

Ludic Composites and Playable Silvas

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the study of videogames' structural complexity, especially ludic composites. The initial discussion of existing approaches to composite games and their elements leads to the notion of silvicity. I postulate it as a new category for use in game criticism in reference to certain "problematic" heterogenous videogames, mostly from the second decade of 21st century—a period of major upheaval in that field. I present it as complementary to such terms as "game-novel" and "menippea," and a more nuanced alternative to "WarioWare-esque" or "minigame montages." This original theoretical proposal is applied in the analysis of Frog Fractions and Pony Island—two exemplary silvic games; excentric, unpolished hybrid titles problematizing the videogaming conventions of their time.

Introduction

As I am waiting for a PC game to load, I toy with another one on my phone. They are entirely unrelated: played on different devices, with their own mechanics, distinct resources and game-states. But what if they launched from the same device? Perhaps even in the same window? What if the waiting itself was covered or replaced by a game-within-a-game?

It is not a new concept by any means. In fact, in one form it used to be protected by a patent, filled by the Bandai Namco back in 1995 and since expired (Hayashi, 1998). At any rate, this method—launching a distinct videogame while the other one is still loading—remains a rare occurrence since its 1980s heyday. However, this might soon change since Epic Games announced partnership to bring games in Unity to *Fortnite* (2017–present), presumably to entertain players waiting for another match to start and to cement the status of their flagship product as a metaversal hub (Peters, 2025)—much like *Roblox's* (Roblox Corporation, 2006–

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present) massive multiplayer online (MMO) playable game-creation platform.

When using *Google Chrome* one can sometimes experience a problem: no internet connection. When that happens, the program (since the September 23, 2014 version)—itself used for many different purposes, including playing games—launches a simple auxiliary game: *Dinosaur Game / Chrome Dino* (2014–present), an endless runner featuring a pixel *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

In *The Sims 3* (Maxis Redwood Shores, 2009), ever since the 2013 Patch 63, if the interactive loading screen setting is enabled, players waiting for the game to load can play a rudimentary hidden object puzzle adventure (HOPA) for a cumulative lifetime happiness bonus to the next household created.

Playing a metroidvania such as *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry, 2017), the player hacks and slashes their way through the world until a special encounter is triggered. The music changes as text flashes across the screen, announcing a boss fight—kind of a game within a game, although subject to mostly the same rules as the platforming sections.

The games are rarely simple—not in terms of difficulty, but structurally. They are complex systems of interconnected parts, many of them at least semi-independent from the rest: minigames, modes, maps, rooms, and levels (including tutorials), as well as quests, quick-time events (QTEs), and achievements.

Videogames are made of other games. And not just that; they are compounds of diverse components, both non- and interactive: ludic, textual, and audiovisual (Aarseth, 2012, p. 2).

This is not a new point in the year 2026. Among game scholars, the explicit recognition comes from Chaim Gingold (2005), who reached it in his analysis of *WarioWare, Inc.: Mega Microgames!* (Nintendo R&DI, 2003) which dubs such components “microgames.” Years later, Paweł Grabarczyk and Espen Aarseth (2017) decided to call them “infragames,” and playable combinations of them “ultragames” (an idiosyncratic formal term closer-but-not-identical to “genres”).

Concurrently, Google DeepMind and Blizzard research team reported training their artificial intelligence (AI) model to play *StarCraft 2* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010) through specially prepared “minigames” based on different constitutive tasks (Groot, 2018; Vinyals et al., 2017). Thus, AI was not taught to “play *StarCraft 2*” as such, but rather to “move units,” “gather minerals,” “build structures,” etc.—simple individual tasks that human players typically familiarize themselves with in a single tutorial session.

WarioWare, Inc. is a perfect example of a videogame not only composed of different isolated mechanics, but showcasing and even specifically tying them to preexisting titles: jumping on

enemies in *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo R&D4, 1985), timing a shot in *Duck Hunt* (Nintendo R&D1, 1984), or speeding past other cars in *F-Zero* (Nintendo EAD, 1990). However, it is not the only game of this kind.

This paper is devoted to the general problem of games' ludic complexity, as well as specific, "excentric" composite titles which are sometimes described as "*WarioWare*-esque". However, I argue for a different terminology—based on the notion of "silvicity" as originally formulated by Polish literary theoretician Ryszard Nycz (1984/1996).¹ I illustrate this theoretical proposal with the analyses of *Frog Fractions* (Twinbeard Studios, 2012) and *Pony Island* (Daniel Mullins Games, 2016).

Composite Game Research: Existing Approaches

To date, there were several academic attempts at defining and classifying games in games—especially quests, achievements, and minigames. Here, I discuss just a few of them from the last 20+ years in a mostly chronological order.

I already mentioned Gingold's work regarding minigames in *WarioWare*. Just as critical was the work of Ragnhild Tronstad, who discussed quests in MUDs in terms of "sub-games" (2004, pp. 22, 27–33). Drawing from her example, Faltin Karlsen (2008) defined quest as "a special mission that the player engages in, that requires a specific set of action to be performed, that has a definite ending point with some sort of reward," noting that "structurally speaking [they] fulfil Jesper Juul's classic game definition" and "often are regarded as 'mini-games.'"

Juul (2009) himself briefly discussed "minigames," treating them as a synonym for all short independent play experiences embedded in other videogames, including discrete game modes (pp. 117–118). This contrasts with a more nuanced view presented by Fotis Jannidis (2009), who discussed metaleptic and metareferential qualities of "games within a game" (pp. 550–553). Grabarczyk (2015a) also touched upon "games within games" in his discussion of history of game modes, pointing out a bygone tendency to view them as distinct games entirely.

Much like Tronstad and Karlsen, Mikael Jakobsson (2011) discussed quests, although he focused on what was then seen as still a relatively new phenomenon: achievements. He arrived at a conclusion that these two are functionally equivalent to each other, and furthermore—that achievement systems such as the one in the Xbox Live service (launched in 2005, with the debut of Xbox 360) can therefore be understood as an MMO comparable with *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004–present).

Juho Hamari and Veikko Eranti (2011) presented a double definition of game achievements: 1) from the perspective of the achievement system, "challenge consisting of a signifying

element, rewards and completion logics whose fulfilment conditions are defined through events in other systems (usually games),” and 2) from the perspective of a singular game, “an optional challenge provided by a meta-game that is independent of a single game session and yields possible reward(s)” (p. 16). In their use of the term, “meta-game” means “something extra” added to the base videogame, instead of “a game about games.”

At the same time, Amin Tavassolian, Kevin G. Stanley, Carl Gutwin and Aryan Zohoorian (2011) formulated what is now a standard definition of minigames, emphasizing that they are “simple activities contained within a larger game ... generally short, self-contained play experiences within a larger game framework, but with their own internal logic, game state, and mechanics” (pp. 174–175).

Marcus Carter, Martin Gibbs and Mitchell Harrop (2012) formulated another distinct proposal, recognizing an original concept of “orthogame,” that is “what players collectively consider to be the ‘right and correct game.’” They used it to define “metagame”: “play acts that involve or consider resources that are ‘beyond’ the scope or control of what players consider to be the orthogame,” e.g. knowledge of popular playstyles in a strategy game. Finally, they also recognized “paragame,” “that which is performed peripheral to, but alongside the orthogame,” e.g. achievement hunting. Despite declaredly discussing play practices, they seemingly applied their concept also structurally to games themselves, as evident by their commentary on *StarCraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998) and its orthogame(s) (p. 14)—virtually recognizing game modes as separate games.

Following definition of minigames by Tavassolian et al. (2011), as well as the works of Manfred Schmeling (1977), Werner Wolf (2009), and Jannidis (2009), Hans-Joachim Backe (2015; 2016) analyzed “ludic *mise-en-abyme*” with a focus on the semiotics, pointing to the self- and metareferential potential of such works. He also brought attention to a number of dimensions pertinent to minigames analysis (i.e., symbolic, paradigmatic, and syntagmatic) (p. 62), and to categories of “naturalization” and “overtiness”, underlining that the latter correlates with higher metareflective potential (pp. 62–68).

Drawing from Gerard Genette, as well as work by Hamari and Eranti (2011), I (2017) took a different position, and considered minigames *vis-à-vis* achievement systems in terms of “paraludicity,” that is as special cases of Genettian “paratextuality”.²

Regina Seiwald (2019), much like Backe (2015; 2016) and Jannidis (2009) before her, discussed nested games in terms of semiotics and metafiction. For this reason, Seiwald introduced three categories: macrogame, which she defined as “a game containing minigames within itself”; “Chinese-box structures, meaning that a game contains a game that is separate from the main game”; and “*mise-en-abyme* structures ... denoting the mirroring of characteristics of the embedding game” (2019). She added that “minigames ... are embedded in another game” and distinguished between ones “not needed to progress in the macrogame”

and those which are inherent part of it (2019, p. 19).

More recently, Stefano Gualeni and Riccardo Fassone (2023) redefined minigames as “playable sub-games that are integrated within the wider gameworld of digital games”—distinct from “nested games [which] are a ‘playable enclave’ ... ludically isolated from the wider gameworld that contains them.” Finally, they briefly mentioned “side quests” which—as they noted—are “very similar to minigames,” but

are not presented or understood as games in their fictional world, and usually involve the use of already acquired in-game skills, instead of new affordances and possibilities. Additionally, side quests typically take place in the broader fictional world as opposed to being somewhat separate from it, and [...] often become inaccessible for the duration of the game if they are failed (2023, p. 27).

They also stressed that neither of the discussed categories constitute “fictional games” in their understanding (2023, pp. 28–29).

Agata Waszkiewicz (2024) similarly identified three related concepts: “a composite game (or a macrogame), an embedded game, and a mini-game.” They defined each as follows: “the composite game will denote the game title, that is a large game object constructed from a multitude of parts” (2024, p. 127)—a concept similar to “ultragames” of Grabarczyk and Aarseth (2017), and, as noted, equivalent to “macrogames” of Seiwald (2019). Indeed:

The term embedded game ... broadly refers to games that appear and can be played by the characters and are recognized by them as games and, thus, are a mimetic representation of an existing titles or game types. This includes individual quests, playable fictional games that do not have an existing counterpart ... , and playable existing games embedded into main games. (Waszkiewicz, 2024, p. 127).

This is, then, an umbrella category for “minigames,” “(side) quests,” “nested games,” and “fictional games,” as discussed by Gualeni and Fassone (2023).

“Finally, a ‘mini-game’ denotes a separate, original mini-game, understood as a specific embedded game structure that consists of a change of aesthetic, perspective, game rules, win conditions, and/or control systems” (Waszkiewicz, 2024, p. 127)—roughly equivalent to Gualeni’s and Fassone’s (2023) “nested game.” Interestingly, Waszkiewicz also noted that some “embedded game structures ... are not necessarily mini games as much as games-with-in-games” (Waszkiewicz, 2024, pp. 127, 135–138). Additionally, they discussed some subtypes of embedded games: mimetic, metaphorical, and synecdochical (2024, pp. 129–135), as well as ironical (2024, p. 151)—depending on their representational functions.

As can be seen, scholars generally agree that various subgames (embedded games, nested

games, infragames, microgames, minigames, quests) have their own game logic (including rules and goals), and can, but do not have to, share the aesthetic, perspective, control scheme, and resources with the framing game (macrogame, meta-game, ultragame, composite game), whereas game modes (sometimes also viewed as “minigames” of sorts) should be rather recognized as separate games altogether.

Furthermore, depending on the embedded games similarity or difference with their framing, they can exhibit certain metareflective potential—especially if they are overt in their gameness, as opposed to more naturalized approaches. This relation can be analyzed in a number of ways, with particular attention given to the:

1. ontological and epistemological position of the embedded game (how is it framed within the context of the gameworld—as a game of the same or different kind, if it is presented as a “game” at all? Does it occur on the same or another level?);
2. spatiality and temporality (is the embedded game replayable, or is it a singular event? Can it be played anywhere, or is it somehow tied to a particular location or framing game sequence? Is the embedded game located on the macrogame’s margins, so that it is playable during loading or from the interface, or is it part of the game proper?);³
3. game logic and other ludic characteristics (do the perspective, aesthetics and controls shift when playing the embedded game, or do they stay the same? Do both games share resources, or are they clearly separate? Is the “game” even playable, and if so—by whom and how?

Further questions arise depending on what and how it is represented, e.g., is it a case of mimesis (direct, naturalized representation), metaphor (an activity of some kind is substituted with a game), metonymy (an activity is reduced to a simplified model), synecdoche (an element is used to representing the whole process) or irony (characterized by a dialectic tension between the signifier and signified)? And furthermore: is the embedded game reminiscent of other games or genres different from the framing game (which may be seen as formal mimicry)? In what ways, and what are these games’ relation to the framing title?

Most reviewed typologies focus on clearly delineated examples: games within other games, where the transitions are clearly marked, organized, and, even if not, generally make sense. Entering combat in *Heroes of Might & Magic* (New World Computing, 1995) may mean the rules have changed for a moment, but the basic structure remains intact. *Super Mario Party* (NDCube, 2018) is more than a little zany, but players know when a new game will start, and are informed about the objectives and such when it does. Same can be said about mobile games such as *Royal Kingdom* (Dream Games, 2024–present) or *Disney Emoji Blitz* (Disney Interactive, 2016–2019; Jam City, 2019–present), where a player can frequently roll a fortune wheel or engage in a special challenge mode, if not play a vastly different game for a while by

accessing it from a menu. However, the software focus and point of reference remains the Match 3 puzzle. Everything else is just meant as a fun distraction, ultimately subservient to the “game proper.”

What happens when that is no longer necessarily true and the game just does not seem to follow one set of rules—even conventions like “every time you do X, the game changes such and such way”? Or when it is near impossible to pinpoint a single recognizable genre, because the game just does not seem to stick to any one in particular? What happens when there is no clear “basic layer” from which one starts and can always return to?

On Silvicity and Ludic Silvas

Hybrid artworks are notoriously difficult to classify, due to their heterogeneity and transgressiveness (Pötzsch, 2019), both eluding and thus inviting critical revision of established genre conventions (Garda, 2016). Because of this, such “improper,” “impure” works are often denied the very name of “games,” instead meeting with such disparaging (yet sometimes embraced) terms as “walking simulators,” “spoofs,” “anti-games,” or “not-games” (Samyn, 2010; Fredner, 2014), vaguely mirroring the scholarly debate on “gameness” and (video) game definitions (Juul, 2003; Juul, 2005; Karhulahti, 2015; Stenros, 2017; Stenros, 2022). This is analogous to the situation the Polish literary criticism found itself in around the end of the 20th century (Nycz, 1996, pp. 9–12). Following this observation, I propose a handful of terms hitherto unused in game studies, and mostly absent from international scholarship, but important in Polish literary theory—“silvas” and “silvicity”—as a possible answer to the question of what happens when a game deviates from the norm presumed by the scholars writing about typical games-within-games.

In its original Latin meaning, “silva” means “wood” (either a forest or a raw material), and—as in the case of the ancient *Silvae* of Statius, a collection of occasional poetry reportedly written in a manner of mere days—can refer to apparently unpolished, impromptu works with formally varied impressions on diverse subjects (Shackleton Bailey, 2003, pp. 5–6). This kind of occasional poetry or oratory works, complete with the name “silvae,” enjoyed a revival in the 15th and 16th century (Krzywy, 2013, pp. 149–150). This, however, is not the entire history of the term. By the end of 17th century, “silva rerum” (Latin for “a forest of things”) became one of a few similar names, alongside comparisons to gardens and such, given in Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to a class of home chronicles. These were household collections combining elements of diaries and commonplace books, containing anything one considered interesting or important, from daily economic and personal notes to political and judicial orations, and from memorable sentences and commentaries to epic poetry (Pisarski, 2010; Krzywy, 2013, p. 146).

For a time, due to similarity of name, *silvae rerum* were considered related to the *silvae* of antiquity and Renaissance, giving rise to a modern misconception which connected two

disparage notions by the virtue of some shared qualities: these of roughness and variety. As noted by Roman Krzywy (2013), this is most visible in the works of Stefania Skwarczyńska (1970). Therefore, it is also prominent in the introduction to the theory by Ryszard Nycz (1984/1996), who observed certain “silvic” qualities in select contemporary works. Unlike Krzywy, I do not view this simply as a “terminological mess” (2013, p. 151), but rather as a sort of ingenious misreading (Bloom, 1975). However, recognizing the need for clarification, I use the plural form “silvas” as opposed to “silvae” (comparable to Polish “sylwy” vs. Latin “silvae”) to differentiate the two genological traditions. Moreover, I focus on the entirely ahistorical category of silvicity, which I see as applicable not just to premodern and contemporary literature alike, but also to videogames.

What, then, should be understood by “silvicity”? I already used a few keywords such as “rough” or “unpolished”. James N. Roney in his review of Nycz’s work noted that a “contemporary silva” is a

self-consciously fragmentary, anti-mimetic, open-ended, essayistic kind of writing, which draws on a great variety of extra— and sub-literary material, juxtaposes within a single text incompatible elements taken from what remains of the traditional literary genres, and emphasizes its own status as a process ... , rather than a product (Roney, 1986, p. 436).

These qualities could perhaps be observed in other types of writing, such as early or experimental novels. Rightly so—but it is not an argument against silvicity, and rather for it as a category that is not limited to one specific historical context (e.g., Polish literature of the mid-to-late 20th century) or genre (Nycz, 1996, pp. 9–10). Consequently, I see similar characteristics beyond writing—in certain videogames, such as *Vidiot Game* (GZ Storm; see Grayson, 2012), *Soda Drinker Pro / Vivian Clark* (Snowrunner Games, 2016; see FK in the Comments, 2016) and *Glittermitten Grove* (Mostly Tigerproof, 2016) / *Frog Fractions 2* (Twinbeard Studios, 2016; see Hawkins, 2016)—to name just a few examples: self-conscious (even metareflective), fragmentary works drawing from various ludic traditions and genres, recombining them into something new, and doing so in such a manner that, to paraphrase Seiwald (2019), the “macrogame” cannot be properly separated from “minigames” anymore.

With that in mind, silvicity, as I understand it, is a spectrum. Some works can be properly called ludic or playable silvas, signifying centrality of this category to their structure and position *vis-à-vis* mainstream games (whether big-budget or indie). In other cases, silvicity might be less pronounced. Perhaps a short comparative analysis might be useful as a demonstration.

The Beginner’s Guide (Everything Unlimited Ltd., 2015) presents as a guide to unreleased games by another creator nicknamed “Coda” by the author, Davey Wreden (more precisely: a narrator seemingly identical with the author; see Backe and Thon, 2019, pp. 14–15), only

to eventually reveal to be unreliable and manipulative to an unknown extent (Nycz, 1996, pp. 15–16). It is composed of several game-like parts, all of which are rough and unpolished, even unplayable (like a shooter without targets), and exist on the same ontic level. Thus, neither is truly a “game within a game” any more than each other. However, these parts are all neatly arranged linearly and cannot be revisited or explored beyond a very limited fashion. The player simply follows a short, pre-scripted narration, which stops until they move from one game-room (chapter) to another, and so on until the end and final plot twist that puts the entire exercise in question (Backe & Thon, 2019, p. 16). Because of this, it is not necessarily a *silva*. A “walking simulator” or “first person narrative game” might suffice as a description, though I keep in mind Nycz’s words about similar “negative ad-hoc approaches” in literature (1996, p. 9). However, it is evocative of one enough to be termed a *silvic* narrative.

On the other hand, there are rare games such as *Soda Drinker Pro / Vivian Clark*, which baffles the player even before the inscrutable title appears. For one thing, *Vivian Clark* is not a stand-alone game as such, but a game-within-an-eggshell-of-a-game—hidden within a rudimentary façade of the *Soda Drinker Pro* (a “first person soda” simulator, as its creators claim on Steam). The player has to play exactly two out of over one hundred levels of this title to enter the “real” game for the first time... only to eventually find ties back to *Soda Drinker Pro*. But *Vivian Clark* itself is hardly a singular ludic object. Rather, it is a chaotic multigame mystery—mostly a platformer or an arcade title, but sometimes also a shooter (2D or 3D) or something else altogether, where one game flows, and sometimes crashes into another seemingly at random. And yet, all these elements (over 80 tasks across a few dozen “worlds”) are interconnected, allowing player to master the mystifying mix and hypothetically reach the “true end” within several hours—albeit the author considered expanding it even further (Snowrunner Games, 2013). This is a ludic *silva* in every respect.

In the end, the distinction is not the key. It is less important to tell whether a game is “a *silva*” than to recognize it is “*silvic*,” and how it relates to other such titles. For instance, whether they inspired each other, or perhaps were released as a response to particular phenomenon? It certainly appears to be the case, seeing as out of several games I would call “*silvic*,” only a handful were released prior to 2012 (that is arguably *The Prisoner* [Mullich, 1980] and *WarioWare* with its several sequels), and just as few came out past 2016 (beyond another batch of *WarioWare* titles, mostly *The Hex* [Daniel Mullins Games, 2018] and *There is No Game: Wrong Dimension* [Draw Me a Pixel, 2018]). Most *silvic* games—like *Frog Fractions*, *Vivian Clark*, *Vidiot Game* (GZ Storm, 2012), and to some extent *dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012), *Unmanned* (Mollieindustria, 2012), *Pony Island*, and *Evoland* (Shiro Games, 2013) along with its sequel—fit within that narrow four-year window.

There is one more pertinent question: why out of all the terms in literary theory should we borrow *silvicity* rather than another, better known concept—such as an experimental novel? For one thing, because “game-novel” is already a term with its own meaning. Tomasz Z. Majkowski in his book *Języki gropowieści* (2019a) characterized the eponymous “gropowieści”

(game-novels) as a ludic equivalent of novels viewed through Bakhtinian lenses. And just as by “novel” one typically does not mean “an early or experimental title going against the grain,” so too Majkowski largely draws his examples of game-novels from AAA, singleplayer open world action-adventure titles (Majkowski 2019a, p. 65 et passim).

Despite certain similarities, I would also not equate silvas with menippea—another concept of Majkowski’s:

a narrative mode that transgresses genre boundaries and combines various genres into a coherent whole in order to distance itself from ideological and aesthetic conventions (2019b, p. 191).

The most notable difference lies in that both novels and menippea are ultimately coherent—even though polyphonic, in Bakhtinian terms (Vella & Cielecka, 2021)—whereas silvas are not, or do not have to be. They are loose compositions; not ordered archives or anthologies, but collections of varied components, especially seemingly unpolished ones, fragmentary and idiosyncratic, eluding conventional generic qualifications, demanding a new name—or a lengthy explanation (Nycz, 1996, pp. 9–10).

At the same time, unlike terms such as “*WarioWare*-esque” or “minigame montages” (Hollis, 2013), or even simply “metagames” (in the sense of “games on games”), silvicity opens the way to a discussion on a broader cultural phenomenon underneath such creations. Thus, it becomes possible to reflect on similarity between what is ostensibly dissimilar: literary and ludic (Nycz, 1996, pp. 10–11), premodern and (post-)postmodern (Conway, 2024).

To reiterate. Silvicity is a trans-generic category meant to draw attention to a group of videogames as an extant class (a microgenre—see Dawson & Barkman, 2026) that should be viewed and discussed together. The main characteristics of this class include: a visibly fragmentary or even incoherent structure utilizing various genres (instead of strategies of [pseudo-]naturalization common in mainstream videogames) and rough and glitchy aesthetics drawing attention to the game object and game-making process (striving for overt “[meta] gameness” instead of contributing to “realism” or “immersion”). Other common features include: a lack of clear-cut “center” or “dominant playstyle”; an employment of a façade masking the true nature of the game being played; a clear ending and one-off character of the experience, as opposed to the replayability of typical games; and deep personal involvement of an authorial figure, often crossing into autobiographical (and commonly: mixing it with embellishments and fiction). Those can be seen as examples of “excentricity” (Nycz, 1996, pp. 113–119)—anti-mainstream, eccentric tendencies.

As to why have we seen a wave of playable silvas especially in the years 2012–2016, with just a handful of earlier and later examples, Ulf Sandqvist provided a tentative answer: because around that time the gaming landscape completely changed from what it was before (2015).

As Sandqvist notes, in the preceding years the videogame industry has established itself as one of the largest entertainment industries—largely thanks to the “successful recruitment of new consumer segments”: younger children, older adults, and more women (2015, p. 4–5), in the process Juul dubbed the “casual revolution”—although that was just a part of a tremendous shift that left many developers in the “videogame field”, though outside “the industry” (Keogh, 2023).

Sandqvist stops short of pointing out one thing—that this expansion quickly became the root of a new conflict, namely the hardcore/casual dichotomy, and renewed popular—but not necessarily academic—discussions about “the heart of gameness,” to borrow another of Juul’s terms (Juul, 2003; cf. Grabarczyk, 2015b). It was further exacerbated by the “rise of the indies”, which—as Sandqvist observed—was itself at least in part a consequence of the financial crisis that began in 2007 (forcing many developers to look for work), as well as newly digitalized business model (making self-publishing easier) along with new financing opportunities for individual creators brought in by crowdfunding (Sandqvist, 2015, p. 15–17).

Frog Fractions as a Playable Silva

2012 web browser game *Frog Fractions* by Twinbeard Studios—a company centered around Jim Crawford (designer, writer and coder)—is in a way the epitome of silvicity. An uninformed player who would stumble upon this title might confuse it with a sort of edutainment—educational software with ludic characteristics. After all, the game has “fractions” in its name, and includes a quote claiming it is “the absolute best way to teach your child” about them. Official screenshots add that the game also “teaches typing.”

This is partly true—the game does feature points given in fractions, not that they matter. Every so often it also includes type-to-shoot sequences, weird as they are. But this is not what *Frog Fractions* is about. Instead, as anyone who has played it in earnest can attest, it is an absurdist ludic experience composed of several segments, playable or not, that flow into each other when the player stops caring about nonsense points and, faced with an unbearable grind, takes a step outside the box they find themselves in—and starts discovering secret upon secret.

Played as is, *Frog Fractions* might well be endless with how it grants the player fractions of points that count toward nothing, and keeps switching from click-to-shoot to type-to-shoot style game, all the while remaining vaguely reminiscent of *Missile Command* (Atari, Inc., 1988) or other old-school shooter-defense games, with its counters of “fruits,” “zorkmids,” and “indignity.” And then, the player who unlocked a turtle, or perhaps even advanced to a dragon, finally dives into the water rather than moving on or above its surface, to unlock an infinite stash of fruits for further upgrades.

That is when an otherwise unattainable warp drive comes into play, and the game moves on

to something else—an oneiric series of game-alikes of various length. This brings to mind the surreality of *The Simpsons: Bart's Nightmare* (Sculptured Software, 1992), minus the platforming bits and explicitly dream-like setting. Recurring “pond defense” episodes come and go, providing a semblance of structure. However, each of them appears stranger than the last one—such as an actual nightmare sequence where the frog character is transformed into a human figure, but still is forced to perform in the original bug-catching game. A dream within a dream; a wicked parody of Zhuangzi’s story of the butterfly.

In total, the player has to go through about ten gamey sequences, generally trivial if not rigged to pass or at least “fail forward” within a certain time or after a series of irrelevant answers (Ruberg, 2019, p. 146). Among them are such elements as space shoot’em up boss fight, an underwater maze and a text adventure. In the end, the eponymous frog finds itself running for the role of a “bug president” (an unwinnable rhythm game that nevertheless always ends in victory), which progresses into an unfailable management subgame with infinite funds, producing “bug porn” for the masses.

An attentive player will notice that this last segment plays out on a screen within a screen—a *mise-en-abyme*. And not just on any screen, but a CRT monitor styled on a Commodore PET from the turn of the 1970s and 1980s. This is the more surprising choice because initial *mise-en-place* picture shows a mirrored version of an Apple III machine from the same era instead. This makes the player reminisce about the early days of personal computers and the kind of games they played—and by the virtue of *mise-en-abyme* as such, points back at the player’s own immediate gaming situation. This is another important feature of silvic works.

Frog Fractions ends the way it started—with the playable figure on a pond, now an elaborate indoor swimming pool, not pestered anymore, with nothing left to do but to dive for the third time, triggering the credits roll (and several shots of “bug porn,” e.g. a bee in a flower, behind mosaic censorship).

While staying irreverent throughout, *Frog Fractions* manages to evoke and mesh genres both popular (management sim) and neglected (edutainment) in the popular memory and histories of gaming, drawing equally from the 70s and 80s (maze game, text adventure) and from the 90s (rhythm game). In doing so, it parodies nostalgic trend among the indie titles of its time (while skipping the obvious platformer reference). It nevertheless manages to capture the feeling of nostalgia for the pre-internet obscurity—piling secrets atop secrets to be uncovered. As Robert Yang put it shortly after the 2012 launch of the game,

Frog Fractions is nostalgic for absurdity in games, at a time when game design schools and developer communities are so focused on congealing design into a teachable discipline / coherent culture, when we think designing something to death is necessarily good design.

Silvic formula with its seeming lack of structure, fragmentariness and roughness serves as a perfect vehicle for videogame artists striving to break free from the tyranny of coherence and overdevelopment. Furthermore, when employed, it does not always result in the same kind of freeform chaos or dream logic. This diversity is evident in games that are not necessarily “ludic silvas”—but utilize silvic tropes all the same.

Silvicity in *Pony Island*

Put simply, *Pony Island* is a videogame by Daniel Mullins released in 2016. Although it would be equally true to say it is (at least) three games in a trenchcoat, pretending to be one—and claiming to have originally come out in 1992 to boot. Not to mention its appearance and mechanics keep shifting, never staying exactly the same for long... In the words of Ryszard Nycz, it is an example of an “impure” work that manifests the *topos* of *varietas* and goes beyond conventional genres (1996, p. 13–16).

If one just keeps playing the game as it is available (almost) from the start, it will have what the title suggests, barring somewhat unsettling retro aesthetics—that is difficulty associated with games for younger children; and not much else. Instead, much like *Frog Fractions*, *Pony Island* provokes the player to seek answers and look beyond itself—not in small part through the mechanic of “pointless points.” What initially appears as the “game proper” turns out to be merely an interlude—one of many to come in this hybrid artifact.

Let’s start from the beginning. When first launching the software, the interface of *Pony Island* appears simplistic, colorful and overly cheerful. However, much like in clear silvas such as *Soda Drinker Pro / Vivian Clark* and *Frog Fractions*, this is just a pretense, which quickly fades. An attempt to launch the supposed “game proper” brings with it a new interface layer—unfinished, mostly black-and-white and framed within an approximation of a CRT screen (a *mise-en-abyme* evoking the material aspect of play)—very reminiscent of *Superhot* (Superhot Team, 2016) and *Her Story* (Barlow, 2015) (see also Dawson & Barkman, 2026; Kominiarczyk, 2017), and again—the final sequence of *Frog Fractions*.

An attempt to bring back the façade or begin playing is met with failure. And an uncanny one at that, as the digital object appears to act as a dilapidated physical one and falls apart. Other commands simply do not function or have uncertain effect, if any. This is again comparable with *Vidiot Game* and *Soda Drinker Pro / Vivian Clark*, two very silvic games.

At times, this metaleptic device goes further, as blurred 3D scenes from around the virtual screen are displayed, as well as hands of the fictional player—player-that-is-being-played. At other points, the interface—not at all peripheral but central to the game, and inseparable from the “diegetic” (Galloway, 2006, pp. 6–8; for the criticism of this term in context of videogames, see Jørgensen, 2013, pp. 65–67)—itself changes and degenerates. And the original, cheerful “extra-fictional” interface available at the press of an Escape key—still includes

hidden elements that appear subservient to the fictional frame. This reduplication-upon-reduplication calls into question not just the status of the game, but also the very act of playing (Krampe et al., 2022).

As discussed by both Astrid Ensslin (2022) and Cassandra Barkman (2023), metalepsis in games is typically foundational rather than jarring, although that is also possible when going beyond its interactional variation. Here it is a dominant trope used alongside general glitchy aesthetics (Gass, 2024) for strong defamiliarizing effect. This is further augmented through out-of-place direct addresses to the player (not just the player-that-is-being-played, but also the player-that-is-playing, or merging the two; e.g., at the very end, in a post end-credits scene), chat sequences (with some scripted answers which take away player's agency) and use of other, nested games. Even though the latter mostly turn out to be variants of one and the same basic game of running and jumping over obstacles to the finish line—a clear metaludic commentary (though perhaps less obvious still than in *The Hex*, another game by Daniel Mullins, which presents even more fragmented perspective—more akin to *Evoland*).

Just to reach the apparent ludic core (the hypodiegetic level, as it is called by Barkman [2023, p. 9]) the player-that-is-playing has to go through at least three or four layers of interface: the operating system and virtual store platform (i.e., Steam), the initial “façade” interface, and then the fictionalized “actual” interface (making it a case of an “interface game” as discussed by Dawson & Barkman, 2026). However, in time even these divisions are called into question. That is the case when the player discovers “glitches” requiring “fixing” the interface in a recurring puzzle segment, or another layer—of fictionalized modern operating system, still within the same frame of a CRT display; or again, when the game seemingly completely crashes during one of the boss fight—soon after displaying what appears to be a message from a Steam friend (for further discussion, see Barkman, 2023, p. 10–11).

The result is not a neat structure with clearly demarcated, intuitive layers, but, to quote Ian Bogost's discussion of game ontology, a mess (2009); or, in Nycz's terms, a *silva* (what Krzywy, 2013, translates as “gęstwina” or “thicket”). However, there is also another word for the trope utilized by the game: *katabasis*, the descent into underworld. Hell. And the longer the game goes on, the clearer its infernal nature becomes.

In one of the segments, Satan himself, Lucifer (1U@iF#r)—presented within the fictional frame of the game as its true designer—asks the player directly: “why can't you play my game the way I intended?” At another point, he asks: “why don't you take a break?” and pleads: “let me code up some more levels.” Instead of a finished product, the game is presented as a process (Roney, 1986, p. 436). And that despite being complete, and not continually supported like many mainstream (and even indie) titles are. At yet another instance, Lucifer calls player out for “cheating” for figuring an out-of-the-box solution to the problem posed (again equivalent to a sequence at the start of *Frog Fractions*).

This demonic designer figure—not just the devil, but Gnostic demiurge—is presented in two ways: as a slightly comical horned character drawing from popularized Christian imaginary, but also in a more compelling way: as the adversary and warden. Not in the theological, but in gaming sense, as the one who poses the “unnecessary obstacles” (Suits, 2005, p. 55) and “imprisons” the player, who in turn strives to end this exercise and break free by finishing the game—not according to the rules, but by any means available. This way, the matter of videogame authorship and player-designer relationship is problematized as a struggle between two actors with opposing goals.⁴

This has some poignancy, since, as noted by Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, “a game’s goal is the death of play”:

There is a curious poetic quality to the struggle of game players as they make their way through the system of a game, playing to no end but the one provided by the game itself, even as their joyful pursuit of that end means the death of their pleasure. Until, of course, the next game begins (2004, p. 258).

This again evokes associations both with *Superhot* and an older title; arguably the first, and for a long time probably the only silvic game: *The Prisoner*. And just as that one leads the player to the realization that “the Island is just a videogame”, and to Orwellian slogan that “to win is to lose”—the ultimate goal of *Pony Island* is to cease playing it and move on.

If the game began with katabasis through layers of interface, it ends with nekyia. “Delete *Pony Island*”—asks the lost soul who served as the player’s guide throughout the underworld of the videogame in their final message, breaking all that remains of the fourth wall. Do not come back to replay it or look for missed achievements. Bring the game to its Aristotelian *télos*—not victory, not even closure (Fassone, 2017, pp. 43–44), but the “death of play.” Walk away and be free.

Conclusions

Drawing on prior works, I demonstrated the scholarly consensus on the matter of composite games, showcasing that they are generally seen as structured around two layers: that of a base, framing game and smaller, embedded ones. This, however, does not cover certain hybrid, heterogenous titles which do not fit commonly recognized genres. Following the original theoretical work by Ryszard Nycz, I discussed the curious quality such games exhibit—silvicity, recognizing it to be founded on three principles: excentricity (anti-mainstream and eccentric tendencies), fragmentary hybrid heterogeneity, and overt metaludicity.

As noted, another common feature of ludic silvas is the employment of various façades, especially “roughness” or “unfinishedness.” The question remains, will that be still the case with more and more games being released in early access? Contrary to the digitalized gam-

ing industry norms, playable silvas are mostly unsupported, finished titles—very different from “games-as-services” such as *Fortnite* that came to dominate the market over the last decade. Regardless, it is evident that silvic games do not simply reject “gameness,” but problematize it, making the gaming conventions of their time a central issue.

Possible future directions include reflection over the real reach of silvicity. Was it only a short-lived phenomenon, mostly limited to years 2012–2016, which can be viewed as a reaction to the industry developments that took place around that time—or is it ongoing and new ludic silvas are still being created? Or perhaps I am mistaken in my intuitions and open-ended, ever-expanding *Fortnite* and *Roblox* as game hubs are the most silvic games ever made, and from the margins, the form has climbed to the very center it once opposed? Regardless of that issue, silvic features can be discussed in other perspectives, like that of trans and queer gaming, just like *dys4ia* and *Pony Island*, or as a particular mode of transgressiveness.

Whatever the future holds for silvas, it is clear to me that literary theory remains a useful reservoir of inspiration for game studies and criticism. Hopefully the opposite can also materialize.

Endnotes

- 1 See also Bolecki, 1986 and Roney, 1986, for further commentary and criticism of silvicity.
- 2 For the criticism of the term, see Švelch, 2017, pp. 38–41 and 59.
- 3 On this matter, see Galloway, 2006, pp. 6–8, 14 and also Jørgensen, 2013, pp. 65–67.
- 4 On other modes of authorship and a similar struggle between player and narrator in games by Davey Wreden, see Backe and Thon, 2019.

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