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Ludic Metalepsis: Boundary Breaking, World Making, and the Interplay of Narrative and
Game

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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To me, there were always interactive elements to narrative composition and consumption. Novels read like puzzles asking me to “solve” or “decipher” their meaning. Conversely, writing stories is like *designing* a puzzle for the reader. Those mindsets drew me towards webseries adaptations of classics, such as *Frankenstein, M.D.* (2014) and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012). These shows captivated me both through their audience interactions. Characters like Lizzie Bennet and Victoria Frankenstein—not the actors (Ashley Clements and Anna Lore respectively)—had social media accounts that would converse with fans and other characters. At a glance, these characters appeared as part of the audience’s reality. The masquerade was so effective that, at one point, fans began a hacktivist campaign to take down the website set to host the “scandal” of Lydia Bennet (Mary Kate Wiles). I found the verve and excitement around this type of worldbuilding continued to make its way into my research as I encountered texts like *S.*, *Building*

Stories, and *This is Not a Game*. My current project uses this mindset to interrogate metalepsis as a practice of playful worldmaking. Working across a variety of mediums, I explore how ludic metalepsis—narrative acts that create a space for reader, text, and author to engage in play—question readerly subjectivity through textual interactions. Theorists like Espen Aarseth, Jesper Juul, Nick Montfort, and Astrid Ensslin all wrestle with tying interactivity to media and narrative. Across these scholars, there is a consistent trend of using “play” and “game” language without fully exploring the ramifications of applying *theories* of play to might bring to bear to understandings of interacting and even reading texts. I contend that overlooking these ludic elements forecloses potential theories on what play offers to questions of textual engagement, readership, narrativity, and even genre. Through graphic novels, visual novels, games, and social media spaces, I examine aspects of ludic metalepsis in acts of world-breaking and -making and reframe readerly subjectivity through a lens that acknowledges the reflexive play found in imaginative acts.

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INTRODUCTION: PLAYING TOWARD RESEARCH

Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2014) arrived in a box—a large, monopoly sized box. Sliding the lid off, I found a cache of fourteen printed materials that range from cardboard bound books to a carefully folded newspaper, to a matte lined board depicting a small apartment building through the seasons. I spread these out across my carpet, carefully arranging them by size and material. I hoped that an organizing principle would jump out at me—a label, a map, anything to indicate where I should begin. I flipped over the box and discovered a helpful diagram about where I could lose these items around my house, but no hint at which text came first. So I just started, following the story of an unnamed protagonist as she experiences love, marriage, miscarriage, and loss. When finished, I carefully stacked the materials in the box and closed it. I reread it a few days later, this time choosing an object from the box at random. I reread it a third time and attempted to organize the fourteen pieces chronologically. Reading this text became a puzzle, a narrative making quest where the pieces were laid out before me. Building Ware's stories felt like playing a game with pieces that I could touch, feel, and manipulate. More than simply a board game as metanarrative, Ware's graphic-novel-in-pieces was a more playful type of world-breaking and -making. It invited me to skim my fingers over the sheafs of paper, to rearrange the differently bound stories across the floor, to unfold a “map” like a board game as I played through each of the stories. What fascinated me with Ware's work was the heaviness and messiness of it. It begged me to consider it a part of my reality, something that wished to engage and play with the energy

of the fiction. Reading *Building Stories* became an exercise, a challenge, a puzzle to maneuver through.

This interdisciplinary project seeks to use narratology and ludology in tandem to reconfigure a readerly subjectivity that accounts for textual interactions and reactions in works like *Building Stories*. By examining texts that employ playful metalepsis (ludic metalepsis), this work considers the benefits of treating reading as a playful act between text, reader, and author. Furthermore, by shifting away from a binaric understanding of what might be considered *ludic* and what might be considered *literary*, this dissertation aims to explore how ludic metalepsis makes apparent the reflexively playfulness of imagination invoked in situated, but materially transformative, narrative-making.

Narratology, the study of narrative structure, in recent decades has built on a foundation of semiotics and structuralist ideas. Instead of focusing on language at large, it has prioritized narratives and how narratives work. Vladimir Propp's *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) begins the practice of breaking down narratives into a variety of functions and then mapping them onto Russian folktales. Ludology, the study of play, was launched in the 1940s with Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, which takes an anthropological approach to play as it relates to culture and civilization. For Huizinga, Play is a leisure activity occurring in a clearly defined space where people volunteer to participate. The act of play is one of "freedom", and involves "stepping away from one's reality" (8). Later theorists such as Roger Caillois take this a step further by taking steps to distinguish *play* from game. Caillois contends that *ludus* (roughly equivalent to game)

is not identical to *paidea* (roughly translated to play)¹ and that Huizinga fails to distinguish between play and game. Play is more unstructured and “free” (as Huizinga puts it), whereas games formalize the rules of play more strictly. Both of these foundational theorists do not separate play from the elements of narrative. Huizinga even lists “the stage” and “the screen” as two examples of the “magic circle” playground (10). While narrative is not the focus of either Caillois or Huizinga’s work, it is not explicitly excluded. *Ludic Metalepsis* uses texts like *Building Stories* to frame questions regarding the relationship between play, narrative, and world-making. What happens when texts insist—through a variety of methods—that they are “real”? What happens when texts refuse to cooperate with the reader/interactor? What can such world breaking and making allow in terms of interrogating histories that may or may not exist? What happens if these tactics are used to erode the boundary between “real” and “fictive” with the express purpose of uniting communities in their vision of this unreality? This dissertation seeks to find language to articulate the relationship between play and narrative when considering texts that are decidedly playful.

While many theorists attempt to juggle these two fields, the primary application is of narratology to digital texts and games, never the reverse (ludology to literary texts). This project argues that such an approach ignores aspects of cross media contamination, ignores how digital media has begun to affect print. It affords little exchange between the two fields. Since Frasca’s intervention in the early 2000s, ludic studies have mostly

¹ *Paidia* formally translates as training the physical and mental faculties (“Paideia” Merriam-Webster) or culture of society (OED). Caillois builds off the idea of physical and mental exploration inherent in *paidea* and relates it back to play.

remained limited to the game studies field. There has arguably been some cross over with works such as Astrid Ensslin's *Literary Gaming*, but even these theories tend to consider the ludic and literary separately. Influential theorists as varied as Ryan, Aarseth, and Juul approach the ludic aspect of reading, toeing the boundary between these two fields but never fully crossing over and interrogating it. There is not an outright omission of the idea; rather, there is hesitancy to bring the two fields back together after the only ever tentative separation of narrative and play in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Aarseth's work in *Cybertexts* (1997) grapples with term "interactive" as it relates to digital texts. Aarseth by no means throws out narrative full sail but prioritizes textual and medial form as opposed to narrative form, dynamics, and reception. Dissatisfied with the term "interactive", Aarseth coins "cybertexts" and "ergodic literature" as a way to account for texts that "posit[...] the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of a literary exchange" (1). Nick Montfort's work in *Twisty Little Passages* (2003) traces a genealogy of interactive fiction (IF) such as adventure point and click games but limits its analysis to electronic media. Montfort uses the term "interactor" to describe what many consider the "player" of these fictions, implying similarities between *playing* with a text and *engaging* or *interacting* with it.

Again, while not ignoring narrative entirely, the game and textual functionality takes precedence over narrative. Marie Laure-Ryan's work in collection *Narrative Across Media: The Language of Storytelling* (2004) and *Avatars of Story* (2006) continues this line of thought through exploring the functionality of digital media. *Avatars of Story* is thus bifurcated into two sections, "Old Media," and "New Media" as an organizing

principle. The book does not maintain this division, even going so far as to note the exchanges and overlap between these two areas. While “Old Media” and “New Media” do not directly align with “narratology” and “ludology” what Ryan’s work demonstrates is a hesitation to embrace the exchange of forms, strategies, and techniques across media. Such hesitation is not present in her early work, *Possible Worlds* where she makes frequent references and analysis of fiction as a game (see chapter one for a more thorough exploration of this notion). Ryan’s later theories switch to questions of new media, digital media, and media analysis. I found her work with Liz Hauskin in *Narrative Across Media* surprising in its scholarly warning for “media blindness”, the instinct to analyze various media together and ignore the mode of transmission (digital media, hypertext, computer game) for the sake of an oversimplified conclusion. While such caution is fair, I find it limiting when considering of how texts inform each other in subject matter and presentation.

Such cross-media contamination borders on questions of intermediality and transmediation. Intermediality a term appearing in media scholarship around the mid to early 2000s. According to Irina O. Rajewsky, intermediality distinguishes itself from transmedia “crossing the borders between media” (6). Transmedia storytelling, introduced by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* (2008), prioritizes productions of storylines, properties, and franchises across multiple media platforms, often focusing on the use of digital technologies. While the transmedia approach examines how storytelling occurs over multiple platforms—often multiple mediums—it does not engage with whether or not those mediums interact beyond the scope of story. This approach

continues to think of these mediums as wholly separate entities connected only by the story. Transmedia occurs *across* multiple platforms, implying that there is story interaction but they do not necessitate a crossing of the boundary between “fiction” and “reality”.² In other words, Jenkins’s analysis does not account for stories that pretend to be from the reader’s reality. The platforms may influence the type of story being told or the way its told, but they do not infect each other with different storytelling techniques. Jenkins stresses that the primary thrust of *Convergence Culture* is understanding convergence as “a culture shift as consumers are encourage to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (3) and contrasts “participatory culture” with “older notions of passive media spectatorship” (3). This type of division continues into the works of theorists such as Astrid Ensslin, whose *Literary Gaming* (2008) proposes a ludicity-literary continuum on which digital media can be tracked. Moreover, intermediality, while more aligned with this project’s idea of media-contamination, takes a purely media studies approach to these ideas. My project differs by approaching cross media contamination as a concept that acknowledges how mediums begin to affect and shape each other. In her book *Paper Knowledge* (2014), Lisa Gitelman proposes “the histories of genres and the histories of media...intersect, constituting partial and mutual conditions for one another” (10). The crux of Reider’s and Gitelman’s arguments is about looking at how these elements affect each other in form, content, and expectation. Where transmedia and intermediality studies focuses on media crossing or transgressing what is expected of a given medium, my project seeks to

² Rajewsky also uses the trans/across distinction in their research.

interrogate the intersections, to use Gitelman's terminology, of different mediums and what occurs at those intersections.

The history of narratology (the study of narrative) and ludology (the study of play) is a complex and angry tango. While foundational ludologists like Huizinga and Caillois referenced narrative in their analysis of play, the early 21st century saw a separation in the two fields that continues strong. Game studies, specifically video game studies, initially launched with scholars analyzing games through a narratology lens, focusing on the story over mechanics. Gonzalo Frasca's work "Ludology and Narratology: Similitude and differences between (video)game and Narratives" (1999) calls for a video games to be studied not through a narratology lens but through a ludic one. Frasca argues that despite all the similarities, games should be analyzed through a ludic lens first and foremost. This work, and others like it, marks a split between ludology and narratology. Frasca later claims this split was neither important nor defining of the field, but I think such an perspective overlooks how this work shaped the roots of digital media and video game research. Digital media scholars began shifting towards narratology where game studies scholars towards ludology. The divide was permeable, where different theories would osmosis their way into each field, but there is a marked hesitation to applying theories of play and theories of game to the study of narrative—be it digital or material. Jesper Juul's takes up this fraught history in the introduction to *Half-Real* by noting that theories in the mid 2000s began to move toward "something of a middle ground where the unique qualities of games are not denied, but the function of the fiction or story in a game can still be discussed" (16). Working from Aarseth, Susana

Tosca , and Ragnhild Tronstad, Juul notes the quest as a central theoretical figure for uniting narrative and game. Even this “middle ground” proposed by Juul suffers from the problem that this happy “middle ground” is where narratology and ludology meet. It reads more as a validation that both sides of the argument rather than examining whether or not ludology and narratology can work synchronously. This struggle continues with Theorists like Aarseth and Montfort, both of whom try to bridge elements of game and play. While Aarseth explores the ideas of cybertexts, Montfort’s work grapples with ideas of interactive fiction (IF). Both of these scholars exemplify the bridging but not necessarily exchange of ludic and narratological fields. They discuss narrative and mechanics, the theories read as if there is a sharp divide between these two fields that cannot be reconciled. Even Jenkins acknowledges how transmedia’s spectators “play” (3) in a new media landscape, yet there is little to no discussion of play theories in that study. If over time there has been hesitant acceptance of theorizing narrative material and value in interactive games, still, I contend that theorists overlook the potentiality of applying the ludic to narrative as such, and in narrative intermediation. What elements of play are present in narratives and what can be gained by examining through ludic perspective?

This project began as a fascination with texts that invited readers to play with them and moves forward to reframe our understanding of the reader as an active participant alongside the author and text. Specifically, the texts examined in this dissertation *break* their expected fictional boundaries and *make* new ones for the reader to inhabit and play in. In this way, they not just metaleptic but *ludically metaleptic*. I offer ludic metalepsis as a term that accounts both for the disruption of expected reader

engagement through narrative progress *and* the creation of new worlds that closely align with the readers reality so much so that it begs them to question their own positionality.

Metalepsis sits at the center of this focus of this project for two reasons. Firstly, it offers a device and strategy that is present in both print and digital media texts. Secondly, metalepsis is, in many ways, inherently playful. There is a magic to metalepsis, specifically ontological metalepsis. This narrative move requires a transgression of boundaries. The term *metalepsis* derives from the Greek prefix *meta*, meaning change, transformation, permutation, or substitution (OED). In the 1980s, Gérard Genette remarks that metalepsis is an “intrusion” that ultimately “produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical...or fantastical” (*Narrative Discourse* 254-5). For a metalepsis to occur, a boundary must be set and a boundary must be crossed to provoke an audience reaction (in Genette’s case, comedy and strangeness). Another way to think of this in terms of ludology, is that there is an assumed rule of fiction—that the narrative exists in and only in its container—and metalepsis seeks to break that rule. Peter Hutchinson’s book, *Games Authors Play* (1983), which tracks the different ways authors invoke play through literary devices, does not include a chapter on metalepsis. Hutchinson identifies three “games” authors employ with readers: enigmas (puzzles and mysteries), parallel games (i.e. the chess games found in *Queen’s Gambit*), and narrative devices (23). Despite referencing a range of narrative devices from red herrings to puns, Hutchinson makes no direct mention of metalepsis. The closest he comes to discussing it is the self-conscious narrator (32). Why does Hutchinson overlook metalepsis? Hutchinson, despite being in apparent

dialogue with Genette, did not take up what, in retrospect, emerges as the deepening problematic of metalepsis in narrative and play art in contemporary media.

The potential of metalepsis is explored later by Ryan, who acknowledges the transgressive and playful potential of metalepsis in her work *Avatars of Story*. Ryan distinguishes two types of metalepsis: rhetorical and ontological. For her, ontological metalepsis is one that transgresses beyond the storyworld, or the diegetic realm in which the story takes place. Compared to a rhetorical metalepsis (the equivalent of a dramatic aside to the audience), an ontological metalepsis crosses between one or more “narrative layers” and “contaminates” the stack. Ryan’s stack demonstrates two things. Firstly, it demonstrates how vital the notion of boundary crossing is to metalepsis. This parallels the importance of boundaries Huizinga and Caillois place on the idea of play and game. Second, it demonstrates a failure to acknowledge this new boundary as something “fantastical” and playful. The term ontological metalepsis points readers to questions of being and existence. Ryan views the boundary crossing metalepsis as one where the reader questions the text’s own being.

However, even in her example, Ryan creates a new boundary made by “metaleptic contamination.” I observe that Ryan’s use of ontological metalepsis points to, but doesn’t yet quite fully identify, the potential of this new stack [I think being less contentious in general will be a good idea – people cited here may well want to read this dissertation, so be as fair as possible]. In diagram provided by Ryan, noticed the stack name has changed—it is no longer World 2 and World 1, but World 1/2. We can take this a step further by noting that in Ryan’s diagram, “World 1” consists of the Author and

Reader and “World 2” consists of the beginning of a text. The visuals make it clear that, after metaleptic contamination, the three primary components of reading (author, text, reader) are now bounded in a single space. I suggest that this new “space” is a site is more ludic than ontological because it offers narrative acts that create a space for reader, text, and author to interact in a playful manner. It is within this space that acts of world-making occur as a method of reframing how readers interact with texts.

By focusing on ludic metalepses, I use narrative playfulness to reframe the relationships between author, reader, and text – relationships that are both crucial to leaning and mastering historical narratives as well as adapting to and mastering contemporary and emerging media. The roles in reading (author, reader, text) are often configured in a linear fashion. There is the agent who creates a text, the text itself, and an agent who later encounters the text – perhaps reconfigured, or re-platformed. What I call the “literary” approach uses the terms author, text, and reader respectively; the Berlo SMRC communication model includes entities such as sender, message, and receiver;³ and a capitalist/materialist approach looks at it through the lens of producer, product, and consumer. Ludic metalepsis matters as a site of meaning making where reader responses helps to redefine information, medium, and economic determinations. Thus, this project explores ludic metalepsis to hypothesize a playful reader capable of shifting between and adapting to the affordances of distinct media forms and experiences and revaluing their complex dynamics.

³ Because David Berlo’s work was focused on technical communications, it also features more steps to the communication process, and more agents that do them. These include encoder (transmitter which converts message into signal, decoder (reception place of the signal), noise (message interrupted by external noise) and feedback (to confirm the receiver has an accurate message).

A Note on Methodology and Terms

In some ways, my choice of texts began at a very personal level based on my interactions with each text. What books captivated me? What games haunted me? Which stories lingered in my mind, my hands, my body, and why? Texts that left me questioning *how* I interacted with them became the basis of selecting objects of study for this project. Some I encountered by happenstance (such as *S.* and *Building Stories*), others through recommendation (such as *Poison*) and other still through assigned course materials (such as *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*). For the final chapter, I modeled my selection after research done by journalists, podcast creators, YouTube video essayists, and academic researchers. The chapters are organized roughly by constructing a definition of ludic metalepsis, applications of the term in fictional spaces, and applications of the term in digital spaces.

Throughout these chapters, I rely heavily on the term “reader” to describe the person who engages, consumes, reads, and encounters a text. Occasionally, I will also include terms such as “interactor” and “participant” for the same role. I do this to acknowledge the complex relationship between the notions of “read” and “play”. Part of reading fiction specifically requires imaginative acts to construct worlds in which characters, settings, and plots take place—something Ryan acknowledges in *Possible Worlds* (1992). By comingling “reader”, “interactor”, and participant I wish not to erase their differences (because they *can* operate differently); rather, I seek to draw attention to the similarities between these functions that become more apparent with playful texts.

A World Map to this Project

Each chapter of this dissertation helps move towards understanding how ludic metalepsis facilitates the breaking of boundaries and remaking them into a new space of textual engagement. Furthermore, beyond reconsidering readerly subjectivity through play, this project also moves towards examining readerly ethics as it relates to meaning-making practices. A large impetus for the latter half of this dissertation arose from the public reactions to real world events such as the COVID-19 Pandemic and the January 6th riot. What began mostly as a formalist project then began to question how meaning-making methods are employed by creators, authors, and the media.

The first chapter defines ludic metalepsis and explores how it problematizes linear paradigms of reading, revealing questions of interactivity as part of textual engagement. I trace the historical divide between narratological and ludic fields and identify a trend of separating these two fields in critical analysis. Gonzalo Frasca's essay "Ludology and Narratology: Similitude and differences between (video)game and Narratives" (1999) begins the trend of separating theories of play and narrative in game studies. This divide was permeable, where different theories would osmosis their way into each field, but there is a marked hesitation to applying theories of play and theories of game to the studies of narrative and media. Theorists like Espen Aarseth, Jesper Juul, Nick Montfort, and Astrid Ensslin all wrestle with tying interactivity to media and narrative. Across these scholars, there is a consistent trend of using "play" and "game" language without pushing analysis farther than an offhand mention. Overlooking these ludic elements forecloses potential theories on what play offers to questions of textual engagement, readership,

narrativity, and even genre. Ludic metalepsis necessitates acts of world-breaking and -making as it invites the reader to play with, in, and between fictive spaces.

The second chapter then considers how ludic metalepsis facilitates world *breaking* by examining Chris Wooding's young adult novel *Poison* (2006) and Dan Salvato's horror game *Doki Doki Literature Club* (2017). The climax of each text sees the main character, aware of the fictionality of themselves and their universe, halting narrative progression by choosing to do nothing. Rather than agreeing to enter what Huizinga calls the magic circle, each protagonist takes on the role of "spoilsport" in their attempts to regain agency. They refuse to cooperate with the reader's intent to progress through the story and world. *Poison* and *Doki Doki Literature Club* demonstrate how uncooperative texts can intentionally "spoil" narrative expectations. My analysis examines the ways in which ideas of rejection are used as methods of communicating and expression agency. Dabbling in glitch theory and cyberfeminism, this chapter explores the potential of the liminal story spaces offered by ludic metalepsis. The protagonists of both texts are teenage girls attempting to regain agency they have been denied as "characters" in larger "story". They fight against the reader and the act of reading as acts of rebellion, interrogating authorship, authority, and the power dynamics of being "characters" to the consumer's "reader" or "player".

The third chapter moves towards analyzing how, once boundaries are broken, ludic metalepsis reforges them in an act of world *making*. I question how *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (Sonny Liew 2015) plays with archives as a fictional genre of historical reflection. Liew's graphic narrative retroactively creates an artistic legacy and

tradition through the fictional cartoonist Charlie. Following the work of Abigail de Kosnik in *Rogue Archives* (2016) and Weihsin Gui's essay "Braiding Stories" (2016), this chapter considers what space can be made when blurring the lines between fiction and reality. Liew's Charlie lived through the political turmoil of the People's Action Party's (PAP) rise to power and recounts his "life story" to Liew's curious, cartoon avatar. Similar to texts like *S.* and *Doki Doki Literature Club*, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* masquerades as nonfiction, as objects and materials collected from the reader's lived reality despite being entirely fictional. I contend that Liew employs ludic metalepsis as a means of history invention and intervention. Building on Gui's terminology of a "conservator's repertoire", Liew's work simultaneously preserves and rewrites pieces of Singaporean history in the space of this graphic narrative. The simultaneity of biofictional "artifacts" and comic recreations of Charlie's life within the page-space articulate a playful potential that could be found in archival fiction. This framework also questions the postcolonial potential of a technique like ludic metalepsis. It analyzes what is gained when a creator like Liew decides to (re)construct a history that allows for a detailed interrogation of Singapore's national narrative.

While the previous chapters explore the potential of *fictional* world-breaking and -making to create liminal spaces that interrogate authority, the final chapter combines these strategies explored in the previous chapters to analyze "bad faith" expressions of ludic metalepsis. Specifically, this chapter examines *unethical* practices of world-breaking and -making as a means of weaponized unreality. This chapter opens with discussions Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of "bad faith" (*Essays in Existentialism*, 1972) and

Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Buterman's examination of media manipulation to help spread fascists ideologies (*Prophets of Deceit*, 1949). By interrogating documentation from and leading up to the January 6th insurrection, radical right-wing websites, social media exchanges between extremist groups, and rhetorical practices within these groups' communications, this chapter examines how play and ludic metalepsis manifest through everyday narrative making. The discursive strategies used to radicalize and indoctrinate individuals display many similarities to the ludic strategies invoked in the previous chapters. For example, radicalized individuals often rely on a different set of "win conditions" than those found in larger debate circles. Working with theorists such as Adrienne Massanari, Gregory Bateson, and Michael Warner, this chapter explores how media participation and interaction allows ludic metalepsis to create an unreality rather than a fictional imaginary for participants to immerse themselves in.

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CHAPTER 1
LUDIC METALEPSIS:
PLAYING WITH READERSHIP IN *S.* AND *BUILDING STORIES*

Introduction

In 2018, Netflix released a special, ninety-minute, episode of *Black Mirror* titled *Bandersnatch*. The episode progresses based on a series of choices made by the viewer and story's protagonist. The "interactive film", as writer Charlie Brooker deems it, won awards that ranged from a Primetime Emmy for "Outstanding Television Movie," to a Nebula for "Best Game Writing," to the Broadcasting Press Guild TV and Radio's "Innovation Award." Viewers marveled at the ability to affect narrative change. Was *Bandersnatch* a TV show? A film? A game? People buzzed about *Bandersnatch*, but a popular question that surfaced was how you chose to watch the film. Some went through exploring the narrative options. Some settled into their couch with their remote in hand. Some watched on their laptop so they could drag their mouse over to the preferred option. Others still recorded each decision and result, constructing flowcharts of the plot. Euphoria swept through viewers at their ability to sit in the narrative driver's seat—to play with the narrative. In moments when *Bandersnatch* looks back at its viewer, questions shifted to not *who* was watching but *how* they were watching.

While the public and critics hailed *Bandersnatch* as innovative, it is not exactly groundbreaking. The film mobilizes mechanics found in interactive fiction and older choose-your-own-adventure print books. "Interactive" texts ask the complex question of what it means to be a *reader* of a text that responds to the very act of readerly choices. Nick Montfort's *Twisty Little Passages* creates a genealogy and terminology of interactive fiction and stresses the joy found in textual revelation (3). Montfort uses the

term “interactor” throughout his book “to emphasize that the actions of reading, writing, playing, and figuring out are all involved in such operation or use” (3). What becomes apparent with both the acclaim of *Bandersnatch* and Montfort’s work is that the analysis stops short of extending to print culture. The closest Montfort comes is comparing the puzzles of interactive fiction to acts of narrative disclosure (3), yet he hesitates to extend certain theories and languages to print fictional narratives. Specifically, there is hesitancy to embrace texts that appear *literary* with theories of play and game.

Many scholars note the parallels between play and story, yet often they employ such analysis to justify the inclusion of games, digital texts, and interactive fictions in academic scholarship. This chapter is, by no means, claiming that such projects are unnecessary. Rather, this chapter seeks to examine how such moments of justification, like those seen in Montfort’s work, led to a theoretical separation of play and narrative. Despite a rich history of games and interactive fiction working materially, theories of play and theories of narrative have remained relatively separate for the past decade. In many ways, print texts respond to this exclusion by employing techniques found in interactive fiction, digital media, and games. Scholarship that limits its analysis to digital texts and offering no reciprocity towards media that is not considered “digital”, “televisual”, or “new” overlooks the potential considering textual engagement and readerly subjectivity as something playful.

This chapter examines two such texts, Chris Ware’s graphic novel *Building Stories* (2012) and Doug Dorst and JJ Abrams’s *S.* (2014), to question how theories of narrative and play can be brought together. What does such a combination yield when

examining the reader, viewer, or “interactor” as Montfort calls it? How have theorists wrestling with the term such as interactive relate to theories of readership? Is there a difference between player and reader? I turn to Johan Huizinga’s seminal work *Homoludens* to reconsider the necessity of theorizing the reader as player especially when faced with texts that engage with playful acts of engaging the reader through breaking into their world and/or creating a new one that feels akin to reality.

A Metaleptic Interlude: The Language of Play in Narratology and Media Studies

When Huizinga published his *Homo Ludens* (1949), his anthropological approach to play and game were not divorced from narrative. Huizinga defines play as a free, voluntary act that is distinct from ordinary life and not connected to any material interest (8). There is no mention or exclusion of narrative from this idea. In fact, when defining what constitutes a play-space Huizinga writes that

All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the “consecrated spot” cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (10).

Huizinga’s magic circle includes stage shows and a mediated form of storytelling—the screen—implying that, while these forbidden spots are “isolated”, there are viewers, readers, and spectators. Courts of justice have seats for the public, stages have seats for the audience, and arenas are built for spectators and athletes. More importantly, Huizinga’s “magic circle” as much a narrative-setting device as a play-setting. He includes the stage and screen, places that often transmit narrative, stories, and fictions.

Similarly, Roger Caillois's *Man, Play, and Games* (1961) did not separate narrative from the ideas of game (play informed by rules, *paidia*) and play (unstructured, *ludus*). *Paidia* and *ludus* might be distinct types of structured and unstructured play, yet Caillois did not exclude that narrative in his four types of games (agon, alea, mimicry, illinx). Although one or more of these game-types might be more suited for narrative, narrative is not *excluded* from these definitions. Caillois' period features increasing interest in narrative and literary play from earlier centuries, but that is beyond the scope of this current project.

In the late 20th century, ludic studies shifted away from narrative as the nascent videogame studies field emerged and sought acceptance in academia. Greg Costikyan's "I Have No Words & I Must Design," distinguishes games from stories based on their linearity (stories are linear; games are not) (1994, 194),⁴ and Gonzalo Frasca's "Ludology Meets Narratology" (*Parnasso* 1999) implores scholars to include more ludic critical analysis of videogames by demonstrating how ludology can complement narratological. This sentiment echoes forward in Jesper Juul's *Half-Real* (2005) which takes up the fraught history of narratology and ludology as it urges theorists toward "something of a middle ground where the unique qualities of games are not denied but the function of the

⁴ In a 2002 edition of the same essay, Costikyan conveys similar, if restrained sentiment. When discussing the structure of games compared to stories, he characterizes a "story" as "one-dimensional, because you can follow only a single path through a story" and a game as something that "*shapes* player behavior; it does not determine it" (2002, 20). Despite almost a decade passing (with all the technological advancements that accompany it), Costikyan sustains the notion of a fundamental, possibly irreconcilable difference between game and story. Such logic ignores reader interactions with a story. They might skip around, they might choose to "quit" before the conclusion, they might choose to read the narrative backwards. While arguably this is not reading the story "on its own terms", such intentional (mis)readings indicate how uncooperative readers demonstrate the "freedom" of the reader.

fiction or story in a game can still be discussed” (16). While he does not abandon narrative studies, Juul proposes an elusive “middle ground” that sits equally between the two fields. Such language implies that narratology and ludology are oppositional frameworks. Astrid Ensslin’s *Literary Gaming* (2014) continues this line of thought with the ludicity and literary (L-L) spectrum (45). Her hypothesis suggests that there is only one place where the ludic and literary meet at equal proponents. The concept of a “middle ground” forecloses any analysis of play and narrativity being deeply entangled, especially when it comes to questions of readers, fictions, and fictional worlds.

The hesitancy to theorize play and narrative is not unique to game studies. “Play” and “game” crop up as frequent descriptors in media studies, yet media studies and narratology often stop short of invoking play theories. Espen Aarseth’s work on ergodic literature proposes a term “cybertext” to account for textual organization based on “the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of a literary exchange” (*Cybertexts* 1). Aarseth maintains that concepts of “reading” do not account for the cybertextual process where “the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence” (1). Ergodic literature, therefore, is literature that requires a “nontrivial effort” from the reader to traverse a text (1). Aarseth’s user *must* retain some agency over the text. Such theorizations mirror popular ideas of players as retaining some type of agency over a video game—be it through exploration, narrative decision making, and/or character presentation. Marie Laure-Ryan’s work in *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (1991) offers a thorough description of fiction through the language, theory, and mechanics of make-believe play (23-4), yet her later essay “Will New Media Produce

New Narratives?” (2004) shies away from similar language when considering digital media.⁵ This essay offers definitions of interactivity based on 21st century digital text forms. Ryan notes that digital media is characterized by its reactive and interactive nature. Her essay develops two spectrums for understanding different types of interactivity in digital media: internal/external and exploratory/ontological.⁶

Internal/external involvement details how users see themselves in a relationship to the text’s imagined world; exploratory/ontological involvement relates to movement through the textual container and recording (or not) these decisions within the text (339). Both Aarseth and Ryan acknowledge the user’s agency in these situations, yet neither acknowledges the full potential of conceptualizing a *reader* as a *player*. Players are seen as retaining some type of agency over a video game—be it through exploration, narrative decision making, and/or character presentation.

The digital media definitions of “interactivity”, while helpful, prove insufficient. Their focus maintains a strict delineation of reader/subject and text/object while simultaneously shortchanging the role (or lack of one) from the creator/author.⁷ As N.

⁵ Indeed, the entire first part of *Possible Worlds* is titled “The Fictional Game”, and this section alludes to that terminology multiple times—even going so far as to note the “ludic” qualities of intertextuality (54). However, I find Ryan’s earlier work interesting in considering the connections between fiction, story-making, game, and play.

⁶ While Ryan uses the term “spectrum,” “axis” is more appropriate for the ideas in her essay. Ryan does not claim that internal/external and exploratory/ontological are mutually exclusive, renaming these spectrums as axes might be more helpful in seeing where and how these ideas intersect and what is offered at these intersection points.

⁷ Iser interestingly identified a similar problem occurring when considering reading from the “critic’s approach”. For Iser, such a practice is “characterized by the division between subject and object which applies to the acquisition of knowledge” (9). Although *knowledge* is the object instead of *text*, his critiques about literary theorists at the time parallel my own when considering questions of interactivity as it relates to texts that attempt to playfully engage readers in their world.

Katherine Hayles remarks in *Writing Machines*, many of these interactive texts clearly comment on—if not aim to destabilize—the power hierarchy in reading, maintaining the Western understanding of author as authority. Segregating the three primary elements that compose a reading (author, text, reader), ignores a key feature of interactive texts: that of collaboration. Ryan, Aarseth, and Hayles position the reader as a navigator of the text. The act of reading, whether it requires a “nontrivial effort” or not, hinges on how the audience maneuvers through the fiction. By focusing on navigability, these theories remove the potential of the reader *as* player, collaborator, and (in some ways), cocreator. Play is a reflexive part of engaging in fiction and constructing of fictional worlds. If we consider the act of reading as an act of textual cooperation between reader and author—as *play* between reader and author—it becomes more apparent that we must reconfigure the author/reader/text levels of interaction in a way that is more playful and game-like. The author, reader, and text must “meet” to interact. This notion dovetails from Wolfgang von Iser’s conclusions that reading is, at its core, an *interaction*, and meaning, *an experience*:

Such a meaning must clearly be the product of an *interaction* between the textual signal and the reader’s acts of comprehension. And equally clearly, the reader cannot detach himself from such an interaction; on the contrary, the activity stimulated in him will link him to the text and induce him to create the conditions necessary for the effectiveness of that text. As text and reader merge into *a single situation*, the division between subject and object no longer applies, and therefore, it follows that meaning is no longer an object to be defined but is an effect to be *experienced*. (*The Act of Reading* 9-10, emphasis mine).

Iser’s theory complicates the claims forwarded Costikayan; if we consider reading *interactive*—meaning deriving from a *situation* or *experience*—then, arguably, the act of reading constructs temporary worlds. The imaginative act of world making reflexively invoke play because the reader is invited into and engages with this magic circle. *S.* and

Building Stories both use their materiality to transgress *into* the reader's world during the act of reading. They attempt to push beyond their narrative containers. In other words, they are a form of metalepsis.

Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980) characterizes metalepsis as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse...produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical...or fantastic" (254-5). The reflexivity of metalepsis forces readers to understand both a narrative's fictiveness and their own role constructing it. The opposite of Genette's claim is true as well: not only does metalepsis ask the reader *do you belong to a narrative*, it also asks *is the text, in some aspects, real*. The challenge to narrativity works both ways. What happens, then, when this step moves beyond narration? What happens when metalepsis is pushed to playful limits?

For there is play in metalepsis. Genette observes that the works of Pirandello, Genet, and Robbe-Grillet (all of which appear in the earlier moment when Caillois first took up a critique of Huizinga)

All these games, by the intensity of their effects, demonstrate the importance of the boundary they tax their ingenuity to overstep, in defiance of verisimilitude—a boundary *that is precisely the narrating (or the performance) itself*: a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells and the world of which one tells. (236)

Genette's language invokes game and play, yet the larger ramifications of connecting play with metalepsis are left unexplored. He connects narrative metalepses with performance (playing a role), individuals (players), and game. These techniques, which "defy" verisimilitude offered by diegetic worldbuilding, use a shifting boundary to point

the reader back to themselves. Narrative metalepsis requires the reader to acknowledge stepping into a fictive space *or* pushes the fictive area onto the reader. It is that outward push that disrupts and confronts readers. Genette even concludes the power of metalepsis “lies in this hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative” (236). Metalepsis forces readers to recognize a divide between the imaginary constructed world of the narrative and the world in which they encounter the texts. The texts

Ryan’s work in *Avatars of Story* furthers metaleptic analysis while pushing towards ideas of interactive narrative. Ryan distinguishes two different types of metalepses: ontological and rhetorical. Rhetorical metalepsis is often, quick, brief and linguistic (she uses Genette’s writings as examples of this metalepsis), where ontological metalepsis challenges the reader to reorient themselves by “open[ing] a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration or mutual contamination” (207, see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). Ryan reasons that the boundary between these narratives must be “ontological: a switch between two radically distinct worlds such as ‘the real’ versus ‘the imaginary’ or the world of ‘normal’ (or lucid mental activity versus the world of dream or hallucination)” (207). Such challenges do not rupture the readers reality but provide a moment of expansion on what the reader could consider fiction.

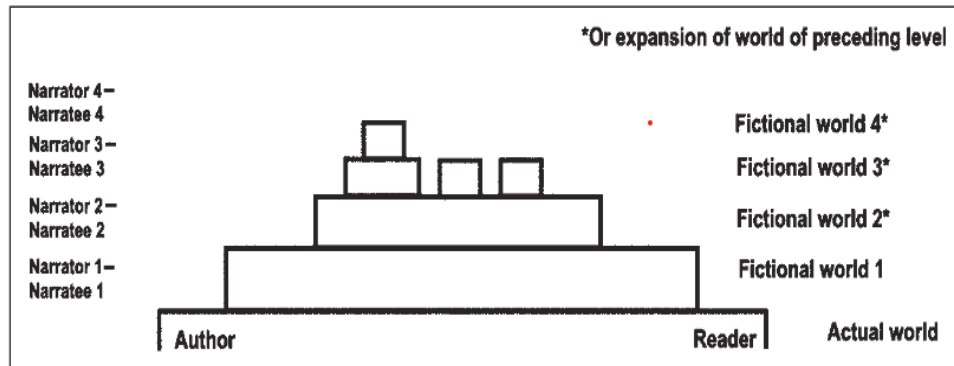


Figure 1. Ryan’s narrative stack to visualize how metalepsis functions (*Avatars of Story* 205).

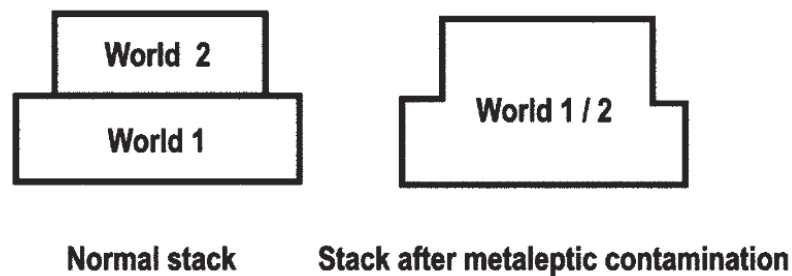


Figure 2. The contamination that occurs with ontological metalepsis (*Avatars of Story* 208).

Interestingly, Ryan lists the metalepsis chapter under her “New Media” section. She justifies this choice as a form of reconnecting old and new media (xxiii), reasoning the metaleptic process through programming. However, I contend that there is something larger at work here. While Ryan regards interactivity as a “distinctive property of digital environments” (xxiii), her metaleptic chapter identifies the interactive potential of “older” mediums such as print. *S.* and *Building Stories*, while both contemporary pieces, are decidedly *undigital* texts. Both express a love of printed tactility; they are heavy materials

that invite the reader to turn and twist their head, to rearrange each piece as they navigate through the narrative.

Jeff Thoss's work in "Unnatural Narrative and Metalepsis: Grant Morrison's *Animal Man*," pushes ontological metalepsis farther by proposing metaleptic prototypes, one of which relies on feigned transgressions between the storyworld and reality (190).⁸

Thoss notes

This...prototype refers to situations where a narrative suggests a paradoxical continuity between a storyworld and the real world of its recipients. I say "suggests" because obviously fiction and reality cannot really merge this way...but there is no reason for a narrative to not claim the opposite, or for readers not to go along with such a claim for as long as they are engaged in the game of make-believe. (198)

While a break between fiction and reality is technically impossible, the reader chooses to "buy" into this transgression as part of "game of make-believe." Thoss uses the term "game" casually, but it is the linchpin of this metalepsis. This metalepsis moves beyond suspending disbelief. It demands that readers "buy-in", that they cooperate with this "act of make-believe". The reader becomes a player, joining the masquerade.

S. and *Building Stories* both, very differently, employ this type of metalepsis. *Building Stories* (2012), contained in a single cardboard box, consists of various printed elements that draw attention to the reader's material and imaginative construction. For its part, the bound volume of *S.* (2014) follows two students of Fordham University conversing through annotations into the margins of V.M. Straka's novel *Ship of Theseus*

⁸ Thoss's work builds from a scholarship in "unnatural narratology." Such a term emerged as Brian Richardson's and Jan Alber's reaction to Monika Fludernik's idea of "natural narratology" which did not account for anti-mimetic texts. See Alber's "The Diachronic Development of Unnaturalness: A New View on Genre" (2011) and Richardson's "What is Unnatural Narrative Theory?" (2011).

(both of which are creations for the story *S.*). To read these novels requires strategy. You must navigate through these stories by arranging pages, rearranging them, and then following another narrative thread. How then should we approach *S.*, *Building Stories*, and (by extension), Thoss's metaleptic prototype? The material transgressions of these two texts seem like ontological transgressions, but more occurs than opening a passage between two narrative levels. Returning to figures 1 and 2, World 1 (the world of the author and reader) begins entirely separate from World 2 (the world within the fiction text); after ontological metalepsis, there is a new boundary *around* World 1/2. It is all contained within a new but singular space. A space where the text, reader, and author exist on the same level. What Ryan's ontological metalepsis fails to account for is this new space, World 1/2. She describes the metaleptic transgression as a passage, yet visually it is represented as a new space altogether. A space that leans towards the ludic rather than the ontological. Where the term ontological focuses on what boundaries were crossed, I propose that the term of *ludic metalepsis* allows us to examine how the boundary created by certain metaleptic transgressions resituates the relationship between author, reader, and text. And it is not a new space altogether, necessarily, but a set of dynamics that can be in some sense "undone" given further meaning making and unmaking. Where ontological metalepsis prioritizes the boundary being transgressed, ludic metalepsis acknowledges the playful potential of the created spaces which can occur in digital and/or material texts. In the case of *S.* and *Building Stories*, ludic metalepsis occurs when a text pushes its world *toward* the reader and, in doing so, acknowledges acts of imagination as reflexively playful for reader, writer, and text.

While this term parallels Ensslin and Bell's "interactional metalepsis" (*Digital Fiction and the Unnatural* 2022), I contend that by limiting analysis to *just* digital texts ignores the dialectical relationship narrative has in media rich environment. Early 2000s media scholarship warns of media blindness (Ryan and Hausken), a trend where scholars make assumptions in spite of media specificity. Even in the wake of transmedia storytelling, scholarship hesitates to compare more digitally inclined texts—such as cybertexts (Aarseth) or technotexts (Hayles)—with a printed novel, despite the functional similarities. Marsha Kinder's essay "Screen Wars: Transmedia Appropriations from Eisenstein to a *TV Dante* and *Carmen Sandiego*," (1997) notes that television's hegemony over modes of communication and entertainment was being disrupted by the introduction of the computer. Her close reading of the *Carmen Sandiego* show, a children's educational computer game adapted into a 1994 television series, reflects on the temporal disjunction of television, reflecting that "television is as a time machine...provid[ing] an illusory sense of interactivity and control (177). While television still holds a hegemonic position in Kinder's analysis (and she herself hesitates to grant television the term "interactive"), her work stresses how media is not insulated, going so far as framing it as promiscuous in some extents. Ryan and Hausken fear generalized statements about new media, and this fear *is* valid. However, theorizing digital media as isolated from its counterparts—digital or material—ignores that media cross-contamination has and will continue to exist. Kinder even remarks that Italo Calvino's novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is "hypertextual" (178). Kinder insists on finding prior instances of hypertextuality in literary work (not just postmodern texts),

as such literary narratives offer important lessons for understanding digital play in new media. Her theories indicate that novels, films, television, and games influence each other but also indicate that we need a more specific vocabulary to talk about their borrowings on each other. Specifically, we need language to help reframe questions of interactivity through readerly subjectivity rather than just questions of remediation. How does a reader interact with a text like *Bandersnatch* or *Building Stories* or *S*? When a fictional world reaches out towards the reader and spreads itself across multiple documents, how do we conceive the fictional universe pushing towards the reader?

S. and *Building Stories* include many *physical* asides that ask their readers to stop, open a new object, and encounter that, the same way a hypertextual story might pop new windows onto a computer screen. *S*. positions postcards and letters between specific pages, providing a concrete, hypertextual “link” to other story threads. Despite the novel’s clear nostalgia for book and print culture, Sara Tanderup argues that *S*. “embraces the contemporary media culture” (55). *Building Stories* works more as a cybertext where the narrative calls attention to the various paths a reader could take through the material. The “messy” feeling that reviewer Katherine Roeder encounters while reading is exacerbated by the knowledge that other pathways *could* exist. John Rieder’s work in *Science Fiction and Mass Cultural Genre System* argues for the idea of a mass cultural genre system that accounts for genres interacting and influencing each other. I believe the same is true for media, narrative, and text. While digital media, print media, and film are separate categories, they do not exist in a void. Netflix’s successful reskin” of the Choose Your Own Adventure form for *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018) and *The Unbreakable*

Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. the Reverend (2020) demonstrates that there *is* cross media contamination, and that it is fully capable of being capitalized in the contemporary attention economy. Additionally, adding Rieder's perspective also makes it clear what Frasca—and to some extent Juul—overlook in their work from 2000s: delineating “old” narratives as traditional, outdated, and antiquated. This assumption substitutes “traditional” as a catch all as a catch-all for print mediums. Furthermore, this line of thought does not account for any experimental literature nor does it anticipate any media cross contamination that might occur in the future.

In its messiness, *Building Stories* draws attention to the multiple entries, exits, and avenues to explore the fictional world. While the objecthood of both *S.* and *Building Stories* is important, I also think it important to consider how they are very clearly mobilizing strategies popularized in new media through older mediums. These works are more than pure print nostalgia. They mobilize the print medium to explore questions and forms popularized through digital media. *S.* and *Building Stories* bring new/digital media tactics to the world of printed texts by creating works that function more like digital texts than print ones. While Ryan's and Hausken's cautions of media blindness are fair, it is counterproductive to imagine these mediums as existing in a void. Different mediums influence each other, borrowing traits, aspects, and tactics mobilized across different creative productions. Popular books are touted as being “cinematic” in their action and description, and video games now feature cinematographers. In *S.* and *Building Stories*, there is a clear homage to both print culture and the rise in popular experimental texts.

Rather than separating these aspects of reading, ludic metalepsis recenters the author/reader/text configuration around the relationship each piece has to the other. The approaches of understanding the relationship between reader, text, and author often limit themselves to a very linear—or at least static—understanding of readership.⁹ Someone creates something to be read or engaged with, the object then exists, and then someone engages with the object. The literary approach dubs these roles as author, text, and reader respectively; cybernetics, focused on information transference, labels these as sender, message, receiver; and a capitalistic/corporate approach would name them producer, product, consumer (see figure 3).

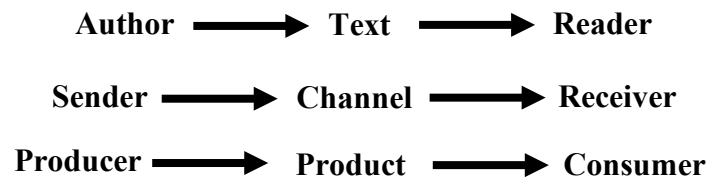


Figure 3. A diagram of different “reading” paradigms. The top is the literary terminology followed by the cybernetic and materialist.

However, the common assumption of a linear relationship between these three components allows scholarship to focus on pieces rather than the whole equation – interactions between each component, and the cumulative effect of meaning-making experience that emerges. I propose that what theories of play allow is for a different view

⁹ A sentiment is expressed in Ryan’s article “Fictional Worlds in the Digital Age”. When discussing the interactivity of digital media fictional worlds, she remarks that “In a classical print fiction, users play the role of a *passive* witness of the represented events” (254, emphasis mine). This conception as reader as *passive*, as someone who snuggles back into an armchair and lets fiction wash over them, is where much of this chapter draws its contention. While Ryan’s article fluidly integrates play terminology, it does not position any notion of “classical print fiction” as interactive nor does it entertain the possibility that print mediums could potentially *become* interactive by adopting practices used in digital media, hypertexts, and video games.

of this triad, one focused on the relation between each role and how such a shift might help reconcile media cross contamination.

Returning to Huizinga, the author *plays* with the reader and the reader *plays* back. The language and examples he can be mapped onto the act of reading. The closing line of that excerpt, “All [playgrounds] are *temporary worlds* within the ordinary world” (10, emphasis mine), we can extend to the act of opening a book to read. Huizinga’s playground—the magic circle—separates itself from the “ordinary” world of the reader and creates a “temporary world” where acts apart from reality occur. The voluntary act of stepping away from one’s reality is what many readers seek when they seek out fiction. Moreover, Huizinga’s definition of play is not medium specific. While many of the places do require a material presence from all participating parties (i.e the card table, arena, tennis court), “the screen” does not. So while it is tempting to say that play requires spatiotemporal synchronicity, that is not the case for Huizinga’s version of play.¹⁰

Ensslin’s work in *Literary Gaming* tackles the question of ludic/literary interactions, proposing a “hybrid subgroup of creative media that has both *readerly* and *playerly* characteristics” (1). Her hypothesis leads her to the L-L continuum (ludicity, literariness) that charts twelve genres of text based on their lucidity and literariness. Enslinn’s analysis, while helpful, is hindered both in the texts chosen for this study and

¹⁰ Additionally, theories of play have been employed across literature and digital media alike. Kathleen Blake’s *Game, Play, and Sport* tracks how Lewis Carroll’s philosophy around terms such as play, playfulness, game, and sport appear in his work throughout the Victorian era, and Michael Suk-Young Chwe uses game theory to explore six Jane Austen novels. Ideas of play are not absent from authors when they construct their texts, so why erase play as part of the critical conversation?

the separation of the literary and the ludic. The L-L continuum maps the literary and the ludic as entirely separate in these texts (45). Her distinction between what is literary and what is ludic precludes any overlap except at the intersection where the literary and ludic values meet in interactive fiction. Enslinn's claim is more nuanced in many ways, but what this continuum identifies is that, at the core, Enslinn sees a fundamental distinction between the ludic and literary. The literary and the ludic are set as diametrically opposed forces rather than elements that double-helix around each other like DNA strands. The book is published in 2014 and still demonstrates not only how contemporary literary scholarship hesitates to embrace ludic elements but also how contemporary ludology has cloistered itself from the literary. As seen in Frasca's earlier work, the division is mutual and works to segregate these theories from each other rather than explore what play has to offer the literary.

Indeed, Mihai Spariosu's work hits on the import of including the ludic in literary analysis: power-configuration. Their focus is the authorial power-configuration between artist and creation, noting that literature allows for authorial-self to engage with "play of identity and otherness" (10). What this article proposes is that a similar approach can be taken to understanding the relationship between play and literature in terms of (re)examining the power-configuration given to message and media transmission. Where Spariosu tackles the author/text power-configuration, this article attempts to grapple with the ways in which disrupt that relation by playing with narrative boundaries. Ludic metalepsis makes apparent both the playful generation of worlds and allows for a variety of disruptions when interacting with a text.

Inviting the Reader Inside

Building Stories follows an unnamed protagonist with her struggles through work, loss, and domesticity. Contained in a 12” by 24” box, the novel consists of fourteen separate pieces that vary in form, size, and content. These materials range from single accordion comic strips to cloth-bond hardcover books to four-panel board. The box itself includes a pictograph on the base which includes “suggestions made as to appropriate places to set down, forget or completely lose any number of its contents within the walls of an average well-appointed home” (back cover). Although Ware provides a map to the reader, these pieces were designed to be read in any order, missing with the narrative linearity of the story. Readers can follow the path designed by Ware, or they can cobble together their own. Roeder initially reviewed the work as “messy and present” and one that hinges on the “physical experience” of encountering each aspect of the text (*The Comic Journal*). This heaviness, this insistence on the physical act of reading and narrative construction offers a different take than what we see through Aarseth’s and Ryan’s theories. Partially because this book is a physical text rather than a new media object, but I find it worth examining through a new media lens based on the tactics that Ware uses throughout this work. In many ways, *Building Stories* works like a hypertext, offering the reader a range of entry points within a large lexia of material. While there are no direct links from one text to another—you cannot click on a word in the “Disconnect” chapbook and be directed to one of the smaller comic strips—but the readers may make connections based on the material’s content, form, or structure. Roeder describes her reading as “haphazard”, and that indicates the attempt to make connections, to find the

“right” way through the narrative. Furthermore, there’s also elements of ergodic literature working through the text, offering the reader choices for narrative paths and stressing those not taken. Roeder’s “haphazard” reading strategy became more apparent to her when she discovered the diagram that may help readers navigate the work.

While it is tempting to use Paul Booth’s work in paratextual board games (*Game Play* 2015), *Building Stories* does more than “allow players to enter a cult world but use a more tangible and material presence to harness player affect” (6). Paratextuality is an affective element to texts like *Building Stories* and *S.* due to their focus on being a “material presence,” but instead of entering cult worlds of popular franchises, *Building Stories* uses its materiality to break into the readers world. The materials exist for the reader to hold, shuffle, and navigate through. The different heft The tactile nature of *Building Stories*—from its boxlike container to its various contents—is intended to harness reader affect. The euphoria of handling the different materials, of running one’s fingers along the edge of the newspaper. Booth’s work places these games as expansions to popular series like *Star Trek*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *The Walking Dead*, which allows critics to overlook the larger framework of the project, which hinges on world building and agency through these games’ “material presence.” Similarly, what Booth’s theories offer is a potential reconfiguration of the reader. These paratexts meddle with agency as it allows “players to interject their own moments of authorship into each game play session” (9). What’s interesting with Booth’s language here is that *players* affect *authorship*. Jenkins works hints towards this with claims of a dialogue between producers and consumers, yet it does not consider such “dialogue” playful. Once again, there is this

crossing languages of narrative and play. It is not creator, authority, or agency that players affect in these games but authorship, a word linked specifically with ideas of narrative. Arguably, this slip might occur because Booth is discussing a *Game of Thrones* board game where George R.R. Martin's role as "author" is vital to player engagement, yet even that belies a relation between narrative and game, between reader and player. For what is a player but a reader with agency?

The definition of player ranges from the tautological "one who plays a game" to an "actor" or "one actively involved especially in a competitive field or process" (Merriam-Webster). A reader follows a similar definition trend with being "one who reads" with reference to the verb read (Merriam-Webster). "Read" itself has many definitions, formal and colloquial. Formally, to "read" is to recognize, interpret, deliver, learn, or study a form of communication (often focused on print and writing). Tavia Nyong'o's *Afro-Fabulations* even notes a queering of the word where to "read" someone is to make pointed (often insulting) remarks concerning the subject. Apparent in these two definitions is the assumption that a player appears to be more active than a reader. Yes, these readers are actively reading, but baked into all of the above definitions is both the lack of motion and the lack of body. Where a player is a potential "actor" or "agent", the reader is defined by their relationship to an already existing object. Learn, study, and interpret are all active verbs, yet these verbs are associated with the sedentary, the academic. Indeed, what was so refreshing about Nyong'o's inclusion of the queer "read" is that it feels both active and grounded. The queer "read" not only comes from its use in the LGBTQ+ community but also how that community flips interpretation—it is

interpretation to both understand and to poke fun, an act of play. Such a reader *feels* more active because built into the queer read is the assumption that whatever the reader interprets will be spoken back to the subject being read. Ludic metalepsis *Building Stories* offers is that is building reading affect through their sense of touch. The joy of reading *Building Stories* comes from handling the pieces in the box.

When looking for ways to navigate this text, *Building Stories* offers both the gameboard/storyboard and a pictograph on box's base. This pictograph—striking because it appears to offer a reader map diagramming the location of the fourteen separate textual pieces—admits that these are “suggestions made as to appropriate places to set down, forget, or completely lose any number of its contents within the walls of an average well-appointed home.” The cramped and consistent art style within each of the fourteen pieces mimics this feeling of overwhelming sameness. There is the occasional two-page spread, landscape picture, or bleeding panels; however, most panels are constructed with grid-like regularity. And there is so much information for the reader to sift through that at first glance a reader feels the messiness. The almost monotonous organization of the panels amongst the various mediums of texts mimics as sense of forgetting or losing oneself in time and space. The work's novelty lies in its vast array of objects that make up the text. The juxtaposition of the content's sameness and the formal complexity allows the reader to lose themselves in the story. Rather, it is not about navigating the text but getting lost in it. The overwhelming “paths not taken”, to use Aarseth's language, leaves the text feeling ambiguous, unfinished, or “messy” as Roeder puts it. This emphasis on paths not taken or potential future paths on rereads allows for a more open narrative construction.

The text does not limit itself to a set *syuzhet*. The participation of the reader in the act of reading provides the enunciative qualities of the text.

Mikhail Bahktin's work in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* reflects on how narrative often prioritizes one voice, order, or presentation of knowledge, and advocates that "information provided must be oriented in a new way to this new world—a world of autonomous subjects, not objects" (9). Bahktin's work tends to focus on Dostoevsky's polyphonic storytelling, the multiplicity of voices he provides in his novels; however, his logic can be applied to newer and more experimental forms of storytelling. Both *S.* and *Building Stories* destabilize prioritization of the monologue. Not only are there multiple narrators but there are multiple ways to structure the order in which information is provided to readers. While Bahktin's use of "autonomous subjects" pertains more to treating narration as a multiheaded entity, I believe we can extend this logic for texts that use metalepsis and the conditioning of receiverly subjectivity through ludic metalepsis. We are not programmers, but at times we can be *creators of meaningful experience in acts of reading*. Offering a new space for reader, author, and text to exist, ludic metalepsis reconfigures the power structure between these three entities.¹¹ Ludic metalepsis also helps reconsider potential asymmetrical expressivity found when *reading* a text compared to the language used when describing readers of digital texts. Montfort calls them interactors, Aarseth calls them players, and Ryan calls them users. Each of these terms implies a type of agency that the term "reader" does not fully encapsulate.

¹¹ Such a claim echoes the work of Mary Flanagan when she compares Laura J. Mixon's novel *Proxies* to "the same kind of simultaneity that being next to and inside a 3-D game character could create" ("Hyperbodies, Hyperknowledge" 437).

Players, users, and interactors are often viewed as affecting the narrative course of text where readers are viewed as ones who engage with the text without necessarily affecting the narrative. Ludic metalepsis, however, resituates the reader by acknowledging the role reader participation has in textual consumption. It speaks to the reflexive play innate in the imaginative acts that come with reading fiction. To construct a fictional world *as a reader*, they must agree to participate in a collaborative imaginative act with the author *through* the text. Both parties enter an agreement to engage in a form of make-believe. They agree to *cooperate* and *play* in the magic circle that is the storyworld.

This point may brush up against Roland Barthes's claims in "Death of the Author", where he seeks to displace an "Author-God" (146) or literature "tyrannically centered on the author" (143). However, Barthes work is much more concerned with textual interpretation rather than textual engagement. Ludic metalepsis does not treat the author as dead, but as player engaged with their counterpart, the reader. Ware's graphic novel asks its readers to construct the *szjuhet*, to construct in what order they encounter narrative information. There is some guidance, but as mentioned above, *Building Stories* revels in losing its reader. The readers navigate the text by getting lost, a paradox that revels in narrative destruction for the author and narrative construction for the reader. John D. Niles's book *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature*, although human centric, acknowledges the role storytelling takes when discussing how to connect and make sense of surrounding events. He notes that "It is through such mental activity that people have gained the ability to create themselves as human beings and thereby transform the world of nature into shapes not known before" (3). Working from

the likes of Paul Ricoeur and Richard Rorty, Niles's claim attempts to reconcile how humans relate to and inhabit worlds (real or imaginary) through the act of story making. *Homo Narrans*, despite its problematic human centrality, identifies the importance of narrative making to connection. Narrative allows both "creation" and "transformation" of the rich mental world Niles writes of. It is, in many ways, an organizing principle, a sense-making tool to help humans reconcile themselves to reality's chaos. *Building Stories* disrupts this calming principle by having the reader construct a deconstructed narrative. They are given the pieces, disassembled and unorganized, and must now determine how to inhabit this "mental world" to use Niles's term. The reading of *Building Stories* feels messy because narrative organization is left to the reader. There is no *szjuhet* for them to follow, but cobblestones that they must lay down to form a path.

Where *Building Stories* is a collection of objects, *S.* reads as a multilayered mystery. The book comes in a black slipcover with the single letter title printed in newspaper script. Break the seal and the book *Ship of Theseus* by V.M. Straka tumbles out into the reader's hand, complete with beveled library cover, call number taped onto the spine, and brown-aged pages. From there, the reader is plunged into the fictional story of Jen and Nick, two students at Praghorn University, who communicate through annotations of the library's copy of V.M. Straka's book. The book becomes an archive for their memorabilia, letters, and conversations, as they try to uncover the mystery of who exactly V.M. Straka was. Like *Building Stories*, there is an immediate heaviness to this novel. Where *Building Stories* included page textures and cloth bound chapbooks, *S.* features maps drawn on napkins, postcards, and fold legal paper. Each character has not

only a distinct writing style (Jen, cursive; Nick small caps) but the annotations are color coded to correspond with different times and encounters with the text. Furthermore, *S.* is more devoted into masquerading as a piece of the reader's reality. The tangibility of the text makes it very easy to mistake the novel as a misplaced library book, and the publication information is hidden in small print on the book's back cover. The frontmatter concerns only the fictional publication history of *Ship of Theseus*.

Ryan and Thoss nod towards the playful nature of metaleptic texts, but neither pushes this idea to its fullest. Neither acknowledges the play that is inherent to the metaleptic texts, especially those interested in engaging the reader as *reader*. Thoss uses the game as an analogy without exploring the ideas further and Ryan stresses that fictionality cannot transgress into bodied reality. *S.* (and to some extent *Building Stories*) complicates this hypothesis about what boundaries fiction can and cannot transgress. Yet the reflexive play invoked with imaginative world-building remains undertheorized. Arguably the material elements of these two texts do not use their physical components in identical ways, yet both novels challenge what it means to transgress the bounds of a fictionality. Both texts incorporate material elements that require readers to rearrange and puzzle them into a narrative shape. *Building Stories* harkens to the paratextual elements in gameboards—with the accordion base board adopting the look and feel of classic game like *Monopoly* or *Clue*; *S.* uses nostalgia for print books to overwhelm a reader's senses with its bookishness. All hints that the diegetic book *Ship of Theseus* and its author, Straka, exist only within *S.*'s storyworld are hidden in fine print at the narrative's conclusion.

More so than *Building Stories*, *S.* reconfigures aspects of the detective genre to complicate ideas of readerly participation. Gabrielle Dean, using Gertrude Stein as a guiding force, argues that most detective stories are driven primarily by plot and a “broken chronology” that features a “time-consciousness” (326). The detective genre progress through two temporalities working against each other: the detection narrative and the narrative of the event requiring detection (326). V.M. Straka’s identity is the mystery at the center of *S.* that the detective characters (Jen and Eric) try to solve. *S.*’s physical layout makes the detective narrative’s broken chronology more apparent. First, the two temporalities offer different textual spaces. The event requiring detection occurs (allegorically) in the storyworld of *Ship of Theseus* while the detection narrative occurs one level above that in the storyworld of *S.*, chronicled in color coded margin notes. Visually, *Ship of Theseus* is a printed text while Jen and Eric’s story appears as handwritten marginalia and additions to the texts (postcards, notes, etc.). These storyworld levels, on the page, appear simultaneously, but chronologically occur at drastically different times. The reader must figure out how to navigate *S.*’s text, but it also clarifies similar mental gymnastics that must occur for every detective novel. *S.*’s marks each narrative layer through a specific material. To map this onto Ryan’s stack analogy, there are the events of *Ship of Theseus* at the top; following or adjacent are the messages found in the footnotes; beyond that are the events encountered by Jen and Eric; and the final “stack” (see Fig 4). All layers coalesce into a single piece that reader then encounters once they break the seal. This demonstrates how Ryan’s term ontological metalepsis overlooks texts that seek to use metalepsis as a form of play. What is apparent

in *S.*, just like in Ryan’s earlier figures, is that she treats any transgression as a pathway rather than a new space altogether (see Fig 5). This ludic metalepsis highlights how the

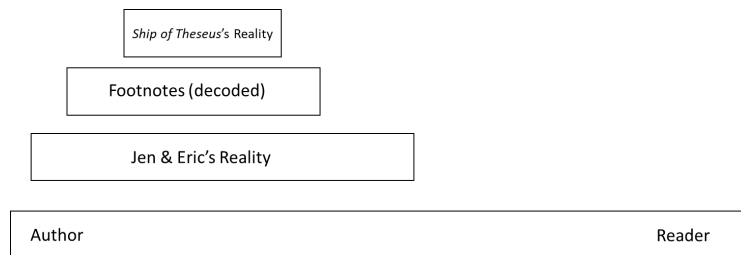


Figure 4. This figure maps *S.* onto Ryan’s concept of narrative stacks. The diagram above tracks the narrative layers.

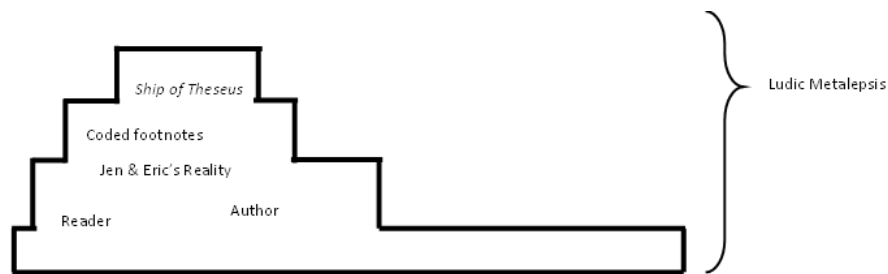


Figure 5. The above diagram remaps *S.* with a ludic understanding. This allows the narrative levels—including the reader and author—to mingle in a shared magic circle, one that makes apparent the dynamic interactions that can occur between author, reader, and text.

interactions between author, text, and reader, are nonlinear even in print mediums. There are hypertextual influences to both *S.* and *Building Stories*, with questions of readerly navigation. More potent though is how these texts exploit Henry Jenkins’s ideas of “convergence culture” to their fullest. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins argues that “convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” and applies this to transmedia storytelling and ideas of collective intelligence (3). However, there is a

similar energy to *S.* and *Building Stories* as they require the reader to play in them.¹² The ludic space these two texts offer is one that where the readers must develop navigational strategies. Neither text includes instructions on *how* to read them. You are presented with either box, and the rest is left to you. If Jenkins considers navigation as a form of play and transmedia storytelling as the art of world making (21), it highlights the shortcomings of the term ontological.¹³

Where ontological metalepsis concerns itself with the “switch between two radically distinct worlds,” (Ryan 207), ludic metalepsis focuses less on boundary transgressed and more on what new space is created by such transgressions and what such spaces offer to theories of reading and interacting. Both *S.* and *Building Stories* rely on a heavy push of textual boundaries. Rather than creating a single bridge between narrative stacks, they approach each of their materials—from the folded newspaper (*Building Stories*) to the tunnel system drawn on a napkin (*S.*)—as intricacies through which the reader must navigate. *S.*, like a hypertext, includes these material insertions on specific pages, implying that the reader would encounter them at a specific moment and choose whether or not to pursue that thread. While Sandy Tanderup’s article views the material elements of these texts as a “part of a common cultural tendency towards resisting digital culture” (52), I think this fails to recognize the similarities between the functionality and construction of such texts. Ensslin defines hypertexts as “assemblage[s]

¹² Jenkins also notes that the larger project of *Convergence Culture* concerns itself with the “work” and “play” performed by spectators (3).

¹³ In this fashion, both *S.* and *Building Stories* directly contradict ideas posited by theorists such as Costikyan. There is freedom in the textual interaction; there are many possible paths for the reader to pursue. Each read yields different results depending on how the reader chooses to interact with story.

of instantiations,” (32), and both texts require elements of assembly. While both *S.* and *Building Stories* revel in their materiality, they do so in the shadow of digital media forms. The organizing principle behind both texts is that of assemblage. *S.* and *Building Stories* arrive with pieces waiting for construction. In many ways, *S.* is fraternal to *Building Stories*. Both are indebted to textual heaviness, to material print culture, and both ask readers to question the role of snuggling down in an armchair. Their homage to digital texts and their centering of two different types of metalepsis make apparent that there is more beyond the linear progression of author, text, reader. *S.* and *Building Stories* destabilize ideas of authorship and readership not by having the reader become the author or vice versa. Instead, they highlight the nonlinear relations between text, author, and reader.

By focusing less on the transgressions taking place (ontological metalepsis) and more on the space these texts create when employing transgressions (ludic metalepsis), the question changes from *what do these transgressions do* to *what is possible in these playful spaces*. Ludic metalepsis makes apparent how fictional narratives suspend spatiotemporal dislocation. Author, text, and reader all exist in different material conditions. However, by engaging in ludic metalepsis, a text creates space for cooperative interactions between author, reader, and text. Once narrative layers are broken, the “game of make-believe” as Thoss terms it, becomes apparent and necessary. An agreement between author and reader maintains the temporary worlds of the fiction, the hallowed ground of the world between pages. Ludic metalepsis makes this contract visible and reconfigures the reader as an interactor, spectator or player—not because their

level of engagement is “greater” than with other media forms, but because ludic metalepsis creates a playful space and highlights the way in which engagement and play overlap.

Conclusion

There are surprising parallels between narratology, media, and ludology scholarship. Almost all call for separation of either medium and theory. Genette, Ryan, and Thoss all argue the playful mechanics of metalepsis without ever pushing into theories of play; Ryan and Hausken advocate media specificity to avoid overgeneralizations; and Frasca demands a separation from studies of play and studies of narrative in video game analysis. Although this comparison risks false equivalency, most scholars employ separate approaches to understanding meaning making in experimental or interactive texts. There are a few exceptions, such as Kinder’s earlier emphasis on “promiscuous” texts and reading, but the main thrust of research diverts from such connections. The works of the 2000s did not fully anticipate the ways in which stories-in-play would themselves become platforms for meaning making. Regarding *Bandersnatch*, Brooker reflects that “everything is becoming a story platform really. Ultimately we have to start recognizing that these are stories first and foremost rather than bespoke media” (Utichi *Deadline*). Brooker is no media scholar, but the term “story platforms” reveals the prevalence of media cross contamination, specifically in areas such as film, television, and video games. However, even Brooker limits his claim by focusing on the blurring boundaries of *televisual* mediums. Similar to Jenkins, there is a focus on newer mediums as being more “participatory” or “interactive”. What *S.* and *Building Stories* demonstrate

is the potential of ludic metalepsis: understanding blurred boundaries beyond mediums that are considered “newer.” Genette’s citations for metalepsis date as early as 1759 (*Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne), and *Pamela* borders on transmedia storytelling—a point Kinder notices and echoes in her work.

Brooker’s reflection may seem naïve, but there is a truth to his words that “everything is becoming a storytelling platform.” This attitude reflects playful attitudes of story making and consumption. The ludic metalepsis in *S.* and *Building Stories* necessitate a reading configuration that considers author, reader, and text as part of the same playful space, reading as a form of playful engagement. To use Huizinga’s terminology, the act of reading creates a “temporary world apart” for the reader. The ludic break at the turn of the 21st century and its legacy of play/narrative separation hamstrings understanding the playful intent motivating texts. Rethinking this type of metalepsis as ludic focuses on what can be offered by these new playful texts and the spaces they create. By remixing theories of play and theories of narrative—acknowledging the overlap between player acts and reader acts—the apparent differences between interactor, reader, spectator, and player become smaller. However, the asymmetries of power afforded to the receiver in the digital instance (the player) from the receiver in the literary instance (the reader) become more apparent when texts such as *S.* and *Building Stories* intentionally play with such asymmetry. The next chapter further explores such power dynamics by examining how ludic metalepsis is used to *break* the assumed reader-writer contract by refusing to cooperate.

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CHAPTER 2:
GLITCHING LOLITA STYLE IN NARRATIVE-PLAY: WORLD-BREAKING CHARACTERS IN
POISON AND DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB

After over 80 hours of play, I had finally made it to the climax of the main quest in *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (*Valhalla*). Released November 2020 on PlayStation, Xbox, and PC, this AAA game continues the *AC* franchise by following the present-day character, Layla, and her Norse ancestor, Eivor. As a female Eivor¹⁴, I slashed, hacked, and wooed our way through Britain to as we learned the mysteries of an ancient humanoid race called the Isu. Sigurd, Eivor's brother, joined me on this final quest to dive into the heart of a mountain and unearth the secrets of a supposed Valhalla. They hook into an ancient machine, and Eivor and Sigurd are transported to idyllic mead hall. Fallen friends and comrades greet them before a war horn echoes. The gates open and all the einherjaren charge into the fields, slaughtering enemies as they prepare for Ragnarök. Eivor (and myself) are skeptical that all is as it seems. Breaking the spell, Eivor forces a confrontation with Odin, the Isu who (among other convoluted things) has been haunting Eivor's decisions throughout the game. The background fades and all that is left is Eivor and Odin, fighting on an endless, shadowy plane. Odin does not take damage, does not flinch as I unload every special ability, weapon, and power that I spent hours gathering in my playthrough. He chips away at my health until almost none is left. How do you beat this invincible opponent? How do you defeat a boss whose health remains a long, steady

¹⁴ Like its predecessor *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, *Valhalla* allows players to choose Eivor's gender (male or female). The game includes an online feature that allows the avatar to change based on the majority of other players chose.

bar as yours dwindles? How do you keep going after 20 minutes of button mashing? The simple answer is you don't.

I begin with this anecdote because the way I discovered this solution was a little circuitous. *AC Valhalla* was written by Chris Wooding. Wooding is an off-the-beaten path fantasy author who revels in disrupting narrative tropes, tendencies, and practices. As a reader, I enjoy Wooding's work, so when confronted with this no-win scenario, my immediate response was: *If this were a Wooding novel, the solution would be: drop the axe and leave.* Odin is playing by a different set of rules so the only possible way to win is to not fight. Players unequip their axe and they can walk out of the arena back to reality. Eivor refuses to participate in Odin's game and that is how the story progresses. Refusing to participate is part of the story. It is this *refusal*, this lack of participation that frames question of this paper. Play and narrative hinge on (often implicit) agreements between authors, readers, and texts. The previous chapter alludes to the euphoria players experience when engaging with acts of ludic metalepsis, the uncanny revelry of the narrative witnessing the reader in some ways. It also considers the frustration of textual interactions as readers attempt to navigate the boundary between fiction and reality. While there is joy in deciphering where a fictional world ends and a real world begins, a simultaneous frustration might exist while getting lost, misled, and confused in such searches.

This chapter shifts focus to narratives where the text itself is uncooperative and refuses to participate. When texts refuse to play, how might we consider this a "glitch" in the reading process. Using the foundation built in chapter one, I explore Dan Salvato's

game *Doki Doki Literature Club* and Chris Wooding's novel *Poison* as texts that employ ludic metalepsis to break their fictional world, halt narrative progress, and invoke the ethics of readerly (and textual) rejection. Both texts feature world-breaking to create liminal spaces that allow for two female characters to engage in acts of rejection, a strategy that mirrors techniques found in glitch studies, cyberfeminism, and even with the participants in Lolita fashion. This chapter connects these issues by considering reading as a process that can be "glitched" both intentionally and unintentionally.

Glitching Narrations

Imagine friends decide that you want to play tag. If you invite a neighbor and they throw a tantrum because they do not want to be "it", they are considered a "spoilsport." If they engage, then they agree to the conditions of play outlined by the game tag. Similar language applies to the act of writing for a reader. In workshops, we always discussed the rules of the story and the contract that the author makes with a reader within the first few pages—sometimes even in the first sentence. Grace Stone Coates's story "Wild Plums" (1929) begins with a narrator reflecting on the fruit of the title: "I knew about wild plums twice before I tasted any" (*Best American Fiction* 100). There is an "I" speaking/thinking this sentence, so it identifies the narrator as one telling the story. I make these observations to demonstrate the type of "contract" a writer might make with a reader, knowingly or not. The writer has agreed to follow the rules of the story and the reader agrees to entertain said rules. By continuing to consume the story, the reader agrees to the author's conditions. Creative writing classes, blogs, and textbooks often use the language of the *contract*, *promise*, and *agreement* to explain methods of establishing story and

voice for reader expectations.¹⁵ An example of such contract can be found in both *Poison* and *DDLC*. Wooding's novel opens with "Once upon a time there was a young lady who lived in a marsh, and her name was Poison" (1). In a creative writing class, we might break down the promises or contracts made in this as follows:

- The novel will be involving fairy tales somehow (*Once upon a time...*)
- The main character is most likely Poison
- Poison is a young girl
- The narrator is not Poison (it appears omniscient third person)

Beyond factual information, tone, voice, point of view, and setting are all established in this sentence. The gestures towards fairy tales (once upon a time, third person omniscient) simultaneously implies a genre and makes the reader aware of the act of storytelling. In *Writing and the Writer* (1994), psycholinguist Frank Smith conceptualizes these writerly intentions and reader expectations as the "writer-reader contract". Robert J. Tierney and Jill ZaLansky use speech act theory to conceptualize the contract between reader and writer, comparing reading to the act of conversing ("The Rights and Responsibilities of Readers and Writers" 1980). They note that "writers must establish a reader-writer interaction which sets up 'a coherent movement' toward a reasonable interpretation of a communication" (608). To reframe this within play theories, the writer must establish the *rules* of the text to help the reader understand how they are meant to engage with it. Such language indicates the inherent playfulness in reading. Tierney and

¹⁵ See John Dufresne's *The Lie that Tells a Truth* and Brandon Sanderson's lectures at Brigham Young University on creative writing.

ZaLansky also note the cooperative elements of conversation *and* reading. Choosing to read a text, click play, or even turn the page, functions as the reader entering the magic circle textual consumption.

Contracts between the reader and author become more complicated when introducing unreliable narrators. While some might consider this narration as “uncooperative”, the author has just altered the rules. Novels like *Rebecca*, *Huckleberry Finn*, or *Trust Exercise* either work to crack the narration’s façade or relish the opportunity of placing the narrator and reader at cross-purposes. But crucial to meaning-making experience as narrative and as play is the ethics of reading, and reading as a ethical test. When analyzing ethics in reading *Lolita*, James Phelan outlines six types of unreliability: underreporting and misreporting, underreading and misreading, underregarding and misregarding (“Dual Focalization” 137). For Phelan, unreliable narration depends on how the narrator unintentionally or intentionally presents information to the reader. This manifests as a doubled rhetorical act where the author’s purpose differs from the narrator’s (132). We can imagine this communication structure as the one below

author→narrator→narratee→reader

with Phelan clearly distinguishing between the author’s purpose and the narrator’s purpose. For an unreliable narrator to function, the reader must *agree* to terms to the contract; they must agree to engage with the narrator as unreliable, otherwise the narrative rules change drastically. Taken at face value, a text like *Lolita* submerges a cruel, abusive relationship in purple prose. If the reader chooses to accept a contract that

Humbert Humbert is a flawed, unreliable narrator, then then *Lolita* transforms into a psychological study of someone trying to justify their actions which they and their audience know are horrendous.¹⁶ In this way, unreliability functions as a clause within the established contract. *Lolita* opens with Humbert Humbert reflecting,

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta. She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock.
(1)

The opening line places Lolita at the center of this drama despite it not being her story. Unlike *Poison*, this narrator is part of the story and, indeed, has a complex relationship with the character they describe. The description itself juxtaposes the pure and the sexual (light of life and fire of loins), obsessing over the name through sound until it is revealed that Lolita is (most likely) a small child. Even within the opening sentence there lies a promise of something amiss with the clash of light and loins. The contract put forth by Nabokov here is that our narrator wishes to find beauty in this relationship, despite understanding the immorality of romancing a child. We infer Nabokov's contract, therefore, is not admiring Humbert Humbert, but an indictment of the narrator – and of the cruelly infantilized and gendered fantasies of power - through which readers receive the story. I will return to the question of ethics and power in readerly play throughout this study.

¹⁶ Additionally, a text like *Lolita* offers us opportunities to consider uncooperative readers. Many teachers and professors can attest to uncooperative reading resulting in some fraught, frayed, and frightening interpretations.

However, for the moment, note that this contract only works if the reader's expectations align with the author's intentions. Tierney and LaZansky consider the "contractual voids" that occur in any form of communication and how reading and writing demand a different solution for miscommunication:

The author-reader situation, [compared to conversation], offers no such mechanism for preventing voids in the author-reader agreement. Instead, the author must predict the intentions and background of experience of the audience. If the author's predictions do not mesh with the reader, then the text the author has written may be deemed by its readers irrelevant, insincere, uninformative, ambiguous or obscure; and it is likely the contract will be voided. (607)

In regard to *Lolita*, Phelan identifies the point where many readers find the contract void. If readers interpret Nabokov's intention as one of condemnation rather than celebration, then a potential ethical reading emerges of *Lolita* as an indictment of the actions of a pedophile. The contract of an unreliable narrator breaks down if the reader misinterprets what is offered by the writer. If readers interpret Nabokov's tone as one of *celebration*, then a problematic reading emerges as the novel celebrates a form of molestation. Such a clash of intentions and expectations could be considered a *glitch* in the reading process. The normal procedures that go into textual consumption *break down* in the face of rules that the reader does not agree to follow. The exchange malfunctions because of an insurmountable contractual void that glitches the act of reading. I draw attention to such a malfunction because such are the dangers of storytelling through unreliable narration. A glitching text like *Lolita* gives the audience an opportunity to be uncooperative in the sense that their interpretations of the text do not align with the author's possible intentions with communication. Uncooperative readers, more than *reluctant* readers, are those who either fail to understand or intentionally misunderstand the reader-writer

contract presented in a text. In other words, uncooperative readers are those who refuse to see or refuse to abide by the same rules the author had while creating a text.

While there are instances of unreliability in *DDLC*, such unreliability is a result of a much larger narrative glitch occurrence: an uncooperative text. The game opens with a dialogue box, the option to name your avatar, non-player characters (NPCs) who converse with the player, and multiple trigger warnings. The cheery piano, bright colors, and big-eyed animation contribute to what the player expects: a cute, dating simulation that (if you're paying attention) may include a big twist. Curie Roe and Alex Mitchell's article "Is This Really Happening?" (2019) considers how metalepsis functions as an ideal vehicle for unreliable narration. Reviewing narratological scholarship over the past three decades, they identify potential "game mechanics" working within the unreliable narrator model (3). They later dissect "unreliability markers" within *DDLC* and conclude that the "extreme use of metalepsis shifted the focus of the story of the original protagonist and the four girls to that of the player-as-character's struggles with Monika, in the process trivializing the original narrative" (13). Like Marie-Laure Ryan and Jeff Thoss, they classify these transgressions as "ontological" before discussing how such boundary breaking relates to unreliability.¹⁷

What Roe and Mitchell miss is the exact thing they propose for analyzing the unreliable narrator: game and play. By ignoring the ludic potential of the *DDLC*'s "extreme [ontological] metalepsis", Roe and Mitchell overlook the play mechanics

¹⁷ See Ryan's *Avatars of Story* (2006) and Thoss's "Unnatural Narrative and Metalepsis: Grant Morrison's *Animal Man*" (2011).

working within the narrative: namely that the narrative completely halts when an NPC refuses to participate. C. Barkman's work with *DDLC*, similarly, maps Genette and ontological metalepsis onto the game's narrative layers and notes how "role diegesis and inaction play in facilitating video game narratives" ("There's no Point in Saving Anymore" 3). This research prioritizes the "cyborgian relationship" that emerges between player and game (14), comparing the game's glitches to that of Schmalzer's idea of "jank". Barkman even acknowledges that "moments when interaction is taken away can be just as narratively significant to the player" (17), but they focus on it through the lens of glitches and subverting player expectations. Barkman's work acknowledges the immersive qualities of metalepsis and acknowledges that "The potential for metalepsis to disrupt the cybernetic relationship between player and game requires greater unpacking" (18). I counter that the metaleptic disruption Barkman describes is ludic in nature, fracturing the diegetic storyworld of games to impinge on players' reality. Furthermore, I wish to shift the focus from the glitching that causes the disruption to how characters actively refuse participating in narrative progress.

By focusing on unreliability, many scholars overlook the world-breaking playfulness of texts that draw attention to narrative *inaction*, when a character and/or text seeks to "spoil" the act the reading. Where chapter one focused on how ludic metalepsis is used to push fictive boundaries, this chapter explores the mechanics of play working in that new bounded space. If we consider ludic metalepsis as a strategy that creates a shared, playful space between reader, author, and text, *Poison* and *DDLC* demonstrate that cooperation factors into textual engagement. Let's assume the reader decides to "play

along” (to paraphrase Thoss’s language)¹⁸ with ludic metalepsis; let’s assume they exist on the same ontological level as the characters in the text. I mentioned chapter one how *S.* and *Building Stories* readers embraced the interactive nature of these texts with potential euphoria. A similar occurrence happens when player/readers accept the agency of textual character. (Un)cooperation creates tension between the text, characters, and/or readers, making it (in some ways) an ideal plot device. The characters resist players, readers, and the narrative form itself.

These refusals amplify the affective experience players/readers encounter when engaging with elements such as unintended play or glitches. It is not unusual for players to intentionally “misplay” a game. The rise of YouTube also saw streamers tailor new rule sets to complicate or rebel against intended play. From challenges such as the Pokémon Nuzlocke run, to pacifist playthroughs of war games to remaining in the starting area until highly leveled,¹⁹ gaming has a long history of users engaging in unintended play. “Machinima”, an animation style where creators used computer game assets, environments, and avatars to animate their own fictional stories, hinged on reconfiguring the game beyond the intention of developers. Henry Lowood notes that the machinima creators reveled in this new narrative form: “Their excitement about

¹⁸ Here I refer to Thoss’s comment in “Unnatural Narrative and Metalepsis” where he suggests that, in narrative where the fiction *pretends* to emanate from reality, the reader can “go along with such a claim for as long as they are engaged in the game of make-believe” (198).

¹⁹ Former game streamer, Griffin McElory, has two series that feature unintended play. In 2016, he posted his Nuzlocke run of *Pokémon Y*. Such a run involves a strict set of rules which include: only catching the first Pokémon in each area, releasing any Pokémon that faints, refusing to use healing items, and randomly trading a Pokémon after completing each gym (“Pokémon Y Nuzlocke Challenge”). In 2017, he released an eleven episode pacifist playthrough of part of the *World of Warcraft* (WoW) MMORPG (“Peacecraft”). Doubleagent became notorious in maxing his character’s level in the starting area (“WoW’s Most Stubborn Peacenik Hits Max Level without Hurting Anyone Once Again”).

exploiting, hacking, and demonstrating uses of game technology emerged out of engagement with computers—a form of engagement that can only be described as playful” (“Found Technology” 176). Like my own experience with texts such as *S.* and *Building Stories*, Lowood identifies the euphoria experienced by intentionally subverting game design. Machinima creators (and arguably viewers) derive joy from the playful acts of subversion. The act of *breaking*—a world, a narrative, a character creator—challenges the expectations of the creator and the limitations of the text/medium.²⁰

A glitch assumes a malfunction, an unintentional consequence that arises from myriad systems working synchronously. Based on work by Paul Virilio, Rosa Menkman concludes that a glitch “From an informational (or technological) perspective...is best considered a break from (one of) the protocolized data flows within a technological system” (*The Glitch Moment(um)* 26). It is praised for its critical potential that helps think through aspects of failing binaric systems. When it comes to narrative forms, glitching allows for creative modes of story progression. As Barkman notes above, the “glitches” of *DDLC* are just a manifestation of the metalepsis. We could even argue that the entire “Malaise” chapter of *Poison* functions as a glitch, as a “malfunction” of narrative. There is also a similar affective response to a glitch as there is to metaleptic narratives. Menkman describes encountering a glitch as one accompanied by “a feeling of shock, with being lost and in awe” (29). Barkman’s work pairs metalepsis and glitch together, noting how they magnify each other. Focusing on these parallels overlooks

²⁰ We can compare this to how Mia Consalvo’s work on cheating and how it demonstrates where users disagree about the “limits” or “rules” of acceptable gameplay and player behavior (*Cheating* 130). Machinima seeks to misuse the game for creative (often narrative) narrative purposes.

intentionality behind *programming* glitches. The primary force of glitch is that it is unintended, an accident that acknowledges the imperfections of a system. When coupled with techniques such as playful worldbreaking, the glitch transforms into a narrative strategy harnessing aspects of worldbuilding *through* their imperfection.

The glitch as a site of resistance mirrors many of the concerns of the cyberpunk genre later taken up by cyberfeminism and women's cyberfiction. Austin Booth and Mary Flanagan note that cyberpunk differs from science fiction in its interest "in the relationships among cultural binaries such as nature/science, body/mind, human/machine, female/male, and, particularly, real/unreal" ("Introduction" 8). Booth and Flanagan view women's cyberfiction as particularly invested in complicating utopian understandings of first wave cyberfeminism²¹ and rewriting "familiar cultural narratives" around the genre (2). The "glitch" takes up these questions and often is often theorized as liminal site of autonomy. Jenny Sundén proposes gender as a (broken) technology and the trans-glitch as a messy slippage revealing gaps in binaric understandings ("On trans-, glitch, and gender as a machinery of failure"). Indirectly conversing with the "new" cyberfeminist movement, Sundén finds potential in the glitch as a place of potential agency and identity formation. *Glitch Perfect: Malfunction and the Machinic Assemblage of Girlhood* (2017) pushes this further by attempt to articulate a notion of "Glitch feminism" as "a radical and innovative visual paradigm aimed to challenge and disrupt a digitally fabricated

²¹ The introduction of *Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices* clarifies that the two different ways of cyber feminism developed alongside technological advancement. The chapter distinguishes first wave cyberfeminism as one that "open[ed] the contested territory of the internet for interrogation, play, and pleasure" while new cyberfeminism aims "to scrutinize, publicize, and contest the complex effects of technology on many aspects of women's lives" (subroasa editors 27).

gendered identity and female body which dominates the popular media” (Wolfgang, Ivanskevich, and Keyes). Experimental and artistic, *Glitch Perfect*’s contributors mobilize glitching as “a toll of digital intervention that problematized limits of the commodified gendered body.” This line of thought continued in Legacy Russell’s manifesto *Glitch Feminism* (2020) where she acknowledges that

Glitch feminism urges us to consider the *in-between* as a core component of survival—neither masculine nor feminine, neither male nor female, but a spectrum across which we may be empowered to choose and define ourselves for ourselves. Thus, the glitch creates a fissure within which new possibilities of being and becoming manifest. This failure to function within the confines of a society that fails us is a pointed and necessary refusal. Glitch feminism dissents, pushes back against capitalism. (13).

A similar perspective could be taken with understandings of Lolita fashion—a style employed in the *DDLC* game itself. In an article for *The Paris Review*, An Nguyen and Jane Mai reflect on Lolita fashion as “dressing for our own enjoyment, not dressing for others” (“Lolita Fashion”). Lolita fashion, according to these two authors, is not strictly a rejection of mainstream culture—and it is *certainly* not a rejection of capitalism—Lolita could be seen as linked towards new possibilities of autonomy, authority, and agency when it comes to female-coded bodies. Nguyen and Lai note that this “activity of adornment” is not “socially productive”; instead the aim appears to be “to feel happy and beautiful on your own terms” (“Lolita Fashion”). This rejection of what is socially “productive” or “acceptable” for a feminine avatar mirrors Monika’s struggle for agency within the game. It is not quite “glitching” fashion, but Lolita fashion reflects the complex desire for autonomy, agency, and the celebration of beauty that, as Nguyen and

Lai warn “can lead to issues such as competition, misunderstanding, and ignorance” (“Lolita Fashion”)—more aspects reflected in Salvato’s game.

Glitch, therefore, both becomes a mode of rejection but also a productive act meant towards expressing self, agency, and authority. While Russell’s work focuses more on the nature of “glitch” as it relates to ideas of gender, identity, embodiment, and technology, much of the manifesto articulates the notion of glitch as a space of possibility. They even reflect that “Glitch feminism makes room for realizing other realities” (32). Russell, Wolfgang, Ivanskevich, and Keyes observe the glitch as a potential site of reality-making. By acknowledging what Russell terms the “digital skin” that separates the fingers pecking away at a keyboard from the avatar moving through a forest, there is a potential opportunity to “hack” the skin further (61).

Poison and *DDLC* invoke these glitch theories and glitch feminisms as their characters resist narrative constraints, much in the same way cyberfeminism and glitch feminism resist the gendered body and gender binary. Wolfgang, Ivanskevich, and Keyes celebrate expression through glitch art, and Russell celebrates the glitch as a cite of resistance *through* refusal or uncooperative play. In the “Glitch Ghosts” section of *Glitch Feminism*, Russell articulates three principles glitch feminism makes possible when “ghosting” the gender binary:

1. The relationship between “*the idea of the body*” and “*gender as construct*” is damaging and needs and “we need to exit.”
2. Ghosting allows us the right to either consent or refuse a “relationship status” with the binary under the idea that “we have the right to deny our use”

3. Ghosting the binary will allow us to acknowledge our multitudinous selves

(41)

That Russell identifies glitch as a rejection, a “right to deny our use”, that can be reframed through the ideas of play.²² The glitch makes visible the constructed world of an imagined space (digital or even narrative as we see through something like Wooding’s *Poison*) and once visible, once the rules are clear, it becomes easier to “spoil” or reject them. Once ludic metalepsis draws attention to these boundaries through notions like glitching, uncooperative play becomes a strategy for characters (especially feminine characters) to exercise agency. In the case of *Lolita*, the reading glitch of misinterpretation makes visible how readers and texts participate in the reader-writer contract. For *Poison* and *DDLC*, glitch feminism makes clear how *texts* rather than *readers* might reject the reader-writer contract.

Refusing to Engage: Poison and Monika Telling You No

Chris Wooding’s *Poison* is a young adult novel that follows the titular character as she journeys to rescue her sister from the realm of Phaerie. Taking place across multiple fantasy worlds, the heroine Poison embarks on her quest. She gathers allies, collects resources, and discovers a mysterious figure, the Hierophant, that each land’s rulers seek to meet, challenge, or depose. From the story’s outset, various characters draw attention to the fiction taking place. When Poison seeks advice from her bardic friend Fleet, he reflects that

²² This refusal is also echoed by Caroline Basset, Sarah Kember, and Kate O’Riordan (see page 80.) as their manifesto claims that their organizing principle “our stack attack begins with a refusal” (103).

“Those things in [that book]...they’re simple stories. Real life is a story too, only much more complicated. It’s still got a beginning, a middle, and an end. Everyone follows the same rules you know...It’s just that there are more of them. Everyone has chapters and cliffhangers. Some go far and wide and come back empty-handed; some don’t go anywhere and their journey makes them the richest of all. Some tales have a moral and some don’t make any sense. Some will make you laugh, others make you cry. The world is a library, young Poison, and you’ll never get to read the same book twice.” (13-4)

Fleet’s speech frames the coming narrative as one that reflects both on the nature of storytelling and story-reading. Before Poison’s sister is kidnapped, before Poison begins her journey—Wooding introduces a seeming metaphor that stories and life are similar. In many ways, this advice reads like a classic quest opener, prepping the hero for a long journey across fairytale worlds. Fleet repeats this sentiment later, stressing that ““Everything’s a story...it just depends on your point of view”” (185). The emphasis on story frames Poison’s journey as she travels through the lands of Phaerie. It also seems as if Fleet broadens the idea from “story-telling” to a general act of “storying”. In other words, if we view Poison not as a fictional character but as an agent contributing to the story, we can see her actions as storying.

However, we later find out that act of story-making is more literal in this universe. Fleet and Poison reunite at the Hierophant’s Library, where he reveals that he is an Antiquarian, the anonymous “biographers of the Realms” that participate in the tales themselves when needed (178). He even claims that ““The Hierophant decides what’s possible”” across this universe (179). The novel’s final act reveals just how central the act of narrative-making is to Poison’s world. Fleet’s respect of the Hierophant mirrors how we might consider an author in a similar situation: the author controls the story. They control what is possible; they are the seat of authority. Poison later accepts an invitation

to meet with Hierophant in person and confronts him, requesting to see *her* book. The Hierophant reveals the pages to be empty. He reveals that Poison's story is not finished because he is still writing it; she is his character (197). Distraught, Poison decides to do nothing. In the chapter titled "Malaise", Poison plummets into depression, refusing to engage with a story constructed *for* her rather than *by* her. Because she feels she lacks agency, she refuses to participate anymore in narrative progression. Her friends begin to sicken and the world fades throughout the chapter. The story loses its shape as a key character eschews any plot engagement, and characters beg Poison to act:

They came to her often, now that she had begun to speak again. They saw it as a good sign, but it really wasn't. She merely wanted to tell them she was sorry for what was happening. Though they did not understand as Fleet had not, they pleaded with her to eat, to regain her strength. They were dying, fading, becoming nothing as the story unraveled around her. But how could she ever pull herself back from the pit into which she had sunk? How could she live on in knowledge that she was reading off someone else's script?...She would fade, and they with her, and so it would go. It was the one choice she made herself, and if she could only thwart the Hierophant by her death, then that was what it would have to take. It was his fault for making her such a contrary character. The harder she was pushed, the harder she pushed back. (203-4)

1.

Here, Wooding stresses that Poison is *not* an unreliable narrator, but rather, an uncooperative one. Once aware of her existence's fiction, she abstains from participating. Poison becomes the "spoilsport" of the story by denying the rules of the fiction laid out to her by an author and halting narrative progress altogether. Now aware of the presence of an author (the Hierophant) and potential readers, Poison decides she is done playing along in the story. The momentary stasis of "Malaise" gestures to the cooperative elements necessary for reading. If a reader, author, or—in this case—text is

uncooperative, then the narrative glitches.²³ In Wooding's novel, it is through the world *breaking down*, the characters and Faerie slowly dissolving into nothing as Poison refuses to move. Such world breakage invokes ideas of play because it demonstrates the collaborative elements inherent to imaginative worldbuilding. By breaking Faerie, Wooding establishes how glitching reading can break the boundary between fiction and reality. The reader is not affected in the same way as in a text like *S.* or *Building Stories*, but there is still an outward gaze from the text to the reader. *Poison* becomes metaleptic by breaking down its own reality rather than trying to intrude on the reader's.

Later, the Hierophant is murdered yet the story continues, revealing that the new author is Poison. The characters ponder how this could be until Poison realizes that this story is not only *about* her. Rather, it is her story to tell. She is the new author of the text and thus exerts a large portion of control over the world itself. Poison even recognizes “‘if you kill me, you kill yourself and everyone else’” (261). Here, Poison realizes her role shifted from “character” to “author.” The agency she was denied early is restored as she challenges her adversaries to kill, to see what happens when an author dies. This conflict demonstrates how integral collaboration is to storying. Without characters *doing* things, the plot dissolves; without an author, there is no story. The world itself begins to break because the imaginative deed enacting its existence can no longer be fulfilled. In being uncooperative, Poison asserts her own agency and “glitches” the novel. Inaction halts narrative progress, and it allows Poison her moment of resistance. To use Russell's

²³ Not explored in this chapter but worth consideration is the notion of uncooperative readers. This chapter focuses on how texts use ludic metalepsis to misbehave, but there are also moments where readers may choose to be equally noncompliant and/or reluctant. This may result in misreadings and therefore misrepresentations, like explored in the opening of Chapter 4.

language, Poison refuses to consent to the “relationship” between herself and the narrative. She spoils the narrative play and her world by *not* acting. Poison views such refusal as a reclamation of agency, yet more compelling is the entanglement between refusing to play and world breaking. If the text refuses to cooperate, then the act of reading glitches and becomes borderline impossible. The storyworld ceases to exist because the magic circle is broken by the refusal to play. By acting the spoilsport, Poison reveals how texts can be *uncooperative*, how they can refuse to abide by the assumed reader-writer contract towards communicating a story.

Like the novel *Poison*, the seemingly innocuous but secretly horrific game *Doki Doki Literature Club* stars a female protagonist resisting narrative programming. In 2017, Team Salvato released the visual novel *Doki Doki Literature Club* on Steam and itch.io. Compatible with Microsoft Windows, macOS, and Linux, the story appears as a lighthearted Japanese dating simulator, with the player joining a high school club. Both Steam and itch.io website opens with a letter from the character Monika describing her goals with the club:

Hi, Monika here!

Welcome to the Literature Club! It’s always been a dream of mine to make something special out of the things that I love. Now that *you’re* a club member, you can help me make that dream come true in this cute game...

I’m super excited for you to make friends with everyone and help the Literature Club become a more intimate place for all my members. But I can tell already that you’re a sweetheart—will you promise to spend the most time with me?
(ddlc.moe)

Bright pink and white polka dots surround Monika’s message, which maintains the masquerade that *DDLC* is a sweet story about high schoolers falling in love (see fig. 6).

Despite the numerous content warnings and tags of “psychological horror”, many first-time players were shocked when they realized that this game had more bite to it.²⁴

Furthermore, while Monika’s cute address seems benign, it foreshadows the frightening twist of the game: that Monika is addressing the player themselves.

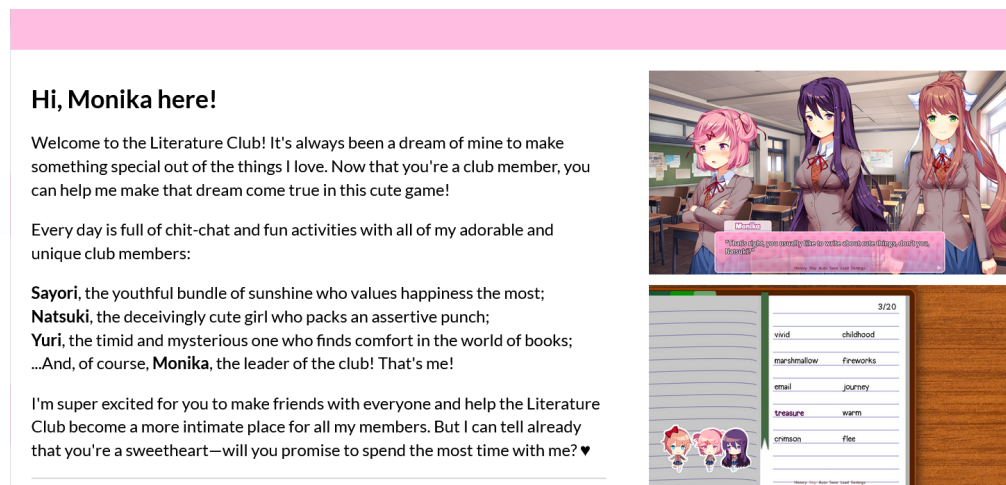


Figure 6. A screenshot taken from *DDLC*’s official website on February 4th, 2024. It features the frilly message from Monika that, upon rereading, carries sinister undertones.

The first act of the game progresses like a standard dating sim, with only a few hints that something is amiss. Monika serves as the player’s guide; she is not a datable option and appears to exist to help the player navigate the mechanics. After typing in an avatar alias (who I will dub Av), Av is introduced to Sayori, the childhood friend who begs them to join the Literature club. Av arrives at the classroom and meet Yuri, Natsuki, and Monika—their fellow club members. The game progresses with the player “writing

²⁴ When asked why the game is, and continues to be, free to play, Salvato remarked that it felt disingenuous to charge customers money when they might not realize the game’s true genre (dansalvato).

poems”²⁵ and reading those of the other characters. Av befriends the NPCs, growing closer to one or more based on their writing. At the midpoint, Av grows worried and visits Sayori to check on her. They find her hanging from her ceiling fan after committing suicide. The game then glitches and restarts with Sayori’s image boxed out (See fig. 7 and fig. 8).



Figure 7. Before Sayori...This is the main menu when the player first opens the game. Bright piano music accompanies the cutesy aesthetic, typical of a visual novel dating simulation.



Figure 8. After Sayori dies and is deleted, the title screen glitches with pixelated amalgamation of the remaining 3 NPCs in place of where Sayori was.

²⁵ Player produced poems are never generated in full. Rather, the player chooses from a list of words that would be “used” in the poem that would present at the next literature club meeting. These words help build social affinity with Natsuki, Sayori, Yuri, and later, Monika.

Players then replay the opening scenes without Sayori. From there, the game deteriorates further—glitching during the poem writing, snapping Sayori’s neck, and even trapping Av in the classroom with Yuri’s corpse for the weekend. Monika, on discovering this, reveals that she has been meddling with the code and deleted Sayori’s character file earlier.²⁶ She does the same with Natsuki’s character file, Yuri’s character file, and large portions of the game data. The screen then changes with Av seated directly across from Monika in the literature club classroom. The windows behind her are dark, with occasional fiery flickers illuminating her hair bow (see fig. 9). After greeting Av and weakly maintaining the literature club façade, Monika acknowledges that she speaks to the player, not their fictionalized avatar. She confesses her love for the player and continues to discuss a variety of topics ranging from depression to school to wine. The game remains this way despite how the player chooses to interact with it.²⁷

²⁶ The files of characters are stored as .chr, which is not an existing filetype. The game never opens the files; it merely checks on their presence. Deleting one or more of the files independently triggers reactions in the game. The files themselves are various easter eggs hidden in puzzles and code.

²⁷ Playing the original, computer, version of the game varies greatly from the console, *Doki Doki Literature Club! Plus* released in 2021. The developers made the game compatible with Xbox, PlayStation, and Nintendo Switch devices, forcing them to create a file system within the game itself for users to fiddle with throughout their playthrough. *DDLC Plus* also includes more puzzles for players to decode.



Figure 9. Only Monika. Following the deletion of the other NPCs, Monika virtually locks herself in a room with the player.

Monika has a number of responses for players trying to “fix” the game. She acknowledges actions like skipping, quitting multiple times, or even recording with specific software in conversations with the player. At first glance, it appears that the player is stuck. The ultimate solution is for players to enter their own computer file program, open the game files, and delete Monika’s character file (see fig. 10). The NPC laments her fate and the game restarts without her. The final ending the players achieve depends on their actions throughout the game and the status of the character files when the game restarts.

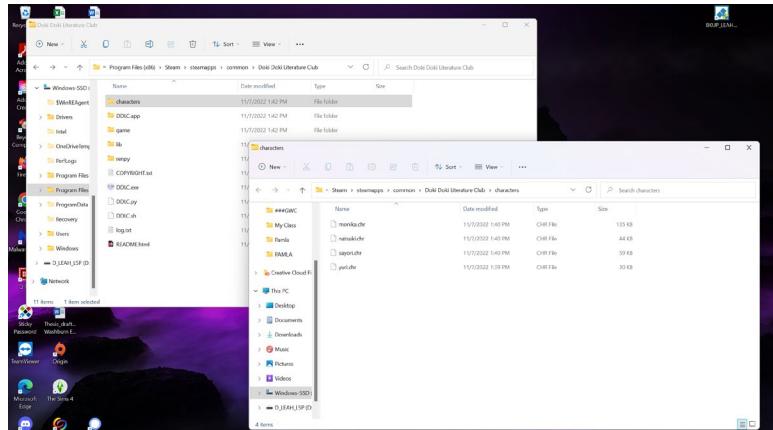


Figure 10. This screenshot was taken partway through my playthrough of DDLC, demonstrating how players encounter the .chr files on their own desktop screen.

DDLC fascinates many with how deeply it relies on the players' relationship to their device. Moreso than games like *Undertale* or *The Stanley Parable*, it asks players to engage with electronic and storytelling aspects of video games.²⁸ Furthermore, its climax, like that of *Poison's* hinges on a character refusing to participate in the storytelling. Monika deletes data to isolate herself and the player in a space between her story and their reality. The final classroom scene, with negative-imposed trees glaring through the window, has been divorced from Monika's world visually and narratively. This is the first time the player is treated to this of the classroom—a table with windows framing a medium-wide sprite of Monika. The dim-lighting, strange treescape, and stark emptiness mark this classroom as different than the locations before it. *This* classroom is other, apart from the previous classroom that players inhabited for most of the game. It is in this

²⁸ *Undertale* remembers various saves and playthroughs of its players. There are three types of runs through the game: normal, pacifist, and genocide. Players cannot achieve a true pacifist run (killing no monsters) until they complete the game normally. This first completion allows players to access more of the story on their second playthrough. Once players complete a genocide run (killing all opponents even potential allies), the game will not allow players to complete a pacifist run with the pacifist ending. *The Stanley Parable* focuses primarily on exploration and includes challenges such as pressing a button 10,000 times, returning after five years of NOT playing, etc.

space when Monika is her most vulnerable, her most direct with the player. Breaking the constraints of the game leads to a space where character and player sit simultaneously.

Through both *Poison* and *DDLC* the narrative disruption is plot integral. The malfunctioning narrative serves to reveal narrative structures, and (more importantly), the cooperative aspect of reading/playing. Both Monika and Poison have different motivations for halting narrative progression (the former because she is depressed; the latter because she is in love), and their refusal to progress the story results in a malfunction of the narrative system. Both engage in acts of worldbreaking as narrative defiance. They are intentionally uncooperative, with ludic metalepsis occurring in their attempts to step beyond their fictional existences. Where *S.* and (as we will see in the following chapter) *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* focus much of their visual energy into masquerading as objects from the reader's world, *DDLC* and *Poison* feature protagonists invested in creating new worlds where they can exist (or cease to) on their own terms. They do not wish to muddle along the Freitag pyramid; Monika wants to be hero, and Poison wants her sister to return home. Both resist being story-ed in a particular way. *Furious: Technological Feminism and Digital Futures*, by Caroline Basset, Sarah Kember, and Kate O'Riordan, frame their introductory chapter around a allegory of Cinderella, using this character to frame the challenges of (feminine) identity in a mediated age. Their work articulates a theory practice intent on challenging the relationship between ideas of femininity and their mediation in a contemporary, digital age. This practice values play as "important" (*Furious* 14) and even asks "Can we get out?" when considering the relationship between media, femininity, and agency (13).

Monika and Poison ask themselves the same questions. For them, being uncooperative, forcing the narrative back on the reader, allows them to escape a narrative entirely. Basset, Kember, and O’Riordan further this idea when comparing female subjectivity to riding in increasingly automated vehicle. They proclaim that “Neither girl racer nor woman driver, we do not adhere to the creed of technological speed” and that they “are drawn to the border of forbidden worlds and approach them with cautious abandon” (81).²⁹ The impetus of this chapter is much the same situation that Monika and Poison find themselves operating in. They seek alternatives to constraints (narrative or real world) that place them between rocks and hard places. Ludic metalepsis in this case allows for the glitch to become intentional, for a way to (re)theorize it along the understanding of a space where play can be rejected, spoiled, and resisted. The reader’s world is invaded by Monika’s files and they, like her, become stuck. Poison’s world dissolves as she chooses to wither rather than continue along what she views as a path constructed by another.

Furthermore, the refusal to “play” or “engage” with the reader functions differently than something like Foucault’s idea of avowal. In a public lecture given at the European Graduate School (2014), Judith Butler walks the audience through Foucault’s analysis of avowing as an act of constituting oneself and an act of identity making, specifically by focusing on the Foucault’s example of a psychiatric patient being asked to admit he is mad. Butler deviates from Foucault by claiming “Although Foucault would

²⁹ This chapter specifically refers to rejecting the idea of the Anthropocene, and I find it particularly compelling that they choose to use the language of world building, boundaries, and “forbidden spaces” to express the feeling of ontological entrapment.

not agree, I suggest that avowal, when it works in the service of power, is a performative of the elocutionary kind. That is, it brings into being what it says” (“Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling 9:10-6). In turn, Butler finds disavowal as the “implicit counteraction” (24:15) to avowal and argues that such acts of refusals “are ways of participating in the formation of a new political will” (23:33). Butler continues this line of thought to attest to how new subjectivities can be formed based on refusing and shaping (24:40). However, *disavowal* as a form subjectivity making and the refusal exhibited by Monika and Poison. Butler looks at avowal and disavowal as inextricably linked when considering subject formation. Although she discusses refusal, it is the refusal to affirm one’s identity rather than a refusal to engage or participate. Butler looks at disavowal as a potential “new formation of a political will”, but refusal as it appears in *DDLC* and *Poison* works towards reorienting readerly subjectivity. The reader is *being* refused. Poison and Monika (and in some ways their respective texts) reject the authority of the reader or writer, breaking a common mode of textual interaction. Because, in these moments, the reader is *subjected* to refusal; they are denied imaginative play. An uncooperative text is not disavowing the reader as reader but shifting the dynamic of a reader engages with the text.

Even in Nick Montfort’s coverage of interactive fictions (*Twisty Little Passages* 2003) and Espen Aarseth’s treatment of cybertexts (*Cybertext* 1999), the reader is assumed to be distanced somehow from the narrative. *Poison* and *DDLC* twist that assumption by allowing the characters to wrest a modicum of assumed control away from the reader. Returning to the idea of the reader-writer contract, the reader did not expect to

face characters that were uncooperative. Often they are used to a text being difficult but still firmly under their control. The world-breaking in *DDLC* and *Poison* resist such authority by having characters refuse progress.

Conclusion

Where the previous chapter focuses on defining ludic metalepsis, this chapter examines how ludic metalepsis might offer sites of resistance and autonomy through uncooperative narratives *breaking* the world. The ways in which *Poison* and *DDLC* exploit narrative (dis)engagement demonstrate the inherently playful aspects of world-breaking and -making. I approached *DDLC* with foreknowledge of what digital specters were about to occupy my computer. When my playthrough of *DDLC* began, the very first thing I checked was the .chr files. The files, their blank page icon, glares back at me from the screen. I considered deleting Monika's file *immediately*, just to say I did, to try and embrace the spirit of glitching—to resist playing the game on its terms. Even knowing those files existed, those four .chr files had my fingers itching. Similarly, *Poison's* climax featured a disintegrating narrative that characters themselves encountered. Both moments result from texts refusing to be read. The stories were not merely difficult; they were functionally impossible. Where the limbo felt in the previous chapter was one of verve and excitement at a new world being opened, uncooperative texts place the reader in limbo by glitching the narrative mechanics. They, like Monika and Poison in this case, become “stuck”, cut off from all avenues of progression or exploration.

What haunts me about *Poison* and *DDLC* are the ways in which the reader can be reminded of real and imagined restrictions. Fiction is often referred to as an *escape*, a

way out from one's own reality into another. However, a text (or characters from a text) refusing to engage with *my* act of escapism points out the potential mess and glitch. Yes, the narrative “malfunctions”, but it is through that malfunction, through the refusal to engage, that Poison and Monika express their autonomy. Recently, I gave a guest lecture concerning *DDLC* to a classroom of undergraduates—some had the opportunity to play the game (or had encountered it in their own cultural milieu) and some encountered it for the first time on my Powerpoint slide. When I revealed that Monika looks out and addresses the reader, multiple students shuddered. A few whispered *nope*'s echoed throughout the audience. I invoke this anecdote to demonstrate the affective reaction readers encounter when the technology—including the book—gazes back at them and *refuses* to abide by the assumed rules of engagement. The glitching of narrative demonstrates the ludic qualities of storytelling. A text that refuses to be read, refuses to be played, demonstrates how interacting with media can be an act of cooperation or a failure to cooperate. A “glitch” or “malfunction” in the cooperative formulation resituates a power dynamic, removing the authority to turn the page or control an avatar from the reader/player to the textual characters. Breaking and breaking out of the fictional world creates a hiccup in the narrative and discomfits the reader, who is accustomed to viewing themselves as bystander rather than participant. The next chapter considers the inversion of this act: ludic metalepsis used to *make* worlds rather than *break* worlds.

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CHAPTER 3
FORGING HISTORY:
PLAYFUL WORLD-MAKING THROUGH THE FICTIONAL ARCHIVE OF *THE ART OF*
CHARLIE CHAN HOCK CHYE

Introduction: Unfortunate Timing

In 2015, Singapore prepared to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its independence. The country prepared by publishing narratives celebrating its national history. In March of that same year, Sonny Liew published his graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* with a grant from the National Arts Council (NAC). His book tracked Singapore's history through a fictional political cartoonist, Charlie Chan Hock-Chye, who captured major political and historical turmoil through his various cartoons.³⁰ On March 23, 2015, former Prime Minister and head of the People's Action Party (PAP) Lee Kuan Yew died just months before the independence anniversary. A few months after Lee's death, reports start appearing that the NAC withdrew its publication grant from Liew's book.³¹ While Liew's work concerns Singapore's history and founding, it is not nationalism with a pretty cover. Through the fictional artist Charlie, Liew critiques Lee as an almost deified leader opposed by Lim Chim Siong, a political ally turned rival.³²

I was first assigned *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* in a graduate seminar on post-coloniality and graphic narrative. This list included illustrated biofictions/memoirs

³⁰ For the remainder of this essay, I will primarily refer to Charlie Chan Hock Chye as "Charlie." I use first names for both Charlie and Liew's fictional avatar to distinguish them from any real-world counterparts or references.

³¹ However, Liew remained on relatively positive terms with the Singaporean government. He partnered with Professor Hsu Li Yang, the leader of Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health's Infectious Disease Program, to produce *The Baffled Bunny and Curious Cat* comic to help educate the public about the COVID-19 virus ("Comics to Educate the Public about Covid-19").

such as GB Tran's *Vietnamerica* (2010) and Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* (2018), so shifting to an author writing back to his own creational legacy felt appropriate. Reading this book over the summer, I immediately texted a colleague, complimenting Liew's museum-detailed attention to history. My first reading of this text was as a biography: a carefully curated three-hundred-page jaunt through a Singaporean comic's history. I finished and immediately began texting my colleague from Singapore regarding the book. I admitted to being fascinated by this person who produced so much art during the rise of the PAP. It took a moment, the little text bubble typing a reply, and then they explained to me that Charlie Chan Hock Chye, the subject of this book, was *not real*. Liew created an entire artist, his history, and his oeuvre to wrestle with the complex histories of Singapore.

The novel's hyperrealism—its forged materiality—acts like *S.* and *Building Stories* in its heaviness. It attempts to *forge* documentation, overwhelming the reader to the point where history can be un- or re-done through a this created reality. Liew's text is not just comic, metafiction, or biofiction. The novel serves as a strange, powerful act of remembering by collecting what appears to be Charlie's old cartoons, sketches, and advertisements as a means to chronicle both the artist's life and Singapore's history. These pieces are often discolored and show the “wear-and-tear” of age. Liew creates a fictional cartoonist *and* a library of their work to trace Singapore's history. Then he proceeds to obscure the fact that his creation *is* fiction. Few articles have mentioned or discussed how or why the text uses (often faked) historical ephemera as it follows Charlie's journey as a cartoonist. Like *S.*, Liew's novel employs ludic metalepsis to

masquerade the objects from Charlie's invented life as museum artifacts. Unlike other works discussed in chapters one and two, this chapter focuses on the ways that Liew mobilizes world-making to interrogate the nationally endorsed narratives of Singaporean history.

Liew's text is politically subversive and formally playful. A fictional avatar of Liew, "Sonny", tells readers about Charlie through a graphic biography.³³ Charlie himself is a cartoonist, created by Liew, through which readers experience the major political turmoil of the PAP's rise to power. Many applaud Liew's text for how it encourages readers to think against the narrative of Singapore as a perfect, neoliberal utopia. Weihsin Gui's essay on graphic braiding in Liew's novel uses comics studies to read Liew's text through a postcolonial lens. He argues that the text encourages readers to "share, debate, and discuss ideas about Singapore's society and politics through the critical, discursive, medium of comics" ("Braiding Stories" 66). He views the repeated images and motifs in Liew's text as ones that invite readers "to perform acts of reflective thinking instead of being coerced to accept a particular point of view or set of ideas" (68). Teri Silvio writes about the relationship between the Singaporean state and creative material used to represent it. After discussing how Singapore's national identity is built on "transcendence, rather than blend, of ethnic cultures," they read Liew's novel as "self-conscious invented tradition of existing history as a resource for creating multiple alternative histories and futures...to create a new global public" (140, 146). Philip Holden

³³ For the remainder of the paper, I borrow Weihsin Gui's strategy to distinguish the author, Sonny Liew, from his fictional avatar, "Sonny. Because Liew's text plays with form with the intention of invoking biofiction, it is useful to distinguish between author and fictional persona.

uses Liew's text as an example of how graphic novels may yield more "as a metafictional form that also relishes the emancipatory possibilities narrative provides" (511). Unlike Gui, Silvio, and Holden, Kim Watson's work prioritizes the narrative of the text rather than the form. Watson examines how the text describes the relationship between Cold War decolonization and the Singaporean state logic. For them, Charlie's narrative is

one response to the alienating developmental state: he detaches from the social and economic worlds it has created and commits ever more firmly to the artistic representations of the PAP's democratic failures...[Charlie] labors his whole life but never quite finds a home in the productive, efficient, and investment-friendly First world "oasis" that Singapore becomes. *Charlie Chan* is a bildungsroman that fails to offer any reconciliation of self and state. (180).

Watson sees Charlie's story as one that encapsulates the relationship between Singaporean subject and Singaporean state. Charlie's desire for artistic integrity, for "not selling out", puts him at odds with Singapore's neoliberal agenda.

Although most of the research surrounding *Charlie Chan* focuses on its formal elements, there is no exploration of how Liew (re)creates Singaporean history through Charlie. Holden attempts to balance the narrative's strange, eclectic qualities but ultimately focuses on how this relates the novel to metafiction. I wish to push all these analyses further by examining how the text builds its (re)visioned history through ludic metalepsis. This chapter uses Liew's work to explore how ludic metalepsis manifests as acts of history (re)making and remembering, simultaneously preserving and reconfiguring pieces of Singaporean history through the artifact of fictional Charlie Chan. It explores how Liew's graphic narrative twists biofiction through metaleptic qualities to create a playful archive where Charlie, the imaginary subject, becomes an artifact himself. Liew employs what Gui would call the "conservator's repertoire" to

simultaneously preserve and rewrite pieces of Singaporean through acts of reality (re)making.

Lee Kuan Yew and Singaporean Mythmaking

The ruling party of Singapore, the PAP, has remained in power for roughly 65 years. Often characterized as a neoliberal city (CITE PEEPS), Singapore has a history of “illiberal laws” that remained from their time as a British colony (George 10). The parliament has elections general elections when the prime minister calls for them (required after at most five years of governance). Lee Kuan Yew, a key figure in *CHHC*, functions in what Cherian George calls “The Singaporean Story” as bordering deific. Akin to America’s George Washington, Lee often appears as “synonymous with the city-state” (Hong and Huang 33). The media and education system continue this trend where Lee fashions himself as the founder of Singapore. The *Encyclopedia of Singapore* features a five page write up that paints Lee as bordering faultless, the only valid criticism of his political practices being “that Lee was a perfectionist” (CITE 133).³⁴ His memoirs, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, often work towards this mythmaking endeavor. Historians Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli claim that Lee’s memoirs offer a

scripting of Singapore’s national history, a linear journey in which a unified actor—the nation—moves forward in time and conquers uncharted territories while staving off the corrosive effects of the transformative drive of global capitalism through a professed possession of timeless qualities based on the unchanging essence of the past. (40)

³⁴ This comment comes after a long justification of Lee’s “seemingly authoritarian manner of government” and applauds his readiness for open political conversation (133). Such a framing of Lee’s policies and involvement with entities such as the Media Development Authority, an entity which Tan notes often shuts down any complex view of Singapore.

Such a singular vision and portrayal of the nation relies on flattening, erasing, and villainizing other narratives entwined with the nation's formation.

Lee himself helped shape many of the institutions that help reinforce the aforementioned illiberal policies. The ARI article notes that "Catch-all laws give wide latitude to ministers, and the Constitution provides little protection to civil rights", and much of the state's coercion "calibrates" around the idea of "get[ing] the job done with as little force as possible" (20). For this chapter, will focus on the media and Lee's construction of media system that quiets dissent, opposition, and even criticism. As George notes:

The authoritarian impulse behind Singapore's press system is as old as the hills. What is more novel is the PAP's astute use of global forces pushed by capitalist liberal democracies to reinforce a profoundly illiberal system. While less clever regimes assumed that they had to subvert the press completely in order to assure their preferred results, Lee Kuan Yew recognised that he merely needed to tweak its incentive structure and install the right barriers. (16)

Singaporean media focuses on silence, regulation, and obfuscation. Regulatory bodies such as the Infocomm Media and Development Authority (IMDA, formerly just the Media and Development Authority [MDA]) proclaim to "safeguard the interests of consumers and foster pro-enterprise regulations" while also silencing voices deemed too dissident. In 2014, the documentary *To Singapore, With Love* (directed by Tan Pin Pin) received the "Not Allowed for All Ratings" (NAR) status from the MDA.³⁵ The regulatory body claimed this decision was based on the film being being "distorted, untruthful and a threat to national security" (Tan 232). This ban received attention due to the films subject matter: self-declared members of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) exiled and reflecting on their lives away from and

³⁵ This rating has been relabeled as "Refused Classification" under the new IMDA rating system.

their opinions of the city state (Mokhtar). This practice is neither new to global politics nor to Singaporean history. Hong and Huang note that the national Singaporean Story insists that Lim Chin Siong and the PAP left wing were participants of the Malayan Communist party whose “detention without trial under the Internal Security Act in the 1960s was justified, not just political opportunism on the part of Lee and his English-educated PAP faction” (37). Lim Cheng Tju notes the disappearance of political cartoons in *The Straits Times* during times of political contention (such as the 1961 election) (“Singapore Political Cartooning”). This tension between a mythologized Singapore (and by extension a mythologized Lee) and Singapore as a complex nation-state are at the heart of *CHHC*.

Charlie “lived” through the PAP’s rise, Lim breaking off with PAP left wing dissenters, Lim’s imprisonment (1956-1959), and the aforementioned contentious election of 1961 with Lim and the PAP left wing dissenters. Liew’s coverage of Charlie’s “biography” stretches from his youth in the 1940s to the novel’s present, 2014. Through that time, Charlie attempts to join the Chinese Middle School student protests, covers the Hock Lee Bus Strike in a comic, the friendship then political rivalry between Lee Kuan Yew and Lim Chin Siong, and the aftermath of the 1961 election. Charlie becomes a tool that shapes a multifaceted history of Singapore, refusing to omit the political actors such as Lim from the narrative.³⁶ This decision in of itself is fascinating because, as Philip Holden notes, it centers the question of “historical myth-making” as a tool used in Singapore *and* as a fictional practice employed by Liew (512). Unexplored by Holden is

³⁶ Holden’s article about *CHHC* characterizes this as the novel giving “equal emphasis, rather than [Lim Chin Siong] being forgotten” (Is it Manipulative? 512).

the question of how Liew works to complicate this picture—namely through the practice of archives and hyperreal objects.

Archives and Playing with Reality Building

Archives are conceptualized as spaces of preservation and history. The word archive invokes dust laden tomes, boxes of ephemera, and a curator (or caretaker) of these objects. However, archives themselves are *created* spaces. People, stories, and memories are left out or intentionally erased; narratives go missing through time or digital decay. The hands of people, governments, and politics leave oily stains all over archived pages. However, as Antoinette Burton notes in her coverage of the field that post-colonial studies configure the archive as “full-fledged historical actors” (*Archive Stories* 7). Roberto Ecchevaria, whose work specializes in Latin American fiction, characterizes the archives as “not so much an accumulation of texts as the process whereby texts are written; a process of repeated combinations, of shufflings and reshufflings ruled by heterogeneity and difference” (24). The dialectical struggle he articulates through this idea of archive as viewed through fiction is helpful when considering fictions mimicking archives. Works such as *Charlie Chan*, *The Illuminae Files*, or even Shirley Jackson’s *Riddance* capitalize on multiple mediums. While the aforementioned texts are all print, it is telling that what characterizes all is that they act as dossiers of past events. Within the diegesis, a need to collect, scavenge, and chronicle motivates these characters. For Liew, this motivation is clearly grapples with the tension between what are “acceptable” historical Singaproean narratives and what must be (re)documented through a lens such as fiction. Liew’s archival form contributes to what Gui called a “conservator repertoire.”

Riffing from Long Bui's theories concerning the "refugee repertoire", Gui asserts that a common theme emerging through Singaporean authors is one of preservation. Authors take on the role of historical guardian of Singaporean history, curating material that the state may deem fit to forget or erase (Lecture).

Gui's terminology articulates a narrative-postcolonial practice with concepts of archive and repertoire. In "Save As...Knowledge and Transmission in the Age of Digital Technologies", Diana Taylor reflects on her introduction of the term "repertoire" to archives and their relationship to the digital. She found tension between repertoire as embodied knowledge and "the 'archive' of supposedly lasting, stable objects such as books documents, bones, photographs, and so on that theoretically resist change over time" (2). Abigail De Kosnik's scholarship in *Rogue Archives* builds from this research to propose how archives themselves can become rogue places of change. When discussing how digital spaces change the nature of archives and archiving, she notes that the trend shifts archives from places of "exclusivity" to places of "commonness" (3). De Kosnik connects the use of archives with repertoire, "For every actual and virtual archive in the digital age depends on heavily on repertoire and can even be said to rely more on repertoire—by which I mean physical, bodily acts of repetition, of human performance" (6). For her, this is the foundation of archontic production, a methodology that articulates what De Kosnik terms the "postmodern digital remix" that helps decentralize emphasis on print mediums as records and logics of memory (7-8). It is the characterization of the archive that grabs my attention here—this seeming monolith that resists change through "older" media such as books and bones. Yet what Liew offers us is a potential

reconfiguration of that understanding by playing on this traditional expectation of historization. *Charlie Chan* anchors the narrative through hyperreal objects from a fictional artist's past. In this way, Liew is enacting some of Jaques Derrida's ideas regarding exergue and altering aspects of provenance of the "pre-archive lexicon" (*Archive Fever* 7) to engage with Singaporean history. Where Derrida notes the violence of filing off the mint information of an object (such as a coin), *Charlie Chan* performs this by *creating* a fictional provenance for Liew as a cartoonist. Liew "re-mints" Charlie as an object from our reality to voice, rather than erase, the fraught history of the PAP.

Charlie Chan anchors the narrative through hyperreal objects forged from a fictional artist's past. Hyperrealism, coined by Jean Baudrillard, is often used to analyze forms of mass-produced art. Baudrillard defines a hyperreal text as one "sheltered...from any distinction between the real and imaginary" (2-3). It attempts to blur the boundaries between art, fiction, and reality. Often, hyperreality is seen as a simulation of reality. In his article "Against a Perpetuating fiction", Garen J. Torikan attempts to distinguish hyperreal objects from art through this definition, concluding that the hyperreal works externally while art works internally (104). "Art" becomes a valorized term for its ability to "rouse its audience from a mental slumber" while hyperreal objects only require surface level, "external" participation (105).³⁷ Such a division between art and the hyperreal is common, with many art and postmodern theorists arguing that the hyperreal

³⁷ This language also creates tension between an aesthetic understanding of hyperrealism (banal objects that require surface level external participation according to Torikan) and how creators such as Liew, Abrams, Dorst, and Ware employ these techniques to supplement their endeavors ludic metalepsis. Not only do these texts *feel* more real, they also require a "nontrivial effort" to distinguish between the fictional world and reality.

is often used to critique the banality of mass culture. However, this distinction fails to recognize that hyperreality, like any technology, is a tool. Because hyperreality attempts to overwhelm the reader, it allows authors to play with the boundary between fiction and reality.³⁸ Beyond just *moving* where the fiction/reality boundary resides, Liew also employs this strategy to forge a version of Singapore that allows for open discussions of the city-state's formation. The objects scattered throughout *CHHC* simultaneously forge themselves by trying to masquerade as piece of the reader's reality and forge an alternative version of Singapore. These objects then become vehicles of *world making*, allowing Liew to recover and recount pieces of Singaporean history to a larger audience. *Charlie Chan* appears as a collection of old comics, found objects, and ephemera that follow Charlie's fictional life. The comics appear water-stained and timeworn, with transparent tape seeming to secure comic strips to the book. One page includes an event guide for the 1988 San Diego Comic Con that Charlie supposedly attended (267, see Figure 1). While Charlie was not present at the convention, the cover art in Liew's text matches that of the 1988 event. A photo even features a stuff plush modeled after one of Charlie's characters. The "archival" information lists the doll's maker (Lily Wong), height (21.5 in), and medium (mixed media) (295). Sketch lines and ink dots characteristic of old comic book printing are preserved rather than polished to high-

³⁸ Eugene L. Arva mirrors this idea with his analysis in "Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism" (2008). Arva notes that magical realism attempts to (re)envision "felt reality" by simulating the effects of violent, traumatic events (61). This parallels with Liew's work as a conservator and notions of ludic metalepsis, which offer spaces of reconfiguring history to interrogate similar experiences. The hyperreality of *Charlie Chan* attempts to overwhelm the reader with its realness. Liew "presents" the story, the media is cataloged like it belongs in a museum, and the sheer *volume* of material implies the work of a lifetime not a single project.

definition. The text obscures its fictionality even more by hiding Liew's authorship. *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* is not written by Liew, but "presented" by Liew (cover).

Through these forged, hyperreal curation, Liew maintains the text's historical legitimacy. Jacqueline Cooke's article about archives and ephemera argues that these objects serve as "condensed sources of information" (38). She identifies a "particular kind of directness" at work in ephemera (35). Liew's "historical" items maintain the *feel* of reality. Archival details overwhelm the reader, distracting from the text's fictionality. With fabricated and real-life ephemera, the text creates a pseudo-immersive environment for Liew's world. Only paratextual elements—like historical endnotes where Charlie is absent and the publication matter—break this immersive bubble. Like Liew's role as author, these elements are often obscured or hidden to maintain hyperreality. The publication front matter, like *S.*, has been moved to the rear, and the historical endnotes are mapped by page number rather than an in-text superscript notation. Unlike *S.*, *CHHC*'s world-making interrogates acts of history and history keeping. The world Liew constructs is one where these records are accessible and where stories like Charlie's can be published. *CHHC* forges a world a half-step away from our own, just enough space for Liew to reframe questions of textual and *historical* authority. The book functions as an archive of the omitted, of things often removed from Singaporean history.

The text does not invite readers to question the divide between fiction and reality. In fact, *CHHC* discourages it most of time, opting instead to use Charlie as a method of (re)constructing history. Such acts speak to what Verne Harris describes as the "ethical imperative" of archival work (18). For Harris, attending archival "ghosts" allows readers,

curators, and archivists to acknowledge the author's absence, their "exterior trace" which in turn becomes mediated by readers and apparatuses (19). There is an insistent *presence* about *Charlie Chan's* material. The sheer volume and breadth of recorded objects feel like the only way such a number *could* exist would be through the detritus of an interesting life. In many ways this echoes Kaitlin Tremblay's understanding of worldbuilding in *Collaborative Worldbuilding for Video Games* (2022). Tremblay characterizes worldbuilding as a "connector", as "identity", and as a "collaborative cross-discipline feat" (Introduction, Chapter 1, Introduction). Liew's work even echoes one of her tenants of worldbuilding: tangibility. She stresses that worldbuilding keys from "tangible touchpoints" which help make the world feel real" (Chapter 1). Like the weight of *S. and Building Stories* in chapter one, Liew seeks to overwhelm the reader, make Charlie's life and world *feel* real with forged curations. These objects entangle the real, lived in Singapore with the Singapore of *CHHC*. In many ways, Liew's fictional framework of the city-state mirrors Mark J. P. Wolf's work concerning possible worlds. Retuning to Enlightenment and Romantic authors, Wolf proposes that primary and secondary worlds exist on a spectrum rather than as diametric opposites:

As secondariness is a matter of degree, it may be more useful to arrange fictional worlds along a spectrum of attachment to, or reliance on, the Primary World (as we know it) and its defaults; from those closest to the Primary World, to the secondary worlds that are the farthest from it (that contain the highest degree of subcreation). (*Building Imaginary Worlds*)

Charlie's sketches, paintings, and weathered comics all serve to identify the constructed nature of Singapore's national narrative. The story of the city itself is carefully curated,

picked over and polished up so that a “utopian” city-state shines through. This narrative has been picked clean, the archives left with gaping holes.

The overwhelming “realness” of the *CHHC*’s objects materializes those “ghostly” or “absent” stories of the national narrative, insisting that they not only exist but that they demand inclusion. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud reflects on how abstraction in comics (and cartoons) functions as another world (35) and demonstrates this using the own avatar through which he narrates the book (see fig. 11)



Figure 11. McCloud notes that more abstract cartoons allow for the reader to move from another realm into another while the more realistic depictions keep them firmly grounded in their reality.

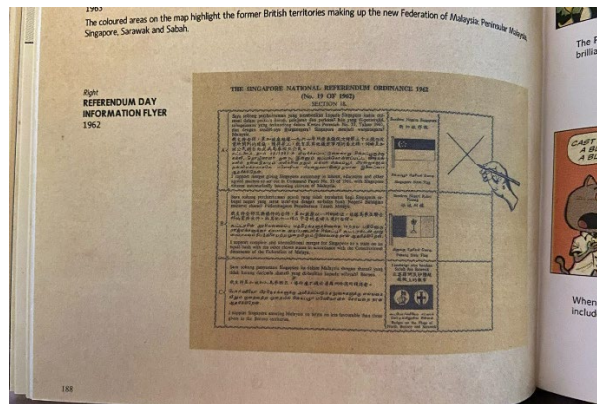
McCloud’s theories about abstraction speak to what other writers and developers note in world-building books (see Hergenrader and Tremblay). Often good world-building leaves gaps or *opportunities* for readers, players, or collaborators to enter into the world. *CHHC* inverts this idea by using hyperreality to insist on the *realness* of Charlie. There are *no* gaps to fill. The seeming *realness* pushes this version of Singapore—the version of it with Charlie—out onto the reader. It is through this process of (re)configuring Singaporean history that Liew engages with ludic metalepsis. I bring attention to world building from a creator’s purview because, as alluded to in the previous chapter, the

reader-writer contract contributes to how texts are consumed *and* how they are constructed. The primary thrust of this dissertation is to articulate a new readerly subjectivity that accounts for play in textual interactions, and to theorize a text's *reader* without accounting for a text's *writer* ignores the interplay between reader expectations and authorial intentions.

Where *S.* and *Building Stories* make ludic metalepsis highly visible, *CHHC* demonstrates its potential as creating space for postcolonial discourse. There is a similar heaviness to *CHHC*, yet rather than questioning the practice of reading, Liew's text reflects on history making, recording, and remembering. *S.* and *Building Stories* fabricate all objects for their fiction; Liew places fabricated political cartoons, old comics, and advertisements from Charlie's universe alongside to real world objects, such as a copy of the San Diego Comicon's program cover and a 1962 referendum day flyer (see fig. 12-14). The text treats these objects *identically*. The *Ah Huat* comic, referendum flyer, and program are cataloged as if part of a museum (or archive) exhibit.



Figures 12. A still taken from *CHHC*. It depicts the program cover from the 1998 San Diego Comic Con which Charlie “attended” (267). In the bottom left, there is an “archival” label that denotes pertinent information to Charlie’s history.



Figures 13. Another still that depicts the photocopy of a flyer distributed concerning the referendum for the merger between Singapore and Malaysia (188). Like the aforementioned program, there is an archival label that acts as a sort of provenance.



Figures 14. This cover appears to be from one of Charlie’s *Ah Huat* comics, this one concerning the Hock Lee Bus Strike (66). Like the others, it is recorded with date of publication, publisher (when available), and other available information, despite the third object being entirely fabricated for the graphic narrative.

The tension between real and “faked” objects draws attention to what histories remain silenced and which histories can be (re)forged. Sándor Radnóti, in his book *The Fake*, notes that “from a conceptual point of view, forgeries are significant to originals by virtue of negating them” (60). *Charlie Chan* forges a fictional character, history, and reality—faking the existence of this cartoonist while creating a space to present omitted histories. In situating these objects as curations, the history itself refuses to become spectral, forgotten, or ignored. It is only through the charade of reality that *CHHC* can “rewrite” Singaporean history. Where chapter two discussed the ways in which ludic metalepsis allows for uncooperative texts/characters to express agency, here Liew’s act of world-breaking and -making speaks to Linda Hutcheon’s description of postmodern intertextuality as “a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context” (842). Liew’s world-breaking and -making becomes a political tool through which he can explore silenced histories of Singapore.

Liew reconfigures the political narrative surrounding Lee Kuan Yew and Lim Chim Siong through Charlie's art, not just his cartoons. While Charlie's comic strips set these two as political rivals, his two oil paintings of each figure are for more revealing in the book's larger project. Titled "Prime Minister", the oil portrait of Lee paints part of his face in red shadow. His eyes are hooded, and harsh angles mark his suit and jaw. Lim's portrait shows him with a cheery smile and relaxed posture. Instead of facing the reader head on, he is turned slightly. Dimples mark his round cheeks, and a few fly-away hairs grace his forehead. (230, 146 fig. 15 and 16).



Figures 15 and 16. Oil on Canvas paintings from "Charlie's" personal collection, taken from page 230 and 146 from *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. The expressions and colors used in each portrait reflect Liew's treatment of them in the text at large.

These two figures are placed in direct opposition. Lim is soft where Lee is hard; Lim is light where Lee is severe. This directly contradicts Singapore's dominant historical narrative. While political hegemonic control is not overtly violent in Singapore, the PAP

maintains power through more subtle forms of coercion. As K.P. Tan notes “while selective censorship of political films that challenge the dominant official discourse has been one part of the state’s approach to maintaining its hegemony, the other part of this approach involves the sponsorship of widespread national nostalgia in ways that depoliticize the past” (243). Narratively, Charlie’s biography works against a depoliticized history through the artist’s allegorical and political cartoons.

Formally, *Charlie Chan* challenges this dominant political narrative by allowing for the coexistence of multiple points of view, in line with how Lauren Berlant views regarding counter-memory. In her reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Berlant notes that

“Official” memory involves the reproduction of the discourses that represent the dominant, hegemonic formations of the public sphere...Counter-memory, and the historical narratives that represent it, does not oppose official memory, but exists alongside it, recording information about the dominant culture without situating it as the only important site of activity and meaning. (98)

Counter-memory is not a rejection of the system or rules of historical narrative making (as seen by glitches in chapter 2). Rather, counter-memory offers a methodology for filling in the archival specters mentioned above. From the beginning, the book confronts Singaporean politics by positioning itself as an archive of what was lost, forgotten, or unseen. *CHHC* attempts to “unflatten” the Singaporean Story using Charlie as the vehicle to (re)create Singaporean history.

As Lee Kuan Yew attained more power, Charlie’s cartoons transition from magazine features to unpublished, self-published and personal pieces. In Singaporean standards, Charlie’s work would be considered highly dissident. Tju’s article “Singapore Political Cartooning” notes that, while there *were* political cartoons in Singapore, many

of them would be considered tame by Western audiences. For Lim, Singaporean political cartoons “indicate the kind of freedom and political space for criticism and expression that was allowed. The very lack of pictorial political criticism itself can be revealing” (126). If Charlie had been real, his more critical cartoons, like *Bukit Chapalang* or the “JBJ Cutout Paper Doll” (257, Figure 5), would not have been published later in Lee’s regime. Both of these works are overtly critical of the PAP or PAP members. In the vein of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, *Bukit Chapalang* uses animals to criticize the Singaporean political theater, and the “JBJ Doll” calls attention to Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam’s repeated problems with the law. Both of these pieces were “self-published” by Charlie (although it is never clear if they were ever distributed or sat in a private collection). Liew’s text retrieves this art, recovering information that is or would be “lost.” If Charlie Chan Hock Chye were real, a post-colonial reading of this text would be about reanimating voices erased by invading regimes. Liew needs the forger’s “negation” to highlight what is missing—a history of political critique. The hyperreal environment overwhelms the readers, making it more believable this person existed. By extension, such techniques also make the readers less likely to question the events Charlie witnessed. He seems real, so what he experienced must be true. Through this fictional persona, Liew creates an irreverent catalog of Singaporean history, one that moves through iconic timeline staples and complicates traditional narratives.

Sonny curates Charlie’s materials and Charlie’s cartoons preserve a history of Singapore. Liew’s text embodies this idea, with many reviewers labelling the text a “dossier” (Lehoczky) or a “longitudinal story” (Levitz 28:22). *Charlie Chan* calls

attention to Sonny's and Charlie's roles as guardians of historical narratives. Sonny pops in to give the occasional commentary, meaning the readers are allowed to "see" the curator at work in this text. The focus on Charlie's cartoons and works as something that could be physical and tangible builds on this idea of collection, curation, and preservation. Each artifact includes descriptive labels and itemized summaries, often organized like museum placards. Taped insertions highlight the *act* of curation, the action of preserving history. Some artifacts appear to come from the "Collection of Chan Hock Chye" (81). Sepia colored comic pages not only highlight the material used on the page. Discoloration speaks to age which speaks to history. Almost as a counterbalance to Singaporean national narratives—which clean up history—Liew intentionally leaves Charlie's materials messy. While this adds to the text's "authenticity", it also stresses the role power and selection plays in historiography. The text critiques what Singapore history *forgets* rather than the actual history itself. To return the forgery language, he "negates" historical erasure through repeated acts of forgery. The (mostly) faked ephemera create a fictional archive through which readers access real history.

Charlie himself is even a forgery, a fictional person used to witness historical events. He does not exist outside of the text, meaning his act of witnessing did not take place. However the events he supposedly witnessed did. Charlie's story is not one of biography but of biofiction. As Michael Lackey loosely defines the genre as "literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure" (1). He argues that finding ways to "manage, balance, and negotiated the competing and sometimes contradictory demands of biography (representation) and fiction (creation)" cause scholars to struggle

with biofiction (6). I would argue that this is probably the exact purpose of biofiction. Hillary Chute, in *Disaster Drawn*, claims that “comics proposes an ethics of looking and reading intent on defamiliarizing standard or received images of history while yet aiming to communicate and circulate” (31). What we see through Liew’s Charlie is both of these ideas working together. Charlie is biofictive—a fictional witness to the actual historical events of Singapore—yet he only exists in comics. His record of historical events also only exists through comics. *Charlie Chan* straddles the fictional and biographical elements through the narrative’s titular figure. The narrative can operate in this liminal space due to the nature of ludic metalepsis: by redrawing the boundary around history to include Charlie, Liew demonstrates how acts of playful worldbuilding offer avenues of rehistoricization.

But Charlie is more than a fictional cartoonist thrust through Singaporean history; he, himself is an artifact. *Charlie Chan* preserves the author’s fictional presence and chronicles, with extreme specificity. Charlie acts as an amalgam of what Lehoczky calls the American greats, moving through style, genre, and material as he explores his career. It is through Charlie that Liew showcases his own artistic flexibility while crafting fictional, artistic lineage for himself. Sonny positions himself as a disciple of Charlie, as the artist who will continue his work into the next generation. However, because Charlie is entirely fictionalized, Liew fabricates his own Singaporean artistic heritage while bringing in his own, real world influences. These styles are inscribed on Charlie who then carries them through Singapore’s “history”. In blending the fictive (Charlie) with real world objects, Liew further obfuscates what might be considered the “real” history of

Singapore. The construction of Charlie and Charlie's city-state bring to bear the entanglement of narrative and history. Gui's notion of the conservator repertoire reflects how writers must navigate and curate a sense of history as they construct post-colonial narratives. Liew is able to magnify this process through Charlie's *feel* of authenticity. The history covered in *CHHC* is rarely discussed in a Singaporean context. In the *Encyclopedia of Singapore*, Lee Kuan Yew's entry has over four pages detailing his schooling, motivations, politics, and a closing statement that all but paints him above reproach.³⁹ Lim Chin Siong's entry is merely two paragraphs. Liew's (re)historying in *CHHC* allows for the Lim, a specter in Singapore's archive, to materialize.

Furthermore, Charlie as a textual figure operates a complex narrative function. His both character and artifact within the text. Sonny and Charlie never interact directly. Charlie's dialogue is often given straight to the reader (although it was implied Sonny voices the questions) (7, see fig. 17). They rarely occupy the same panel, and in the one case where they do, the scene is disjointed and lacks and character-to-character interaction.

³⁹ The previous quote mentioned on pg. 92 in fn. 34 clearly indicates this.



Figure 17. The bottom line of panels depicts Charlie responding to a question. The implied speaker is Sonny, whose words are represented by squiggles. Charlie then responds while breaking the fourth wall and seeming to address the reader.

Sonny enters a boat, expositing about the 1964 Race Riots for a few panels, and then Charlie appears in the boat once his name is mentioned (198, Figure 6). The cartoonist then recounts his personal experiences during this time, ending the scene facing away from the reader and lamenting “it was difficult putting the pieces back together again” (198). The boat sequence demonstrates Charlie’s relationship to historical Singaporean events in two ways. Firstly, Charlie’s dialogue allows Liew to color these historical moments with emotion. Having “lived in” these moments, Charlie’s dialogue is not about political moves made to grab power, but the effect these moves had on the people. He reflects on the seriousness of the Race Riots and ultimately acknowledges the difficulty of “putting the pieces back together.” Although they do not contain an overt emotional appeal, Charlie’s words complicate the historical scene. They give the experience Sonny just recounted texture and weight. Sonny’s words about the Race Riots, while by no means “lighthearted”, read like a detached museum tour guide compared to Charlie’s stoic response. He allows the pathos of these historical moments to come through more

directly. Just as the ephemera gives the audience a more “direct” access to historical moments, Charlie allows the audience to experience the emotional turmoil of living through these moments in an ethical manner.

Secondly, by materializing in the boat, Liew asserts Charlie’s fictionality. Charlie has never existed. Rather, he serves as a repository for these major moments. History inscribes itself on him much in the same way it inscribes itself on a piece of pottery or paper. These moments impact him and shape his life, his personality, and his work. The final product seen by audiences, the Charlie Chan Hock Chye Sonny “interviews” reflects each moment of political turmoil and upset. In many ways, the boat in which they sit is a perfect demonstration of what ludic metalepsis: a liminal space where reality and fictionality can come together. What ludic metalepsis offers, in this instance, is an avenue to interrogate constructed historical narratives. It offers a space to reconfigure the archives that exist around this national narrative.

Conclusion

The Art of Charlie Chan Hock-Chye unites its genre-bending and formal playfulness with a clear postcolonial project. The novel is a strange balance of history, fiction, archive, comic, and artist’s book. Masquerading as an archive of material forgotten from Singapore’s national history, *Charlie Chan* focuses on the materiality of the lost objects to create a hyperreal environment that reflects on (re)making and remembering history. In pushing extending the fictionality toward the reader, *CHHC*’s ludic metalepsis allows for Liew’s characters and Singapore to *feel* real. The realness, the heaviness, of the objects proliferating this text make it difficult to protest its reality. The narrative positions itself

as a collection of work that would be forgotten or removed. By forging historical artifacts, the text actively works to negate history to complicate the national discourse. The text, while genre bending, plays with elements of biofiction and metafiction to reflect the real-world struggle with ethical representation in remembered events. Charlie becomes a biofictional artifact, inscribed by real world history and Liew's artistic influences. On a macro and micro level, the text embodies the conservator's repertoire that pervades Singaporean narratives. Elements of comics are not only for the Charlie's narrative. As Holden notes, there is a strange confluence between graphic narrative and metafiction, especially in *Charlie Chan*. Furthermore, Liew's text identifies a similar spatiotemporality working in comics, historical artifacts, and play. All three operate with simultaneous space and time. Historical artifacts take up space in the present, but they are remnants of a different time; comics allow for space and time to coexist on the page in a way that can be difficult for other mediums; and play operates in a space apart, separate yet synchronous with the real world.

Liew demonstrates the postcolonial potential of ludic metalepsis through undoing and reconstructing Singaporean history. By creating Charlie's Singapore, *CHHC* allows Liew the space to build the conservator's repertoire despite such conservation being actively complicated by Singaporean media, government, and official histories. Ludic metalepsis offers a narrative technique for world and history making. Charlie's Singapore rehistoricizes the events which have often become ghosts in the Singaporean national narrative. Using archival practices to build this fictionalized Singapore, Liew's graphic narrative manifests what Harris might term archival ghosts. Forgery becomes both an act

of falsification and creation. By *forging* objects for Charlie's story, Liew *forges* a world where these counternarratives exist publicly. It is through this strange, fictionalized version of the city-state that Lim Chim Siong's story and the PAP's history becomes more widely disseminated. The ludic metalepsis invoked in Liew's worldbuilding intensifies the biofictive elements, drawing readerly attention to both archival and national narrative creation. The narrative of Singapore is what solidifies its national identity. Liew, in complicating this image, demonstrates how playful worldbuilding permits the interrogation of such idea and ideologies. Moreover, Liew's text and its use of ludic metalepsis indicates how the situation of reading has become globalized in many ways. The everyday reader is inundated with texts seeking to capture their attention for reasons ranging from the banal "buy our product" to the more sinister "join our worldview." Such practices necessitate critical engagement with post-colonial theory, cyberfeminist theory, along with theories of narrative and play to construct an ethical approach for navigating a hypermediated world.

The next chapter considers what happens if this act of world-making is used to help shape views of reality. While the previous three chapters all use fictional texts as their objects of study, I shift in the next chapter to consider what happens when ludic metalepsis is used in social media spaces. Liew's work demonstrates that there is the potential to rewrite and reframe history as a method of interrogating narratives sustained by hegemonic systems of power; chapter four considers ludic metalepsis as a tool to create *unrealities* that forward agendas of radicalization and indoctrination.

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CHAPTER 4
BAD FAITH LUDIC METALEPSIS AND UNREALITY:
WORLD-BREAKING AND (RE)MAKING AS RADICALIZATION AND INDOCTRINATION

It is Fall 2021, I am preparing for my qualifying exam, stressed, concerned, and still teaching the theoretical primer course for my institution. From classic to contemporary, this course covers frameworks that help students engage in advanced literature studies in the major. For an 8 am, the class was lively, engaged, and eager to discuss course material—with a single exception. My department chair emailed me within the first week of course work to alert me to a (at the time) public Twitter account with posts about the class with identifiable course information. Not *just* about class—they had tweeted out my syllabus, derogatory statements about their peers, and judgements about my appearance. These included gems such as

- *Love reading a bunch [of] critical theory excerpts explaining shit you already pick up through the ambient cultural climate and don't get anything out of because it's just excerpts and also some literal who mainstream novel*
- *I'm better read than anyone in this class including the teacher and this should mean the class will be a breeze but on a basic experiential level it's demoralizing*
- Concerning another student that he tweeted about during class: *The progressive hates Kafka because he loves to be an enormous insect*
- and, my personal favorite, an exchange that was clearly sexualizing me within a racialized framework:

she'd actually be to your taste, not mine though.

thicc blaq prof confirmed

no, unfortunately, she's white

*So, not hot.*⁴⁰

Beyond recontextualizing the material in bad faith, this student's language had me concerned. Each of these posts demonstrates a fundamental misreading of the classroom, the theories, and the course goals. As a media scholar and self-proclaimed nerd, the reference to "literal who" recalls the violence and harassment of the GamerGate campaigns from early 2010s, especially when the author being referenced is a minority writer. As a teacher, insults to peers in attempts to close off proactive discussion is reminiscent of academic elitism. Lastly, as a *female* teacher, witnessing the fetishization of black and brown bodies when used as an insult to my appearance made me feel slimy.

Embarrassed that my chair knew before me and frustrated that the student felt comfortable disparaging their peers on a public platform, I chose not to pursue action beyond classroom reminders about copyright policies, consent, and general contextualization. In my spare time, I monitored the account while preparing my exam materials. It continued to toe the line of legality while fortifying its position through toxic masculinity, ideas borrowed from the "manosphere" (a movement characterized by "disparate male grievances that emerged as a reaction to feminism" [Kutner 7])⁴¹, and a clear investment in trolling culture. Despite numerous warnings in class, directed to a

⁴⁰ I have chosen not to reveal the account's handle nor to disclose dates on this material to grant the student the privacy he did not grant to myself nor his peers.

⁴¹ Kutner's definition was precise and to the point and echoes the sentiments of many others. Many (such as Azani et. al) note its anti-feminist tendencies and overall misogyny of the movement. "Manosphere" is often linked with ideas such as alpha/beta/sigma male, pick up artist, involuntary celibates, men's right activists etc. (For more like this, see Ribeiro et. al, Condis).

general audience, *not* to engage with social media this way regarding course materials, his posts grew bolder, more pointed, and more vitriolic. This came to a head the week that my exam materials were due. During a virtual lecture on Eve Sedgwick's "Epistemology of the Closet," he chose to record 45 seconds of it on his computer and then post it for his Twitter gang to mock. While classrooms are a public space, this was done while more than twenty-five students were at home (some of them with their cameras on), and none of which invited this level of scrutiny.

With the support and help of my chair, I contacted student conduct and began the process of reporting this behavior. Upon finding out that he had been reported, the student promptly deleted every post regarding classroom material, myself, and his peers, and scheduled a meeting with me to discuss the situation. He expressed that he meant no harm and that he thought his actions were acceptable because he "took down everything immediately," even though many of the posts remained up for over four weeks. Due to unfortunate timing, all of this occurred during the week of my exam. I and the chair met with the student, discussed copyright policies, and pointed him to potential campus resources that he might use should he feel in distress.⁴²

I open this chapter with this anecdote not as a strange form of comeuppance or expression of self-indignation. Rather, I wish to use this as an entry point to consider how radicalized spaces twist material, reality, and people to suit a very specific (often conservative/authoritarian leaning) agenda. When covering the events of January 6, 2021,

⁴² During my reports with conduct and Title IX, I was told that none of these posts were "bad enough" to constitute any other major violation beyond copyright.

insurrection, journalist and podcaster Robert Evans's six episode series *The Assault on America* describes (2021) reflects on the day's events. His coverage includes interviews with those close to some of the rioters and fellow journalists following the story. Towards the series' midpoint, he mobilizes the term "weaponized unreality" and contends that "the voices on this channel are not part of the same reality I live in and probably that you live in too" ("No Ordinary Rioters" 12:37). How does this occur though? How are these unrealities constructed and maintained? How do people enter these spaces and police them? Where the previous chapters explore the liminality of world-breaking and -making, this chapter shifts to focus on ludic metalepsis employed in bad faith. What happens when world-breaking and -making is applied to the narratives people tell beyond fiction? How might world building contribute to acts of radicalization and indoctrination? Commentators like Innuendo Studios, the aforementioned Evans, and Dan Olsen⁴³, often analyze how outsiders engaging with these spaces always end up "losing" because there is a distinct set of "rules" or "plays" that they cannot avoid. This chapter continues that line of thought by considering how ludic metalepsis manifests as an act of weaponized unreality.

Bad Faith, Realities, and Online Communities

In *Essays in Essentialism*, Jean-Paul Sartre explores the notion of "bad faith" as a type of self-perpetuating lie. He distinguishes between *lying* (dual consciousness) and *lying to one's self* (single consciousness) because "in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding"

⁴³ On September 11, 2020, Dan Olsen posted an hour-long deep dive titled *In Search of Flat Earth* that explores conspiracy theory groups like QAnon and flat earthers. Framed around Lake Minnewanka and the ability to capture on camera the curvature of the Earth, Olsen's work in this (and future) videos continues to explore how these communities create and sustain unreal narratives in the face of scientific evidence.

(150). To use Ronald Santoni's language, bad faith is unique because it unites the deceiver and the deceived ("Bad Faith and 'Lying to Oneself"). For Sartre, bad faith exhibits a metastable psychic structure that offers an "autonomous and durable form" (151-2). For Sartre, lying to oneself means convincing yourself of some "untruth". In a legal sense, bad faith is a more nebulous concept, although David Pozen notes that commonalities between understandings include: blameworthy behavior, deception and obfuscation of information, malicious purpose, improper motive/belief, dishonesty, and insincerity ("Constitutional Bad Faith" 892). Bad faith, in the courts, would be akin to *cheating* or *spoilsport* behavior, if we continue Huizinga's analogy. This person is refusing to play by the rules of the court to achieve their ends. In my earlier anecdote, I use the term "bad faith" with similar intent. The student acting in "bad faith" sought to engage with material within the rules of academic discourse (read: with the intent to have an academic dialogue). Conversations with school officials hinged around that it was "good" the student engaging with the material, right? However, what was overlooked was the *method* in which the student chose to publicly engage the readings and his peers.

In fact, although Sartre's definitions of bad faith include some flawed examples⁴⁴, it is around sincerity which he bases much of his analysis on bad faith patterns. Sartre concludes that similarities in the goals of bad faith and sincerity:

Thus we find at the base of sincerity a continual game of mirror and reflection, a perpetual passage from the being which is what it is to the being which is not what it is and inversely from the being which is not what it is to the being which is what it is. And what is the goal of bad faith? To cause me to be what I am, in the mode of "not being what one is." We find the same game of mirrors. (178)

⁴⁴ Sartre demonstrates "bad faith" through a description of a "coquette" claiming she does not want to have sex with her date (verbally and to herself) when, in actuality, this is her "real" desire (160-1).

Sartre concludes that sincerity must exist within bad faith (180). I would argue that what he gestures towards here combines some multiple aspects of the legal definition of bad faith—namely dishonesty and insincerity. As we will see in some of the later examples, people engaging with conspiracy discourse are often extremely sincere. They legitimately believe in this (un)reality they inhabit and construct. They do not engage with it because they believe it is false but because they vehemently believe that the earth is flat.

However, as Sartre indicates “Bad faith does not hold the norms and criteria of truth as they are accepted by the critical thought of good faith. What it decides first, in fact, is the nature of truth” (182). Bad faith constructs its own reality through its rules. Returning to my own experience, what part of my student’s tweets were bad faith engagement? I said he “recontextualized material in bad faith”, intending for it to be read as “dishonest” or “insincere.” While he was conversing with these authors and participating in the class, it was without adding to the class discourse. He did not want dialogue; he wanted monologue. His Twitter account had constructed a version of the world and myself that felt incongruous with reality, and *that* was where his key interest lay. He was content existing in an *unreality*.

Unreality is a method of constructing an imaginary reality, often used when discussing media coverage, journalism, and political science. Gabriel Weimann’s chapter discussing the Gulf War of the 1990s dubs it “The Unreal War” due to the discourse used by media outlets to distance consumers from the horrific events (291-2). The chapter chronicles various euphemisms, sports metaphors, and state personification that contributed to distancing these events from the “real”. In concluding how one

communicates unreality, Weimann notes that the audience is “a central actor”, which “is evident in many dimensions of the audience’s interaction with the medium and messages (e.g., use, intention, selectivity, interpretation, and involvement with the medium and its contents) (366). In an interview with *Journal of Design and Science*, Ethan Zuckerman notes that “By essentially constructing your own reality with [untrue] facts you are creating an unreality” (“Unreality and Social Corrosion”). Using Zuckerman’s ideas of first “persuading someone” of false information then constructing a reality based on those facts, the creation and maintenance of unreality then relies *both* on a party presenting untrue facts *and* a participant accepting these and constructing a world based on said facts. Maintaining this unreality then becomes a practice to maintaining the boundaries set by these new “rules”. Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman discuss a similar occurrence in *Prophets of Deceit* (1949), which outlines how “agitators” gather followers for often authoritarian regimes. They characterize the agitator as “giv[ing] the impression that he is deliberately play acting” (5) as this “leader” configures new targets for their constituents’ ire. Agitators present the world differently to win followers to their side. Löwenthal and Guterman even note that

In his relationship to the audience, the agitator tries to establish a tentative understanding which will lead to nothing less than seduction. There is a sort of unconscious complicity or collaboration between him and the listeners; as in cases of individual seduction neither partner is entirely passive, and it is not always clear who initiates the seduction. (5)

Both Weimann and Löwenthal and Guterman's work point to audience participation as something vital in constructing an alternate version of reality.⁴⁵

Similar patterns are at play in digital communities. Shrvani Minesh Kapse and Sandya Gupta describe trolling as "Assaultive, stimulating discriminatory, racist, or offensive language" as staples of trolling across multiple platforms ("Trolling and Victims' Perception of Trolling" 49). When characterizing and defining digital hate culture, Bharath Ganesh notes that "Digital hate culture builds on a cultivation of common sense amongst its audiences that seek to radicalize those who listen" ("The Ungovernability of Digital Hate Culture" 33). I note this because of the large overlap between ideas of unreality, digital hate, and trolling. More importantly, central to Ganesh's claim is the "cultivation of common sense". The Oxford English dictionary contains many definitions of "common sense", most of which hinge around what is considered instinctively "reasonable" or "sensible." What interests me is how this points to a shared perspective of reality, shared experiences and agreements on what the world looks like. For example, my friends would argue that it is "common sense" that the earth is round; yet many in the flat earth community would argue that "common sense" dictates that the earth is flat. Mike Hübler and Diana Bell outline this strategy when describing how humor can help create and unite online communities: "Group formation, from a rhetorical perspective, is partly a process of situating individual ethos appeals in relation to each other, so that a common, group ethos emerges" ("Computer Mediated Humor and

⁴⁵ I want to flag that, like Sartre, there is a tinge to this analysis that elides the complex relationship between agitator and agitated that is not necessarily universal and ignores how vulnerable peoples can and often are radicalized. For more in this vein, see Michael Kimmel's *Healing from Hate* (2018).

Ethos” 287). While a group ethos and common sense are by no means identical, they indicate the priorities and perspectives of a community.⁴⁶ Both are tacit agreements of how *something* works. Group ethos is a shared understanding of practices to be upheld while common sense is a shared understanding of what makes up the fundamentals of “sense” or “reality”. This is paralleled with Scott Selisker’s description of cults, in which he notes that that cults are “an extreme form of social life, wherein the quirks of ordinary culture are suspended or amplified, or as principled refusal of ordinary culture” (127). Like Huizinga’s magic circle, cults exist *outside* reality—separate, apart, secluded. They insulate themselves by suspending reality beyond their confines.

Returning to Taylor’s work from the previous chapter. When reflecting on changing archival practices, she notes that “place/thing/practice change online...the three are deeply interconnected and altered through digital technologies” (“Save As” 9). While the scholars above were not invested in archival study, I find Taylor’s claim about the connection between place, thing, and practice helpful for understanding how unreality functions for these communities. The statement from Evans above, that January 6th rioters do not live in the same reality as his audience, implies that unreality holds some sort of locus. Although labelling the insurrectionists as “cultists” misattributes certain qualities of each organization, Selisker’s language regarding the *suspension* of reality for cultists certainly rings true. Hübler and Bell’s, Ganesh’s, and Phillip’s research could also situate unreality as a practice—the “common sense” agreed upon by these communities and the

⁴⁶ Kapse and Gupta note that part of the trolling ethos beyond humor is a will to hurt and an “immune[ity] to any kind of productive or bothersome comments or criticisms” (50).

“group ethos” by which these spaces operate. When describing Hübler and Bell’s research, Whitney Phillips characterizes the “generative power” of laughter as ““world building”” (*This is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things* 45). Phillip’s research engages with online communities and practices of trolling, and she reflects that “Within the community play frame, all reading is writing and all reception is creation; to recognize an in joke is to participate in the community formation, and to participate in community formation is ensure community growth” (45). The connection she draws between worldbuilding and community formation is telling, especially as it relates to the practice of online engagement. These communities hold generative power because they can “create” worlds to some extent. In the case above, Phillip is using the “in joke” to frame the use of world and community. The same logic motivates how bad faith ludic metalepsis functions as an avenue to unrealities.⁴⁷ Previous chapters explored ludic metalepsis as a productive space for postcolonial discourses (*The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*) and questions of agency (*Doki Doki Literature Club* and *Poison*). However, what occurs in radicalized spaces is ludic metalepsis used not to questions fictionality, historicity, narrative construction, and agency. The acts of boundary breaking become a strategy to *break* reality and offer a new construction of it that aligns with a particular political or commercial agenda.

⁴⁷ Although not identical, Elaine Scarry’s work in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* takes a semiotic (ontological? Epistemological?) look at pain and torture. She concludes that through the permission for “one person’s body to be translated into another person’s voice, that allows real human pain to be converted into a regime’s fiction of power” (18). In regards to pain, she even notes “This dissolution of the boundary between inside and outside gives rise to a fourth aspect of the felt experience of physical pain, an almost obscene conflation of private and public” (53). Despite this conflation of the private and public, Scarry is careful to note that with torture a key component lacking in these interactions is camaraderie. Scarry’s observations echo the principles outlined by Hübler and Bell, Kapse and Gupta, and Philips in regard to blurred private/public space. Scarry frames this boundary breaking as weaponizing the torture room into an agent of pain (40) rather than a space for connection, but the masochism of triumphing over pain may speak to what Kelly notes in relation to warriorism (see pg. 137).

What is articulated by Bell, Ganesh, and Philip are markers of a counterpublic. Michael Warner classifies a public as comprised by the reflexive “circulation of texts among strangers who become by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity” (11-2). For Warner, a public is united by a shared definition of common sense (8). A counterpublic, conversely, is “structured by different dispositions or protocols from that obtain elsewhere in the culture, making different assumptions about what can be said and what goes without saying” (119).⁴⁸ By using offensive jokes as anchors, communities like those of trolling help signal each other. Laughing at the joke meaning participating in the counterpublic; it means distinguishing yourself from the “sheeple” majority that finds certain behaviors unacceptable. It is within this counterpublic that an (un)reality takes shape for its inhabitants.

I bring together unreality and bad faith because ludic metalepsis enacted in bad faith might be a method through which we can reconfigure unreality’s construction and maintenance. The previous chapters explored how ludic metalepsis interacts with ideas like agency, (re)historization, and imagination. However, all of these works are fictional despite their attempts to masquerade as reality. They might *pretend* to be nonfiction or objects from our world, but their authors understand the fictionality of these world-breaking and -making acts. In other words, these texts engage with ludic metalepsis in *good faith*. They classify and market their texts as fiction and, despite uncooperative characters, attempt to engage the reader by acknowledging that this text however real or

⁴⁸ Warner includes queer spaces as examples of counterpublics and hints a discursive parallel in regards to practices of defining oneself against the normative.

hyperreal it might feel, is *not real*. Gregory Bateson's "A Theory of Play and Fantasy" outlines a play frame which explores the metacommunication elements of play and the psychological frameworks invoked therein. While analyzing play, Bateson notes

The discrimination between "play" and "nonplay", like the discrimination between fantasy and nonfantasy, is certainly a function of secondary process or "ego." Within the dream the dreamer is usually unaware that he is dreaming, and within "play" he must often be reminded that "This is play."

Similarly, within the dream or fantasy the dreamer does not operate with the concept "untrue." He operates with all sorts of statements but with a curious inability to achieve metastatements. He cannot, unless close to waking, dream a statement referring to (i.e. framing) his dream. (72)

Bateson uses this to explore the psychological implications of communication. However, I wish to draw attention to how he describes the dreamer here. The dreamer is "unaware" of this new reality they inhabit while inhabiting it and supposes it as their own. The metastatement "This is a dream" is inoperable to the dreamer. Similarly, *good faith* ludic metalepsis operates on the metastatements "This is play" and "This world is not real." Ludic metalepsis enacted in *bad faith* shifts the metastatement from "This world is not real" to "This world *is* real." Obscuring the fictionality of an object and then maintaining it within online spaces contributes to radicalization and indoctrination techniques.

As a political science concept, "radicalization" remains rather nebulous. For the sake of this chapter, I wish to focus on radicalization as *process* rather than concept.⁴⁹ Radicalization describes the methods for which people *develop* extremist ideologies (Borum 9). I favor this concept because it does not necessarily situate radicalization as requiring the end goal of extreme, violent action. While violence and radicalization often

⁴⁹ For more on this see Borum's overview of radicalization theories and definitions.

coincide—and indeed, many radicalized spaces are tinged with violent language, ideologies, and practices—they are not mutually exclusive. Considering radicalization as a process also allows us to draw parallels with indoctrination techniques. Clinton L. Rossiter notes that the simplest definition of indoctrinate is to teach “with an emphasis on that sort of teaching which presents ideas, attitudes, and principles in addition to mere facts” (543). While Rossiter’s definition aims to articulate the ethics of teaching political science at an introductory level and what that entails, it is helpful to keep in mind when considering *unethical* practices of teaching. If radicalization is a process and indoctrination is teaching, these two mesh like adjacent puzzle pieces when considering methodologies to pull people into these social spaces.

An NYPD study looking at domestic terrorism in relation to al-Qaida outlined⁵⁰ four stages leading to radicalization: pre-radicalization, detachment/self-identification, peer immersion/indoctrination, and planning the execution of a violent action (“Radicalization in the West” 21-43).⁵¹ Michael Jensen and Gary LaFree’s research into

⁵⁰ Many of the political science studies used in this chapter use al-Qaida as their focus organization of study. Post the September 11th, 2001, research in radicalization shifted towards Islamic radical groups. Although the terrorism and counterterrorism field has recently expanded to include domestic terrorism, the strategies, tactics, and methods examined in studies such as the NYPD’s “Radicalization in the West” can be applied to radicalized (often white supremacist groups based out of the United States).

⁵¹ Pre-radicalization is the individual’s world just prior to their first steps towards radicalization. Much of this stage is the groundwork set for a particular incident to prompt an individual towards radicalization. The second stage, self-identification, signals the transition from the individual’s former identity to their new, more radicalized one. Specifically, the study notes that self-identification occurs when their worldview becomes “re-defined” by the new philosophy, ideology, and values (30). A crisis (political, economic, political, and/or personal) often heralds this shift as well. Indoctrination, the intensification of the radical beliefs, follows as the individual begins to look more favorably towards violent actions. The final stage, jihadization, is when individuals “accept their individual duty to participate in jihad and self-designate themselves as holy warriors” (43). Although groups, such as the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys, do not strictly characterize themselves through religion, the idea that their members are “warriors” for American patriotism operates similarly.

radicalization pathways notes that “both a sense of community victimization and a radical shift in individuals’ cognitive frames are necessary conditions for radicalization to violent extremism” (“Empirical assessment of Domestic Radicalization” 47). The previous chapters viewed spaces created through the world-breaking and -making properties of ludic metalepsis as productive sites of resistance. Yet such spaces also invite resistance and world (re)shaping in ways that further exclude marginalized populations. Part of the radicalization process—or “playbook” to borrow Innuendo Studio’s Language⁵²—involves constructing a new(er) world view for the radicalized subject that aligns with the ideals of that sphere. Jensen and LaFree’s study note that five of the paths to radicalization involve “personal vulnerabilities [to] exert causal influence by fueling identity seeking behaviors in individuals, who then find direction in extremism narratives and meaning in camaraderie with like-minded individuals” (72). That people who perceive themselves as vulnerable flock to these spaces for “camaraderie”, as Jensen and LaFree note, indicates a desire for some type of socialization. John Lofland and Rodney Stark’s participant-observation study of cult of Reverend Sun Myung Moon (later termed the Moonies), and their findings indicate that often people became attached to the group’s ideology due to their connections with group members (“Interpersonal Bonds” 1378). In other words, the “like-minded individuals” Jensen and LaFree identify may not *begin* as all that like-minded. Considering radicalization and indoctrination as a *process*—social,

⁵² YouTuber Innuendo Studios began an informational series titled *The Alt-Right Playbook*. Currently comprised of 23 video essays, this series ranges from 2-50 min videos on the rhetorical strategies that these communities employ as well as histories of radical digital spaces. His strategy of analyzing these tactics and the language of “playbook” I find helpful when considering these spaces because it acknowledges the implicit protocols of these spaces.

psychological, and even physical—also makes apparent that there must be *spaces* for these processes to occur.

In their study “Radicalization through the Lens of Situated Affectivity,” Hina Haq, Saad Shaheed, and Achim Stephan theorize radicalization through affective bonding between the recruits and the organization. They identify two types of affective scaffolding that take a more wholistic approach to radicalization analysis: user-resource interactions and mind invasion. User-resource interactions focus on emoting and socialization, while mind invasion aims more for enculturation, transformation through social media, and manipulation (“Radicalization”). Their study comments on how mind invasion speaks to how Haq, Shaheed, and Stephan analyze the organizational structures of radicalized groups:

From the organizational perspective, radical organizations structure themselves to provide affective and social platforms for young individuals to connect with the organization and its ideology. Such organizations provide their recruits with a *well-developed structure and system*, which facilitate them to generate positive feelings such as strength, trust, pride, and belongingness within the group, and to generate negative feelings such as hate, anger, and disgust toward an outgroup, to mention the important ones. (“Radicalization”, emphasis mine)\

The “well-developed structure and system” used to enact social, psychological, and affective change hints towards how games and game-like spaces might contribute to this process. Another way to consider this might be seen through Stefano Gualeni and Riccardo Fassone’s *Fictional Games: A Philosophy of Worldbuilding*. Although Gualeni and Fassone focus on games portrayed in and through fiction, they also note games can

“persuade and transform” players when functioning as a rhetorical tool (94).⁵³ The parallels of fictional games as “persuasive” and the regimentation of radical groups that mirrors game organization indicates potential analysis for how game mechanics and storytelling might be used in acts of indoctrination. A Norwegian study analyzed how role-playing activities help with socialization and stand speech (Larson). This conceptualizes role-playing as a social-activity both as part of child culture and as part of linguistic growth (401).⁵⁴ The study reflects that the younger girls “use the role-playing context to practice speech which they will incorporate into their own repertoires” (401). While radicalization and indoctrination are by no means identical to “role-playing”, Larson’s study indicates a clear connection between game, play, and socialization. In a talk at Reagan Ranch, conservative speaker Ben Shapiro claimed that “All politics is narrative” (“Ben Shapiro’s 10 Rules for Debating Leftists”). As such, it seems appropriate to examine the narratives and rhetoric employed in these spaces through theories of play and narrative. What happens when that idea becomes mobilized *to* radicalize and indoctrinate vulnerable parties? What worlds are built to maintain these (un)realities?

Andrew Glazzard in “Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter Narrative, and Violent Extremism” proposes that extremist narrative and counter narrative studies need to

⁵³ Specifically, Gualeni and Fassone outline three ways in which fictional games/play can express utopian ideas: structural indeterminacy, the possibility of transgression, and rhetorical and transformative effects. For this chapter, I highlight the language used for the final category in comparison with Haq, Shaheed, and Stephan (despite the vastly different contexts) because it points to the way in which organizations use the mechanics and trappings of games to radicalize and indoctrinate new members.

⁵⁴ While Larson’s study ultimately concludes a difference in male and female role-play speech, I think similar principles are at work when considering how radicalization and indoctrination works. If we consider both processes as invested in reconfiguring language, ideas, and actions, then, arguably, the ways in which role-playing prepares Norwegian children for their adult futures, so to do radicalization and indoctrination allow participants to build towards more violent language, action, and ideologies.

incorporate more literary analysis into the field. He suggests that “If the appeal of a text is more complex and more subtle than messages it contains, then it follows that we cannot simply combat it through a more accurate rebuttal” (16). That is what I believe many of the creators on “Left Tube” identify as they struggle with ways in which to construct counter narratives to the (un)worlds constructed by radicalized groups such as Qanon, flat earthers, and incels.⁵⁵ Warner notes that publics seek out confirmation of their worldview and attempt to realize and recirculate that view among the public (114). I contend that what Glazzard and Warner both gesture towards is an act of bad faith ludic metalepsis, an act of world-making for an (un)reality that suits a world view of these radicalized spaces. These narratives create an “unreality” for participants to escape into; their discursive practices and community cement this unreality as *actuality* within their minds. Moreover, perhaps the pervasiveness of these unrealities subsist due to how the formal markers of fictionality operate. According to Marie-Laure Ryan, such markers (such as the world-creating predicates that James McCawley identifies)⁵⁶ that denote when a space/text/object is fictional “operate emotionally not logically” (*Possible Worlds* 22). It is not about whether a world *is* fictional but whether it *feels* fictional. Earlier chapters allude to the affective verve of ludic metalepsis, of the excitement a reader feels

⁵⁵ Selisker echoes this sentiment when reflecting on the “literary style” of cults (*Human Programming* 130). Like Glazzard, this is an inclination towards analyzing the narrative powers influence participants. Cults and terrorism are not identical, but both provided new narratives for their follows to escape into should they desire it.

⁵⁶ McCawley’s work in *Everything Linguists have Always Wanted to Know about Logic but Were Ashamed to Ask* (1993) analyzes the linguistic components employed when creating “possible” worlds. These world types include dream worlds, belief worlds, and wish worlds—all of which McCawley views as “not simply worlds but entire modal systems” (417). Ryan extends his analysis to fictional worlds, which I find helpful when considering how such worlds are marked as magic circles.

when suddenly something is in their reality (or actuality). The excitement stems from blurring the fictionality of a storyworld. In a similar vein, an unreality, once created, becomes difficult to dislodge in the minds of followers/believers because such a reality *feels* real to them. Radical spaces can then capitalize on this emotional reliance to create a self-perpetuating unreality machine. Such machines easily find fodder in online and networked spaces.

Case Studies in Rhetoric and Worldmaking: Men's Rights, January 6th, and Ben Shapiro

Many radicalized spaces unite their communities in a worldview of an unreal actuality. By that I mean, these spaces frame, portray, and characterize their world in ways that transform it from real to unreal. Casey Ryan Kelly's work in *Apocalypse Man* identifies a metanarrative that these spaces employ to "connect everything": men are the "victim-heroes" battling against antagonistic "feminism", an enemy over which they much triumph (60). This narrative then becomes the keystone of reconstituting this counterpublic's worldview. The aim is for this new narrative imposition to become "powerful enough to surpass the veracity of other rhetorical forms such as deliberation, debate, and dialogue" (63). Kelly rightfully identifies that users much both uphold and "seed" this narrative throughout the online space to maintain this worldview.

As of writing this, the current r/MensRights subreddit sees this narrative and world-making put to use as affirmation of male victimhood. Reddit—an online platform where users can post, read, and respond to similar content aggregated by a subject or concern—allows these individuals to pool their knowledge as they attempt to connect

their disparate grievances into a unifying worldview. Like any moderated forum, the subreddit includes rules regarding relevancy and codes of conduct. With this veneer of civility, the rules appear very equitable in their approach for allowing a space for conversation. However many of the rules involving issues such as violent speech, misogyny, and external interactions ring hollow. Hate speech is not banned, merely “restricted” and often not enforced. The example provided by the mods notes that

Messages that are purely for insult or hate purposes will be removed (eg "black people are lazy"). Alternatively, messages that discuss a person's opinion, or argue for a point, may not be removed. Serious misogyny or misandry will be removed - this doesn't include posts about general traits of women/men, but attacks on either gender as a whole. For example, "all women are whores" is unacceptable, but "women who marry men only for money are whores" is acceptable. (r/MensRights)

Hate speech when couched in “opinion” is considered an acceptable form of engagement in this community, which seems contrary to the oft memed sentiment *facts not feelings*.⁵⁷

Under a post regarding discrimination against men, one poster omitted one later from a racial slur in their attempt to articulate the victim hood of white masculinity

(*ilikehotasfuckwomen*).⁵⁸ Similar sentiments are found in the tags, which range from

“general” to “false accusation.”⁵⁹ While none of this is surprising, the outright statement of these rules feels at odds with the rhetorical discourse of the forum. As Kelly observes,

⁵⁷ PragerU released a video on May 11, 2017 titled “Facts Don’t Care about Your Feelings” featuring Shapiro, and he later references this notion. in a lecture at University of Connecticut in 2018 where he complains about the phrase “your truth” (“Ben Shapiro at UConn” 9:19) and the pernicious of conflation “the facts” and “your [unverified] opinion” (10:19).

⁵⁸ Whenever possible, I will describe harmful language vaguely and provide more clearly documented evidence in separate appendix for people to engage with on their own terms.

⁵⁹ More tags include discrimination, activism/support, mental health, social issues, humour, feminism, edu./occu., health, and legal rights.

there is a consistent frustration expressed throughout these posts, an expression of victimhood and the desire to overcome this struggle against the enemy of modernity.⁶⁰

While Kelly focuses on the metanarrative aspect pushed by these communities, I find it more compelling *how* communities frame and maintain narratives that remain at a level of discordance with what others seem to experience. To again paraphrase a statement made by Evans, how does unreality continue to sustain itself in the minds of its believers? These are people who, as Kelly notes, often equate corporate global capitalism and feminism as “the same thing” (u/WannabeLeagueBowler). Kelly argues that these communities situate themselves in relation to the apocalypse because such a scenario “makes what was once fantastical seem possible” (37). It is the sense and space of possibility that is maintained through ludic metalepsis invoked by these communities. There are elements at play at work in these spaces that continue to keep reality at safe distance. In a later thread discussing sigma males, the same user reflected on the two types of women at comic books conventions as either “prostitutes” or “beta females” that are plagued by “hormonal poisoning” (WannabeLeagueBowler comment on Sigma Males). A thread discussing the pink tax, a popular term to describe the inflated prices often placed on feminine hygiene products, claims to “want to look at it as a basic matter of basic economics” eventually devolves into similar rhetoric lampooning women, feminism, corporations, and media (WannabeLeagueBowler comment on Sigma Males). The same poster comments on the pink tax as

⁶⁰ Shapiro’s advice for debating leftists uses a similar combative mindset. To “win”, a debater must “take down” those they consider political opposition to give themselves space to debate (“Ben Shapiro’s 10 Rules for Debating Leftists” 11:10).

The pink tax means women are feeding corporate power. If we're ever going to fight back against corporations, we need to take purchasing power away from women and return it to men. Women should not be allowed to keep enriching these corporations, without being punished...Protect them from themselves. Don't let corporations prey on women's weakness for buying shiny plastic crap. (WannabeLeagueBowler comment on "pink tax")

This statement echoes the earlier connection between feminism and global capitalism and furthers an adversarial relationship between both ideas. Kelly notes that these white, masculine communities often invoke aspects of warriorism in their practice and rhetoric:

A largely masculinist worldview that encompasses survivalism, warriorism is a cauldron of frustration resentment, and paranoia shared by individuals (white men in particular) who believe that they are *embattled* by the forces of modernity: secularization, feminism, multiculturalism, globalization, and so-called entitlement culture. (39, emphasis mine)

Such a framework almost seems to employ Caillois's notion of *agon*, games characterized by competition. These communities hold a desire to "defeat" these forces they identify as oppositional. What Kelly hints at but never fully articulates is that these spaces have methods for establishing their adversaries and creating an (un)reality in which this scenario conforms to logic. Such a space occurs due to acts of ludic metalepsis taken in bad faith, where people lie with their intent and the metastatement surrounding acts of world-breaking and -making. Creating a common discourse—be it through aggressive language, a common "enemy", in jokes etc.—sets the groundwork for a separate discursive community that may then construct a separate, imagined "reality" in which they inhabit.

Shelia Jasanoff's scholarship with sociotechnical imaginaries (*Dreamscapes of Modernity*), while not identically aligned with worldbuilding, supports the notion imagination functions as a social practice and a potentially complex process where

unconventional ideas gain traction (322-3). While her research reframes the science and technology studies field around sociotechnical imaginaries, her treatment of “imaginaries” and “imagination” indicates the reflexively playful nature of the practice. If imagination is *social* practice, then it could also be a *playful* one in the same breath. There is cooperation in social spaces to enact an imaginary; a community works together to build, construct, and feed those lines of thought. Furthermore, Jasanoff indicates that is *through* imaginaries that ideas become both embedded in culture and cultural momentum, paralleling my treatment of weaponized unreality. If these imaginaries represent “people’s hopes and desire for the future” (22), then arguably the process of constructing these imaginaries is eerily similar to the language, process, and techniques employed in worldbuilding. Treating imagination as a social practice *and* a process through which “unconventional” ideas infect the larger cultural conscious allows us to reconsider this practice both as a playful one that invokes acts of constructing an imagined reality. The world-making enacted in radicalized spaces is one that seizes on acts of cooperation and even coproduction, something Jasanoff gestures to as well: “Work in the coproductionist vein sensitizes us to the ways in which elements of human subjectivity and agency get bound up with technoscientific advance through the adjustments in identities, institutions, and discourses that accompany new representations of things” (14). Jasanoff’s project and mine are on different trajectories, yet her treatment of imaginaries and how they come to fruition is useful when considering bad faith acts of ludic metalepsis.

Let us return to the example of trolls. Trolls and trolling attempt to justify behavior through the lens of humor—the “in joke” Phillip might call it. They claim

nothing that this behavior is “playful” and part of accepted behavior in their group, therefore it should not be treated as real. Ryan notes how this might actually contribute to unreality: “In many cases, the unstable character of our beliefs prevent us from assessing the extent to times we end up identifying with the role we thought we were only playing, sometimes we end up secretly distancing ourselves from the position we fought to establish” (*Possible Worlds* 63). Jasanoff, too, explains that “If networks diffuse responsibility they can also depoliticize power by making its actions opaque or invisible” (*Dreamscapes* 17). What occurs in the networked spaces, like the r/MensRights is the process of obscuring power dynamics with attempts at play and imagination. Even when gathering sources for this chapter, I had to continually ask myself *but what if they’re trolling?* What if they claim that this material—these acts, these rules, these words, these beliefs—are not real? Such justification of behavior elides how these rules and behaviors, however playful, still contribute to constructions of an unreality that allows for harmful, sometimes even radicalized behavior to be considered “acceptable”. Jasanoff’s work with sociotechnical imaginaries theorizes this as ways in which ideas are both embedded in culture and gain cultural momentum. Many times, these communities use joke and play as a political tactic to justify bad faith behavior. They mobilize play—this idea of a separate magic circle that both sequesters their language and keeps real-world consequences at bay. By constructing a reality that ignores the sociopolitical nuances of such ideas like globalization, capitalism, politics, identity, etc, many of these spaces facilitate radical narratives and ideologies.

One of the largest examples of this is the events surrounding the January 6th, 2021 riots, an event which at the time Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, describes as “domestic terror” (*Final Report* vii). As former President Trump continued to claim that the 2020 election was stolen, news outlets such as Fox News repeated this narrative and this version of events. A memorandum to the investigative committee’s final report concludes:

This data provided no evidence that the right-wing or left-wing partisan media covered in this report directly incited the January 6th riot. However, Fox News’s repeated claims of voter fraud, illegal vote counting, and general election conspiracy likely contributed to a political environment that allowed conspiracy, hysteria, and extremism to thrive. As the most watched cable news network in America in 2020 with roughly 20 times more hourly viewers than Newsmax, Fox News’ potential cultural impact is significant. (“Legacy Media” 2)

Much of the January 6th investigation materials (which interviews with news outlet hosts, defendants, political party members, and more) center on former President Trump’s culpability and responsibility in aggravating or mitigating the actions of the rioters. The final report, however, also includes sections covering how groups—such as the Proud Boys, Oathkeepers, and Gropyers—communicated, organized, and planned for the event. The narrative section makes special note of the Proud Boys group chat calling themselves the Ministry of Self Defense (MOSD), despite engaging in offensive actions (510), and of higher ranked Proud Boys acknowledging the illegality of storming the capital (512). When discussing QAnon—a conspiracy group organized around information dumps known as “Q drops” from the mysterious “Q” on cites like 4chan—the report characterizes it as a “bizarre and dangerous cult” (525) heavily involved in the spread of

election misinformation.⁶¹ Zuckerman describes QAnon as “a big tent conspiracy theory, a meta narrative that knits together contemporary politics and hoary racist tropes with centuries behind them” (“QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal”). Notably, Zuckerman remarks that QAnon “Like all successful conspiracy theories...is self-sealing” and somewhat jokingly reflects that the appeal “is that the process of deciphering and interpreting these vague clues is a hell of a lot more interesting than reading the rantings of a paranoid mine” (“QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal”). The draw of QAnon, and many of these other groups, *is* how they mobilized reader buy-in and participation as gravitational center.

While there is a lot of media and legal coverage of the events leading up to and occurring on January 6th, what I find compelling are the ways in which media interactions shaped the beliefs of many people who came to attend the event. The aforementioned memorandum notes Fox News’s frequent declarations of election fraud, and the Select Committee determined many political actors engaging in bad faith through the Stop the Steal campaign.⁶² Trump’s tweets and engagement with organization leaders through social media created an interesting environment regarding information, perspective, and narrative. The narrative pushed across these sources was that the election was stolen. There were different *ways* in which that narrative was spun depending on the source, but the central message was that these groups were being called to action to reinstate

⁶¹ The report also noted that conspiracy theory beliefs often overlap heavily with other extremist beliefs (526).

⁶² Roger Stone initially coined this phrase in 2016 when Trump’s victory was unclear. Multiple outlets (the report and Evans to name a few) reflect that he dusted it off and then mobilized it for the 2020 election.

democracy. On November 19, 2020, *Info Wars* host Alex Jones interviewed a Proud Boys leader who reflected on the organization's unity: "the media went crazy over it" ("Hispanic Proud Boys Leader" 0:29).⁶³

This language and idea of gaining media attention mirrors the language Shapiro used to open lectures at Reagan Ranch in Santa Barbara (2013) and UConn (2018): to give a performance to an audience and provide "fodder" ("Ben Shapiro at UConn" 7:03) for internet virality. The goal is not persuasion but attention. The goal appears to be to proliferate a narrative, to spread a message and/or gain fame through outlandish, media grabbing actions. They are *playing* through argumentation. In a *Business Insider* article tracing the history of the phrase "owning the libs", Shapiro claims that "'If you want to truly own the libs, the only way to do that is to win an argument...Not alienate them by saying jerky things that make them upset'" (Perticone).⁶⁴ A video posted on Shapiro's personal YouTube channel sees him claiming debate is not about "tactics or tricks...it really is more about trying to understand what the other person thinks and then critiquing what they think in a good faith way" ("Ben Shapiro's Secrets to Winning Any Argument")

⁶³ This video and many others from the *Info Wars* network are not platformed on the more popular social media sites such as Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube due to misinformation. Many of the videos I accessed via internet archives (due to legal action requiring them to be removed from any platform) or BitChute, an alternate video-sharing site with less regulations. Founded in 2017 by Ray Vahey, the site claims to prioritizing and protecting freedom of expression for such reasons as "ensuring that individuals can be heard", "holding those in a position of power to account", "preventing the monopolisation of the media by the state and/or private companies", and "the development of a fair and just society" ("Our Commitment"). The language used in their community guidelines mirrors that used in the r/MensRights subreddit in ostensibly claiming to want to be a site of empowerment, responsibility, and free expression while contributing to the incitement of violent actions, building mob mentality, and being unaware of their own biases.

⁶⁴ This article was published merely six months after Shapiro's UConn lecture that relies on many such "jerky comments" and ad hominem attacks.

0:34-:45). However, what Shapiro and many right-wing leading figures demonstrate is that, for their “debates” they have a different set of rules and win conditions despite claiming to “enter the arena” with the intent to debate in good faith. They enter the magic circle with an opponent with the express intent of arguing for performance, attention, and, in Shapiro’s own words, “to humiliate them in front of as many people as possible” (“Ben Shapiro’s 10 Rules for Debating Leftists” 10:10).⁶⁵ Considering this tension through understandings of play, what becomes apparent is that the two parties operate by different rules: one wanting to critique the other’s ideas in good faith and one wanting to “own” or “humiliate” their opponent. Such a strategy is a twisting of what is explored in chapter two: uncooperative narratives, characters, and texts. Where Poison and Monika use refusal as an expression of agency, Shapiro’s debate tactics demonstrate a refusal to engage in good faith. These parties agree to *play*, but they will only play *by their rules*. It is that distinction which erodes the nature of good faith debate.

Alongside implicit and explicit attempts at attention, radical organizations admit to exploiting narratives of unreality for their purposes. In the Select Committee’s interview, Stuart Rhodes, leader of the Oath Keepers, admits to “cynically exploit[ing] QAnon for his own purposes” despite not being a QAnon believer (*Final Report* 526). Both Proud Boys’ and Oath Keepers’ social media featured QAnon terminology and themes (526). These actions are examples of how lacking the proper play metastatement *this is play*—whether intentionally omitted or not—create pockets that allow for new

⁶⁵ Shapiro’s debate tactics are his most frequent and popular speech. In many ways, he has built an identity around these practices.

imaginaries and (un)realities to form. In pushing the QAnon conspiracy outwards, in proliferating and platforming it and acting as if the Oath Keepers *believed* such theories, Rhodes legitimizes these ideas. Publicly, he blurs the line between fact and fiction, real and imaginary. Similarly, Trump's retweets of Ron Stewart, a key figure in the QAnon movement, and QAnon followers lend credence to the movements ideas even if Trump himself believes them or not. In legitimizing these theories, Trump's and Rhodes's actions enable these ideas to masquerade as reality, like *S.* and *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. However, where Liew employs acts of world-making as a chance to resituate erased moments of Singaporean history, the above examples use it to *obscure* reality. They exploit conspiracy theories for their own political purposes, and in doing so, create and weaponize *unreality* to suit their own aims.

Conclusion: Beyond a Broken World

Trump, Rhodes, Shapiro, the posters on the Men's Rights subreddit, and even my former student demonstrate how narrative and play are entangled in every day interactions. While this chapter focuses mainly on conservative leaning spaces, my goal is not to rant about their harmful actions (although they are certainly harmful). Rather, in this chapter I seek to diagnosis their discursive and behavioral practices through understandings of narrative, play mechanics, and world building. The bad faith practices—whether they be Rhodes's admitting to using QAnon conspiracies for his own purposes or Shapiro's argumentation strategies—demonstrate how Huizinga's "hallowed" (*Homoludens* 10) magic circle can be mobilized for ulterior purposes. Jokes

become a shield for harmful behavior, and reality twists so that the blurring of “play” and “real” spaces becomes obfuscated by (un)reality constructed from misinformation.

The larger thrust of this chapter and dissertation aims to articulate a readerly subjectivity that accounts for interactions between reader, author, and text. Where the previous chapters apply this theory to fiction, my goal with this chapter is to consider the real-world implications and manifestations of ludic metalepsis. In watching many hours of creators cover communities like QAnon, flat earth, and even certain financial dialogues, I was struck by the many parallels between the practices employed in these spaces and the storytelling strategies used in texts like *S.*, *Doki Doki Literature Club*, and *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. The language that creators like Innuendo Studios, Folding Ideas, and even Robert Evans use in their coverage of these groups was that of play, game, narrative, and world-making. These explorations considered how, for people hailed into these spaces, reality breaks and a world emerged in place of it. The January 6th final report remarks, a bit offhandedly, the entanglement of QAnon conspiracy theories and extremism (526). What such description fails to acknowledge is how tightly these two practices can be coiled together. Far more than overlapping, in many ways, extremism and conspiracy work manufacture unreality *together*. The hallowed magic circle distorts to allow a more sinister kind of play to emerge—a play that is both part of and separated from the real world. This play space becomes a shield from behind which people enact harm because not everyone is playing along.

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