

Playful Literature, Literary Play: (Video) Games and American Fiction
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Call for Papers

Guest Editors

Francesca Razzi, "G. d'Annunzio" University of Chieti-Pescara (francesca.razzi@unich.it)

Valentina Romanzi, University of Torino (valentina.romanzi@unito.it)

Stefan Schubert, Leipzig University (stefan.schubert@uni-leipzig.de)

As Henry Jenkins famously remarked, ours is the time of "convergence culture," i.e. the historical moment where old and new media intersect and cross-pollinate fruitfully (2006). Since the early 2000s, scholars have dedicated ample attention to how different media interact with each other, how the audience participates in the creative process, and how the digital sphere has shifted not only the way we enjoy and absorb fiction, but its very formal features. Remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999) and transmediality (Kinder 1991; Jenkins 2006) have been a key field of investigation in the 2000s and 2010s, as best evidenced by *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies* (eds. Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, 2019) but also by *Iperstoria's* own issue 16, "Transmedia Storytelling/Narrazioni Transmediali" (eds. Anna De Biasio and Valeria Gennero, 2020). Transmediality has truly been a marker of our digital age, as stories left their traditional single-medium domain to spread across the media constellation.

Tellingly, Jenkins described the object of his study as "the work - *and play* - spectators perform in the new media system" (2006, 3, emphasis added). It follows that there is a ludic element in the audience's interaction with the source material, in chasing it across the transmedia landscape. In fact, more recent scholarship has frequently highlighted the 'gamification' (Fuchs et al. 2014) and 'ludification' (Frissen et al. 2015) of contemporary culture. Accordingly, these transmedial cross-pollinations are far from one-way streets: (video) games might, at times, strive to become more literary or cinematic, but literature, film, television, and other more 'traditional' media have also increasingly embraced their playful sides. Recent studies on the relationship between the novel and the video game have advanced that they both pertain to the same aesthetic lineage, insofar as they both test how narrative form can model systems of choice and consequence (i.e., how they can be "ergodic" texts in Aarseth's famous formulation [1997]), rejecting the story/play dichotomy and rather advancing that they both contribute differently to the same narrative enterprise (Hayot 2021). It is this kind of interplay between 'playful fiction' and 'literary play' that this special issue seeks to investigate, since the digital age has been radically reshaping our critical understanding of narrativity and 'playfulness,' and the influence of new media and digital forms has led to rethinking contemporary narrative in terms of an interactive "communicative interplay" among stories,

storytellers, and audiences (Page and Thomas 2011). In this critical context, video games stand out as especially fertile ground for interactive fictional narratives, based on a “story-assemblage” and centered on the mutual imbrications of temporality, agency and immersiveness (Mukherjee 2015). American studies has recently begun to take notice of video games’ potential for cultural and literary hermeneutics. Among others, landmark studies like *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies* (2019) by Sascha Pöhlmann and *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* (2019) by John Wills have shown how the mutual crossings between video gaming and US culture might help shed new light on constructions and contestations of ‘America.’ The cultural and ideological negotiations surrounding processes of gamification and ludification have created fruitful ground for examining the role of American digital gaming, as testified by the special issues published in the *European Journal of American Studies* (“Video Games and/in American Studies: Politics, Popular Culture, and Populism,” edited by Mahshid Mayar and Stefan Schubert in 2021), *American Literature* (“American Game Studies,” edited by Patrick Jagoda and Jennifer Malkowski in 2022), and the *Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* (“Digital America,” edited by Michael Fuchs and Stefan Rabitsch in 2023).

Expanding on this scholarship on US culture and digital games, our special issue aims to investigate the question of *interactive literariness* in a US context, by discussing the numerous instances of literary playfulness and gaming, and conversely of playful fiction, that characterize contemporary narratives. We welcome contributions that address diverse forms of storytelling and/or playing, especially in consideration of the interactive intersections between literary and ludic structures. The lines of this inquiry, related to the US context, may involve, but are not limited to, the following aspects:

- Play in fiction: representation of (video) games and/or (video) gaming in literary narratives and genres (such as novels, short stories, anthologies)
- Literature in games: representation of literary narratives and genres in (video) games
- Transmedia literariness and playfulness: adaptation to and from video games in entertainment franchises (e.g. movies, tv shows, comics, magazines, etc.)
- Material literariness: representation of physical books and book-related places and practices in video games; use of video games as textbooks within undergraduate and/or graduate academic curricula
- ‘Ludic’ or otherwise playful elements in media other than games (e.g., ‘choose your own adventure’ novels or other kinds of ‘gamebooks’; interactive movies)
- Video games with particularly pronounced literary or cinematic ambitions, or intertextual and transmedial elements; or (video) games that seem to grapple with their status as both a form of play and a kind of narrative

Submission Guidelines and Timeline

Those interested in submitting a proposal should send a 250-word abstract to the editors at francesca.razzi@unich.it; valentina.romanzi@unito.it; stefan.schubert@uni-leipzig.de by January 15, 2026. Abstracts will be evaluated by the editors and notifications will be sent shortly thereafter.

Publication is scheduled for December 2026. Selected papers, in English, must be submitted by April 30, 2026 and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length.

Submitted manuscripts must be original and uploaded to the journal's website following the procedure available at the link: <https://iperstoria.it/about/submissions>.

Final acceptance will depend on the relevance of the article to the call theme(s), as well as on the originality and quality level of the submission. All submitted manuscripts must conform to *Iperstoria's* guidelines.

Works Cited

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