Chapter 4

Many Happy Returns: Sameness in Digital Literature, Narrative Games, Adaptations and Transmedial Worlds

Seven hundred years after the rhapsode from the previous chapter successfully performed his epic, another poet is sitting in his room, finding his own way through the dactylic hexameter form, taming it to his own language. He wants to write a worthy sequel, but nothing seems good enough. He rewrites, he polishes, but time will catch up with him and he will actually die before the poem is finished to his satisfaction. Fortunately, it does not get burned as he had commanded, but goes on to become one of the most admired of all Latin literary texts. The name of the poet was Virgil and his work, *The Aeneid*, a poem that not only cements the direct connection of Rome to ancient myth but also celebrates the end of the chaotic civil wars and the birth of a new political system.

The Aeneid is actually a proper spin-off from Homer's epic poems, where a secondary character suddenly gets his own show. Aeneas, a son of Aphrodite/Venus and a mortal, is one of the less prominent Trojan warriors, not as competent in battle as the better-known heroes, so he does not appear for many lines in the original epic. Despite this, or maybe precisely because of it, he is the ideal blank canvas unto which Virgil can project the Roman virtues that needed to be exalted in order to legitimise Augustus' new reign and trace his lineage to divinity. The poem is a deliberate political operation, with as careful a honing of the intended target group as any contemporary Hollywood franchise. Structurally, it imitates both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and starts 7 years after the Trojan War, with which the audience needs to be familiar in order to situate the derivative work. This connection is taken for granted, which is a clever strategy. It taps the energy of the old canonic works and pours it into what should serve as the mould for Roman national identity. The first part of the poem covers Aeneas' journey home to Latium, and the second, the wars in his homeland. The themes directly connect to those which unfolded in the previous epics; there is meddling by the gods, battles, love, single combat and even a visit to the underworld. However, the new text's ultimate goal, the establishment of a Roman national

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identity based on virtue, requires that some crucial elements are modified. Not only are the gods here called by their Roman names, but the protagonist sets out to find Latium, the promised land, where the remaining Trojans can settle. Virgil, by the way, also invokes the muse:

> O Muse, the causes tell! What sacrilege,
> or vengeful sorrow, moved the heavenly Queen
> to thrust on dangers dark and endless toil
> a man whose largest honor in men's eyes
> was serving Heaven? Can gods such anger feel?[1]

Aeneas appears as a more modern heroic archetype than its homeric predecessors. He is on the losing side, a tragic figure with a burdened destiny because of the sins of his ancestors. When we first encounter him as he is fleeing from the disaster, he literally wishes he had died in the battlefield. This can be interpreted as an initial refusal of the heroic call, in Joseph Campbell's sense, but it also essentially means that Aeneas has an inner life as a man in conflict with what is expected of him as a hero. However, Aeneas is no modern antihero. As we will discover through the poem, the pious Aeneas always follows his duty.

Sameness and variation go hand in hand, for they need each other to be recognised for what they are. The new story succeeds in recreating the same old world of the Trojan War from the beginning, even starting with a storm at sea, where Juno convinces Aeolus, the king of winds, to help her destroy Aeneas' ships. Many perish, until the waters are calmed by Neptune and the hero sails further on to an unknown coast that will provide interesting plot developments.

I remember this beginning as satisfying, like a homecoming. The text had been assigned to my Latin literature class at University, and fragments were also used to practice translation. I was back at the perilous sea that was hostile to Ulysses in *The Odyssey* of my high school days, with vengeful gods as a familiar cast of characters. I could feel the same sense of purpose and adventure in the hero's strife to get to a promised land. To me, the long gap between the two works meant nothing, I even doubt that I was aware of it. There was a continuity in the world building, as if the two poems were seasons of a contemporary television series, separated by a few months of filming and post-production. However, as I got further along in my reading, the story began to feel different, and my translations, while better than the homeric ones, acquired an involuntary parodic veneer that my professor deplored. I am not sure how it started. It could be that reading about the context of Virgil's work on the poem, I was put off by the realisation that it was a sort of propaganda operation. In those days, I firmly believed that art should only exist for its own sake. I think, however, that it was not only a consciousness about the conditions of production, which made me think less of the

[1]The text is provided by the Perseus digital library, based on D. West's translation from 1990. https://classicalanthology.theclassicslibrary.com/2012/07/31/aeneid-1-1-33/.

work. Something had changed in relation to the violent, chaotic world of old. This hero was wiser and less selfish. Judging from my own commentary, scribbled in pencil along the sides of my old book, it seems that Aeneas' piousness, oft-praised in the text, provoked me and that I was irritated by the way he always put duty before his own desires, going as far as to dump Dido in a really weaselly way. I realised that the praise was meant to inspire the reader to emulate this kind of strong civic conscience, and for some reason (maybe just youth), this put me off. Maybe I should read it again now, to find out what new Deleuzian insights I might gain; the text is the same, but I, like Heraclitus' river, am not.

Just as *The Aeneid* relates to Homer's epic poems, this chapter is a sequel to the previous one. Where I previously have focused on form and structural repetition in relation to stories, I will here move on to content, understood as short word sequences that get repeated verbatim (like the verses that the rhapsode needs to remember in his recitation) as well as bigger semantic units such as plots or characters, and big scope story-worlds with their own laws of physics, flora, fauna, history and philosophy. This is a very muddy terrain, as Julie Sanders notes when she explores the semantic range of adaptation: 'variation, version, interpretation, imitation, proximation, supplement, increment, improvisation, prequel, sequel, continuation, afterlife, addition, paratext, hypertext, palimpsest, graft, rewriting, reworking, refashioning, re-vision, re-evaluation (...) mash-up, remix, hack and sample'.[2] For me here, all the elements of this semantic family are related but not equivalent, and their very chaotic parentage can again illustrate how repetition is never a straightforward affair.

In this chapter, I will concentrate on three repetitive content modalities that all build and capitalise on the encyclopaedias and emotional attachments of audiences. First, I will consider the literal iteration of *short content units*, exploited in rhetoric, poetry and literature, which has also given rise to combinatorial storytelling genres where repetition is necessary for aesthetic effect, like hypertext, visual novel games or loop narratives of different kinds. Second, I move up towards bigger elements, no longer textually literal but certainly recognisable as concrete units, like specific plots or characters, that evoke the centuries-old discipline of *adaptation*. And finally, at the broadest repetitive scale, I will focus on *entire fictional worlds*, which function as familiar homes to be again inhabited, and which storytellers can expand with new stories, characters, timelines and all sorts of additions across media.

Short Sequences

Poetry is born from music, and repetition (of sounds, of words or concepts) is a way to create rhythm and different kinds of semantic effect. In fact, repetition is the oldest rhythmic strategy in any kind of wordplay across languages, where

[2]I would not call of these concepts and operations adaptations. For me, adaptation has a much narrower range, as it will become clear in a few pages. However, her paragraph is very useful to give an idea of the complexity of this conceptual area. Sanders (2016, p. 5)

both poetry, word games and baby talk share repetition as meaningful element.[3] Think of the exhilarating effect of hearing the same sentence in the chorus of your favourite pop song.[4] Poetry can also change your mood and stimulate affect and cognition through repetition and other figures of speech. Consider, for instance, a poem like *The Raven*, by Edgar Allan Poe, or better yet, listen to it. There are several good versions on YouTube, or you can read this aloud yourself[5]:

> Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
> Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore –
> While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
> As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
> "'Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door –
> Only this and nothing more."

Feel how time is stretched and suspense created through the rhythmic repetition of the sounds: dreary/weary, napping, tapping, rapping, rapping, tapping. And note the closing 'nothing more', which gloomily reverberates with the most repeated word in the poem 'Nevermore'. It will be introduced a bit later and appears a total of 11 times, always closing a stanza, as the ominous answer to the poet's questions as to when he will recover hope. Now go and listen to the whole poem before returning to this text. This insistence on repeating the exact same short units works wonderfully in poetry and song, as introduced in Chapter 1, but is not tolerated in the same way in other communicative genres that use longer sequences of text as their medium.

As Aristotle already noted, if repetition appears in a text, like a speech, it must have a rhetoric effect.[6] Repetition goes against the pragmatic ideal of language efficiency, as, for instance, prescribed by the Gricean maxims, and therefore, must always add something. The listener/reader benefits both in terms of communication (more nuanced, more informative…) and perhaps even aesthetic pleasure, otherwise, the extra processing effort, and maybe annoyance at hearing the same words, would not make sense. If we consider prose genres, it is hard to bear repetitions that are longer than a sentence or two, but it can still be used to intense effect, like the growing intensity of each 'I have a Dream' as Martin Luther King recites his famous speech for hope. His message gets clearer and clearer, bolder and stronger with every repetition, like a hammer hitting a nail, making us hopeful. In fact, poetry and rhetoric share a number of repetitive figures of speech

[3]As explored by José Antonio Millán in Tengo tengo tengo (Millán García, 2017).
[4]DeNora (2000, p. 55).
[5]You can, for instance, decide by yourself if you prefer the voice of Christopher Lee or that of Christopher Walken, who have very different rhythmical reading patterns.
[6]Mammadov et al. (2019, p. 5).

that have for many centuries been identified as artful ways of signalling emphasis: alliteration, anaphora and epistrophe.

Longer text genres can also take advantage of this kind of amplification, but it needs to be very carefully measured out to avoid saturation. A good example is Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where the sentence 'So it goes' gets repeated more than a 100 times, whenever there is a mention of death (bold typeface is mine)[7]:

> And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she was turned into a pillar of salt. **So it goes**.[8]
>
> And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden. **So it goes**. . .[9]
>
> Martin Luther King was shot a month ago. He died, too. **So it goes**.[10]

There are many deaths in the novel, the highest tally coming from the bombing of the city of Dresden, which kills 135,000 people, but there are also individual deaths and more abstract deaths. A detached attitude towards death is also a key element of the philosophy of the Tralfamadorians, an alien race that can experience time as simultaneous and not linear. The protagonist Billy Pilgrim is abducted by them and becomes a kind of prophet to them. 'So it goes' is both a tragic and banal expression in the novel. It chills us to the bone every time it appears. The many deaths become flattened by this sentence, all made equally small, meaningless and unavoidable. The short phrase points to both the need of the living for moving on and the futility of trying to accomplish anything of value. For some readers, the sentence can act as a sort of anaesthesia, desensitising them to the suffering of others; others can see it as a wise reminder of our mortality, stoically preparing us for our own inevitable end; and yet others can become indignant upon its indifference to human suffering. There is not a critical consensus on what exactly the sentence *means*, as simple as it is, and this is good. It succeeds as a rhetorical device, adding extra value to the decoding process, so pragmatic relevance is ensured, but it also succeeds as an aesthetic device, creating ambiguity and pleasure along the way. You can also use phrase-repetitions in a more prosaic but equally effective way, for characterisation: 'A Pound of Flesh', 'Barkis is willing', 'The name is Bond', 'Scooby-dooby-doo'. We associate these sentences with their characters and almost look forward to them saying them.

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[7]Vonnegut, K. (1967). *Slaughterhouse-Five or the Children's Crusade*. Dell Publishing.
[8]Ibid., p. 19.
[9]Ibid., p. 87.
[10]Ibid., p. 182.

Somehow the sentences encapsulate a central character trait or dilemma, so they become iconic. Recognition is pleasurable.

This would not be the case if the unit to be repeated was a whole paragraph, or an entire page in a novel. Most likely, we would think that it was a mistake, the printer having perhaps messed up the manuscript provided by the author. And yet, there are some genres of digital storytelling that make use of unit repetition at a larger scale than a phrase. Unlike print literature, digital formats take advantage of the non-linearity of the medium, so some pieces of context can be reused and called forth in different contexts in various ways. I will here look at hypertext and visual novels to illustrate this.

Digital storytelling has always been tied to repetition in one way or another: from the hypertext works and interactive fictions of the 1980s and 1990s, through the electronic literature experiments of the last 30 years, to the explosion of computer game genres with a focus on narrative structure. In all ergodic genres, where reader/player activity is key, repetition is often an important aesthetic tool, especially in more lyrical works.[11] Through repetition, readers can be forced to pay attention to specific elements of the text, be it small fragments or bigger sections. Slight variations make things appear in a new light, and even exact repetitions are fruitful when seen in a new context; maybe the second (or third) time around, the reader will understand something else.

In the 1990s and early noughts, hypertext was an exciting novelty, seen by authors and digital theorists as the interactive future of literature. Hypertexts are fictional networks where units of texts (called nodes) are connected to each other through links, which the reader actively chooses in order to move around the network. It can be thought of as a sophisticated version of the *Choose Your Own Adventure Books* for children, and even though links are widespread now, as the basic organisational unit of the Internet, it was a novelty then. Branching structures are also the basis of mainstream computer game genres like adventure, roleplaying or visual novels. The challenges of creating a multiplicity of interesting stories while at the same time allowing for a reader's choice have been vigorously discussed in the field for many years, and there are strong arguments as to the best way of describing the different kinds of networks that can appear,[12] and even the degree of configurative freedom allowed for readers.[13] Here I am interested in how the repetition of actual text units can create rewarding meaning even though the units themselves are rather long compared to the examples from poetry or speeches considered above.

Afternoon (1987) is one of the most celebrated hypertexts from this first wave of digital creativity, probably the best known of them, judging by the sheer amount of academic references (Fig. 1). A lot of readers have traversed its paths, trying to piece together the story of Peter, who sees a wrecked car on his way to work and wonders if the covered bodies by the side of the road could be that of his

[11] Aarseth (1997).
[12] See, for example, Bernstein (1998) or Ryan (2001).
[13] Aarseth (1997) and Ryan (2011).

ex-wife and his son.[14] Are they even alive? It is then, at the very beginning of the story, that the reader encounters this node: ‘I want to say I may have seen my son die this morning’. The sentence will keep reappearing through the reading, as a memory that Peter cannot suppress. He goes to work, and we follow him around in his daily life and his musings about other characters, their mutual infidelities, memories, dreams and reflections about life and the nature of storytelling. It might not sound very exciting, but at the time, it was exhilarating to be able to choose and steer a literary narrative, even though this work and others from the first wave of digital literature are very much weighed by the choice to make their theoretical concerns explicit. If branching stories were a species, we could say that hypertext was the literary high-brow offspring, whereas visual novels and other kinds of games are the popular culture progeny. But let us return to *Afternoon*, because as we read, trying to figure out what is the secret at the centre of this story, a few nodes keep returning, like the ‘I want to say I may have seen my son die this morning’, which mimics the way in which Peter cannot forget what he has seen and feels guilty about not stopping with his car.

It is a feature in *Afternoon* that the reader cannot see which words are links (words that yield, as Joyce calls them) to be activated, so we have to advance by trial and error. That is, we click on words but we do not know if we are activating a default traversal sequence or if the word we clicked takes us to a specific branching choice.[15] Moreover, it also happens that when we see a node for the second or third time, clicking on the same word will take us somewhere else, as if links became clickable only when we already had seen them once, so repetition is a way to identify new paths. This, combined with the reshuffling of nodes, so that they make part of slightly different chains of meanings as they are paired with different nodes around them, means that repetition is the essential aesthetic feature of *Afternoon*.

In order to understand this disorientation and interpretive work, let us consider a node which only contains the words:

<What shall I call you?> I ask
<nausicaa>, she says calmly

This text does not follow any development from the previous screen, so this feels out of context in my first encounter: Who is this woman the narrator is talking to? Is she the same that two nodes before had said: ‘You could call me Giulia’, and are these their real names or some sort of roleplay? I cannot even be sure that the narrator is the same as in the previous node. The narrator in *Afternoon* is generally pretty unreliable (he does not know everything, but he also manipulates), which has become a common trope for interactive narratives in the more popular video game genres. Jill Walker has identified the uncertainty of re-interpreting nodes we re-read in *Afternoon* as an example of Nietzschean

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[14]Walker-Rettberg (1999).
[15]This is very uncommon in hypertexts. Most other authors made their links explicit.

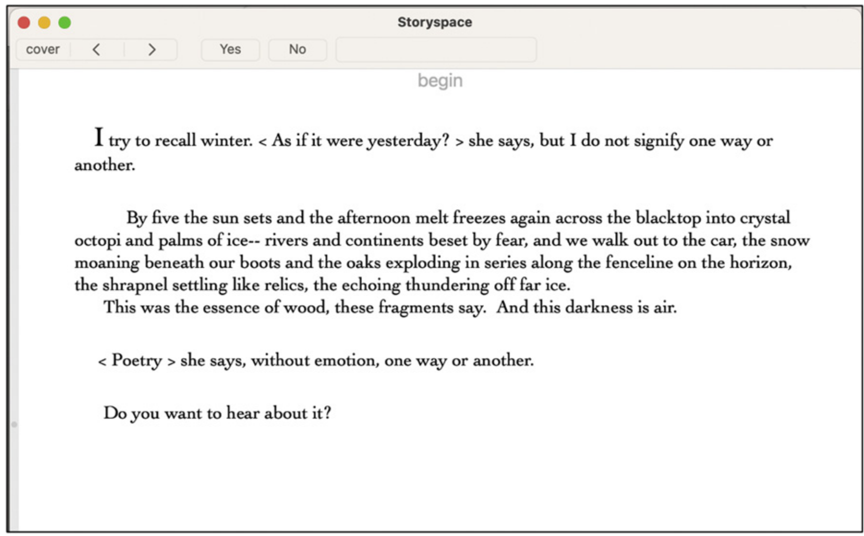

Fig. 1. A Screenshot of *Afternoon*.[16]

repetition, which is based on difference, and has the function of both disorienting the reader and helping them find patterns. Reappearing nodes are both familiar landmarks and ghostly appearances since their turning up in a new context means that they are not exactly what they were before.[17]

The branching structure of hypertext is so widespread now, as the basis for all web content, that it has lost its aesthetic strangeness. It has been incorporated into a number of more popular genres, where audiences are asked to put the story together themselves. A recent example is the film *Bandersnatch* (2018), the Netflix experiment on interactive storytelling, which is often compared to computer games.[18] *Bandersnatch* has a branching structure, and the spectator is invited to make choices while watching the movie. Some of the choices are inconsequential (should the main character eat Frosties or Sugar Puffs for breakfast?), leading to the same next scene. But other decisions will take the viewer down different paths, opening up for alternative stories and eventually different endings. Many of these endings are dead ends; in some, the main character dies. The film gives viewers the opportunity to 'go back' and take another decision at a key point in order to try to find one of the more satisfactory (longer/more complete) narrative paths through the story. The film cleverly thematises its own interactive nature and the topic of choice, since the plot revolves around the main character struggling to finish

[17]Walker-Rettberg (1999, p. 12). She also notes how *Afternoon* contains 'false repetitions', where most of the words of a node will be the same, but there can be a variation, which contributes to the uncertainty and ghostly appearance of the text.
[18]The film was made as a special episode for the dystopian series *Black Mirror*.

programming a video game that adapts the legendary *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, raising questions of free will and the nature of reality.

In *Bandersnatch*, traversing the branches and looking for answers is the point of the viewing session: is the main character living a series of parallel lives? Has he got a way to control the spawning alternative worlds and find truth and success in the end? As a textual artefact, the film deals with choice both at a semantic and structural level, so that there is a satisfying aesthetic overlap of these categories. The characters and the viewers will both be in doubt: is this real? Who is making the choices? Is there a way to go back and choose again? At some point, the whole thing becomes very metaleptic, and the puzzle is so cleverly composed that plot and structure become completely imbricated, making it doubtful that this structuring method would work as well with any other theme.

As it is, the film showcases some of the problems of branching storytelling and the indiscriminate repetition of sequences:

- Some choices feel inconsequential
- Some endings feel random (not justified by how the choice was framed)
- The endings have clear 'values' so there is not a lot of motivation to explore different paths

Despite the initial buzz, *Bandersnatch* has not created enough enthusiasm to make this genre finally take off.[19] I argue that these problems have to do with the film fighting against its own repetitive nature, that is, insisting on the multiplicity of endings as its main purpose and aesthetic advantage, instead of exploiting repetition in a more productive way. The film's obsession with foregrounding interactivity and downplaying repetition is only viable because the very idea of interactivity is the theme of the film, but it would not work with any other kind of plot. In this, *Bandersnatch* is not alone. The way that digital storytelling has been theorised tends to frame the uniqueness of the experience as its highest value (a sort of holy grail of non-repetition), but in truth, the strength of both *Afternoon* and *Bandersnatch* is not that they produce a story that is different for each reader/

[19] *Bandersnatch* is not the first interactive movie to be produced by Netflix. They have made a few of what they call 'interactive specials' mostly based on existing franchises like *You Vs Wild* or *Minecraft: Story Mode*. There have been many interactive movies since Radúz Činčera made the first one, *Kinoautomat* in 1967, which was operated with the steering of a human moderator. It is symptomatic that this first movie also thematised its own structure, since viewers had to choose ways to avoid catastrophe, which ended in the building burning anyway, as a commentary of humans not really being able to control their destiny.

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viewer because this cannot happen, as everybody traverses the same paths in very much the same way. They both show great promise of fruitful repetition, of how longer textual units (nodes and whole scenes) can be 'reused' within the same text, since they gain renewed significance every time they turn up. *Afternoon* is more cyclical, and the reader can decide themselves when to stop, while *Bandersnatch* has clearer paths that need to be explored separately and endings that are clearly marked as more narratively satisfying, exactly like the looping games of Chapter 2.[20] Their real aesthetic value is thus relational, and dependent on the fact that the different paths are tightly controlled by the authors of the works, and reader interactivity is limited to occasional binary choices.

In digital media theory, the issue of interactivity has been heavily debated, often with the underlying assumption that it is desirable to have as much of it as possible in order for new media to distance themselves from the tyrannic linearity of old formats. Marie Laure Ryan writes that:

> I would like to argue that digital texts are like an onion made of different layers of skin, and that interactivity can affect different levels. Those who regard the existence of interactive stories as a *fait accompli* are satisfied with an interactivity that operates on the outer layers; those who regard interactive stories as "an elusive unicorn we can imagine but have yet to capture" (...) want interactivity to penetrate the core of the story. On the outer layers, interactivity concerns the presentation of the story, and the story pre-exists to the running of the software; on the middle layers, interactivity concerns the user's personal involvement in the story, but the plot of a story is still pre-determined; on the inner layers, the story is created dynamically through the interaction between the user and the system.[21]

Her distinction is very helpful for us here in connection to repetition, for if the sequences are fixed, and the repetition orchestrated by the authors of the system, then interactivity is, in fact, only simulated. But my point here is that this does not necessarily pose a problem, for the variety is not in the generation of an infinite number of different stories, tailored to each and everyone of us, but in the different meanings that we can get from the same subset of nodes, because the value of the experience is in putting them together. Computer games have been better at framing this advantage, or maybe they are just blessedly free of post-modern hype.

Narrative computer game genres include adventure games, action adventure, roleplaying games, survival horror... Here I will focus on Japanese Visual

[20]'Save the Date' and 'Force Code'.
[21]Ryan (2011, p. 37).

Novels,[22] more specifically the subgenre of Otome games.[23] Visual Novels/Otome games have a rather static gameplay: they do not require any other input from the player but that of reading, and once in a while choosing a narrative path that will eventually bring forth an alternative ending. As such, the games are closer to literature or *Choose-Your-Own-Adventure* books than to action-heavy game genres. The text is always framed on top of beautiful background images and character designs, and typically, key moments in the story will be rewarded with the unveiling of a special image (CG) or animation, depicting the situation in a more pictorial manner. Thus, completing the stories also means collecting a series of images. Most of these games have a very prominent aesthetic use of sound, as they have evolved to include specially composed music, and the dialogue lines are voiced by well-known *seiyuu*.[24]

This repetitive genre operates upon the premise of several replays, that is, their story can only be fully experienced through a thorough exploration of all the narrative possibilities. In Otome games the alternate routes are linked to pursuing different male characters as love interests. This might sound like an immoral predicament, but it nonetheless allows the playing character access to very varied sources of information about the game world as well as the possibility of empathising with very different points of view. Games labelled as Visual Novels are more story-heavy and do not necessarily include any romance, although some, like *Collar X Malice*, *7Scarlet* or *Norn9 Var Commons* blur genre divisions.[25] The plots and settings vary, but there is a preference for mystery, detective, science fiction or supernatural stories, catering to popular tastes.

In the game *Collar X Malice*, I play the role of Ichika Hoshino, a young police officer charged with helping the citizens of Shinjuku, an area of Tokyo under lockdown following a series of violent crimes by a terrorist group called Adonis. Even though I am a junior member of a very big department, and am usually only allocated to small tasks, I am for some reason at the centre of this mystery. A few days ago, I was kidnapped and woke up with a collar around my neck that is directly connected to the terrorists, who are able to talk through it and issue threats and orders. The collar cannot be removed or it will inject deadly poison into my neck. I must keep this connection secret while I toil away to find out why I have been targeted, how to take the collar off and stop the chain of crimes that will eventually lead to a catastrophe baptised as 'X Day' by the criminals. Tonight, I am watching a horror movie with Kei, my secret agent boyfriend. I do

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[22]Visual novels are generally considered to have been born in 1983, with the launch of *Portopia Renzoku Satsuji Jiken* (Yuji Horii) directly inspired by western graphic adventures.

[23]Otome means 'maiden' in Japanese. The origin of the subgenre of Otome is dated back to *Angelique* (Keiko Erikawa), from 1994.

[24]Japanese voice actors.

[25]Visual novels branch out into many related genres, and all together make for a solid subculture of branching storytelling, including eroges, dating sims for men and the fact that their mechanics have been incorporated into other hybrid genres such as roleplaying games like *Persona 5*.

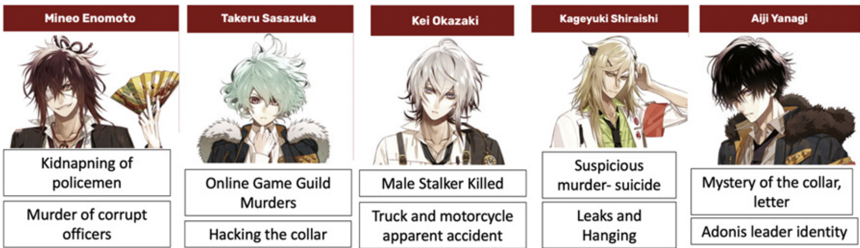

Fig. 2. Some of the Different Criminal Incidents Investigated in Each Route.

not like horror movies, so I hide under the blanket while he pats me on the head; he thinks I am cute. We have made up after an argument, where I discovered that he had a plan of dying while protecting me in some sort of self-redeeming mission. I have told him that I do not want him to die, and I would rather he lived, with me. But I am not sure he listens, and to be completely honest, I do not really mean it. He is rather self-absorbed, and although his tragic past is supposed to make him heroic, I actually miss the lighthearted dorkiness of my previous boyfriend, Mineo, whose route I finished yesterday and who now treats me like a stranger. Which of course I am because every time I restart the game, the non-playing characters lose all memory of our interactions, no matter how passionate they were. Only I remember. And I will have to romance all five main guys in order to get to the bottom of the mystery, since each route reveals important information needed to piece the story together (Fig. 2).

Collar X Malice forces its players to go through the same overall story five times.[26] We could say that the *fabula* is always the same, but the *syuzhet* changes with every narration and point of view, focusing on the different events which each character is privy to. Slowly, the player gets a full picture, and the different focalisations are a source of pleasure, like in the four interconnected novels of the *Alexandria Quartet* by Lawrence Durrell.[27]

Other game genres offer even more openness through the use of simulations, natural language commands or even a database structure instead of a set of predetermined paths. This latter kind of narrative structure is purely fragmented, and repetitions are thus initiated by the user themselves, in search for meaning. An example of this (more open) kind of narrative is the indie game *Her Story*

[26]At least, there is also another extra story following the discovery of the identity of the terrorist group leader, and each of the routes has multiple endings.
[27]The distinction between fabula and syuzhet comes from Russian formalism and has been used widely in narratology and film theory. It refers to the difference between the chronological order of events (the story as it happened) and the way it is told (with omissions, temporal changes etc.) There are slightly different understandings in Propp, Shklovsky or Bakhtin, but the overall point is the same (Tomashevsky, 1973, p. 268).

(2015) developed by Sam Barlow. *Her Story* is a database of 271 short videoclips that are fragments of the seven interviews where the police interviews a woman about a crime she might or might not have committed. The user can only access the videos by taping keywords which will summon them from the database. From the beginning, it is clear that there is something strange about the woman's testimony, and it is up to the player to continue looking for clues until they are satisfied that they have figured out what is going on. Any more information about the plot would ruin the story for you, so I will not say what the solutions are, or even if there is a solution. Like in hypertext, the player is encouraged to stop when they think they know, even if they have not seen all the videos. Repetition in this case becomes more a matter of fact-checking, as we suddenly might remember something that the woman said in a past video and want to see it again armed with the new information. While playing, I made a list of keywords on a piece of paper, and wrote small summaries of what the videos said. I kept going back and forth, as if it was a research project and I was coding people's interviews looking for academic gold. Here, I was watching the same clips not because I especially enjoyed the performance of the actress (although she is very good), but because I needed to, in order to put the puzzle together. Repetition becomes a strategic necessity and can only cease when the story has been revealed. But this is not an exclusive feature of computer games.

There is a specific genre of fiction that thrives on using the exact repeated fragments as narrative device, not as a source of interpretative pleasure like in the examples above, but as intra-diegetic punishment for the characters, or rather, usually only one character. I am referring to time loop stories in which a character is literally trapped within the same narrative sequence over and over again. There are many examples of this trope, both in literature, film and video games, but possibly the most iconic one is the film *Groundhog Day*, the story of the grumpy weather journalist Phil Connors (Bill Murray), who continues to wake up to the same winter morning in the small town where he had been sent to cover a festival.[28] He is the only one experiencing the time loop, as all the other characters just go about their regular lives, nonchalantly repeating the same movements and lines over and over, as if they were NPCs in a roleplaying game.[29] The story arch is about Phil trying to break the loop by attempting all sorts of strategies, and occasionally falling into despair and bouts of dark behaviour. Here, repetition is the enemy to be conquered, which only happens when Phil begins to pay attention to the apparently banal details of his life in Punxsutawney. He starts listening to people, getting to know them and their lives, gradually developing empathy and even falling in love, which ends up breaking the curse.[30] There is obviously a redemption subplot unfolding in the film, a spiritual awakening of sorts where Phil moves from a very selfish position to opening up to the world and others.[31]

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[28]Columbia Pictures (1993).

[29]NPC means Non-Player Character, and is a typical abbreviation in computer games.

[30]I am trying to not spoil the stories I write about in this book, but I am assuming that no one hasn't watched this iconic movie. If I am mistaken, my apologies.

[31]Daughton (1996).

The interesting thing for me here is that Phil's growth is facilitated by repetition. When the world is offering absolutely no stimuli, because everything is always the same, he must make an effort, look inwards and try to understand other people. Repetition liberates Phil from himself, so he can carve another path to act in his life. The many repetitions and his new attention to minimal variations actually create narrative suspense: what will he see/do today? The time loop can be understood as a metaphor for our daily lives, often buried in routines we do not even question. What would we learn if we paid attention?[32]

More recent time loop movies are less contemplative and more strategic about the characters working to break the time loop, like the comedy *Palm Springs* or the science fiction film *Edge of Tomorrow*, which unfolds in the very different setting of a future Europe overwhelmed by an alien invasion.[33] William Cage (Tom Cruise), an army PR officer with no combat experience, gets sent to take part in an attack towards the invading forces as disciplinary punishment. The attack is a spectacular failure, with all human forces getting wiped out. Cage dies in action, as he gets covered in the corrosive blood of an alien he has killed. But a second later, he wakes up again at the beginning of the previous day, and has to re-live the same events. His attempts to warn his superiors backfire, since no one in the repetitive story world believes his story. Like Phil in *Groundhog Day*, Cage seems to be the only one trapped in the time loop. Eventually, he finds another soldier, the war hero Rita Vrataski (Emily Blunt), who is also conscious of the time loop. They start collaborating to defeat the aliens: she trains him for battle and shares all the information she has uncovered. Over the course of the same day, repeated hundreds of times, Cage learns by trial and error (which here means death) what is the best possible way to act at every turn, minutely choreographing his action route through the battlefield. In this way, the film is an enactment of video game mechanics. Vrataski and Cage collaborate to solve the mystery of the time loop and in the end manage to destroy the aliens, who are the obvious enemy all the way through. However, Cage also needs to change himself. Along the way he becomes not only more proficient in battle but also more creative, empathic, brave and dependable. He grows into a hero. *Edge of Tomorrow* is task-oriented, and Cage's progress through it thematises the trial-and-error dynamics of a video game session as we saw in Chapter 2. Here, the point is that knowing exactly what is coming can liberate the hero's energy to find out what to do next. The repeated sections are not shown in full to the spectator. Once the point has been made, the film cleverly avoids real-time repetition of all the scenes, indicating they are passing with just a couple of seconds of footage in more and more staccato compositions, knowing all too well that watching repeated long sequences is as unbearable for the spectator as for the heroes themselves.

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[32]I have written about feeling trapped in a time loop in the lockdown enforced by the authorities when the corona pandemic was at his highest in 2020. *Groundhog Day* features in this article as an annoying impossibility since I was unable to break free from any of the routines imposed by the situation (Tosca, 2021).

[33]Warner Bros. (2014)

To summarise the many different threads touched upon by this section: repeating a short sequence in a text calls attention upon it. This generates different effects according to the formats. In poetry, repetition makes rhythm and music; in speeches, it helps drive an important point home; in novels, it highlights the importance of a motif or theme; in hypertexts, it emphasises the passages which the reader needs to reinterpret; in Otome Games, it offers different pathways to piece a complex story together; in time loop films, it allows for the character's learning and developing, and perhaps the audience with them. This is not meant as an exhaustive catalogue, there are many other forms and nuances, but it illustrates a wide range of themes, genres and modalities that demonstrate that repetition is much more than noise.

Adaptation

As we move up in scale regarding the size of the content elements to be repeated, the idea of literal repetition must be abandoned. In the middle layer, I will consider the repetition of plots and characters, in order words, what is usually known as adaptation, and has become a discipline of its own anchored mostly in literary and film studies, although cultural issues also arise.

Adaptation refers to texts that have been re-written and are presented again to the public. It can happen within the same medium (for instance, the novel *Eligible*, by Curtis Sittenfeld is an adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen) or across media, where the 1995 BBC adaptation of the same Austen work, starring Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle is one of the best known renditions.

We could consider adaptation as a form of translation, across languages, modalities or perhaps simply times and dominant discourses. A translation is never objective or straightforward, and any form for adaptation will include many creative choices, even when the aim is to reproduce the original work. Like musical variations, each individual translation focuses on different aspects while still attempting to be faithful to the same meaningful core. We can illustrate this going back to our pivotal epic poems. Think, for instance, of the many ways to translate the ambiguous term, πολύτροπος (*politropos*), that describes Odysseus at the beginning of *The Odyssey*. Literally, it means 'of many forms', but this is still rather open, so it has been made concrete in English translations from different times as, among others, 'the man for wisdom's various arts renonwn'd', 'resourceful man', 'man skilled in all ways of contending', 'man of many ways', 'man of twists and turns' and 'a complicated man'.[34] Which one is *your* Odysseus? In my youth, I used to see him as an extremely clever problem-solver, the MacGyver of the ancient world. Later, I have come to think less of him, and am troubled by his duplicity and his domestic situation. He does indeed carouse with changing lovers while his wife is stuck in Ithaca, fending off usurpers to ensure the

[34]These translations of *The Odyssey*, respectively, by Alexander Pope (1725), E.V. Rieu (1945), Robert Fitzgerald (1961), Richmond Lattimore (1965), Robert Fagles (1996), and Emily Wilson (2018).

survival of the kingdom. None of the translations above can encapsulate my less favourable opinion of Odysseus, and I would probably propose a new one if I was charged with that commission. As you can see from the range of variations, translators interpret *politropos* as a quality or a flaw, stressing different nuances in between, sometimes leaving the moral qualities of the word undetermined, others attempting to explain what those could be. The interpretative reward for a returning reader (or spectator, if this was a film) resides in perceiving the subtle details, perhaps even in disagreeing. Thus, a translation, like any other kind of adaptation, invites a double process or reception, where we consider the two related texts at once, although one of them can of course be enjoyed without knowledge of the other.

Adaptation is also the most straightforward way we have to produce media content, as it is evident every time a new platform emerges into the existing media ecology and needs to get going before having found its own aesthetic conventions: the radio dramas of the 1920s were based on theatre and novels; the early interactive fiction, *Zork*, was inspired by preexisting roleplaying games like *Dungeons and Dragons* and so on.[35] This happens with everyday storytelling too. Most people do not invent a new story every time they need to put their kids to sleep, but most likely narrate their own version of whatever folk tale they remember, or their children ask them to repeat. If we hear a good story, fiction or not, we are bound to re-tell it, share it with others whom we think will enjoy it as much as us or who might be able to use it in their own lives: 'Did you know that David won over Goliath even though he was much, much smaller?'. We might even embellish the story a little bit, amplifying it or adding some elements, pruning others, adapting it to our audience. Artists do the same thing, for it is impossible to re-tell a story without somehow appropriating it in smaller or greater measure. In this way, we can probably safely assume that the stories that survive through the centuries are those that get told over and over. Do they become less worthwhile as they age and mutate slightly? A good story is a good story, no matter how many times it is told, and it will always be new to someone. The question seems preposterous, and yet, it gets complicated if we consider the issue of authorship and how its understanding has evolved through history.

Many of the stories that get told and retold have no recognisable single author, they are 'no one's' or rather 'everyone's'. For instance, the European fairy tale of *Red Riding Hood* can be traced back to the folklore and oral tradition of several countries/languages, and has been retold in many different ways and across various media (text, paintings, films, computer games…), but they are all recognisable as versions of the same story, with returning plot points, characters and endings. Not all the elements might be present in the same way in all the instantiations, but enough will be so that we can identify the story as the same one. In fact, even changing a crucial element, like a happy ending into a tragic

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[35]Infocom (1977).

one, will only make sense precisely because we know it is a variation of the original schema, as we will explore later. Some of these versions have authors, like Perrault, Grimm, Roald Dahl or Angela Carter, but we cannot identify the origin of the tale for sure. Many 'old' stories operate like this. Folk tales, myths, fables, legends... they are part of a shared repository of stories that serves as an inexhaustible pool for collective creativity. There is a certain tolerance for these stories being picked up again and again, as they acquire a near-scaffolding quality that allows them to be used as blueprints to tell other stories in more modern times, as we have seen in Chapter 3.[36]

However, adapting or retelling suddenly takes on another character when there is an identifiable first version with a named author, even if they also were inspired by others. Let us consider the tragic tale of Carmen, that has passed through several authorial hands and perhaps has become a myth in its own right. When French romantic author Prosper Mérimée was travelling in Spain, he heard the real story of a woman who was killed by a jealous lover. The tale impressed him so much that he was inspired to write the short novel *Carmen*, but he threw in a good dose of exoticising, dangerous beauty, black eyes, knives and all too proud men.[37] He also made the assassinated woman into a passionate gypsy and her brawler lover into a soldier fallen in disgrace, introducing new tragic social elements.[38] Mérimée's compatriots, dramatists Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, adapted the story into a mediocre comic opera libretto, but fortunately, the musician commissioned was Georges Bizet, who managed to create a brilliant score. Even though the genre was supposed to be lighthearted, the initial reception was catastrophic, as the scandalised Parisian public judged the story to be amoral. Not too long after though, the opera started gaining popularity as audiences became fascinated by the violence of Spanish passions. It ended up becoming the most popular French opera ever, but Bizet, who died 3 months after the opening, never found out. There are now more than 50 film adaptations of the story, and the character of Carmen, the *femme fatale*, has become an archetype recognised around the world. *Carmen* has been the source of heated ideological battles that

[36]As I write these lines, Netflix has launched the film *The School for Good and Evil*, which incorporates old fairy tales for a new YA take on a story of friendship and proving yourself.
[37]Mérimée (1845).
[38]Mérimée scholars have noted that his fascination with gypsies was not only a product of his travels in Spain but was also shaped by his reading of books, among them George Borrow's *The Zincali*, and possibly by a poem by Aleksandr Pushkin. It is not entirely clear what the real story was, which local historians have attempted to throw light upon on several occasions (see, for instance, Rodriguez Gordillo, 2012 or Martín de Molina, 2017). Mérimée's version in the short novel seems to be an amalgamation of different anecdotes: there was indeed a jealous soldier who killed his lover (a dancer), there were smuggler women collaborating with bandits in the mountains, there was also a nobleman in love with a worker from the cigar fabric whom Mérimée knew personally and finally, his diary reveals a (to him) shocking encounter with a young Spanish woman in a tavern. Their conversation, as recorded in the diary, is very similar to the dialogue with which Carmen meets Don Jose for the first time in the novel.

still can incense audiences. Spanish directors have tried to de-exoticise and culturally reappropriate it, and more recently, a production of the opera has changed the ending so that it is Carmen who kills her lover (in self-defense), and not the other way around, an artistic intervention looking at the topic of partner violence through a critical lens.[39] Who has the right to decide how the story should be told? Who owns Carmen? Is it the short novel or the opera libretto that generates the archetype? Is there an unknown, but real Carmen, buried in the pages of history? Is the story French, Spanish or universal? With every repetition, someone else has appropriated the story for their own means.

Unravelling dilemmas like this have occupied adaptation scholars for decades, and they treat each further appropriation with caution. The question of originality has indeed been at the centre of the field, so that relations to an urtext are always carefully traced and demonstrated through rigorous analysis. This perspective tends to favour the older text, typically a literary source that gets adapted, for example into film, while the newer renderings cannot be anything but inferior.

This enduring attitude is surprising if we consider one of the inaugural texts in the field: the essay Laocoon by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, from 1766, which deals with the relation of the visual and the textual arts. This text is the first time that someone makes a case for art forms to be judged according to their own premises. For the longest time, the idea of mimesis, that art had to imitate nature, had dominated, so that the art form that somehow managed this best (painting, which for Lessing covers all visual arts including sculpture) was considered superior to the rest. That is why poetry and prose had to compensate for their 'shortcomings' by presenting elaborate descriptions that recreated reality as faithfully as possible. Lessing shows how painting and poetry each use their own medium to create art differently: painting uses form and colours in space, and poetry, sounds in time.[40] They cannot therefore be expected to do things in the same way. Lessing has liberated poetry from the need to imitate painting, and new kinds of poetic expression arise. His essay is also important because it starts paying attention to what today we might call the affordances of each medium, liberating content from its formal realisation. The underlying idea is that content then can be successfully represented/recreated in any medium, and that each medium will do it in its own way.

Such an argument might sound obvious to our hypermediated ears, but amazingly enough, the field of adaptation theory has been deaf to this realisation for a long time, and instead been preoccupied with establishing a moral discourse of 'fidelity' to the superior original text. More recent scholarship has challenged this perspective. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, insists on the idea that the new text also has its own value and even own agenda, so that we cannot assume that it will always be conveniently subservient to the original text: 'Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication. And there are

[39]This production was put up in Florence, in 2018, directed by Italian Leo Muscato.

[40]He does not use this word, which is a more modern understanding of how meaning is realised. A medium is, for instance, image, sound, text and so on.

manifestly many different possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying'.[41]

Indeed, Hutcheon advances the adaptation field, moving from the text-to-text 'literature as superior' position, and articulating the creative value of intertextuality, with numerous examples of adaptations that reinterpret, challenge and renew older texts. I was inspired by her commentary on the work of author Priscilla Galloway, who adapts mythical narratives for children.[42] Galloway thinks that these valuable stories cannot be accessed without a 'reanimation', so her endeavour is to retell them in a way that can engage contemporary audiences.[43] Despite its zombie connotations, *reanimation* is a good word because it shows how old stories and characters get a new life so that they also can communicate to us today.

Along the same ideological lines, Julie Sanders proposes that adaptation can be seen as 'a form of collaborative writing across time, and sometimes across culture or language', in a dynamic conception of text that can be traced back to Julia Kristeva's proposition of intertextuality.[44] Her *Adaptation and appropriation* shows how our culture's obsession with originals is in fact connected to the copyright system and property laws. In former times, like Shakespeare's era, people and authors were much more open to borrowing and imitating one another. In fact, imitation was part of regular schooling and understood as practice to develop proficiency with different text genres, as we will see in Chapter 6.

Following Deborah Cartmell, Sanders proposes three categories to understand adaptation, which all make explicit how repetition is never neutral, but always adds a new intentionality:

(1) Transposition: it relocates source texts in new ways (cultural, geographical, temporal...), to bring them closer to the new audiences' frame of reference. It can also change the text's genre. For instance, Baz Luhrmann updates Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in his film of the same name, where the original text plays out in an extravagant modern universe seen through the prism of Luhrmann's trademark "red curtain aesthetics".[45]

(2) Commentary, comment on politics of source text, or the new adaptation, or both. The impact of this adaptation is dependent on the audience knowing the older text, like how the 2000 film *Mansfield Park* makes explicit how the British colonies success is built upon slavery in a way that critically interpellates the original novel.

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[41]This quote is from the second edition: Hutcheon (2012, p. 7), but Linda Hutcheon had already made this point in the first edition from 2006.

[42]Among them, her book *Aleta and the Queen* (1995), centred around the women of *The Odyssey*.

[43]Hutcheon (2012, p. 8).

[44]Sanders (2016, p. 60).

[45]Cook (2019).

(3) Analogue. A sort of reinvention, exemplified by the *Clueless* film, which is loosely built upon Jane Austen's *Emma*, keeping a lot of the plotlines and character functions, even if the characters get new names and traits. The setting and script are original, so the analogue adaptation is less close to the source text than the transposition, although it can also involve similar relocation elements.

Sanders proposes a distinction between adaptation and appropriation, where appropriation does not signal back to the original text as clearly as adaptation, and is more clearly generating a whole new cultural product that can actually be a sort of 'hostile takeover', where the original is completely revamped.[46] Both adaptation and appropriation are in this way not mere repetitions.

To illustrate more closely how modern adaptation practices work, we can keep on following the trail of Jane Austen. The Emmy award-winning web series, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, or TLBD, is a 100-episode work broadcast on YouTube that adapts Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.[47] The story is told by Lizzie herself, who makes videos mostly in her room (in Vlog fashion), on and off accompanied by her sisters, a friend and other characters.[48] Most events happen offscreen and are therefore either narrated (or reenacted) by Lizzie, who also interacts with viewers in Q&A (question and answer) episodes. Other characters have social media accounts and post their own videos, so we get to see their perspectives and versions on events. In fact, the hype around this series was greatly helped by the transmedial activity of all the linked accounts and platforms. Now, only the videos remain, so the experience of watching them is much more static and contained, although it can still give a good idea of the kind of pleasures offered by this format.

Lizzie's videos are repetitions, part retelling, part reenactment. As she explains, they always take a starting point on something from her everyday life, which she talks about directly facing the camera. These anecdotes are often 'acted out' with Lizzie and other characters impersonating the people talked about. This is usually done in a lighthearted parodic fashion, which allows the actor to use a more formal, scripted tone. In this way, the parody works as a way of establishing a *contract* with contemporary audiences that can accept old-fashioned language and behaviour because they are presented with ironic distance. That is, for instance, why we never see Lizzie's mother, who is always impersonated by someone else (mostly Lizzie) so she is almost exclusively reduced to her outdated obsession with marrying her daughters off. Parodies are not for everyone though. Darcy's earnest character for instance does not really fit with such duplicity,

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[46]Sanders (2016, p. 26).

[47]The series is produced by Jenni Powell and was distributed in *YouTube* through its own channel in 2012 and 2013. The producers went on to found the company Pemberley Digital as a result of the success of the series.

[48]A *Vlog* is a video blog. In the beginning of the 2000s, this expression was used to distinguish video blogging from textual blogging. Now, most people talk about *blogging* without specifying the medium, and video blogging is the dominant form.

although he at some point impersonates his friend Fitz, who acts as a comic relief character. This is not 'slice of life' unadultered footage, but the artificiality of the videos does not matter, because it is a premise of the format that there are several meta-layers of retellings and commentary on top of the original story. Modern repetition is often about media containing each other, as we will explore in Chapter 6. The story world is adapted to our present, where the female characters go to university, find jobs and can have sex before marriage. Character traits are modernised, too, so that, for instance, the scoundrel army officer George Wickam, who seduces the youngest sister, Lydia, and makes her elope with him in the novel, becomes here a swimming instructor that coerces her into making a sex tape about to be shared online. Events can also take on more contemporary shapes: a tea visit becomes a party where people drink alcohol and trash the house, or a letter from Jane becomes an exchange of 'care packages' that can be boxed/unboxed on camera. *TLBD* is more media saturated, fast and colourful than *Pride and Prejudice*. The result is an entertaining *transposition*, in Sanders' terms, where not only the semantic level is relocated to the future, but just as importantly, the chosen media format radically alters the relation between narrator, characters and audience. The novel is told in the voice of a third person omniscient narrator who has access to the characters' inner lives, but the source of focalisation is mostly Elizabeth Bennet. This narrator occasionally comments ironically on the characters and the situations, allowing Jane Austen to let Elizabeth make a fool of herself; her misjudging others' characters becomes a source of narrative tension and learning, both for her and the reader. In contrast, the *YouTube* series, being told in the first person, naturally conflates narration and focalisation, so that Lizzie only tells us what she knows or speculates about. *TLBD* chooses to maintain the humorous glint of *Pride and Prejudice*, but now it is Elizabeth who has to carry all the irony, so she comes across as rather detached in her reflections and interactions. There is less compassion and possibly also insight in Lizzie, as compared to Elizabeth, at least by the end of the novel. This is not to say that Lizzie is callous, but that the format, based on comic retellings and reenactments, does not allow for heartfelt confessions. It would be ridiculous in this context to look at the camera and show real affection or sadness, too raw and unpolished, a display of low media literacy,[49] since ironic distance is rampant on *YouTube* and has even been considered a defining characteristic of postmodernism.[50] In that way, *TLBD* is a child of the times.

However, as successful as it was, the *TLBD* recipe might well be outdated already, maybe even more than *Pride and Prejudice*, securely comfortable in its 'old medium' status. Pemberley Digital, the producing company of *TLBD*, has suffered for this in their own business model. After *TLBD*'s success, they went on

[49]Although the 'authentic' style is a feature of other genres in YouTube, like the confessional, see Dekavalla (2022).
[50]Hutcheon (1987).

Fig. 3. *Pride and Prejudice* as Shojo Manga, by DALL-E and me.

to produce vlog adaptations of other classic works (like *Emma*, *Frankenstein* or *Little Women*), but they were not as popular.[51] One explanation could be that the *Pride and Prejudice* story is simply better suited to the online video format because of the focus on the heroine and the confessional style. But maybe it is simply that the timing is no longer right, and the media ecology has readjusted. That is, when *TLBD* launched in 2012, it still fitted within the existing vlog culture of YouTube, but this too has moved on. Nobody makes videos like this anymore. Now, audiences are used to the more fragmented and amateurish look and feel of TikTok videos, so the scripted monologues of Pemberley's adaptations are not fresh. They might still be an innovation compared to text or film adaptations, but our expectations as to the aesthetics of online video have shifted dramatically. Digital media aesthetics are evolving fast, and this degree of media convention instability might be one of the most poignant characteristics of adaptation in our time, where the known story is practically the only safe anchor, as we find our way through a maze of shifting platforms, modalities, framings and audience expectations.

Jane Austen's works will no doubt resurface in the media of the future too, since, through periodic repetition through the years, they have become part of the canon of 'very adapted texts', which Sanders identifies as a group of specific

[51] *TLBD* videos had often more than half a million viewers, some episodes even over one million. *Emma Approved* has mostly between 100,000 and 200,000, *Frankenstein* under the 100,000 and *March Family Letters* rarely over 20,000.

authors including Shakespeare and Dickens. These works seem to occupy an intermediate position between being just delimited works and the status of literary archetype. They continue to appeal to us, as more and more people have experienced one of the previous versions. Maybe we can even pretend that new media forms cannot be considered mature until they have tried their forces with the adaptation canon. Just as we wonder if Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* can be as good as they say, we might also expect that someone will soon find the perfect recipe for channeling Jane Austen in *TikTok* or an AI image generator, in a sort of combinatorial enthusiasm where stories, platforms and storytellers can shape things in different ways (Fig. 3).[52]

This adaptive exuberance is a matter for rejoicing:

> Adaptation and appropriation, we might add – supplementing, complementing, coming after Derrida and Darwin, as it were – are all about multiple interactions and a matrix of possibilities, about different versions of things. They are, endlessly and wonderfully, about seeing things come back to us in as many forms as possible.[53]

In this middle ground, repetition goes hand in hand with variation to make adaptations endlessly interesting. We began the section by considering how translations engender polysemy, and continued with examples from different genres to illustrate how the successive variations upon an original theme enrich and widen its scope. Adaptations are never neutral, they appropriate, reinterpret, update, contest and even reject.

Transmedial Worlds

The last category expands on stories at an even bigger scale, when the repetition is not limited to plot or character (although both can be part of it), but at the top layer of vast fictional universes that can house a multiplicity of stories. In the case of the Ancient Greek epics, the multiple re-tellings through the ages have enriched them so much that they have become a story-world with a reproducible topos and ethos, an entire fictional-mythical universe where innumerable side stories can unfold. Story-worlds are a specific instance of sameness, understood not as literal unit repetition, but as a more structural concept where elements and patterns become recognisable as being similar to something else, or fitting into a particular worldview. Here, familiarity morphs into repetition and back, as some elements are very clearly repeated, such as a specific use of language that identifies characters by their epithets, and others are more vague or open to interpretation. Isolated fragments function as prompts for our imagination (a Corinthian helmet

[52]This is a 2021 film adaptation of *Macbeth* directed by Joel Coen, with Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand as protagonists.
[53]Sanders (2016, p. 212).

in a book cover) transporting us to the fictional world and invoking the relevant interpretive frameworks in an instant.

Together with Lisbeth Klastrup, I have researched and published about this topic for some 20 years, so I am not about to repeat myself too much here.[54] Our key proposition is to look at these fictional universes as imaginative constructs shared by audiences and producers, that is, not focus on one single product as 'authentic' but more on the common experience of a vast fictional world. Since the focus is on the world and not on any particular plot or story, we have proposed three concepts to describe and understand the essence of the said world, their *worldness*: mythos, topos and ethos, that is, the foundational stories, history and myths, the space and places, and the belief systems that organise sociality. Such a world can be inhabited by many characters, each with their own story, and it can be expanded nearly infinitely, adding new characters, plots or timelines, across a number of platforms and modalities. What is repeated here is the whole setting, so transmedial worlds are a growing mould that always can generate new stories.

In our work, we have tested our concepts in analyses of transmedial worlds like *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*, also incorporating Japanese media mix cases. We have looked at how these worlds are recreated and reproduced in comics, films or computer games, among other products, and how each new instantiation both expands and slightly modifies the shared image of the world in audiences and producers. Transmedial worlds are always work in progress, and they motivate audience engagement again and again, although of course it is difficult to predict when they will be a success. The entertainment industry is keen on establishing recognisable transmedial worlds, in this context most often referred to as *IP* (Intellectual Property) or *franchises*, as they ensure continuous revenue for years. I would argue that the strategic development and nurturing of franchises has been one of the main driving forces of our current media industry, who rely on audiences tolerating, perhaps even craving, a certain amount of repetition. Film is the best example of how the ubiquity of repetitive strategies turns into a continuous search for and exploration of the most productive transmedial worlds.

Looking at the 2022 Worldwide Box Office listings, we can see that out of the first 20 top grossing movies of the year, most are repetitive in one way or another, with only four movies whose screenplay was originally written (*Elvis, Nice View, The Lost City* and *Nope*).[55,56] The rest are three sequels, five adaptations and eight franchise installments, most American, some Chinese[57]:

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[54]Lastly in our joint book, *Transmedial Worlds in Everyday Life* (Tosca & Klastrup, 2019), where the essence of our approach is explained and unfolded.

[55]IMDBS: https://www.boxofficemojo.com/year/world/.

[56]I am writing this in October, maybe it will change by the end of the year, specially due to the Christmas season.

[57]A sequel can of course morph into a franchise if more and more products keep being added.

- Sequels: *Top Gun: Maverick, Water Gate Bridge, Sonic the Hedgehog 2*.
- Adaptations: *Uncharted* (video game), *The Bad Guys* (childrens' books), *Bullet Train* (novel), *Too Cool to Kill* (Chinese version of a Japanese film), *DC League of Super-Pets* (comic book)
- Franchises: *Jurassic World Dominion* (Jurassic Park), *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Marvel), *Minions: The Rise of Gru* (Minions), *The Batman* (DC), *Thor: Love and Thunder* (Marvel), *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore* (Harry Potter), *Lightyear* (Toy Story), *Morbius* (Marvel).

Sometimes there are fluid lines between adaptations and franchises, and even though they are not equivalent in terms of world building, I will consider them together in this section, since my focus is on how the medium of film relies on 'tried and tested' formulas rather than risk new developments: the same story, the same characters or the same world.[58] I can feel my own underlaying prejudice here, between the lines. My point is not to judge a whole industry though. While blockbuster films are the flagship of the business, there are many other kinds of mid-budget or low-budget productions where other creative rules apply. Still, that the top industry level is dominated by repetitive practices says something about the changing cultural role of cinema in our time. This is what everyone, world-wide, is watching: a comfortable return to well-known worlds with some (hopefully thrilling) new developments. Adaptations have always been present in film, but scholars talk about a 'franchise era' from 2001 on, defining franchise as 'the expansion of a single intellectual property (IP) into different texts'.[59] When considering how producers develop their franchises, Fleury, Hartzheim and Mamber distinguish between multimedia (simply adapting material across media) or transmedia (developing pieces of the same story puzzle) strategies, drawing on Henry Jenkins idea of transmedia as more organised and complementary. At this point, and with the increasing complexity of storytelling conventions, with higher and higher intertextuality, I would argue that it is difficult to distinguish between the two. I am here more interested in the reasons behind this overwhelming use of repetition. In their book, the authors offer different explanations, with the economic one being prevalent. Blockbuster films are so expensive to make that producers need to ensure stakeholders that there is an existing public (and therefore revenue that ensures a return of their investment) even before the first line of the screenplay has been written. In other words, it is a mere question of industrial survival, which the authors trace back to the Hollywood studio era and the accelerated standardisation of filmmaking. In a way, the film industry is reacting to television, where a lot of innovation in terms of themes, plots and characters happens these days. Big budget films have specialised in spectacle and extended world building. Franchises attract more international audiences than

[58]Sometimes adaptations become franchises, and franchises include adaptations in their ecology of products.
[59]Meikle (2019) and Fleury et al. (2019, p. 1).

tent-pole movies,[60] so there is a better possibility for reaching foreign markets.[61]

Kyle Meikle has proposed five dimensions to understand the franchise era of endless repetition (adaptation and transmedial alike)[62]:

(1) Quantity. There are more and more adaptations, across more different media than ever, establishing increasing intertextual connections.
(2) Legality. While previous periods were less worried about owning the actual IP (for instance, adapting texts that were out of copyright), there is now both an interest in reinforcing the owned IPs and a draconian legal system in place to manage them.
(3) Interactivity. An increased number of products that extend franchises into media that require playful user participation, such as computer games.
(4) Materiality. Franchises have become increasingly focused on toys and other kinds of physical merchandise.
(5) Juvenility. Meikle notes that there is a disproportionate share of juvenile content, with franchises growing both from children and YA texts, but oriented towards the general public.

This analysis points to an increased level of professionalisation that is making American franchises closer to Japanese media mix in terms of corporate development of strategies for extending the life of successful IPs.[63] From the audience's perspective, this abundance of self-referential texts means that their beloved franchises are everywhere: in their breakfast cereal, on their t-shirts, on streaming services and social media. Their constant re-apparition, in various guises, ensures that we never forget them. Meikle recovers the wise words of Marsha Kinder, who already in 1993, reflected about the consequences of the intense proliferation of the same content, so that 'eight-and-a-half-year-olds find themselves gazing into a "Lacanian mirror" in which the imaginary signifier "is not static or stable, but dynamic and processual . . . constantly moving backward and forward in time and constantly shrinking and growing – like Alice in Wonderland or Through the Looking-Glass"' Transmedial worlds offer a familiar place to return to, looking for new meanings and comfort.[64] Products are regularly launched, awakening

[60]A tent-pole movie is expensive to produce but generates so much revenue that it can keep the studio afloat for a while, maybe financing other enterprises too.

[61]This paragraph is based on the introduction to their edited volume, *The Franchise Era* (Fleury et al., 2019).

[62]In Chapter 6 of Meikle (2019). Here I summarise and explain in my own words.

[63]A media mix strategy refers to the integrated way in which Japanese producing companies launch their IPs across several media that support each other, for instance manga, anime and game. The Japanese media mix has grown into a perfect media industry machine, as documented by Marc Steinberg in his illuminating *Anime's media mix franchising toys and characters in Japan* from 2012. I have worked on several prominent media mix cases, specially with *Gundam*, together with Aki Nakamura (Nakamura & Tosca, 2020, 2021).

[64]Meikle (2019, p. 171).

nostalgia and acting like data points in a tightly connected rhizome of meanings and affections. When we recognise characters, plots and places, the world suddenly makes sense again.

Coda

In this chapter, I have looked at the repetition of exactly the same content in three layers of literal text, adaptations and transmedial worlds. It has become clear that the affordances of repetition shift as we move up through the different layers.

The first layer reveals that short sequences have the simple but strong effect of communicating that the things that get repeated mean more, confirming the findings of Chapter 1. The repeated elements catch people's imagination as they are highlighted again and again, increasing affect with every encounter. This section is mostly about the craft of storytelling, the detail of composition and how audiences experience it. In other words, here we are at the level of stylistic affordances and how they facilitate aesthetic experiences.

The second layer, of adaptation, gives attention to the dance of familiarity and variation, where the repetition of elements sparks the interest of knowing audiences, always ready to re-visit the classics, or re-adopt an old story that presents itself in new clothes. Here, audiences have something at stake, as they need to compare, evaluate and appreciate.

The third layer, of transmedial worlds and franchises, showed how repetition becomes an industry strategy to mitigate risks, relying on people's long-time affective attachment to specific fictional worlds.

Repetition in adaptations and transmedial worlds gives rise to ideological affordances, since determining which works get repeated, transformed and extended over and over has consequences for our cultural and political life. One dimension of this is of course the formation of a 'canon' of preferred works in any medium: the great works of literature endorsed by ministries of education, lists of the best films of the century voted for by experts, vintage TV series that attract the greatest number of viewers and therefore get repeatedly broadcast to ensure advertisement revenue. The reasons behind the formation of a canon are many: cultural, political and economic, but the effect is always the same: a repeated and accumulated exposure to a selection of cultural works. Attempts to expand the canon are often met with mistrust; how is it possible to include something new in a list we know so well? How can we be sure it deserves to be there? We will not know until we have encountered it often enough. The obsession with 'tried and tested' formulae makes it difficult for new stories to be told.

Another affordance related to repetition in this overarching layer is that the stories that get repeated over and over colonise our imagination, offering us ways of knowing that go beyond the anecdotal example and can frame our way of understanding the world, like the love metaphors from Chapter 3. If the love stories that our culture prefer are tragic (*Tristan and Isolde; Romeo and Juliet; The Sorrows of Young Werther; Bonnie and Clyde…*), the message is that suffering and love belong together, so maybe we will end up pursuing impossible partners,

putting up with too much misery or doubting that a joyful relationship can be real love. The power of discourse to organise sociality has been well established at least since Foucault, although of course, if we subscribe to a more modern view of audiences as active participants, we will acknowledge that people have free will; they can also reject any trope and be able to separate the pleasures they derive from entertainment from the way they live their lives. We cannot, however, escape the fact that myths have power, and cultural meanings become myths through sustained repetition and adaptation.

The most important affordance related to the repetition of content in the way examined here is that we develop an emotional connection to the words, sentences, stories, characters and worlds that we encounter over and over again. We have nostalgic attachment to the media of our childhood, and positive feelings emerge when we recognise a story, a trope or a motive. Well-known worlds become secure havens, where we know what to expect. The more time (and money) we have invested in engaging with a particular fictional universe, the more rewarding it will be to revisit it again. That is why franchises and revivals feel so safe, both for audiences and producers.

I must admit that I am conflicted about this last point. On the one hand, I think it is unsettling that I keep on being invited to the same fictional worlds over and over, like a place I can't ever leave. Have we become afraid of visiting new places? Can we even see the value of stories that cannot be attached to any franchise or transmedial world upon release? On the other hand, I wonder why we are we so preoccupied with always innovating. Maybe we do not need any more stories (or fictional worlds), if the ones we have are enough to express all the range of human experience. Think of storytelling in less mediatised societies. The average person of a hundred years ago would not have been exposed to as many stories as us, without television or streaming services, without a robust literary industry sprouting hundreds of criminal novels every year. What stories did they know and love? Why not return to the few well-known ones and 'just' pass them on to the next generation? When language or plot become archaic, the stories can simply be adapted, as we saw above, revamping them for modern taste.

This discussion cannot be closed here, but I hope that one thing has become clear throughout this chapter. Repetition is a tool that storytellers of all kinds can deploy to engender different kinds of familiarity and recognition. Repetition is lauded in one field as great craftsmanship (the brilliant speech, the beautiful rhythm in a poem) but seen with suspicion in another (the adaptation, the franchise). If high and low cultures are making use of the same kind of aesthetic strategies, maybe the thorny question of cultural value should be reconsidered and reformulated.

The diverse repetitive strategies examined here also offer different kinds of aesthetic value to audiences, related to some of the pleasures and learning opportunities introduced in Chapter 1. There is both recognition and comfort in terms of affective pleasures *and* cognitive rewards in terms of learning (comparing adaptations, invoking the whole through the part, correlating similar occurrences in search of a coherent story). If Virgil had known all this, he would no doubt have been more hopeful about the fate of his *Aeneid*.