

(Meta)identity: Renegotiating identity through metamodern design in *Slay the Princess*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyze how Black Tabby Games' horror adventure game *Slay the Princess* (2023) echoes the search for identity within an immutable system through a metamodern lens. The game uses spatial rhetoric to create a metamodern reflection on the human condition and identity in modern society.

Slay the Princess (2023) (henceforth *StP*) is a psychological horror in which the player interacts primarily through selecting dialogue options that shape the direction of the story. The narrative unfolds according to the player's choices, introducing a branching and looping structure in which earlier decisions continually reshape subsequent events. This system of recursive choice-making positions the player as an active participant in determining the flow and tone of the narrative.

StP (2023) exemplifies metamodern narrative design through its use of space and branching narrative. This paper explores the game's portrayal of spatial liminality and looping narrative, with particular emphasis on the symbolic and affective role of one of the two spaces available within the game – the cabin. It is a mutable space that anchors the player's cyclical return, while providing a visual commentary on the prior decisions. The setting of the game, a cabin, may be considered a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1981) of a fairy-tale environment, fulfilling a comparable role to that of the fairy tale itself: it operates as an allusive and metaphorical device, constructing an "as if" space wherein the player engages in a journey of self-reflection (Barsotti, 2015). The space in the game acts as a critical tool, reacting to the Player's decision and accordingly changing its form, revealing new interpretive perspectives and complicating the recovery of meaning from experience. Looping narrative emphasizes returning to the same point in the story while simultaneously opening multiple polysemic possibilities for interpretation and analysis, which, according to Steven Conway (2024), is a characteristic feature of metamodernism.

StP (2023) seems to use "ludic kennings" (Conway, 2024), design gestures that use repetition and looping to provide a new way of understanding the narrative, to underscore the game's main message: the importance of identity, maintaining relations, and polyphony of both human and non-human agents. It echoes core metamodern features such as the desire to belong, metatextuality, the circulation of affect, reconstruction, and the search for meaning (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). By treating the cabin as an object imbued with agency, considering its ability

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to impact the narration, this paper engages with object-oriented ontology (Harman, 2005) to suggest that space in *Slay the Princess* (2023) is a realization of metamodern narrative structure that acts as a carrier of existential reflection: the instability of identity and meanings within imposed systems. The reconfigurations of the game's liminal space echo the metamodern commitment to rebuilding meaning from within a fractured or constraining structure (van den Akker et al., 2017). In *StP* (2023), nonhuman objects take a prominent role in shaping narrative and dynamics, reflecting, to some degree, what Marco Caracciolo (2020) calls "object-oriented plotting", as the cabin is not only a material anchor but also an active factor in the construction of the story. Viewed through a metamodern lens, *StP* (2023) acts as a text reflecting on the necessity of continuous renegotiation of one's identity, even if it seems predetermined or unchangeable. Within the game, characters resist prescriptive roles and duties, and the space itself overwrites players' choices, forcing them to try again, with a different insight.

As such, *StP* (2023) realises a metamodern narrative structure using *ludic kennings* (Conway, 2024), mitigation of the player's agency, and *object-oriented plotting* (Caracciolo, 2020). This paper analyses *StP* (2023) through a structured approach, inspired by Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton's (2006) methodological toolkit. Interpretation will focus on the game's story, with particular attention paid to its construction of spatial narrative, analysing the range and variation of interaction with game characters, interface, and taking into consideration overall mechanical constraints. Using methods of critical play (Flanagan, 2023) and textual analysis (Fernández-Vara, 2015), the paper posits that, through its medium-related tools such as procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007), the game positions the player as a co-creator of a pre-structured but changeable story, in which agency is distributed between the player, characters, and objects within the game. This layered construction underlines the metamodern investigation into the possibility of non-human agencies as constructive forces in the process of meaning-making. Drawing on the theoretical framework of metamodernism (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010; Huber, 2014; van den Akker et al., 2017; Radchenko, 2023), enriched by the findings of Conway (2024) and Caracciolo (2020), this paper gives insight into metamodern narrative structure in *Slay the Princess* (2023) as a story of reconstruction of personal identity and search for meaning despite their perceived unreachability.

Keywords

metamodernism, spatial rhetorics, object-oriented ontology, fairy-tale, Slay the Princess

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