Serial Games in a Transmedial World

A Typology for the Digital Age

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Abstract

Computer games that refer to previously unfolded serial narrative worlds reflect the relationship between media in various forms. They offer different suggestions on how to think about the relationship between part and whole, which is fundamental to all (transmedial) serial storytelling. This article illustrates this observation by analyzing three computer games, namely BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER (2003), ENTER THE MATRIX (2003) and THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON ONE (2012). All of them are transmedial extensions of serial narrative worlds established in other media contexts. In different ways they reflect the relationship between part and whole on an intermedial level as part of ongoing transmedial storytelling. The main aim thereby is to offer a typology of intermedial reflections in the age of transmedial storytelling.

Let's play a game!

The task of this game is to put together as many big and notoriously fuzzy terms from the humanities as possible, and to link them as coherently as possible. Consider the following text as a walk through a world in which I take up as many of these terms as possible and try to put them together. In proceeding this way, a typology is sketched that will serve to analyze intermedial phenomena in the context of both transmedial and serial narrative worlds.[1] I will illustrate the different

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1   Cf. Rajewsky, Irina O: "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality," in: *Intermédialités / Intermediality* (6) 2005, pp. 43-64, https://doi.org/10.7202/10055; Schröter, Jens: "Discourses and

types based on some computer games, which relate to serial narrative worlds already before constituted in other media. Computer games are particularly interesting in this context because firstly, in the age of serial media convergence, they have been under special pressure to legitimize themselves from the beginning, which in turn made intermedial reflections particularly urgent.

Secondly, their role and status in a transmedial narrative world has changed considerably over time. In the 90s, transmedial narrations became popular in all media. Computer games[2] are a part of this development. Different intermedial relations were quickly formed: starting with the computer game to the film or television series as part of the franchise business, then on to the computer game that narrates events between individual films of a movie series, or is set between seasons of television series, all the way to computer game series that are set within a serial world already established in other media contexts.[3]

In the following, I will illustrate this thesis by analyzing three computer games. All of them are transmedial extensions of serial narrative worlds established in other media contexts. These three computer games were chosen because they prototypically present very different ways in which the relationship between part and whole is reflected on an intermedial level as part of ongoing transmedial storytelling.

First, I will look at the computer game published in 2002 for the television series Buffy the Vampire Slayer (hereafter: Buffy), which was first broadcast over seven seasons on the US network channels *The WB* and *UPN* between 1997 and 2003.[4] This is followed by an exploration of the 2003-released computer game

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Models of Intermediality," in: *Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011), https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1790; Jenkins, Henry: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University Press 2006; Long, Geoffrey A.: *Transmedia Storytelling Business, Aesthetics and Production at the Jim Henson Company*, Master Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2007, https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/39152

2   The term 'computer game' is intended to be a generic term for all possible forms not only of games played on a computer, but also video games, console games, video games, tele games, vending machine games, television games, etc.

3   Cf. Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon et al.: *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*, London: Routledge 2013, pp. 53-116; Denson, Shane / Jahn-Sudmann, Andreas: "Digital Seriality: On the Serial Aesthetics and Practice of Digital Games," in: *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 7 (1), 2013, pp. 1-32.

4   Buffy (US 1997-2003, D: Joss Whedon).

ENTER THE MATRIX,[5] which acts as a narrative bridge between the animated short FLIGHT OF THE OSIRIS[6] and THE MATRIX REALOADED,[7] the sequel to THE MATRIX.[8] The third computer game is a series that was released over four seasons from 2012 to 2019. This computer game series follows on from the serial narrative cosmos already told in comic book form and in a television series from 2010 to 2022 under the title THE WALKING DEAD[9]. In the comparison of these computer games, the different strategies are finally outlined in terms of how they reflect the relationship between the part and the whole.

1 THE PARS PRO TOTO PRINCIPLE: BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER

Buffy Summers is a rather slight girl with long straw-blonde hair who, at the beginning of the TV series BUFFY, has just moved with her single mother to the fictional Californian small-town Sunnydale. There, Buffy is not only confronted with the 'horror' of everyday high school life. She also has to hunt down vampires and demons week after week on behalf of the so-called Watcher's Council. Together with her friends, the vampire slayer thwarts no less than twelve apocalypses during the television series. In 2002, between the broadcast of the second to last and the final season, one of a total of five computer games for the series was released.[10]

This computer game (like the four other BUFFY games) has at least two crucial problems in relation to the television series: On the one hand, as a piece of the BUFFY franchise, the computer game must make its affiliation to the 'Buffyverse' clearly recognizable. This makes an intermedial reference in the mode of imitation, for the purpose of an identifiable similarity almost an obligatory operation. On the other hand, the computer game should not simply be a cheap copy of the television series. This raises the question of what kind of added value this computer game has to offer. To make matters worse, the computer game has always
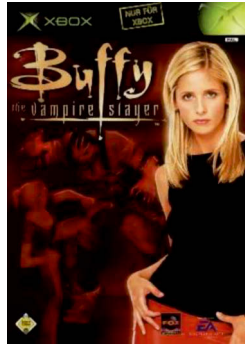
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5   ENTER THE MATRIX (US 2003, O: The Wachowski Brothers—Shiny Entertainment. Atari).

6   FINAL FLIGHT OF THE OSIRIS (US 2003, D: Andy Jones).

7   THE MATRIX RELOADED (US 2003, D: Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski).

8   THE MATRIX (US 1999, D: Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski).

9   THE WALKING DEAD (US 2010-2019, D: Frank Darabont, various).

10   BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER (USA 2002, O: The Collective). For a full list of all the BUFFY games, see "Gameography."

had, and still has, a difficult position in comparison to the preceding films or series. As a game 'to X' it is suspected of being a mere supplement to an economic exploitation chain and thus ultimately a trivial accessory.

Therefore, intermedial operations are simply necessary for the computer game, which mark—on the one hand—differences from the television series. Be it in the form of variation ('an old story is told/played in a different way'), as an optimization of the TV series ('Everything you need to know about Buffy in just one game!'), in form of a revision ('Finally, stake vampires yourself!') or as an over-bidding strategy ('Right in the middle, instead of just being there'). On the other hand, as part of the BUFFY franchise, the computer game must make its affiliation to the 'Buffyverse' clearly recognizable as a mimicry of already established visual and narrative elements and structures. I will show that in the case of the computer game BUFFY, the two diametrically opposed intermedial activities—reproduction versus difference—are constantly rebalanced. The computer game offers thereby a reflexive condensation of the television series BUFFY as a whole in that special game part.

An intermedial reference is clearly marked 'before the game' on the cover of the supplement to the computer game (see Fig. 1). Already there, a contradictory double movement of computer games to television series or films is visualized. Both an imitation of the television series and a differentiation in the form of variation can be found there. The cover shows the branding logo of BUFFY and below it a photographic portrait of the actress Sarah Michelle Gellar, in the role of Buffy, which she plays in the television series of the same name. Clearly, we are dealing here with imitative operations, that is, the effort to establish identity across different media platforms. To the left of the photographic portrait—slightly offset to the back—a graphic figure can be seen kicking a demon. This figure is similar to Buffy from the television series (hair, clothes, fight against demons that appear to be overpowering); however, it is also characterized by some differences (unlike body proportions, rougher facial features, change of media form from the reproduction of a photographic portrait to a graphic figure).

Figure 1: Into the game
before the game: The
double logic of the Buffy
game cover

This combination of a photographic portrait and a traced still image from the computer game has a clear goal: it refers explicitly to the fact of changing the media. But we are dealing with a change that focuses on continuity to make the transition into the computer world smoothly.

The photograph of the Buffy from the TV series is placed in the foreground, and she is looking at us. To her left, slightly offset to the back, is the fight scene from the computer game. The 'other' Buffy has turned her head away from us and towards her opponent. The overall composition implies a balancing of imitation and variation: The Buffy of the television series makes eye contact with us at the image threshold like a figure in so many paintings of the Renaissance and thus leads the viewer to a pictorial event in which the world of the computer game becomes visible to the left behind Buffy. First of all, this computer game world looks graphically different from that of the television series. Secondly, it becomes obvious that the Buffy avatar looks different from the Buffy character of the TV series. At least in terms of body proportions and fighting technique, she appears much more like Lara Croft from the computer game series Tomb Raider. The intermedia reference on the cover serves to balance the poles of continuity and change to the television series and therefore prepares the recipient for the change already in the para-text of the computer game.

In the computer game itself, which is primarily a jump-and-run game, Buffy fights the 'Master', a powerful and very old vampire. The 'Master' of the computer game is a resurrection of the television series. The central plot of the first TV season is the confrontation between Buffy and the 'Master'. In the last episode of this season, Buffy kills the 'Master'. In the epilogue of the computer game, it is pointed out that the 'Master', although only bones remained of him at the end

of the first television season, had almost returned in the meantime through magical powers; but Buffy had just been able to prevent this return in the second television season. But now he will return for real in the computer game, where Buffy must kill him once more. The computer game thus takes an already-known character from the 'Buffyverse' and brings him back to life again.

Despite these narrative, structural, and motif connections to the television series in the prologue of the computer game, the knowledge of this connection ultimately plays no role in the game's plot. The computer game works like another episode that takes up the established patterns to tell a story that is comprehensible in itself. In this respect, the computer game is a sort of stand-alone episode.[11] Accordingly, the computer game is not designed to continue and does not advance the overarching plot of the series in any way. In other words, a new story is told episodically according to well-known patterns, motifs, and characters from the 'Buffyverse'. The story with the 'Master' is only minimally varied. In this respect, the same thing is told, only slightly differently. So here, too, the computer game oscillates between similarity/repetition and difference/variation.

Moreover, the computer game is a kind of *pars pro toto* of the television series. The computer game 'episode' in fact encompasses everything that characterizes the series in principle. At least this is how the computer game is staged. This is true on many different levels, first and foremost on the level of the ensemble cast. Not only is Buffy versus the 'Master' a well-known story told again, but differently. In addition, almost the entire ensemble of characters from the TV series makes appearances. The computer game gives the impression of a class reunion, where all kinds of characters from different TV episodes and seasons are gathered. Not only Buffy's usual comrades-in-arms are involved, but also a myriad of vampires, zombies, demonic 'sleepers', hellhounds, demonic spider demons, and much more.

Secondly, the entire mythology of the 'Buffyverse' is presented to us in a fast-forward right at the beginning. Giles, Buffy's mentor, tells us in the first 3 minutes of the game in detail—at least in much more detail than in any of the opening credits of the TV series—the basic mythology of the 'Buffyverse' (a Chosen One who fights the forces of evil and who, after her death, is inherited by another Chosen One, etc.). Following this, Buffy's biography is told in short, and then the centuries-long life story of the 'Master'. In the process, we learn details of the 'Master's' life that are not brought up in the television series. In the computer game, for example, the Master's actual name is mentioned for the first time,

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11   Cf. Mittell, Jason: *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York/London: New York University Press, 2015, 296ff.

namely Heinrich Joseph Nest. In these opening credits, everything relevant from the 'Buffyverse' is explained to us by the narrator Giles, from the overarching mythology of the 'Buffyverse' to the biography of the 'Master' vampire to Buffy's short life journey to the point where the story of the computer game begins.
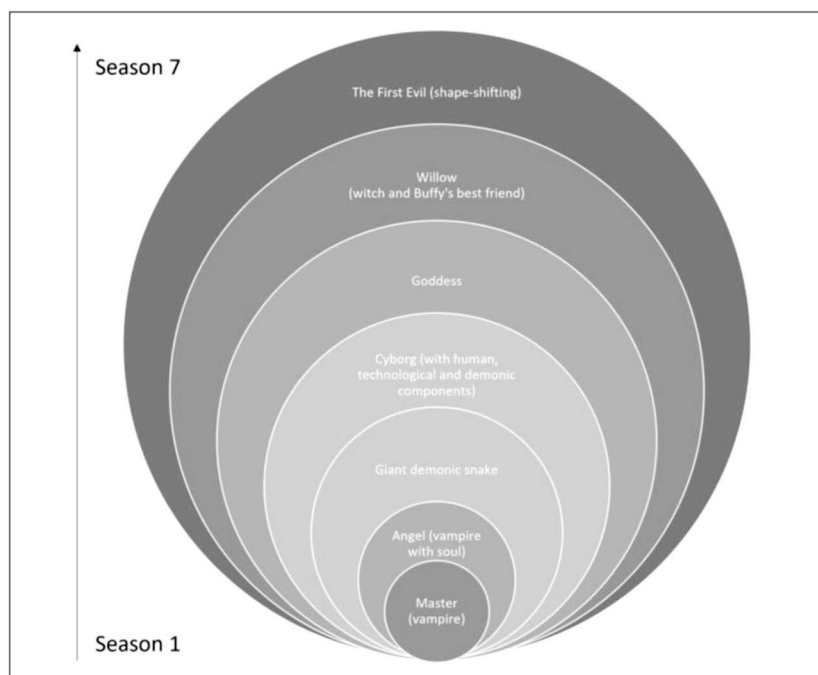
Giles' speech is followed by the opening credits, which imitate those of the television series. Giles then explains their special mission, now addressing Buffy. It is a test of her abilities in a Spanish mission near Sunnydale. Giles says: "This is a crucial part of your training [...]." And continues: "This test is extremely challenging. And comes with its share of peril." Of course, as time goes on, this training turns to brutal reality as the 'Master' and his demonic minions intervene and attack. What is important about Gilles' words is that they speak about a "crucial part" of "training." This can be understood as a meta-communicative speech act, which is saying: This computer game is a particularly important episode. Namely, one in which we will be able to test, repeat, practice, and, if successful, acquire the many skills and abilities of the vampire slayers in training with Buffy, or more precisely as Buffy, since we control the avatar. In other words: the central elements that made up Buffy/Buffy are compressed here into a special episode in training mode, i.e., with many, many repetitions.

At the end of his speech to Buffy, as Giles warns of how challenging this test will be and that it brings with it peril, Buffy replies, annoyed: "Don't they all?" To this, Giles, after a short pause, replies only: "Yes." This again tells us, the players, on a meta communicative level: We are not only to learn about and rehearse the many different aspects of Buffy during the game. We are also to become acquainted with the risk of being a vampire slayer, a risk that reappears episode after episode in the series with the monsters of the week. Indeed, that constitutes the series. The typical reaction of the protagonists of the television series to this risk is also clearly presented to us at this point and again turned into a meta-communication statement, namely an ironic reaction to the dangers, and even more importantly, to the structural logic and ultimately paradoxical claim of the series. After all, every episode, strictly speaking, is about something extremely challenging, about peril, and every episode ultimately promises to be a crucial part.

That the computer game is an episode that is meant to encompass all other episodes, becomes evident beyond motif recurrence and meta-communicative explication in its structural logic. In this context, the first thing that is striking is the fact that the television series BUFFY itself is organized according to the level structure of a computer game: In the individual episodes, the so-called Monster of the Week must be hunted down. From the beginning, however, the cross-episodic narrative boils down to the fact that a Big Bad must be hunted down at the end of each season. In the first season, for example, it's the 'Master'. From season to

season, an even more powerful Big Bad is introduced, one that is even more difficult to defeat. From vampires to giant demonic serpents, goddesses to the first evil, which can take on all kinds of forms of the dead.[12]

Figure 2: Big—Bigger—Biggest Bad: Cross-season escalation logic of the television series BUFFY

In short, the series follows an escalation logic, segmented by Big Bads at the end of each season. Structurally, this is identical to computer games or, more precisely, to a hitherto prevailing idea of computer games, especially action games and adventure games: Each level has its Big Bad, the level of difficulty increases from level to level, and thus the Big Bad becomes more powerful; at the end, all mission objectives are fulfilled; nothing remains to be done. Based on these clear structural analogies, one can certainly claim that a certain form of intermedial reference is present here: The narrative structure of the television series imitates the level structure of computer games. But even more central in the present context: In the computer game BUFFY, precisely this structural principle is taken up again and turned back in a concentrated form into a single game: At the closing of each level

12   Cf. Fig. 2.

there is a Big Bad who is replaced by a 'Bigger Bad' in the next level. In the end, the game leads to a confrontation with the 'Biggest Bad', the 'Master'. Consequently, the 'Master' of the computer game is not simply the one from the first season of the TV series; indeed, he only exists as a phantom in the computer game—and is accordingly more difficult to fight than a vampire in flesh and blood. In other words, the 'Master' of the computer game is a 'Bigger Bad' than the one of the television series. Thus, the computer game not only follows a logic of intensification internally from level to level, but also on the scale of transmedial storytelling.

Here, in the game accompanying the television series, the serial order of the television series, including its logic of escalation, is reflexively intensified in a transmedial expansion. Seen in this way, the computer game is an episode that reflects the series as a whole. Thus, the computer game itself, in its intermedial references to the initial series, shows and thinks itself primarily in the mode of similarity. However, a special figure of similarity is formed: It is a similarity that structurally encompasses all the other episodes. The computer game is thus distinguished as a meta-episode from the episodes of the television series and, at least in this intermedial twist, also presented as a higher-quality ('crucial') episode.

The problem of part and whole mentioned at the beginning, with which every serial narrative is confronted, finds a clear solution in this transmedial expansion of the TV narrative zone into the computer game by means of intermedial relations: a single, outstanding episode can encompass all other episodes and thus illustrate the whole in a concentrated way. The Aristotelian axiom of the whole always being more than its parts is taken upside down here: a (certain) part is already the (not yet, perhaps never completely, finished) whole.

2 The Puzzle Piece Principle:
Enter The Matrix

The computer game ENTER THE MATRIX tells the story of Niobe, captain of the Logos, the fastest ship in the rebel fleet, and Ghost, Niobe's first officer. Both are minor characters who appear in the cinematic sequels to THE MATRIX, namely THE MATRIX RELOADED and THE MATRIX REVOLUTION. Accordingly, they participate in the world established in the MATRIX films, which is based on the master narrative of a confrontation between humans and machines. ENTER THE MATRIX builds the narrative bridge between the animated short film FINAL FLIGHT OF THE OSIRIS and the sequel to the first MATRIX film sequel. ENTER THE MATRIX is thus part of a multiple media networking franchise, making it an almost ideal example of transmedial storytelling in the sense of Henry Jenkins[13]: The diegetic world of the MATRIX films is hereby continued and deepened in another media context.

The player can control and play one of the two avatars. Niobe and Ghost have different strengths and weaknesses. Accordingly, the player can fight his way through the many dangers of the Matrix with varying ease or difficulty and thus explore and experience the Matrix world in different ways. A special feature of ENTER THE MATRIX is that the film sequences inserted into the computer game are not just recycled from former movies, as is still common in many other cases today. Rather, these sequences were shot together with the follow-up films of THE MATRIX and uses exclusively in the computer game. In this sense, the game's manual proudly states, that the "plot of Enter the Matrix [...] is told through a combination of different elements, including real film sequences shot with the original actors [...]." In any case, on this level, as in BUFFY, the intermedial relation is imitation, in fact, extended even further towards indistinguishably: because they are not simply film sequences taken from the film—or, as in the case of the manual cover for the BUFFY computer game, a photograph from the set. Instead, exclusive film footage becomes part of the computer game. Thus, the computer game participates on the original (real) Matrix film world at the level of material production and recording processes.
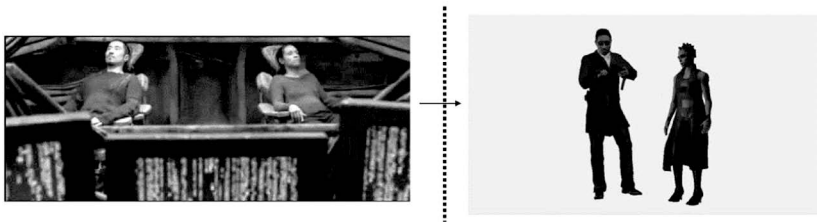
The transition from this (real) film starting point to the digital world is, however, staged in the computer game itself, unlike in the films, as a change of forms of representation. Whenever the characters move from the 'real' film world into the Matrix, there is a change in the visual representation register, namely from an analogue image space to a digital one.[14] In the 'real' world of the ship we see the

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13   Cf. H. Jenkins, Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide, p. 93ff.
14   Cf. Fig. 3a-c.

two protagonists in (real) film sequences, but in the Matrix itself we then see them as digitally animated avatars. ENTER THE MATRIX: The title of the computer game is taken quite literally here. After all, with Niobe and Ghost we enter the Matrix, which exclusively represents a digitally generated world and no longer gives the impression of witnessing a (however digitally heavily processed) reproductive recording of external reality and the performance of real actors. This again marks a strong difference to the original film, in which the difference between the space outside and inside the Matrix is not connected to a distinction between the real/analogue and the artificial/digital world; indeed, the highlight of the films visually consists precisely in keeping this difference unrecognizable or even blurred.

Figure 3: The Passage into the Matrix: From the analogue 'real' world to the digital simulation

We also learn something about their motivations, which make the actions of these characters more plausible in the subsequent third MATRIX film. Overarching story lines also become more coherent through the narrative of the computer game. In the animated short film FINAL FLIGHT OF THE OSIRIS, for example, at the end a letter to the ship Nebuchadnezzar is dropped into a letterbox. This letter contains important information about machines that want to destroy Zion, the central place of human resistance. At the beginning of ENTER THE MATRIX, the player must fetch exactly this letter from a post office. Again, at the beginning of THE MATRIX RELOADED, this 'final delivery' of the Osiris is briefly discussed. If the viewers have only seen the first MATRIX film, they have no way of knowing where this letter came from and how much effort was involved in its circulation through various media.[15]

The individual media parts intertwine in order to continue and deepen an overarching story. The computer game ENTER THE MATRIX is therefore a part of an ongoing transmedial world building. A world is 'built' here, which is founded on

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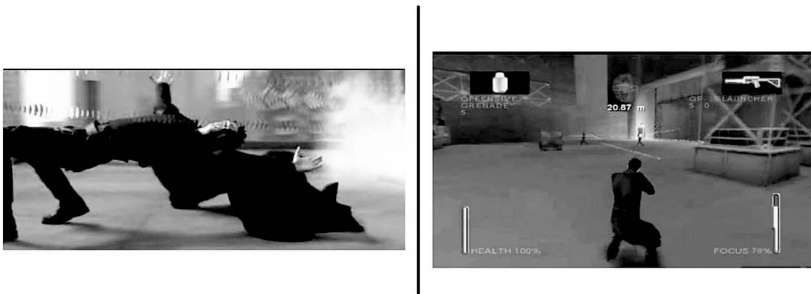15   Cf. H. Jenkins, Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide, p. 101.

the concept of an infinitely expanding and deepening narrative cosmos across different media. Apparently in building this narrative cosmos, great care has been taken to ensure that the individual parts of the narrative do not contradict each other. Instead, the parts should intervene coherently towards an imagined whole.

The connection between part and whole is hence understood and staged as an information deficit that is only temporary although may be infinite. Each part of the Matrix is another piece of the puzzle to understand the Matrix even better, but at the same time it contains references to further elements that are not yet understood (other secondary characters, other motivations, other ships, etc.) and that must be understood once again, in a different way. The narrative cosmos does not become completely visible in one part by means of symbolic compression, as it is the case in the computer game Buffy. Rather: In the individual part, it is possible to have the experience that there are, potentially, infinitely many other parts that have to be told, received, and played in order to really overview and understand the entire cosmos. But what is important, despite all the information deficits, is that even if the cosmos will never be completely accessible, may continue to expand, and all motivations and connections will never be revealed—we are still dealing with a coherent diegetic world. In this respect, the Matrix franchise follows an indicative narrative: It tells what really is/was, not what could be or contradicts what has been told so far. It is about decoding the Matrix, which is admittedly complex and in which false traces are laid. But still there is one reality, the one diegetic world (behind) the Matrix, which becomes more understandable in each of its (narrative) parts. This principle is symbolically expressed in the game Enter the Matrix insofar as stories of characters are told and played, who were previously secondary characters but now rise to become main characters. In addition, plot motivations and narrative contexts are made clear, which will be important for understanding future film events. This also formulates something about the significance of the computer game in the inter media structure: Knowing and playing this computer game has crucial advantages. In this sense, there is no subordination to other media, but rather a subordination of various media in the transmedial narrative world of The Matrix.

Of course, one could still ask what the added value of such a computer game is. Even if it provides information that is important for the overall story and even if film sequences are used exclusively for the computer game, this has little to do with the media specifics of the computer game. Apart from the fact that the computer game is not only narrated, but can also be played, we can point to a perhaps marginal aspect that nevertheless shows particularly well how the appreciation of a computer game through an intermedial reference is accomplished in Enter the Matrix, namely in a specific appropriation of bullet time in the computer game.

On a stylistic level nothing is more associated with the MATRIX films than the so-called bullet time, a special effect that, starting with the MATRIX films, has become a major influence on many moving image productions in popular culture. Technically, the basic concept of bullet time is to direct a semicircle of still cameras at the same point in space. Images taken at the same time are projected one after the other as a film, resulting in a movement around a still object. The term 'bullet time' has become established for this technology because the viewer can be guided around a bullet that has just been fired and is now stationary. In THE MATRIX, these still images are additionally blended into each other through morphing processes, thus creating the specific 'Matrix style': Scenes can be slowed down in time and at the same time kept spatially mobile.[16]

Figure 4a-b: Different Media—different Bullet Times: form an aesthetic point of view to a performative turn

This technique finds a very specific twist in the computer game ENTER THE MATRIX, because the aesthetic form of bullet time takes a performative turn.[17] The game can activate the 'Focus' option and thus trigger a slowing down of the passage of time in the sense of bullet time.[18] However, this bullet time does not apply to the player themself. The player can not only make an input as quickly as ever, but his avatar also reacts just as quickly as before the activation of the focus function. In such a way, bullet time is shifted from purely aesthetic perceptual pleasure to the performative register: bullet time becomes a slowing time option, allowing the player to act quickly.

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16   Cf. for example Fig. 4a.

17   Cf. S. Denson/A. Jahn-Sudmann: "Digital Seriality: On the Serial Aesthetics and Practice of Digital Games," p. 14f.

18   Cf. Fig. 4b.

In this way, not only is a similarity to the aesthetics of the films aimed at, but a central stylistic element of the films varied and even transformed. It is precisely through this transformational treatment of bullet time that ENTER THE MATRIX shows a difference to the movies and has insofar something like a unique selling point. The computer game stages itself, insofar as a crucial part of a virtual holistic whole, that would never be fully completed.

3 THE POSSIBLE WORLDS PRINCIPLE:
THE WALKING DEAD

THE WALKING DEAD tells the story of a zombie apocalypse. It follows various characters, centered around former sheriff Rick Grimes, as they wander through the (now) inhospitable landscapes of North America. Started in 2003 as a comic book series, THE WALKING DEAD was adapted into a television series seven years later. From 2012 to 2019 there has also been a computer game series in four seasons, which was quickly and frequently examined, not to say celebrated, after its launch in the context of Game Studies.
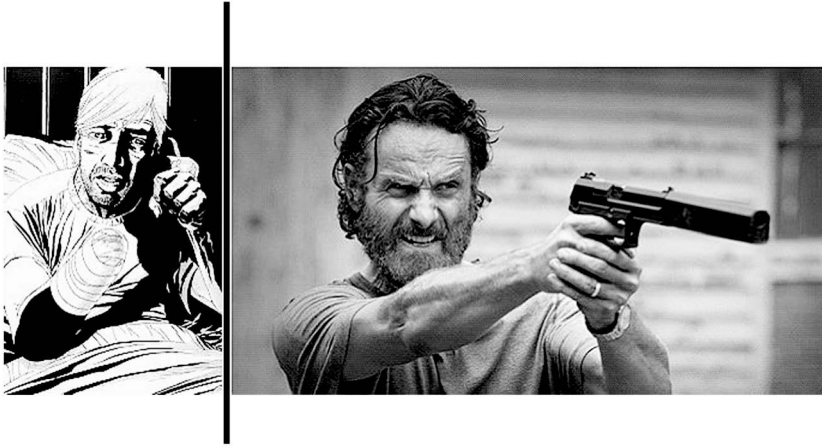
To begin with some inter media aspects beyond the computer game series: The television series started as an adaptation of the comic book, but quickly developed a certain autonomy from the original series. This means that even if the arsenal of characters is similar, the processes, sequences of events, and characteristics of the protagonists and their motivations for action are smoothly modified, which leads to an independent narrative development. What we have here is neither a pure adaptation of the comic on television, nor a narrative cosmos coherently expanded as in ENTER THE MATRIX. Instead, we are dealing with two possible plots that are very similar to each other, but which are not compatible in all aspects. To give just one obvious example of this: The main character Rick loses his arm quite early in the comic book series; in the television series, however, he still had it, until his death in Season 9.[19] Two possible worlds[20] are existing simultaneously in two different media, one with Rick's arm, one without it. THE WALKING DEAD narrative

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19   Cf. Fig. 5a-b.

20   Cf. Ryan, Marie-Laure: "From Parallel Universes to Possible Worlds: Ontological Pluralism in Physics, Narratology and Narrative," in: *Poetics Today* 27.4, 2006, pp. 633-674.

mode is therefore conjunctive. Intra-medial 'What-is' narratives are transformed on a transmedial level in an 'what-if' mode.[21]

Figure 5a-b: Different Media—Various Stories—Several Numbers of Arms

The computer game series THE WALKING DEAD also follows this 'what if' principle, but as will be shown, in a special sense. There, two new main characters are inserted, and in addition a few characters who had already appeared in the comic and the television series have a (mostly brief) performance. Nevertheless, this series does not function according to the Buffy principle of a stand-alone episode, nor according to the principle that the entire series is concentrated in the computer game. Just as little, however, is a story told further with the help of new or secondary characters, thus expanding or deepening the narrative cosmos, as in ENTER THE MATRIX. Instead of concentrating, deepening or expanding, we get a new possibility with the computer game, how the WALKING DEAD cosmos could be told in a different way again.

What is interesting in the case of THE WALKING DEAD is that the options narrated in each case do not offer radically different possibilities in the way that one

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21   Cf. J. Mittell: Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling, p. 214ff.

finds them in the field of so-called counterfactual history.[22] In the latter case, major questions of history are usually played out with fundamentally different events than those that actually took place: What if Hitler had won the war, Alexander the Great had died much later, the Iron Curtain had not perished, etc.? In contrast, the transmedial extensions of THE WALKING DEAD are about minimal variations of the narrative. How such minimal variation changes the plot lines can be illustrated with a small example: Shawn Greene is a character who briefly appears in the comic book, the television series and in the computer game. Shawn's story is told a bit differently in all three media.[23]

Figure 6: 'Healthy is what repeats itself minimally': The many Walking Deads of Shawn Green

As already mentioned, the differences are minimal, and one could legitimately argue that these differences are not relevant to the overall narrative. But that is not my point here. Much more important is that Shawn's origins and modes of death are not compatible with each other in all respects across the various media

22   Cf. Raghunath, Riyukta: *Alternative realities: Counterfactual historical fiction and possible–worlds–theory,*–Doctoral–Thesis,–Sheffield–Hallam–University,–2017, http://shura.shu.ac.uk/19154/

23   Cf. Fig. 6.

platforms. So, neither is a narrative cosmos coherently expanded or depends upon, nor is there a strict adaptation of the 'comic book' in the television series and/or the computer game. Instead, we are dealing with minimal variations of the narrative in the television series and the computer game.

If one does not want to understand this operation, which could be demonstrated by many other examples, simply as an error or carelessness, or if one is not tempted to somehow establish a coherence between the individual narrative sequences, as is the case on many fan sites, this strategy could be understood as a pragmatic decision or an economic calculation. In this way, different actors can, with little need for co-ordination, produce autonomous stories, which may correspond to the respective clientele, but which are nevertheless set in the same fictional milieu.[24]
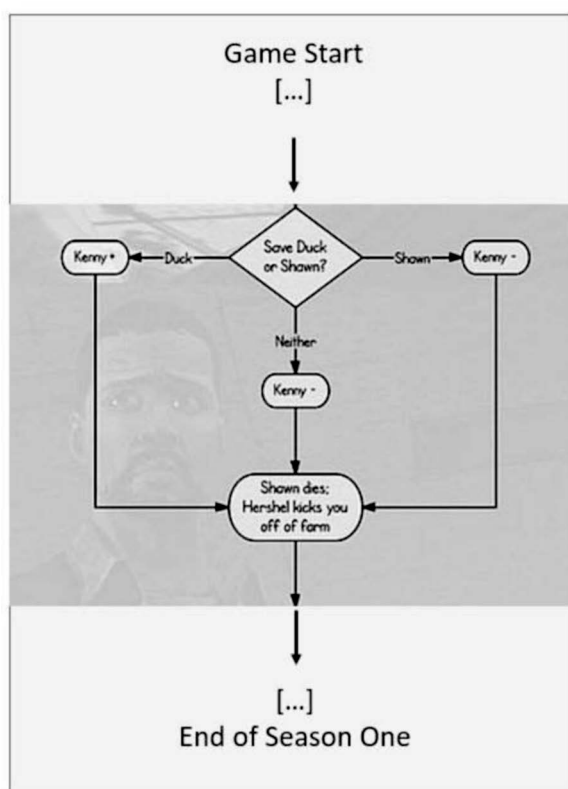
Intermedial variation can be interpreted in a somewhat more ambitious way as a certain aesthetic form, which Umberto Eco has assigned to the arsenal of postmodern aesthetics regarding television series such as Columbo.[25] According to Eco, the basic understanding of postmodern aesthetics does not consist in seeking differences from other works. Above all, postmodern works do not want to be innovative trough radical differences. Rather, it is about the minimal variation of a basic scheme. Be it in the form of twelve-tone music or in the shape of a soap opera, the basic understanding of postmodern aesthetics does not consist, according to Eco, in seeking the rough distinction to other works, episodes or tune sequences. In the TV series Columbo, for example, more or less the same crime story is told again and again, only in minimal variations. It is precisely this minimal variation of the scheme that gives pleasure to a certain type of recipient, following Eco. THE WALKING DEAD follows this postmodern aesthetic of minimal variation, but not so much in the individual comic, television, and computer game series, but through and in the intermedial relations of the different media formats. It is only in the comparison of the different media that this structural principle of minimal variation becomes virulent.

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24 Cf. J. Mittell; Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling, p. 315f.

25 Cf. Eco, Umberto: "Innovation & Repetition: Between Modern & Postmodern Aesthetics," in: *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 ,2005, pp. 191-207.

This is precisely where one of the decisive features of the computer game series can be found. The principle of conjunctive storytelling previously only worked on an inter media level. The comic series, as well as the TV series, tells the story in a 'What-is' mode. The 'what-if' mode only comes about the media comparison of the two. This inter media logic is turned into the computer game logic itself. The player must make decisions again and again, decisions that influence the course of the story. These choices have consequences over several episodes and seasons, and thus lead to different story lines.

Figure 7: 'Shawn or Duck or none?' 'Whatever!' The Art of Decision Making in THE WALKING DEAD

These decisions are mostly about minimal differences—like the inter media differences. Incidentally, this has led to a lot of criticism, especially of the first game season. The central point of criticism consists in pointing out that despite all the player's freedom of choice, nothing fundamental really changes in the course of

history. No matter what we decide, in the end—spoiler alert!—our avatar will be dead in any case. This reproach can also be applied to the character already mentioned above, namely Shawn Green: In the very first episode of the first season, we are given the choice of saving either Shawn, Duck, or neither of them from the zombies. But in the end, it doesn't matter how we decide: Shawn will die.[26] The conclusion is obviously that something like freedom of choice and actually different courses of history is basically only pretend.

However, this course can be interpreted quite differently in light of what has been formulated above. Critically: Nothing really changes because of our decisions (Shawn will be dead either way), but small things do change, because of our decisions. Hershel, for example, will behave differently towards our avatar based on whether he or she wanted to save his eldest son or not. So, Shawn's fate is also a splendid example of the minimal variation principle. Shawn is dead for sure. However, there are minimal differences, namely Hershel's different reactions to us.

The connection between part and whole is presented here through the establishment of a conjunctive mode of narration and play. The individual parts are reflected as the actualization of an open field of possibilities that could always have been realized in a different way. In the computer game series, we are constantly reminded of this fact, while the possibilities branch out more and more from season to season. After all, we must always make decisions that influence the course of the story and minimally readjust it.

The computer game is thus, on the one hand, the performative culmination of this principle within a single medium. What previously could only be revealed in a comparison of different media is now turned into an intra-medial constellation, and there symbolically condensed. The computer game series is thus ultimately the outstanding series in comparison to the comic and television series. On the other hand, the computer game as a series is parallel and simultaneously—at least this is true from 2012 to 2019—with the comic and television series, designed for an open future full of possible, still undefined, even indeterminable worlds that multiply and branch out further in the intermedial comparison.

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26   Cf. Fig. 7.

4 'IT'S ALL IN THE GAME'

In a final step, the three computer games presented will be placed in relation to each other with the help of different interpretative registers. In doing so, I would like to show on the one hand what is fundamentally characteristic of the particular series, and on the other hand that they stand for different types of how computer games deal with the problem of part and whole in the context of transmedial narration.

If one had to choose a rhetorical or logical figure to describe the central principle of the computer games presented here, the following three figures, illustrated in Fig. 8, would certainly be suitable candidates.

First line: In the case of BUFFY, the synecdoche is central insofar as it describes a rhetorical figure which, by naming a part, actually means and represents the whole. The computer game BUFFY corresponds precisely to this rhetorical figure: the game is contained as a special part the whole. The situation is quite different in the case of ENTER THE MATRIX. There, the story is told in order to expand and deepen the MATRIX universe. Consequently, this play corresponds to the logical figure of conjunction: THE MATRIX and THE MATRIX RELOADED and ENTER THE MATRIX and so on. The case of THE WALKING DEAD is quite different. The central logical operation of this game is adjunction. Shawn is Hershel's stepson or his biological descendant, if Shawn dies a quick or a slow death; the player either wants to save Shawn or not. With each decision there comes a new, minimally different narrative progression. Something that could previously only be observed in the media comparison now becomes directly apparent in the structural logic of the computer game, namely the 'what-if' mode of adjunction. It could be also different. 'Choose to save Shawn or not'. Enter the game means in this case 'enter possible worlds!'

Figure 8: Figures, Modes and Orders of Intermedial References in Computer Games as Part of Transmedial Storytelling

Computer game	*Buffy*	*Enter the Matrix*	*The Walking Dead*
rhetorical/ logical figure	syndeckdoche (part as a whole)	conjunction (and)	adjunction (or)
narrative mode	imperative	indicative	conjunctive
time mode	fruitful moments	arbitrary moments	virtual moments
epistemic order	similarities and mirroring of an organic world	causal and final relations in an homogeneous infinitely expanding system space	minimal differences in various possible worlds

In correspondence to the rhetorical-logical figures, the different narrative modes can be pinpointed, too:[27] THE WALKING DEAD narrates conjunctively; alternative scenarios are unfolded in parallel in different media as well as in the individual decision options of the computer game series. In contrast, the entire MATRIX franchise, and therefore the computer game ENTER THE MATRIX, are based on indicative narration: It is not told what could be at the same time, but what is. In turn the computer game BUFFY could be assigned to an imperative narrative mode: After all, it tells, or rather claims, what the central elements of the 'Buffyverse' are and should be. It is not about continuation, deepening or possibilities. It is about an ultimate authorial definition of what Buffy is and always will be.

In accordance with a famous provision by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, which he already formulated in the 18th century regarding a central quality of (appropriate) art, the computer game BUFFY could be described as a fruitful moment[28]—or perhaps more appropriately, although paradoxically, as a fruitful moment sequence (Fig. 8, third line). What I mean by this is, the computer game BUFFY concentrates on the central elements of the television series BUFFY and is therefore not just any other random episode in the series cosmos. Rather, the computer game compresses the series in much the same way that, according to Lessing, a successful painting or sculpture compresses and captures the entire story, the before and the after, in just one moment. It is precisely in this sense that a moment is fruitful:

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27   Cf. Fig 8, second line.

28   Cf. Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim: *Laocoon; An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1992[*1766].

it points beyond itself; ideally to everything essential that happened or will happen before and ever after.

In contrast, ENTER THE MATRIX is much more about arbitrary moments in a basically endless chain of events.[29] 'Arbitrary' here does not mean that an incomplete story is told. Rather, it means that the story of Niobe and Ghost is one among many others in the MATRIX universe, or more precisely: one among any number of others. ENTER THE MATRIX does not reduce the entire MATRIX universe to a single point but is one part of a basically infinite number of other parts that also contribute to the world-building of the MATRIX with their different narratives.

In contrast, THE WALKING DEAD refers to something I would like to call the principle of the virtual moment. This formulation is supposed to mean in the individual moments. With the help of the decision options and the (minimal) variations of the parallel events in other media, reference is made to the fact that an event is just one among many other possible ones. In contrast to BUFFY, the whole is not present in a fruitful moment. Rather, the whole is present as a field of infinite possibilities, which as such cannot be brought together in a single point (or sequence). Every actualization shows that there are also other possibilities of actualization.

If one asks more broadly about the epistemes[30] of the games, i.e., about the specific orders of knowledge and representation to which they belong and which they unfold, we can also separate the games quite clearly.[31]

The computer game BUFFY follows the principle of similarity or mirroring within a world conceived as organic. This is the case because all elements are in an interrelation of similarity or mirroring with all others. This is precisely why the computer game BUFFY can figure as a synecdoche for the entire narrative cosmos of the BUFFY series. The part is not only part of the whole, but also resembles the whole; there is a suggestion of an organic connection between the phenomena in this narrative cosmos. This structure corresponds pretty much to what Michel Foucault calls the order of knowledge, which characterizes a pre-modern episteme. In *The Order of Things* Foucault writes: "Up to the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture. […] The universe was folded in upon itself: the earth echoing the sky, faces seeing

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29   Cf. Deleuze, Gilles: *Cinema 1: The movement-image*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1986, p. 4f.

30   Cf. Rheinberger, Hans-Jörg: *On Historicizing Epistemology. An Essay,* Stanford: Stanford University Press 2010.

31   Cf. Fig. 8, last line.

themselves reflected in the stars […]"[32] Or as Charles Taylor puts the key point of pre-modern thinking about the world: "They all embody the same idea reflected in different media [...]."[33] We can turn this idea to the computer game BUFFY: The game reflects in a 'fruitful sequence', the 'Buffyverse' as a unity of similar things which mirror and resembles each other.

The MATRIX universe, on the contrary, takes place in a so-called system space, i.e., in a kind of infinitely large container in which the individual things and events are clearly distinguishable from each other and interlock with each other in a causal form and not at all in the way of similarity.[34] Although the various media explore and show many different aspects of the Matrix, bullet time, for example, is used differently in films and computer games. Nevertheless, it is the same world that is told or played out differently across all media.

THE WALKING DEAD, in turn, takes place in plural worlds that simultaneously branch out endlessly, following the principle of minimal variation. The knowledge of the world is not concentrated in one point, the things are not connected on the basis of similarity, nor are the events and things of this world causally interrelated in an infinite system space.

5 'THE GAME REMAINS THE SAME, BUT DIFFERENT'

A perfectly justified question to the previous presentations and allocations could be: What is the point? At least six answers seem obvious to me and should be briefly outlined in a final step.

1 The presented computer games show in a prototypical way how differently the fragile relationship between part and whole can be expressed in a trans media context.

2 In the computer games, the still future-open totality of a trans media narrative series is imagined and anticipated as different wholes. The parts of a series, therefore, create various 'wholes' during the series. At least in this respect, the parts are actually more than the whole.

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32   Foucault, Michel: *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Pantheon Books 1971, p. 17.

33   Taylor, Charles: *Hegel,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977, p. 4.

34   Koselleck, Reinhart: *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, New York: Columbia University Press 2004.

3   The computer games presented here, however, not only design diverse wholes, but also create different epistemic orders. In the games, distinct world views and ideas of the order of things are designed. However, this does not take place on the level of content or motif, but on the level of (inter-)medial shapes and reflections. In the end, it doesn't matter whether it's about vampires, zombies, or simulation worlds. What is more crucial is that the narratives of computer games draw up such world images due to their intermedial references within a serially generated world of fiction.

4   The fact that such inter media operations occur elaborately and become particularly vivid in computer games, which connect to already established narrative worlds, should not be surprising. As 'secondary' phenomena they are always already under pressure of legitimacy and must dignify themselves against already established media of the narrative world.

5   Although it has been repeatedly emphasized here that computer games in particular, which connect to already established series worlds, undertake this kind of inter media reflection in an especially ambitious way, this does not mean that they do not also occur in other media contexts. This has two implications: on the one hand, the inter media references presented here are representative examples and can be found in other fields as well. In my opinion, they are useful to create a typology of narrative strategies in a trans media context in general, even beyond computer games. On the other hand, such reflections and strategies are perhaps particularly characteristic of inter media operations in trans media narratives but can also be found in intra media contexts, which means without changing the media of storytelling. In the TV series BUFFY, for example, there is already an episode that narrates conjunctively beyond and before transmedial extensions. In the *Buffy* comic series, there are also standalone stories that can be interpreted as *pars pro toto* for the entire comic series. Or think of the Marvel franchise with its myriads of superheroes and the multiple interconnections of films, television shows, computer games or comic series up to fan fiction. In this context, one could also think of ambitious projects like the episode BANDERSNATCH of the Netflix series BLACK MIRROR. In this episode we are confronted with an interactive film about the making of a computer game in which the viewer/player must make decisions similar to those in the computer game THE WALKING DEAD. Here we are dealing with a media hybrid that can be understood as an intramedial reflection of the series BLACK MIRROR within the context of a digital platform. The examples could be continued almost indefinitely. What is important to me is that in all these cases the three forms of serial reflection about part and whole can be related to different medial contexts and levels of serial narration. So, they could be

used fruitfully for the analysis of serial phenomena, be they inter, intra, trans medial or whatsoever.

6   The fact that this kind of media reflection in a serial context occurs particularly frequently in the context of trans media narration probably has to do with the increasing networking of media forms and platforms. The essential characteristic of our media situation is probably connectivity. Intermedial references that reflect the relationship between part and whole are places where this interconnection is stabilized in a special way, precisely through intermedial reflections on how parts of a complex network can be thought of as belonging together. Seen in this way, games to series always have the big whole of connectivity in view.

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