Parallels and Interactions between Videogames and Literature: Analyzing Harlan Ellison’s I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream

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Abstract

Many people argue that stories can be experienced by audiences through very specific media such as films or books. This paper will instead introduce its readers to the contemporary and interactive medium of videogames, aiming to establish it as a form of art. In an attempt to prove the academic, as well as philosophical, value of videogames this paper compares Harlan Ellison’s award winning short story I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream (1967) with its 1995 videogame adaptation, in terms of plot, characters, narrative and the ability to convey feelings. Last but not least, it analyzes the hidden philosophy of videogames, shedding light on the different ways they can be “read” and answering the fundamental question: “Why do we play videogames?”

Keywords: literature, videogames, storytelling, Harlan Ellison, dystopia.

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Introduction

Storytelling has always been of great importance for humankind and an essential part of its nature even from primitive times (Yilmaz 2). Throughout the years, technology has provided us with various media in order to satisfy this need including books, music, cinema and, more recently, videogames. Gaming remains a taboo subject even up to this day, since most people consider it to be a childish hobby, unlike reading a book, and appear to be negative towards this specific medium of entertainment and storytelling. Despite the various voices of disapproval however, the gaming industry has developed rapidly and even surpassed the market value of Hollywood in a relatively short time according to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA 10).

Despite their disputants, videogames have even been considered to be viable teaching or educational media. For instance, Harry J. Brown considers the interaction between the player and the author as the pinnacle of creative thinking, while James Paul Gee argues that videogames can incorporate several beneficial learning principles (Brown 5; Gee 4-12). Many videogame companies have attempted to capitalize on this and have created “educational” games that defy the norms of both gaming and storytelling in an attempt to satisfy audiences and make them aware of the benefits of videogames for the development of younger people. These attempts, however, diverge from the norm that games simply spark the interest of the player.
without focusing on the learning aspect, resulting in harsh criticism in relation to their gameplay and plots.\textsuperscript{1} 

The aim of this paper is to dispel some of the existing prejudices, which reduce videogames to solely a medium of entertainment with insignificant educational value, and to provide deeper insight regarding this form of entertainment and the themes it conveys. The paper is divided in two distinct parts: in the first part focuses on the reasons behind the immense appeal of videogames, as well as the way they can be analyzed, while the second section draws parallels between Harlan Ellison’s critically acclaimed short story \textit{I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream} with its videogame counterpart.

Part 1: Gaming in depth

1.1 The need to play games

An important question that needs to be addressed is why some people have a seemingly intrinsic need to play videogames, no matter how childish they may appear to others. According to Scott Rigby and Richard Ryan, gaming researchers, psychology professors and authors of the book \textit{Glued to Games}, videogames are used in order to satisfy some of our internal needs. Based on the model they have developed — called Player Experience Need Satisfaction or PENS — each and every game you may play, or you may be interested in playing, will satisfy one or more of three different needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness (Rigby 15-80). I shall now provide a definition of each need based on how they are perceived by Rigby and Ryan.

1. Competence:

In close resemblance to Bernard Suits’ definition of videogames as “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles,” competence refers to our need for personal growth and development (Suits 55). One common element that all such videogames share is the fact that they appear to be challenging, in order to force the players to master all of the patterns given, to rise to the occasion, and to reach the next level. According to Rigby, “We have to believe that, although they are challenging, we \textit{can and will} eventually succeed” (Rigby 19). Examples of this case are arcade games like \textit{Street Fighter}, \textit{Donkey Kong} and \textit{Pac-man}, which relied on the players’ need to prove their mastery by maintaining a simple, yet effective formula.

The game presents the players with an obstacle — in \textit{Donkey Kong} for instance a player has to save the princess from the “evil” gorilla — and challenges them to overcome it. In order to achieve this task, the players have to develop certain skills like anticipation and master timing, so that they will be able to avoid fire and barrels that get in their way. If they are not competent enough, the game will punish them with the much feared “Game Over” screen. The same formula also applies to fighting games such as \textit{Street Fighter}, as

\textsuperscript{1} The moment-to-moment activity of the player within the game world and its content.
mentioned above. The *Street Fighter* series is notorious for its high level of difficulty, which means that only a limited number of people have managed to become masters of this particular fighting game. To highlight the immense impact of the series in the gaming community, we will have to address the fact that only a handful of players have managed to compete consistently at the highest possible level and that *Street Fighter* has remained relevant in the competitive E-sports scene, despite the fact that Capcom has not released a new game for more than a decade.²

However, even in instances where users are not interested in international competitions, they will have to become familiar with the patterns and the intricate combinations even if they simply want to finish the arcade mode. Naturally, a lot of practice is needed to achieve such high level of competence and this is where true satisfaction lies: proving dominance over a formidable opponent, whether this is the CPU or another player in an online match.

2. Autonomy:

Autonomy refers to our inherent need to have control over our actions or as Rigby states “have interesting choices and opportunities” (Rigby 40). Autonomy can appear in various sectors of our lives, for instance in sports or even in education, and videogames could not be any different. In videogames, autonomy can be established in multiple dimensions and in different ways. Even from the beginning of the game, the players are given the ability to choose their identity, which may include features such as race, gender, physical traits or even a unique set of skills.

Another feature of games that satisfy autonomy is their ability to engage the players in different activities and side quests, thus giving them more freedom in the virtual space. As will be analyzed later on, in Ryan’s model, a game can also have a forking narrative structure, which allows the players to explore the virtual world, acquire new skills and partake in various hobbies and activities. Moreover, strategy is another important factor that is used to satisfy autonomy, since it leaves the process of completing a task up to the players rather than forcing them to act in a specific way.

Last but not least, all of these elements are designed to exist in an Open World environment.³ As a result, they offer the choice of exploration and allow players to find the more appropriate course of action according to their playstyle. Unlike competence, autonomy is closely related with the so called “volitional engagement.” According to Rigby, volitional engagement is the internal desire of the player to keep moving by being completely immersed in the game through its engaging story and addictive gameplay (47).

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² Capcom began in Japan in 1979 as a manufacturer and distributor of electronic game machines. In 1983 Capcom Co., Ltd was founded and soon built a reputation for introducing cutting-edge technology and software to the video game market. Now an industry leader in the video game industry for 25 years, Capcom’s legacy of historic franchises in home and arcade gaming are testaments to an unparalleled commitment to excellence. For more information, see “Capcom.”

³ A game where players can move freely through a virtual world.
genres that focus on satisfying the need for autonomy to a great extent are Role Playing Games (RPG’s), Simulators (Sims) and last, but not least, Turn-Based Strategy Games (TBS).

3. **Relatedness:**

Relatedness is the final reason people become engaged with videogames according to Rigby and Ryan’s PENS model. Essentially, relatedness is the feeling of completion we get when we think that we matter to others and contribute to a cause or society. In turn, relatedness can be broken down into three distinct components: Acknowledgement, Support and Impact.

- **Acknowledgement** is the feeling that our actions are acknowledged by another person. **Support** is the desire to emotionally connect with another person, both cognitively and empathically, through common experiences. Lastly, **impact** refers to the impact that we have on the lives of others, which can be as simple as laughing at the same joke or sharing other common feelings (Rigby 68).

Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG) and Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas (MOBA) are usually the game genres more likely to sate relatedness, due to the fact that they team up the players with other people around the world in order to achieve a common goal, such as dominance over a boss or an opposing team. This, of course, may lead to strife, since most of the players are not willing to admit their mistakes, but there are some rare cases where online interaction among players develops into long-term friendships or even relationships.

Having provided information regarding our intrinsic drives to play videogames, I shall now turn to some of the more significant details concerning the issue of literature in comparison to gaming. However, much like buying a book, a videogame has its own price of admission: the game itself, and more importantly the medium through which the game can be played (Rigby 82).

**1.2 How to Read a Game**

A number of factors have to be taken into consideration when evaluating the way a videogame should be analyzed. Although videogames are cultural texts, similarly to films and books, the traditional storytelling rules do not necessarily apply to them due to the fact that they are designed to be “played.” Whereas in traditional storytelling media the audience is limited to the position of the spectator, in videogames the players have the ability to interact with the virtual world to various degrees. This way they are allowed to participate in the story and have a more active role rather than simply reading the given hypertext. That degree of interactivity however, also poses a
problem, since there are some genres, such as Text-based RPGs, that allow the players to interact with the game solely via written text, which is limited to predetermined commands. This raises the rather philosophical question: “Are videogames meant to be read, played or both?” James Newmark stresses this issue by arguing that the problem derives from our inability to specify “which experiences and products constitute a 'videogame’” (Newmark 9).

The inherent nature of videogames, as well as the vast variety of genres, has created a problem as to “how” videogames should be analyzed. As videogame studies started to become more popular among scholars, a great dichotomy was created between narratologists and ludologists, resulting in a debate that rages on up to this day (Newmark 91). The former group claims that videogames should be treated as literary works, focusing primarily on their narrative aspects (cut-scenes, introductions, hypertext), as they are omnipresent even when they are not clearly evident (Newmark 91-94; Kokonis 363). The latter group, however, supports that videogames should be analyzed as games, placing gameplay in the forefront, while downgrading the story elements and the messages presented by the creators, since they “cannot be constituted without the activity and action of the player” (Newmark 95). While both schools of thought have a degree of truth to them, they are flawed in a sense. This is due to the fact that they attempt to analyze videogames in terms of previously-existing media rather than forming a unique approach that takes every element of videogame narration and interactivity into consideration.

At this point, it is important to highlight the fact that game studies as a branch of study is still at a very basic level since, according to the University of Chicago, it was established in 2006 (Aarseth 1). As Kokonis points out in his chapter about computers and videogames, there is little to no academic analysis for videogames, despite the fact that they have developed an industry much greater than that of Hollywood in a relatively short time span (Kokonis 392).

Furthermore, the fact that videogames allow the players to interact in such a unique way with the virtual world and the storyline has led analysts to draw parallels with the analysis of other media, such as movies or even literature. In order to solve the open/closed interactivity dichotomy, literary scholar and critic Marie-Laurie Ryan has created two pairs of opposing concepts: internal/external interactivity and exploratory/ontological interactivity (Ryan 338-40). In an attempt to include all of the videogame genres, Ryan has introduced four contradictory levels of interactivity as follows:

1. **External-exploratory interactivity:**

   Certain “classical” hypertexts fall into this category, such as the electronic “novels” of Michael Joyce, Stuart Moulthrop, or Mark Amerika. The user can choose paths through the virtual space, but the space itself has no physical narrative setting. This type of interactivity is defined as exploratory because “the reader’s path of navigation affects not the narrative events themselves, but only the way in which the global narrative pattern… emerges in the mind” (Ryan 338-42).
2. **Internal-exploratory interactivity:**

In this category, “the user takes a virtual body with her into the fictional world, but her role in this world is limited to actions that have no bearing on the narrative events” (Ryan 338-42). Even though the users’ actions have no effect on the plot, they are still immersed through the virtual body (avatar) that they themselves have created. The players, as physical entities, are present on the story’s stage only as observers, while guiding their avatars in the virtual space. Examples of this type of interactivity are the videogames *The Last of Us* and *Assassin’s Creed*. In these games, the users play an internal role — concrete examples include Joel in the *Last of Us* or Desmond in *Assassin’s Creed* — but the game is structured in such a way that they must follow a linear narrative path. The course of the narrative is predetermined and straying away from it, if there is such a choice, usually halts the plot until the users decide to follow the indicated objective that leads to the progression of the main story.

3. **External-ontological interactivity:**

External-ontological interactivity suggests that the users are outside of the virtual world, but have some control over the story and the fates of the characters in the game. To be more specific, the decisions made by the players affect the storyline and the game’s conclusion. In this case, due to the fact that the users are external to the narrative, “the individual forking paths in the plot are… less interesting than the global pattern of their interconnections” (Ryan 338-42). Computer games that follow the god approach to user interactivity usually fall into this category and include games such as *Rome: Total War*, *SimCity*, and *The Sims*. Most, if not all, of these games attempt to immerse the users a little further by giving them a role to play in the game. For example, in *Rome: Total War* the players take up the role of a Roman Emperor governing their city, while in *SimCity* they play as the mayor of a fictional city. This internalization of the users’ role places these games somewhere between external-ontological and internal-ontological interactivity.

4. **Internal-ontological interactivity:**

In this final category, the users become a vital part of the narrative and have the ability to control their own fate by making decisions according to the laws of time and space that govern the virtual world. This category has expanded in recent years, mainly due to the fact that videogames have become more interactive and story based with prime examples being *Hand of Fate*, *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*, *Skyrim* as well as their online counterpart *Elder Scrolls Online*. Similarly to a book, the users flip through the first-person text to follow a branching-type narrative, and ultimately govern the path they will take through the different narrative possibilities. A concrete example of this

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9 These are games in which the users take on the role of an omnipotent being controlling the world’s destiny.
type of interactivity are the Massive Multi-Player Online Games (MMORPGs), where thousands of players interact over the internet in a shared virtual world. Players are actual characters who travel around a fictional realm and can either choose to follow the inherent storyline, as established by the game creators, or diverge from it and create their own set of goals and activities, thereby creating a completely generative/generated narrative. Another example, this time in an offline format, is the rather overlooked Hand of Fate, where the players are dealt a number of random cards, representing different elements of their playthrough, during the end of each of the game’s chapters. For the users of this game, the narrative experience emerges from their own interactions and relationships in the virtual world, thus creating a unique and personalized experience.

Having established the theory behind the ways to analyze videogames, as well as the reasons why people become so involved with them, I shall now attempt to put things into perspective by applying the theory to Harlan Ellison’s videogame I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream and comparing it with its literary counterpart.

Part 2: I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream
2.1 Plot and overview

Originally, I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream was a short story written by Harlan Ellison, first published in the March 1967 issue of IF: Worlds of Science Fiction. The story was met with critical acclaim, receiving a Hugo award in 1968, and has been re-released various times ever since, inspiring a radio play for BBC radio 4 in 2002, as well as a videogame under the same title.

Harlan Ellison’s story takes place in an alternate universe, where the Cold War never ended but actually developed into a full-fledged World War between America, Russia, and China. In order to gain a tactical advantage over their opponents, each of the nations involved created a subterranean supercomputer called Allied Mastercomputer (AM). AM, however, at some point became self-aware, developed its own personality and even redefined its name on the basis of “cogito ergo sum, I think therefore I AM” (Ellison 4). In Ellison’s story, each of the supercomputers represents a specific part of the psychic apparatus, as it is defined by Sigmund Freud: The id, the unorganized part of the personality structure that represents a person’s basic instincts and drives and motivates pleasure seeking, the ego, the part of the psyche that regulates the urges of the id via external stimuli, and the super-ego, which reflects the internalization of cultural rules, while also striving for perfection, spiritual fulfillment and idealistic goals (Lapsley 5-7).

Due to the fact that AM was not created in a stable social environment, its psyche was developed through war data, also referred to in the story as “Killing Data,” thus making it indulge in its primal urges to strive for human genocide. After redefining itself, AM soon discovers that it is constrained by its logistic code and that it lacks both creative and constructive capabilities, thus making it completely dependent on humans. This realization fuels AM’s anger, giving birth to its pure hatred towards
humankind. For this reason, it decides to enslave and genetically modify the five protagonists in order to torture them for the rest of eternity and annihilate the rest of humanity.

This is the point where the narrative of the book and that of the videogame start to diverge. In the original *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, the five main characters start a journey in an attempt to find some canned goods that have escaped AM’s sight. The finale of the story, however, leads to an all-round massacre with Ted being the only one to survive, but with no chance of redemption or salvation. The epilogue belongs to Ted, who is transformed into a “Smoothly rounded, with no mouth, with pulsing white holes filled by fog where [his] eyes used to be. Rubbery appendages that were once [his] arms; bulks rounding down into legless humps of soft slippery matter. [He leaves] a moist trail when [he moves]. Blotches of diseased, evil gray come and go on [his] surface, as though light is being beamed from within” and states that AM has won, despite their best efforts (Ellison 12).

For the videogame, Harlan Ellison decided to use the same outline, but tell a rather different story than the one outlined above. The game addresses the audience that has already read the original short story and acts more like a companion to the book. The cast remains the same, but in this scenario AM, voiced by Harlan Ellison himself, challenges both the player and the characters of the story to participate in a game for redemption. The player selects each of the protagonists and plays a different scenario with the final award being freedom in death and the end of torture for each of them. As Ellison describes it during an interview, “it’s a game of ethics, you will never win the game but you will learn about morals, ethics courage and friendship” (Ellison, “Harlan Ellison’s Watching 54” 2:25). This is partly true, since each of the characters suffers from a different deadly flaw that can be redeemed with the help of the player in order to “earn” the best or the less depressing ending for their playthrough.

The following part of the paper will provide a short analysis of each of the game’s protagonists who have been genetically modified by AM, and compare them with their literary counterparts.

2.2 The Cast of *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*

Nimdok is an elderly, ex-Nazi scientist, who not only betrays his parents to the regime in order to hide his Jewish heritage, but also conducts pointless medical experiments on helpless subjects. Although he does not retain any of his memories in his scenario, Nimdok is considered a kindred spirit of AM and has earned its respect and admiration. His story is considered to be the most controversial, due to the fact that it takes place in a fictional concentration camp. In order to avoid raising controversy, all of the Nazi symbols have been replaced with the letters “AM,” which also act as a way to establish AM’s superiority over its subjects in a similarly cruel regime. Furthermore, the references to real-life events are numerous as Ellison creates a scenario revolving around Jewish folklore and even puts Dr. Mengele in the game as an NPC and close friend to Nimdok, in order to create a sense of continuity between
the real world and the events of the videogame. In the game, the player is presented with a choice: either fall in line and conduct horrific experiments on seemingly insignificant and expendable NPCs, following the plotline of the book, or carve a new path, by taking their side and turning against Dr. Mengele.

**Ellen** has always been the writer’s favorite, despite her relatively forgettable role. In the book, Ellen is portrayed as a paragon of purity made into an insatiable sex slave to satisfy the needs of the rest of the group, often depicted either scared or crying in order to “get her way” (Ellison 3). The rest of the group considers her to be a treacherous and sneaky individual, who will not hesitate to betray them at any given chance. In the videogame, Ellen has undergone a radical change. Until the extinction of the entire human race, Ellen is described as an extremely charismatic and competent woman with an exceptional career. Ellen’s story is the most up-to-date, since it reflects on the theme of rape, which halts her career and creates her inherent fear of the color yellow. Unlike all of the other characters, she is the only one who has not committed an atrocity or has full responsibility for the state to which she has been reduced. Her overall story seems more like a series of unfortunate events and the player feels sympathy for her rather than resentment. Another unique twist in Ellen’s story is the introduction of a new mechanic for the player, since she suffers from panic attacks and is often too scared to follow the commands given by the player, simulating in this way the feeling of paralyzing fear and anxiety. In this case, the players have to delve into the paranoid mind of the character they are controlling and figure out new ways to overcome the obstacles posed by AM. Finally, in her scenario, Ellen comes face-to-face with a manifestation of her rapist and learns to overcome her fears by fighting back.

**Gorrister** is another character who has undergone a massive change in order to fit into the narrative of the videogame. Initially, in his literary depiction, Gorrister is a pacifist and an idealist serving a higher cause, but is reduced in the videogame to a listless and apathetic state, thus turning him to the exact opposite of what he originally was. Furthermore, Gorrister serves as a second narrator and carries out the exposition of the story in the book by providing a synopsis of AM’s rise to power in order to entertain Benny after his torture. In the game, Gorrister is suicidal due to the unbearable guilt of having had his wife committed to a mental institution where she allegedly took her own life. Gorrister’s scenario takes place in a zeppelin over a desert and revolves around the motifs of death, violence and apathy. As a means to emphasize the cruelty of his actions and enhance his guilt, he is depicted with a gap where his heart used to be. Near the end of his chapter, Gorrister learns that his mother-in-law, Edna, holds him responsible for her daughter’s suicide and tries to murder him. Gorrister has to face a hard choice: enact revenge for his lost wife or learn to bury the past.

**Benny** was once a brilliant, handsome, homosexual scientist, who has been transformed to an ape-like creature with gigantic genitalia that resemble those of a

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10 An NPC is any character that is not controlled by a player.
horse (Ellison 3). At some point, after AM’s modifications, his sanity was lost and he was reduced to a child-like state with a short temper and violent rage outbursts. Benny is the most heavily altered character compared to his original, short story counterpart. Although he retains his ape-like features in the game, Benny’s background is changed heavily. In the game, Benny is a demanding military officer, who does not hesitate to execute his comrades, if they do not meet his expectations in terms of combat ability or if they do not follow his orders. Throughout his story, there are many hints that suggest he cannibalized them in order to survive, despite the fact that he was provided with a choice. In typical Poe resemblance, Benny’s scenario places him in a stone-aged community, where the villagers worship AM as a god. Each day the villagers hold a lottery, similarly to Shirley Jackson’s story “The Lottery,” in order to decide who will be sacrificed to AM in exchange for food and protection. The villagers, much like Benny, obsess over food and eating, which constitutes an essential part of their culture. In Benny’s case things are more complicated, since AM provides him with plenty of food sources, but makes him unable to chew or swallow it without being in tremendous physical pain. In close resemblance to the book, AM has severely damaged his mind, but completely restored it in order for Benny to be able to think clearly during his quest for redemption. However, following the recurring motif of revenge, AM imposes a price for this generosity, as it cripples Benny’s legs, making him unable to act according to his thoughts. The trial that Benny has to face is the choice between showing compassion for another human being, in this case a mutant child that is chosen to be sacrificed to AM, or continuing his old ways and making the child suffer the same fate as previous tributes.

**Ted** appears as a sentient man and serves as the narrator of the story. He is younger than the others and claims that he has not been genetically altered. It is later revealed however, that he is paranoid, delusional and that he suffers from nightmarish hallucinations, which are probably a side-effect of AM’s genetic modification. Although he retains all of his characteristics in the videogame, Ellison decided to give him a new backstory in the game in order to provide more character depth and make his flaws apparent from the very start of his scenario. Ted appears to be a womanizer and a former con artist, who uses his charm in order to seduce women for his own pleasure and benefit. His paranoia is evident from the beginning of his chapter, due to the fact that he suffers a nervous breakdown when AM challenges him to solve the first overly simplistic puzzle. Unlike the previous characters, Ted is transported to a medieval castle in a scenario that closely resembles a fairytale. In order to redeem himself and Ellen, Ted has to discard his opportunistic past, while also refusing the easy way out through deals with shady characters and even the devil himself.

### 2.3 The philosophy and the importance of choice in *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*

Having briefly explored the background of the stories I shall now discuss the game itself. *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* is not a typical videogame or as Ellison states: “It’s not an arcade, where people just bang bang bang. It’s a game that is supposed to make you think. It’s supposed to disturb and upset you and unsettle you
and I don’t know of any other games that are like that” (Ellison, “Harlan Ellison’s Watching 54” 2:05). This is the reason the game requires the players to adopt a twisted sense of logic and step in the shoes of a sadistic, megalomaniac supercomputer to achieve even the most gruesome of endings, making them strive for success, while satisfying both their need for competence and autonomy.

The game also introduces some interesting mechanics, considering when it was released. A concrete example of this is the forking path narrative that leads to different endings depending on the player’s in-game decisions, thus satiating the need for autonomy. In order to evaluate the actions of the player, the game uses a simple, yet intriguing system called the Spiritual Barometer. In other words, every time the players decide to act kindly towards the other characters they are rewarded with a green tint in their character’s portrait ranging from a dark green to a lighter shade of green and reaching up to white to indicate a perfect playthrough. On the other hand, whenever the players react violently towards the NPCs or their character suffers physical damage, the portrait of the character turns red indicating a negative score.

The interesting innovation made by Cyberdreams is the fact that the game never judges the player for your choices, nor does it set a standard track for the player to follow. Instead, it makes the players rely on their instincts in order to complete the set of given tasks with the only feedback on their actions being the voice of AM, which will either express contentment or anger towards their achievements. Consequently, this means that the only person that can have an objective point of view for the players’ actions are the players themselves, since they will have to decide whether AM can be considered a reliable ally and a paragon for either morality or disarray and reevaluate their actions even as they play.

According to Kokonis, “games are like novels which train the reader’s intellect for critical thinking and they are like cinema which makes the reader more intelligent, enhancing perception” (10). A concrete example that can support this argument is the game itself, since it does not have any training session and assumes the players are already familiar with the generic point and click mechanics. This also means that the game addresses itself to a certain type of audience that is mature enough to comprehend the themes of the story and be critical towards their own actions as well as the game itself.

The sound sets the pessimistic tone of the story from the beginning and is acceptable for 1996 standards. In relation to modern standards, it is annoying and disruptive. On the other hand, the voice acting is top quality with Ellison stepping perfectly in the shoes of an evil supercomputer enhancing in this manner the feeling of immersion in his sadistic scenery. The plotline is introduced in an opening speech

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11 This is an in-game mechanic that evaluates the morality of the players’ actions.
12 Cyberdreams Inc. was a video game studio founded in 1990, based in California, USA (Barrows).
13 Constructs of rule or methods designed for interaction with the game state.
14 Apart from being the writer of the original story, Harlan Ellison, was also involved in the development of I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream the videogame. Ellison was the designer and creative director of the game, while also voicing the supercomputer AM.
about hatred, setting the menacing mood in a perfect manner, while also providing tiny bits of information about each of the main characters.

According to several analysts like Gehr, the key to success in attempts to convey emotions lies in the interactivity and the control factor that is considered essential in videogames, and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* does precisely this (Gehr 38). The game lets the player interact with the environment and provides new insight to grotesque themes, such as the Freudian theory of the human psyche, genocide, hallucinations, dementia, racism and cultural dogma. *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* has spread disparity among critics for this particular reason, creating an ongoing debate on whether the videogame can be considered “entertainment” in the traditional sense. In this case, the videogame tends to be more about the journey rather than the conclusion; it can cause the players to feel uneasy, sad and at times offended due to Benny’s blatant racism, while also showing them that an easy way out may be, at best, morally ambiguous. Finally, the ending of the videogame, much like the ending of the book may leave some players unfulfilled and dissatisfied, especially if they are not familiar with Ellison’s writing style.

2.4 The ability to convey feelings

Given the fact that *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* is one of the hardest games ever created, it is only logical to wonder why anyone would choose to “punish” themselves rather than breeze through a relatively short story. The answer to this question is the narrative, the ability to satisfy your intrinsic needs of competence and autonomy, but more importantly the ability to convey feelings. Reading the story may lead to disturbing feelings in the readers, however, it is the videogame that will put them in the same state of agony that all of the characters were created to feel.

Reality and illusion are closely related and at some points the players may feel that the game makes no sense at all. For instance, in Gorrister’s story the players will find themselves conversing with Edna, Gorrister’s supposed murderer, while also trying to recover the character’s mechanical heart that has been taken away from him. On paper this may feel a bit too far-fetched, but in the game the players can choose how to react to this, seemingly over the top, scenario. Of course, the characters are anything but relatable, since they have been tortured for 109 years by a massive supercomputer. However, the game tests the players in this way by drawing a parallel with reality. If we take a closer look, it is the players’ own device that tests their limits and becomes the manifestation of AM in the real world. Despite the fact that some parts of the game are designed to be nearly unplayable, the game is brutal towards the players and will force them to restart a certain chapter over and over again without providing any hints of what they did wrong, and that is how Ellison’s original idea comes to fruition and the emotions of the characters are perfectly conveyed. As one of the game’s producers, David Mullich states: “we tried exploring ways to create something that is truly interactive literature, otherwise there is no point in hooking up with creative geniuses like Ellison” (Ellison, “Harlan Ellison’s Watching 50” 3:05).

As the creative director, Ellison was significantly responsible for the artistic part of the game, allowing the players to see the world he has created just as it was
imagined. Ellison’s ideology manifests itself throughout the game with symbols and the occult being evident in every chapter. Focusing primarily on disturbing plotlines, *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* reveals the author’s views on the ugliness of the human psyche and touches upon topics such as insanity and the vagueness of human existence. This is perfectly portrayed in the way the author attempts to convey these feelings to the wider audience, since he forces the players to make morally gray judgement calls and then punishes them. In terms of narrative structure, the episodic elements of the game make its story initially hard to follow, but it also encourages the players to read the book in order to gain more details about the characters they are controlling throughout the course of the game.

Much like any other piece of literature, *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* the videogame, is not made to make you feel comfortable or to just kill your spare time. Ellison has created this sadistic videogame in order to make the users feel the anguish of the situation by making them play a game they cannot possibly win, trapping them in an endless struggle with their own devices, much like the protagonists of the short story. However, as Khalil Gibran has famously said, “Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls”; and this is the only motivation for the players to keep moving forward in order to complete the game.

**Conclusion**

*I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* is a concrete example of an author using modern, for the age, technology in order to provide deeper insight into their work and to reach out to a wider audience. Despite the fact that the videogame was not as successful as its literary counterpart, Ellison was hailed for this leap of faith since he managed to introduce a new type of audience to his work.

Casting his hatred towards videogames aside, Ellison created a place where reality and fiction intertwine by turning the players’ devices into AM, proving that videogames can act in tandem with literature to provide a more satisfying storytelling experience. *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, the videogame, takes advantage of the players’ need to prove their dominance over a formidable opponent, in this case the game as well as their device, and provides them with interesting judgement calls that will make them ponder over the morality of their choices long after they have finished the game. Concluding, this vicious circle of trial and error that starts the moment the players turn on their devices portrays perfectly the state of despair and agony the protagonists experience in the book, thus giving birth to Ellison’s Freudian nightmare.

As technology evolves, more intricate ways of storytelling are being sought and videogames provide one such solution. Their ability to provide a completely immersive experience, while incorporating elements from previously-existing media, have made them extremely popular in a relatively short time. Hopefully, this paper has provided a deeper insight into the subject, highlighting the literary, as well as the academic and philosophical value of videogames.
Works Cited


