Immateriality and Immortality

Digital Toys in Video Games

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This chapter takes the puzzle-platform game UNRAVEL as a case study to explore how the 'haptic-panoptic'[1] quality of digital toys can locate players in the liminal space between material reality and immaterial imaginings. Drawing across Zoe Jaques'[2] theorization of the 'spectrality' of stuffed animals and Katriina Heljakka's[3] examination of toys as avatars, I argue that toylike protagonists in video games are intuitive vehicles to shuttle players between the realms of the physical and the digital. I suggest that since digital toys occupy an intermedial space between sensory planes, they can simultaneously elicit an intense sense of presentness and a profound sense of absence. I consider the paradox of manipulability and intangibility through the lenses of nostalgia and tactile memories, making connections between UNRAVEL*'s* core mechanic of 'dis-membering' the protagonist and 're-membering' the past. I posit that the subject position available to players in UNRAVEL is that of 'ghost,' haunting the playspace and possessing the doll-like

1 Lancaster, Kurt: *Interacting with Babylon 5: Fan Performances in a Media Universe,* Austin: University of Texas Press 2001.

2 Jaques, Zoe: Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg, New York: Routledge 2015, and Jaques, Zoe: "Always Playing: The Specral Nostalgia of Cinematic Pooh," in: Harrison, Jennifer (ed.), Positioning Pooh: Edward Bear after One Hundred Years, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi 2021.

3 Heljakka, Katriina "Aren't You a Doll! Toying With Avatars in Digital Playgrounds," in: *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds,* Volume 4: Issue 2, 2012, pp. 153-17, and Heljakka, Katriina/Harviainen, J. Tuomas: "From Displays and Dioramas to DollDramas: Adult World Building and World Playing with Toys," in: *American Journal of Play,* 11(3), 2019, pp. 351-378.

avatar. I conclude by exploring the idea of spectral 'play-echoes' in video games, looking specifically at traces left in gameworlds by deceased players.

DOLLS, PLUSHIES, AND PLASTIC FIGURINES

While collecting data for a content analysis documenting depictions of children in contemporary video games,[4] I identified a subset of texts that featured avatars designed to resemble dolls, plushies, and plastic figurines. I was struck by the 'haptic-panoptic'[5] quality of these avatars: their digital skins had been carefully designed to evoke sensory memories of soft, warm wool, flat, stiff paper, or shiny, rubbery plastic. I appropriate Kurt Lancaster's coinage 'haptic-panoptic' here to refer to that synesthetic space between senses where the visual is suffused with tactile qualities that call to mind experiences of weight, texture, pliancy, and other physical sensations. The avatar in the LITTLEBIGPLANET series, for example, is a crocheted creature made from itchy, brown yarn with black buttons for eyes and a comedy-kitsch zip running from gusset to neck that serves as a tie. His construction looks as straightforward as his overly literal name: Sackboy. Sackboy appears to have been assembled from scrap materials—the reincarnation of a holey jumper, perhaps, or a widowed sock—and the crafting process is rendered visible in the lumpy stitching that secures his hands to his arms and seals up his disproportionately large head. The fact that Sackboy bears signs of being handmade, in conjunction with the fact that the scale of the game's virtual environments suggests he is hand-sized, makes him feel graspable. As a result, there is a gestural congruence between the shape and size of the player's hand movements as they press buttons on the controller and the audiovisual feedback of Sackboy responding on screen.

The playable protagonist in the puzzle-platform game UNRAVEL is also designed to represent a handcrafted woolen doll. In the game's marketing material, this doll is given the name 'Yarny,' suggesting that his identity is closely tied to his materiality. Yarny belongs to a long fairy-tale tradition of toymaker's creations that are absent-mindedly imbued by their artisans with a soul—a side effect of a long lost, pre-Fordist magic. Homely and whimsical, Yarny seems as if he were quickly crafted from offcuts—not without love, but without pretension. The low cost of Yarny's production is inversely proportional to his sentimental value. His

4 Reay, Emma: "Representations of Children in Videogames," in: *Game Studies,* Volume 21: Issue 1, 2021.

5 K. Lancaster: *Interacting with Babylon 5*, pp. 1-33.

loose ends and visible stitching evidence the unique quirks of his human creator, making him individual, irreplaceable, and therefore priceless. In a binary medium of computational precision, Yarny's imperfections convey traces of human craftsmanship: this knitted being re-weaves the rainbow, and his corporeal crochet conceals the cold, wraithlike code from which his is actually constructed. That is to say, "the medium's computational materiality—inherently founded as it is upon the empirical value, the defined procedure, the rigid binary of true and false"[6] is sublimated beneath a skin that strongly evokes sensory memories of an organic, homespun, folksy texture.

While characters like Sackboy, Yarny, and Yoshi are made of fuzzy wool, the avatars in TEARAWAY and TEARAWAY UNFOLDED resemble animate origami and move through dioramas of painted cardboard, confetti, and crumpled tissue. Similarly, the heroes of SCRIBBLENAUTS UNLIMITED seem to be constructed from stickers and split pins. The playable characters and the in-game objects in SCRIBBLENAUTS UNLIMITED are composed of simple, saturated, two-dimensional shapes with hard, contrasting outlines. Furthermore, the fact that there is no movement along the Y-axis in this game compounds the sense that the world of SCRIBBLENAUTS is paper-thin. The flatness of the environments—which consist of just two stacked layers—is reminiscent of a Victorian paper theatre, with the edge of the screen functioning as a miniature proscenium arch. The visual design of SCRIBBLENAUTS UNLIMITED—combined with the skeuomorphic 'skrish' sound of a paper page turn that accompanies the main game mechanic—gives the virtual world the modest heft of a coloring book or a paste collage that might be showcased on the family fridge.

Finally, there were several avatars in my corpus that recalled the armies of identical figurines often found heaped in bargain bins near toyshop tills or begreased between burger and fries in a McDonald's Happy Meal™. The toylike characters in FALL GUYS and PIKMIN 3, for example, share a cheap, shiny plasticity that Roland Barthes would have likely condemned for being "a graceless material, the product of chemistry, not of nature" and having "an appearance at once gross and hygienic."[7] Synthetic, lurid, and effortlessly replicable, Pikmin look like injection-molded mandrakes, while Fall Guys appear to be made from a gummy, neon flubber that combines the robustness of a dog's chew toy with the gelatinousness of a Jelly Baby.

6 Vella, Daniel: "No Mastery Without Mystery: Dark Souls and the Ludic Sublime," in: *Game Studies,* Vol. 15, Issue 1, 2015.

7 Barthes, Roland: *Mythologies,* translated by Annette Lavers, London: Vintage 1993 (1957).

I posited that the diverse toylike textures of these avatars all scripted a certain style of play, namely roughhousing.[8] As a blimpish blobject, the rubbery elasticity of a Fall Guy spectacularizes bloodless sadism. That is to say, the avatar's wobbly tactility invites violence because it is biteable, squishable, and deformable whilst simultaneously being reassuringly robust, durable, and resilient. Equally, the pleasure found in hurling hordes of Pikmin into battle is contingent upon their inorganic materiality. Smooth, hard, and uniform, Pikmin have no breakable parts nor vulnerable soft spots: they do not look like they would decompose, shatter, or hemorrhage. Players are prompted to treat the Pikmin as if they were wholly expendable in part because their materiality is suggestive of inexpensive mass production. Although he is neither waterproof nor wipe-clean, Sackboy's toylike materiality also encourages players to conduct playful experiments using his body—many of which result in him being incinerated, melted in acid, and pulverized by heavy machinery. Sackboy's blithe attitude towards his own repeated destruction sets the tone for a joke that is repeated in the tutorial of each game in the series: the narrator questions whether Sackboy is resurrected after each dismemberment or whether he is simply replaced by an identical toy. The series hamstrings aggression by invoking a childly world of wonder, but, paradoxically, this apparent innocence makes violent play—specifically, the reckless sacrificing of Sackboy's body—acceptable by alleviating the player's sense of culpability.

SCRIBBLENAUTS UNLIMITED makes creative spontaneity and impulsive curiosity feel safe and viable in the same way: the ramifications of vandalism and destruction are mitigated when enacted within a paper world. This goes some way to explaining the countless Let's Play videos uploaded to YouTube in which players of SCRIBBLENAUTS UNLIMITED attempt to solve the game's puzzles solely using a flamethrower. Despite 'fire' being a suboptimal solution in most of the game's scenarios, setting the paper world alight is a valid response to the latent, transgressive script that runs counter to the game's overt encouragement of neighborly community service. I concluded my analysis of toylike avatars by positing that the pleasure found in their rippable, crushable, destructible materiality was augmented by their restartable, respawnable, rewindable *im*materiality. That is to say, both their materiality and their immateriality work in parallel to mitigate consequences by suggesting an imperviousness to pain and a forgiving sturdiness. Like exhibits protected behind a screen of glass in a toy museum, the avatars

8 Reay, Emma: "Cute, Cuddly and Completely Crushable: Plushies as Avatars in Video Games," in: *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds,* Volume 13: Issue 2, 2021, pp. 131-149.

invited boisterous, rough manhandling whilst simultaneously attenuating the consequences of touch.

One game in my corpus, however, seemed to be at odds with this 'best of both worlds' interpretation. Despite featuring a delightfully destructible doll-avatar, UNRAVEL is a game that is deeply anxious about disintegration. Rather than Yarny's woolly materiality and his pixelated immateriality working in tandem to support a carefree, careless playstyle, UNRAVEL scaffolds a tactile experience that elicits a bittersweet sense of a loss, distance, and disconnection. Entangled with the feelings of satisfaction players derive from the game's physics-based puzzles that simulate weight, gravity, tension, and friction is a fundamental dissatisfaction rooted in an unsatiated yearning for physical contact induced by sensory nostalgia. This chapter offers a close reading of UNRAVEL that centers on the gap between its haptic plane and its audiovisual plane as a key site of meaning. Just as picture book theorists[9] have argued that tension between the verbal plane and the visual plane in children's books can generate interpretive gaps that prompt 'literary' readings, I argue that the snags between the haptic and the audiovisual in videogames generate complex, layered, subjective possibility spaces. I suggest that UNRAVEL uses the partial embodiment that characterizes both toy play and video game play to elicit feelings of homesickness and separation that speak to the game's central themes of loneliness, mourning, and letting go.

TACTILE NOSTALGIA

UNRAVEL begins in the front room of a grandmother's cozy cottage that is bathed in the low, golden glow of a long Swedish summer's evening. On a small, wooden table stands a vase of foraged wildflowers, a tin kettle, a plate of Swedish biscuits, and an open photo album. A hand-embroidered prayer cushion reads, "*Lycka blommar ur sma enkla*"—'Happiness blooms out of small, simple things.' The accompanying music is ruminative—even plaintive—but nonetheless sweet and soothing. An elderly woman wrapped up in a crocheted shawl smiles at the framed photograph held in her hands, but her expression soon drops, and she bows her head. She walks over creaking floorboards to a staircase, stopping briefly to straighten a portrait of a toddler sitting in a heap of autumn leaves. She collects a wicker basket of half-finished knitting and carries on upstairs, but the camera, rather than following her, is distracted by a ball of bright red yarn that falls from the

9 E.g., Scott, Carole/Nikolajeva, Maria: *How Picturebooks Work,* New York: Routledge 2001.

basket and bounces across the kitchen floor coming to rest under a dining chair. The screen fades to black, and the next moment, the player sees Yarny—a red, woolen sprite—climbing onto the table, stepping over a hand-written letter, and gazing around the room, saucer-eyed with wonder and curiosity.

Through the character of Yarny, UNRAVEL facilitates a fantasy of being born again into a second childhood, one more magical and more vivid than the first—a childhood lived between the *hygge* game hub of the grandmother's rustic, welcoming home and the breath-taking Scandinavian natural landscapes that constitute the game's levels. Toy theorist Katriina Heljakka writes:

> "[a]dults who acquire toys and play with them have their activities often explained as nostalgia, their toys considered objects that merely provoke a yearning for childhood. However […] this remembered childhood is not a lived childhood but, instead, a voluntary one."[10]

The childhood revisited in UNRAVEL is not a 'lived childhood' but a Platonic ideal of childhood—a childhood viewed both through the long lens of nostalgia and also through the tinted lens of a coveted fantasy. Carolyn Steedman has argued that childhood as an abstract concept has become an emblem of a lost past and lost selves,[11] and this is certainly the case for UNRAVEL. In fact, the poignancy of the game rests in the partial and temporary nature of the experience it offers to players: they can re-enter the Edenic garden of childhood as visitors, but with the knowledge that they will never be repatriated to this universal homeland.

The transitory impermanence—this sense of being out(side) of time—is embedded in the videogame medium itself. In the opening cutscene described above, the rotary telephone, the rustic wood stove, and the old-fashioned furniture all feel anachronistic because they are rendered as computer-generated images. Equally, the precision and fidelity with which the game portrays its timeless pastoral environments paradoxically draw attention to the medium's technical sophistication. The visual style of this game reaches towards photorealism, to the extent that the photographs by the grandmother's staircase and in her albums are real-world images taken by the development team of their friends and loved ones. This careful commitment to visual verisimilitude—particularly to the minutiae of the natural world—feels like an act of loving devotion. What is more, since the game's serene digital vistas are experienced from the perspective of a very small creature (Yarny measures approximately four inches tall), this meticulous attention to detail is

10 K. Heljakka/J. T. Harviainen: "From Displays and Dioramas to DollDramas," pp. 355.

11 Steedman, Carolyn: "Inside, Outside, Other: Accounts of National Identity in the 19th Century," in: *History of the Human Sciences,* Vol. 8, No. 4, 1995, pp. 59-76.

further exaggerated. The distortion of scale imbues the humble pinecone with the majesty of a mountain, gives the moth the air of an angel, and other such Burkean sentiments. The size of these artifacts relative to the avatar enlarges their importance for the player, replicating the fascination young children are thought to have with objects that have lost their intrigue for adults.

The game's paean to small pleasures is connected to long outgrown childly perspectives and to Romantic, pre-industrial rural locales that have remained 'unadulterated' by modernity. As a result, the sublime beauty of the gameworld tugs the player into personal and collective pasts, eliciting something Zoe Jaques terms "spectral nostalgia." "Spectral nostalgia," Jaques writes, "can be defined as a wistful looking back to the past, certainly, but via a backward glance that is specifically attentive to its hauntings and echoes, the way specters not only emerge from the past but can shape an inflect the present and future."[12] The immateriality of these computer-generated images combined with the reverential veracity with which these digital specters reproduce the physics, dimensions, and textures of their material referents gives them a phantasmagorical quality. The analog is rendered in the digital and is experienced like a mirage in the desert. The fact that these objects are both interactive and intangible exaggerates the sensory shortfall of digital formats. The resultant feeling is like an unscratchable itch on a phantom limb.

UNRAVEL is profoundly nostalgic for its material referents, and this is made explicit in the game's narrative premise, which entrusts Yarny and the player with collecting (or recollecting) the grandmother's fading memories. The recollection process is symbolized by the restoration of the damaged photographs in an album. Torn, sun-bleached, and stained, the photographs held between yellowing pages evoke age-related memory loss and familial neglect. Yarny traverses different game levels encountering soft-focus, life-sized still images of moments from the grandmother's memory. These images dissolve into glowing particles of dust that Yarny absorbs so that he can 're-member' them when he returns to the photo album in the game's hubspace.

The 're-membering' process is also expressed via Yarny's material body. Yarny is a visualization of two linguistic metaphors: the images of one's mind 'UNRAVELling' with age and of 'losing one's thread' when retelling a story. As an avatar, he is subjected to repeated dismemberment at the hands of the player as part of solving the game's physics-based puzzles. Players must use the wool that makes up Yarny's body to strategically connect platforms so that he can climb it, swing from it, and use it to form tensile bridges. The wool available is finite and begins to unwind as Yarny moves from the left-hand side of the screen towards

12 Z. Jaques: "Always Playing."

the right-hand side until he is reduced to a thin, hunched, single-threaded skeleton. Like Theseus' Ship, Yarny's 'original' body is quickly replaced with entirely new skeins of wool, gesturing towards the fact that a memory of an event is not equivalent to the original experience and that reliving a memory creatively overwrites the previous recording. The final lengths of Yarny's wool have a series of knots that, rather disturbingly, evoke organs, and the sense that he is being disemboweled is compounded by the blood-red color of the wool. The player can replenish Yarny's wool by directing him towards fresh spools snagged on odd nails and splinters of wood, but when he is reduced to his final lengths, he moves pitifully slowly as if he were almost too weak to carry on. In these moments, his size and appearance evoke a bloodied tampon, or even a fetus, far from the womb of the grandmother's cottage, pathetically trailing its umbilical cord behind it. Additionally, when played with a controller, the player experiences rumbling vibrations as Yarny yanks at the last lengths of his own intestinal tubes. Yarny's materiality both facilitates and limits the player's ability to master the game's puzzles. When players run out of thread, the grandmother's status as someone who is both 'forgetful' and 'forgotten' are brought to mind, along with the attendant emotions of frustration and despair.

The disintegration of Yarny's body recalls Shel Silverstein's weepy picture book THE GIVING TREE, in which a tree representing a caregiver has its resources entirely depleted by a demanding child. However, in UNRAVEL, it is the surrogate child that hazards its physical body for the benefit of its elderly creator. Both the tree and the toy are transitional objects, and their eventual abandonment is inevitable, but the toy's childliness loans it a hopeful, regenerative, evergreen endurance that allows it to outlast individual generations and remain in the garden of childhood. More so than photographs preserved in an album—which hold only the past—the toy is a script that always solicits new performers and generates new performances. It is a doorstop that holds open the entrance to the polyreal realm of *paidia*[13] so that players of all ages can step through and encounter both their own *childselves* and the *childselves* of the players who came before them.

Lynda Barry questions whether "a toy can exist without a person"[14] and insists "the same toy is not the same toy for anybody else," [15] suggesting that what brings a toy into being is the act of play as a spatio-temporal event and that each time a toy is awoken from dormancy by a new player the seemingly constant

13 Caillois, Roger: *Man, Play, and Games,* translated by M. Barash, New York: Free Press of Glencoe 1961.

14 Barry, Lynda: *What it is,* Montreal: Drawn and Quaterly 2008, p. 51.

15 Ibid., p. 46.

material object is made fundamentally different. Jaques compares the lifecycles of toys in two contemporary children's films, noting that as "Christopher Robin's toys [find] fresh playfulness in Madeline just as Andy's do in Bonnie, the recyclability of the relationship between toy and child paper[s] over the unsettling fact that such beings can eternally outlive their human companions, even as they become tattered and frayed."[16] Jaques draws attention to the parallels between Roland Barthes' horror at "that rather terrible thing that is in every photograph: the return of the dead"[17] and the spectral quality of toys preserved in museums.[18] A key difference between photographs and toys, however, is that as photographs fade, their referent also disintegrates, meaning that the material and the immaterial are effaced in tandem. In contrast, as toys grow more 'tattered and frayed,' the immaterial begins to manifest on a material plane. That is to say, the intangible play-echoes of imaginative games become concretized as marks upon the body of the toy. Like tattoos or scars, the vandalization and destruction of the toy is a record of ephemeral incidents of pretend play—specifically, it preserves what was seen in the mind's eye, mediated via idiosyncratic haptic gestures. The gap between the material and the immaterial is never so narrow as it is in the moment before a toy disintegrates entirely.

In UNRAVEL, the toy exceeds the photograph as a focal point of nostalgia—not just because it functions as a record of a tactile experience, but because it bears the traces of previous players' 'aliveness.' Barry hypothesizes, "[t]here is something brought alive during play, and this something, when played with, seems to play back."[19] This is perhaps why Yarny's total disintegration towards the end of UNRAVEL is so emotionally charged. The penultimate level requires Yarny to traverse a snow-covered cemetery during an intense blizzard. He spends the level shivering with his thin yarn arms wrapped around his tiny body for warmth. In the context of this gentle game, the puzzles in this level are punishing. A biting wind erases the players' progress by forcing Yarny back to the start of the level and brings about sudden fail-states by freezing him to death. Finally, threadbare and deformed, Yarny reaches the crocheted badge that signals the end of the level—in this case, it is one half of a ripped heart. As the player makes Yarny jump towards it, the game wrests control away from the player and runs a cutscene showing the ruthless wind snatching the heart from Yarny's hands at the last moment.

16 Z. Jaques: "Always Playing," p. 60.

17 Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang 1980, p. 9.

18 Z. Jaques: "Always Playing," p. 53.

19 B. Lynda: *What it is,* p. 51.

When Yarny dives after it, he overextends himself, UNRAVELling completely and disappearing from existence. The thread of life is cut—as is the connection between the grandmother's younger selves—and the portal to the past is finally closed.

The grief elicited by Yarny's UNRAVELling is only short-lived, as the game quickly replaces or repairs the broken toy. After a weighty pause, a *deus ex machina* in the form of a mitten-clad hand reaches down from the top of the screen and retrieves both the crocheted heart and the unspun string of red yarn. Following a black loading screen, what seems to be an eyelid peels open, revealing that it is, in fact, a backpack being unzipped. Light pours into the bag, and Yarny emerges, reborn and blinking in the sunlight. It is springtime once more, and he is at the bottom of the grandmother's garden, back where the game began. In juxtaposition to the previous level, the final brief stretch of gameplay facilitates Yarny's easy passage via a skyful of sparkling fireflies that allow Yarny to float, flip, and fly above the ground, creating a dreamlike feeling of weightlessness and joy. He is lifted by a flurry of fireflies up onto the windowsill of the grandmother's house, where he is—rather unceremoniously—launched inside as a football hits the pane of the open window.

Yarny's hard-earned reward for his dutiful restoration of the photograph album comes in the form of a little girl—presumably a grandchild—who flings open the door to the grandmother's front room and skips towards the table. Yarny throws himself prostrate and feigns lifelessness while the little girl helps herself to a traditional Swedish cinnamon swirl. She grabs Yarny and examines him approvingly before plonking him down on the table and running back outside into the garden. The passage of time and the process of aging are not linear and do not end with death in the frozen cemetery—they are cyclic and continuous, always returning to the child. Yarny's immortality and unending reincarnation rest on the permanence and persistence of his material body. The warm, safe haven of the grandmother's garden does not signify a final resting place but a transitional passage leading to reincarnation. Yarny's quick decision to hide his 'aliveness' from the granddaughter is an invitation for her to entwine her own imaginative aliveness with his physical form. That is to say, his inanimate state primes him for possession that will continue the unbroken chain of previous possessors, bridging the gap between grandmother and granddaughter. One of the hand-written captions in the grandmother's photograph album reads, "The past can help you cope. It can be a strength and a solace. But if you can't let it go, it can drag you under." UNRAVEL suggests that a photograph can only replay a single moment in time, but the graspable, poseable, manipulable body of a toy is future-oriented, always in anticipation of its next incarnation. Letting go of the past is less painful when it is framed as passing on a plaything to the next generation.

PLAYING AS POSSESSION: HAUNTED DOLLS IN VIDEO GAMES

The returning gaze of dolls, plushies, and action figures invites speculation about divergent forms of 'aliveness.' Jaques notes how fundamental a toy's materiality is to its 'aliveness' in her reading of Margery Williams's tale of *The Velveteen Rabbit.*[20] In this classic children's book, the old Skin Horse explains to the plushie protagonist that only attachment expressed through extensive physical handling can bring toys to life. Toys that "break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept"[21] do not become real because they are not sufficiently graspable. Jaques comments on the way the text valorizes the gradual decay of frequently hugged toys, arguing that toys require something akin to an organic, mortal body in order to attain proximity to living beings. Roland Barthes also links a toy's material body to its' aliveness,' making an almost religious connection between the likelihood of a toy having an afterlife and the purity of the material it is made from. He writes:

"Wood is a familiar and poetic substance, which does not sever the child from close contact with the tree, the table, the floor. Wood does not wound or break down; it does not shatter, it wears out, it can last a long time, live with the child, alter little by little the relations between the object and the hand. If it dies, it is in dwindling, not in swelling out like those mechanical toys which disappear behind the hernia of a broken spring. Wood makes essential objects, objects for all time. Yet there hardly remain any of these wooden toys from the Vosges, these fretwork farms with their animals, which were only possible, it is true, in the days of the craftsman. Henceforth, toys are chemical in substance and colour; their very material introduces one to a coenaesthesis of use, not pleasure. These toys die in fact very quickly, and once dead, they have no posthumous life for the child."[22]

Only the toys that submit to and endure the mauling of the child-God gain admittance to his nostalgic heaven, where toys' physical bodies are retired, but the ephemeral, imagined play experiences that they once prompted are immortalized as sweet, hazy, haloed memories. The body of Winnie-the-Pooh may be out of reach in a display case in the New York Public Library, but the teddy's soul is

20 J. Zoe: *Children's Literature and the Posthuman.*

21 Ibid. p. 10

22 R. Barthes: *Mythologies*, pp. 54-55.

forever "in that enchanted place on the top of the forest [where] a little boy and his Bear will always be playing."[23]

One wonders what Barthes would have made of digital toys that are simultaneously more durable and more intangible than those hewn from wood. Although digital toys cannot decay, they can bear traces of their handling by players, as Jordan Erica Webber records in her moving interviews with bereaved people who return to the save files of games played by their lost loved ones.[24] Many of the interviewees mention games from the ANIMAL CROSSING series, including Meredith Myers, whose sister, Kylie, passed away as a teenager. Myers describes wanting to maintain her sister's town in ANIMAL CROSSING: WILD WORLD because interacting with something that Kylie had once played with herself gave her a feeling of closeness and connection to her sister. Myers relates that, four years after Kylie's death, an inhabitant of the virtual town—an anthropomorphic cat named Lolly—revealed that she was in possession of a letter written by Kylie, which Myers was then able to read. Myers says, "Being able to see the relationship [Kylie] had built with this little virtual cat and seeing it come to life was like having a little piece of her again." Kylie was outlived both by her digital toy and by her own playfulness, which engaged her sister in a paidic interaction long after her death. While the haunted toy did not help Kylie to materialize on a physical plane, it did enable her sister to enter into the digital space containing Kylie's preserved play echo.

For Myers, the ANIMAL CROSSING village is a liminal space between the past and the present and the deceased and the living. Myers' play in this space is akin both to the ritual visiting of a gravesite and to a cross-sensory séance. Since paidic play takes place between the material and the immaterial, playing with the dead can feel like one is meeting them in the realm between imagination and experience. To put it another way, a memory exists somewhere between imagination and experience, and so a toy that straddles sensory worlds can shuttle the player back and forth in time as well as material planes.

The liminal space of toy play requires a sensory compromise—or, rather, it requires the relinquishing of presentness in one material plane to manifest in another. In encountering Kylie's play-echo, Myers experiences what is gained in terms of what is lost. She reflects, "I couldn't take care of [Kylie] in real life anymore. But I could take care of her [Animal Crossing] village. Hear her voice

23 Milne, A./Shepard, E.: *The House at Pooh Corner*, London: Egmont 2011.

24 Webber, Jordan E.: "Playing with the Dead," in: *BBC Radio 4,* 2020, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000nv36

through her letter. The game gave me this little piece of her."[25] Myers 'hears' Kylie's voice through the written text of Kylie's letter—combining auditory memory with a *new* communication—but her sister's resurrection is only partial: she is granted only a *piece of her*. She contrasts *real life* with the virtual playspace, suggesting that her actions within the digital game are mimetic signifiers of care rather than care itself. They are specters of care that exist in the present but belong to the past.

Similarly, the bereaved father of Ezra Chatterton describes interacting with a WORLD OF WARCRAFT quest designed and voiced by his son as "an echo—it's a shadow—of the thing that I want, which is to be able to actually touch him, feel him, be with him again. But it is something. It's more than the void."[26] Immateriality is, again, experienced as a loss, and the *actual* is contrasted with the *virtual.* Ezra's auditory (echo) and visual (shadow) manifestations scaffold the absence of his tactile, haptic manifestation. The same sensory language appears in Amy and Ryan Green's description of the memorialization of their son Joel in the autobiographical game THAT DRAGON, CANCER. Ryan comments,

> "They're echoes, but echoes fade. And we have to turn our hope to the future. My hope is that someday I will see Joel again and someday I will hold him for real and someday I will play with him for real."

The virtual afterlives of these deceased players who have been *saved* in games are beyond materiality and beyond mortality. The bereaved await their own dematerialization that will, paradoxically, allow them to experience the haptic, tactile aspects of their lost loved ones once more.

TOYS AS MATERIALIZED FICTIONS

The omnipresence of toys in transmedia franchises attests to their ability not only to transport players into fictional worlds by inviting games of Let's Pretend but also to manifest fictional beings in the material realm. Hybrid character toys such as Nintendo's *Amiibos,* Activision's *Skylanders,* Hasbro's *Telepods*, and the figurines associated with the DISNEY INFINITY series draw on understandings of toys as two-way portals from material reality into individual mindscapes and into collective fantasies. LITTLEBIGPLANET positions Sackboy as the conduit that

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

transports players to the "Imagisphere, the natural home of our creative wonderings."[27] The homophonic pun on "wondering" and "wandering" reflects the game's aim of manifesting creative fantasies in a mappable, navigable space. As a simulation of a concrete prop for make-believe play, Sackboy is an entry point into a parallel world that naturalizes the player's partial embodiment there. Brendan Keough has analyzed this phenomenon in the game TEARAWAY, played on the PlayStation Vita. He describes the moment when players are invited to poke their flesh-and-blood fingers into the game's paper world via a touchscreen as a "reverse trompe l'oeil, where the actual world is made to look as if it is part of the virtual."[28] The material affordances of the digital paper that constitutes the gameworld facilitate a metaleptic rip between semiotic planes that transforms the haptic into the visual and the physical into the virtual. Keogh does not explicitly connect the toyness of the game's avatar with the collapsing of sensory levels, but he does draw attention to the ways in which video game controllers are akin to toys in that they function as material interfaces that facilitate the manipulation of an internal, intangible, virtual world.

One could say, then, that toys are tools that encourage immersion, and their presence in video games cues players to imagine themselves re-materialized inside the gameworld. Keogh writes, "[t]he term *immersion* usefully describes the ideal sensation many videogames aim to imbue in their players: being transported to and enveloped in another world discrete from the actual world."[29] He notes, however, that the experience of interacting with video game worlds is best described as "an imperfect and partial sense of presence" that "flickers between present and absent, corporeal and incorporeal, immanent and transcendent, actual and virtual, 'me' and 'not me.'"[30] I would say that this 'between' state better captures the experience of play with physical toys than total immersion. Furthermore, I would argue that in UNRAVEL, this liminal space between the physical and the virtual is the intended destination.

The gap between sensory planes is a possibility space that has parallels with the 'interpretive gaps' in picturebooks. Children's literature scholars Carole Scott and Maria Nikolajeva devised a typology of interactions between the verbal (i.e., the written text) and the visual (i.e., the illustrations) that provides the critical terminology needed to distinguish between relationships. The terms they

27 From the opening narration of LITTLEBIGPLANET 3.

28 Keogh, Brendan: *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press 2018, p. 2.

29 Ibid., p. 33.

30 Ibid., p. 13.

devised are: symmetrical, complementary, enhancing, counterpointing, and sylleptic.[31] When the verbal and the visual are 'symmetrical'—when the written text and the images convey the same information—the interpretive gap is narrow and monosemic. However, when the two planes express divergent or even contradictory information, this opens up a polysemic space in which readers can infer meaning in a subjective, creative, imaginative manner. Children's literature scholars have posited that snags between semiotic planes elicit *literary* readings of picturebooks, while a perfect weft and warp of the verbal and the visual can flatten and constrain meaning.

In contrast, discussions of tension between sensory planes within game criticism have primarily revolved around concepts such as 'ludonarrative dissonance,' a term coined by Clint Hocking to identify what he felt was a central design flaw in the *Bioshock* games.[32] Hocking was frustrated by the fact that the audiovisual narrative and the game's mechanics were not symmetrical, and he felt that this undermined *Bioshock's* intended player experience. While Hocking's critique might hold true for the *Bioshock* games, asymmetry between semiotic planes in other interactive texts can be a powerful poetic, aesthetic, or rhetorical device, expressing irony, choral perspectives, nuance, mystery, complexity, absurdity, paradox, or ambiguity. Applying critical lenses from picture book theory to video games allows for the possibility that imperfect, partial, or even contradictory relationships between semiotic planes can be deliberate and powerful ways to shape 'literary' playing experiences. Interpretive gaps can enshrine creative self-fashioning, playful resistance, and experimental boundary testing—all of which are central components of paidic play. Furthermore, if we think of 'immersive' toy play as being immersed in the liminal space *between* material and immaterial, the gap created by semiotic dissonance demarcates that space. Whether the space is used for sincere self-projection or ironic, critical distance, it is contingent on 'incompleteness.'

The 'incompleteness' of toys is directly linked to their capacity to elicit paidic play. David Myers writes, "[f]or a toy to remain a toy and an object of play, that toy must remain in the liminal space between what is and what is not,

31 Scott, Carole/Nikolajeva, Maria: *How Picturebooks Work, (Children's Literature And Culture),* New York: Routledge 2006.

32 Hocking, Clint: "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock: The Problem of What the Game is About," in: Davidson, Drew (ed.), *Well Played 1.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*, Pittsburgh: ETC Press 2009.

a state kept paradoxically 'alive' by the player's ludic attitude."[33] As a digital toy, Yarny sits in that liminal space of 'aliveness.' Unlike the 'complicated' toys reviled by Roland Barthes, Yarny is not a literal prefiguration of a component of the adult world—a world that is closed and complete; rather, he remains in a state of embryonic gestation. He is 'unmarked'—his odd shape does not signify a specific creature; he lacks clothing and accessories and is technically genderless. Mute and mouthless, he defers to players to narrate his inner monologue. The open scripts implied by his homely, simple form can be endlessly reinterpreted, and so he survives the lengths and breadths of time to be continually reawakened by new sets of hands. This immortality is further compounded by his immateriality. His digitization permits endless respawning following each UNRAVELling, which reflects his limitless potential for reanimation by future generations of players.

His immateriality is also key to fostering imaginative projection. The on-screen audiovisual responses to the player's hand gestures have a synaesthetic quality. When Yarny is swinging fluidly from point to point, for example, his audiovisual appearance makes him *feel* light and gracile. The player's carefully timed, rhythmic button-presses are a mimetic approximation of Yarny's on-screen acrobatics. Importantly, these gestures do not need to be symmetrical to what is rendered on an audiovisual plane: this imperfect mapping of haptic onto audiovisual creates an interpretive gap that allows for diverse interpretations. Perhaps Yarny does not feel light-footed and nimble to all players—perhaps to some, he feels insubstantial and frail, and his looping leaps are experienced as stomach-turning rather than effortless. Furthermore, the distance between the haptic and the audiovisual layers encourage metaphoric readings. If the bridge-building mechanic in UNRAVEL were overly literal and required players to enact the knot-tying hand gestures that Yarny performs on screen, it would align signifier and signified too closely, short-circuiting potential poetic interpretations of 'bridge building' as a symbol for interpersonal attachment and connection.

Yarny's digital nature means that he can simulate a level of independent sentience. A number of his animations in response to his environment are unprompted by the player—for example, Yarny turns his head to look at the world around him, he shakes himself like a dog when he gets wet, he claps his hands in delight, and he jumps in fright when he is startled by a passing butterfly. Stewart has theorized the fear of the mechanized toy as 'a dream no longer in need of its dreamer' as being rooted in anxiety about the uncontrolled incursion of the immaterial world

33 Myers, David: "A Toy Semiotics, Revisited," in: Magalhães, Luísa/Goldstein, Jeffrey (eds.), *Toys and Communication*, Palgrave Macmillan UK 2017, p. 51.

into the material world.[34] However, UNRAVEL tackles the opposite fear—the dissolution of the material into the immaterial—the 'unbecoming' of one's physical self through death. Souvik Mukherjee writes, "[t]he term *avatar* is rather freely used in game criticism as meaning 'player embodiment' which is only a part of its original significance; its key connotations of reincarnation and immanent existence have so far been ignored."[35] I agree with Mukherjee's critique of the colonial repurposing of this term, and I would add that 'avatar' in its religious sense emphasizes only one direction of transformation between the material and the immaterial, or between the carnal and spiritual: the player-god materializing on screen. Rather than becoming flesh, players of video games could be said to become specters—to experience the dispersal of self as much as they experience incarnation. Thinking of the players of FALLGUYS as mischievous poltergeists, for example, seems more fitting than figuring them as gods made flesh (or made flubber).

Players experience a liminal, limited, co-constructed form of 'aliveness' when engaging with video games that is akin to being a ghost possessing an inanimate object. This 'flickering' sensation, as Keough puts it, is key to disrupting the idea that adults have a stable, unified self. Straddling worlds reminds players that their identities consist of fragments, and the pieces of themselves can be distributed between objects, locales, and moments in time. Children's literature scholar Clementine Beauvais notes, "[t]he child embodies for the adults the possible return of indeterminacy in their own existences."[36] I would add that as a proxy for the child—or, rather, as an object that scripts childliness—the digital toy solicits 'betweenness' and a spectral sense of being neither here nor there.

CONCLUSION

When D.W. Winnicott described toys as 'transitional objects,' he meant that they were temporary aids to support children on their journey towards adulthood.[37] However, toys are transitional in another sense: they shuttle players between material and immaterial planes. When an object inspires make-believe play—be it a

34 Stewart, Susan: *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1992.

35 Mukherjee, Souvik: "'Remembering How You Died': Memory, Death and Temporality in Videogames," in: *Proceedings of DiGRA,* 2009.

36 Beauvais, Clementine: *The Mighty Child: Time and Power in Children's Literature,* John Benjamins Publishing Company 2015, p. 185.

37 Winnicott, D.W.: *Playing and Reality,* London: Routledge 1971.

tree branch, a teddy bear, or a tin can—it is incorporated into a mixed reality in which it is both a material thing and a screen that reflects projections from an imagined world. Toys have the capacity to anchor the virtual in the physical, allowing players to externalize their own mental simulations. As Heljakka puts it, "[t]he toy is a materialised fiction."[38] It is no coincidence, then, that many video games with toylike avatars lean on understandings of 'the toy' as an anchor point in the interdimensional waters between material and immaterial realms as a means of locating the player between the physical and the digital. The toy is an intuitive bridge between the material reality of the game's hardware operated using the player's body and the intangible, digital world seen through a glass screen.

In this chapter, I have argued that toys bridge the material and the immaterial, and their presence in video games works to bridge the physical and the digital. Furthermore, I have suggested that the bridge itself is a valid destination. Rather than aiming for the total dematerialization of players who abandon their bodies to enter the gameworld, or the materialization of gameworlds as hybrid toys or tactile hardware, the intended player experience can be one characterized by incompleteness. This incompleteness can create interpretive gaps that welcome distributed selves and elevate the literariness of a playing experience. Finally, I have suggested that we might nuance the language of 'avatars' and the process of incarnation it implies by thinking of play as a spectral experience and by positioning players as ghosts rather than gods.

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