

Beyond Metagames: Analyzing Metareference in Videogames

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Looking at recent trends in AAA as well as indie game design, one could be forgiven to think that videogames have gone “fully meta.” From highly self-reflexive “games about games” such as *The Beginner’s Guide* (2015), *The Magic Circle* (2015), or *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* (2020) via experimental meta-horror titles such as *IMSCARED* (2016), *Doki Doki Literature Club* (2017), or *Inscription* (2021) to “postdigital” games such as *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017), *Pentiment* (2022), or *The Plucky Squire* (2024) that play with the mediality of other media forms, metareferential videogames have not only become more frequent and more visible in videogame culture but also more radical in the way they experiment with the formal possibilities of the medium and draw players’ attention to their own artifice. Arguably, this development comes at a moment of crisis. Videogames have reached a stage of maturation at which established aesthetic and representational conventions have been overused to the point of losing not only their originality but their very impact. This is further exacerbated by a “permacrisis” of reference fueled by the loss of trust in images and “truth” as well as software and data. Metareferential videogames respond to these tensions with self-reflexive irony, but also with a resurging creativity that gives rise to new forms of ludic as well as narrative expression. Yet, while a substantial body of research on metareferential videogames has emerged in and beyond game studies (e.g., Backe 2018; Ensslin 2014; Ferri et al. 2016; Fest 2016; Gualeni 2016; Jannidis 2009; Krampe 2023; Krampe et al. 2022; Waszkiewicz 2024), not all relevant cases have received the same degree of scholarly attention, leading to the persistence of considerable theoretical and analytical lacunae. To address that issue, this extended abstract proposes a comprehensive framework for the analysis of a broad range of metareferential strategies that takes into account the medium specificity of videogames and that can be productively applied beyond so-called meta games (see also Krampe 2025a; and the contributions in Krampe and Thon 2025).

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Despite various competing conceptualizations, the term “metareference” at its core describes a form of medial self-reflexivity characterized by the presence of a “metalevel” from whence the media text or artifact in question comments on itself and draws the recipients’ attention to its own mediality (e.g., Hutcheon 1980; Waugh 1984; Wolf 2009a; see also the contributions in Nöth et al. 2007; Wolf 2009b; Wolf 2011). As (usually) multimodal, interactive, and digital media forms, videogames can use a particularly broad range of metareferential strategies. For instance, they may not only employ a multimodal surface layer of representation but may also draw on their technological infrastructure and programming in order to generate metareferential effects. By the same token, the metareferential comment they formulate may refer not only to the artifice of the gameworld but also to the rules, mechanics, processes, algorithms, codes, and hardware that characterize the videogame as a profoundly ludic and, no less importantly, as a digital media form. Analyzing the metareferential strategies that videogames may employ thus necessitates considering several dimensions of their mediality and materiality at once. To map the different metareferential elements in videogames, we therefore propose to distinguish between three main layers of the core dimension of metareferential form, in that (1) metareferential elements may be situated within the layer of the gameworld (e.g., when metaization is achieved by means of the actions or utterance of specific characters); (2) metareferential elements can be situated within the layer of the game system (e.g., if they are created by means of the game mechanics or the extradiegetic interface); (3) metareference can be produced through elements that reach beyond the videogame (e.g., if play is extended to the interfaces of the respective computer’s operating system). A comparable distinction between three layers can also be drawn with regard to the dimension of metareferential content, in that a metareferential comment may (4) refer to the gameworld (e.g., if a videogame comments on its narrative conventions or exposes the fictionality of its world); (5) to the game system (e.g., if a videogame discusses its rules, mechanics, or software); or (6) to aspects beyond the videogame (e.g., if the videogame comments on other videogames, the videogame industry, or the broader media system it is embedded in).

This approach to the analysis of videogame-specific metareferential strategies and/or metareferential elements has two main advantages: On the one hand, it helps to systematically map instances of metareference across a diverse set of videogames, allowing us to identify similarities and differences between these videogames in terms of how the instances of metareference in question are produced and what they comment on. On the other hand, it also serves as a powerful heuristic protocol for the in-depth analysis of videogames that put metareferential strategies front and center and which thus could rightly be called “metagames,” affording a nuanced description of the ways in which metareferential elements may interact with one another as well as with the non-metareferential elements of the videogame in question. Capitalizing on the latter point in particular, the heuristic power of the proposed model will be demonstrated via brief analyses of a selection of metareferential videogames that can be considered to be representative of broader trends in AAA as well as indie game development, with a particular focus on recent indie games that foreground their own mediality and materiality as digital media forms by employing various metareferential strategies that range from the remediation of nondigital aesthetic forms (e.g., Bolter and Grusin 1999; as well as Juul 2019; Thibault 2016; Thon 2025) via “manufactured” glitches and disruptions (e.g., Menkman 2011; as well as Gualeni 2019; Janik 2017; Thon 2025) to what could be described as “real” ontological metalepses that involve transgressions to the actual world via the users’ operating systems (e.g., Ryan 2006, 226; as well as Bell 2016; Ensslin and Bell 2021; Krampe 2025b; Krampe et al. 2022).

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