Not that kind of Level: Metalepsis and Narrative Levels in *Pony Island* and *Doki Doki Literature Club*

Christopher Barkman
Swinburne University of Technology
John St, Hawthorn
Melbourne, VIC 3122
92148000
cbarkman@swin.edu.au

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INTRODUCTION

The narrative tradition of separating the 'telling' from the 'told' is described in Gérard Genette's Discours du récit (Narrative Discourse Genette 1979, 229) through its breakdown of storytelling into distinct narrative levels and the definition of intrusions between those levels as metalepsis. While this theory has been used to describe what occurs in films like *Adaptation* (Jonze 2002) and *Stranger than Fiction* (Forster 2004) (Milkos Kiss & Steven Willemsen 2017; Matthew Campora 2009), this paper applies Genette's theory to two recent metaleptic and experimental narrative games - *Pony Island* (Daniel Mullins Games 2016) and *Doki Doki Literature Club* (Team Salvato 2017). I also expand on Alexander Galloway's (2006, 34) brief mention of metalepsis in relation to nondiegetic machine acts. Both *Pony Island* and *Doki Doki Literature Club* (*DDLC*) embody what Galloway (2006, 36) refers to as "the play of the nondiegetic machine act" through "the various semiotic layers of the video game" in how they manipulate the player's expectations of the boundaries of the diegesis. They do this using narrative levels, rhetorical metalepsis and ontological metalepsis in relation to nondiegetic machine and operator acts with the potential goal of eliciting a sense of ambiguity in the player's comprehension of both video game's diegesis. In describing both these games through the lens of Genette's metalepsis and Galloway's gamic actions, a connection can be drawn between the way the structure of narrative levels operates in video game design.

Genette's (1979, 229) theory consists of two distinct narrative levels – the extradiegetic which encompasses everything that exists outside the storyworld's diegesis and the intradiegetic that includes everything within the storyworld itself. There also exists another level referred to as the metadiegetic (Genette 1979, 229) or the hypodiegetic (Marie-Laure Ryan 2004, Kiss & Willemsen 2017, 42) that exists within a narrative when a character on the intradiegetic level becomes a narrator themselves. This hierarchy of narrative levels is complicated by the concept of metalepsis, or what Genette (1979, 234-5) describes as "the intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into

the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe)". Several types of metalepsis exist – rhetorical metalepsis, or the brief intrusion of a literary narrator into the diegetic storyworld, and the more drastic ontological metalepsis. Occurring in films like *Stranger than Fiction* and *Adaptation,* ontological metalepsis occurs when the ontological divide between narrative levels is broken and "the two levels [become] so hopelessly entangled that [what is the primary fictional world] becomes a moot question" (Ryan 2004, 441).

Galloway (2006) borrows the term diegesis as it is used in film and literature to describe four distinct acts that are performed in a video game across the two axes of operator/machine and diegetic/nondiegetic. In describing nondiegetic machine acts he (2006, 34) suggests that they can elicit a "generative agitation or ambiguity – what Genette calls metalepsis – between the inside of the game and the outside of the game, between what constitutes the essential core of the game and what causes that illusion… to be undone". His conception of metalepsis in relation to video games can thus be described as occurring when nondiegetic acts, be they machine or operator, intrude into or are acknowledged by the game world. If we are to relate Galloway's diegetic/nondiegetic binary with Genette's extradiegetic/intradiegetic levels, then both *Pony Island* and *DDLC* perform disorienting acts of metaleptic intrusion between various narrative levels.

Pony Island follows the story of a mysterious individual playing an arcade game also called 'Pony Island' in a narrative device that creates a hypodiegetic level in the form of a game-within-a-game. This means that when the player begins tampering with the arcade machine's code, it creates a form of ontological metalepsis between intradiegetic and hypodiegetic levels and thus leaves the extradiegetic level intact[1]. By contrast, *DDLC* takes the form of an interactive novel dating simulator in which one of the characters becomes sentient and begins altering the game's code. This manifests in the game's machine acts taking control of what Galloway (2006, 12) describes as nondiegetic operator acts through the game manipulating the acts of starting a new game, fast-forwarding and other actions typically controlled by the player in the form of an intrusive and agitating form of rhetorical metalepsis. The game finally culminates in the extradiegetic level of the computer itself being intruded on when the player is encouraged to enter the game's files and delete the troublesome character directly. *Pony Island* and *DDLC* therefore exist as concise examples of how Genette's theory of narrative levels can be applied to video game design.

BIO

Christopher Barkman is a current PhD student at Swinburne University in the area of Media and Communications under Prof. Angela Ndalianis and Dr. Dan Golding. Christopher's research regards the investigation and application of complex/puzzle narrative theories typically reserved for film and television to video game examples with the goal of both creating a framework to understand the way certain game stories challenge sense-making and position the medium as part of the wider cultural shift towards complex and puzzling storytelling.

ENDNOTES

[1] It is worth noting that *Pony Island* also possesses several moments of rhetorical metalepsis when the game pretends to crash and co-opt the ability to send messages to a friend on the platform it is being played on.

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