

# Reconceiving the Fictionality of Game Worlds: Money in Osadchuk's *Mirror World* as an Affective Point of Entry

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## INTRODUCTION

Alexey Osadchuk's *Mirror World* series (2016) is part of an emerging genre of books that found popularity from the early 2010s, a genre characterized by narratives directly influenced by videogames and videogame conventions. In *Mirror World*, the roles that money play shed light on how to understand the ontological positions inhabited by the multiple worlds of the story. Money interpenetrates worlds in this work as a transferrable substantiation of affect, and its analysis reveals how this literary genre operates according to a unique reconfiguration of fictional worlds. Ultimately, this paper is interested in how the aspect of the game motif masks and naturalizes the existing affective "stickiness" of money-based values and ideologies that surround both the protagonist of the book as well as the reader.

## THE WORLDS OF GAME FICTION

Books that represent playing a computer game differ from other literary texts that delineate fictional worlds within their narratives. Books in the present category build fictional worlds through thematized and oftentimes intuitive depictions of "entering" videogames (Lavocat 2019), and consequently the worlds are juxtaposed against one another in ways that are narratively significant. The game worlds are not simply Tolkienesque subworlds or secondary worlds, or a "fantasy world internal to a narration" (Christoph 2019), but they have their own places within the larger "storyworld" (Bell and Ryan 2019), which enables them to have spatial and temporal backdrops contributing meaningfully to the story.

Crucially, the game world also gains ontological meaning in relation to the reader of the book and not just for the textual characters playing the game within the narrative. The affect of the highly relatable pleasure of gameplay progression—embodied in the motif of money in Osadchuk's books—is enlivened by the reader, who puts in the work of calculating statistics, tallying what came before, and referring to one's own ludic experience in order to make sense of the story. In such a process, the enlisting of the reader's participatory attention—or, turning their role into one that is more "configurative" (Aarseth 1997, 64; Eskelinen 2004, 38)—becomes a driving force for

the entire book, bringing, in some significant instances, the worlds of the LitRPG together.

## WHAT IS THE LITRPG BOOK?

The genre that is examined in this paper can be described as literary fiction that uses computer games—usually adventure-type games—as a major diegetic environment. *Mirror World* is specifically categorized as a work of LitRPG, which falls under a subset of GameLit. The “literary role-playing game” labels the work as a game, but the genre is compositionally textual and requires readers to encounter its books as stories, not as games. Despite this, the genre is able to lend the reader some of the pleasures of playing a game.

In a LitRPG fiction, the story tracks the gameplay progress as if the reader were seeing it on a game screen. The book punctuates the text with graphics that mimic a digital game interface and provide statistics about acquired items or coin, levels, achievements, or negative outcomes. These graphics, though in print form are merely representations of their digitality, are a mark of the genre being multimodal, not just superficially in the sense that it uses images alongside text, but also because the integrated nature of these images specifically reconfigures the way in which the story is read. The stat windows are used at times to replace the mimetic description of story developments.

## GAME MONEY AS REAL MONEY: A SUBSTANTIATION OF AFFECT

This paper argues that the “windows” through which the worlds of the LitRPG books are able to find contiguity in this way are substantiated in the content of the graphics, which boils down to gains, losses, and rewards—or calculable developments represented in money. Money is very much integral to the stat boxes which flag character progress and development.

At first glance, videogames that the LitRPG book is based on use a monetary system that seems to caricature real-life money. Money in games is too “neat,” embodying the perfect capacity of numerical data to represent the quantifiable value of all in-game items. In one sense, such caricatured money, appears to be separated off in its own circle or world, possessing all the real-world-money patinas to render it exciting, but being too unsubtle to be a tool of critique. According to Espen Aarseth, game money, while part of the “semiotic system” of a game and thus constituting one of three properties inherent to games, is in large part “coincidental to the game” (2004, 48)—infinitely “themeable” and interchangeable with other semiotic systems (Juul 2001b).

Game money, however, is still money, and as such it is not so removed from the money of real life. Two criteria are used to determine the grounds of such an argument. Firstly, especially in *Mirror World*, game money satisfies Keith Hart’s requirements of what money is (1986). “Real” money, in Hart’s definition, is both symbolic—a token between humans—and objective. Likewise, money in computer games is “authorized” by game code, which polices the standards and methods of expenditure, and, in the case of *Mirror World*, it is further managed by other *human* components in an active economy.

Secondly, game money can also fulfill Viviana Zelizer’s sociological definition of money as something that is “shaped by cultural and social values” and is therefore “qualitatively heterogeneous” (1989, 351). Money is plastic based on extraeconomic factors that imbue the money with social and cultural contexts (347). While game money appears to be purely transactional, books representing gameplay show that in fact, an array of factors determines expenditure and how different kinds of money

“feel.” Game money in *Mirror World* is highly divisible according to Zelizer’s taxonomy of how money can be shaped and restricted by various contextual pressures.

## CONCLUSION

Focusing on how the protagonist of *Mirror World* carries over “affective money” in and out of worlds—the capacity of which touches even the reader’s world to some small degree—this project uses the aforementioned methods to describe the bridging of multiple worlds within a “computer game literature” context through the mediating artifact of money. The exaggerated fictional veneer of game worlds can oftentimes mask the personal contexts informing gameplay, and books that tell stories about gameplay can recapture these relations. The fictional worlds in such stories need to be analyzed using a framework of fictionality that departs from the usual notions of worldbuilding and theories of narrative forms.

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