

From Paper to Pixels: Horror Remediation in *Inscription*

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ABSTRACT

Analogue and digital games collide in *Inscription* (Daniel Mullins Games 2021), creating a hauntingly immersive experience that blurs the lines between reality and fiction. This paper examines *Inscription* through the lens of remediation theory, exploring how its design utilises immediacy and hypermediacy to evoke a compelling hybrid of analogue and digital gaming experiences. By blending skeuomorphic design with metafictional narrative elements, *Inscription* crafts a uniquely unsettling and immersive player experience. This analysis focuses on the game's ability to remediate analogue card games into a digital horror context, leveraging design elements and layered narrative structures to evoke both nostalgia and unease. We argue that *Inscription* exemplifies the potential of digital games to innovate at the intersection of media forms, challenging conventional notions of player interaction. We offer insights into the evolving dynamics of analogue-digital convergence and its implications for the future of game studies.

Keywords

Inscription, remediation, analogue-digital convergence, skeuomorphic design, metafictional game studies

INTRODUCTION

You sit across from a looming figure shrouded in shadow, with a single candle flickering on a worn wooden table, in front of you cards depicting creatures are sprawled across the table. You reach for a card not with a mouse click, but with a hand that drags across the screen as though guided by muscle memory. As you place a squirrel on the board, you sacrifice it to summon a stoat. The stoat talks. It remembers. The table creaks, and the candlelight flickers as you reach for a pair of

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

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rusty pliers, an in-game item quietly inviting you to use them to rip your own tooth as a token of sacrifice. This is *Inscription* (Daniel Mullins Games 2021): a game that doesn't just represent analogue play, it simulates its physical rituals and unsettling tactility within the bounds of digital design.

In the dim flicker of Leshy's cabin, Daniel Mullins' *Inscription* (Daniel Mullins Games 2021) awakens analogue nostalgia, summoning the tactile ambience of tabletop play within the calculated bounds of digital representation. This unique hybrid exists in a liminal space, merging cards and screens, ink and pixels, and it beckons players not merely to play but to participate and embed themselves in a nuanced illusion where physical and digital worlds collide. This paper analyses the methods by which *Inscription* crafts this evocative simulation, posing the question: *Why does Inscription painstakingly simulate the physicality of analogue card games?* In doing so, *Inscription* does not simply evoke the analogue but actively constructs a digital simulacrum of physical presence, offering a commentary on gaming's evolving landscape and hinting at future directions for hybrid media designs.

Guided by Bolter and Grusin's (2000) theory of remediation, we analyse how *Inscription* oscillates between immediacy—immersing players in an experience of seemingly authentic tactility and card-based tabletop gameplay—and hypermediacy, where it self-consciously unveils its own digital presence. Remediation theory suggests that in seeking to evoke a prior medium, each new form also illuminates its own boundaries, producing a layered awareness of hypermediacy. In *Inscription*, Mullins constantly oscillates between immediacy and hypermediacy to hold the player in suspense, simultaneously immersed and aware of the simulacra, producing a horrific effect.

As an homage to and distortion of traditional tabletop games, *Inscription* also merges skeuomorphic visual design principles (visuals that mimic the appearance and functionality of real-world objects) with the eerie uncertainty of digital play, creating an unsettlingly familiar but unstable world that straddles the safety presumed by fictionality. In its effort to evoke the tangible elements of analogue play, skeuomorphic emulation becomes essential to *Inscription's* act of remediation: each carefully rendered detail bridges the gap between physical and digital, anchoring the player's experience in familiar textures and forms even as they interact within a digital realm. This design invites players to embrace Mullins' hybrid-media experience without relinquishing the "old ways" of play, providing a sense of comfort even as it challenges their expectations (Taylor and Dell'Unto 2021, 456). Leshy's table becomes a centre stage where cards are dealt under shadowed scrutiny, creatures crawl in defiance of the screen's confines, and a knife looms to remind of the physical stakes simulated in this digital stage. The table is not just a set piece but an actor in its own right, forming familiarity that leans on the skeuomorphic tradition of mimicking real-world objects. Through these visual cues, *Inscription* transports the player to an uncanny 'almost-real' analogue world, even as the mechanical precision of its gameplay consistently reminds them of the game's digital core.

To explore how *Inscription* crafts this experience, this paper focuses on two analytical components that anchor our investigation into its hybrid nature. The first analysis focuses on *Inscription*'s oscillation between immediacy and hypermediacy through intermittent shifts in perspective, such as in-game footage intercut with unsettling 'real-world' vlog segments, intensifying its haunting atmosphere, and destabilising the viewer's sense of where the boundary between screen and table lies. The second analysis centres on the skeuomorphic elements of *Inscription*, with a specific focus on Act One's 'antagonist' Leshy and their dynamic tabletop environment. Here, we dissect how the game crafts a phenomenological experience of physicality through textured surfaces and tangible interactions, capitalising on the player's familiarity with card games to imbue its digital artefacts with an eerie weight.

By delving into these elements, this paper seeks to uncover how *Inscription* bridges the crossroads of digital and analogue in both aesthetic and gameplay, creating a hybrid model that points to the future of game design. Ultimately, *Inscription* reveals the rich potential of games that embrace the tactile histories of analogue play while leveraging the immersive possibilities of digital space, showing us a haunting yet captivating vision of what hybrid metafictional forms may yet yield.

BACKGROUND

Analogue-Digital Convergence in Videogames & Skeuomorphism

The historical evolution from physical to digital games has created a hybridisation of genres, particularly in narrative-centric analogue games. Sullivan and Salter (2017) highlight how games like *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) and Eurogames (or modern tabletop-styled board games) borrow storytelling conventions from tabletop role-playing traditions and integrate them with video game mechanics to construct nonlinear, immersive experiences. This evolution reflects a growing unity between narrative and mechanics, where storytelling is not merely decorative but integral to shaping the gameplay experience (Woods 2012).

Inscription builds upon this trajectory by merging the tactile qualities of physical card games with the possibilities of digital interactivity. Its skeuomorphic design, featuring textured surfaces, animated cards, and atmospheric elements like flickering candlelight, evokes the physicality of analogue gaming while leveraging digital tools to deepen narrative complexity. This blend not only immerses players but also illustrates how digital games can reimagine physical conventions, offering fresh opportunities for innovation in storytelling and play.

Defined by Basalla (1988, 107) as the opposite of "flat design" that prioritises 2D, bright colours, and sharp contrasts, skeuomorphic design, or the "skeuomorph", is "a derivative object that retains ornamental design cues from structures that were necessary in the original". Or, when applied to UI design, "skeuomorphism uses metaphors of real life and deploys gradients, shadows, ornate details and textures to

mimic the real-world object represented. Skeuomorphic designs are intended to help users understand how to use a new interface by allowing them to apply their prior knowledge about the real-world object it contains” (Spiliotopoulos, Rigou, and Sirmakessis 2018, 1). In modernity, this is most popularly understood through the lens of pre-iOS 7 Apple UI (Oswald and Kolb 2014), where the notes app had ruled lines and yellowed paper like a legal pad, the iBooks were placed on a virtual shelf, and the calendar represented its real-world counterpart.

In the context of game design, skeuomorphic design was most popular in the 1990s and 2000s, making the interactive elements of a game space more easily parsable by directly mimicking their function in reality. For example, Swallow (2023, 7) highlights how paper, books, and scrolls are often used in fantasy video games like the Elder Scrolls series, *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009) and *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red 2007) as an effective method of evoking “the materiality of the book”, but also because it contributes to immersion, immediate understanding of documentation in terms of save games being contextualised as ‘writing down’ the journal progress, and controls by clicking the left or right page to turn it, a rough approximation of reality.

Card-based video games, such as *Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment 2014) and *Slay the Spire* (Mega Crit 2017), further demonstrate this analogue-digital relationship. These games emulate the strategic dynamics of physical card games within digital environments, employing skeuomorphic elements to evoke nostalgia and familiarity. Skeuomorphism, once prominent in digital interfaces, has seen a resurgence in gaming as developers bridge the gap between physical and virtual interactions with VR technologies (Chu, 2023). While often associated with comfort and familiarity, skeuomorphism can also influence player behaviour. For example, in online gambling, animations mimicking real-world interactions can affect player decision-making (Meng and Leary 2022). *Inscryption* reclaims this design philosophy to create an eerie, immersive environment that contrasts sharply with its unsettling narrative.

Remediation and the Duality of Media

Remediation, as articulated by Bolter and Grusin (2000), offers a lens to understand *Inscryption’s* engagement with analogue inspirations. The game oscillates between immediacy and hypermediacy, balancing the tactile, grounded experience of handling in-game cards with deliberate interruptions that highlight its digital artifice. Remediative influences within videogames have been well established for games such as *Crusader Kings III* (Paradox Development Studio and Lab 42 2020), as the concept is inherently designed around simulation and reality of history and war (Lundblade 2024). While *Inscryption* is grounded within a less familiar arena, its balance of handling cards with deliberate uncanny disruptions dually serves both narrative and thematic purposes, aligning with remediation’s inherently reflexive nature, where media forms reconfigure each other to adapt to cultural and technological shifts.

Inscription's design aligns with broader trends in digital media that emphasise a balance between user immersion and medium reflexivity. Hypermediacy, in this context, becomes a deliberate design choice rather than a flaw, creating opportunities for self-reflection. Manovich (2002) explores a similar phenomenon in digital art, where creators use the visibility of the medium to engage audiences in new ways. By foregrounding its constructedness, *Inscription* mirrors this approach, using its meta-design elements to reinforce its themes of control, obsolescence, and the uncanny. This reflects Bolter and Grusin's (2000) assertion that remediation is inherently dialogic: media forms constantly reconfigure one another, blending familiarity with innovation to adapt to cultural and technological changes.

Daniel Mullins' engagement with the duality of media echoes trends in contemporary horror games that use hypermediacy as a narrative and atmospheric device. Other metafictional games like *Pony Island* (Daniel Mullins Games 2016) (also published and developed by Daniel Mullins prior to *Inscription*) and *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (Team Salvato and Dan Salvato LLC 2017) leverage the medium's self-awareness to unsettle players, challenging the boundaries of immersion and detachment, manipulating players expectations of the diegesis via intrusion of the media's narrative levels (Barkman 2020). This reflexivity not only aligns with the broader aesthetic strategies of horror but also invites players to reconsider their role in mediated experiences. In *Inscription*, the tension between immediacy and hypermediacy is not merely a technical feature but a central narrative mechanism that highlights the game's exploration of power, manipulation, and the boundaries between analogue and digital.

The deliberate use of hypermediacy reinforces its horror themes, reminding players of their mediated experience through glitches and disruptions. This interplay between immersion and self-awareness mirrors broader trends in digital media design, where creators navigate the balance between drawing users into a narrative and exposing the medium's constructed reality.

Analogue Horror and the Aesthetic of the Uneasy Familiar

Beyond its skeuomorphic design and use of remediation, *Inscription* is deeply rooted in the aesthetic tradition of analogue horror—a relatively infant genre characterised by its use of outdated media forms and technologies to evoke unease (Serdula 2023). With famous instances, such as, the radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* (Welles 1938), which took H.G Wells (1898) science fiction novel and adapted it into a live broadcast, or more recently, as found footage horror media such as *The Blair Witch Project* (Sánchez and Myrick 1999). Analog horror often relies on the uncanny, presenting the familiar through a distorted lens that highlights its obsolescence or decay, like that of a distorted VHS recording, creating a feeling of a “corrupted distorted memory or almost like a dream” (Long 2023, 29). In *Inscription*, this aesthetic manifests in the grainy textures of the cards, the flickering CRT monitor used to display certain story elements, and the crackling audio effects that accompany key

moments. These features not only contribute to the game's unsettling atmosphere but also reinforce its thematic exploration of obsolescence and transformation.

Act One of *Inscription* immerses players in a rustic cabin that contrasts with the digital nature of the card game itself. This juxtaposition not only contributes to the game's unsettling atmosphere but also invites players to question the authenticity of their experience and the layers of mediation that shape their interaction with the game world. This thematic exploration of mediation, obsolescence, and transformation sets the stage for a deeper analysis of how *Inscription* remediates analogue forms to craft a uniquely engaging player experience.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative textual analysis of *Inscription*, guided by Bolter and Grusin's (2000) theory of remediation. This methodology allows us to systematically explore the game's design, mechanics, and narrative elements, focusing on their interplay to evoke a phenomenological experience of physicality within a digital framework. The analysis focuses primarily on the cabin environment in Act One, examining how the game's design, mechanics, and narrative elements produce a hybrid aesthetic that merges analogue and digital forms. Particular attention is to be given to moments that foreground immediacy, hypermediacy, and skeuomorphic design.

Gameplay footage was recorded and reviewed to support close readings of specific scenes, with particular attention to those involving player-object interaction, shifts in perspective, and the dynamic portrayal of Leshy as both a narrative and environmental actor. This iterative process of gameplay observation was supplemented by secondary sources, including academic works on remediation, horror game design, and skeuomorphic interfaces, to contextualise *Inscription* within broader discussions of hybrid media. By combining textual analysis with theoretical and player-centred perspectives, this methodology provides a comprehensive framework for examining *Inscription's* evocative simulation of analogue play.

REMIEDIATING THE SAFETY OF REALITY INTO ANALOGUE HORROR

In his investigation into the relationship between remediation and horror video games, Kirkland (2009, 116) writes that the "lack of 'the real' in digital media represents a central "problematic" for horror video games whose affect depends on evoking a tangible experience of imperilment, embodiment, and spatial depth". As developed by Carroll (1990), Cherry (2009), and Todorov et al. (1975), horrific affect is not tied directly to the horror genre, but to the central emotion of being horrified, which can generously be defined as a bounded encounter with fear in a fictional context where the audience engages with a text in such a way that they empathetically experience an evocation of the unknown, the uncanny, or the otherwise incomprehensible. Horror is not shock, terror, or disgust, but a distinct

emotion unto itself, centrally concerned with a compelling verisimilitude that places the audience in the orbit of the fearful unknown. Therefore, for horrific affect to occur in the context of a video game, its formal, visual, and interactive characteristics must be compelling enough to implicitly convince a player of its reality despite the fact that, as Kirkland argues, the digital medium necessarily lacks the reality necessary to 'trick' the player's psychological perspective into the space of verisimilitudinous horror.

As *Inscription* demonstrates, one solution to this central problem of a horror video game's function is the remediation of real textural spaces through intertwined immediacy and hypermediacy, such as the experience of sitting at a table, the texture of playing a card game, and the experience of being witnessed and watched by an opposing player. Immediacy is the desire of media to achieve total transparency for the end-user by making its form invisible, prioritising seamless representation over all other considerations, resulting in a "medium itself that should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 6). Hypermediacy are texts that draw attention to their own formal characteristics and ask the audience/user to "take pleasure" in obvious interpolations that exaggerate formal characteristics, such as elaborately ornate beginning letters in Medieval manuscripts, web pages from the late 1990s inlaid with copious images, fonts, and interactive media etc. (ibid, 14). Finally, drawing upon post-structuralist literary theory, Bolter and Grusin (2000) conceptualise remediation as a process that "makes us aware that all media are at one level a play of signs", which is, in its simplest form, the "representation of one medium in another" (19, 45). In the context of digital technology, such as video games, Grusin and Bolter argue that "the digital medium can be more aggressive in its remediation" where "the work becomes a mosaic in which we are simultaneously aware of the individual piece and their new, inappropriate setting" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 46-47).

While immediacy seems to be the more natural choice to solve the problem of providing verisimilitude for a player of a video game to feel horrific affect, Bolter and Grusin (2000) note that "immediacy depends on hypermediacy" pointing to flight simulators as a prime example where "the experience of the game is that of working an interface, so that the immediacy of this experience is pure hypermediacy" (6, 11). Bolter and Grusin (2000, 5) make it clear that immediacy cannot exist without hypermediacy, a process they call the "twin logics", but the process of remediation in electronic media may provide a solution to Kirkland's (2009, 45) central problematic, as it often "wants to erase itself, so that the viewer stands in the same relationship to the content as she would if she were confronting the original medium". Therefore, remediation in digital media does not eliminate the barrier between reality and text, but it can offer a vector through which the player can simultaneously occupy the immediacy of the horrified spectator as well as an outside appreciation for the formal characteristics generating the horrific affect.

Inscription offers a clear example of how remediation can serve to produce this horrific effect in the player, particularly in how it evokes the experiential sensations

of playing a card game in reality. Though the perspective of the player is later complicated by compounding metafictional factors, the player's first cogent view of the playspace that will dominate approximately a third of the game's runtime is of a single warm light over a grainy (both in terms of graphical fidelity and texture) wooden table, shrouded by darkness on all sides (see Figure 1). Particles float in the air, suggesting a 3D space above the wooden table and texture to the simulated air, before a pair of eyes opens in the darkness beyond the light, staring directly at the camera perspective. Before gameplay has begun, these simple but compounding factors build a compelling sense of place, scale, and perspective for the player, where, because they have been directly addressed as a player on the opposite side of the table, is placed into the performative position of someone playing a game against an opponent in reality. This adheres to Bolter and Grusin's (2000) explanation of remediation in electronic media, as the medium of card gaming, in reality, is being represented through video gaming, allowing the player to simultaneously enjoy the immediacy of occupying that subject position while appreciating the aesthetic qualities designed to evoke that verisimilitude-rich experience.



Figure 1: The player's first view of the antagonist, Leshy, in the opening moments of the game, situating the player in the perspective of a player at a table.

However, *Inscription* uses this remediated subject position of being a person at a table playing a card game to reinforce a low-lying eeriness and dread, ultimately culminating in horrific experience. Leshy, the player's captor, tormentor, and game master, is a figure constantly surrounded in darkness, always staring at the opposite side of the table at the player. Speaking in a low bassy rumble, accompanied by an eerie soundtrack, and offering macabre solutions to the player such as pulling out their own teeth or gouging out their eye to get a mechanical in-game benefit, Leshy is a prototypical horror villain in how he embodies the fear of the unknown. For the first

third of the game, the player cannot know what Leshy looks like. Even when players get the ability to stand and leave the table, they are unable to see Leshy in the dark, all the more disconcerting when it becomes clear that Leshy repeatedly murders the player's avatar in the world when they fail on one of the game's rogue-like loops. Leshy's sinister nature is amplified by the remediating quality of the game that places the player in the subject position of a player of a card game because Leshy's malevolent actions are straightforwardly addressed to and directed at the first-person player character. That presence takes up the physical void-like space on the other side of the embodied table, who in turn, uses the same mechanics and cards as the player. The game's visual design continually seeks to reinforce the tangibility of Leshy's immediate presence as an uncomfortably close horrific threat.

While the game's low-poly graphical style that imitates early 3D graphics does not evoke immediacy in the sense that it is convincingly realistic, the impressionistic and compounding presentational choices effectively convince the player of their perspective as a participant in a card game. Źmuda (2024, 133-134) conceptualises remediation theory as one "mostly concerned with diachronic development" of media forms, in other words, the progression of one medium into others as new interpolations that are not better or worse, but necessarily developmental. Despite the card game medium degrading in 'realism'/immediacy, interpolating reality into nostalgic early 3D graphics increases the hypermediacy by drawing attention to the presentational format. Dolan (2024, 77) argues that modern games like *Inscryption* which use nostalgic art direction and graphical styles are not nostalgic but "hauntological", a reversal of nostalgia that does not seek to comfort players through familiarity but instead corrupts familiar spaces, disquieting and horrifying players in the present because the familiar and the known becomes unknowable. Similarly, the bounds of reality confine the space of the card game in reality, but remediated into the form of early 3D graphics (clearly drawing on J-horror classics like *Resident Evil* (Capcom 1996) and *Silent Hill* (Team Silent 1999) but transposed into a first-person perspective) and corrupted by the uncanny and horrifying presence of Leshy, turning the familiarity of both card games in reality and nostalgic 'known' encounters with horror into the space of the unknown. *Inscryption's* graphical presentation, in Dolan's (2024) framework, haunts the player's own relationship to formational encounters with video games and card games.

Not only does *Inscryption* remediate the player's experience of card games in reality into the graphical world of haunted formative experiences with video games, but the unique presentation of *Inscryption's* narrative also soon makes clear that their perspective is not of the in-game character, but instead the internal UI of a video camera positioned to record a computer screen of Luke Carder, portrayed in live-camera footage by actor Kevin Saxby, who is 'actually' the person playing the in-universe game, also called *Inscryption*. Therefore, the player is 'playing' the role of Luke Carder, playing the game, from the perspective of the in-game character, who is playing a game with Leshy. This dense, multi-layered meta-narrative also represents another development of remediation, where the remediated card game into a

videogame is remediated again into YouTube-style “Let’s Play” content, where audiences can watch someone else play and commentate over their gameplay, which Luke begins to do more often as the game progresses (see Figure 2).

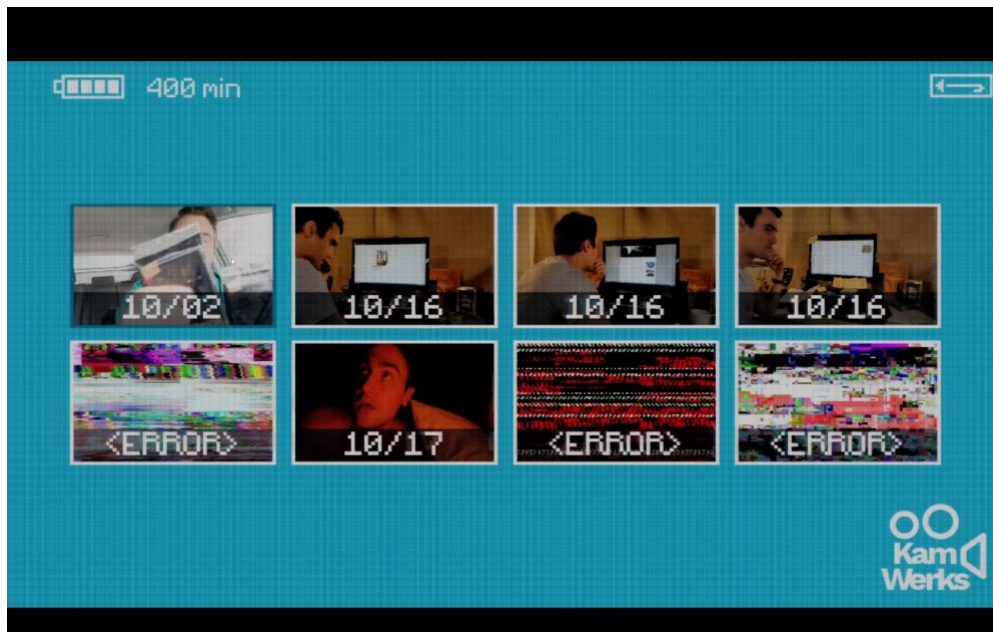


Figure 2: The in-game live-camera footage depicting Luke Carder making YouTube vlog-stylised recordings. Later in the game, the player has access to a camcorder-style interface to watch Luke Carder’s recordings, which slowly renders the digital horror of the game into the ‘real’ world.

This development of nested remediations evolves the representation of the game’s horror that is defined by, in a style typical of Daniel Mullins games, the complete collapse of the proverbial fourth wall where Luke, and the player, are actively confronted by and communicated with by the in-game characters. For example, in the game’s final act, where the card game has permutated into an entirely new aesthetic and form, players are tasked with rummaging through their own storage system on their PCs to unearth files whose size dictates the statistics of cards to be generated in battle, as well as integrating the player’s friends list, and any photographs the player chooses to import. Where the remediation of card game to video game was subtle and not sign-posted, this ‘invasion’ into the safe space of the player is a kind of ‘forced’ remediation, where the context of media such as UI, photographs, and data files are co-opted into the narrative of the game. Similarly, Mullins provides several in-game clues to a real-world ARG (Alternate Reality Game) where players need to cooperate in reality to solve the game’s central mysteries. This is what Thompson (2020, 91) terms as “metafictional horror”, defined by intertextuality, self-awareness, and the breakdown of assumed boundaries of a text which, as Tarr (2017, 2) writes, blurs “narrative and cognitive boundaries, producing a destabilizing effect”. When engaging with horror media, the assumed boundary of safety between the bounds of the form and the bounds of reality are implicitly delineated, but due to the interactivity and permutability inherent to video games, interaction can be leveraged aggressively

against the player to trigger metafictional horror through the evolution of verisimilitude as a state of consensual immersion to forced remediation back into reality.

In this way, remediation becomes an aggressive action, co-opting the hauntological grounds of nostalgic media, ‘infecting’ the space in which the player exists, to more potently push the game’s horrific effect, but it all finds its source in the central remediation of the card game into the digital space. As the success of *Tabletop Simulator* (Berserk Games 2014) and the recent popularity of *Slay The Spire* (Mega Crit 2017) and *Balatro* (LocalThunk 2024) indicate, the card game, despite being one of the most universal remediations in the form of default-installed *Microsoft Solitaire* (Cherry 1990) on every Windows OS, is a powerful and evocative evolution of the analogue into the space of the digital, where it necessarily evolves away from from the co-operative social element of card games in reality, and developing into hyper-sensorial deck-builders or narrative-heavy horror games like *Inscription*. However, *Inscription*’s skeuomorphic UI may also be a key reason why its atmosphere, particularly in the first act, is so tangible, where the remediation is as subtle as possible.

SKEUOMORPHIC GATEWAYS TO HORRIFIC GAME DESIGN

Inscription, as a game that graphically presents as one originally released in the heyday of skeuomorphic design in video games, is rife with subtle but powerful choices to remediate the reality of a card game into the context of skeuomorphic design to teach central mechanics to the player, whilst simultaneously contributing to the tangibility and depth of atmosphere of Leshy’s cabin. For example, when the player first gains control in Leshy’s cabin at the beginning of the game, a ‘board’ of sorts is laid out on the grainy wood table before the player, as are two decks of cards, accompanied by a fluttering sound effect, before cards are dealt into an invisible ‘hand’ in front of the player’s face, stacked on top of each other so that they partially obscure the card behind them, as one might do in reality. When Leshy asks the player to “PLAY THE SQUIRREL CARD” as the first action of the game (see Figure 3), Mullins does not tutorialise by telling the player how to do this, instead relying on the skeuomorphic design and a player’s understanding of the context, form, and rhythm of how card games are played, particularly through the use of discrete and obscured hands, held close to the face. By floating the cursor over any one of the cards, the card comes to the fore, rising above the rest, as if the invisible finger of the player character has pulled it slightly out of the hand in the moment of consideration before playing it. By clicking the card, the player’s view changes to a top-down perspective of the impromptu board on the wooden table, where clearly delineated ‘slots’ for the cards, four of which are closest to the player, present themselves for the selected card to be played. This process of tutorialisation happens in less than 20 seconds, all prompted by a single instruction, and reliant on a player’s natural familiarity with the material space of card games in reality.



Figure 3: Daniel Mullins utilises context and the form of card games to tutorialise the game; in the opening card game, the antagonist, Leshy, asks the player to take an action without tutorialising the actions to do so.

However, this familiarity of the skeuomorphs is turned against the player to heighten the horrific effect of the play experience. Luke Carder, in an unedited card opening video shown to the player later, explains that the in-world game *Inscription* is a relatively obscure but beloved game from the late 1990s/early 2000s that never received a video game adaptation. Thus, in the context of the in-universe world of *Inscription*, the experience of playing the game in Leshy's cabin is a direct remediation of a pre-existing game, and the tangible materiality of the cards suggest that, on the surface, the in-fiction designer of the game used skeuomorphic design to adapt the 'real-world' game. However, when cards begin to directly address, manipulate, and plead with the player as well as taking on the guise of previously murdered players, the tangible safety of a familiar, intuitive design is warped into an eerie and increasingly unsettling world in which the cards that players readily sacrifice (a central mechanic of Act One's card game design) have consciousness. The skeuomorphic design that is effective in communicating familiarity and ease of use (as seen in its tutorialising function) is turned against the player, making the tangibility of the cards, the table, and Leshy on the other side of the table characteristics of fear rather than familiarity.

Skeuomorphic design principles are a natural choice for remediation of analogue card games that at first provide an intuitive method of tutorialising the game for players in reality, as well as building the fiction of the remediation in-game, but *Inscription* also demonstrates how subversions and distortions of subtle remediations provide a

uniquely powerful emotional space through which game design can evoke feelings of dread, eeriness, and horror.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis demonstrates how remediation theory can serve as a foundation for creating evocative, immersive, and emotionally complex gaming experiences. Through its interplay of analogue card game conventions, skeuomorphic design, and metafictional elements, the game illustrates how digital media can transcend simple mimicry of physical spaces to evoke multifaceted responses in players. This paper's analysis emphasises that *Inscription's* power lies in its ability to flow between immediacy and hypermediacy, constructing a phenomenological experience that alternates between the familiar and the uncanny. These design choices not only craft a deeply atmospheric and engaging game but also highlight broader implications for understanding the evolving relationship between digital media and player perception. By highlighting the key themes uncovered in our analysis, the unique design choices of *Inscription* contains meaningful knowledge for considering the future direction of the games industry, as well as potentially alluding to future analogue games where we see a historical trend of back and forth between analogue and digital games borrowing from each other to enhance experiences.

By grounding the player in a remediated subject position—playing a card game in a darkened cabin—the game initially builds trust and familiarity. Yet, as the narrative progresses and metafictional elements are introduced, this trust is systematically eroded. The game begins to foreground its constructed nature, revealing the mechanisms of its remediation and disrupting the player's sense of security. This dual-layered approach—immersing the player in the immediacy of the gameplay while simultaneously reminding them of its deception—leverages remediation as a tool to evoke horror and unease. Future research could explore how this oscillation impacts not only player immersion but also broader themes of narrative reliability and emotional investment in games. The importance of immersion in media and technology in general is a factor which has increasingly been given value and substantial resources to enhance, from VR gaming or advanced AR experiences like the recent *Apple Vision Pro* devices. The annual enhancements and developments which we are observing for these AR and VR devices demonstrate that industries are placing significant value in threading digital immersion with reality. In this respect, *Inscription* presents a template design for demonstrating how the real can be intertwined with the uncanny to generate brand-new experiences, which will become a valued dimension to have in future horror media, particularly those utilising modern immersive technology.

By mimicking the materiality of physical card games, the game creates a natural learning curve, allowing players to engage deeply with its mechanics without requiring extensive tutorialisation. Similarly to the game's immersion, *Inscription* demonstrates the potential of skeuomorphic design as a means of fostering accessibility and

emotional connection in digital spaces. However, *Inscription* subverts this familiarity by transforming skeuomorphic elements into sources of discomfort and fear. The cards, initially a benign and familiar interface, become imbued with unsettling autonomy, forcing players to reassess their relationship with the game's mechanics and narrative. This dynamic illustrates how skeuomorphic design can be employed not just for usability but as a narrative and emotional device, a concept ripe for further study in game design and UI research. Skeuomorphism initially identified as a concept to bridge the gap between physical and digital interfaces (Chu 2023), as demonstrated in our analysis, can provide much more meaningful dynamics than an understandable interface, when used effectively this can evoke player emotions and subtly add to environmental storytelling.

On considering the usage of hauntological aesthetics, as described by Dolan (2024), positions it within a growing trend of media that draw on nostalgic visual styles not for comfort but to evoke the disquiet and distorted (Long 2023). The graphical aesthetic of *Inscription* is leveraged to tap into players' collective memory of formative gaming experiences, only to corrupt and subvert them, Long (2023, 23) identifies this mechanism as a form of 'false nostalgia', lulling players into a false sense of comfort that slowly descends into distortion. This approach aligns with broader recent trends in media, where nostalgic elements are reimagined to evoke a sense of loss or unease. Recent gaming experiences like *Doki Doki Literature Club* (Team Salvato and Dan Salvato LLC 2017), *Pony Island* (Daniel Mullins Games 2016), and *Undertale* (Fox 2015) each employ metafictional and nostalgic horror mechanisms, demonstrating that this technique is increasingly prevalent amongst indie game development. Future research could investigate the cultural and psychological implications of hauntological aesthetics in gaming, examining how they resonate with contemporary audiences and what this reveals about collective memory and digital media. With the opportunity to analyse why metafictional and nostalgic horror media is predominantly found in lower budget or 'indie' media, opposed to larger scale productions, most notably when we consider titles like *Inscription* and *Undertale* have been nominated and won numerous accolades and received critical acclaim.

Finally, *Inscription's* narrative and mechanical design highlight the unique affordances of games as a medium for exploring complex themes. Its ability to simultaneously engage players with its mechanics, narrative, and aesthetic choices reinforces the potential of games to serve as rich sites for interdisciplinary study. The game's success suggests that remediation, skeuomorphism, and metafiction are not isolated phenomena but interconnected tools that, when used effectively, can create profoundly impactful experiences. As such, future work could investigate how these concepts intersect with other emerging trends in game design, such as procedural storytelling, adaptive AI, and immersive VR environments.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Inscription* stands as a testament to the potential of digital games to evoke complex emotional and intellectual responses through innovative use of remediation, skeuomorphic design, and metafictional narrative. Its layered design invites players to oscillate between immersion and self-awareness, crafting an experience that is as unsettling as it is compelling. By examining these elements in detail, this paper contributes to a growing body of research on the intersections of analogue and digital media, highlighting new avenues for exploring the evolving dynamics of player experience and game design. Future studies building on this work could further illuminate how digital games reflect, reshape, and challenge our understanding of media, memory, and the self.

Daniel Mullins' ability to hybridise analogue inspirations with digital affordances speaks to broader trends in game design, where traditional boundaries between media forms are increasingly blurred. By remediating analogue card games into an atmospheric digital experience, *Inscription* not only reflects the present state of hybrid game development but also proposes a future where the interplay between analogue tactility and digital immersion becomes a fertile ground for innovation with modern technology devices. Its integration of skeuomorphic design and metafictional narrative challenges existing paradigms of player interaction, creating a blueprint for exploring hybrid experiences that leverage both the physicality of analogue games and the flexibility of digital media. As game studies continue to evolve, works like *Inscription* highlight the potential for critical inquiry into the convergence of media forms and their implications for the future of gaming and interactive storytelling.

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