Lykke Guanio-Uluru

Lykke Guanio-Uluru is assistant professor of literature at Bergen University College, Norway (renamed from January 1st 2017 as Western Norway University of Applied Sciences), and the author of Ethics and Form in Fantasy Literature: Tolkien, Rowling and Meyer (2015), published by Palgrave Macmillan. Dr. Guanio-Uluru has taught courses in literary theory and fantasy literature at the University of Oslo, Norway, and currently teaches multiple courses in literature, digital aesthetics and adaptation at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences. Professional affiliations include the Nordic Network of Narrative Studies, the Ethics Programme at the University of Oslo, the research programme Nature in Children’s Literature, and DiGRA. lykke@hib.no

War, Games, and the Ethics of Fiction
by Lykke Guanio-Uluru

Abstract

This article draws on Espen Aarseth's concepts of cybertext (1997) and ludo-narratives (2012), on rhetorical narrative theory and on Miguel Sicart’s (2013) conception of the ethics of computer games, in a discussion of medial functions and affordances of games and literary narratives, and the construction of ethical fictions. On the basis of this discussion, it analyzes the interrelationship between ethics, war and games in three popular fictional works: Orson Scott Card’s “Ender’s Game” (1977), Terry Prachett’s Only You Can Save Mankind (1992) and Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games (2008). Their publication spanning three decades, these narratives all hinge on the premise that what some characters in the diegesis experience as an actual war, others perceive as a game, thus problematizing the relationship between the two. Furthermore, all of the narratives explore the “fictionalization” that occurs to our perceptions of people encountered via the mediation of a screen. Comparing and contrasting the ways that these narratives frame the interrelationship between war, games and ethics, the article reveals the development between “Ender’s Game” and The Hunger Games of an increasing focus on the effects of advanced military technology on the individual human body.

Keywords

war, games, ethics, narrative, Ender’s Game, The Hunger Games, Prachett

Games as Fiction: Users and Readers

In several respects, literature and digital games are designed for different uses and purposes. While literature typically invites its readers to listen, to empathize and to reflect, digital games tend to invite their users to strategize, to master and to achieve. So while games invite play, literature about games and gaming invites reflection on the nature of games and their cultural and contextual meaning.

In Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature (1997), Espen Aarseth discusses the concept of text in relation to both literature and digital texts, arguing that "... the real difference between paper texts and computer texts, if it exists, must be described in functional, rather than material or historical terms" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 17).

Defining the concept of cybertext as focused both on “the mechanical organization of the text” and on the “user” of the text, Aarseth coins the term ergodic (from the Greek words ergon and hodos or “work” and “path”) to denote the “nontrivial effort” required by a cybertext user in the traversal of the text (Aarseth, 1997, p. 1). Aarseth further draws on the concept of power to distinguish a literary reader from an ergodic user, arguing that a reader of literature is powerless, since s/he is not a player and since only a player can experience “the pleasure of influence” (Aarseth, 1997, p. 4). While a reader is “safe but impotent”, a cybertext user “is not safe” and therefore, arguably, “she is not a reader” (ibid.). The risk that the cybertext poses to its user is that of “rejection”: in spite of a given user’s considerable investment of time and energy s/he may fail to gain “narrative control” over the text and to shape it to his or her own narrative ends (Aarseth, 1997, p. 4). Thus, in a sense, the ergodic user’s aim is to shape the telling of the text.
While story is central to most literary narratives, story need not be a significant element in gaming. Discussing narrative in relation to digital games, Graeme Kirkpatrick notes that

The most important thing about computer games is not their content, if this is understood to mean a message that is transmitted and then interpreted by audiences. A study of self-identified gamers..., shows that the story line element of games is not particularly important (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 160).

Here, Kirkpatrick highlights how gaming is something other, or more than, narrative engagement, since gaming also requires gaming skills, the satisfactory execution or testing of which is an important facet of the pleasures of gaming. Arguably, this looser relationship between gaming and narrative content is a factor influencing the ethical potential of games. Notably, Aarseth argues, in a more recent text, that “there is much to gain from a rigorous application of narratology to game studies” (2012, p. 130). Dismissing previous theoretical engagements with the "mythical position" that games are stories, he presents his own contribution as a rescuing mission that is meant to reinstate "the original meaning and function of narratology" within the field of game studies (Aarseth, 2012, p. 129).

Establishing "world, agents, objects and events" as "the cognitive building blocks of human reality", Aarseth holds that these four elements are shared by games and stories (2012, p. 130). However, human cognition also involves thought and emotion, as well as the understanding of social interrelationships and the attribution of values and motives. Of course, reducing the basis of cognition to the four components of world, agents, objects and events greatly simplifies the task of discussing the relationship between games and narrative. One of Aarseth's central points is that "every game (and every story) contains these four elements, but they configure them differently" (Aarseth, 2012, p. 130). To describe these various potential forms of configuration, Aarseth borrows Seymour Chatman's (1978) concepts of narrative kernels and narrative satellites.

According to Chatman, kernels are "narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events... Kernels cannot be deleted without destroying the narrative logic" (Chatman, 1978, p. 52). The satellites represent the "working out of the choices made at the kernels" (Chatman, 1978, p. 52). To Aarseth, a kernel is what makes us recognize a story as that particular story, while "satellites are what can be replaced or removed while still keeping the story recognizable" (Aarseth, 2012, p. 131). Thus, Aarseth's "rigorous" application of these concepts differs slightly from that suggested by Chatman, to whom kernels represent decisive points of choice in the structuring of the story. Such choices related to the storytelling typically have ethical significance. However, this ethical dimension is notably absent from Aarseth's interpretation of the concepts of kernel and satellite.

Aarseth's description of readers as "safe, but impotent" begs the question: When we have games, empowering us as "users", why do we need literary narratives about games? What do narratives about games bring to games that playing them does not? The answer implied in the discussion above is that literature about games and gaming may function as tools for reflection about gaming and gaming practices. Thus, the more central games and gaming become to our life experience, the more we need narratives about games and gaming to help us assimilate their meaning and significance relative to the rest of our lives.

Following the narrative turn in the humanities and social sciences during the past few decades, there is now general acceptance, across a range of critical discourses, that narrative is fundamental to the human structuring, experience and perception of reality (Meretoja, 2014, p. 5). There is no general acceptance, however, of the notion that reflections on narrative can be reduced to a discussion of the four components of world, agents/characters, objects and events as outlined by Aarseth. Central components of narrative theory that are missing from Aarseth's account are reader-response factors, such as the interaction of the told with the cognitive schema, ethos and emotions of the reader, and reflections around authorial intention. Indeed, Aarseth acknowledges that "the model presented here does not account for "content" aspects of ludo-narratives, such as
emotions, themes, style etc.” (2012, p. 133). In his structural
description of games, authorial agency is accounted for in terms of
the parameter of authorial affordance, determined by the level of
object malleability in the game, since “a game which allows great
player freedom in creating or modifying objects will... not be able
to afford strong narrative control” (Aarseth, 2012, p. 132). Summarizing
his own discussion, Aarseth notes that agents/characters represent
the most important dimension for storytelling in games, while world
and objects determine player agency (ibid.). While acknowledging the
usefulness of Aarseth’s model to discussions of the narrative overlap
between ludo-narratives and other kinds of narrative, the intention
here is to highlight the dimensions of narrative and narrative theory
that fall outside Aarseth’s field of interest.

The frequent adaptation of literary fictional worlds to digital game
worlds may well be accounted for, at least partly, in terms of an inter-
medial translation of the four categories outlined by Aarseth.
However, Aarseth’s model does not account for the emotional, ethical
and aesthetic aspects of the user’s engagement with ludo-narratives.
The potential of much literary fiction to engage its readers in
emotional experience, ethical reflection and aesthetic appreciation is
probably related to the way that literature is structured as narratives.
Thus, the current popularity of narratives about games is indicative of
a cross-fertilization between narrative literature and gaming culture
that suggests that games and gaming are gaining increasing cultural
significance. Medial comparisons between games and literature
highlight certain affordances of literary narratives that enable them to
function as tools for ethical reflection. Such ethical emphasis is, at
least not yet, as significant to the design of most digital games.

Games, Violence and Distance

In the media, as well as within academic research, much of the
discussion about games and gaming centers on the often violent
content of computer games and on the potential harm this may cause
to young and susceptible minds. A large body of research exists on
the alleged effects of violent computer games (see for instance
Anderson & Dill, 2000; Bushman & Huesman, 2000; Anderson &
Bushman, 2001; Funk et al., 2004). Using psychological methods,
these studies evaluate the impact of violent computer games on their
users. The hypothesis is that the viewing of violence in the media
causes the formation of aggressive cognitive scripts. This is known as
the general aggression model, or GAM (Bushman & Anderson, 2002).
However, a randomized study by Ferguson et al. (2008) problematizes
the suggested causal relationship between gaming and violent or
aggressive behavior, arguing that factors other than gaming, such as
exposure to domestic violence, are more significant than is gaming for
the development of aggressive scripts. In view of the medial
properties of digital games and literature discussed above, it is
pertinent to analyze how the relationship between social factors,
violence, war, games and ethics is framed in popular fiction.

A popular narrative problematizing the relationship between games
and war that has proven its enduring appeal is Orson Scott Card’s
short story “Ender’s Game”, published in 1977. The original narrative
tells the story of eleven-year-old Ender who is trained in battle tactics
from early infancy so he can lead a final battle that is the culmination
of a century’s preparation. Ender is portrayed as a military prodigy
and a tactical genius. At the same time, the ethical cost to Ender of
the “games” he plays is emphasized. Used as a pawn in a military
plan, Ender is tricked into committing genocide, eventually
demolishing an entire planet in the belief that he is engaged in just
one more battle simulation.

The story of Ender has now spread out across a wide range of media.
The original short story was expanded into a novel published in 1985,
which again was expanded into a series, the Ender saga, now
including fourteen novels, a number of short stories and comic books
and an audio-play. The 1985 novel formed the basis for the 2013 film
Ender’s Game directed by Gavin Hood, which again spawned an
official board game, designed by Matt Hyra -- thereby turning the text
into an actual game.
Card was heavily involved in the writing of the screenplay for the film and stressed the challenge medial differences presented to the filmic adaptation of his literary text:

As it’s written, *Ender’s Game* is unadaptable. The book takes place entirely inside Ender’s head. If you don’t know what Ender is thinking, he’s just an incredibly violent little kid and not terribly interesting. You have to find ways to externalize what he’s thinking (Manier, 2013).

This quote from Card calls attention to one of literature’s strong points: that written narratives give us the impression of having access to the internal workings of the protagonist’s mind, and consequently help us develop what Lisa Zunshine terms our ”mind reading” ability (Zunshine, 2006, p. 20). According to Zunshine, complex literary narratives give us pleasure because they affirm our ability to navigate “immensely complex, multi-leveled, ethically ambiguous, class-conscious, mutually reflecting and mutually distorting states of mind” (Zunshine, 2006, p. 21). Consequently, literary narratives may help us develop an understanding of the thought processes and motivations of others, and may thereby stimulate sympathy for, or even empathy with, others.

Discussing the 1985 novel *Ender’s Game* in relation to game theory, Andrew Zimmerman Jones points to Ender’s ability to understand the motivations of his enemies, terming this intuitive understanding “empathy”, while noting that Card uses the word “love” to describe this ability in Ender (Jones, 2013, p. 57). Jones further stresses how such empathetic ability has a mental effect: “If you love an opponent, your mental perspective changes. The whole person ceases to be an enemy and becomes a person who simply has goals opposing yours” (Jones, 2013, p. 59; emphasis in original). In this sense, the feeling of empathy requires a mental adjustment that a reader, due to the medial properties of the literary text, might be more inclined to make than a “user” traversing an ergodic text.

Part of the ethical “distancing effect” in games is that the playing is more important than what the game is about. As Graeme Kirkpatrick notes:

> Playing a game involves a kind of distancing from its narrative components, or conventional interpretations of its symbolic contents... The very assertion “it’s only a game” often heard in debates about violence, for instance, invokes the deeper understanding that we do not actually know what our gameplay is “about” and that most of the time it does not really matter: being about something, or representation, is not the principal way that meaning works in play with games.

(Kirkpatrick, 2013, pp. 162--163)

While meaning in games is not principally related to either what the game is “about”, or to its narrative dimension, it is noteworthy that Miguel Sicart (2013), in his call for “a new generation of video and computer games that are ethically relevant by design” (jacket blurb), draws on the literary theory of Wayne C. Booth (1988) to develop his ideas. In Sicart’s view, Booth “proposes a type of ethical criticism that is insightful for literature studies and for understanding the ethics of fiction in games (Sicart, 2013, p. 11).

More recently, James Phelan (2005, 2007) has developed Booth’s work on the ethics of fiction. The Neo-Aristotelian Chicago school of rhetorical narrative theory, which they both represent, puts emphasis on the “feedback loop” between readers, textual phenomena and authorial agency (Phelan, 2007, p. 85); and the interaction between the ethos of the implied author (as embodied by the text) and that of the individual reader. In accordance with such an emphasis, Sicart argues that it is the act of surrender, whether to the fiction or to the game, that “allows fiction to become a companion with whom we can start a conversation about values and about morality” (Sicart, 2013, p. 12). Sicart’s aim is to understand and describe how games can be designed as fictions with the potential to subject its users to experiences that trigger ethical reflection.
Designing Ethical Fictions

When discussing design features of ethical gameplay, Sicart looks past functionality models, like the one developed by Aarseth, to include the dimension of player emotion, noting that design may sometimes sacrifice optimal, usability-correct design elements in order to create emotional experiences (Sicart, 2013, p. 86). Sicart further notes that as object users, we are influenced by the suggestions for use that are integrated in a well-designed object -- as well as to its suggestions regarding "why we should use it, and how we should feel when using it" (Sicart, 2013, p. 86). Ethically interesting experiences occur when there is conflict between the design affordances of an object and its cultural meanings -- the example offered by Sicart is a cuddly toy representing a gonorrhea bacterium (Sicart, 2013, p. 86). The toy-like design invites a cuddle, while the cultural significance of gonorrhea makes the user recoil.

When it comes to computer game design, Sicart isolates two levels: a procedural level (rules, mechanics, and systems), and a semiotic level (communication, contextualization, and user empathy). His central argument is that when games do not follow semiotic conventions -- that is, when they signify in new and unexpected ways relative to the common player repertoire -- they may create an ethical gaming experience (Sicart, 2013, p. 87). Citing the "Aftermath mission" in Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Sicart notes how certain design elements of this sequence cued his ethical interpretation of the game (Sicart, 2013, p. 90). The game sequence, in which the player briefly regains limited agency only to die, toys with the game convention that "agency leads to manipulation of the environment, which leads to gameplay", thus contradicting player expectations (Sicart, 2012, p. 90). Such play with gaming conventions potentially leads to ethical reflection in the user.

Strikingly, Terry Prachett makes use of the very same design principle deployed in "Aftermath mission" in his 1992 novel Only You Can Save Mankind. This literary work tells the story of 12-year-old Johnny who, while immersed in a gaming experience, suddenly has his player expectations undermined so that the game changes from trivial playing to an ethical dilemma. Positioned by the game's logic as the only one "who can save mankind," Johnny's role as "savior" is called into question when the aliens he seeks to destroy (in accordance with the game's internal logic) suddenly surrender to him:

We surrender. Do not shoot... We give in. No more war...

Johnny stared at the screen. What he wanted to type was: No, I mean, this can't happen, you're Aliens, you can't want to be shot at, no other game aliens have ever stopped aliening across the screen, they never said We DonT Want to Go...

This is probably that Virtual Reality they're always talking about on the television.

He typed: It's only a game, after all... I shoot you and you shot (sic!) at me. That is the game.

But we die.

Johnny typed: Sometimes I die. I die a lot.


Written during the 1990s Gulf War, dubbed, the "first video war," just as computers were getting powerful enough to run realistic-looking games, the images from the two media and their ontological status would blend in Prachett's mind: "On your computer: games that looked like war. On your TV: a war that looked like a game" (Prachett, 2013 [1992], p. 2). Thus, the "aliens" in Johnny's game turn out to be sentient beings seeking to escape from the game world in which they exist to fight human gamers. Caught in what he comes to think of as a real war, Johnny starts defending the aliens from other gamers, attempting to escort them across The Border and out of the game world to safety.

What happens here is that an unexpected occurrence inside the game turns the game into ethical gameplay, and that the space confining
the game is ruptured. The game is no longer contained "in a box." Through their act of surrendering, the ontological status of the aliens changes in Johnny's mind: what from a distance were green dots on a screen, there to be shot at according to the game's definition, at a closer range resolve into sentient beings in need of his ethical engagement in their situation. This surreal occurrence inside the game is blended in the narration with live televised footage from the war that is occurring in Johnny's everyday reality, the Gulf War. By juxtaposing these situations in the design of the novel, the implied author invites the reader to make a similar mental and empathic shift relative to the victims of not only fictional but also actual wars.

**War or Game?**

Both *Only You Can Save Mankind* and "Ender's Game" thematize the ways in which modern warfare is increasingly like a computer game. The ethical dilemma in "Ender's Game" hinges on the premise that these phenomena are so similar that it is possible to mistake the one for the other. Both narratives highlight how the contents and medial aspects of gaming make the activity of gaming and the engagement in real warfare to all purposes indistinguishable for the individual player. Kirkpatrick has noted the distancing effect of games relative to "what they are about," and it is precisely this distancing effect of computer mediation that makes modern warfare ethically challenging in a new way. When warfare is increasingly conducted sitting at a console, remotely controlling lethal drones at a safe distance from the actual devastations of war, it makes warfare "eerily similar to a game" (Brophy, 2013, p. 72). In fact, this type of remote military action has been termed "Nintendo warfare" due to its reliance on the use of computers and consoles to achieve destruction of remote targets. Such remote involvement now "replaces much of the 'face to face' warfare of twentieth century wars" (Brophy, 2013, p. 72).

This physical distancing from the action seems to also encourage a psychological and mental distance relative to the effects of the actual military operation, an attitude of distance that has ethical consequences as well. With reference to the Milgram experiment and "the trolley problem" first posed by Philippa Foot [1], Matthew Brophy argues that moral distance (distance from the effects of one's action) makes it easier for human beings to kill (Brophy, 2013, p. 73). This is due to the fact that "the distance insulate[s] the agent from any personal connection with the loss of life, the collateral damage, the suffering" (Brophy, 2013, p. 74). Thus, if digital games are ergodic texts, and warfare is increasingly like digital gaming, then Aarseth's assertion that "users are not safe" begs refinement, since agents of "Nintendo warfare" are physically safe while putting themselves, perhaps, morally at risk.

In *Only You Can Save Mankind*, Johnny's experience of the game as a game is tied to his perception of what is real and not. Drawing on Bernard Suits, Brendan P. Shea offers the following four features that allow us to tell games apart from the rest of ordinary life: games have a *prelusory goal* (a purpose independent from the game that the players aim to accomplish), *constitutive rules* (the rules that define the game are distinct from moral rules regarding player conduct), a set of *lusory means* (methods to achieve the goal permitted by the constitutive rules) and one or more players who possess the lusory attitude (they obey the constitutive rules because they want to play) [2] (Shea, 2013, pp. 90–92). Consonant with this definition, the computer game *Only You Can Save Mankind* ceases to be a game for Johnny when he discovers that some of the players do not want to "play." Their presence in the game does not involve their voluntary acceptance of the constitutive rules, which are stacked against them: by design, successful gaming involves their annihilation. In other words, they do not possess the lusory attitude but rather seek to escape the game, since to them it is lethal.

A very similar premise is operative in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008), where the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, is forced to fight fellow teenagers for her own survival. This "war" takes place inside a "game world" devised by the head "game maker" of a politically oppressive regime. The narrative's explicit references to the gladiator games of the Roman Empire create an historical precedent: what is new is the totality and persuasiveness with which the game world is simulated. The "game makers" have total control within the
“bubble” of the game. They can “reprogram” the weather, and create forest fires and earth quakes. The “arena”, rather than a Roman amphitheater, is like an electronically controlled, holographic computer simulation -- or like a virtual reality experience except that the experiencer can die. While the Hunger Games are called games, the players only participate in order to survive the certain death that awaits if they refuse. Accordingly, they do not possess the lusory attitude since their participation cannot be classed as voluntary in any real sense. The game is circumscribed not only by an electronic force field but also by a set of rules that Katniss strives to bend in order to survive as an ethical being. By staging a burial for one of the other contestants, Rue, she re-frames them both as “more than just a piece in their Games” (Collins, 2008, p. 276). At the game’s end, she forces a change to the constitutive rule that there can only be one winner by threatening to eat poisonous berries, thereby ensuring that both she and her partner Peeta exit the game as survivors and “winners,” with their ethical integrity at least partially intact.

Like the “aliens” in Prachett’s novel, Katniss strives to break out of the game’s defining borders to secure her own bodily safety. So while Johnny is subject to the “risk” of the cybertext user in that he “dies a lot” and thus fails to gain narrative control over the game, his physical body remains safe and he can return to the game at will to improve his performance since he “lives again” at each game’s end. For Katniss the stakes are higher since she may sustain bodily harm and lose her only (if fictional) life. Like Orson Scott Card’s Ender, Katniss must fight a real war, disguised as a game. In both these texts, the protagonists are coerced by a superior adult force to “voluntarily” participate in battle games.

In “Ender’s Game”, the reader is rhetorically positioned to empathize with Ender, due not least to the emphasis placed on the fact that he is eleven years old.

Captain Anderson: “I want him into battles, every day starting tomorrow. I want him to have a year’s worth of battles in a month.”

Graff: … “These are children, Anderson. Do you realize that? Ender’s army is nine years old.”

CA: … It’s good for children to have fun, I think, sir. I know I did when I was a boy. But right now the world needs soldiers. And this is the way to get them” (Card, 1977, pp. 4--5).

Due to the way that the children’s age is repeatedly emphasized in the text, it clearly plays a vital part in the author’s rhetorical agenda, highlighting the fact that the ethical issue up for reflection is the child soldier. Ender and his fellow children are rhetorically positioned as the victims of military consequentialist reasoning: their happiness must be sacrificed to supply the world with soldiers. Given that Ender is the narrative’s main character, readers are clearly encouraged to wish for his well-being: a well-being threatened by Captain Anderson’s plans for his life.

The bulk of the narrative follows Ender as he successfully, and keenly, passes a number of gradually harder battle tests. Ender’s strategic adeptness ensures his rapid but increasingly enforced “progress” from physical combat training in the Battle Room on to the mastering of computer generated battle simulations in Command School, where Ender is taught to “command mock ships in mock battles by manipulating the keys on the simulator” (Card, 1977, p. 17). To Ender, fighting the ships is still a game, although he is pushed ever harder. Questioning his new teacher, Maezr, Ender learns that “the computers pick targets, aim; they do all the detail work. You just tell them when and get them in a position to win” (Card, 1977, p. 22). Thus, Card describes Ender as engaged in “Nintendo warfare” in 1977, years before computer gaming became feasible in the 1980s.

Since the reader has been rhetorically positioned to empathize with Ender, it is difficult to read the narrative as anything other than a critique of the military regime under which Ender is placed. Ordered to fight two increasingly difficult battles a day, Ender starts falling apart: “Sometimes he would wake up in the middle of the night crying for a reason he didn’t remember. Sometimes he woke up with his knuckles
bloody from biting them” (Card, 1977, p. 24). As he is steadily pushed harder, Ender starts to question his life, eventually desiring only that the “games” come to an end.

A whole host of “observers” come to watch Ender’s last battle, “staged” around a planet. Maezr tells Ender that it is “against the rules to use weapons against the planet itself” since “there are rules of war that apply even in training games” and that he, Maezr, is Ender’s enemy and will “use any means” he can to defeat Ender (Card, 1977, p. 26). Outnumbered a thousand to one in the game, Ender finally figures that if he breaks the rules of war and fires on the planet they will kick him out of school and that way he would “never have to play a game again” (Card, 1977, p. 27). Breaking the game rules -- and the rules of war -- Ender demolishes the planet.

Maezr eventually discloses that they have trained children to fight since discovering that adult commanders would become afraid, cautious or insane when faced with the task of killing. Ender is angry, asking how many people were on the planet he destroyed. Graff replies: “Weapons don’t need to understand what they are pointed at, Ender. We did the pointing, and so we’re responsible. You just did your job” (Card, 1977, p. 30). Although Graff absolves Ender, the ethical issues raised in the narrative are not as easily resolved. Is the military commanders’ treatment of Ender and the other children ethical and just?

A consequentialist would not object to the principle of sacrificing the lives of some, not even those of innocent children, to save the many. Thus, in spite of the damage Ender suffers, the ethical theory of consequentialism validates this “gambling” with children’s lives in “Ender’s Game”, as well as the use of children as the vehicles in military tactics. One may further ask whether the fact that Ender annihilates the planet by breaking the rules of the “game” makes him at least partly responsible for this act. The rhetorical thrust of the narrative seems to question the use of children for military purposes, however, or at the very least to highlight the personal cost of such a practice. This is underscored as the short story closes with Graff and Anderson discussing new career options earned by their successful maneuvers, at the expense of the psychologically damaged Ender.

The way that the short story is designed encourages certain responses from the reader. However, the consequences of the interaction of the ethos of the short story with any individual reader’s ethos cannot be predicted. Brophy has argued that the 1985 Ender’s Game storyline (which is expanded to include more of Ender’s own reasoning and his recovery after the planet’s destruction) begs the interpretation that Ender, rather than being the innocent child manipulated by the military for their ends, allows himself to be used as a weapon to save humanity (Brophy, 2013, p. 74). The ethos of the individual reader, as well as the reading context, influences the ways in which a text may be read and understood. Interestingly, Ender’s Game features on the reading list of the US Marine Corps [3].

In Only You Can Save Mankind, Johnny too discovers that wars have rules, and that the Geneva Convention regulates the treatment of prisoners of war. The alien captain is confused: “You humans are strange (...). You are warlike. But you make rules! Rules of war! (...) You think all of life is a game” (Prachett, 2013 [1992], p. 79).

**Magic Circles and Game Context**

A common theme in the three narratives is the problematization of what constitutes the border between games and the rest of reality. In both Only You Can Save Mankind and The Hunger Games, there is a “design border” that the characters strive to cross in order to move from the “inside” to the “outside” of the game, calling to mind John Huizinga’s (1955) metaphor of the “magic circle” that has been widely appropriated by games studies scholars. Salen and Zimmerman have used the term straightforwardly, to denote the space “where the game takes place” (2003, p. 95), so that the circle is what “encloses” the game and separates it from other activities. Consequently, it functions like a marker separating the “ordinary” world from the game space. Read in this manner, Katniss’ disabling of the force field enclosing the game world of the arena in Catching Fire (2009) effectively collapses the “magic circle” defining the borders of the deadly game. The coercion and the war do not end when the game...
collapses, however, since they are factors in the social construction of Katniss’ world.

Edward Castronova (2005) has argued that the notion of a membrane is a better metaphor than that of a closed or open circle, since the game experience will permeate into the player's everyday experience. Castronova's metaphor is apt in relation to Ender's experiences, since the psychological effects of Ender’s “gaming” seep into his real life, causing him to cry in his sleep, bite his knuckles and develop stomach pains. Or do these symptoms occur because the magic circle has been broken and the membrane dissolved? The implication in the narrative is that Ender suffers from his “gaming” only when he is no longer involved in games but in real warfare, even if he is not consciously aware of this difference.

Just as these narratives all problematize the “border” between games and the rest of reality, Gordon Calleja has argued that the concept of the magic circle is untenable as a concept in game studies, since starting the discussion of digital games by cordoning games off from the rest of culture has a number of problematic implications (Calleja, 2012). As a spatial marker it is simply redundant for digital games:

In physical games, the distinction is needed because the game rules are upheld socially. Actions that take place within the marked area of the game, when this exists, are interpreted differently from actions outside that area. In most digital games the distinction is void since the only on-screen space that one can act in is the navigable space of the virtual environment (Calleja, 2012, p. 83).

Katniss occupies a middle position relative to this definition: she is involved in a physical game, where the game rules are upheld socially, while at the same time she is in a simulated environment marked out by a, sometimes visible, electronic border. According to Calleja, analysis of actual empirical material on gaming makes it hard to meaningfully separate the players' personal and social history from the game activity (Calleja, 2012, p. 85) -- which is why Tom Boellstorff (2008, 2012) advocates anthropological and ethnographic approaches to the study of digital games and gaming cultures. Boellstorff's anthropological study of Second Life (Linden Lab, 2003) highlights the profound ways in which the activities conducted in virtual reality MMOGs can affect a person’s life. This type of culturally situated understanding of games permeates all three literary narratives discussed here in their ultimate rejection of gaming and game playing as an activity “apart” from life.

All of these narratives are set against the backdrop of a conflict-ridden society. Furthermore, they all portray the world as a place in which violence and friendship co-exist. Ender grows up in a military institution, itself in many ways sealed off from the rest of society. Consequently, the troops Ender trains in the Battle Room are the closest he comes to forming friendships. Johnny plays computer games supplied by his friend Wobbler as a respite from the “Troubling Times” at home: his parents are about to divorce. With his friends, Johnny discusses the televised war footage from the Gulf War that form part of their everyday lives. Furthermore, Johnny’s friend Bigmac lives in a neighborhood fraught with gang wars where “even muggers are afraid to go” (Prachett, 2013 [1992], p. 111), highlighting violence and conflict as facets of Johnny’s everyday existence. Thus, the narrative positions battle games as only one more expression of the level of conflict and violence that permeates Johnny’s society at large.

In The Hunger Games, children of the 12 deprived Districts of the fictional country, Panem, are each year elected to battle to the death to entertain the well-fed populace of the Capitol. The contest is televised, functioning as a reality Television show feeding on the display of real hunger, brutality and suffering. Thus, the narrative rhetorically questions, as does Only You Can Save Mankind, the relationship between real violence and violence as entertainment. Navigating a brutal reality, Katniss still forms significant friendships in the arena, both with Rue from District 11 and with Peeta from her own District, thereby seeking to redefine the game through acts of ethical engagement.
War and the Body

Written over a time span of three decades, between 1977 and 2008, the three narratives convey shifting views of the nature of warfare. What comes increasingly into focus in these texts is the bodily cost of war. Discussing the development of military technology, Steffen Hantke notes that the past few decades have seen the disappearance of the spatial delineation of the zone of combat (Hantke, 2015, p. 495). Contrasting the mass-directed destruction of World War I trench warfare -- and World War II carpet bombing and the destructive range of atomic bombs and genocidal military campaigns -- with the modern day concept of the surgical strike, Hantke argues that such strikes accomplish their mission “through precision instead of mass destruction, selectiveness instead of saturation, and stealth instead of conspicuous show of force”, thereby “erasing the distinction between terrorist and military destruction” (Hantke, 2015, p. 495). He further argues that, due to this military strategic reorientation as a response to technological development, “the target of military action is now again the individual human body, separated from its environment and its tactical position within it” (Hantke, 2015, pp. 495--496). In this context, Hantke discusses the literary version of Ender's Game from 1985, noting that the computer simulations in which Ender engages are “battle at its most abstract,” where performance is reduced to “bodily reflexes that themselves have been abstracted from their objectives or contents” (Hantke, 2015, p. 505). Furthermore, by fighting such remote battles, technology ensures that there is no need for Ender to face captivity, to witness the injury or death of his comrades, or to suffer from injury or death himself; thus, he is shielded from the physical repercussions of face-to-face combat. The original 1977 narrative still hints that war, even when conducted unknowingly and at a distance, comes at an emotional and psychological cost to Ender.

While Johnny is also, at first, engaged in a game of annihilation through the operation of a remote control, emotional immersion in the game (or an ethical quirk in the game design) allows him to enter the game space as a witness to and a sympathizer with the aliens who are subject to destruction. Johnny enters the zone of combat but is not in any significant way subject to harm himself. Moreover, his rescue mission is successful in that he manages to escort the aliens safely across the border and out of the game, consonant with the common semiotics of gaming that frames the gamer, once successful, in the role of the hero [4]. However, the narrative cleverly turns the reader’s gaze from focusing on the agent to focusing on the victims, pointing to the ethical responsibility of the aggressor in the “game” of war.

In the most recent narrative, The Hunger Games, the protagonist is in real danger of annihilation and is forced to witness the injury and death of her comrades. Armed with the outmoded weaponry of a crossbow and arrows, Katniss faces a technologically advanced game design that allows the “game makers” to control the battleground of the game, as if they were the programmers of a computer game. The contestants, however, must participate through embodied action, facing not just each other but also genetically engineered mutations or “mutts”; human-animal hybrids created by the technologically advanced culture of the Capitol. Thus, the narrative highlights the imbalance of power between the poor, technologically underdeveloped Districts, and the Capitol that houses the ruling elite that controls advanced technology. This set-up highlights the vulnerability of less technologically advanced nations against the aggression of technological “super-powers.” The posthuman (Hayles, 1999), and political, elements of the narrative are hard to miss.

Situating the posthuman destabilization of human ontology in relation to other species and to the machine in a geo-political context, Rosi Braidotti argues that the current global economy establishes a trans-species “bond of vulnerability” to exploitation, mutilation, violent abuse and annihilation (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 63, 122--123). She further notes that “new forms of warfare entail simultaneously the breath-taking efficiency of ‘intelligent’ unmanned, technological weaponry on the one hand, and the rawness of dismembered bodies on the other” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 122).

“The rawness of dismembered bodies” certainly feature vividly in the last volume of the Hunger Games trilogy (2010), in which Katniss’
sister Prim, a doctor, is killed by a bomb time that is triggered to strike just as medical personnel run in to take care of the victims of a previous explosion. Crossing an ethical border, this technology was developed by Katniss former hunting partner, Gale, to take advantage of human empathic ability [5]. The terror of such weaponry is poignantly formulated since the protagonist stands in a close emotional relationship to both the engineer and the victim of this “military art.”

While in “Ender’s Game” war is “out there” in outer space, one hundred light years away, Johnny encounters it through a screen in his home. For Katniss, war becomes part of her physical reality as an extension of the political oppression that characterizes her society. Katniss embodies the entity on the other side of the screen -- the one who can only hope to vie for food, favours and safety through a media favorable personality. Thus, Katniss and the people of her District 12 allegorically represent the poor who are the technological underdogs in today’s world, forced to feel on their own bodies the effects of superior military technology and environmental upheaval (caused by the overconsumption of the wealthy and materially privileged). As illustrated in Mockingjay (2010), the changing nature of modern warfare, which relies increasingly on acts of terrorism, means that war is no longer located “on the front” far away, but may play out as sudden explosions of violence that shatter scenes of everyday life. Potentially, this is a type of war in which rules no longer apply, and thus a type of war that is much less likely to be conflated with a game.

Due to the socially devastating consequences of war, the relationship between war and games naturally generates debate. In terms of sales figures [6], however, which show that Wii Sports (Nintendo, 2006) and Tetris (PajtNov, 1986) are far more popular on a global scale than is Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (Infinity Ward, 2007), one could argue that violence in digital games has received a disproportionate amount of attention, since, statistically, it seems that people are more likely to be engaged in peacefully competitive games rather than in aggressively violent ones.

Endnotes
[1] Foot’s trolley problem demonstrates that people find it morally harder to kill an innocent bystander by physically pushing them than by flicking a switch.
[2] Calleja argues that Suit’s definition is circular, since he claims that games are activities that require a lusory attitude, while simultaneously maintaining that the lusory attitude occurs while playing a game (Calleja, 2012, p. 84).
[5] WikiLeaks has released material showing that the US military uses a similar tactic, where strikes on alleged terrorist targets involve follow-up strikes so as to hit those moving in to rescue the wounded, see for instance WikiLeaks’ “Collateral-Murder” video. Retrieved on November 15, 2015: https://collateralmurder.wikileaks.org/.

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