

The Smooth Crossing of Ontological Boundaries:

Interactional Metalepsis and Video Game Avatars

DOI: 10.14746/fp.2026.43.2

This is an open access article distributed under
the terms of the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

Elżbieta Niewiadoma

ORCID: 0000-0002-4634-1594

Introduction

Video games have become an incredibly popular medium over the past few years. As a unique form of entertainment, they have become the subject of a wide variety of academic queries, ranging from media studies to philosophical analyses.¹ One aspect that has been widely drawn attention to is the role of the avatar in video games. Qasim Latifi et al. point out the role of the avatar as pivotal in video game studies, noting that avatars can have a significant influence on the user, shaping their ludic experience in profound ways.² Indeed, avatars have recently become a subject of growing academic interest regarding their role within the ludic landscape.³

¹ Since 2017, the "Routledge Advances in Game Studies" book series continues to provide detailed academic insight into the state of video games and academic research.

² Mohammed Qasim Latifi, Dylan Poulus, Michaella Richards, Yang Yap & Vasileios Stavropoulos, "Predicting Proteus Effect via the User Avatar Bond: A Longitudinal Study Using Machine Learning," *Behaviour & Information Technology* 44, no. 8 (2025): 1595-1611, DOI:10.1080/0144929X.2024.2363974

³ Kathrin Fahlen Brach and Felix Schröter's chapter titled "Embodied Avatars in Video Games" (2016), and Katherine M. Rahill and Marc M. Sebrecths' article "Effects of Avatar Player-similarity and Player-construction on Gaming Performance" (2021) are examples of sustained academic interest in avatars in ludic environments.

A notion that is frequently discussed within the context of avatars is metalepsis. In the realm of narratology, metalepsis can be defined as “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse.”⁴ This definition, put forward by the structuralist Gerard Genette, aptly draws attention to the fact that metalepsis is primarily about breaking narrative boundaries. Moreover, it succeeds in clearly defining an abstract concept, which has since been expanded on and applied to multiple fields,⁵ including video games and avatars. John Pier observes that in contemporary understanding, metalepsis has shifted beyond its strictly narratological understanding, becoming a phenomenon that “is not . . . restricted to narrative, and that its effects are not exclusively anti-illusionistic.”⁶ Current academia concerns itself with not just the application of metalepsis, but also its taxonomy, typology, and contemporary definitions, which are influenced by the increasing presence of the non-tangible, digital world in our day-to-day lives.⁷

As such, the following article will focus on one particular type of metalepsis within the context of the video game avatar- interactional metalepsis, which has been discussed by such scholars as Karin Kukkonen and Alice Bell.⁸ Unlike its other types, which will be briefly addressed within the confines of the article, interactional metalepsis comes across as natural and non-disruptive, which is a characteristic not often associated with metalepsis. The article will posit that in video games, avatars are examples of interactional metaleptic tools and that they are key for immersive and non-disruptive gameplay. This will be established through referencing key academic literature as well as two specific video games: *Alan Wake II* (2023) and *Inscription* (2021). The conclusion is such that avatars act as ontological bridges in video games, and that it is through interactional metalepsis that ludic immersion, not disruption, can occur. This is due to the fact that avatars are one of the most important aspects of video games, as it is through them that ludic immersion is achieved; a player can actively participate in a game, becoming a protagonist.⁹ As Katherine Isbister notes, “This joining of player to virtual self through avatar-based action marks a core innovation that games have brought to media.”¹⁰ Avatars, therefore, allow for the person controlling them to project themselves into the game in a variety of ways.¹¹ However, before discussing the avatar within the context of interactional metalepsis, it is important to establish an understanding of metalepsis itself.

⁴ Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cornell University Press, 1980)

⁵ John Pier, “Metalepsis,” in the *Handbook of Narratology*, eds. Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier and Wolf Schmid (De Gruyter, 2014), 326.

⁶ Pier, “Metalepsis,” 327.

⁷ Pier, “Metalepsis,” 327.

⁸ Both scholars discuss interactional metalepsis in the context of new media: Karin Kukkonen in her chapter “Metalepsis in Popular Culture: An introduction” (2011) and Alice Bell in her article “Interactional Metalepsis and Unnatural Narratology” (2016).

⁹ Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (The MIT Press, 2013), 11.

¹⁰ Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*, 13.

¹¹ Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*, 11; Isbister notes four key levels that players project themselves into their avatars: visceral, cognitive, social, and fantasy. Visceral has to do with avatar’s acquiring of skills, looks and abilities, cognitive with the avatar’s enactment of certain strategies and actions, social with the avatar’s realization of a social persona within the game-world, and fantasy is the combining of all three categories, allowing the player to realize a fantasy version of themselves within the game.

Metalepsis in Contemporary Understandings

In her book *Avatars of Story*, Marie-Laure Ryan describes metalepsis as “one of the favourite conceptual toys of postmodern culture.”¹² This observation is connected to the proliferation of diegetic boundary crossing in postmodern literature and culture. Indeed, Ryan bases herself on Genette’s understanding of metalepsis, emphasizing that the phenomenon is about the crossing and intersecting of fictional worlds on narrative levels, or what she terms “the challenging of the stack,” a metaphor portraying the stacking and intersecting of fictional worlds, as well as the narrative jumps between them as a result of metalepsis.¹³ As Ryan emphasizes: “Metalepsis is a grabbing gesture that reaches across levels and ignores boundaries, bringing to the bottom what belongs to the top and vice versa.”¹⁴ Importantly, Ryan differentiates between two basic instances of metalepsis: rhetorical and ontological.¹⁵ Ryan defines rhetorical metalepsis as a brief interruption of narrative levels,¹⁶ one that in common nomenclature is referred to as “breaking the fourth wall.”¹⁷ In contrast, ontological metalepsis is a product of postmodern literature and creates a stronger interruption between fictional worlds, if not a complete intersection. Ryan observes that ontological metalepsis is far more intrusive, as it: “opens a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination.”¹⁸ Such metalepsis goes beyond an interruption and alters the narrative in a substantial way. Indeed, it can be seen that metalepsis is associated with disruption, unnaturalness, and its goal is often to question narrative worlds and create an unsettling feeling within the recipient.

However, in the early 2010s, the potential of metalepsis as a naturalizing agent had begun to be considered by scholars. In the introduction to *Metalepsis in Popular Culture* (2011), Karin Kukkonen defines interactional metalepsis as a “special kind of metalepsis” that relies on “the actual interaction between the text and the reader”, which will become more relevant as research into digital forms and media, such as video games, will increase.¹⁹ Werner Wolf comes to similar conclusions in his work on metalepsis, noting that the term applies to contemporary forms of narratology that are not limited to one genre or medium,²⁰ and that metalepsis can act as a naturalizing agent within the realm of narrative.²¹ It is for this reason that avatars have begun to be seen as a kind of metaleptic tool that causes immersion and familiarization, connecting them to interactional metalepsis.

¹² Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 204.

¹³ Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, 206.

¹⁴ Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, 206. The notion of “grabbing” is connected to the Greek etymology of the word.

¹⁵ Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, 206-207.

¹⁶ Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, 206.

¹⁷ “Metalepsis,” Glossary, Ultius, accessed August 4, 2025, at <https://www.ultius.com/glossary/literature/rhetorical-devices/metalepsis.html>

¹⁸ Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, 207.

¹⁹ Karin Kukkonen, “Metalepsis in Popular Culture: An introduction,” in *Metalepsis in Popular Culture*, eds. Karin Kukkonen, Sonja Klimek (De Gruyter, 2011), 18.

²⁰ Wolf Werner. “Metalepsis as a Transgeneric and Transmedial Phenomenon: A Case Study of the Possibilities of ‘Exporting’ Narratological Concepts,” in *Narratology beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality, Disciplinarity*, ed. Jan Christoph Meister (De Gruyter, 2005), 83-108.

²¹ Wolf Werner. “‘Unnatural’ Metalepsis and Immersion: Necessarily Incompatible?” in *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, eds. Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson (The Ohio State University Press, 2013), 113-41.

Interactional Metalepsis and Video Game Avatars

In her paper on metalepsis and unnatural narratology, Alice Bell notes that some forms of metalepsis are medium-specific, as they are influenced by certain affordances, more so if said medium is digitally-based.²² It is within this context that Bell mentions interactional metalepsis, which “occurs when the ontological boundary between the reader (in the actual world) and the storyworld is crossed” but is not based on alienation.²³ Rather, interactional metalepsis is “a form of metalepsis that exploits the interactive nature of digital technology via the hardware through which the reader accesses the text, such as the mouse, keyboard, or other navigational devices, and/or via media-specific interactive modes of expression such as hyperlinks or avatars.”²⁴ Interactivity is often associated with digital technology and is thus cited as a naturalizing factor, along with any hardware or navigational devices. It is particularly crucial that Bell cites avatars as important devices that allow for interactional metalepsis to take place; this is due to the fact that, unlike other forms of metalepsis, they allow for an ontological transgression to take place, that is, the crossing of the border of a fictional world with a version of the real-life player, but without causing a disruption.²⁵

The lack of disruption occurs due to the fact that digital ludic forms are inherently dependent on interactional metalepsis taking place in one form or another. Bell specifically points out that they are “fundamentally built into and therefore an inevitable feature of ergodic digital fiction,” including video games.²⁶ This observation is supported in other academic literature dedicated to the topic of interactional metalepsis, video games, and avatars. For instance, Astrid Ensslin considers the immersive potential of metalepsis, noting that avatars are: “The most immersive metaleptic tool as [they offer] user-players the opportunity to project themselves physically and graphically into the storyworld.”²⁷ Thus, an avatar’s inherent quality is about non-disruption and immersion within a fictional video game world. In a later work, Ensslin points out that “videogames are complex ludonarrative, procedural, and interactive systems,” which “embed players in a cybernetic feedback loop that foregrounds processuality.”²⁸ This processuality is very often achieved through the immersion avatars facilitate; if the user-player does something as an avatar, a response frequently follows, which prompts further action, and another response. For example, in the original and remake of *Resident Evil 4* (2005/2023), user-players embody special agent Leon S. Kennedy in order to save the USA President’s daughter, Ashley Graham. Not only do user-players have to save the young woman, but they also have to make sure she is not harmed, killed, or taken; otherwise, a “game over” occurs.

²² Alice Bell, “Interactional Metalepsis and Unnatural Narratology,” *Narrative* 24, no. 3 (2016): 297, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2016.0018>.

²³ Bell, “Interactional Metalepsis and Unnatural Narratology,” 297.

²⁴ Bell, “Interactional Metalepsis and Unnatural Narratology,” 300.

²⁵ Bell, “Interactional Metalepsis and Unnatural Narratology,” 300.

²⁶ Bell, “Interactional Metalepsis and Unnatural Narratology,” 300.

²⁷ Astrid Ensslin, “Diegetic Exposure and Cybernetic Performance: Towards Interactional Metalepsis” (Conference, *Staging Illusion: Digital and Cultural Fantasy*, 2011), 14, quoted in Cassandra Barkman, “‘There’s no point in saving anymore’: Diegesis and Interactional Metalepsis in *Pony Island* and *Doki Doki Literature Club*,” *Journal of Games Criticism* 5, no. 1 (2021): 5.

²⁸ Astrid Ensslin, “Video Games as Complex Narratives and Embodied Metalepsis,” in *The Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory*, eds. Paul Dawson, Maria Mäkelä (Routledge, 2022), 413.

Overall, Bell and Ensslin have been at the forefront when it comes to drawing attention to the role interactional metalepsis plays in video games. In a dedicated chapter to interactional metalepsis, they highlight that the phenomenon appears as a response to the interactive nature of digital technology, which allows for the smooth transitioning across ontological boundaries- the real world vs. the game world.²⁹ While avatars are not the only ontological vehicles that allow this immersive crossing-over,³⁰ they present a unique standpoint, acting as conventionalised, logical impossibilities.³¹ Technically, it is ontologically impossible to exist in two places at the same time, and yet no user-player questions how “they” exist within a game world through their avatar. It is a natural, expected realization of the affordances video games offer through their software. It therefore can be seen that interactional metalepsis is highly medium-specific, and moreover, it “normalizes ontological transgression and has immersive, rather than defamiliarizing effects,”³² which are observable through the way user-players can interact with a video game world through the use of an avatar or any other media-specific devices.³³

In essence, the avatar functions as an extension of the user-player, and thus facilitates interactional metalepsis occurring, allowing for a naturalized inhabiting of a game world. At the same time, multiple factors rely on this perceived naturalness; metaleptic intensity is defined by such characteristics as customization, game mechanics, and the overall ludic and narrative structure of a game.³⁴As such, the following sections will focus on two specific horror video game titles as examples: *Alan Wake II* (2023) and *Inscription* (2021). The goal is to demonstrate how avatars can function as immersive metaleptic tools within the understanding of interactional metalepsis.

Alan Wake II (2023)

Alan Wake II (2023), developed by Remedy Entertainment, is a single-player, third-person survival horror that is a sequel to *Alan Wake* (2010). It is known for its supernatural and surrealist plot and environments, as well as its detective elements, which often require the user-player to uncover secrets and do puzzles.

The game takes place in three key locations: the town of Bright Falls, the neighboring Cauldron Lake, and the so-called Dark Place, a dangerous mirror dimension. The sequel focuses on the novelist Alan Wake, who has been trapped in the Dark Place since the events of the first game

²⁹ Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell, “Interactional Metalepsis,” in *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method, and Analysis*, eds. Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell (The Ohio State University Press, 2021), 49-82.

³⁰ Ensslin, “Video Games as Complex Narratives and Embodied Metalepsis,” 416; Ensslin also mentions hyperlinks and webcams as examples.

³¹ Astrid Ensslin, “Video Games as Unnatural Narratives,” in *Diversity of Play*, ed. Mathias Fuchs (Meson Press, 2015), 54-55.

³² Ensslin, “Video Games as Complex Narratives and Embodied Metalepsis,” 416.

³³ Bell, “Interactional Metalepsis and Unnatural Narratology,” 315

³⁴ Kim Szolin, Daria J. Kuss, Filip M. Nuyens, Mark D. Griffiths, “‘I am the character, the character is me’: A thematic analysis of the user-avatar relationship in videogames,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 143, (2023): 1-13; Ensslin, “Video Games as Complex Narratives and Embodied Metalepsis,” 415-416.

13 years ago. Desperate to break free, Wake has been trying to escape by using a special ability stimulated by his initial encounter with Cauldron Lake and the influence of the Dark Place: the ability to turn his fictional writing into non-fiction.³⁵ As Wake's writing can influence reality, he alternates between trying to "write himself out" of the Dark Place while avoiding the influence of the so-called Dark Presence, who frequently takes the form of Mr. Scratch-Wake's *dopplegänger*. The Dark Presence itself is also imprisoned in the Dark Place and is trying to use Wake's writing to bring itself into the real world. As the Dark Presence is a highly dangerous entity, Alan Wake writes a character to life to additionally help him- FBI agent Saga Anderson.

Saga Anderson has extraordinary memory and intuition, is professionally trained with firearms, and has telepathic abilities. At first, she comes to Bright Falls to investigate the murder of a fellow FBI agent, only to gradually begin to search for Wake and help stop the Dark Presence, as per Wake's metafictional writing. The game has user-players control Saga and Wake, with the possibility of switching between them at given times. As a result, the game plot becomes non-linear, with user-players cycling through story lines in a self-designed way.³⁶ These engaging character profiles allow the user-player to embody these avatars, immersing themselves in a game world that is as interesting as it is confusing.³⁷ Not only does the plot jump between Saga and Wake's perspectives, but it also switches between different narrative realities, often delving into metatextual themes about creating and character fate. Embodying both the Saga and Wake avatars allows for interactional metalepsis to occur smoothly, as the characters are a part of a rich narrative universe that the user-player accepts they can interact with. For example, a user-player embodying Alan Wake as their avatar understands the need to use a flashlight to ward off remnants of the Dark Presence and to gather pages necessary for compiling a story to bring Saga to life. In this way, interactional metalepsis takes effect, bridging the ontological gap that exists between the virtual and real world through avatars.

This immersion becomes crucial in the later narrative stages of the game, which contain strong metalepsis elements. Indeed, Depboylu analyses *Alan Wake II* (2023) within the context of metalepsis, calling the game "a detective and horror story in a metaleptic spiral," whilst drawing attention to the meta-narrative within the game that exacerbates the artificiality of fictional worlds.³⁸ These metanarrative qualities take shape through extreme instances of intersecting non-immersive metalepsis. For instance, one example occurs when Alan Wake, in an act of authorial metalepsis, emerges as the narrator of the in-game story, guiding his characters (and himself) and interfering with the narrative in a bid to defeat Mr. Scratch and escape the Dark Place. *Alan Wake II* (2023) therefore functions as a deeply postmodern

³⁵ In *Alan Wake* (2010) and *Alan Wake II* (2023) lore, Cauldron Lake is a paranatural threshold to the Dark Place, which has the power to cause any creative fictional work to become reality.

³⁶ The only exception occurs during the beginning and ending acts of the game, where the player embodies avatars ranging from Saga, Alan, and other minor characters according to narrative needs.

³⁷ The *Alan Wake* series' plot is hard to grasp during an initial playthrough due to its overlapping plots and subplots that occur at different times and with different characters.

³⁸ Kağan Depboylu, "Meta-ludological Narrative in Digital Games: A Study on *Alan Wake II*," *Turkish Online Journal of Design Art and Communication* 14, no. 3 (2024): 546–551, <https://doi.org/10.7456/tojdac.1464059>

piece of media that thrives on crossing and challenging ontological boundaries.³⁹ However, such thematic exploration, which hinges on what Cassandra Barkman describes as “typical metalepsis”⁴⁰ is not possible without the occurrence of interactional metalepsis, which is primarily realized through the avatar, allowing for an inhabiting of the game world, and allowing for the immersion within a fairly horrifying ludic reality.

Depboylu also further points out the naturalizing effect metalepsis has within the game, specifically drawing attention to the role game mechanics play: “*Alan Wake II* provides players with the freedom to explore different layers and paths of the story, presenting the game’s unique narrative in an integrated manner with gameplay mechanics.”⁴¹ These mechanics are made possible through the roles each avatar can enact. For example, a core mechanic is realized through Alan’s ability to alter reality, which is done through shining a flashlight at certain points within the game, gathering relevant “scenes” (interactive areas within the game) and pages in order to successfully bend fictional reality and manipulate it. As *Alan Wake*, the user-player compiles all of this in the Writer’s Room, a dark room with a typewriter and board in the Dark Place. *Saga Anderson* has a similar place within her mind; in order to tidy up and connect relevant evidence, the user-player goes to the Mind Place, *Saga*’s mental space that is ludically visualized as an investigation room. This creates a tangible, immersive effect of progress and influence while the user-player is steeped within a game world that thrives on metaleptic themes.⁴² The user-player is able to immerse themselves in the video game through embodying an avatar and using it as a natural metaleptic tool in a ludically confusing world.

Inscription (2021)

Inscription (2021) is very similar in how it takes advantage of metaleptic tools, such as the avatar, to facilitate interactional metalepsis and secure immersion, whilst directly contrasting it within the video game narrative with typical metalepsis in order to incite feelings of fear or anxiety within the user-player. *Inscription* (2021), a game developed by Daniel Mullins Games, is a roguelike deck-builder drawing inspiration from horror, escape room, and puzzle games.⁴³ Furthermore, it contains Alternate Reality Gaming (ARG) elements, which rely on breaching ontological boundaries between the “real world” and game world.⁴⁴ In a comment on the impact metalepsis has as a narrative device in video games, Barkman mentions that: “metalepsis . . . takes advantage of videogame affordances to achieve various effects: disorient the player’s conception of what takes place inside and outside a storyworld, position inaction

³⁹ Gene Park, “‘Alan Wake 2’ is the best, most creative game of the year,” ProQuest. Accessed August 7, 2025. <https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/alan-wake-2-is-best-most-creative-game-year/docview/2898159000/se-2?accountid=14887>

⁴⁰ Cassandra Barkman, “‘There’s no point in saving anymore’: Diegesis and Interactional Metalepsis in *Pony Island* and *Doki Doki Literature Club*,” *Journal of Games Criticism* 5, no. 1 (2021): 2.

⁴¹ Depboylu, “Meta-ludological Narrative in Digital Games: A Study on *Alan Wake II*,” 557.

⁴² Depboylu, “Meta-ludological Narrative in Digital Games: A Study on *Alan Wake II*,” 552.

⁴³ Roguelike games depend on subsequent runs in order to complete the game without the possibility to save, while deck-builder games rely on creating a deck of cards and beating an opponent.

⁴⁴ ARG frequently involves the so-called “breaking of the fourth wall” and injecting of the fictional into real-world surroundings via digital means.

as a site of narrative significance, and alienate the player from the cybernetic system that makes up gameplay.”⁴⁵ Importantly, Barkman conducts this analysis within the context of interactional metalepsis, thus confirming the need for immersion within the digital realm in order for typical metalepsis to take effect.

Inscription's (2021) metaleptic disruption largely depends on the game's ability to switch not only genres, but avatars, thus positioning the user-player in a continuous state of questioning their role, goal, and possible diegetic effect on the narrative world within the game. Indeed, the game contains multiple disruptions of player/game boundaries; such games are sometimes termed metagames, which use metatextuality to create: “disruptive and defamiliarizing mechanics to explore certain themes specific to their medium.”⁴⁶ While *Alan Wake II* (2023) could be termed a metagame as well, this categorization becomes especially prominent within the context of *Inscription* (2021), which takes ontological disruption to an extreme on multiple levels while maintaining a prominent level of immersion.⁴⁷

Inscription (2021) takes place over the course of three acts, each containing multiple changes of perspective, as well as a constant subversion of expectations regarding the user-player's embodied avatar. The first hint that the user-player is not embodying a traditional avatar occurs upon opening the game, wherein there is only the option to click “continue”, and not “new game”.⁴⁸ Further shifts occur through changes of perspective; in Act 1, the user-player takes control in first-person perspective of an avatar who is trapped in a cabin and forced to play a card game against a mysterious entity, later known to be Leshy. In order to progress, the user-player has to navigate a wooden pawn across board-game type of map to instigate consequential rounds of the roguelike card game. The card game round itself is in first person, as is the limited ability to explore the cabin without leaving it. If the user-player fails to beat Leshy, a death card is created for them, and they have to pick up another pawn to traverse the board game and go through the next rounds, the goal being to defeat Leshy and obtain the “new game” button.⁴⁹

As such, the user-player initially acts under the assumption that they are inhabiting a series of nameless avatars that are trying to beat Leshy. This assumption is subverted in Act 2, when the player not only beats Leshy and obtains the “new game” button, but also gains access to video files that indicate the existence of the actual avatar they are in control of: a fictional YouTuber named Luke Carder. Luke Carder, who is introduced through a sequence of live-action clips from his YouTube channel, is revealed to be a niche card game YouTuber who has accidentally stumbled upon a digital copy of *Inscription*.⁵⁰ Yet while boundary-disrupting

⁴⁵ Barkman, “‘There’s no point in saving anymore’: Diegesis and Interactional Metalepsis in *Pony Island* and *Doki Doki Literature Club*,” 2.

⁴⁶ Aylin Pekanik, “‘Insert Your Soul to Continue’: The Self-Reflections of Metafictional Digital Games,” *Acta Ludologica* 3, no. 7 (2021): 36. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1322777>; Kenton Taylor Howard, “The (un)Lucky Carder: *Inscription*, submission, and metafictional games,” in 2024 ELO (Un)linked Conference Proceedings, eds. by Anastasia Salter and John Murray (2024), 34-41. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/elo2024/hypertextsand#ctions/schedule/2/>

⁴⁷ Pekanik, “‘Insert Your Soul to Continue’: The Self-Reflections of Metafictional Digital Games,” 42.

⁴⁸ Pekanik, “‘Insert Your Soul to Continue’: The Self-Reflections of Metafictional Digital Games,” 42.

⁴⁹ Pekanik, “‘Insert Your Soul to Continue’: The Self-Reflections of Metafictional Digital Games,” 42.

⁵⁰ Luke Carder's youtube channel @LuckyCarder actually exists on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/@LuckyCarder>

metalepsis occurs, immersion isn't broken; due to interactional metalepsis and the strong establishing of the avatar as a metaleptic tool, the user-player accepts the subversion and ensuing uncanny gameplay.

After assuming the role of Luke Carder, the user-player moves on to Act 2. *Inscription* shifts into its supposed original 2D version, where, using a pixelated avatar, the player moves across a limited map in order to defeat the four Scrybes- Supernatural entities responsible for creating the game and making it cursed.⁵¹ The stakes become higher in Act 3, during which the game shifts into a top-down 3D mode, and the goal changes; the user-player has to stop one of the Scrybes, named P03, from taking over the game and releasing a cursed version of *Inscription* onto digital platforms. The game culminates with a perceived success; P03 is supposedly defeated, but another series of clips shows that Luke developed an unhealthy obsession with the game, ultimately inciting paranoia and resounding fear that leads him to destroy the game. A narrative twist reveals that Luke is murdered for the remnants of the game, thus making it impossible for the user-player to have, in fact, embodied him. The final implication is that a corrupt version of *Inscription* has made its way to digital platforms in real life, something that *Inscription's* (2021) ARG confirms.⁵²

Such metaleptic and metatextual entanglements are not new within the video game industry. M. J. Clarke and Cynthia Wang point out that in recent video games, especially belonging in the indie genre, frequently delve into such provocative experimentation, altering gameplay expectations and introducing unique formats.⁵³ However, the reason such extreme narrative and gameplay subversions exist in the first place is through the presence of interactional metalepsis, which secures immersion within a reality-altering game world. In the case of genuine extension into the non-ludic world, as is the case with *Inscription* (2021) due to its ARG elements, such games retain their sense of horror and the surreal through disruptions that seem believable. Barkman points out that in video games, "reaching across this [ontological] barrier conflates the player with the fictional protagonist, contributing to the horror genre trappings of the game."⁵⁴ Indeed, the user-player is not only pulled into *Inscription's* (2021) ludic world, but it also simultaneously sees that the game world becomes external.⁵⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, interactional metalepsis is a defining feature in video games, with the avatar acting as an important metaleptic tool that has a naturalizing and immersive effect. This is

⁵¹ The four Scrybes are the previously beaten Leshy, as well as Grimora, P03, and Magnificus.

⁵² The ARG in *Inscription* (2021) can be solved by seeking codes, visiting websites, and discovering secrets. A final video briefly shows P03 taking over Luke's computer. Detailed explanation of the ARG can be found at Archbishop Wex, "The *Inscription* Story ARG: Mystery of the Old Data," posted March 25, 2022, Youtube, 35:49, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1x8ecQcktI&t=18s>.

⁵³ M.J. Clarke and Cynthia Wang, *Indie Games in the Digital Age* (Bloomsbury, 2020), 8.

⁵⁴ Barkman, "There's no point in saving anymore': Diegesis and Interactional Metalepsis in *Pony Island* and *Doki Doki Literature Club*," 12.

⁵⁵ Xin Pan, "Breaking the Fourth Wall: Spectating as Metagaming in *Inscription*," *Proceedings of DiGRA* (2024): 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2024i2.2270>.

in contrast to the common understanding of metalepsis as a defamiliarizing phenomenon, as interactional metalepsis makes the unfamiliar familiar: “interactional [metalepsis] describes a transgression that is not jarring but foundational to videogame play.”⁵⁶ The examples chosen for this article demonstrated how necessary interactional metalepsis is in experiencing a ludic world, and moreover, how vital avatars are in securing immersion. *Alan Wake II* (2023) and *Inscryption* (2021) were chosen for their unique ludic structure, which operates in a two-fold manner; on the one hand, both titles ensure the user-player embodies assigned avatars, allowing them to immerse themselves in their ludic role; on the other hand, both games feature typical metalepsis, which actively works in opposition to interactional metalepsis to enact narrative disruption. Thus, it can be seen that avatars act as ontological bridges in video games, allowing for immersion within the ludonarrative, no matter how much it interferes with ludic expectations. Even if genre or form subversions occur, user-players are able to experience them as intended due to the primary understanding that avatars are natural navigational devices, successfully functioning as metaleptic tools. Interactional metalepsis, therefore, naturalises the crossing of ontological boundaries, and the user-player’s immersion is not broken. Rather, it is magnified.

⁵⁶ Barkman, “‘There’s no point in saving anymore’: Diegesis and Interactional Metalepsis in *Pony Island* and *Doki Doki Literature Club*,” 2.

References

- Barkman, Cassandra. "‘There’s no point in saving anymore’: Diegesis and Interactional Metalepsis in Pony Island and Doki Doki Literature Club." *Journal of Games Criticism* 5, no. 1 (2021): 1-22.
- Bell, Alice. "Interactional Metalepsis and Unnatural Narratology." *Narrative* 24, no. 3 (2016): 294-310. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2016.0018>.
- Clarke, M. J., and Cynthia Wang. *Indie Games in the Digital Age*. Bloomsbury, 2020.
- Daniel Mullins Games. *Inscription*. Devolver Digital, 2021. PC.
- Ensslin, Astrid. "Diegetic Exposure and Cybernetic Performance: Towards Interactional Metalepsis." Conference: *Staging Illusion: Digital and Cultural Fantasy*, 2011. Quoted in Cassandra Barkman, "‘There’s no point in saving anymore’: Diegesis and Interactional Metalepsis in Pony Island and Doki Doki Literature Club." *Journal of Games Criticism* 5, no. 1 (2021):5.
- Ensslin, Astrid. "Video Games as Complex Narratives and Embodied Metalepsis." In *The Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by Paul Dawson and Maria Mäkelä. Routledge, 2022.
- Ensslin, Astrid, and Alice Bell. "Interactional Metalepsis." In *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method, and Analysis*, edited by Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell. The Ohio State University Press, 2021.
- Ensslin, Astrid. "Video Games as Unnatural Narratives." In *Diversity of Play*, edited by Mathias Fuchs. Meson Press, 2015.
- Gerard Genette. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Cornell University Press, 1980.
- Isbister, Katherine. *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*. The MIT Press, 2013.
- Kenton Taylor Howard, "The (un)Lucky Carder: Inscription, submission, and metafictional games," in *2024 ELO (Un)linked Conference Proceedings*, eds. by Anastasia Salter and John Murray (2024), 34-41. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/elo2024/hypertextsand#ctions/schedule/2/>
- Kukkonen, Karin. "Metalepsis in Popular Culture: An introduction." in *Metalepsis in Popular Culture*, edited by Karin Kukkonen and Sonja Klimek. De Gruyter, 2011.
- Latifi, Mohammed Qasim, Dylan Poulus, Michaela Richards, Yang Yap and Vasileios Stavropoulos. "Predicting Proteus Effect via the User Avatar Bond: A Longitudinal Study Using Machine Learning." *Behaviour & Information Technology* 44, no. 8 (2025): 1595-1611, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2024.2363974>
- Pan, Xin. "Breaking the Fourth Wall: Spectating as Metagaming in Inscription." *Proceedings of DiGRA (2024)*: 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2024i2.2270>.
- Park, Gene. "Alan Wake 2' is the best, most creative game of the year." ProQuest. Accessed August 7, 2025. <https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/alan-wake-2-is-best-most-creative-game-year/docview/2898159000/se-2?accountid=14887>
- Pekanik, Aylin. "‘Insert Your Soul to Continue’: The Self-Reflections of Metafictional Digital Games." *Acta Ludologica* 3, no. 7 (2021): 34-49. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1322777>
- Pier, John. "Metalepsis." In the *Handbook of Narratology*, edited by Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier and Wolf Schmid. De Gruyter, 2014.
- Remedy Entertainment. *Alan Wake II*. Epic Games Publishing, 2023. PC.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Avatars of Story*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- Zsolin, Kim, Daria J. Kuss, Filip M. Nuyens, and Mark D. Griffiths. "‘I am the character, the character is me’: A thematic analysis of the user-avatar relationship in videogames." *Computers in Human Behavior* 143, (2023): 1-13, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2023.107694>

Ultius. "Metalepsis," Glossary. Accessed August 4, 2025, at <https://www.ultius.com/glossary/literature/rhetorical-devices/metalepsis.html>

Werner, Wolf. "Metalepsis as a Transgeneric and Transmedial Phenomenon: A Case Study of the Possibilities of 'Exporting' Narratological Concepts." In *Narratology beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality, Disciplinarity*, edited by Jan Christoph Meister. De Gruyter, 2005.

Werner, Wolf. "'Unnatural' Metalepsis and Immersion: Necessarily Incompatible?" In *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, edited by Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson. The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

KEYWORDS

Alan Wake II

metalepsis

avatars

ABSTRACT:

Metalepsis has been defined as a “disruption of the hierarchical structure of diegetic levels of narration” (Hanebeck, 2017, p.1). As such, it is frequently associated with a narrative break that interferes with any fictional immersion, often for narrative goals. However, academics like Bell (2016), Ensslin (2015) and Kukkonen (2011) have pointed out the existence of interactional metalepsis, whose goal is to ensure the smooth crossing of the aforementioned ontological boundaries. It is noted that interactional metalepsis frequently takes place within the world of ergodic digital fiction through the use of so-called “media-specific interactive modes of expression” (Bell, 2016, p. 297). An important example of these are avatars, which Ensslin describes as “the most immersive metaleptic tool, as it offers user-players the opportunity to project themselves physically and graphically into the storyworld” (qtd. in Barkman, 2021, p. 6). As such, the following paper will explore how video game avatars function as metaleptic tools within the confines of interactional metalepsis. Specific examples and video game titles will be referenced, including such games as *Inscryption* (2021) and *Alan Wake 2* (2023). The paper concludes that avatars act as ontological bridges in video games, serving as a key foundation for immersive and non-disruptive gameplay.

interactional metalepsis

VIDEO GAMES

I N S C R Y P T I O N

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Elżbieta Niewiadoma – b.1992, PhD, is primarily associated with the English Department at Vistula University, and also conducts courses for the Open University UW and VIZJA University in Warsaw. A member of the PTBK (*Polskie Towarzystwo Badań nad Komiksem*), her research is devoted to digital literature, new media, ludonarratives, video games, and the comic medium. She has published in a wide selection of academic journals, monographs, and magazines, including “*Studia Literaria*”, “*Inter-/Trans-/Unidisciplinary Methods – Techniques*”, “*ANGLICA*”, and “*Zeszyty Komiksowe*.” |