Game or Supernovel? Playing and Reading Massive Game Novels

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For half a century, digital machines have lent their computational power to mediate text-based, diegetic worlds, in the shape of software that we call games, video games, or sometimes interactive fiction. Perhaps the first such was Gregory Yob's simple labyrinth-monster game *Hunt the Wumpus* (1973), but ever since then the games (if that is what they should be called) have become larger and far more complex, and, in recent decades, a single such work can contain more text than, say, Shakespeare's collected plays. Given this massive textual content, as well as the often experimental and innovative nature of these works, they can also be considered a new form of novel; a kind of text that has much more in common with literature than with other digital games such as *Candy Crush Saga*, *Age of Empires* or *Counterstrike*. In these 'games', we find complex characters, difficult ethical choices (left to the player), imaginative landscapes and mythologies, and thousands if not millions of lines of carefully crafted prose. Teams of writers work collectively to stich these textual universes together, under production conditions that might remind us of multi-season TV series, but which are structured and consumed very differently – in fact, more like literature than TV. The claim made in this article is that the perspective of the novel (or supernovel) is a productive one for understanding the nature of these artistic works of ludic software. Should they be considered Literature? Through a discussion of the notions of literature, novel, and fiction and through a close ludic reading of *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) I will argue that these textual games are in fact Literature, a new kind of novelistic genre, and discuss the wider cultural implications of this assessment.

Should I kill Caesar? For hours [weeks in the game] I have tried to gain his confidence, and now we are alone in his tent. As the leader of the most brutal faction in the Mojave, he is clearly evil, as the trail of crucified people across the Wasteland shows, but he is also an interesting figure to talk to, well-read

and fascinating, and there could be more benefit from staying on his good side, at least for a while. If I do try to kill him, the soldiers on guard outside will attack me relentlessly, and escaping from the camp will be difficult. Will killing him make a real difference in this world, or just bolster my own ego? Perhaps an even more cruel despot will take his place?

Introduction

The question of whether single-player *text* games are or should be considered Literature is an old one, and in fact it was asked more frequently in the 1980s than it is today. Before hypertext fiction took over as the most successful form of experimental, digital literature in the late 1980s, with the work of Michael Joyce (1987) in particular, text adventure games were at the centre of attention of literary scholars who investigated the new artistic computer genre, looking for literary value or literariness (Niesz and Holland 1984; Buckles 1985; Randall 1988; Lanestedt 1989). These scholars all agreed and even championed that text adventures were a form of literature; they were text, using verbal messages for poetic effect (which is the hallmark of being literature) as well as for other, more instrumental communicational functions such as controlling a text-based avatar and operating the software itself. Although the general public assumed these software-based texts were 'games' (hence the name, adventure *games*), they were also equally well known as 'interactive fiction', thus marking them as literary endeavours. As the case for their literariness has been made – successfully – decades ago, they are not pertinent to the current discussion. Instead, and in the frame of intermediality, I want to examine the literariness of visual, 3D computer 'video' games that also contain text; in short, investigate their possible status as *novels*.

As computers grew more powerful and affordable, during the 1980s and early 1990s, following Moore's Law (Moore 1965), which states that the number of transistors on an integrated circuit roughly doubles every two years, it became possible to migrate from purely text-based adventure worlds to landscapes that were cinematic and iconographically navigable. These new games of the late 1980s and early 1990s captured the text games' commercial market, and effectively forced out the commercial text-only games, by transforming the adventure game genre into a visual as well as textual spectacle with much greater market appeal. At the same time, the side effect of Moore's Law was that the new, commercially successful, graphical 3D games, with very few exceptions, could no longer be made by a single person, but required, for every iteration of the graphical game engines, increasingly larger teams of programmers and graphical artists, as well as composers, musicians, voice actors, 2D artists, level designers, usability testers, marketers, producers, publishers and investors. This production process is actually much easier today than at the start of the graphical 3D genres three decades ago; since then, game authoring tools such as the 3D cross-platform game building engines *Unity* or *Unreal* have made it possible

for individual authors to create quite sophisticated game worlds, though typically these do not contain anything near the amount of text that an average novel does.

In short, the production paradigm of commercial adventure games moved from something very much akin to a literary model with a single author to something that looked eerily like a film production, but even more complex, based on an ever-developing technology. However, what remained, and unlike film (at least since the silent movies), was a complete reliance on written text as a main channel of communication between game and player. Unlike fast action games, simulation games, platformers and to some extent, strategy games, these creations could not be played without descriptive prose as a main source of information. And not just little text snippets here and there; vast volumes that had to be written and edited by large teams of writers and editors. Some games, such as the *Elder Scrolls* series, even included hundreds of short in-game 'books' that the player could read and even collect; short tales that were intended to give texture and historical background to the world of the game, and occasionally also offer useful clues or gameplay affordances. However, the vast majority of text encountered would be lines of dialogue involving encounters between the player character and the other personae in the gameworld.

This is not the place to describe the many different aspects of game genres and how they differ, but the games with the most text also appear to be the games with the most expansive worlds, the largest number of characters, and the most detailed content. Typically, game worlds come in three or four flavours: the linear corridor game (classic examples would be the *Half-Life* games, Valve Corporation 1998, 2004), with an event structure like a string of pearls, easily comparable to a picaresque novel; the multicursal labyrinth games, such as *Baldur's Gate*, or *Knights of the Old Republic*, which, unlike the linear games, allow the player to decide where to go next by following branching paths in the game landscape; and more complex variations of labyrinths, which let the player unlock new areas as a reward of successful gameplay (such as *Dragon Age: Origins*); and finally, the open-world games, where the player is free to roam in any direction they please, but where there may be boundaries in the shape of impassable enemies, natural borders, or buildings, to steer the player. Another classic, literary device we find reified in the structure of these games is the quest; obligatory in the linear games, more flexible in the multicursal games, and completely optional (depending instead on their seductive qualities) in the open-world games.

Quests in these games are not necessarily as poignant as in the classical literature; they vary from mundane and repetitive tasks (as a means of gathering skill points or resources) to the essential thematic of the ludo-drama (saving the world, the princeling, or both), and the games often incorporate both types. Quests are typically used to keep the player focused on a central, unfolding narrative, but often one with variable endings, which offers the player a supported sense of agency or ownership over their ludic destiny. In open-world games, which can be difficult to navigate, quests function as a means for the designers to show off their created world to the players, by rewarding them for exploring the areas which they would otherwise easily

miss. Like long, descriptive passages in traditional novels, however, they can often be skipped in favour of alternative, enticing, activities or spectacles also on offer.

The type of games focused upon in this article will be termed *massively single-player games* (MSGs), to emphasize the sheer size of the games in terms of content, plus the fact that they are controlled from a single player position, unlike massively multiplayer games. They can still be played by more than one person, just as a novel can be read aloud in front of an audience, but the player(s) have only a single strategic point of entry into the game world. The games are long-lasting, providing typically hundreds if not thousands of hours of engagement, where most experiences will only be had once, unless one starts again from the beginning. They are massive, in the sense that they consist of a vast amount of material. While small compared with our physical world, these worlds still cover hundreds of square kilometres of ludic landscape, either handcrafted or automatically computer-generated (CG), often in combination. The very largest open-world games, such as the computer-generated *MineCraft* (Persson and Bergensten 2009) which is about 60 million metres across (compared with the Earth's diameter of 12 million metres, so about the same surface size as the gas giant Neptune) are practically impossible to traverse fully (or even partially), and therefore are largely undiscovered, despite its millions of players. More typically, the landscapes of open-world games are usually the size of real-world amusement parks such as Disneyworld in Florida – about 50 square kilometres (Aarseth 2008). In addition, they contain a large number of artefacts, characters, buildings and other, often unique, objects. And they contain words: *Metal Gear Solid 4* contains 400,000 words, *Mass Effect 3*: 430,000 words, *Little Busters!: Ecstasy* may hold the world record with 1.3 million words! In comparison, The Bible and *Harry Potter* volumes 1–7 both contain about 1 million words each, and *Pride and Prejudice* a measly 122,000 words. In other words, these games rival most, if not all, literary single works in terms of word count. But does that make them novels?

The question of whether massively single-player games such as *Fallout: New Vegas* are a new kind of novel can be broken down to – or at least discussed in terms of – four sub-questions: (1) Are they narratives? (2) Are they fictions? (3) What about their quality? Are they any good, or at least interesting, as novels? (4) And what is a novel, anyway? Let's start with the last question.

What is a Novel?

As the name implies, defining a novel is not easy; it is a genre constantly reinventing itself; an anti-genre always seeking to expand its domain. Its definition is perhaps mostly determined by the fact that other genres are much easier to define: the lyrical poem, the classic tragedy or comedy (drama), the short story, the essay – the novel is as much defined by what it is not, as by what it is. It is also a meta-genre, containing poems, essays, stories, histories, news, tragedies and comedies. It is often episodic, concerned with travel and space, centring on a main character but also full of side characters. An early topical scenario is the quest; the redefining, dangerous journey

reluctantly sought by the itinerant hero, filled with dangers and unexpected wonders. Unlike the tragic heroes and comic fools featured in their respective genres, the main character in modern novels is typically neither foolish nor heroic, but represents everyman, us. The novel is unbounded by generic conventions, it allows for any topic, mode, and new perspectives, as well as for playing with conventional form. From Austen via Dickens, Flaubert, Proust, Woolf, Robbe-Grillet, each generation changes some fundamental aspect of what the novel is. Finally, it allows for more than one sequence of actions and parallel series of events covering different timelines and places (Lothe *et al.* 1997).

What are the arguments, if any, that games such as *New Vegas* are *not* novels? After the coining of the phrase 'graphic novel' (when 'comic book' or 'cartoon' no longer quite captured the aesthetic ideals and ambitions of highly complex and accomplished serial illustrations, such as Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986)), not to mention *telenovels* or *telenovelas*, one might simply embrace the reasonable conclusion that yes, they are *ludic* novels, but distinct from *real* novels by way of their visual form. However, this argument is not very strong; one of the most popular media for novels today is audio books; recordings of a novel being read aloud. The novel therefore cannot be defined by its material medium or sign type, unlike, say, film. Are MSGs not novels, because they are games? Both 'game' and 'novel' are perspectives, tags applied rhetorically to sell, depreciate, or understand various actual artifacts or phenomena. The early Greek or Egyptian texts that we now call novels (Hägg 1991) did not start out under that label; the perspective of 'novel' was applied with hindsight and deemed fitting. (One can imagine the literary historians specializing in early English or Spanish novels agitating over these expansions of the category, which rendered their own material that much less original or historically unique.) The term 'game' is amorphous and not formally definable (Wittgenstein 1958); many literary texts that have been termed 'games' are at the same time unquestionably novels. So perhaps the opposite move can also be made? There are also novels comprised of loose, printed sheets, so the notion of fixed sequences need not be held up as an absolute criterion. Compared with such experiments, MSGs such as *New Vegas* are far more rigorous in their ludo-narrative structure. Just as some novels, from early on, contained illustrations in the shape of drawings or etchings, and sometimes maps, MSGs contain 3D visualizations and pseudo-movement. It should not matter how far MSGs are from a material ideal of what a novel should, at the core, be (since the essence of the novel is not based in its material form), as long as the application of the term to the work provides added clarity rather than added bewilderment.

As we have seen, the novel is a very wide category or even anti-category, with a focus on unique qualities and innovation. As such, and since I approach it here as a perspective rather than a formal category, it appears pertinent to apply this perspective to text-rich games such as *New Vegas*. However, they may still find themselves at the disparaged end of the spectrum, where the gatekeepers of high culture dismiss their quality regardless of their form. But we should do well to remember that the now classic novel itself was not always considered Literature; it

did not immediately or automatically belong to the fine arts, and with its every evolutionary turn, the same battle had to be fought. The question of literary quality in the game novel is not one that can be settled by definitions and logical reasoning and decided once and for all by rational arguments but must emerge and be played out over decennia in the slow discursive game of changing cultural tastes.

Are MSGs Narratives?

This question has long roots in the still youngish field of game studies. Since even before there was an organized field, in the 1990s, the relation between games with representational elements and narratives has been hotly debated, with little consensus reached. This is not the place to recount this debate (instead see Aarseth 2012, 2014), but again the question can be broken down into sub-questions: What are the constituent parts of a narrative? Does a text with these elements constitute a narrative? The short answer is, not necessarily; e.g., encyclopaedias are not narratives, but do contain all elements found in them. (On the other hand, there can be encyclopaedic novels that play with this possibility.) Do MSGs instead *contain* narratives, and if so, how? If MSGs are not narratives, what kind of representational enterprises are they?

But first, do novels have to be narratives? Clearly the literary experiments of the twentieth century demonstrated that this is not the case. Alain Robbe-Grillet (1989 [1963]), perhaps the best-known of the French *roman nouveau* authors, condescendingly referred to a novel's story as 'the anecdote', part of 'a dead system', which no longer corresponded to human experience and was therefore impossible to use in novels.

If the novel 'developed as a genre that had at its core a new way of conceptualizing time' (Bakhtin 2014), then the game novel has added a spatial dimension: it has developed chronotopically: game novels developed as a genre that had at its core a new way of conceptualizing spacetime, to paraphrase Bakhtin. Here I am invoking Einstein's and not Bakhtin's own Einstein-derived concept of spacetime: the chronotope – literally a place or space over time. Your physical room, in the chronological time it takes you to read this. Or a house, a field, or a city, from time A to time B. The World, as we live in it (and before and after), is the ultimate chronotope. Stories invoke fictional or historical chronotopes (or storyworlds – a concept too blurry and narrativist for our purpose here), but games and spatial simulations produce chronotopes that are experienced directly, unfolding in real (player) time, thus having an empirical, phenomenological dimension that narrative chronotopes lack as the mediated product of a narrating agent. All spatial games, including sports, then, are *metachronotopes*, machines that produce chronotopes. The produced chronotope, in turn, can be de-spatialized into a storyline, but it can also be reduced to an infinite number of other storylines, depending on the selected and sequenced events lifted from the chronotope. In a game session (chronotope) of football or soccer, there are hundreds or thousands of potential perspectives, depending on the position or role of the acting or observing agent, and each of these perspectives can be used to form any number of different stories. Confusing a game

session/chronotope with a story is therefore a theoretically naïve shortcut. Before someone decides to tell a story based on a chronotope, whether from a game or elsewhere, there is no story at all. Only data.

Are MSGs Fictions?

As a parallel problem to the previous one, what is the nature of MSGs on the fiction–nonfiction spectrum? At first glance this might seem like a non-problem, especially to students of fiction. But theories of fiction are typically weak and at odds with one another. The notion of fiction itself is not born in philological or philosophical scholarship, but in vernacular language, and did not have or need a formal definition when it was first used. Instead, literary theorists and, to a greater extent, analytic philosophers, have tried to convert the term into a salient, theoretical concept. But they still don't seem to land on a common definition or even on congruent definitions,[a] unlike the definitions of narrative stemming from (classical) narratology. Thus, the problem of determining the fictional status of MSGs is twofold: there must first be a solid definition of fiction, and then it must be shown to fit the object of examination.

A peevish strategy might be to simply wait for the philosophers to reach an agreement and conclude nothing before that happens. However, given the very long and largely consensus-free time they have had already, a pragmatic and less passive move might be to note observable differences between what are commonly accepted as fictions and MSGs: How are MSGs and elements within them perceived by their players, and what are some qualities of these elements that do not pertain to fictional objects? Just because an experience is not physical does not mean that it is not real. MSGs contain fictional elements (pragmatically defined) but that is not their defining quality as experiences; they provide a personal form of engagement that belongs to the experience of the real. The ludic actions in the game are performed by a human agent, not by a fictional character. *We* are playing – exploring, competing, solving problems, creating ludic artefacts. None of these are make-believe actions. Make-believe and role play – pretending to be someone else – is optional, an additional layer that can be added to any human activity, not just games. MSGs, on the other hand, and diegetic games in general, presents us with clear depictions and descriptions of what happens. No pretence or imagination is needed, what we get is empirical feedback on our actions.

MSGs and the Question of Quality

How is literary quality measured? Clearly, when it comes to *the novel*, there are no rules. The novel's poetics is an anti-poetics, and this might be an argument against the literariness of most MSGs, *Fallout: New Vegas* included. The quality of the series is iterative, not radical. But in this sense, we can also look to the best-regarded authors, such as Shakespeare and Ibsen, who developed variations over a template,

even as they shifted mode from historical to fantastic or to contemporary, by honing a formula with incrementally better results. Compared with last-century avant-garde novels, the popularity of these MSGs, as well as the material and commercial conditions of their production makes it clear that the success of MSGs such as *New Vegas* is closer to the great, popular novelists of the nineteenth century than the experimentalists of the twentieth.

We might also measure paratextual audience responses, both in the shape of forum discussions, playthrough videos, mods (player modifications of the game to bring about new features or effects), fan-fictions, as well as the influence of the title on later game titles. Few authors alive today are more read, by millions, nor do they generate more response, than the writers of a popular MSG. Currently, they are underrated as producers of literature, but this may change, and given the few decades this type of literature has existed, the best works may be yet to come, and perhaps soon.

We could also ask, what are some innovative aspects that MSGs uniquely bring to literature and the novel? Except for sheer size (textual mass), a clear innovation is the very literal spatialization of the diegesis. In describing novels as containing worlds, there has always been an element of metaphor. However, a novel is not a world, but usually a description of a path through a partly imagined world, sometimes parallel or broken paths, or both. And the reader cannot examine the world directly, at will. But in MSGs the space is unmetaphorical and examinable; not a trope but a figure that is actually spatial. An actual garden of forking paths, not just an account about one, like the eponymous garden in J.L. Borges' famous short story. The literary work is thereby freed from narrative and its structuring function replaced, in a very different way from the literary or filmic anti-narratives of the early twentieth century avant-garde. Or the work is now free to include narrative paths as optional and guided tours (quests) in a landscape that is not in itself narrative, unless the artistic vision demands it. The game novelist is free to use narrativity as one colour among many on their creative palette. And the player is free to ignore it.

Reading *Fallout: New Vegas*

The *Fallout* series (1997–), lauded as one of the most artistic and influential MSG franchises, entered a fully 3D format with the technologically sophisticated *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008), and was quickly followed up with the even more acclaimed *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), made not by Bethesda but by Obsidian Entertainment, a studio comprising several of the designers and writers of the first two *Fallout* titles. The series takes place in a counterfactual US Southwest, after a thermonuclear war in the 1950s has ravaged most of the globe. The series is full of reminiscences and references to post-Second World War USA, with music, advertising, architecture, language and art, and the wild-west mythos used as the dominant inspirations, in a heavily ironic, cartoonish mix. Central governments and normal infrastructure have broken down, some humans have survived in
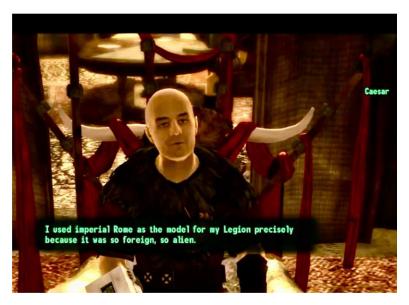
Figure 1. The fictional character Caesar from the MSG *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) outlines his political vision.

subterranean 'vaults' (nuclear bomb shelters) and others have become mutants to various degrees. Along with mutated animals and robots they fight for dominance and survival in an inhospitable, radioactive landscape, often grouped in clans and factions, which the player-character (PC) must navigate to play the game successfully. In *New Vegas*, the PC is suffering amnesia after a near fatal attack, a courier who must solve the mystery of their identity and negotiate a path through the enemies and potential allies of the Mojave Wasteland. A complete playthrough of this game takes hundreds of hours, so a diligent analysis of the whole game novel is best conducted in a lengthy book, and impossible in a short article. There are 390 speaking characters, spread out among 38 locations, and many characters can be encountered in different locations.[b] In lieu of a full analysis therefore, let us instead briefly look at a metachronotopical fragment: the quest line of Caesar and Caesar's Legion (see Figure 1).

The non-playing character known as Caesar was an orphan adopted by a tribe of monks, and in their pre-apocalyptic library he found a copy of the historical Caesar's memoir of the Gallic War, the *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (58–49 BC), and was inspired to use the Roman emperor's methods of rule and leadership to attempt to unite the tribes and bring a *Pax Romana* to the Wasteland; he saw in Caesar's writings many similarities between that age's challenges and his own. My own first meeting with Caesar's Legion was not a happy one; I came across a small town recently ravaged, with citizens crucified alive as a statement of power and deterrence. As a righteous child of the (factual) 1960s, I decided to fight this Caesar and his legion, because crucifixions are distasteful and should be abolished. After engaging the Legion in battle, however, I quickly realized that they are a formidable fighting

force and not easily eradicated, much like tyrannical regimes in general. And so I changed tactic and managed to infiltrate Caesar's camp, and eventually got an audience with the tyrant himself. Listening to Caesar explain his political vision for the Wasteland is a fascinating highlight of the game, and the player is offered a chance to help Caesar accomplish his goals in various quests, leading to many exciting and violent adventures and also to negative alignments with Caesar's enemies, many of whom appear much more humane, such as the New California Republic. Players can also attempt to assassinate him, but may or may not succeed, depending on their strength and skill. Whatever path one chooses, and whichever chronotope is produced, Caesar is one of the most fascinating characters in an MSG full of such creatures, most of whom we will never meet in a typical playthrough. *New Vegas* is clearly also a didactic novel, teaching us about politics, ancient history, religion, the ethics of violence, the aesthetics of the 1950s and the American Southwest (Las Vegas, the varied landscapes of Arizona and Nevada, dialects, fashions, brands and technologies), and the list goes on. Is it the Great American Novel of the twenty-first century? Why not? Let's wait and see.

Conclusions – Great Literature or What?

What are the benefits and disadvantages of seeing MSGs as novels? Also, what influences, if any, may games such as MSGs have on the evolution of the novel? It is too early to answer; after all, even Shakespeare only became canonized as 'the Bard' or the National Poet in the Enlightenment, some 200 years after his birth. But if we see, with Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel, and now, the game novel, as the dominant genre of our time, 'the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it' (Bakhtin 2014) then we only need to find, in other art forms and genres, examples of this dominance. And they abound and resonate throughout the cultures of the globe.

> I decided to kill Caesar. In a just world, the only kind of world I would like to inhabit, evil tyrants must die. *Sic semper tyrannis*. I carefully planned my attack . . .

Acknowledgement

Notes

a. Even the most reasonable theories of fiction can be divided into three different understandings, following the three positions on the communication axis (sender, text, receiver): Fiction is best described through the sender's intent (Currie 1990); fiction is a referent without a (real-world) reference (Cohn 2000); fiction is best understood through receptive practices (Friend 2008).

b. According to the list at *Fallout Wiki*, https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Fallout:_New_Vegas_characters (accessed 25 April 2023).

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