

Beyond Dominance, Mixture, and Hybridity. On the Challenges of Hypercomplex Objects

Hans-Joachim Backe

Abstract

Through the analysis of several hypercomplex objects – Mike Gross and Peter Carey’s *The Unwritten* (2010) and Inkle’s *80 Days* (2014), as well as Doogie Horner’s *Die Hard: The Authorised Colouring and Activity Book* (2016) and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Legacy* (2017) – the article demonstrates the challenges intermedial studies of texts without conventional profiles face. The argument presented here is that a careful hermeneutic analysis is needed to overcome these obstacles, despite the universal applicability of some media studies concept and a recent opposition against hermeneutics from posthumanist theories. The analysis of the examples unearths their aesthetics of hypercomplexity and argues for why facile categorizations of them would be detrimental to their interpretation. The conclusion suggests to draw more strongly on play within the intermedial discourse, both as a verb denoting autotelic activity and as a noun denoting inevitable or necessary imprecision, in order to engage with the intricacies of such examples.

Keywords

Play, Hermeneutics, Posthumanist, Affect Theory, Electronic Literature, Comic Studies, Game Studies

Beyond Dominance, Mixture, and Hybridity. On the Challenges of Hypercomplex Objects

Hans-Joachim Backe

Introduction: Not ‘conventionally distinct’ media

One of the central, and potentially unsolvable, challenges of any comparative media study is the question of what we consider a distinct medium. Intermediality is commonly understood, in Werner Wolf’s terms, as «any transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media” (Wolf 2011: 3). ‘Conventionally distinct’ is a heuristic category, not a sharp definition. For most inquiries in inter- as well as transmediality, this heuristic is inevitable, productive, and in many cases sufficient. Even my argument here can, despite striving for critical distance from it, not avoid operating with it. That independently developed alternative concepts such as the Media Mix (Steinberg 2012) despite some marked differences (like its departure from the primacy of narrative) share this soft definition, seems to support this observation.

Yet whenever we probe the idea of the ‘conventionally distinct medium’ by studying particular examples closely, a problem occurs. As Lars Elleström points out, the question of what should be considered a distinct medium as opposed to a blend of media – in his terms, a multimodal medium – is salient for the oldest and newest cultural forms.

However, theatre and computer games, two examples of strongly multimodal media, are conventionally understood and rather well defined as qualified media, so in that sense they are coherent media rather than examples of pronounced intermedial

crossings of conventional borders, although they may be said to fuse a multitude of qualified media that also exist in their own right: music, for instance. (Elleström 2010: 38)

In other words: once we look closely enough, the epistemological idea of a 'conventionally distinct' medium becomes just as shaky as an ontological notion of pure, original, basic media.

This fundamental challenge to comparative media studies has been primarily tackled in research on 'New Media.' At the turn of the century, the «metamedium of the digital computer» and its «takeover of culture» (Manovich 2002: 33) were identified as the central challenge to media studies: «The computerization of culture not only leads to the emergence of new cultural forms such as computer games and virtual worlds; it redefines existing ones such as photography and cinema» (*ibid.*: 35). Since then, North American research has foregrounded the development of visual language (Bolter and Grusin 1999) and participatory behavior (Jenkins 2006) in digital and networked culture, while their European counterparts theorized relations between media based on studies of traditional, high culture encounters between music and literature (Wolf 2002) and (post-)modern theater practices (Rajewsky 2002).

That attention to both high culture and computing technology has, of course, been more than justified; the latter's ability to digitize, process, network, and recombine linguistic, visual, auditory, and participatory forms of communication is doubtlessly staggering, and creates intermedial encounters that are unique and extremely complex. There is, however, a significant number of phenomena that remain unobserved, or at least undervalued, by these perspectives, although they pose unique challenges to the most fundamental of questions – what constitutes a 'conventionally distinct medium' that intermingles, conflicts, or synergizes with others. Beyond the 'New Media' of the 1990s and also the 'New New Media' (Levinson 2013), i.e. Social Media in its different manifestations, we find forms of cultural expression that appear to deliberately undermine concepts of 'conventionally distinct media.' I will discuss here some examples that appear less aimed at

undermining an existing or establishing a new qualified medium (in Elleström's terms) than at creating an individual piece that relates to 'conventionally distinct media' in an out-of-focus, parallax, not-quite way.

To avoid established genre or media terms, I will refer to these artefacts in the following as 'hypercomplex objects.' While this term might appear hyperbolic, I will offer an argument for why I think it is justified and productive. In abstract terms, hypercomplex objects are media objects which combine traits of so many qualified and multimodal media that they cannot be meaningfully identified with conventional media terms. To demonstrate what that means in practice, I have selected four paradigmatic examples. Only one is digital, while the others are in different ways beholden to the technical medium (again, in Elleström's terms) of the book; none of them are social media, and even among popular culture artefacts, two of them might appear as particularly undeserving of attention. Yet those are precisely the reasons, I argue, why Mike Gross and Peter Carey's *The Unwritten* #17 (2010), Inkle's *80 Days* (2014), Doogie Horner's *Die Hard: The Authorised Colouring and Activity Book* (2016), and Chuck Palahniuk's *Legacy* (2017) deserve earnest academic discussion. They are marketed and sold as, respectively, a comic book, a computer game, and as adult coloring books, yet on closer inspection, they problematize not only these labels, but media categories in general. I will discuss the first two examples at greater length and use the two others to round off and contrast some key aspects, most importantly to show that this phenomenon is indeed not limited to one particular type of qualified medium.

In the following, I will introduce the examples and why they defy conventional approaches, putting them into a critical conceptual context. After that, each of them will be analyzed to demonstrate why I consider them emblematic of hypercomplex objects, before finally suggesting contemporary theories of play and playfulness as a productive lens for approaching them in more depth. The goal is not to present a conclusive argument for why we need additional intermedial concepts, but rather to contribute some epistemological and methodical suggestions to the ongoing debate.

Hypercomplex Objects as a Conceptual Challenge

The reflections presented here are a continuation of a critical engagement with the notion of 'media hybrid' (Backe 2020). In an excellent and thorough study of the intersection of computer games and comics, Daniel Merlin Goodbrey (2017) posits that there is a well-defined class of media artefacts that are true 'media hybrids' between comics and games, «a game comic [which] must exhibit some of the key characteristics of games and some of the key characteristics of the form of comics» (*ibid.*: 126). I have argued that the notion of hybrids is not a particularly productive way of discussing the questions involved, as it cements media essentialist ideas of pure 'source media.' As an alternative to potentially limiting a priori categorization, I proposed deep hermeneutic engagement using fundamental intermedia markers (e.g. a detailed discussion of the media involved) to study individual objects in their relation to the different domains they draw on. In other words, the categorization of an object as a 'game-comic' is useful as a broad descriptive category and expressive genre, but it is not inductive to a detailed analysis and glosses over potentially crucial points of rupture. Instead of labeling an artefact before study and thus predicting the direction of the following analysis, taking stock of all involved elements and the aesthetic principles of their combination seems more productive.

Many of the examples discussed by Goodbrey and me in the context of hybridization could be considered hypercomplex in the sense I have proposed above, and the conclusion I will offer at the end of this argument is basically the same, namely a call for attentive close readings of examples as artefacts ambiguously situated in complex media networks. The argument presented here is meant to demonstrate the universality of the previously observed principles and theorize them further.

The first example is both the most conventional and the most well-researched. Part of a critically acclaimed comic book series running from 2009 to 2015, issue #17 of Peter Carey and Mike Gross' *The Unwritten* (Carey and Gross 2010) is, for all intents and purposes, a comic book.

What sets it apart from the rest of the series is, simply put, the order of its pages. Instead of appearing in regular, linear order, they are arranged in a hypertextual fashion, and the reader has to follow instructions on the pages to find the next page in the story. It therefore initially appears as a hypercomic, «a comic with a multicursal narrative structure» (Goodbrey 2017: 87), but on closer inspection, it does not adhere to the conventions of this rare medium, either. In terms of its publication context, the second example, Inkle's *80 Days* (80 Days 2014), is similarly straightforward. Distributed through digital distribution services for games and bound to computer platforms (albeit a lowest common denominator, running on smartphones as well as PCs), it is unquestionably a digital game. The fashion in which it adapts Jules Verne's classic *Le tour du monde en quatre-vingt jours* into a postmodern piece of electronic literature still problematizes its mode of reception. Stand-up comedian Doogie Horner's *Die Hard: The Authorised Colouring and Activity Book* (Horner, *Die hard* 2016) and novelist Chuck Palanhiuk's *Legacy* are even more openly idiosyncratic examples which will be discussed briefly to illustrate the diversity of the phenomenon. Where Elleström in the passage quoted above describes an aporia for intermediality scholars – should theatre or computer games be considered to be combinations of other media or rather media in their own right – the examples discussed here challenge even the layperson's categorization attempts. While *Unwritten* and *80 Days* pass at first glance for comic book and computer game, yet become more problematic upon closer inspection, *Die Hard: The Authorised Colouring and Activity Book* leaves one to wonder what one is dealing with in the first place.

The argument I want to make here is that hypercomplex objects require in-depth hermeneutic engagement before we can even begin to discuss them adequately. Their complexity amplifies the bias towards the well-known inherent in any given approach and conceptual framework. Take Bolter and Grusin's 'remediation': their distinction between immediacy and hypermediacy, the hiding or exposing, respectively, of the imprint left by other media, is often taken to be universally applicable to contemporary media. While their theory is explicitly not limited to digital media, much of their argument revolves

around digital user interfaces in the late 20th century and the discourses connected with them, such as that «the desire for immediacy is apparent in claims that digital images are more exciting, lively, and realistic than mere text on a computer screen» (Bolter – Grusin 1999: 23). Their concepts are suffused with the ethos of universal applicability even when they speak specifically of «the last several hundred years of Western *visual* representation» (*ibid.*: 11, my emphasis). The examples discussed in the following surely have properties that allow for them to be discussed in terms of a tradition of visual representation, yet doing so would limit their study to aspects based on an a priori and ad hoc categorization which is, as I will show, not productive.

Explicitly privileging hermeneutics might be seen as something of an anachronism, particularly given that newer developments – Posthumanism, Affect Theory, Actor-Network-Theory – not only offer productive approaches to complexity, but often do so in active opposition to the “scapegoat” terms (Gumbrecht 2004: xiv) of humanistic traditions, hermeneutics and interpretation. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht suggests a dialectic between meaning, the domain of hermeneutics, and presence, the domain of affect:

all cultures and cultural objects can be analyzed as configurations of both meaning effects and presence effects, although their different semantics of self-description often accentuate exclusively one or the other side. (*Ibid.*: 19)

What Gumbrecht proposes is a radical re-fashioning of analytic practice by emphasizing the bodily dimension of human world-appropriation. The primacy of interpretation and communication is supposed to be overcome by embracing mysticism, penetration, and eating as not only traditionally formative modes of cultural appropriation, but as methods for post-humanistic analysis (*ibid.*: 86-90). As stimulating as such radical proposals are, they appear paradoxical to adherents of more traditional concepts (Israelson 2017: 44), because their envisioned paradigm shifts are contingent on internalizing a comprehensive philosophy. Neocybernetics (Clarke 2014), to take just

one example, is a fascinating approach that considers aesthetic artefacts as elements of whole media ecologies, without subjecting them to pre-judgements beyond that of being part of a system. Beyond the mental hurdles of all posthumanist thinking (e.g. conceptualizing non-human agency), its application is complicated because it builds on systems theory, a wholistic approach in its own right, yet does so by undermining its central premise, the inviolable boundary between system and environment, through the idea «of a system-environment hybrid» (Israelson 2017: 52). No matter how powerful the resulting approach is, its involved nature makes it less than ideal for an initial analysis of a hypercomplex artefact.

The following reflections propose to draw on the rich and evocative concepts of post-humanistic approaches without requiring one to follow along with their paradigm shifts. The analyses presented here will show that going through the hermeneutic circle of evaluating the elements of an artefact vis-à-vis the whole as well as that of situating the whole artefact within a wider context of a genre or a media ecology are inevitable. The examples discussed here are both ontologically and epistemologically challenging. The question of how we make sense of media phenomena that elude facile categorization and easy recourse to generic principles of engagement and understanding is one of involved epistemological processes that involve chiefly an intellectual interrogation which cannot eschew hermeneutics.

The Unwritten

The Unwritten is a limited comic book series, published by Vertigo, an imprint of superhero publisher DC comics. Throughout its existence, Vertigo targeted adult readers with publications originating in early 90s 'edgy' themes, yet infusing these stories of the dark supernatural with much literary ambition and skill. Carey and Gross' *The Unwritten* is a quintessential Vertigo title: Set in the present day of an alternate reality, it tells the fantastic story of Tom Taylor, the son of a best-selling author, Wilson Taylor. Wilson has written a series of children's and young adult novels about a group of kid wizards which build on the Harry Potter

craze of the late 1990s and early 2000s. While openly epigonal – like in Rowling’s novels, which also exist in this world, two boys and a girl from a wizard’s boarding school are the nemesis of an evil, undead archmage – the books become the world’s most successful fiction, propelling not only the reclusive Wilson Taylor to world fame, but to an even greater degree his son Tom. In what appears initially as a shrewd marketing move, the titular hero of Wilson’s novels is kid wizard Tommy Taylor, making the ‘real life’ Tom the focal point of a devoted fan cult and a conspiracy theory proclaiming that Wilson’s novels are not fiction, but the true history of his son’s magical childhood. The series begins with a journalist claiming to have proof for these outlandish sounding claims, which sets Tom on a journey to find out the truth about his father and his own identity. In the world of *The Unwritten*, the boundary between fact and fiction is porous. Tom Taylor’s companions, Richie Savoy and Lizzie Hexam, exemplify this radically: Richie is turned into a vampire by a character from a book, and Lizzie believes that she is not simply named after a character out of Dickens, but *is* a fictional character come into the real world. As to Tom, he appears to be stuck in a sort of ontological parallax, simultaneously being and not being Tommy Taylor, remembering his past as a real person while being able to work magic like Tommy.

The series uses this fantastic setup to explore topics of identity and power in a lot of depth, and before the backdrop of literary and pop-cultural references, chiefly among them *Moby Dick*, *Frankenstein*, and *Winnie the Pooh*. These literary allusions have been studied in depth (Almeida Cardoso 2017; Katsiadas 2019; Varis 2019), as have been the thematological roots of individual characters (Di Gennaro 2017) and the explicit metafictionality of the series (Thoss 2015; Mellier 2017; Israelson 2017). The complexity of *The Unwritten* results to great part from the way that the comic book presents its several ontological levels as permeable and tangible at the same time: «the porosity of this limit helps shape the secondary world as essentially different from the first while remaining accessible» (Mellier 2017: 310).

The most extreme formal experiment in the whole series occurs in issue #17, entitled “The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam” (Carey and Gross

2010). Unlike any other part of the series, issue #17 is executed in hypertextual structure, i.e. as a hypercomic (Goodbrey 2017). Instead of linearly progressing through the pages, the reader is instructed at the start of the issue to follow the indicated path (or choose between several options) by turning to indicated target pages. In the last panel of the first page, a children's psychiatrist is debating with herself whether to refer young Lizzie to a clinic or look for support in treating her. Each option has a number attached to it that points towards the pages on which the story continues, depending on which option is chosen.

The choices offered to the reader are, as Per Israelson points out, in most cases less about changing the actions of characters than their motivations. Making such a choice on behalf of a character «affects the ethos of the whole comic, and naturally influences how it is read and interpreted, but does not pose insurmountable problems of continuity» (Israelson 2017: 96). Given that Israelson's focus is on the fantastic, it is unsurprising that he understands the hypertextual structure first and foremost as a textual manifestation of the indeterminacy of the fantastic according to Todorov:

the moment of hesitation, of vacillation between two different paths through the narrative, is presented repeatedly as a choice between textual units. And what is more, as opposed to the hermeneutical vacillation Todorov discusses, here the choices materially alter the reading of the comic book. (Israelson 2017: 96)

Israelson contextualizes this hypertextual structure in two of the standard theories of non-linear expression, Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997) and Ian Bogost's *Unit Operations* (2006). Aarseth defines the eponymous cybertexts as structures that are 'ergodic', i.e. the traversal of which requires "non-trivial effort"

He understandably limits his application of those two theories to the obvious intersection with his topic and approach, highlighting the performative, agential nature of ergodicity and the posthumanist egalitarianism of the category of 'unit.' To him, what is important is that

Rather than as a text to be read and interpreted, issue no. 17 of *The Unwritten* presents itself as a site for configuration and embodied cognition. The comic book becomes a configurative text, involving the reader in a cybernetic feedback loop, in the perception-event of sympoiesis. (Israelson 2017: 97)

Despite the reliance on the idea of media ecology, Israelson does not engage with the narrative tradition and, thus, the generic conventions issue #17 refers to. The second title page of the issue¹ identifies it as a “Pick-a-Story® book”. Despite the registered trademark symbol, this is not an established term; on the contrary, Carey and Gross carefully select a wording that is reminiscent of the (copyrighted) genre names ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’, ‘Choose Your Path’, and ‘Pick a Path’. The books published under those titles, many of them parts of long-running series, follow the same kind of hypertextual, multicursal structure found in experimental literature, most famously Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (1966). As game-books targeted at boys and young men, they were very successful throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. Published around the same time as the development of the ‘adventure game’ genre of computer games as well as the literary genre of Interactive Fiction, they form a network of mutual influences with these digital forms (Montfort 2003: 71). The lesser known history of hypercomics, reaching back at least to the 1980s (Goodbrey 2017: 89), remains unmentioned. This seems a conscious omission, as it adds to the ambiguity of the issue’s structure, which appears to be carefully constructed in more than one respect.

The first major difference from the ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ tradition is the absence of any randomizing elements. Many, if not most

¹ The hypertextual structure only begins a few pages into the issue. This section has its own title page, followed by a page of instructions about the conventions of navigating the rest of the issue. In a sense, the hypercomic is therefore a book within the book, adding another layer of metalepsis to the complex interpenetration of different ontological layers that characterizes *The Unwritten* at large.

traditional gamebooks require a die or some other method of random number generation – the choice their title promises is therefore not completely free. Carey and Gross do not employ such a device. Equally apparent from the start is the relation between player/reader and text: Where such texts will usually address the reader in a second-person narrative with a strict focalization on the protagonist-cum-reader-vehicle, Carey and Gross make the story explicitly about Lizzie, ostensibly sticking with a more conventional third-person narrative.

Another aspect in which hypercomics and literary hypertexts, including ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ gamebooks, differ, is the synchronoptic one. In a physical gamebook, we will catch glimpses of other segments than the one we are supposed to read when searching for the right passage, and even those individual terms (particularly names) that catch our eye influence our knowledge about the world and events. This dimension of the reading process is greatly amplified with a hypercomic. Comics in general are, in Goodbrey’s term, «spatial networks» (2017: 50–52) of images and framings that live from being perceived, alternatingly, in isolation and conjunction. In the print layout of *Unwritten* #17, with four to six panels per page, it is virtually impossible not to see developments in the story too early or be reminded of them at later points.

One further significant deviation from norms is the nonlinearity of Carey and Gross’ structure itself. While there is some variety between the gamebooks of different authors and publishers (Hendrix 2011), one can observe a general tendency to offer ample room for decision-making of the reader and reflect the consequences of these decisions in a range of endings – a structural principle also employed frequently in computer games to further the player’s sense of agency (Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009). In a unique qualitative study, Christian Swineheart has coded and analyzed a representative corpus of game books. The wealth of data allows him e.g. to categorize endings into five classes of desirability (great, favorable, mediocre, disappointing, and catastrophic), and to render tangible the range of agency the books afford.

While Swineheart’s metrics don’t translate perfectly to a hypercomic – the sections and pages of gamebooks have a different

character than the panels and pages of a hypercomic –, some larger trends are unmistakable. The most noteworthy discovery when approaching *Unwritten* #17 in this manner is that it only has two endings, which in Swineheart's terminology would be considered great and catastrophic. That this is not more obvious is due to a very clever structure, where the 'losing ending' – protagonist Lizzie spends the rest of her days locked away in an asylum – is positioned close to the beginning of the narrative, a mere two 'wrong' decisions away. The remainder of the hypertextual structure is far more linear and, as previously discussed, primarily suggests differing motivations for characters instead of changing the course of the fabula.

Following Swineheart's coding to distinguish between the elements that are connected by choices and those that are not (because they are consecutive or have only one path out of them) as well as endings, it becomes apparent that only 11% of elements in *Unwritten* #17 allow the reader a choice, and only 3% of elements are endings – the remainder of the structure forces the reader to trace the nonlinear distribution of panels, but without more than trivial effort. For comparison, Swineheart lists one canonical game book with as few choices as *Unwritten* #17 (in which, however, 17% of elements are endings), while a more typical distribution would be 40% decisions, 25% linear connections, and 34% endings (Swineheart n.d. [2009]).

Drawing on game books in comic format for comparison, it becomes clear that Carey and Gross could have very well adhered much more strongly to a cybertextual paradigm. CED and Boutanox' *Sherlock Holmes Et Moriarty Associés* (Boutanox 2015), a part of a series of hypercomic gamebooks, makes extensive use of its inherent nonlinearity. As the focus is a traditional mystery, there is only one ending; it is, however, diversified through measuring success on a 20-point scale, where points are accumulated by finding hints and correct solutions, rendering the ending much less binary than it is in *Unwritten*. While the number of panels per page is comparable between both books, the latter example uses a more granular approach in its distribution of choices. Where *The Unwritten* offers a maximum of one choice per page, CED and Boutanox frequently have up to 15, distributed over up to six

panels that each lead to a fixed destination or even need puzzle-solving to decode their destination. Not only does this multiply the number of paths through the book, it also mitigates the risk of perceiving too many panels out of sequence, because the smaller font and more dense information make it much less likely to glimpse something significant in the proverbial blink of an eye. The book even offers, in the tradition of one famous 'Choose Your Own Adventure', *Inside UFO 54-40* (Packard and Granger 1982), a panel (no. 81) that has no regular way into it, but is only stumbled upon by accident, mistake, or voluntary ignoring of the rules.

Unwritten #17 takes a very deliberate approach to hypercomics, using that format in an ambiguous way to underscore the ambiguity of its subject matter. They use the hypercomic gamebook, an already unusual format, as a point of departure, but instead of 'only' presenting this unusual combination of two traditions in any established form, they play with the format even further, taking their readers on a unusual experience that in the end is not only no common comic or hypertext, but not even a regular hypercomic.

80 Days

80 Days draws on many of the same traditions as *Unwritten #17*. Its creators, the small software company Inkle, made their name through digital adaptations of classic 'Choose Your Own Adventure' gamebooks. *80 Days* is their first game based on 'original' material: As the title suggests, it is a loose adaptation of Verne's classic travel narrative, radically updated and expanded by writer Meg Jayanth. The treatment of the source material follows, in her words, the question: "How can you take a story of two white dudes going around the world and decolonize that and make it interesting?" (Torkington 2014)

At first glance, it appears as a hypertext narrative or interactive fiction: Though beautifully illustrated with art deco-style vignettes and supplemented by a map and a graphical user interface, the characters, places, and events of the game are presented in evocative, terse prose. The events are transposed into a steampunk setting full of retro-

futuristic technology, from submersible trains to wandering cities. The politics of this world are modernized in a similarly idiosyncratic fashion: while parts of history parallel ours (e.g. the Franco-Prussian war's immediate aftereffects), many small and big revolutions have shaped the societies of *80 Days* to be more diverse and colorful than those of Verne's novel. In Jayanth's words:

I like making games and creating worlds where women, queer people, people of colour and those who are under-represented in mainstream games and culture can be heroes. And worlds where they can be villains too, and everything in between. (Parkin 2016)

The narrative is vastly expanded, because the player is given the freedom to choose the route for Fogg and Passepartout, and can easily get lost in parts of the world barely mentioned by Verne, such as the Arctic or Sub-Saharan Africa. The result is a game that, when considered purely from a literary angle, acts as a text generator that draws on a script of half a million words to produce a vast number of distinct voyages around the world, some of them as fast as 30 days, some of them unsuccessful, but with each completed journey running to about 60.000 words, the length of Verne's novel (Parkin 2016).

Given the game's topics and runaway success, it comes as little surprise that it has become the subject of analyses focusing on feminine historiography (Toma – Rughiniş 2016), postcolonialism (Mukherjee 2017) and neocolonialism (Harrer 2018). The question of whether to consider *80 Days* a game, an interactive fiction, or something else, is mostly only touched upon in passing, with some studies using it as an example for «reading with a touch of gameplay» (R. Rughiniş – C. Rughiniş 2017). This somewhat offhand treatment of the medium and genre question is all the more surprising as the categorization of artefacts as 'Games' is a loaded issue within the tense identity politics of game culture that have come to the fore in recent years (Consalvo 2019).

There are a number of factors that contribute to a perception of *80 Days* as primarily a literary text. The already mentioned length of the script and the unquestionable amount of deep engagement with the

source material give is as much literary credibility as the well-paced plot, the vivid characterization, and the subtle, yet deft language. Yet above all, it is a perfectly realized application of hypertext poetics. In stark contrast to *Unwritten #17*, *80 Days* has dozens, if not hundreds of distinct endings, and a mind-boggling number of decision points in-between: «We could attempt to make a graph of the choices, but it would have 10,000 branches. Every location has its own web. From a programming point of view, it's much more like an AI» (Torkington 2014). In addition to the vast number of explicit choices, there are also implicit ones, moments in which the game will select one of several possible paths based on an earlier decision of the player.

80 Days is, however, not only remarkable for the number of branching points it offers. Passepartout forms the nexus of the literary and computational aspects of *80 Days*: he is the constant focalizer for the player/reader, but not an avatar for them to embody. Like *Unwritten #17*, it replaces the customary second-person narrative of interactive fiction is, in this case with a first-person narrative. What takes this change in pronoun and perspective from the linguistic to the ludic is the way in which Passepartout's choices are kept somewhat his own. His choices are characterized by multiple dimensions of unpredictability. The player only sees the first few words of each of Passepartout's possible replies, which frequently leaves room for surprises.

The very first choice in the game exemplifies that already, giving the player a taste of how their choices will not give them full control over Passepartout: Upon Fogg announcing the plan for a journey around the world, Passepartout can react with an inquiry or an affirmation. When selecting the affirmation – ““Very good, Monsieur”” – the game shows us that Passepartout signals unflinching support despite grave doubts, because after selecting the reply, its context is revealed, complementing the direct speech with the narratorial «I murmured dutifully, not believing a word of it» (*80 Days* 2014). Beyond this uncertainty about Passepartout's 'own mind' as a character, the player can only hypothesize about the effects the character's replies or actions will have. This goes both for the resolution of immediate challenges and longer-term effects. Sometimes, the game goes so far as to give the player the

choice between outcomes – e.g. when Passepartout participates in a bicycle race, we can choose whether he wins or loses – yet these still have unpredictable repercussions. At the other end of the spectrum, completely mundane decisions, taken many times along the journey – e.g. reading the newspaper vs. having a conversation – will have an accumulative effect on the characterization of Passepartout (as reliable, polished, courageous etc.) and the relationship with Fogg. It is, however, never transparent to the player which of these actions will have what concrete effect, what the precise value of these parameters is, or when the game makes use of them.

While in this fashion, the interactive fiction component of the game removes the player from Passepartout and his choices, it collapses all difference in the significant and impactful play elements: In standing in for the resourceful valet with the responsibility of arranging the practicalities of travel, the game requires a significant amount of resource management from the player. The two most important resources are, as to be expected given the subject matter, time and money. The player, through Passepartout, has to carefully balance Fogg's funds with the speed and comfort of travel. The game introduces this challenge already at the outset of the journey, too: When packing for the first leg of the trip, the player has to choose between bringing either a timetable for public transport in Europe or an item that can be sold for profit along the way. The former will give additional possibilities for finding routes in the first days of the journey, while the latter will replenish the constantly depleting funds. Both options come with potential drawbacks beyond their influence on each other: Whether the public transport routes are feasible (and not too slow or too expensive) will only become apparent when visiting cities connected to their network, while the luxury items will only fetch high prices in particular cities, which might be badly connected and less than ideal for the purpose of circumnavigating the globe fast.

Other factors further complicate the way we make meaning of *80 Days*, like the handling of time. While in the literary passages of the game, we are at leisure to act at our own speed, the strategic decisions of planning the route and acquiring provisions happen under time

pressure. Time passes at a rate of one real-time second per in-game minute, which results in a surprising amount of stress. Means of transport run on fixed schedules, and it is easy to miss a train or boat by spending time on the market or simply by comparing different routes.

Where *Unwritten #17* challenges categorization by recourse to different traditions that result in omissions and incompleteness, *80 Days* takes a similar route that confounds through over-achievement. It is a significant work of adapted literary fiction, an intricate hypertext, and a fully realized computer game, in a way that makes each of these labels insufficient and misleading.

Conclusion

The two examples might give the impression that hypertextuality or game elements are central to my argument. That is not intentional; the selection was based on the richness and vividness of the two examples, in the hope that they would be best served to illustrate a wider phenomenon. There are numerous other phenomena that could be discussed in a similar fashion.

A genre predisposed towards hypercomplexity is the adult coloring book. After being considered for the longest time «an activity often reserved for children, coloring books for adults rose from hipster trend to global phenomenon beginning in 2013» (Blackburn – Chamley 2016). Since then, adult coloring books have become the subject of serious psychological studies (Mantzios – Giannou 2018) and even clinical test as tools against depression and anxiety (Flett et al. 2017), and they seem to be completely agnostic with regard to subject matter, as evidenced e.g. by the IEEE's engineering coloring book (Knurek 2018).

One way in which the coloring book has been enriched and problematized is the addition of narrative. Novelist Chuck Palahniuk recently published a collection of short stories (Bermejo et al. 2016) and a novella (Morris – Norton 2017) accompanied by black-and-white illustrations of well-known comic artists, both ostensibly as coloring books for adults. In interviews, he has stressed the interdependence of

narrative and coloring book format. As a pure prose piece, the cynical, picaresque novella *Legacy* seemed to him too grandiose: «My only solution was to embrace that quality of the story and present it in a child-like medium: A coloring book. That cuts the profundity down to a manageable size» (Semel 2017). Not only does he consider the illustrations a vital part of the books, he also sees the readers as active co-creators, as «the people who eventually finish the book by coloring it» (Shannon 2017).

A very different form of narrativized coloring book is Doogie Horner's *Die Hard: The Authorised Colouring and Activity Book* (2016). Horner has published several adaptations of 1980s Hollywood movies (e.g. Horner, *A Die hard Christmas* 2017), and even though they are unmistakably thoroughly commercialized products often sold as part of novelty gift sets, they are also part of egalitarian fan culture. The adaptation of the movie is very liberal, a re-working the subject matter through iconic vignettes and fan-favorite moments, drawn not from reference but from memory (Purdy 2016). Even given the wide range of subject matters found in adult coloring books, the gunfire and explosions of the story are clearly not in line with a mindfulness context. The liberal, tongue in cheek approach to the coloring book genre extends to the inclusion of additional activities that aren't reading and coloring. Some of these activities, particularly simple geometrical puzzles, are references to the traditions of children's coloring books, while others apply the same principles to more adult-specific activities (like a bingo or a gap-text parodying the censorship of the movie on TV). Horner's book not simply adds things innocuously on top of each other, as its subtitle suggests, but puts them into contrast with each other, partially through emphasizing just how incongruous the activities offered by it really are.

My proposal to consider the examples discussed here a particular kind of phenomenon might be met with skepticism; they might be considered nothing more than complex, artful specimens within an established medium. After all, art generally pushes against established definitions and breaks continuously with conventions. My reply to such a contention would be that the examples discussed here are built around

their hypercomplex allusive structures and gain their meaning in great part from their recipients' epistemological struggles with their indeterminacy. This aesthetic should rather be considered a transmedia phenomenon in Rajewsky's sense, i.e. a strategy found in different media, largely independent from technological and communicative affordances, such as irony (Rajewsky 2005). And if one was to accept the category of hypercomplex objects, then a great number of metareferential works of art would be part of it. Most importantly though, the category of hypercomplex object is not a new genre, medium, or hybrid, but an umbrella term for particularly challenging phenomena that oppose the linearity of traditional, patriarchal, hegemonic structures with play and exploration.

Because of these shared tendencies, the analysis of the near-endless chain of allusions to both content and style of other media needs to go beyond the obvious, i.e. the thorough hermeneutic analysis of modes (Elleström 2010) and involved media (Wolf 2011). What we are facing in these experimental popular texts are playful connotations that emerge out of conceptual parallaxes and not-quite adherence to standards.

That makes play a productive concept, both as a verb and as a noun: On the one hand, the examples invite playful engagement and draw not only on comics and books, but also on games, while, on the other hand, hermeneutic flexibility allows to introduce some play into otherwise rigid frameworks that would run the risk of flattening the difference between the examples.

Play is not only a diverse activity, but it is ambiguous, both in itself and in the ways we talk about it (Sutton-Smith 1997). Play has been identified as a common factor in transmedia franchises (Harvey 2015), and is shared not only by people of all cultures, but even by human and non-human animals (Jørgensen – Wirman 2016). Going beyond play in a narrow sense to the playfulness found in many serious, goal-driven processes and products (Sicart 2014), play can be said to be a dominant meaning-making force in contemporary culture. Play, then, is instrumental in engaging such phenomena in two ways: Only by playing along are we completing the text and allowing it to produce its meaning, which we then decode during and after play. This cognitively

and intellectually complex process apparently comes naturally to humans, yet is difficult to operationalize and explain, and has consequently led to involved theories of the game-as-played (Leino 2009) and real-time hermeneutics (Arjoranta 2015).

The reflections presented here will necessarily remain suggestions, yet hopefully timely ones. For too long, the locus of intermedial innovation has been sought in the digital arena. To assume that 'new' equals 'digital' is not only to succumb to an unfortunate tradition in media history, where reliance on widely documented phenomena tends to «reproduce dominant narratives» (Uricchio 2003: 34). The study of presumed minority phenomena, activities, and perceptions serve as a reminder that «technological change is not a laboratory event or a corporate strategy but a fully social practice» (Gitelman 2003: 62). Looking only towards digital culture for innovation is also to challenge humanistic media theory on only one front, forfeiting an opportunity for re-appreciating widely applied methods and positions. The aporia of hypercomplexity enriches these discourses, because it suggests a shift in perspective from the work to its reception, bringing into relief connections of inter- and transmedia approaches to both reader-response theory and fan studies.

Works Cited

- 80 Days, Inkle 2014.
- Aarseth, Espen J., *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- Almeida Cardoso, André, "ON WHALES and GIANTS: IMAGES of LEVIATHAN in NEW MODEL ARMY and the UNWRITTEN", *Gragoatá*, 22.43 (2017): 787–808.
- Arjoranta, Jonne, *Real-Time Hermeneutics: Meaning-Making in Ludonarrative Digital Games*, Jyväskylä, University of Jyväskylä, 2015.
- Backe, Hans-Joachim, "Game-Comics and Comic-Games: Against the Concept of Hybrids", *Comics and Videogames: From Hybrid Medialities to Transmedia Expansions*, Ed. Daniel Stein, Routledge 2020.
- Blackburn, Heidi – Chamley, Claire E., "Color Me Calm: Adult Coloring and the University Library", *Kansas Library Association College and University Libraries Section Proceedings*, 6.1 (2016).
- Bogost, Ian, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*, Cambridge, Mass., London, MIT 2006.
- Bolter, J. David – Grusin, Richard A., *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 1999.
- Boutanox – CED, *Sherlock Holmes Et Moriarty Associés*, Makaka Éditions, La BD Dont Vous Êtes Le Héros, 2015.
- Carey, Mike – Gross, Peter, *Unwritten Vol. 1 # 17: The Many Lives of Lizzie Hexam*, New York, Vertigo, 2010.
- Clarke, Bruce, *Neocybernetics and Narrative*, Minneapolis – London, University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Consalvo, Mia, *Real Games*, Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press, 2019.
- Cortázar, Julio, *Hopscotch*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1966.
- Di Gennaro, Paola, "The Queer Peer: Masculinity and Brotherhood in Cain and Abel Literature and Imagination", *Queering Masculinities in Language and Culture*, Eds. Paul Baker – Giuseppe Balirano, Palgrave Macmillan 2017: 111–26.
- Elleström, Lars, "Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations", *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*, Eds. Lars Elleström – Jørgen Bruhn, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010: 11–48.

- Flett, Jayde A. M., et al., "Sharpen Your Pencils: Preliminary Evidence That Adult Coloring Reduces Depressive Symptoms and Anxiety", *Creativity Research Journal*, 29.4 (2017): 409–16.
- Gitelman, Lisa, "How Users Define New Media: A History of the Amusement Phonograph.", *Rethinking Media Change*, Eds. David Thorburn – Henry Jenkins, Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press, 2003: 61–79.
- Goodbrey, Daniel Merlin, *The Impact of Digital Mediation and Hybridisation on the Form of Comics*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Hertfordshire 2017, e-merl.com/theory/thesis (accessed: 20/06/19).
- Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Harrer, Sabine, "Casual Empire: Video Games as Neocolonial Praxis", *Open Library of Humanities*, 4.1 (2018).
- Harrison, J. J. – Doogie Horner, *A Die Hard Christmas: The Illustrated Holiday Classic*, Insight Editions, 2017.
- Harvey, Colin B., *Fantastic Transmedia: Narrative, Play and Memory Across Science Fiction and Fantasy Storyworlds / Colin B. Harvey*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Hendrix, Grady, "Choose Your Own Adventure Books: How the Cave of Time Taught Us to Love Interactive Entertainment" in *Slate*, 2/18/2011, slate.com/culture/2011/02/choose-your-own-adventure-books-how-the-cave-of-time-taught-us-to-love-interactive-entertainment.html (accessed: 05/05/2020).
- Horner, Doogie, *Die Hard: The Authorised Colouring and Activity Book*, London, Harper Collins, 2016.
- Israelson, Per, *Ecologies of the Imagination: Theorizing the Participatory Aesthetics of the Fantastic*, Stockholm, Department of Culture and Aesthetics, Stockholm University 2017, urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn%3Anbn%3Ase%3Asu%3Adiva-142205.
- Jenkins, Henry, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York, New York University Press 2006.
- Jørgensen, Ida Kathrine Hammeleff – Hanna Wirman, "Multispecies Methods, Technologies for Play", *Digital Creativity*, 27.1 (2016): 37–51.
- Katsiadis, Nicholas P., *Transforming Literary History into Romantic Myths in Comics: Neil Gaiman's Sandman, Alan Moore and J.H. Williams III's Promethea, and Mike Carey and Peter Gross's the Unwritten*, Doctoral Dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2019, www.academia.edu/download/60664286/Transforming_Literary_History_into_Romantic_Myths_in_Comics20190921-46434-n43bbi.pdf.

- Knurek, Jeff, *Engineering Coloring Book for Adults*, IEEE USA Books & eBooks 2018, ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/8395368.
- Leino, Olli Tapio, "Understanding Games as Played: Sketch for a First-Person Perspective for Computer Game Analysis", *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Computer Games 2009*, Oslo, Philosophy of Computer Games 2009, www.hf.uio.no/ifikk/english/research/projects/thirdplace/Conferences/proceedings/Leino%20Olli%20Tapio%202009%20-%20Understanding%20Games%20as%20Played%20Sketch%20for%20a%20first-person%20perspective%20for%20computer%20game%20analysis.pdf.
- Levinson, Paul, *New New Media*, Second edition, Boston, Pearson 2013. Penguin Academics.
- Manovich, Lev, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press 2002.
- Mantzios, Michail, and Kyriaki Giannou, "When Did Coloring Books Become Mindful? Exploring the Effectiveness of a Novel Method of Mindfulness-Guided Instructions for Coloring Books to Increase Mindfulness and Decrease Anxiety", *Frontiers in psychology*, vol. 9, 2018: 56. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00056.
- Mellier, Denis, "World Building and Metafiction in Contemporary Comic Books", *World Building: Transmedia, Fans, Industries*, Ed. Marta Boni, Amsterdam University Press 2017: 304-318. Transmedia: Participatory Culture and Media Convergence 2.
- Montfort, Nick, *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction* / Nick Montfort, Cambridge (MA), London, MIT 2003.
- Mukherjee, Souvik, *Videogames and Post-Colonialism: Empire Plays Back* / Souvik Mukherjee, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Packard, Edward – Granger, Paul, *Inside UFO 54-40*, Toronto – London, Bantam, 1982.
- Palahniuk, Chuck, *Bait: Off-Color Stories for You to Color*, Dark Horse Books, 2016.
- Palahniuk, Chuck – Fegredo, Duncan – Morris, Steven – Norton, Mike, *Legacy: An Off-Color Novella for You to Color*, Dark Horse Books, 2017.
- Parkin, Simon, "Meg Jayanth: The 80 Days Writer on the Interactive Power of Game-Play: 'Games Are About Pulling People into a World, Making a Space for Creativity and Building a Dialogue'", *The Guardian*, 10 Jan. 2016, www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jan/10/video-game-makers-meg-jayanth-80-days (accessed: 01/07/2020).
- Purdy, Megan, "The Die Hard Coloring and Activity Book Is Mostly Great", *Women Write About Comics*, 1 Jan. 2016, womenwriteaboutcomics.com/2016/

- 12/the-die-hard-coloring-and-activity-book-is-mostly-great/. (accessed: 05/05/2020).
- Rajewsky, Irina O., *Intermedialität*, Tübingen, Francke, 2002: www.gbv.de/dms/hebis-darmstadt/toc/100029086.pdf.
- Ead., "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality" *Intermedialités*, 6 (2005): 43–64.
- Rughiniş, Răzvan – Cosima Rughiniş, "Reading with a Touch of Gameplay: Gamified E-Books' Convergence with Classical Literary Worlds", *Gamification: Using Game Elements in Serious Contexts*, Eds. Stefan Stieglitz et al., Springer International Publishing, 2017: 139–52.
- Semel, Paul, *Exclusive Interview: Legacy: An Off-Color Novella for You to Color Author Chuck Palahniuk*, 11 July 2017, paulsemel.com/exclusive-interview-legacy-an-off-color-novella-for-you-to-color-author-chuck-palahniuk/ (accessed: 05/05/2020).
- Shannon, Hannah Means, *Doing Things 'Beautifully' – Chuck Palahniuk Talks Legacy: An Off-Color Novella for You to Color*, ComiCon, 1 Jan. 2017, www.comicon.com/2017/11/07/doing-things-beautifully-chuck-palahniuk-talks-legacy-an-off-color-novella-for-you-to-color/ (accessed: 05/05/2020).
- Sicart, Miguel, *Play Matters*, Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press, 2014.
- Steinberg, Marc, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan / Marc Steinberg*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.
- Sutton-Smith, Brian, *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997), Cambridge (MA) – London, Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Swineheart, Christian, *One Book, Many Readings*, 1 Jan. 2009, samizdat.co/cyoa/.
- Thorburn, David et al. (eds.), *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, MIT Press, 2003.
- Thoss, Jeff, *When Storyworlds Collide: Metalepsis in Popular Fiction, Film and Comics*, Leiden, Rodopi, 2015.
- Toma, Elisabeta – Cosima Rughiniş, "Playing with Herstory. Representing Femininity in Historical Video Games", *Proceedings of Playing with History 2016: DiGRA/FDG Workshop on Playing with History: Games, Antiquity and History*, 2016.
- Torkington, Janel, *80 Days (IOS): Next Generation Interactive Fiction*, Medium. 1 Jan. 2014, medium.com/ios-os-x-development/next-generation-interactive-fiction-80-days-379b9a2ad1c5 (accessed: 06/05/2020).
- Uricchio, William, "Historicizing Media in Transition", Thorburn – Jenkins 2003: 23–38.

- Varis, Essi, "Graphic Human Experiments: Frankensteinian Cognitive Logics of Characters in Vertigo Comics and Beyond", *JYU dissertations*, 2019, jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/63458.
- Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, et al., "Agency Reconsidered", *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory: Proceedings of the 2009 Digital Games Research Association Conference*, Ed. Barry Atkins et al., London, Brunel University 2009, www.digra.org/dl/display_html?chid=09287.41281.pdf.
- Wolf, Werner, *Intermediality Revisited: Reflections on Word and Music Relations in the Context of a General Typology of Intermediality* 2002, worldcatlibraries.org/wcpa/oclc/604577923.
- Wolf, Werner, "(Inter)Mediality and the Study of Literature." *CLCWeb - Comparative Literature and Culture*, 13.3, 2011.

The Author

Hans-Joachim Backe

Hans-Joachim Backe is Associate Professor at the IT University of Copenhagen. He holds a Master's degree and a PhD in Comparative Literature from Saarland University, Germany. He was chairperson of the ICLA Research Committee on Literature in the Digital Age, was a co-founder of the German Association for Media Studies' SIG on Comic Studies, and is chairperson of the Games and Literary Theory Conference series. His research focuses on game studies, comparative media studies, and literary theory.

Email: hanj@itu.dk

The Article

Date sent: 15/07/2020

Date accepted: 15/10/2020

Date published: 30/11/2020

How to cite this article

Backe, Hans-Joachim, "Beyond Dominance, Mixture, and Hybridity. On the Challenges of Hypercomplex Objects", *Transmediality / Intermediality / Crossmediality: Problems of Definition*, Eds. H.-J. Backe, M. Fusillo, M. Lino, with the focus section *Intermedial Dante: Reception, Appropriation, Metamorphosis*, Eds. C. Fischer and M. Petricola, *Between*, X.20 (2020), www.betweenjournal.it