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Audiovisual Media Convergence and the Metareferential Strategies in *Layers of Fear 2*

The entanglement and the aesthetic influences of film on digital games have been the object of thorough study of game scholars since the very beginning of the medium and the discipline, with various scholars exploring this dynamic relationship over the past decade, including Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2002), Alexander Galloway (2006), Michael Nitsche (2008) and Gretchen Pazian and Joseph Sommers (2013).

This article aims to analyze the metareferences and metaleptic relationship between the media as reflected in the example of the *Layers of Fear 2* (Bloober Team, 2019) video game, which not only acknowledges its indebtedness to film, but does so in a direct, and utterly self-reflexive fashion. The game is subjected to close reading through the lenses of the typology adapted from Matteo Bittanti (2017) in order to show the variety of ways in which metareferentiality can be explored.

Watch It, Play It: The New Media Convergence

Although metareferentially is a trait that can be found in every media, there seems to be a certain agreement among game scholars regarding the uniqueness of video games which are considered “fundamentally self-referential” (Walther, 2007, p. 219) and “the epitome of self-reference” (Santaella, 2007).

Many scholars, most notably Fotis Jannidis (2009), Kristine Jørgensen (2013), Jan-Noël Thon (2016) and Hans-Joachim Backe (2018), use and develop the concept of “metareferentially” as introduced and developed by Werner Wolf (2008) as a special type of self-reference found in all types of media and manifesting as a commentary of its own status, structure, materiality, mode of production or specific, recognizable titles. It “establishes a secondary reference to texts and media (...) as such by, as it were, viewing them ‘from the outside’ of a meta-level from whose perspective they are consequently seen as different from unmediated reality and the content of the represented worlds” (2008, p. 22). Since metareferentiality is a broad term encompassing a wide range of techniques that draw attention to the materiality of the medium (i.e. a game’s “gameness”), the article focuses on one specific instance of the references between film and games through the example of *Layers of Fear 2*, due to its broad use of film imagery on almost all metaleptic levels.

Matteo Bittanti, who introduced the idea of a “technoludic film” as an “umbrella term for films that incorporate video games in their narratives” (2007, p. 307), recognized four modes of incorporating games into film: commentary, quotation, adaptation and remediation. The following section discusses them in detail and expands on them, showing how they can be applied in reverse to the games that feature film imagery and techniques.

The first mode, “commentary”, describes a situation in which a film “becomes a screen or a mirror upon which society projects and re-enacts through myth-narratives its deepest anxieties, forbidden desires, escapism from the self, the body, and ultimately, from reality tout court” (p. 309). Thus, the function is limited here to a generalized commentary on the growing role of technology and games in (Western) societies and the anxieties of their potential influence, reflected especially in the films of the 1980s and 1990s. However, by constricting the definition to social commentary, it omits a range of other occurrences which can be encompassed under the same term. As opposed to what could then be referred to as macro-commentary, the micro-commentary would focus on the significance of the individual titles embedded into the text or appearing in a form of the vocalized meta-commentary in which a narrator or character potentially acknowledges the insertion of text.

The “quotation,” on the other hand, can be compared to Genette’s intertextual relationship as the effective co-presence of two texts. While Bittanti does not specify or differentiate between its various potential types, there are many potential ways to quote text either verbally (e.g. mentioning its title or parts of its dialogue) or through still or moving image (e.g. the insertion of posters, screen-

shots, or scenes). If one understands the quotation as the insertion of any recognizable part of the outside text, a distinction could be made between a direct and indirect quotation in the form of parody or other forms of allusion. A special type of quotation would then be the so-called “Easter eggs,” that is a “hidden element in a computer game (world) which elicits some sort of surprise when detected and constitutes a form of witty communication between the designer of computer games and the player which, in the framework of art, would be perceived as breaking aesthetic illusion” (Jannidis, 2008, p. 546). The metaphorical name of the phenomenon implies the small scale and non-obvious character of the interaction, since their discovery is often awarded with an additional achievement, and their unexpectedness can be a source of humor, becoming a reason for their popularity (p. 547).

Both reference and quotations then reflect the metaleptic transgressions occurring between two hypodiegetic worlds, that is the so-called “internal metalepsis” (Cohn, 2005, p. 122), “intrametaleptic” transgressions (Pier, 2005) or “heterometalepsis” (Rabau, 2005), as they include the transfer between two different fictional worlds. Rather than vertical, which is the more common type of metalepsis, it features the horizontal type between two hypodiegetic planes.

The third category, “adaptation”, describes situations in which a specific title is considered a source text, referring to a “thematic and narrative persistence [combined] with material change” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 4). Furthermore, it could be argued that “the study of adaptation is necessarily the study of media itself—of the protocols that support both the adapted medium and the medium to which a work is being adapted” (Moore, 2010, p. 191). The adaptation between the media of various levels of interactivity needs then to accommodate for it, fleshing out the differences between the media in question.

Finally, the last mode discussed by Bittanti is “remediation”. According to David Bolter and Richard Grusin, “all currently active media (old and new, analog and digital) honor, acknowledge, appropriate, and implicitly or explicitly attack one another” (1999, p. 87). They argued that all the new media, rather than replacing their predecessors, remediate them, defining remediation as the process of “representation of one medium in another” (1999, p. 45). As an example of the technoludic film as remediation Bittanti offers “movies that embody into their narratives and/or style some of the conventions of video game language,” (p. 310), where as examples he provides titles like *Groundhog Day* (1993) and *The Matrix* (1999) with this type seeing its resurgence over the last few years with productions like *Ready Player One* (2018) and the TV series *Russian Doll* (2019). However, the impact of cinema on the structure is less striking than on

their audiovisual language and aesthetics. Ivan Girina (2013) compares the use of cinematic practices and tools such as scripted staging, and expressive lighting in the AAA titles: “the expressive tools of the cinematic mise-en-scene can not only be replicated in video games, but they have also adapted to the medium’s specificity and have occasionally been successfully translated into gameplay dynamics” (2013, p. 53). The idea that the video game medium has to rely on the cinematic perspective as dictated by the use of an optical camera is questioned by David Thomas and Gary Haussmann who argue that “the central lie told to the videogame player by the camera is that it exists at all” (2006, p. 1) and, thus, “the reliance of contemporary game design on the optical camera perspectives blurs useful conceptual boundaries between cinema and videogames” (2005, p. 2).

The Many (Meta)References of *Layers of Fear 2*

In the following section I analyze Bloober Team’s psychological horror game *Layers of Fear 2* (2019), arguing that through its multiple homages to classic Western cinema, it encompasses all four concepts discussed earlier in the article. Despite the implied continuity, *Layers of Fear 2* should be considered a second standalone game with different narrative and characters rather than a direct sequel to *Layers of Fear*, released three years earlier. Like its predecessors, which also include *Layers of Fear: Inheritance* (2016), it is a psychological first-person horror game relying on environmental exploration and puzzle-solving. Its highly abstract, surreal narration is told in such a way as to blur the lines between reality, memories, and fiction, exploring the themes of trauma and guilt. The player controls an Actor, whose identity remains unknown for the majority of the game, and who explores an empty ship turned into a stage of what appears to be an experimental play cast and orchestrated by an eccentric, villainous Director.

The game is divided into five acts differing in gameplay, main themes, and even visual techniques: *The Unmooring*, *The Hunt*, *Bloody Roots*, *Breathe*, and *Forever*. Between each act the player returns to the Actor’s room and the deck around it, which serve almost as a non-diegetic space reflecting the player’s progress: each section showcases collected objects including film posters, photographic slides, phonograph interviews, and other items. The narrative is paused in those semi-diegetic spaces so the player can piece together the elements of the story and attempt to guess the identity of the Actor. Perhaps the most curious things are the posters of famous films, the majority of which showcase two actors, a woman and a man, with an identical birthmark. When the player is ready to leave the area and progress to another act, they are presented with a short black-and-white film mysteriously narrated by the Director.

The game's narrative is delivered through scattered notes and the pieces of dialogue triggered by a collection of in-game items. The polyphonic, unreliable voices and the memories that blur the present and past create a sense of confusion, deceiving both the character and the player as to what is real and what is fiction. At the beginning of the game the Director seems to be a real person – or at least as real as the Actor – and a note can be found explaining that he is known for making “the actors jump through hoops before he even lets them on the set. Supposed to be some new method of building the character” (Bloofer Team, 2019). However, as the story progresses he seems to be embodying the Actor's inner darkness and can even be interpreted as an internalized figure of their abusive father.

Exploration of the ship reveals scraps of paper – letters, newspapers, and handwritten notes – and various items, containing information about both the Director and the Actor. Upon inspection of the latter a recording is played, giving the object significance and placing it in the bigger narrative of two siblings, Lily and James, who in order to escape an abusive father sneaked on the liner to the United States. While struggling to remain undetected in the unoccupied cabins and scavenging for food, Lilly engages her younger brother in an elaborate make-believe story designed to ease the hardship of the voyage for him. In the play, she assumes the role of the pirate captain called Baynes, also known as the Black Wanderer, while addressing James as “Mr. Hardy”, her quartermaster. This establishes a play-within-play situation, the second most important layer of the story parallel to the present-time Actor investigating the ship while being hunted by a mysterious Monster and constantly mocked by the invisible Director. While the two storylines intersect and collapse into each other, the player can never be sure whether they are a real memory or a fictional backstory for the character which the Actor tries to portray.

As the game includes multiple interlaced narrative layers reflecting many types of play, it evokes the *mise en abyme* structure. One level showcases the confrontation between the Actor and the Director in the stage play while on another there is a children's play of imagination. Through the unreliable narration and the symbolism, there is a certain identity play with the player. Finally, the Director's cinematics and the omnipresent allusions to, on the one hand, cinema in general and, on the other, to the very specific titles, adds a constraint dialogue with another medium embedded in the player's reality. Despite the heavy indebtedness to theatrical tradition, the game pays constant homage to classic cinema, creating a collaboration between the game's interactivity and the cinematic aesthetic and symbolism. However, it could be argued that this

synergy is already evoked by the choice of the first-person exploration-based gameplay which heavily draws from the walking simulator genre.

Through it, the game can be interpreted as a commentary in the primary sense assigned to it by Bittanti, as a general commentary on its influences and its dominant trends. Although, “metareference is no doubt frequently used in computer games” (Jannidis, 2008, p. 544), the practice of referencing in video games tends to assume different forms than the ones of other visual media. While it is not uncommon for video games to include metareferences to other games, either as a parody or as heavy influence, the scope of such reference tends to be less detailed and shorter. Many of the references found in the game belong to the quotation type. Although none of the quoted films refer to the characters, they do appear in the form of posters, reenacted scenes and the use of similar symbolism.

Each act includes three collectible movie chapters, paying tribute to the history of cinema. Some use the actual titles of Shakespeare’s plays, including *Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, and *King Lear*, others either close reference famous titles, like *Schizo* playing in *Psycho* (1962, dir. Alfred Hitchcock), or *Wondrous Voyage* referencing *The Wizard of Oz* (1939, dir. Victor Fleming), while some are more vague, seemingly in order to mirror the in-game narrative of the specific acts and emphasize the game’s constant play with the binarities, like *Double Shadow* and *Remember Her*, both of which at the same time evoke *Casablanca* (1942, dir. Michael Curtiz). On the other hand, *The Pirate Prince and the Cyclops King* is the first poster found in Act III, foreshadowing the storyline of the father who lost his eye during the War and is envisioned as the enemy of the level, a literal Cyclops towering above the protagonist in the distorted memory of their childhood. *The Trial of the Martyr* could offer a hint about whether the siblings killed their father or left him to die. Should it be considered a reference to *Let Me Make You a Martyr?* (2016, dirs. Corey Asraf and John Swab), telling a story of siblings who fall in love with each other and plot to murder their abusive father?

Already at this stage, there is no doubt that both commentary and quotation are clearly present in the game. The two main metaleptic levels – of the Actor’s performance on the ship as choreographed and observed by the Director and of Lilly and James whose lives bleed into the play – interweave the real with the performative. The use of the movie posters has, then, several implications. On the one hand, it establishes a firm link with the real world, showing that despite the surreal narrative, this world is, even if not the same, then similar to the one in which the player resides. The recognizability of the posters

is a metareferential nod that indirectly informs the player that even if the game presents an alternative reality, it is one that is close to the one which they are familiar with. On the other hand, as a micro-commentary, it acknowledges the importance of the given titles – or the titles to which these posters are a clear reference. The significance of the chosen films is placed in the context of the genre and both media, but also in the individual context of the protagonist. Although their career is not discussed explicitly, it is reflected through the films in which they have taken part, painting a picture of a specific type of actor fascinated with the classics and theater.

Moreover, the direct implementation of the films plays the role of an Easter egg considering their often hidden locations and the collectible character. Furthermore, they help establish the gameworld and provide clues towards the protagonists' past. As the story of Lilly and James continues, it is revealed that only one of the children survived their journey to America, leaving the other traumatized and haunted by feelings of guilt. As the player's choices determine the identity of the survivor and the protagonist, the posters change to erase the other sibling, establishing their role in the environmental storytelling.

Another type of quotation happens through the insertion of easily recognizable imagery both from other game titles (e.g. *P.T.*, Kojima Productions, 2014) and films into the game. Acts I and IV reconstruct the corridor from *The Shining* (1980, dir. Stanley Kubrick), including the characteristic carpet, toy bicycle, and the twin girls who are replaced by two child-sized mannequins. After finishing the game, it is possible to repeat it in the New Game +, which features a secret scene referring to *Fight Club* (1999, dir. David Fincher), the discovery of which triggers an achievement "We don't talk about it". Act III, which concentrates on James and Lilly's traumatic childhood, includes references to *A Trip to the Moon* (1902, dir. Georges Méliès), *The Iron Giant* (1999, dir. Brad Bird), and has an elaborate puzzle based on *The Wizard of Oz*. This last case is worth special notice since it blurs the line between the categories of quotation and adaptation by not only replicating the aesthetic and characters from the film, but reprising the tasks performed by Dorothy. In order to progress the player has to find a brain, a heart, and a lion paw representing courage, leading the protagonist to the entrance of Emerald City which introduces vibrant, saturated colors, unlike the rest of the game, which has white-and-black levels or overall dark colors. Due to its length and the lack of introduction of the character of Dorothy it does not fall under the common definition of adaptation, which usually signifies a larger work. However, since the homage applies here not only to the visual layer but the gameplay as well, it

is a video game version of the task presented in the film. Interestingly, considering the early date of creation of the said film, Dorothy's task might already be considered to follow the structure often introduced in adventure games quests.

Hence, the *Wizard of Oz* scene can be considered an adaptation because it utilizes both the aesthetic and the narrative of the source text, and because it actively engages a player to interact with it while following the original construction. However, this cannot be said about the most robust quotation occupying the majority of act IV, which in detail reprises all seven murders from David Fincher's *Se7en* (1996). In the film two detectives – young and idealistic David Mills and the experienced William Somerset – are tracking a serial killer committing gruesome, brutal murders. Each one represents one of the seven deadly sins and featured the killer forcing the victims to mutilate and kill themselves or others. The crime scenes are reproduced in Act IV of *Layers of Fear 2*, with perhaps the most dramatic level in which it is revealed that Lilly has been attacked and raped during their journey to America: the Act begins with the player forced to go down a corridor flooded with blood and with mannequins which are present in the entire game as silent, unsettling props, who are reaching towards them, creating a sense of entrapment and helplessness.

Through the level the player goes through the first five scenes from *Se7en* one by one, but they do not tie to the narrative, adding to the unsettling environment but in a way separate from the main story. While originally envy and wrath were metaphorically personified by the two detectives, they do not have corresponding stages murders. The film's killer, Johnathan Doe, accused William Somerset of being envious of his younger partner's happy wife. When Doe killed her to prove it, David Mills killed him, completing the killer's plan and embodying wrath. While envy does not have an obvious counterpart, jealousy could perhaps be found between the children or could be a metaphor for the guilt experienced by one of them over their sibling's death. Wrath, however, is associated with Lilly, for whom anger was the most important coping mechanism after the attack.

These two elements, the partial adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* and the robust homage to *Se7en's* locations and scenography are among the game's most fascinating elements. Far from a simple adaptation of the material, they combine all Bittanti's concepts to create commentary on the relationship between games and film, and the differences between the ways one interacts with both media. Interestingly, the characters in the game do not reprise the roles known from the film as its main conflict between the police officers and the killer is not part of the narrative. However, because the separate rooms and murders do affect the emotions of the characters significantly, it can still be considered a quotation.

Despite certain similarities with the genre, *Layers of Fear 2* cannot be categorized unanimously as an example of a walking simulator since many games from the genre feature little to no puzzle solving and tend to rely on the process of discovering the narrative through exploration. This derivation of the gameplay characteristic to many AAA games caused the walking sims genre to either be called an “advancement of the medium, a true evolution of the art form (...) or a sign of its decline and the threat to its future” (Grabarczyk, 2016, p. 253). While *Layers of Fear 2* bears many similarities with the genre, relying on the experience of overlapping memories and realities by walking through the ever progressively abstract spaces, it does have the possibility of failure through the encounter of the shapeless, unnamed shadow monster that follows the Actor, and it does involve a certain agency over the game’s ending through the series of choices, out of which three are meaningful.

Perhaps one of the longest and most passionate discussions in game studies have been concentrated around the topic of agency, engagement, and how the ergodic effort required for the interaction with the game (Aarseth, 1997) differentiates it from the act of watching a film. The hybrid nature of video games which connect the gameplay with the cutscenes and many other watchable moments (Cheng, 2007; Vosmeer and Schouten, 2014) is one of the reasons why the rise of walking simulators and other games requiring seemingly less active participation were met with such a strong backlash at first. However, it could be argued that in *Layers of Fear 2* the choice of first person perspective and the camera perspective are an act of remediation which emphasize its gameness and which showcase the potential of the medium to create fluid, continuously merging and overlapping identities. A player’s choices lead to one of three endings in which the Actor is revealed to be male, female, or where the otherwise absent Rat Queen turns them into the very monster that was chasing them through the game, symbolizing the lack of decisiveness and the inability to overcome trauma. However, the constant reminder of the Director’s instruction that in order to find the character they portray they must lose themselves, it is never sure whether the protagonist is Lilly or James, or whether the traumatic experiences belong to the character’s past whose life the Actor absorbed as their own.

Through the rich symbolism and the constant blurring of the lines between the realities – emphasized further by repeated usage of the real world’s imagery and referencing pop cultural texts known to the player – the player is pulled into the play with the identities, creating one more layer of the nested construction of the plays inside the play. These multiple layers (sic) of meaning are reflected in the way film references and adaptations bleed into the gameplay, making *Layers*

of *Fear 2* such an interesting object of study. Whereas the constant merging of the entangled, polyphonic voices and identities seems to be its main focus, the effect of the blurring of the boundaries between real and fictional is emphasized through the use of all four types of media convergence.

Conclusions

The article considered the convergence and the mutual influences between the film and video game media by applying the modes as proposed by Matteo Bittanti to the game *Layers of Fear 2*, due to its direct indebtedness and referencing of film titles. Although Bittanti's four categories offer room for development through additional sub-categories that would allow a more precise analysis of the metareferential techniques, they do show a wide range of ways in which one type of text can be implemented in another. *Layers of Fear 2* was used for this analysis due to its unique saturation with film references falling into each of the four categories as well as the fact that despite its clear purpose as a homage to the classic titles it still fully utilizes the potential of the ergodic, interactive medium.

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Ludography:

Layers of Fear 2 (2019, Bloober Team).

Summary:

There seems to be a certain agreement among game scholars that video games can be considered as inherently metareferential. The practices of emphasizing game's "gameness" have the vast potential of creating the sense of rupture, Brechtian alienation or estrangement, and it can be obtained through a number of strategies. The article examines the typology of such methods presented by Matteo Bittanti (2007) which are expanded upon and applied to film influences on video games. The final part of the article contains a discussion of the metareferential strategies found in *Layers of Fear 2* video game (2019, Bloober Team).

Keywords: metareferentiality, remediation, quotation, *Layers of Fear*