer' as conceived by the novelist, and writes from there out into character, location, dialogue, and event. Despite machphrasis of this ilk arising from limitation, video gaming's brief history is overdetermined enough to afford prose interesting emphases and theoretical possibilities. Origins relating to the military-industrial complex (Ottosen, 2008; Mead, 2013; Robinson, 2014), computational proof (Jagoda, 2018, p. 132; Smith, 2019) and older forms of games (Ivory, 2015) are equally valid, and the gamer's history is representable through subcultural and normative, tabletop and technological, American centric and global contexts, and more besides. Truthfully, all these relations apply, and uncovering the yarns unspun is just as important as interpreting histories receiving voluble textual support. Where these origins converge, they can reveal video gaming's imprint upon contemporary forms of oppression. Fickle's work on 'Ludo-Orientalism' (Fickle, 2019, p. 3) illustrates 'the rhetorical force and material consequences of describing a racialized body or relation as a game' (2019, p. 122) or, more abstractly, the process 'of "gamifying" race – of defining race in ludic terms' (2019, p. 122). Ludo-Orientalism is an example of a blended object/subject relationship (here specifically Chinese-American) where video gaming distorts the perception of peoples undeservedly interwoven into ludic logics. For example, Fickle uses Cory Doctorow's *Anda's Game* (2007) to chart how eponymous gamer Anda's tussling with Chinese gold farmers in an MMORPG 'points to the broader continuity of Ludo-Orientalist epistemologies in game studies' (2019, p. 193), because 'gold farming and internet addiction underscore how nation making and race making play out in seemingly color-blind, global digital spaces' (2019, p. 197). This line of thought distinguishes between playful, hence free, bodies, and gamified bodies. To summarise, ludo-Orientalist interpretations of texts trouble racialised reductionist fallacies stemming from machphrastic analysis or fiction within American and, as Fickle argues, globalised contexts. Machphrasis can, like ekphrasis, encourage a naïve aposiopesis – a species of incomplete speech – that voices some histories of the video game whilst rendering others silent or subordinate.

Returning to the theoretical possibility, these origins of the video game and gamer offer an exciting dialectical opportunity for machphrasis; from the regressive, neoliberal, gatekeeping bile and spleen of the gamer identity, its antithesis may burst to model more progressive machphrastic possibilities. A theoretical sister to such could be the cyborg, on which Donna Haraway and Katherine N. Hayles are pertinent luminaries. For Hayles, 'central to the construction of the cyborg are informational pathways connecting the organic body' – the sensual, phenomenal origin – to 'its prosthetic extensions' (1999, p. 2), allowing the body to push beyond normative, organic sense data into thinking, feeling, sensing anew. Through such thinking, the video game could complete a cyborg, becoming these 'prosthetic extensions' that so excite and extend the 'organic body'. Haraway, stating that 'the cyborg is our ontology' by it being the 'condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation' (2016, p. 7), is no

less ambitious, completing the explicit shift to the ontological that Hayles, in her recourse to origins, only implies. The cyborg under the auspices of both thinkers becomes both the imaginary idea or, if idealism does not suit, the best indicator of materially being human in the late 20th and 21st centuries. However, Haraway is short with video games. Haraway casts the video games from the technological utopia because ‘the culture of video games is heavily oriented to individual competition and extraterrestrial warfare’ (2016, pp. 42–43) and so thrums with a masculine agonistic death drive that Haraway cannot rehabilitate. By offering the political judgement that video games are gross privatisations of right-wing family ideologies and militarization, Haraway appears disinclined towards any subsequent aesthetic judgement. However, given that video gaming culture is no longer quite so bound to *Space Invaders*, and by Haraway’s own admission cyborgs are ‘the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism’, which ‘are exceedingly unfaithful to their origins’ (2016, pp. 9–10), then the cybernetic unions of player and game may survive their troublesome ancestry.

Continuing, the cybernetic implant, whether literal or metaphorical, can positively or negatively transform a subject’s agency. Although these effects are sometimes non-social, caused by subjectivity being empowered/impinged by its blend with technology, it is social comprehension – how the cyborg is coded as threatening or emancipating – where fiction can intervene. Research can as well; one example of how scholarship interprets a gaming cyborg entity is as a figure with one hand in older, fleshy comprehensive modes and another in the warp of newer technological literacies, with [James Paul Gee \(2008\)](#), [Brenden Keogh \(2016\)](#) and [Tina Arduini \(2018\)](#), producing studies where video games, a cyborg subject, and new literacies collide. Plainly, sometimes the cyborg embodies a new form of learning – Neo’s journey in *The Matrix* comes to mind. However, positioning video games as the didact of new digitalised literacies is one thing, but what is being taught is equally important. As Dennis Jansen argues, if ‘what is being taught in play-as-cyborgization is not a critical engagement with cyborg-being but a mode of thinking that does not accept contingency, risk, or uncertainty’ (2020, p. 45), then the utopian dream falls at the first hurdle. Plainly again, sometimes the cyborg embodies a new way to police variables – an Agent Smith-like conformity to contest a Neo’s freedom. Fortunately, literary depiction can make its way towards play-as-cyborgization negatively. Machphrasis need not posit the gaming cyborg in the way sociological study, hypothetically, may posit it, but may instead come to it by highlighting the internal contradictions at play in gamer ideology. What appears necessary, common-sensical or sound about video gaming and the gamer becomes contingent, slantwise, and internally confused as writers experiment with constructing gamer-like identities from opposing norms, values, and circumstances. Machphrasis is a great place to reckon with this antithetical gamer construct because defining oneself via the negation of an identity naturalised by right-wing ideologies remains dangerous, as Gamergate has shown ([Mortensen, 2016](#)).

Currently, this machphrastic angle is quite underrepresented. It seems likely to arrive in force, though; as novelists become more gaming literate, their viewpoint of

society will blur with videoludified processes. This will preoccupy and distress them. Texts exploring concerns through fiction include Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, where playing video games, watching snuff films and child pornography, and bringing about ecological cataclysm intertwine in the eponymous gamer Crake Atwood (2003, pp. 77–80). Darshana Jayemanne understands Atwood's novel as 'a parable of the apotropaic potentialities of gaming in the face of contemporary biopolitics and hyper-exploitation' (2017, p. 218), and to understand the gamer's queasy aporias he believes that the "sins against videogame time" will need to be radically redefined' (2017, p. 219). He charts this confluence of aporias through the 'aesthetics of infelicity' (2017, p. 135), the vertiginous encounter with alienated performance, affect, or art that video games and video gamers can provide to fiction. Jayemanne's aesthetic of infelicity cuts to the heart of Atwood's machphrasis; it is not simply the premise of Crake-as-gamer's alienation against suffering that unnerves, but that fiction seems capable of modelling the relationship between gamers and games to speak to a wider transformation of sin. Sins, like birds of a feather, flock together in *Oryx and Crake*, and Atwood's machphrasis suggests a gaming sensibility from which contemporary moral repugnancy can be extrapolated. By the same process that Jayemanne positions Atwood's work as a project redefining sin against video game time, I hope there is space to redefine virtue against it as well.

Returning to Lu's machphrasis, *Warcross* is a fine example of writing experimenting with how video games shape contemporary ethical behaviour. One way Lu imagines the virtuous gamer is through reconstituting how gaming literacy concepts like hacking will function as its accessibility flattens. Traditionally, hacking is the preserve of white males and occurs in service of either that white male individual (such as with *Neuromancer's* Case) or serves ideologies propagating the status quo (as with *Ready Player One's* Wade Watts). However, *Warcross* captures in protagonist Emika Chen a less normative hacking body, exploring how hacking reconfigures ethically under more proportionally representative computing and gaming. After Chen's friend Annie Patridge becomes subject to online harassment because her schoolmates photographed her showering, Chen's hacking nous turns from a defensive measure protecting her identity in the novel's titular VR game *Warcross* into an offensive vigilantism:

I got the data of every student (and a few teachers) who'd shared the photo. School admin systems? As much a joke to break as a PC with the password Password. [...] I downloaded all of their personal info – their parents; credit card data, Social Security numbers, phone numbers, all the hateful emails and texts they'd sent anonymously to Annie, and, of course, most incriminating, their private photos. [...] Then I posted all of it online, titling it: 'Trolls in the Dungeon' (Lu, 2017, p. 73)

Complicit teachers represent the apathy that comes with institutionalisation, and the porous, complacent systems typified by a *Password* password discourage the idea that even well-meaning social structures adequately safeguard their systems, be

they pastoral, educational, or otherwise. Nothing is safe from Chen's vengeful voyeurism; vulnerabilities lay bare in familial, financial, and social spheres of public life, and whatever is 'most incriminating' about those 'private photos' alludes to a compromising peripeteia where 'revenge porn', the act of non-consensually circulating pornographic images of a person online, which usually targets women (Eckert & Metzger-Riftkin, 2020, p. 275), is concerned. Chen dissolves the communal anonymity so crucial to deviant online assaults such as revenge porn. By appending a face to the transgression, Chen achieves rarefied accountability in the context of online anonymity. One of the great challenges of ethical conduct in online spaces and video games is the essential facelessness afforded to the dissemination of information. Visual artefacts like photos circulate effortlessly in globalised, digitalised forums without ethical hinges, save for ones only tenuously connected to distributors themselves. What Chen accomplishes, then, is a little more than wish fulfilment for those assaulted from online anonymous vantage points; by unveiling these perpetrators through hacking abilities, Lu through Chen experiments with how proportionally representative gaming literacies may empower communities of women non-consensually surveilled by contemporary institutional/criminal systems.

Between Guillermo's machphrasis and my own additions, I hope to have demonstrated machphrasis' generative potential as a poetics of the video game in contemporary literary culture. I propose that contemporary literary culture's formulations do crucial work in determining the video game's cultural imaginary understood today and evolving towards the future. However, discourse on the deployment of video games in literature today – with or without machphrasis – will be incomplete, as the best of what writers have written and thought about video games in the novel is probably to come. To paraphrase Hayot, who writes that 'no one has ever imagined the Great American Video Game' (2021, p. 178), the 'Great Video Game Novel' seems destined to be such because it will frame video games in ways machphrasis cannot anticipate. What machphrasis is, I hope to have demonstrated, is a variety of urges, techniques and images endemic to late 20th/21st century writing that are explorable with respect to the deployment of video games in contemporary literary culture. As with any theoretical contribution, machphrasis needs to prove itself in the field through its applications within literary and game studies. However, I am confident the literary material under machphrastic purview will grow in quantity and sophistication as videoludifying processes multiply, as video games further entrench themselves as aesthetic objects, and as comprehending video gaming logic, sensibility, and influence comprises an increasingly important element of contemporary literacy.

It is fitting that machphrastic writing would be so indebted to ghosts. From Buckles' underappreciated thesis to the dead gamer; the auto-hauntological *Neuromancer* and Frissen et al. rejigging Karl Marx's famous opening in *The Communist Manifesto*; Caillouis' *ilinx*, which shamans used to bring about spirits; and Guillermo himself who I call upon to give the name: perhaps it could be said that a spectre is haunting literature – the spectre of video games. Spectres in western literature are commonly products of necessity. King Hamlet dies asleep, and so could only dream of that

injustice while Denmark's sovereign rot awakens him (Shakespeare, 2003, 1.4.67). In 'an intense hush in which the sounds of evening dropped' (James, 2016, p. 25), Peter Quint came to the Governess, his arrival dividing nature from its hubbub, but nature recedes here in ceremonial, complicit fashion. Or Jacob Marley's ghost, brought 'on the wings of the wind' (Dickens, 2005, p. 24) to unnatural Scrooge, whose miserliness and sin so deeply offended the universe that it enlists the elements to change him. My point is this: wronged worlds raise ghosts. It makes sense that a world defined by its videoludification, its ludic turn, would raise ghosts in the video game's image. Literature, in creating worlds about our own, would surely follow suit, with inflections and designs upon video games which challenge preconceived notions of what they are, what they mean, and how they change us and the world they inhabit. Machphrasis is one way of generating productive discourse about their ghostly footfall in contemporary literary culture.

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