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ESCOLA DE HUMANIDADES
PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM LETRAS
MESTRADO EM LETRAS

LUCAS ANTÔNIO VIAPIANA BAPTISTA

A LABYRINTH OF LABYRINTHS: BRANCHING NARRATIVES

Porto Alegre
2024
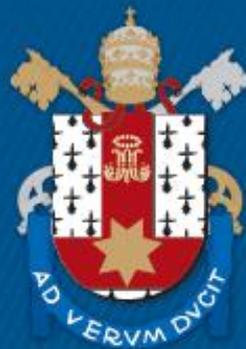
Pontifícia Universidade Católica
do Rio Grande do Sul

PONTIFÍCIA UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL

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ÁREA DE CONCENTRAÇÃO: ESCRITA CRIATIVA

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A labyrinth of labyrinths: branching narratives

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Dissertação apresentada como requisito para a obtenção do grau de Mestre em Letras, na área de Escrita Criativa pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Escola de Humanidades da Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul.

Orientador: Bernardo José de Moraes Bueno

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Banca em 18/07/24 às 14h.

BANCA EXAMINADORA

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Prof. Dr. Bernardo José de Moraes Bueno (orientador)

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Prof. Dr. André Fagundes Pase

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Prof. Dr. Roberto Tietzmann

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[1] "Project Play, Learn, Teach". My translation.

like in the mentioning of professors, colleagues and friends, there are many more people that could be named here, but length restrictions and common sense calls for parsimony.

I want to thank Paula Dias, who has been a source of inspiration and motivation. She sometimes sees in me more than I see myself. She was kind and soothing when I needed it most. She was and still is an island of respite and joy amidst stormy seas.

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Walk any path in Destiny's garden, and you will be forced to choose, not once but many times. The paths fork and divide. With each step you take through Destiny's garden, you make a choice; and every choice determines future paths… The paths diverge and branch and reconnect; some say not even Destiny himself truly knows where any will take you, where each twist and turn will lead.

- Season of Mists, Neil Gaiman

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is part theoretical essay, part literary writing. The first part consists of a review of concepts regarding ergodic and electronic literature, as well as some of its subgenres and specificities. The general history and context of ergodic and electronic literature are presented, together with examples of the most relevant works in each subcategory, such as *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961) by Raymond Queneau, *afternoon, a story* (1994), by Michael Joyce and *Zork* (1977) by Tim Anderson and others. From the reviewed concepts, a definition of branching narratives is proposed, following authors such as Espen J. Aarseth, Janet H. Murray and N. Katherine Hayles, among others. The context, inspirations, goals and creative processes regarding *Ferrea: A Tale of Rust*, which is the original literary part, are exposed and discussed. Finally, an excerpt of Ferrea, both in hypertext and gamebook form, is presented.

Keywords: Branching Narratives, Creative Writing, Electronic Literature, Ergodic Literature, Hypertext Fiction.

RESUMO

Esta dissertação é em parte ensaio teórico e em parte escrita literária. A primeira parte consiste em uma revisão de conceitos propostos por outros autores a respeito de literatura ergódica e literatura eletrônica, assim como alguns de seus subgêneros e especificidades. A história e contexto gerais da literatura ergódica e da literatura eletrônica são apresentados, juntamente com exemplos das obras mais relevantes de cada subcategoria, como *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961), por Raymond Queneau, *afternoon, a story* (1994), por Michael Joyce e *Zork* (1977) por Tim Anderson e outros. A partir dos conceitos revisados, uma definição de narrativas ramificadas é proposta, seguindo autores como Espen J. Aarseth, Janet H. Murray e N. Katherine Hayles, entre outros. O contexto, inspirações, objetivos e processos criativos a respeito de Ferrea: A Tale of Rust, que é a parte literária, são expostos e discutidos. Finalmente, um excerto de Ferrea, tanto em formato de hypertexto quanto em formato de livro-jogo, é apresentado.

Palavras-chave: Escrita Criativa, Ficção Hypertextual, Literatura Eletrônica, Literatura Ergódica, Narrativas Ramificadas.

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

There are so many ways one may start a dissertation that it is a daunting task to perform. I think I will begin by saying that branching narratives have been in my life from a very early age, and though at times they didn't always constitute a strong presence, they never completely went away. I remember one of the first video games I played, still sitting on my fathers lap some twenty years ago, was *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (2003)*, or *KOTOR*, for short. Neither of us knew much of the English language, and games at that time were rarely translated and localized to Brazil. So we had this English-to-Portuguese dictionary nearby, and went through the game with it as a guiding tool. Even with the dictionary, we probably didn't get most of the narrative, beyond the basic conflict and plot. And it was still a great experience. Like many other RPG games, KOTOR has a complex branching narrative that allows the player to experience vastly different stories, depending on the choices they make. From that point on, many similar games using those mechanics of branching narrative through dialogue and action choices followed. From *Neverwinter Nights 2* (2006) to *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011), from Telltale's' *The Walking Dead* (2012) to *Divinity: Original Sin II* (2017), to *The Witcher*[2] game trilogy. And, more recently, *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) and *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023). It is safe to say that my interest in narrative in general came first through the medium of video games, an interactive medium by nature, rather than conventional non-interactive works, like most of print literature and most of audiovisual works, be them movies or series.

I also remember hating reading as a kid. One day, my mother decided to read with me a children's book of a famous series called *Salve-se quem puder*, or, in English, *Puzzle Adventure*[3]. The Puzzle Adventure series consists of mystery books that use branching paths, as well as other clue-seeking dynamics of reading (like riddles and passages that were only readable through a transparent red paper magnifying glass-type object). That, more than anything else, made me want to read physical books (there practically weren't any digital ones back in the early 2000s, at least not easily accessible).

The main take about all of this is: interactivity and agency was what sparked my interest in reading and in the literary world to me in the first place. And I believe that that essence of choice-based storytelling, filled with the sense of unpredictability and multiple possibilities, never really left me. That is why I chose to study and research it. Traditional, one-path, linear

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[2] *The Witcher* (2007), *The Witcher 2* (2011) and *The Witcher 3* (2015).
[3] *Salve-se Quem Puder*, Scipione; published originally by Usborne Publishing in the UK.

stories are fun too, but everyone knows them, everyone has experienced them. I want to stride the weird, labyrinthine pathways of the branching narratives. I want to live in Borges 's *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*[4]. And, if at some point on this journey, my work, either the theoretical or the literary parts of it, or both, happens to be that spark of initiation and wonder, either for branching narrative works, or reading and literature in general, for someone else, even better.

We should, then, explore some definition possibilities to key concepts for this work. In the first topic of this work, titled, *Branching Narratives*, I discuss previous proposals of definitions by renowned authors of the field, and how they interact with each other. How I interpret this ecosystem of new media, electronic literature and ergodic literature in general. I give a general contextualization of the concepts of *ergodic literature*, *cybertext*, *electronic literature*, *interactive fiction* and *hypertext fiction*, as well as examples of each one and its possible "ancestors". I discuss and compare hypertext fiction and interactive fiction, the two main subgenres of electronic literature, in my view. I also reflect on the key differences between them and how the strengths and weaknesses of each can and should be thought of when deciding which type of electronic literature narrative one wants to tell.

I also highlight some important early works, movements and authors that flirted with the idea of branching fiction, in some cases, before the age of computation and digitalization. Some of the exemples are, in fact, branching narrative works, and some, despite being unisequential, traditional works, explored the idea of branching narratives in the contents of their stories.

After situating and organizing all of those elements, I then aim at reaching a satisfactory definition of "branching narrative", using those previous concepts and definitions, their hierarchies and relationships, as a base for my own theoretical proposal. I present my definition of branching narrative, as an addition to this ecosystem, and not a major change to what already exists.

The second topic, *Twine*, is dedicated to the exploration and contextualization of Twine, its characteristics, its history and its importance to branching narrative in general. Twine is also the tool that I choose to write the literary part of this dissertation.

For the third topic, *Ferrea: A Tale of Rust: Creative Process*, a more personal approach is used. It is intended as a sort of creative process diary, or post-production analysis. Here I convey my experience of creating *Ferrea: A Tale of Rust*, explaining my general feeling on the

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[4] *The Garden of Forking Paths*, in English. Contained in *Cuentos Completos* (2023), or, *Collected Fictions*, in English

matter, as well as the thoughts behind some of the major creative decisions. Here I talk about my inspirations, struggles and strategies relative to the writing of Ferrea, as well as explaining a little more in depth and extra-diegetically about the setting and the backstory of the player-controlled protagonist.

The fourth and final part of this dissertation is an excerpt of *Ferrea* itself. It consists of the beginning of the story up until a little after the first big turn of events. The conversion from hypertext to game-book is a rough one, but necessary to the purposes of this dissertation. And also, it can be useful for the analysis of the text. But, if the reader/player wants an optimal experience, I also provide a link for it to be played directly on a web browser.

1. BRANCHING NARRATIVES

1.1 ERGODIC LITERATURE

Just like the works discussed in this dissertation, the very debate about definitions and nomenclatures surrounding those works is a complex maze. I arrived at the term *branching* because I feel that other terminologies, despite their merits, do not quite encompass all elements I believe these works have. Although many of those definitions overlap with each other, there is a lot of room for blind spots, and cases where an object of study is half one thing and half another. And that can quickly become overcomplicated. Of course, in no way I intend to substitute, disproof or disregard any of those pre-existing definitions and categories (in fact, they are essential to formulate my own proposal), nor to imply that my proposal is flawless. It can and should be tested, questioned and added to, if the occasion calls for it.

First, we should consider some of those already existing categories, understand them, and see which aspects of them work and which don't for our purposes.

In the following pages we will explore briefly Aarseth's (1997) concepts of *cybertext* and *ergodic literature* , Murray's (1997)[5] concepts of *multiform* and *multisequential* stories, as well as the broader concepts of *electronic literature* and of two of its variants that are the most relevant to this study: *hypertext fiction* and *interactive fiction*.

Those categories, as I understand them, can be organized in an umbrella structure, with *ergodic literature* being the broader term, *electronic literature* being a type of ergodic literature, and *interactive fiction* and *hypertext fiction* being types of electronic literature. Other categories, like *cybertext*, *multiform stories* and *multisequential stories*, don't fit well in this umbrella hierarchy, and instead can be present at each level of it (or even entirely outside of it). I propose that this umbrella hierarchy can be expressed in the following figure:

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[5] Although the original work was published in 1997, the edition used for this dissertation is the 2017 one, with new commentary from the author.

Ergodic literature

Electronic literature

Hypertext IF
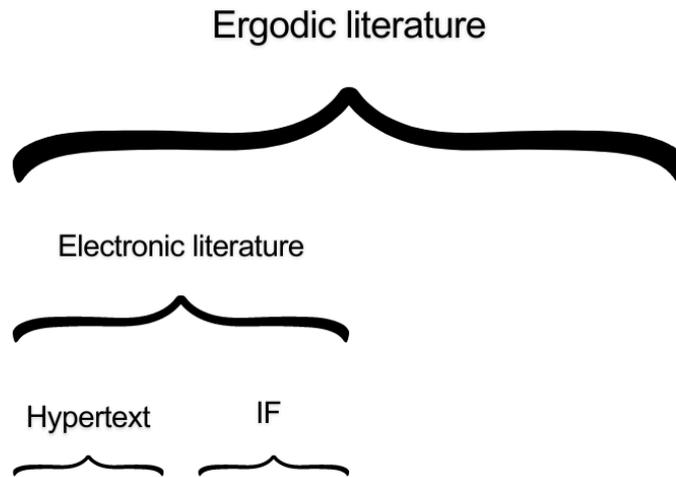
Ergodic Literature umbrella hierarchy. Made by the author.

An understanding of Aarseth's concepts of ergodic literature is necessary, not only for contextualization purposes, but also because I consider that all branching narratives are necessarily ergodic (among other things). The main point of Aarseth's argument lies in the degree of participation required of the reader, or user, for the successful experience of the work being read. An ergodic text, then, requires more from a reader than a traditional text would, at least in some aspects.

> The concept of cybertext focuses on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange. However, it also centers attention on the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure than even reader-response theorists would claim. The performance of their reader takes place all in his head, while the user of cybertext also performs in an extranoematic sense. During the cybertextual process, the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of "reading" do not account for. This phenomenon I call *ergodic*, using a term appropriated from physics that derives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning "work" and "path". In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. (AARSETH, 1997, p. 1)

This nontrivial effort means having to actively navigate the text in some way, instead of just having it feed onto you in the traditional codex format and layout, where one simply reads from left to right (in western countries at least) and from top to bottom. The ergodic text

requires a deeper interpretation not just of the message, but of the form itself. Aarseth accentuates the point by stating that: "A reader, however strongly engaged in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless. (…) He cannot have the player's pleasure of influence: "Let's see what happens when I do *this*." The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent." (AARSETH, 1997, p. 4). In essence, ergodic literature requires from the reader physical effort as well as mental effort.

A cybertext is a type of ergodic literature, one that "is a machine for the production of variety of expression". (AARSETH, 1997, p. 3). We could think of a cybertext as a sort of engine, a mechanism that combines a fixed set of rules with human interaction and input to produce texts. Although the name "cybertext" might immediately suggest something out of a sci-fi novel and contingent to the computational and digital era and beyond, there are examples of cybertexts dating as far back as ancient China. The *I Ching*, or *The Book of Changes*, in English, is a cybertext developed about 3000 years ago that serves a divinatory function. It involves the interpretation of multiple combinations of coin tossing results into symbols, with a total of 64 combinations (possibly much more, if some specific rules are in place), every one of which has a distinct meaning, that the user must apply to the question or general area of life they were thinking about when before and during the process.

Another famous example of cybertext is Queneau's 1961 *Cent mille milliard de poèmes* (*100,000,000,000,000 Poems*), "which took the form of a book with ten sonnets (each of the usual fourteen lines) bound one in front of the other and with each line cut so that it could be "turned", like a page, separately. Any one of the lines could thus be selected for each position." (MONTFORT, 2003, p. 70). In the book, a sonnet of fourteen verses can be assembled, with each verse having ten possible choices, leaving the reader with a total number of 10^{14} possible results. According to Queneau himself, in the preface of *Cent mille milliard de poèmes*, it would take approximately 200 million years to read every possible combination, reading nonstop for 24 hours a day.

It is important to highlight that ergodic literature and cybertexts are medium-agnostic, and they, as evidenced in the previous examples, don't necessarily need to be digital. In fact, they don't even need to be physical objects. Aarseth states that "The *Dungeons and Dragons* genre might be regarded as an oral cybertext, the oral predecessor to computerized, written, adventure games." (AARSETH, 1997, p. 98). Of course there are *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*) and other role-playing games systems rulebooks, but those are general guides, and not necessary for an RPG session to unfold. The true mechanisms of the D&D cybertext are at work in the exchanges between the players.

Cybertexts are also outside the hierarchy I proposed earlier, since they can be digital or non-digital. And although every cybertext is necessarily ergodic, not all ergodic texts are cybertexts. The examples in the following paragraph are works that fit perfectly in this case, since they are ergodic, but are not text engines. Although they all have the possibility for variation of result, they all have one or two canonical narrative paths. They function more like puzzles or riddles (we will discuss those more in depth later), with single right answers and solutions, rather than a potential literature mechanism or engine. Although some of them can produce literally millions of results, all of those results, except one, would be considered failed attempts at solving the puzzle, and thus, not constitute an acceptable final state or result.

Other notable works of ergodic literature are: Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (1963)[6], a book with two reading paths proposed, one traditional reading, and one which involves the skipping of multiple chapters, completely changing the reader's perception of the story. Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) is a book consisting of a 999-lines poem, with annotations and commentary by Charles Kinbote, a fictitious scholar and the narrator of the novel. The narrative is really in the commentary, and not the main poem. Doug Dorst's *S.* (2013) a novel composed of the fictional novel *The Ship of Theseus* whose margins are filled with "handwritten" notes that serve as dialog between two characters, as well as other supplementary loose materials found between the pages. Edward Powys Mathers' *Cain's Jawbone* (1934), which is a literary puzzle consisting of a hundred pages organized in the wrong order. It falls to the reader to assemble the right order, which is only one among millions of possibilities.

I purposefully cited only non-electronic examples, even though there are many fundamental works of ergodic literature that are also electronic literature, to save those for a later discussion, in relation with electronic literature, hypertext fiction and interactive fiction as well. But, as previously established, all hypertext fiction and interactive fiction are electronic literature, and all electronic literature are ergodic. That said, the examples brought later in this text add to the list of ergodic literature as well.

1.2 ELECTRONIC LITERATURE

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[6] *Hopscotch*, in English.

Electronic literature, as I consider it, is ergodic literature conveyed through and dependent on digital mediums. However, not every text that is read through a digital device is electronic literature. That is, the digitalization of conventional, non-ergodic literature is not electronic literature. Electronic literature is composed of works that are exclusively readable or experienceable through digital means. In her book *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, Hayles defines electronic literature as "generally considered to exclude print literature that has been digitalized, is by contrast "digital born", a first-generation digital object on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer". (HAYLES, 2008, p. 3).

She also points out that electronic literature encompasses other kinds of works, that are not primarily textual, and as such, electronic literature is, among other things, a zone of heavy hybridization of mediums:

> At the same time, because electronic literature is normally created and performed within a context of networked and programmable media, it is also formed by the powerhouses of contemporary culture, particularly computer games, films, animations, digital arts, graphic design, and electronic visual culture. (…) Hybrid by nature, it comprises a "trading zone" (…) in which different vocabularies, expertises, and expectations come together to see what might emerge from their intercourse. (HAYLES, 2008, p. 4).

It may seem controversial to affirm that such a vast array of mediums as films, animations, games, and so on, can be literary, and it certainly brings up a discussion that is in itself a kind of pandora box for literary criticism. The arguments in favor of some new media works having literary qualities are still met with resistance, or straight up dismissed, by some academics in literary studies. The literary, as we understand today, in terms of medium at least, wasn't always understood the way it is, and at every major historic change in that regard new technologies and modalities of the literary were met with doubts and rejections by the current status quo of each respective time and place. Moreover, we have to consider that literature is not the medium which carries it, and it certainly isn't lost in the transition from one medium to another, as Hayles points out:

> When literature leaps from one medium to another – from orality to writing, from manuscript codex to printed book, from mechanically generated print to electronic textuality – it does not leave behind the accumulated knowledge embedded in genres, poetic conventions, narrative structures, figurative tropes, and so forth. Rather, this knowledge embedded is carried forward into the new medium typically by trying to replicate the earlier medium's effects within the new medium's specificities. (HAYLES, 2008, p. 58).

She also has the following to say about the specific case of electronic literature, and the broader use of computers in the making of literature (electronic or otherwise):

> Literature, conceptualized not just as print books but as the entire complex system of literary production – including writers, editors, publishers, critics, designers, programmers, booksellers, readers, players, teachers, copyright laws and other legal formations, websites and other electronic dissemination mechanisms, and the technologies that enable and instantiate all of the above – is permeated at every level by computation. The bellelettristic tradition that has on occasion envisioned computers as the soulless other to the humanistic expressivity of literature could not be more mistaken. Contemporary literature, and even more so the literary that extends and enfolds it, *is* computational. (HAYLES, 2008, p. 85).

In essence, the rejection of computers as tools associated with literary practice doesn't find any basis today, as even traditional printed literature is permeated with computational processes in almost every level of its making.

Another critic that discusses this topic at length is Murray, in her book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. She also argues in favor of the literary as medium-agnostic[7], writing that "The real literary hierarchy is not of medium but of meaning." (MURRAY, 1997, p. 346). Murray also comments about the reactionary tendencies against new literary forms, that seem to be common throughout every era:

> Shakespeare and Jane Austen were once considered to be working in less legitimate formats than those used by Aeschylus and Homer. One hundred years after its invention, film art still occupies a marginal place in academic circles. The very activity of watching television is routinely dismissed as inherently inferior to the activity of reading, regardless of content. (HAYLES, 2017, p. 345).

Murray echos her sentiment:

> The paralyzing alien kiss is the latest embodiment of the fear with which we have greeted every powerful new representational technology – from the bardic lyre, to the printing press, to the secular theater, to the movie camera, to the television screen. We hear versions of the same terror in the biblical injunction against worshiping graven images; in the Homeric depiction of the alluring Siren's songs, drawing sailors to their death; and in Plato's banishing of the poet from his republic because "he stimulates and strengthens an element which threatens to undermine the reason" with his fraudulent "phantasms." All the representational arts can be considered dangerously delusional, and the more entrancing they are, the more disturbing. The powerful new storytelling technologies of the twentieth century have brought on an intensification of these fears. (MURRAY, 1997, p. 20).

The case of hybridized medium most relevant to us is that of video games. Perhaps it is also the one with the most heated debate too. Games can be understood, read and analyzed with an emphasis on narratology, or with an emphasis on game theory, and the tensions between those two theoretical currents have an intricate and complex history that permeates not only electronic literature discussions, but also game theory academic research in general. I will not

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[7] *Agnostic* is used here in its computational sense, meaning an object that is not exclusive to a particular system or model.

get into too much detail on that, since it is not an essential part of this dissertation, but the existence of this on-going theoretical war had to be at least mentioned. The fact is that "games" is as broad a term as "literature". If we follow Murray's argument that the literary value of a work lies in its meaning, and not in its medium, and we will, we can conclude that games, like other mediums, *can* be literature. Not all of them are, just not like every piece of printed paper with letters on it is; but certainly there is a vast percentage of video games that are indeed literature (among other things). We will discuss some examples later on.

Murray is very adamant in her defense of video games as a literary medium. She states that:

> The most common form of game – the agon, or contest between opponents – is also the earliest form of narrative. This is not surprising since opposition is one of the most pervasive organizing principles of human intelligence and language. (…) The Greek word *agon* refers to both athletic contests and to dramatic conflicts, reflecting the common origin of games and theater. A simple shoot-'em-up videogame, then, belongs to the extremely broad dramatic tradition that gives us both the boxing match and the Elizabethan revenge play. (MURRAY, 1997, p. 179).

Although I agree with her that videogames, just like any other medium, can be literary, I don't think that *every* video game is. Here I evoke her own words to say that "The real literary hierarchy is not of medium but of meaning." (MURRAY, 2017, p. 346). That goes both ways, we cannot assume that every work of a certain medium is literary, just as much as we cannot assume that entire mediums cannot be literary because of their very nature. That is not to say that "a simple shoot-'em-up" cannot be literary. It certainly can, but we should apply some criteria when thinking about the literary essence (or its lack) of a work. That said, I believe that what we perceive as "literary" or "not literary" is very nebulous and subjective. The same work might be literary to someone and non-literary to someone else. In addition, the same work might be literary to someone today and non-literary to that same person tomorrow. Of course, none of that is really useful, and we need a solid ground to what we consider literary.

The requirements for a game to be literary considered here will follow Aarseth's following example, and the logic he used on it (at the cost of having to anticipate a bit the discussion about hypertext):

> Narratives have two levels, description and narration. A game such as football has one level, the ergodic. A video game (e. g., Atari's *Pac-Man*) has description (the screen icons) and ergodics (the forced succession of events) but not narration (the game may be narrated in a number of ways, but like football, narration is not part of the game). A hypertext such as *Afternoon* has all three: description ("Her face was a mirror"),

narration ("I call Lolly"), and ergodics (the reader's choices). (AARSETH, 1997, p. 95).

In essence, I will consider literary something that has meaningful narration and/or meaningful poetics (again, the "meaningful" part is, for this dissertation, related to my personal opinion). With those rules as our guide, we can safely say that all video games are ergodic, since they require player input to function, but not all of them are electronic literature, since some of them don't have meaningful narration (at least not in a deeper, significant way). Additionally, based on Aarseth's examples, we can conclude that, like literature, games can also be divided between electronic (video games) or analogue (sports, board games, card games, tabletop RPG systems), as well as between literary (such as *Dungeons & Dragons*) or non-literary (such as *Solitaire*). From those findings, I also propose that being ergodic is the most essential attribute of a game, while being literary is the most essential attribute of a literary work. Or, at least, being ergodic should be the most important attribute of a game, and being literary should be the most important attribute of a literary work.

We already established the literary value of electronic literature, but we should also ask ourselves what it brings of novelty, what purpose it has that couldn't be achieved before its existence. In essence, what is the point of electronic literature, and why do we need it (if we really do). On that regard Hayles writes that:

> (...) the experience of electronic literature can be understood in terms of intermediating dynamics linking human understanding with computer (sub)cognition through the cascading processes of interpretation that give meaning to information. (HAYLES, 2008, p. 57).

So, the main novelty of electronic literature, and computation in general, is its capacity to generate output from the reader or interactor's input. The basic distinction is that we can engage with a printed text, or even a digital non electronic literature text, but it cannot engage back with us. When a reader reads a non electronic literature text, even if they reflect upon it deeply, annotate it, cite it, write about it, talk about it with others, all interactions happen between the reader and themselves, or, at most, between the reader and another human being. This relation between reader and traditional, non electronic literature is what Hayles infers as an open feedback loop:

> At this point readers who grew up with print and remain immersed in print aesthetics may object that this is merely a fancy way to say what literary criticism has said for a very long time – that literature functions as a technology designed to change the cognitions of readers. Certainly print literature changes a reader's perceptions, but the loop is not closed because the words on the page do not literally change in response to the user's perceptions. The new component possible with networked and

> programmable media is the cycle's completion, so that the feedback loops run in both directions – from the computer to the player and from the player to the computer. (HAYLES, 2008, p. 83).

She furthers that point by saying that:

> The book is like a computer program in that it is a technology designed to change the perceptual and cognitive states of a reader. The difference comes in the degree to which the two technologies can be perceived as cognitive agents. (HAYLES, 2008, p. 57).

Hayles also points out the "uneven demographics of deep attention to hyper attention" (HAYLES, 2008, p. 118). Meaning, as new media, especially computational and digital media, becomes more accepted and hegemonic, the tendency for the newer generations is for individuals to be more aligned with hyper attention modes of consuming information than with deep attention. Her book was published over fifteen years ago now, and it seems that in that regard she was not only right, but that the shift from deep attention patterns to hyper attention patterns have increased exponentially. However, I believe we shouldn't see that as necessarily an entirely bad phenomenon (or, an entirely good phenomenon, either). That shift was and still is inevitable, just like the popularization of radio and television changed cultural practices and thought patterns at their respective eras, so to the personal computer and the internet would. We should adapt to it, and take advantage of it. As Hayles puts it:

> As media change, so do our bodies and brains; new media conditions foster new kinds of ontogenic adaptations and with them, new possibilities for literary engagements. This is the context in which we should evaluate and analyze the possibilities opened by electronic literature. (HAYLES, 2008, p. 118).

Moreover, as touched upon before, new technologies don't necessarily erase the previous ones. Just like the new mediums of electronic literature carried over the conventions, tropes, figures, poetics and structures from printed, manuscript and oral literatures, so to the reading practices and thought processes from before electronic literature will not cease to exist. They will merely be changed, incorporated. In fact, electronic literature sits in a gray zone that doesn't favor one or the other, but invites both. Hayles states that "In terms of complex dynamics between body and machine, we might say that the gamer and textual critic have had their neural plasticities shaped in different but overlapping ways." (HAYLES, 2008, p. 124). I propose that electronic literature engages both the neural plasticities activated by gaming experiences, and those activated by traditional reading experiences. Works of electronic literature can even act as gateways to the literary (electronic or otherwise). A work of electronic literature could be successful enough at engaging someone who is only interested in gaming to open their eyes to literature, and vice-versa.

That perspective of electronic literature as a potential gateway between gaming culture and literary culture is not an absurd suggestion. As Hayles notes, it is likely that there are a considerable amount of people who might come to electronic literature works being very familiar with one of those areas, but with almost no experience with the other:

> Some users may come to electronic literature with sophisticated reading strategies developed within print traditions but with naïve expectations about computer code and little experience in computer games, persistent reality sites, and other computationally mediated art forms; other users may come to it with the inverse qualifications, having considerable experience in reading and understanding print literature. These differences in background correlate with different kinds of intuitions, different habits, and different cognitive styles and conscious thoughts. (HAYLES, 2008, p. 139).

Having established a definition to electronic literature, as well as its relevance to the academic debate, not just to new media studies but also to literary studies, we will now explore two of the most prominent of its subgenres, their differences and particularities: *interactive fiction* and *hypertext fiction*.

Lets first explore the *twisty little passages* of interactive fiction, also known as IF. Since *Ferrea*, the literary part of this dissertation, is a hypertext, or a game-book, when converted to a non electronic literature format (more on that distinction later), we will leave hypertexts to be discussed last.

1.3 INTERACTIVE FICTION

Interactive fiction (IFs for short) is a submedium of electronic literature. In IF the reader, or interactor, must type commands periodically to advance the narrative of the work they are experiencing. Interactive fiction works have parsers, which are computer programs capable of interpreting user textual inputs. Those are essential for the functioning of a IF. An IF work is usually narrated in the second person, with the interactor controlling the main character, and having to navigate a game world, slowly deciphering its locales and unfolding the plot through exploration, experimentation and puzzle-solving.

According to Montfort's theory, an interactive fiction work requires the following characteristics: "a text-accepting, text-generating computer program", "a potential narrative, that is, a system that produces narrative during interaction", "a simulation of an environment or world" and "a structure of rules within an outcome is sought, also known as a game". (MONTFORT, 2003, p. 23). Interactive fiction is perhaps one of the most ergodic of electronic

literature mediums. That is, the one that requires the most effort from the reader. Experiencing IF is somewhat like reading a text with missing phrases and having to complete it with the right words. Usually, the clues that lead to reaching those required answers are diegetically present in the world of the IF work, but sometimes external knowledge may be required.

The usual progression of interactive fictions goes more or less in a succession of stages, as follows: a description is presented to the interactor; the interactor types in a command; the IFs parser interprets key words contained in the interactors input; if the input was a valid command, another description is given to the interactor, according to the previous input they provided, or, if the input was not a valid command, a report stating that failure in communication is returned to the interactor. It is important that we understand the main terms associated with these exchanges here: a command is a "diegetic input that refers to an action in the IF world.", a directive is a "extradiegetic inputs, save, restore, quit, restart functions", replies are "outputs that follow input from the interactor and describe anything about the IF world and events in it", and reports are "outputs that do not describe the IF world." (MONTFORT, 2003, p. 26-27).

Interactive fictions usually have a goal, a desirable end state. That usually is the solution of every puzzle and the exploration of every region of the game world. The pacing of the story is dictated by how fast the interactor is able to solve the puzzles and reach that end goal. As Montfort puts it: "For one thing, the puzzles in a work of interactive fiction function to control the revelation of the narrative; they are part of an interactive process that generates narrative." (MONTFORT, 2003, p. 3). In a weird way, the puzzles of interactive fiction are obstacles, curtains hiding something interesting behind them, and the narrative conflict itself, all at once.

For Montfort, "The most direct counterpart to interactive fiction in oral and written literature is seen in the riddle" (MONTFORT, 2003, p. 4). He presents a few examples of classic riddles, such as the following: "My knees hasten, my feet do not rest, a shepherd without pity drives me to pasture" - (river); "Who becomes pregnant without conceiving, who becomes fat without eating" - (rain cloud); "What is that which has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?" - (man); "I am the greatest of all teachers, but unfortunately, I kill all my students." - (time). The first two are believed to have originated in ancient Mesopotamia, the third is the classic riddle presented by the Sphinx to Oedipus at the entrance of Thebes, in *Oedipus Rex*, and the last one is of unknown origin. Just like in literary

riddles such as the above presented, what draws us to these works is the curiosity to know the answer, and what gives them a sense of completeness stems from its solving. Montfort also states that: "The riddle is best at giving a new perspective on something already familiar in certain ways." (MONTFORT, 2003, p. 60). I not only agree with it, but will also dare to add that this capacity to reflect upon something familiar from a different point of view is one of the main characteristics that bestows a work with literary value.

Not unlike the previous topic discussed above about works of electronic literature that contain in themselves elements and merits of both gaming culture and literary culture, interactive fiction and literary riddles are also hybrid objects:

> Literary riddles and this type of interactive fiction are related in four important ways: Both have a *systematic world*, are *something to be solved*, present *challenge and appropriate difficulty*, and join *the literary and the puzzling*. (MONTFORT, 2003, p. 43).

But riddles are not the only pre digital ancestor to interactive fiction. Another cultural practice that Montfort mentions as related to interactive fiction is that of the situational puzzle:

> One other form, the situational puzzle, seems to be closely related to the riddle and may bear a close relationship to interactive fiction. Such a puzzle describes a situation and challenges the listener to give the full context of the description. (…) Once such a situation is described the one who gave the description will reply to *yes* or *no* questions asked by the others. "Irrelevant" is also sometimes given as an answer. (MONTFORT, 2003, p. 41).

Indeed, analogue works of this type have been very popular in the last few years, even commercially. The *Black Stories* (2004) series and its variants are well known to many people. These are sold as party games, consisting of cards with a description of a mystery or an unusual situation on one side, and the answer on the other. One of the most famous cases of a situational puzzle is the following: "A man enters a bar and asks the bartender for a glass of water, the bartender points a gun to the man, who thanks him and leaves". The game ends when the participants (these situational puzzles are usually played in social contexts, with more than one person attempting to solve it at once) arrive at the right answer. In the case of the example above: the man asked for water because he had the hiccups, which were cured when the bartender scared him with the gun.

The most famous and influential early interactive fiction works are *Zork* and *Adventure*. Adventure (whose full title is Colossal Cave Adventure) was developed by Will Crowthner and released in 1976. Later, Don Woods collaborated with Crowthner and added new content and features to it. Zork was developed by Tim Anderson, Marc Blank, Bruce Daniels and Dave Lebling and its original version was released in 1977. These early works were generally the products of hobbyists, computer programmers who programmed IFs in their spare time and for their own enjoyment. Crowthner's Adventure was famously developed for his own daughters to play. Commercial viability and the "commercial era" of interactive fiction came gradually over the next few years.
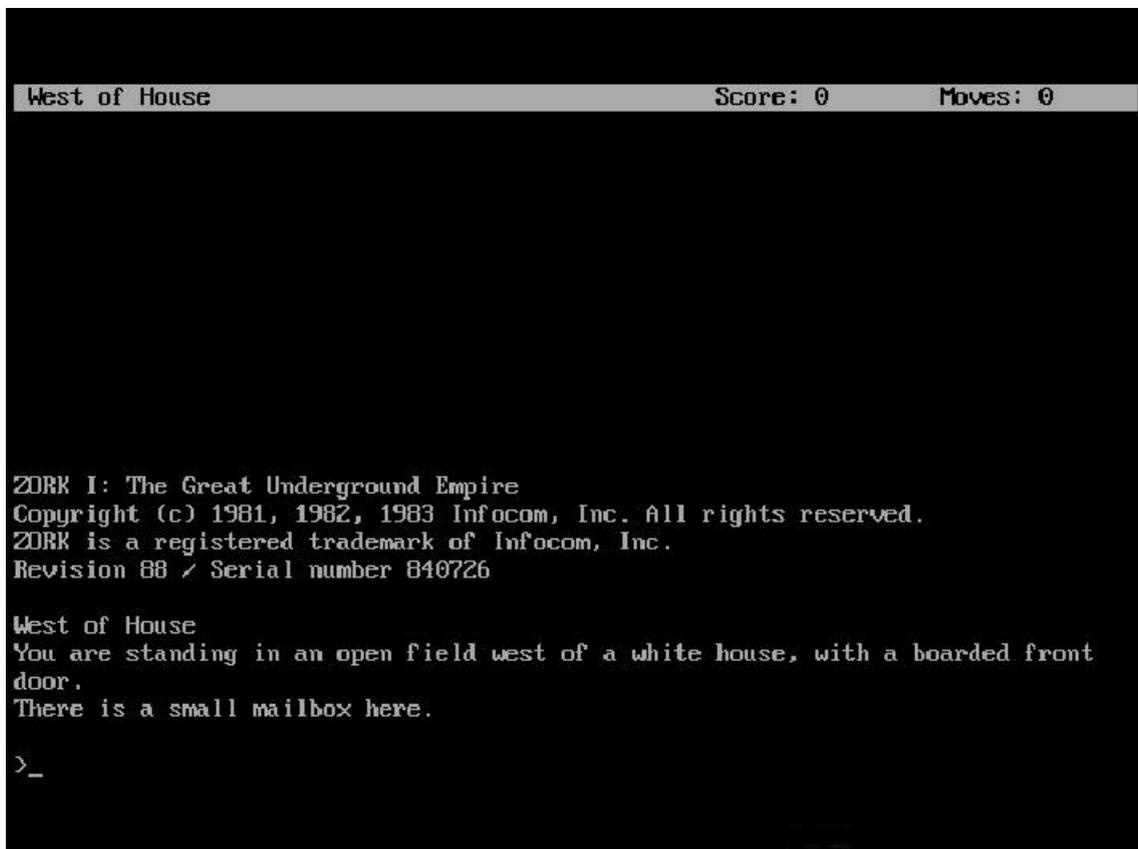
Initial screen of Zork. Zork. (1977). PC [Game]. Infocom.

In 1979, the creators of Zork, and others, founded Infocom, which would be one of the most influential IF companies throughout the 1980's, releasing over thirty IF works in the span of a decade. Their works didn't extend just to the fantasy genre and aesthetics of dungeon exploration, like Adventure and Zork. They released works across a variety of genres, including detective fictions like *Deadline* (1982), sci-fi works like *Planetfall* (1983), horror IFs

like the lovecraftian *The Lurking Horror* (1987), and even works with elements of eroticism, like *Leather Goddesses of Phobos* (1986). Another interesting work is *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1984), written in collaboration with Douglas Adams, the author of the homonymous book. This is, of course, but a brief summary of the history of interactive fiction. For a more comprehensive and detailed discussion on it, I recommend reading Montfort's book.

There is another type of medium that, although it differs significantly from the Adventure style IFs, I would categorize as a type of interactive fiction. A multi-user dungeon, or MUD (sometimes also referred to as "multi user dimension" or "multi user domain"), is like an interactive fiction world connected to the web, a multiplayer IF. Aarseth discusses them in length:

> The first MUD was created by two students at the University of Essex, Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle. In the spring of 1979, inspired by *Adventure* and *Dungeons and Dragons*, Trubshaw developed a rudimentary system; Bartle took over the programming in 1980. The game strongly resembled an adventure game, with the major difference being that several players could be together in the same intrigue. It was both socially oriented and play oriented, with an extensive game world in which players could team up and hunt for treasure, kill dragons, and so on. (AARSETH, 1997, p. 149).

As we can see, MUDs were developed almost immediately after the first interactive fiction works started to get increasingly popular. It is safe to infer that the awe and fascination that those IF works inspired in people also made them want to experience it collectively. MUDs were experiences that relied strongly, if not mainly, in its social aspects:

> MUDs are macrogames and metagames that go on for months, sometimes even for years. (…) Several hundred players can in principle be connected to the same game (…) In a MUD, the players log on and connect to their own, usually self-defined, puppet and engage in activities that are determined by several factors: the type of MUD, the interests and inclinations of the players, and the interests and inclinations of the other players. (AARSETH, 1997, p. 152).

Aarseth also comments on the legitimacy of MUDs as literary objects of study:

> Like the plays of Shakespeare (and in some ways quite unlike them), MUD sessions are texts. They are to be experienced subjectively and can provide meaning without the absolute need for staging, although it usually helps. They may not be intended "to be read as an artifact" (neither were Shakespeare's plays), but they certainly are intended to be read. This makes them textual, and the unique aspects of MUD communication make MUD relevant and interesting and well worth comparing to other types of text. (AARSETH, 1997, p. 149).

One thing we should touch upon, at least briefly, is the fact that interactive fiction, both the Adventure style single player games and the MUDs, gradually lost public interest in the 1990's and early 2000's to improvements in graphical experiences. That is why we don't see a lot of works of those genres nowadays. The multi-user dungeons lost ground to the MMOs (Massive Multiplayer Online), games that did basically everything that the MUDs did, but with visual elements, be them 2D or 3D graphics. On the other hand, the single player IFs in the style made by Infocom shrank and practically vanished, at least commercially. Graphics-based puzzle-solving and RPG single-player games started to pop up, but I wouldn't consider them direct descendants of IF, since most of them don't use parser and player input systems. In that regard, they are closer to hypertext fiction than to interactive fiction.

Finally, having explored a bit of the context and history of interactive fiction, as well as its literary ancestors as proposed by Montfort, now I would like to touch on the topic of a few other practices. There are two mediums that seem to be closely related to IF, but were not mentioned, or didn't get as much attention as riddles and situational stories in Montfort's book. These are *escape rooms* and *larping sessions*. I propose that they are, if not ancestors to IF, at least cousins, given the great degree of similarities between them.

Escape rooms consist of real world challenges that usually involve the solution of a crime or mystery in a predetermined and confined space. Usually played by groups of people, escape rooms, although maybe not so literary, certainly check most of the prerequisites for IF as established by Montfort. The only difference is that there is no separation between interactor and character, because there is no character, or, better yet, you are the character. Although there is no text input in escape rooms in the same way that there is text input in IF, many escape rooms involve the unlocking of numeric locks, safes and suitcases, so there is *some* kind of input-output going on. In a few cases, some digital locks are even programmed to restrict attempts for a few minutes, if too many wrong attempts are typed in, putting more pressure on an already difficult and time restricted challenge. Escape rooms seem to be, in many ways, practically interactive fictions of the real world. However, while escape rooms are filled with enigmas, its interaction is almost always restricted to objects. There are no live characters interacting with the game world and the narrative besides the players themselves. That is an issue that interactive fiction doesn't have, since its characters are simulated, and not human, an IF work can have as many of them as its creator desires and implements. But there is another form of "real world IF" that contours this matter.

Some configurations of LARP, or *live action role-playing*, could be thought of as a kind of MUD of the real world. We could think of larping sessions as similar to those medieval or renaissance fares, or to war reenactment events, where people dress according to the desired setting, be it fantastical or historic, and enact certain events involving a large number of people, sometimes hundreds. Alternatively, we could think of larping as if a dozen or so different D&D groups all played together, simultaneously, in the real world, and in character. Each larping group has its set of rules and its referees, and a varying degree of enactment. For example, some in-game acts, especially those concerning violent or sexual behavior are not done in actuality, or at least not to its full extent, depending on the rules of each group, and on the participants' willingness. They are, instead, "done" in the game world, if all conditions, both diegetic and extradiegetic (for instance, the involved players' consent), are met.

Both escape rooms and LARP, although much less material, and as such, harder to analyze from a literary studies point of view, certainly share much of the characteristics of interactive fictions. The main differences are that their interactions are mainly between people, and not between a person and a machine, and they take place in the physical world (even if the participants redecorate that world or use their imaginations to simulate another setting). Because of that, they are not electronic literature. Rather, they are the analogue counterparts of interactive fiction and MUDs, respectively. However, they certainly are literary and ergodic.

1.4 HYPERTEXT FICTION

Hypertext fiction works are what interests us the most in this dissertation, since *Ferrea* belongs to that category of electronic literature. In hypertext fiction the reader is presented with continuous pieces of text, usually short, no more than a page long, called lexias. George P. Landow, in his book *Hypertext* (1992)[8], defines lexia as a fixed unit of text that links to other lexia. If we think hypertexts in terms of a house plant, lexias would be the rooms and corridors, while links would be the doors, the first are destinations, places to be in, while the latter are the connecting pieces that enable navigation between the rooms. Lexias are usually pieces of narration, and sometimes can contain dialogue as well. We can think of it as a fragment of a traditional printed work. Within the lexia are hyperlinks that, when clicked, lead to other lexias. That is the way the story and the reading progress in hypertext fiction. Although there are

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[8] *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (1992).

hypertext works that are uniform, without branching paths, most of hypertext fiction consists of multiform works. This way, hypertexts usually have variation of plot and of endings, that come to be depending on the reader's choices throughout the reading.

It's important that we overview a few definitions proposed by Murray (1997), such as the just mentioned *multiform* and *uniform* expressions. She rejects more well known terms, such as *linear* or *nonlinear*, since they are too broad and can easily be applied to non-ergodic literature. Linear and nonlinear are usually used to refer to the diegetic temporality of a narrative, something that is somewhat common to present variation and nonlinearity in non ergodic literature. Writing tools such as *in media res* and flashbacks are exactly that. But, when referring to ergodic literature, we could be talking about navigational linearity and nonlinearity. She reserves the term multiform for works that present more than one possibility of plot:

> I am using the term *multiform story* to describe a written or dramatic narrative that presents a single situation or plotline in multiple versions, versions that would be mutually exclusive in our ordinary experience. (MURRAY, 1997, p. 36).

And also:

> (…) I offered the term "multiform" for stories that exist as variations on a single scenario. In a well-constructed multiform story each individual instantiation should stand alone as a coherent narrative. But the design opportunity is to motivate the viewer/interactor to replay the same scenario in order to access the deeper meanings that can emerge from well-formed variations. (MURRAY, 1997, p. 73).

When thinking about linearity or nonlinearity of navigation, that is, of the reader/user experience itself, she offers the terms unisequential and multisequential:

> Since I am particularly interested in the potential of using computers to create more complex structures of organization, I have favored the terminology "unisequential" over "linear" for bound books, conventional movies, etc., and "multisequential" for stories that allow the interactor to navigate through multiple sequences, all of them coherent. The terms "multiform" and "multisequential" are overlapping; one emphasizes variations in composition (like replacing blueberries with chocolate chips in a recipe) and the other emphasizes variations in navigation (like a garden with forking paths) (MURRAY, 1997, p. 74).

Already we can realize that there are major differences between interactive fiction and hypertext fiction, and not just of user experience. IFs are certainly multisequential, since exploration of spaces is an integral part of their essence. However, they are usually not multiform. What I mean by that is the fact that the ergodic nature of hypertext fiction relies heavily on variation of plot possibilities, while in interactive fiction it relies more on exploration and navigational freedom. IFs function more like puzzles with a narrative overcoat, there are many possibilities of interaction, but usually only one right answer to the puzzle, and

one ending (if we discount the instances where the main character dies before the journey's end). Hypertext, on the other hand, is a much more rigid experience in terms of the actions the reader can take. Instead of offering the possibility of typing and figuring out for themselves the next step, all alternatives are explicitly presented, lexia by lexia. Hypertext fiction is, in that sense, like a system of train railways where you can pull levers to redirect the tracks, and change your final destination (even if you can't see where you are going clearly). Interactive fictions are more like crime scene investigations; there are a lot of elements to interact with, but only one right answer.

Hypertext offers us the experience of "where will I end up if I took a different path?", while IF offers us the experience of "where should I get, and how do I get there?". Of course all of this is a generalization; there are works of interactive fiction that present more than one solution to its puzzles, as well as works of hypertext fiction that are so granular and detailed in their offering of links, that their player action possibilities become as complex as that of an IF work. There are also some hybrid works that use both hypertextual and IFs conventions.

We should also note that there are specific types of hyperlinks. Salter and Moulthrop call them "*navigational* linking, tied to the movement of a virtual character or point of view through a described space." and "*conversational* linking, where the anchors are options for responsive speech." (SALTER; MOULTHROP, 2021, p. 69). Although their effect is essentially the same, they are indeed different in the way that the reader experiences them. Another dichotomy in hyperlink usage for hypertext fiction is between bifold construction and unified construction: "Very roughly speaking, bifold construction accentuates the game-like qualities of Twine stories, while the unified approach plays to the literary interests; but the distinction can never be absolute." (SALTER; MOULTHROP, 2021, p. 70). The bifold construction separates static, non-interactable text, from clickable hyperlinks. This usage usually follows the logic of interactive fiction, where there is a bit of exposition and narration, and then the opportunity for reader action is presented. The unified approach is the opposite, where the links are among the main body of text. This method is more akin to general hyperlink usage on the web, on sites, blogs etc. To illustrate, I bring two examples from Ferrea itself:

His eyes stare at you behind the mask, silently but intently. You can tell it's taking all of his strength not to pass out.

"Who are you?"

Point at his severed arm and ask "How did this happen?"

"What were you doing out here in the middle of nowhere, anyway?"

"Is that mask really so important that you would die for it?"

"Do you have any last wishes?"

Point to where you and Rhea were going and say "Is Nanthas really in that direction?"

"I'm done here. Farewell, and good journey"

Bifold construction conversational in Ferrea. Made by the author.

"Well, we have three main destinations, besides Nanthas itself, which should be our final one, since it is the most distant, and all the others are on the way to there. Besides, there's no use getting there if we don't have the items we need."

She does a brief pause, considering her words.

"First, we have the dread marshes, beyond those hills to the east. It is a surprisingly **swampy region** amidst the desert. But it is also filled with dangerous predators and blood sucking mosquitoes the size of your hand and that are also filled with diseases."

"And then", Rhea continues, "There is the **Crimson Dawn lands.** You know, the blood drinkers. Rust-infected who believe they are vampires. It is, together with Nanthas, one of the least lawless regions. The problem is that the laws are often not very kind towards outsiders like us."

"And finally, there is, well, the home of those bastards who captured us. **The Maw.** All sorts of crazy down there."

"We need to go through them in that order, as it is the most optimal route."

Rhea looks at you, smiling. "So, whatsit be? What kind of vacation do you prefer?"

"Well, they all sound wonderful, don't they." You say.

She laughs.

You sigh.

"I wanted to ask something else first"

"I'm ready to go"

Unified navigational followed by bifold conversational constructions, in the same lexia of Ferrea. Made by the author.

The first image is of a lexia consisting of purely conversational linking, indicated by the quotation marks and occasional interrogation signs and small action descriptions in the second person, in a purely bifold construction approach. The second image contains the same conversational-bifold hyperlinks at the bottom, but there are three hyperlinks that are amidst the narrative text itself ("swampy region", "Crimson Dawn lands" and "The Maw"). Those three are of a unified construction, and they are navigational in the sense that they "go" somewhere. In this specific case, those links represent the flow of consciousness of the main character focussing on key words spoken by his companion, that trigger (if the reader decides to follow those links) deeper thoughts about those places, and consequently reveal more information about them. These links are not literally navigational, since the character doesn't go to those places physically, but they are navigational because his mind "goes" there.

Another important aspect of hypertext is its flexibility towards multimedia. It is common that a hypertext will have not just textual elements, but visual and auditory ones as well. As Murray writes:

> Hypertext is a set of documents of any kind (images, text, charts, tables, video clips) connected to one another by links. Stories written in hypertext (…) are best thought of as segmented into generic chunks of information called "lexias" (or reading units). (…) Lexias are often connected to one another with "hyperlinks" (or "hot words"), that is, words that are displayed in color to alert the reader/viewer that they lead someplace else. (MURRAY, 1997, p. 62).

With that in mind, we can see how the *hyper* prefix in hypertext stands not only in the sense of something that is dynamic and fast, but it can also be thought of in the sense of overstimulation and excessiveness. That's not to say that hypertext works are excessive, but that excessiveness and overstimulation of the senses are creative possibilities within the medium. One good example that utilizes that is *Cry$tal Warrior Ke$ha* (2013), by Porpentine, a work set during a performance of the singer Kesha, that includes song, colorful, sparkling letterings and psychedelic narrations and imagery[9].

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[9] It can be played for free on the web in the following link: https://ifdb.org/viewgame?id=yu5uu9zhy79z9wgx

your fans are all turned into snakes and fucking up shit

chaotic energy attack, probably off-world tech

where the fuck are the bodyguards

One of Cry$tal Warrior Ke$ha's lexias. Cry$tal Warrior Ke$ha. (2013). PC [Game]. Porpentine.

Salter and Moulthrop also recognize the great variety of multimedia elements that can be used in the making of hypertext fiction, when writing about Twine, they say that:

> Indeed, one of Twine's defining characteristics is the ability to harness layered, multimedia expressions of emotion rapidity, and remixing is particularly easy for live works drawing on everything from YouTube videos for backgrounds and music to digital art heritage of animated GIFs, vector graphics, blinking text, and more. (SALTER; MOULTHROP, 2021, p. 210).

This flexibility of form and of presentation is one of hypertexts greatest strengths. Another is hypertexts' capacity for producing encyclopedic-like systems. Murray formulates that one of the essential properties of digital environments is its encyclopedic capacity:

> Computers are the most capacious medium ever invented, promising infinite resources. Because of the efficiency of representing words and numbers in digital form, we can store and retrieve quantities of information far beyond what was possible before. (MURRAY, 1997, p. 101).

And also:

> But when we turn on our computer and start up our Web browser, all the world's resources seem to be accessible, retrievable, immediate. It is a realm in which we easily imagine ourselves to be omniscient. (MURRAY, 1997, p. 101).

It is important to note that she wrote it in 1997 (the 2017 version has only a few additions and commentary), far before the internet became a global phenomenon, directly present in almost every human life there is. It is interesting to see how much the hyperlink technology became relevant in our everyday lives, for fields as vast as social communication, media, news, marketing, education and practically every desk job. And yet, its use for literary purposes is still very timid and niche. Except in video games, hypertext is sparsely used in the telling of stories and building of narratives. Uniformality of narrative seems to be favored by most, and even the most highly regarded works of hypertext literature are not well known by many people.

Just like Infocom was the main name for commercial interactive fictions in the 1980's, Eastgate Systems was the main name for commercial hypertext fictions throughout the 1990's and early 2000's. Although Eastgate Systems still exists and operates today, their releases of hypertext works diminished considerably throughout the years. We will briefly discuss some of their main works in the following paragraphs.

Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story* (1990) is a story that follows the character and narrator through his thoughts and memories in a flow of consciousness style narration. The narrator tries to come to terms with his past, his life choices and recent tragedies in his life, including his divorce and a fatal car accident involving his son. In *afternoon* every word from every lexia is a hyperlink, many of which go back and forth between already visited lexias. The reader ending up in an endless loop where they get "stuck" in the story, and having to start it over, is somewhat common. Despite that, the prose and narrative are of very high quality, and the ending (the passage that reveals the plot-twist) is a satisfactory one.

Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* (1992) is set during the Gulf War, and its scenes or lexias constantly change the point of view through many different characters, giving us a sense of various different stories being told simultaneously. The more we dive into it, the more we see the connections between the characters. The chronology of all the scenes sometimes is hard to pinpoint as well, adding to the ergodic nature of the work. Victory Garden is also, as its title suggests, a homage to Borges' *Garden of Forking Paths*.

Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995) explores themes of body, reconfiguration and appropriation. The main character is the female creature that Victor Frankenstein started building in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. In the original work, Victor destroys the creature

before she is completed. In Patchwork Girl the female creature is completed by Mary Shelley herself. We follow the footsteps of the monster throughout her (un)life, as well as some passages that explore the lives of the women whose body parts were used in the construction of the creature. Patchwork Girl also utilizes drawings of body parts and anatomical imagery that come into play in its assemblage and reconfiguration proposal.

Image contained in Patchwork Girl. Jackson, Shelley. *Patchwork Girl*. Eastgate Systems, 1995.

In a way very similar to that of the commercial era of interactive fictions, commercial hypertext fictions seemed to die down after a decade or so of its initial popularization. Many of the works developed and read today are born of the activity of hobbyists. But, of course, although small, there are still active communities living and breathing, writing, developing and reviewing hypertext fictions.

Nowadays, the main publisher of hypertext fiction worldwide is Choice of Games. They publish and sell works of hypertext fiction for mobile and PC, mainly in the Apple App Store, Google Play Store, Amazon Appstore and Steam. They also offer demos of most of their works on their official website[10]. They have 116 games listed in their Steam page, and a little

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[10] https://www.choiceofgames.com

over 14,000 followers there. I searched for the top three best seller Choice of Games games on Steam, which are *Heroes Rise: The Prodigy* (2012), *Choice of the Vampire* (2010) and *Choice of Magics* (2018). I searched for those games on SteamSpy[11], a site that estimates how many copies a steam game has sold, but the searches didn't yield any results, meaning those three games are not in that site's database. I then searched for them on SteamDB[12], and found out the peak number of simultaneous players of each. Heroes Rise had a peak of 216 simultaneous players in 2014, Choice of the Vampire had 19 in 2018, and Choice of Magics had 213 in 2018.[13] Although not horrendously low numbers, in contrast to many other games on Steam, including narrative and text heavy games, they are not very good numbers. That doesn't necessarily mean that the works published by Choice of Games were a commercial failure, but it certainly does mean that hypertext fiction is still a very niche genre. It seems that most people want to either read a more traditional piece of literature or play a more traditional, hegemonic, genre of video game. However, the existence of Choice of Games is positive and should be celebrated. The few of their works that I read (none of which I read in full) presented a high quality of writing and production, and the ones that I only browsed in store pages or on their site seem to be just as good.

We discussed the definition of hypertext fiction, as well as briefly explored its history, but, like with interactive fiction, hypertext fiction has some important cousin mediums. Two of note are *gamebooks* and *visual novels*.

Gamebooks, also commonly referred to as *Choose your own Adventure* books, are, in essence, non-electronic hypertext fictions. They usually have the form of the codex, are narrated in the second person and are in the genres of fantasy, science fiction and detective fiction, and many of them are children's books or young adult books. These works are read "out of order", meaning, the ordering of the pages has nothing to do with the ordering of the narrative, and a reader has to constantly go back and forth through the codex. Instead of the literal hyperlinks of hypertext fiction, gamebooks simulate hyperlinking by shuffling its lexias at random and numbering them. At the bottom of each lexia there is one or more "link", usually using the bifold construction method, saying something like "If you wish to do A, go to number X" or "If you wish to do B, go to number Y". This way, the reader can easily find the next lexia of the story (since the lexias are disposed of in the conventional ordering in regards to their numbering). Many gamebooks follow the themes and aesthetics of tabletop RPG and of

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[11] https://steamspy.com
[12] https://steamdb.info
[13] All of this information was gathered in June 2024.

early IF, like *Adventure* and *Zork*. Some of them even include combat mechanics, by using dice rolls to determinate the outcome of combat encounters. So much so that many people consider gamebooks to be "single player tabletop RPG". An opinion that I somewhat agree with.

Two of the most famous gamebook series are *Choose Your Own Adventure* and *Fighting Fantasy*. The *Choose You Own Adventure* (CYOA) original series started with Edward Packard's *The Cave of Time* (1979) and had over 180 gamebooks published throughout the 1980s and 1990s. It is estimated that over 270 million copies of CYOA books have been sold worldwide, across the original series and its later reboots, ranking it as the sixth best selling series of books of all times.[14] Fighting Fantasy's first published gamebook was *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (1982), written by Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone and illustrated by Russ Nicholson. They published over 50 books in a little more than a decade, before being purchased by another company. Fighting Fantasy gamebooks relied heavily on RPG elements. Their books are notoriously hard to navigate and complete, some encounters are unforgiving, and some of the settings are so labyrinthine that the reader/players are encouraged to keep paper and pen nearby while reading, to draw maps and annotate.

Although gamebook is a term used more in relation to these commercial, genre-fiction works, I consider many works celebrated by academia and deemed as literary canon, to be gamebooks. Works already cited, such as Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* are undeniably gamebooks.

The main "problem" with gamebooks in my view is that it is very easy to "cheat". If a reader/player doesn't like the consequences of their choices, they can simply return to a point in the story before those events. In a similar way, they can easily choose to bypass every combat encounter without rolling the dice. Because gamebook lacks both the dungeon master of a tabletop RPG session and the programming of a IF, hypertext fiction or video game, it is a game with a complete lack of referees. Of course, that doesn't completely demerit this medium. Gamebooks are fun for the right reader, and I believe they had, and possibly still have, done an immense amount of work in terms of stimulating reading habits, especially in children.

Despite having written *Ferrea* primarily on Twine, I transposed it to this dissertation, in a way that mimics that of a gamebook. Everything that makes Ferrea is there, all of its merits and failures. The only difference is that the gamebook format breaks a bit of the atmosphere of mystery that an electronic literature work has. What I mean by that is that when reading an IF or hypertext fiction for the first time, the reader can never be sure of how long the work is, how

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[14] According to Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_books#More_than_100_million_copies_2

close they are to the ending, or what lies in the lexias that they didn't pass through in the first reading. In essence, what I'm trying to say is: one of electronic literature's effects and merits is that it takes away the possibility of jumping straight to the last page and reading the end of a novel.

Having discussed the analogue cousins of both interactive fiction and hypertext fiction, I now bring to the table the same umbrella hierarchy that I presented in the beginning of this dissertation, but accounting for those analogue mediums. Although they are not electronic literature, they certainly are ergodic literature, and that will be relevant for my branching literature definition proposal.
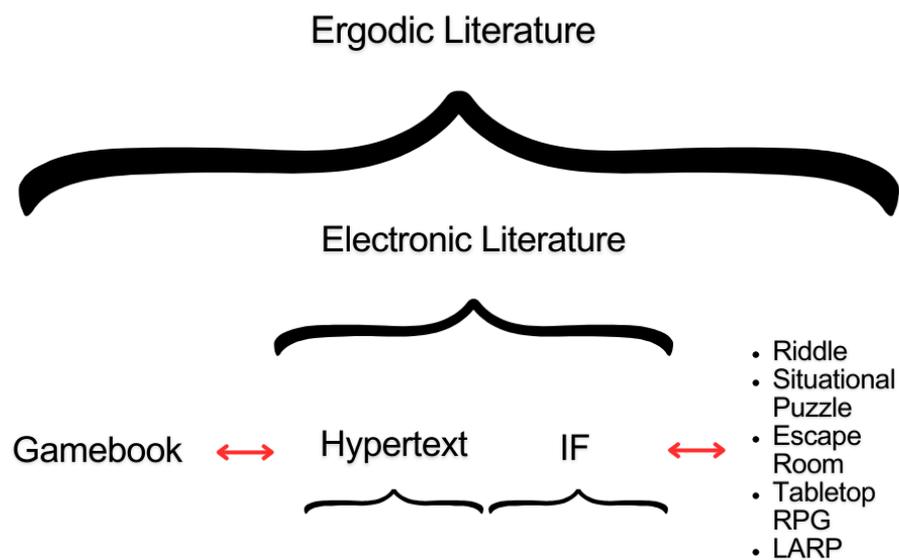
Ergodic Literature umbrella hierarchy 2. Made by the author.

Finally, I would like to briefly touch upon the medium of visual novels, or VNs. Visual novels are hypertext fictions that mainly use the conventions of graphic novels instead of the conventions of novels. Visual aspects are, as the name suggests, an integral and indispensable part of them. Most visual novel narratives are predominantly conveyed through dialogue, and descriptions tend to be short and few. We can think of VNs as the japanese interpretation and context of analogue mediums becoming electronic. The site Visual Novel Database[15], created in 2007, lists almost 50,000 visual novels. The oldest visual novel there is *Mystery House*

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[15] https://vndb.org

(1980), developed by Sierra Entertainment. Although the very first visual novels were made in the west, today, Japan is the region that both produces and consumes the majority of visual novels. Naturally, the aesthetics and thematics of most VNs (including some produced in the west) are heavily borrowed from anime and manga. The most famous series of visual novels is probably *Ace Attorney*, which debuted with *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* (2001). The series is considered to be the top one VN franchises on sales, estimated to have sold over 11 million copies among all of its releases. The genres of visual novels vary greatly. It's almost certain that there is a visual novel dedicated to practically any niche one could think of. Some of the most prominent are horror, fantasy, and romance (ranging from the most light-hearted and innocent to the most pornographic). Dōjinshi is a term commonly used amidst the VN community to refer to independent VNs, and means something like "fanmade" or "fanzine" and is a significant part of the VN market.

Their importance not only to hypertext fiction, but to electronic literature and ergodic literature in general is rarely explored by researchers of electronic literature in the west. Maybe that's because despite visual novels technically being hypertext fiction, they belong to a genre distinct enough it almost feels like it's an entirely other medium. Maybe it's because most VNs are Japanese, and linguistic and cultural barriers are still too strong (before the 2000's Japanese VNs were rarely translated into other languages). Whatever the reason, it is a subgenre of hypertext that we should hold in a higher regard, and pay more attention to.

1.5 BRANCHING NARRATIVES

Finally, having gone through this overview of the main concepts and definitions that are of interest to this dissertation, as well as exploring briefly the histories of its main subgenres, we arrive at my proposal of the branching narrative. Although I cannot point to any scholar who specifically uses "branching narrative" as a terminology, nor find a clear definition of it, it is a term somewhat commonly used, both inside and outside academia. I am aware that I am not the first person to use it, but nonetheless I choose it because I feel it is the most fitting. The base idea for it is already present in Borges' short story *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), except that "forking" connotes a two-way split (the original term is "*bifurcan*", in its literal translation is "bifurcate"). Despite what the title might suggest, the story itself makes it clear that it's dealing with the idea of infinite possibilities and variation of outcomes of events. This

way, we should imagine a garden as vast as another one of Borges' famous labyrinths, the *Library of Babel*[16], or Destiny's garden in Gaiman's *Sandman*. The garden is infinity itself manifest.

Of course, that depth of variation and possibility might never be achieved, not even with the help of AI. But that's not important. What matters is that branching narratives should give the reader or player the feeling of wonder and curiosity that we feel when faced with the concept of infinity, even if in the work itself there are only two variations of narrative. What matters is that the reader thinks critically about their choices, and gets emotionally involved with its consequences.

With all that said, I propose that branching narratives should have the following attributes: they must be ergodic, they must be multiform, and they must provoke a sense of dramatic agency in the reader. I delayed the discussion about this last concept, dramatic agency, until now, to emphasize it, as I believe it's the most important aspect of branching narratives. Murray considers dramatic agency as the following:

> When the action is motivated by something in the story, by an anticipation of some story event or action or revelation, and when the response rewards that anticipation in some appropriate way, then the interactor experiences dramatic *agency*. Dramatic agency should be the goal of design of interactive narrative of any form. (MURRAY, 1997, p. 189).

This definition and its criteria is not medium-exclusive, since it fits for hypertext fiction as well as gamebooks. But it also includes a lot of traditional video games and even works of audiovisual, like *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. Thus, the branching narrative moves freely between genres and mediums. I hope it inspires other writers, artists and creators to experiment with it, or further work with it.

2. TWINE

Twine is a digital tool designed to be used in the creation of branching experiences. It can be accessed directly on an internet browser, or downloaded as a software. Twine's official website, https://twinery.org (2023), says it all: "Twine is an open-source tool for telling interactive, nonlinear stories". Originally launched in 2009, by Chris Klimas, Twine had multiple updates, versions and story formats over the years. We should pay attention to the

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[16] La Biblioteca de Babel, in the original.

terms *stories* and *experiences*, as the choice to use them is not innocent. We could say a work made in Twine is a game, and we could say it is a piece of (electronic) literature, but those categories are not broad enough to embrace every type of work done using Twine.

Twine is many things, and it is difficult to find a common ground between all of Twine's characteristics that both synthesizes and do justice to what it is. Noneless, I elected a fragment of Moulthrop and Salter's book, *Twining: Critical and Creative Approaches to Hypertext Narratives* (2021), as my guiding definition:

> Twine's heart: it is a piece of cultural software that allows a user to build complex interactivity toward many ends, and it invites the user into a rabbit hole of complexity where the entryway is paved with language, not code. (SALTER; MOULTHROP, 2021, p. 20).

In the book's introduction, the authors point out that Twine doesn't fit into the mainstream gaming culture's history, neither to the electronic literature history, nor to the interactive fiction history. They argue that Twine moves freely between them all.

Twine is, in that regard, a niche within niches. As for the uses of Twine, they vary broadly. Although Twine appears to be only a tool for making hypertext fiction, it also "has been used recursively as a tool to build tutorials; rhetorically as a tool for arguments and essays; abstractly for poetry and generative art; and educationally for making materials across disciplines" (SALTER, MOULTHROP). Although the most common characteristic in Twine works is branchingness through choice-based progression, some of Twine's most brilliant works offer more complex iterations and experiences. For example, Anna Anthropy's *Queer in Love at the End of the World* (2013)*,* which consists of an experience with a ten second duration. The player has ten seconds to say goodby to their lover before everything ends, both diegetically and non-diegetically, as the game itself abruptly ends, no matter what choices, or how many of them, the player makes. Another famous work, *Depression Quest* (2013), by Zoe Quinn, uses audiovisual elements to enhance the reader/player experience. The visuals and audio throughout the game change in nature, becoming more and more unsettling as the depression of the protagonist grows, or more calm and peaceful, as the depression shrinks. Depression Quest is an exceptionally good reference to me, since in my own Twine literary project, Ferrea, I intend on using a similar mechanic to convey the mental state of the protagonist in relation to the growth of their rust infection (a fictional disease that plays a major role in both the story and the setting of Ferrea).

So, it is safe to say that Twine is not only a tool for making basic interactive fiction, but also a means for the achievement of multiple creative and artistic possibilities. Twine allows its content creators to mix and match hypertext, generative and even parser elements, as well as the incorporation of images, sounds and videos. And all that being a free, open source software. A truly powerful tool, be it for writers, game developers, and everything in between (or beyond) those categories.

Another important aspect of Twine is its accessibility, both for readers/players and for creators. A Twine story can be easily published online to be experienced directly on a web browser, as well as compiled into an executable and downloadable file. If we think about mainstream gaming, usually the access to those games are restricted to a few online centralized stores. Even if someone wanted to play a free game on those platforms, they are at least required to create an account, which is something that by itself can be a quitting point for a possible interested user. People already inserted in mainstream gaming culture may not find that bothering, but we have to consider that most Twine works are meant for a broader audience. Electronic literature in general, including Twine works, should be thought of as something for readers *and* gamers (not exclusively). The issue is, a great number of gamers are not readers, and a great number of readers are not gamers. So, by making the introductory experience as smooth and quick as possible, and as less invasive as possible, Twine has that welcoming and embracing essence.

As for the creators, Twine is a powerful tool for writers who don't have a background in programming. It really is as simple as it can be in that regard. Twine is, after all, a learning tool as well, broadly used on different levels of education. It can be an entrance point to a fledgling electronic literature writer, that down the line could move to more complex programming tools. It can even be a tool used by professional game developers and film and series production staff, for script outlines and such, like in the case of Netflix's *Bandersnatch* (2018)[17]. Twine is also accessible entirely online. That is, you can create a Twine experience without even downloading the platform itself. If you compare that to most programs, both in game development and in writing, especially those focused on script writing, that is almost unbelievable. Salter and Moulthrop also highlight this aspect of Twine on their book:

> Twine is part of a growing category of tools that focus on allowing rapid procedural creativity, removing barriers of both hardware and knowledge. It also removes barriers in distribution, allowing for the rapid sharing of whatever is made, removing

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[17] "*Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* Is Hard to Watch, But It Was Almost Impossible to Make".

gatekeepers and creating an ease of "free" distribution. (SALTER; MOULTHROP, 2021, p. 5-6).

It is precisely this accessibility that drove me to choose Twine as the platform used for the creative writing and literary part of this dissertation. I believe that electronic literature and branching narrative works can be a bridge between the world of the traditional literary readers, writers, scholars and critics and the world of gamers, game developers and game scholars.

3. FERREA: A TALE OF RUST: CREATIVE PROCESS

I am someone divided between two great passions: literature and videogames. As I said before, I have been influenced by games and gaming culture from an early age. Especially single-player, storydriven titles. Despite only really starting to pick up reading habits later in life, I consider it a fundamental part of my life now. It is hard for me, today, to even separate the two. Where most see two vastly different and, sometimes, even antagonic fields, I perceive different states of the same matter, if that makes sense. It is my belief that every literary work is also some kind of game between reader and text. And, also, that every well made game is, to a greater or lesser degree, a literary experience.

So it felt natural, almost even unavoidable, that I chose to trail this path, the zones in between those two fields. I feel that people like me, who create this kind of content, and also scholars who study it, are not seen with the credibility and seriousness we deserve.

From the side of video games, it is common to encounter some resistance toward considering Twine games, and visual novels in general, as games, or as much games as "real games". One of the most famous cases of this kind of friction within the gaming community was Zöe Quinn's *Depression Quest*, a Twine visual novel that sparked hate and bigotry by parts of the gaming community, and unfolded into the infamous "Gamergate[18]". Although obviously not all who question the gameness of a work or genre of game are perpetrators of hate speech and online threats, the people that behave in these ways found a launch platform for their extremism in the valid debates about what are games and what are not games.

In the same year (2014), the literal "game police" of Steam Greenlight were deciding whether a Twine game, *Depression Quest*, could be included on the game storefront. Being present on Steam opens up a market of opportunities for a designer, and Zöe

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[18] Gamergate was an online campaign of harassment and misogyny mainly toward female game developers, journalists and critics, that sparked between 2014 and 2015.

> Quinn's work, tagged by them as "interactive (non)fiction", would be the subject of hostility and debate. While the game was released in 2013 and had already been recognized as a game within independent spaces (including winning Best Narrative Game at Boston FIG and Oficial Selection at Indiecade 2013), one of the most popular discussion threads on the Steam Greenlight page asked, "Can this be counted as a game?". (SALTER; MOULTHROP, 2021, p. 22-23).

Another example of this, this time of a civilized and valid debate, is Raph Koster's *A Letter to Leigh* (2013), where the game designer and writer expresses his views more aligned with formalism and mechanic-based concepts of gameness. About the "art games", referring to narrative focused, indie games, like *Depression Quest*, he writes that "Effectively, these are games as *rhetoric* not games as *dialectic*, moving against the fundamental current of gameness".

We can observe the sentiment in some professional game reviews as well, such as Anthony Gallegos' *To the Moon* review (2012), where he writes "A few more "gamey" moments slip in (...)". He also notes that "Some games are utterly mindless and carried by the action or gameplay, but To the Moon's gameplay moments are reliant on the excellent plot". *To The Moon* (2011) is not even a visual novel, it is a top-down RPG Maker[19] style RPG, which is much more, to use Gallegos' term, "gamey", than Twine works. It's ironic, though, in the context of this debate, his regard about how some games that are "pure gameplay", end up being mindless.

Although I understand where this sentiment comes from, it's hard not to cringe at the face of it. Even the most traditional video games, like, for example, a FPS[20], have some form of narrative and storytelling. Say it is a FPS focused on online gameplay, with no single player campaign, no named characters, no story, like *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (2012). Even that has some kind of narrative. It is conveyed through the aesthetic choices applied to the game, like the clothes from each team, which guns they have access to, and the visual elements of each map. Anubis, Mirage and Ancient are maps located in ancient ruins or conflict zones, so the buildings in them are not in their best shape, there are varying degrees of destruction and/or disrepair. Meanwhile, maps like Nuke or Vertigo are located in more modernized and "safe" locations, their buildings are usually either intact or under construction, and there is almost no sign of destruction. That in itself is story and narrative, even if it has a very light flavor. And that is not even considering the emergent story aspect of this kind of game. That is, the narratives that are birthed during gameplay itself. Those that have the players, or, at least,

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[19] Famous series of game engines. Usually, the games made using them have a very distinct "RPG Maker" aesthetic.
[20] First Person Shooter.

the personas they use while playing, as characters. Stories common to every sport, competition, or any activity of the sort that involves unpredictability of results and a group of people participating. Stories born from *agon*, as Murray writes. One example of it could be a CS:GO player being the last survivor of their team in the round and managing to win by themselves against the entire adversary team of 5 players.

People who maintain this view, of narrative-focused games not being "real games", fail to realize that every piece of art, no matter the medium or the platform, has narrative in it, or, at least, narrative potentiality. Maybe someone didn't directly write a narrative, but someone at least composed the elements (be them of music, of scenery, of level design) aiming to generate the best experience possible for that specific work of art. They wrote the narrative between you and that experience.

It is important to mention here that there are some recent advances made in that field. For example, the inclusion of a "Best Game Writing" category on the Nebula Awards[21], since 2019. Another example is *Her Story* (2015), a game that could be disregarded and considered "not a real game", or "not game enough", and won the best narrative category of The Game Awards 2015.

On the other hand, the literary world, especially writers, academics, critics and readers very attached to the "literary canon", tend to not like anything that deviates even a little from their ideas of what is literature and literary. To most of them, the idea of branching narratives, electronic literature, gamebooks and video games being considered literature is not taken seriously. Maybe one of the most known examples of this is Roger Ebert's essay *Video games can never be art* (2010). The eternal dilemma of art. What is art? And what is not? Could anything be art? Is art only art when someone says it is? Who can and who cannot say something is art? The argument used is usually in regards to medium, saying that videogames are not literature because "real" literature is written words against a white background. As we have already seen, literary value and artistic value derives from meaning, not medium.

Naomi Alderman's article for The Guardian, *The first great works of electronic literature are already being written* (2015) illustrates that feeling of separation and alienation between people who work and study primarily in tech fields, and people who work and study primarily in literary or arts fields. She highlights the generalized disinterest or disregard of video games by "literary people", and the same sentiment towards literary works and storytelling by "digital people". She concludes with "We can't afford that kind of thinking

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[21] Annual awards hosted by Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.

anymore. Being culturally educated about video games is as important as going to museums or learning about opera". A statement that I agree with completely.

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* were originally oral stories, passed down from generation to generation of *aedos*. The same can be said by countless other epic poems and mythological narratives, from hundreds of cultures all over the world. And yet the "literary purists'", shall we call them, arguments would exclude those works. Disregarding oral tradition in that sense, is like burning the great library of Alexandria all over again. If that's the case, I prefer to be "not a real writer", a "non-literary writer", or a "entertainment literature writer" than a "literary writer", in the eyes of those who might think that way. Although we see some change in direction in that regard, like the Nobel Prize of Literature in 2016, awarded to Bob Dylan's work, which, in itself, sparked controversy and outrage, it remains a point of contention.

Another argument commonly used is in regard to content. The literary canon has a hardcore tendency towards realism fiction. Unless, of course, a speculative or fantastic work is too good to be ignored. What I mean is, there is a general disregard for fantasy, science fiction, horror and any other kind of genre fiction, and they are generally considered lesser forms of fiction by people more aligned with the literary canon. But some exceptions are made, as long as the fantastic or speculative elements of those works are considered allegorical. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), there is a ghost at the very beginning. In Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), well, the protagonist turns into a giant insect. In the previously mentioned Iliad and Odyssey, as well as Dante's *The Divine Comedy* (1472), Miltons' *Paradise Lost* (1667), and many other epic poems, we have multiple manifestations of the fantastic as well. When latin american[22] writers started to produce works that are obviously fantastic, those works were, and still are, called "magic realism", maybe, as a way to legitimize them as "literary", despite them being fantastic. To cite some Brazilian examples, in Machado de Assis' *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881)[23], we have a novel with a first person narrator who is telling his story after his death. It is not absurd to say that the narrator is a ghost. It is absurd to say that that book is pure realism fiction. And yet, it is likely that it will be said of one of the most well regarded Brazilian works of literature, by literary canon aligned people.

Thinning those barriers, making those outdated notions a bit more *rusted* and decayed, is also part of my reason for Ferrea: A Tale of Rust. If possible, I want those purists, both of the

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[22] There are authors from other parts of the world that write in that genre, but the majority of them (at least the well known ones), were latin american.

[23] *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, in the original.

gaming world and of the literary world, to give a chance to those works born of intersections. I suspect that they would like it.

The main motif of Ferrea is loss. Loss of control, loss of loved ones, loss of one's self. When I was in the first stages of thinking about what I wanted to do, I had recently dealt with a lot of loss in my personal life. The world was crawling out of the COVID-19 pandemic, and everything felt, at least to me, more like a sad epilogue than a promising new beginning. Everything was (still is) strange. Estranged relationships, deaths and the ever present feeling of time lost are some of the main ingredients that shaped my mental state in the past few years. It just seemed right to make a tragic story.

And usually in stories, the more you can delay the tragedy, the more powerful it gets. I wanted to make something with one big plot twist at the very end, and make it so that the player/reader had to decide between one big loss or another. There are some obvious classic literary inspirations for that, like ancient Greek and Shakespearean tragedies. *Oedipus Rex* , in particular, is an important one, because it has that element of unforeseen consequences, of the main antagonist being the hero himself, or, at least, his ignorance. I want to cause a similar effect with Ferrea: not only simple tragedy, but the idea of a tragedy one brings upon themselves, of the crushing weight of consequences and the dread of guiltiness. We can think of the first part of Heracles' myth here as well, when he brutally slays monsters that invaded his home, only to find out soon after that his senses had deceived him, and the deaths he caused were those of his own wife and children.

Other, less known references are the video games *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) and *Tell Tale's The Walking Dead* (2012). In the first exemple, you are an amnesiac jedi seeking to stop an evil and genocidal sith warlord, only to find out, near the end, that you were that sith in the first place, before losing your memory. On the second, a brilliant retelling of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), you control a special ops soldier form the US army on a rescue mission in a post-apocalyptic Dubai that had been devastated by a ruthless and unrelenting sandstorm. As the game progresses, so does the paranoia and madness of the protagonist, and, in the end, he ends up facing the truths and horrors of his own cruelty: he (but also you, the player) killed the very people he aimed to save. The third example is a game filled with hard choices at each corner. You must not only survive the zombie apocalypse, but also raise a recently orphaned child, and teach her how to navigate this new reality. In the end, you are faced with the fact that some of the choices that were crucial to your survival ended up meaning the destruction of another innocent family. The main

villain in that story was just a father seeking to protect his child, just like you. Or, reversely, the main villain of that story *was* you, in the other father's point of view.

There are other references to be recognized as well. *Fight Club* (1999), for example. It has the same essence of crises of identity, loneliness and illusory relationships that I want Ferrea to have. Late 1990's and early 2000's cinematography seem to have had a strong presence of those elements in general. Films like *Memento* (2000), *Shutter Island* (2010), *Inception* (2010), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), *Perfect Blue* (2002) and *Black Swan* (2010) are all, in that sense, influences. The same goes for the anime *Serial Experiments: Lain* (1998).

I often think about James Baldwin's famous quote: "Every writer has only one story to tell, and he has to find a way of telling it until the meaning becomes clearer and clearer, until the story becomes at once more narrow and larger, more precise, more and more reverberating"[24]. If I had to guess what my repeating story is, I would say it has something to do with the wars fought within ourselves, the slow and inevitable fading away of oneself, physically, mentally and spiritually. The rust. It is no wonder the protagonist from my first novel has a condition similar to leprosy[25]. Or that one of my short stories is about a man who adds new pieces of plate armor to his body everytime he suffers a great loss, never removing them, until one day, when he is already entirely covered, he is defeated and killed, only for the victors to find out that there was nothing underneath the armor[26]. Or that another one of my protagonists is a albino detective, suffering, among other things, the prejudices people have towards his albinism[27].

I can't help it. Broken people fascinate me. In that regard, I believe that is why I like Star Wars so much, and, ultimately, why it is so successful and keeps being relevant and acclaimed. Beneath the veneer of glowing swords and spaceship battles, the real essence lies: loss and tragedy. Although the most obvious character that fits that role is Darth Vader, we can say the same about Obi-Wan (especially considering the recent series focused on him) and Yoda, just to cite a few. And that is only considering the movies. If we dive into other mediums, and even more, into Legends contents, a whole dissertation could be written about it. It's no wonder that *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005) is my favorite one. Because it is the most cathartic and tragic one, and, consequently, the one that gives the most depth to its

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[24] I couldn't find the original source.
[25] Khamir, from "A Torre do Tempo". A translation could be "The Tower of Time".
[26] Nameless character from "O Cavaleiro Andante". A translation could be "The Knight-errant".
[27] Nameless character from "O Alvo". "Alvo" in Portuguese has a double meaning: "Target" and "White one" (since he is albino). A translation could be "The Target" or "The White One".

character. It's no wonder we see so many new perspectives of order 66[28][29], be it through a video game or a television series. Because the writers of those works know that an empathetic public, a crying public, even, is a public that will remember more, more fondly and for a longer time.

When thinking about dark fantasy or sword and sorcery specifically, the genres that I write more on, and the ones I feel like Ferea sits on, Moorcok's Elric of Melniboné[30] and Sapkowski's Geralt of Rivia[31] are the main influences. They both fit perfectly in the role of a broken protagonist. Another important mention is Leiber's Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser[32], even though they fit that category more loosely, in my view. Elric is a character of contrasts. Physically he is frail and sick, very different from Robert E. Howard's Conan[33], in that sense. He is heir to the empire of Melniboné, a decadent and cruel society, and most of his trials involve more palace intrigue than raw force. He is also a magic addict, a condition that both empowers and enslaves him. And one he has to struggle with constantly. Geralt is a mutant monster hunter, who is shunned, feared and hated by most common folk, even those he ends up protecting. His appearance, which includes albinism and yellow eyes with vertical, feline-like pupils, together with his longevity and unnaturally increased senses, speed and strength, makes him a pariah. Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser are a barbarian and a thief, respectively. On their first adventure together, they both suffer massive losses, turning their optimistic views of the world upside down. All of these characters are like Conans who failed, in one way or another. People who have flaws, weaknesses, doubts, existential dread, vices, regrets, who second guess themselves. Basically, more down to earth and relatable.

The following paragraph contains major spoilers for *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Telltale's The Walking Dead Season One*, *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* and *Shadow of The Colossus*.

To convey that feeling of loss and brokenness is not enough. In branching works, at least in the majority of them, the reader/player themselves have to feel it, as if it is not only happening to the character, but to them as well. It is like Ciri's death in *The Witcher 3: Wild*

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[28] Order 66 is a tragic event in Star Wars canon where almost all Jedi, even children, were betrayed and killed in cold blood by their own troops.

[29] Star Wars: *Jedi Fallen Order* (2019), *The Mandalorian* (2019-present), *The Clone Wars* (2008-2020), *Bad Batch* (2021-present), *The Book of Boba Fett* (2021), *Obi-Wan Kenobi* (2022).

[30] *Elric of Melniboné: The Elric Saga Part 1* (2022), *Stormbringer: The Elric Saga Part 2* (2022), *The White Wolf: The Elric Saga Part 3* (2022).

[31] *The Last Wish* (2019), *Sword of Destiny* (2020) and *The Saga of the Witcher: Blood of Elves, Time of Contempt, Baptism of Fire, The Tower of the Swallow and The Lady of the Lake* (2020).

[32] *Swords and Deviltry* (2014), *Swords Against Death* (2014), *Swords in the Mist* (2014), *Swords Against Wizardry* (2014), *The Swords of Lankhmar* (2014), *Swords and Ice Magic* (2014), *The Knight and Knave of Swords* (2014) and *Swords Against the Shadowland* (2014).

[33] *Conan: The Barbarian complete collection* (2020).

Hunt (2015), or when Lee dies at the end of *Telltale's The Walking Dead Season One* (2012), or when the older brother dies in *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (2013), and the younger brother suddenly is capable of climbing higher walls and swimming (before, he depended on the older brother's help), or when Agro, Wanderer's horse, dies in *Shadow of The Colossus* (2005). Note that, I purposefully chose events that are unavoidable, even in games where player choice matters, like in The Walking Dead or The Witcher 3. Interactivity alone causes that. In all those exemples, those losses are heavy ones because the player not only spent tens of hours (if not more) with those characters, as a reader would on a novel, or a spectator would on a TV or streaming series, but they *were* the character, or someone close to the character who died.

When a dramatic event is the direct unfolding of player choices, the feeling that that event causes tends to be even stronger. For example, in games like *Baldur's Gate III* (2023), or *Divinity: Original Sin II* (2017), when a player chooses to side with one companion character over another, and the side not chosen ends up dead or destroyed. Those are hard choices on themselves, at the very least, it is a choice that implicates in the exclusion of an entire main character and/or subplot of the whole game, at least for that playthrough. When the game manages to make the player care about those characters, factions and world, those choices become even harder. In the case of Baldur's Gate, for example, it might be hard to choose between two companions because they are all generally very charismatic and interesting. It is a hard choice because you want both options, and they are self-excluding. In the case of The Witcher, however, it is common that the player sees themselves faced with a self-excluding major choice between two options you don't want. The choice between Emperor Emyr's Nilfgaard and Radovid's Northern Kingdoms, for example, is essentially a choice between the iron rule of two cruel and unscrupulous tyrants. Whatever the result, different specific groups, many of which contain friends and acquaintances of Geralt, will be persecuted and massacred.

It is that underlying feeling of choice-anxiety, analysis paralysis and bittersweet unfoldings that I want to evoke in my players/readers with Ferrea. I want not only the consequences to weigh heavily on them, but the moments of choosing as well. In that sense, I decided that the final choice, right before the ending, would be the most dramatic and impactful one. That, combined with what was addressed before, that is, the idea of a tragedy one brings upon themselves, birthed the climax of Ferrea. Jamek, the protagonist, who will meet Rhea, a woman in similar conditions to him, will have to decide between saving her or saving himself. With a caveat. She never really existed. At least, not in the traditional sense of the term. The woman who accompanied him for months in his journey, who helped and guided him through a dangerous post-apocalyptic world, who he (and, hopefully, the player/reader as

well) became fond of, and maybe even in love with; was, from the beginning, an illusion. An elaborated hallucination that his own mind conjured, affected by extreme conditions and the progressing fictional disease called rust. The thing that he seeks since the beginning, a cure, suddenly becomes a subject of doubt. If he cures himself, he will live longer, but without Rhea; if he doesn't, he will have her company as usual, but the rust will progressively destroy his body and mind, with great doses of suffering too.

Although I haven't played it, *Prince of Persia* (2008) is a relevant mention here, since it has a similar theme of sacrifice in its narrative. Elika, the princess who accompanies the protagonist, was resurrected by the demon Ahriman. In order to save the world the demon must be defeated, but his defeat also means the end of the magic that resurrected Elika, and her death. In his essay, *Virando o Jogo*[34] (2010), Daniel Galera writes a detailed analysis of the game and its narrative. In the case of *Prince of Persia*, there is only one ending. The player doesn't get to choose. Nonetheless, it's an important example, since the core element of conflict of its narrative is so similar to that of *Ferrea*.

Returning to the final choice of *Ferrea*: it is, a bit, the classical dilemma of a hard reality versus a happy illusion. Maybe the most notorious case of that trope in fiction is *Matrix* (1999), but we see that in many works as well. From the episode *Beyond Aquila Rift*[35], of the first season of *Love, Death and Robots* (2019), to other above cited films, like *Inception* (2010), to the book *Ready Player One* (2011). Even works like *Naruto: Shippuden* (2007-2017) touch on the subject. What was Madara's plan after all, if not putting everyone in a sort of magical matrix? I think we face some form of that dilemma, to a lesser degree, often in our real lives. It is hard to give a definite answer of what is more valuable: quality experience or realness of experience. Even more the more technology advances, especially in the fields of AI. It is not absurd to envision a day-to-day existence where humans date AI's, like in the movie *Her* (2013), for example. I believe that, now more than at any other time in human history, that dilemma is relevant. But, since I don't write literature, neither branching nor traditional, to give answers, but to instigate questions, that dilemma is up to the reader/player of Ferrea to decide on.

Another important aspect of Ferrea is the rust itself. Like I mentioned before, I like writing stories of ruin and ruination, be that literal or figurative. With Ferrea, I wanted to extrapolate that concept to the maximum, I wanted to create a fictional world where that

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[34] A literal translation would be "Turning the game". I propose a more contextualized translation: "Turning point". In Portuguese it also carries the double meaning of "finishing the game", "beating the game", "completing the game" etc.

[35] Based on the homonymous short story collection by science fiction writer Alastair Reynolds.

element is central to every aspect of experience. So Rust was born. The idea is that the main deity of this world is, contrary to most monotheistic real religions, a deity that punishes first. While in the real world, the tendency is that a human who deviates from the moral code of a deity and/or religion is free to do so, but has to pay the price in the afterlife, in Ferrea, an individual does not get to deviate in the first place. Before they become sinners, or whatever other analogous term, they are punished with rust. It is a disease loosely inspired by leprosy, a real world condition, but with extra symptoms, and not only physical ones, but mental as well. Rust manifests first, criminal, violent, or just strongly non-desirable social behavior comes after. In that sense, rust and its symptoms serve the societal role of sanitation, both in the literal sense, and in a more sociological one.

The main government, which is a theocracy, monitors and controls individuals with a high likelihood of contracting rust, which can be, by the way, a spontaneous process. So, anyone could be living their normal life, never having been violent, never having committed a crime, and suddenly see themselves in a situation of complete social exclusion and hostility. The question of what comes first, rust, or "undesirable behavior" is never really answered definitively. If on one hand, the power structure of that society uses and abuses the existence of that real disease to exercise control on its citizens in a broader and deeper way, the disease itself really makes people more violent. It is an infinite loop. Some inspirations are dystopian and/or sci-fi works like Ursula K. Le Guin's short story *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* (1973), Philip K. Dick's *The Minority Report* (1956), and the anime *Psycho-Pass* (2012-2013), which all have that essential element of punishing criminals before they commit crimes, or sacrificing the liberties and rights of a few to maintain the peace and comfort of the majority.

The world is divided between the Imperial Walled Cities and the Wastelands. I draw direct inspiration here from a few sources: the manga and anime *Attack On Titan* (2013-2023) and *Ergo Proxy* (2006), as well as the game *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), which all, to a varying degree, have that element of a small, densely populated zone, walled of from the lawless and dangerous (or even inhospitable) outside. In the case of Ferrea, there are only two destinies a person with rust can have: death or exile into the Wastelands. The story itself is told in the second person and from the point of view of Jamek, a man who spent most of his life obsessing with rust, and who wished to find a cure for it. The story begins with him in his first days of the disease, already exiled into the Wastelands, made prisoner by a bandit gang. The Wastelands

are obviously inspired in the *Mad Max*[36] franchise, borrowing its aesthetic essence and feel, constituting a mostly lawless, savage and post-apocalyptic territory.

I like to think of Ferrea as a work trespassed by dichotomies. Disease and health, civilization and savagery, piety and sin, safety and exposure, control and freedom. And it is my goal to try, as much as possible, to move away from macheists views. I want to present imperfect and impure individuals and systems, to convey that everyone and everything is inherently flawed to some degree, and that nothing is a simple binary choice. I want my players/readers to feel as if all of those dichotomies cited above are composed of two sides with positives and negatives. The final choice of Ferrea, that I presented earlier in this topic, was conceived with that idea in mind. To convey that even more, I intend on implementing a rust progression system. Certain choices the player/reader has to make will make the rust advance or regress its contagion on Jamek. And certain lexias will only appear if that rust bar is above or below a certain number. What I'm aiming for is something akin to Zoë Quinn's Depression Quest, where narrative, textual, visual and auditory elements of the game change depending on how strong the depression is currently, reflecting the mental state of the protagonist.

Finally, it's important to note that, for this dissertation, I had to adapt Ferrea into a PDF format. I will provide the link that enables it to be played on an internet browser, which is the ideal way for it to be experienced. But the text of Ferrea will be a part of this dissertation, written in a way similar to how a gamebook might be structured. Another thing to be aware of is that, it is a first version, a draft, and not the final work, both in terms of quantity and of quality. Meaning, it's a fragment of what it would be if made to its entirety, for a commercial official release, for example.

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[36] *Mad Max* (1979), *Mad Max 2* (1981), *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015).

4. FERREA: A TALE OF RUST

Firstly, I should say that the best way to read Ferrea is through its Twine version. It can be read on a browser window, and accessed through the following link: Ferrea: A Tale of Rust. If you choose that route, you will have to download the file and open it with a web browser application. In that way, the story will unfold more naturally without the reader having to constantly go back and forward through the same PDF file. But, for those who wish for a more centralized experience, and one where the reader could see more into the backstage, so to speak, of the different branching paths Ferrea presents, it is also available here, in this document.

If you wish to read Ferrea here, on this document, there are some basic things you need to know. The subtitles in **red** correspond to the beginning of a section, or lexia (which is the piece of text that would be visible on the screen in Twine, before the reader clicked a link to the next lexia). You should start at Story Start, which is just below, and read its contents until you reach the texts in **bold** and double brackets **[[Like this example]]**. Those serve to indicate which section is the next one. Note that some sections contain more than one of those indicators. In those cases, it is up to you, the reader, to decide which one to follow.

Story Start

The Lady will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and rust, which will plague you until you perish.
[[Awake, exiled.|0]]

0

The thirst comes first. You don't know how many hours or even days have passed since the last sip of water that you drank. The cell is dry and dusty, and a fine tickle of sand drops down from the barred window every time someone walks near it on the street level above. Those savages that captured you almost certainly didn't build the dungeon, they just found it and took it as their own. That is what they do with everything and everyone, after all. You would know, considering you are a historian. Or, maybe, you were one. Now, just a broken and confused man stares back at you when you look at your own reflection in the shards of broken mirror that lay around.

Exiled, diseased, captured by slavers and cannibals. Once you were relatively respected and looked upon with smiling eyes. Now, your name is shunned. 'Jamek' is now a meaningless sound. At best, they'll refer to you as 'slave', at worst, well, they'll use the oldest language there ever was: violence.

** In //Ferrea: A Tale of Rust// You, the player, have to keep track of your Rust meter. You begin with 10 Rust. If this number goes to 100, your character succumbs to the influences of Rust and completely loses any sense of identity, and the game is over.

The Rust meter is relevant because some events of the story require you to be above or below a certain amount of Rust to happen. Although Rust seems like an exclusive bad thing, having a moderate amount of it can also expand your possibilities, and make some parts of the game easier.

Some choices will alter your Rust meter, either increasing or decreasing it. But you won't know it until the choice is made. **

[[**Next**|**1**]]

<div align="center">

1

</div>

Even the desert rats and vermin avoid you. You know that healthy, not infected animals usually avoid the rust. You laugh at the irony of it. Someone who dedicated his life to the study and understanding of the disease, now infected by it. It is barely noticeable now, just a couple of furrows snaking through your face below your eyes. It's not even ugly, you think. But it surely is enough to be exiled from the imperial walled cities. And out here, in the wastelands, desert rats are the most friendly company available.

One of them stares directly at you. It almost seems as if it wants to speak something. It is hungry, just like you. And near enough for you to catch it. You won't get another chance like this.

[[**Try to catch it**]]

[[**Leave it alone**]]

Try to catch it

You launch forward and catch the rat. It squirms in your hand and bites one of your fingers. The pain makes you instinctively tighten the grip. The animal emits a high pitch wail of agony. You beat it against the wall, ending its suffering. Your hand is now covered with blood and gore.

For a fleeting moment you feel disgusted, but the hunger kicks in immediately after, as if it had a will of its own and wished to remember you of its existence. You drink the rat's blood, and eat its raw flesh. Automatically, without thought. As you finish, you begin to wonder if Rust had anything to do with how easily you managed to do that. Or, if it was just desperation and extreme circumstances. Both these forces always seemed to be entangled with each other, you thought. Not that these theories matter anymore.

(+5 Rust)

You hear a whisper coming from the cell window above…

[[**Look at the window**]]

Leave it alone

Mercy? Cowardliness? Apathy? You are not sure. It is as if your body is not really yours. Your thoughts run with the same celerity and clarity as they always had. A powerful, but restless mind you have. Rust didn't change that. Not yet, at least.

But your body is non-responsive, starved, dehydrated and tired. Too tired to even attempt catching that rat.

It is of no use, you think. The small nutrition that creature could provide wouldn't last long, and soon starvation would kick in again. Trying to kill and eat the rat, besides being no guarantee of success and a possible complete waste of energy, would only prolong your suffering.

Better to just wait around and die.

The rat skitters away, as if it agreed to the conclusion of your little mental debate. You exhale heavily.

(-1 Rust)

You hear a low whistle coming from above. You turn your head to the window…

[[Look at the window]]

Look at the window

"Hey, pssh, over here"

You hear a low whisper. You rub your eyes, trying to remove whatever grain of sand or goo that might be in there. You squint, turning your gaze to the window.

At first, it's difficult to get used to the light. You blink heavily. And as you open your eyes again, you see...

[[Next|3]]

3

It is a young woman. Her pale-red strands of hair and sunburned skin almost hides the Rust crevices in her face. She seems to be at the early stages of the condition, just like you.

"Hey, can you hear me?"

You open your mouth but no sound comes out of it at the first attempt. You clear your throat and try again. "Y-yes", you manage to mutter this time.

"Good. We need to get out of here. Those raiders only stay around here at night. In the daytime, like now, they go out hunting for prey."

She speaks with so much confidence. It looks like she has been living in the wastelands for some time. That means she definitely knows her way around. But it also means she cannot be trusted.

"Are you paying attention?" Her tone is now a bit indignant.

"Yes. Yes, s-sorry. It has been days since someone spoke to me." You answer. Then you breathe heavily.

She is about to say something, but you interrupt: "How can we get out of here?"

She smiles.

[[Next|4]]

4

"These cell bars are old and frail. If you sit on the floor with your back against them and then use the opposite wall as support and your feet as leverage..." she says.

"I see what you mean."

You do as she says. You put all your weight and the little strength still left in you to the task. But it is not enough.

"Keep trying" she says softly, "I know you can do it"

[["It's no use, I can't do it"|5]]

[[Keep trying|6]]

5

"You have no other choice", she says.

"Why don't you just open the cell for me?" you ask.

"I would if I could, but I'm on a cell of my own, my dear". Her mouth forms a sad smile.

"If you get out of there, you can get the keys and release me as well. There is some food and water the raiders left behind too. We can escape, I know it."

You breathe heavily, then look at her for a moment. She is beautiful. You can see it even through all the dirtiness a prisoner like her - and like you - must endure.

Without saying a word, you return to your attempt at escaping.

[[Next|7]]

6

"Yes! I knew I could count on you. That's it, just a little more and the bars will fall!" She cheers you on in an almost infantile way.

You cannot help but smile. You actually feel stronger and more energetic. You can hear the notes of dryness and dehydration in her voice, but even so, it is the most beautiful sound you have heard in a long, long time.

[[Next|7]]

7

You press against the old, rusty bars again and again. The movement has become automatic, and, soon enough, you hear the clanking of iron and you feel the bars giving in. They bend and fall loose on the sandy ground.

"Yes! You did it!" The woman screams.

You instinctively gesture to her, telling her to be more quiet. She continues to celebrate and laugh.

"It's ok! No guards around, like I said before. Now, quick, get out of there and come let me out as well."

You nod. Your legs are frail, and you realize you spent days without getting up. You need a moment to recompose yourself. One last look back, and you see the woman smiling and making encouraging gestures towards you.

You exit the cell.

[[Next|8]]

8

A gust of wind hits your face as you leave the crumbling building that is the prison. You get the key-ring on the way out, and go towards where the woman was. She has one hand chained to a pole. After the third try with different keys, the lock falls open and she is freed.

"Thanks," she says, smiling. "My name is Rhea. What about yours?"
"Jamek," you mutter.
Her facial expression goes from happy to concerned.

"You were here for longer than me. You must be really thirsty, sorry for making you talk so much", she says.

[["It's ok. Where should we go next? Where can we find water?"|9]]

[["I need water... why should I trust you, anyway?"|10]]

<center>**9**</center>

She smiles at you.

"Thanks, you know, for everything. We should get going now, follow me!"
She seems trustworthy enough. Besides, the chances of survival increase if you work together, especially considering she wandered the wastelands for some time, while you are a new arrival. It is evident that a lot can be learned from her.

[[Next|11]]

<center>**10**</center>

"Hesitation is a valuable tool, and you are right, it's not wise to trust others lightly. But in this instance, we are both on the same boat. Helping each other is helping ourselves too."

She has a decent argument. Besides, she knows this world, the world of the exiled, for longer than you, and deeper than you.

You nod. She smiles.

[[Next|11]]

<center>**11**</center>

"Perfect, then. Let's first get some water and food from their stash."

She laughs abruptly.

"Let's raid the raiders!"

You follow her. When they took you to your cell, you were unconscious, so now you see for the first time, the various little houses that dot the village around you. They are in different stages of ruin. On a superficial glance, it looks like this place was built decades ago, maybe longer.

You follow her to a building that seems to have been some kind of temple. It is hard to discern the age or the culture it originally belonged to, even more so, what deity it honored.

The history taught in the Empire doesn't go into details about the Wastelands, or the world before the Walled Citie.

As you enter the building, a storm of smells assault your nose. Dry meats, wine, hard bread, herbs and even a bottle of *mallura* stand before you at a table. This is obviously the raider's makeshift kitchen and dining hall.

[[**[Next](|12)**]]

12

You two drink and eat from the raider's kitchen.

"Be careful, take a good look before you put something in your mouth. These people eat human flesh." Rhea says.

You look at her for a long moment, trying to discern if she is joking, and, reading your gaze perfectly, she continues:

"I'm serious, Jamek".

Then she returns to her aggressive biting and chewing of a chicken leg.

You two eat your fill and drink as much as possible. Then look at each other, exhausted.

She takes a deep breath, before declaring:

"We have to go now."

You nod.

The next half hour or so is spent collecting and packing as much resources, tools and rations you two can get, putting it all in a sand sled and departing.

Then it strikes you: you have no idea of where she is going, but then she says:

"I was about to ask you, Jamek, where do you wanna go? I think we should get to Nanthas. As much as I hate to admit it, it's the safest place for people like us."

When you ask her what she means by 'like us', she just traces her fingers through the characteristic Rust furrows in her face, then points to those in your own face.

"We got the worst kind of misfortune, my friend," she says. "Being infected enough to be feared and hated by healthy people, but not nearly enough to the point our minds degenerate and we become like those raiders."

"I wouldn't like to be like them," you answer.

She sighs. "First, if we take too long, we will become like them. Second, if it came to that, we wouldn't feel as we feel now, we would be completely different people." She gestures expansively around her. "We would belong in this hellscape."

You nod. "Not as outside prey, but as natural predators".

"Precisely", she concludes.

[[Next|13]]

13

Rhea guides you on the basics of conducting sand sleds and you two depart. The weather is dry and hot as always, but at least there are no sandstorms forming on the horizon. The sun is high in the sky, and a breeze of hope blows past you.

"I was there when they took you to that prison, Jamek. They stripped you of your belongings. A notebook, a compass and a canteen, isn't it?"

You nod in agreement.

"We need to get those back. Especially the book."

"Why?" you ask her.

"It will slow down the spreading of rust in you. Things from your past, from before, well, you know," she gestures around her, "all this. They help tether you to a version of yourself that was not infected."

She makes a small pause, considering her words.

"Secondly, in Nanthas we can plead for a treatment, but those are extremely expensive. And nothing is more valued in Nanthas than knowledge. Their nobles and scientists are obsessed with things from the Walled Cities. That's why the raiders took them. Out here it's just as worth to sell them as it is to sell slaves, like they intended to do with us. It is more lucrative, actually. Those objects are more easily carried, and don't need food or water."

[[**"Sounds like our only viable option"**|14]]

14

She gives you a sad smile. "Yes", she says.

[[**"Where should we look for my lost objects?"**|15]]

[[**"How long have you been, you know, in this situation?"**|16]]

[[**"Are you sure we can outrun the raiders?"**|17]]

15

"Well, we have three main destinations, besides Nanthas itself, which should be our final one, since it is the most distant, and all the others are on the way to there. Besides, there's no use getting there if we don't have the items we need."

She does a brief pause, considering her words.

"First, we have the dread marshes, beyond those hills to the east. It is a surprisingly [[**swampy region**]] amidst the desert. But it is also filled with dangerous predators and blood sucking mosquitoes the size of your hand and that are also filled with diseases."

"And then", Rhea continues, "There is the [[**Crimson Dawn lands.**]] You know, the blood drinkers. Rust-infected who believe they are vampires. It is, together with Nanthas, one of the least lawless regions. The problem is that the laws are often not very kind towards outsiders like us."

"And finally, there is, well, the home of those bastards who captured us. [[**The Maw**]]. All sorts of crazy down there."

"We need to go through them in that order, as it is the most optimal route."

Rhea looks at you, smiling. "So, whatsit be? What kind of vacation do you prefer?"

"Well, they all sound wonderful, don't they." You say.

She laughs.

You sigh.

[[**"I wanted to ask something else first"|14**]]

[[**"I'm ready to go"|18**]]

Swampy region

You remember mentions of this place from your studies. Some people call it The Dread Marshes. Despite the dangers of this desolate and presumably uninhabited region, it is commonly used by traders and smugglers of all sorts, since it is a shortcut between the nearest walled city and Nanthas. It's not unlikely that the buyers of your belongings chose to go there.

[[**Return|15**]]

Crimson Dawn lands

The barons, counts and dukes of the Crimson Dawn are famously greedy, tyrannical and blood-lusted, as well as insane. In some cases of rust, intense photo-sensitivity and a desire to consume blood are the predominant manifestations of the condition. Thus, the idea of "vampirism" spreaded and was eventually taken as truth. It was adopted and used as the main criteria for hierarchies and power structures by the nobility of the region. These people are among the most dangerous the Wastelands has to offer, but they are also extremely vain. Your objects could easily have ended up in the personal collection of one of them.

[[**Return|15**]]

The Maw

The Maw is a region of canyons and labyrinthine narrow passages, that are home to most of the raider clans. The different clans and tribes are in a constant state of infighting among themselves, and are fanatical towards mechanical vehicles and technological objects. It

is common for them to mutilate their own bodies and substitute organic parts for mechanical ones. They could well have taken interest in some of your objects.

[[**Return|15**]]

16

Rhea looks at the horizon intently for a moment. "Its hard to say. I feel that, in a way, I have always been here, and, at the same time, I'm not really here at all. You know?"

She pauses for a while, thinking. Then she tightens her grip around the reins of the sled.

"I have been here long enough to know that I want to get out of here. That is the most important thing. I suggest you develop the same mentality."

You nod. She probably has some things she doesn't want to share, but who doesn't? Furthermore, she seemed genuinely confused, which is expected, since memory loss and fabricated memories are common symptoms of Rust.

[[**"I wanted to ask something else"|14**]]

17

She smiles defiantly. "No. Of course I'm not sure. We probably won't. But I honestly don't see any other way."

[[**Maybe we could negotiate with them?|19**]]

[[**What if we fought them? Or made a trap for them?|20**]]

[[**You are right. Running is our best shot at survival, even if the odds aren't that good on our favor|21**]]

18

"Good. The humidity will do us well," she says, with a grin on her sun-touched face.

[[**Let's go to The Dread Marshes.|ACT II**]]

19

"Absolutely not." She says. "Those people are barely people anymore. The only thing they understand is strength. And we are not strong, at least not in the way they respect."

You frown. "Are you sure, Rhea? Then why do they go through the trouble of making prisoners in the first place? Why do they even sell slaves? Why wouldn't they attack the slave buyers too?"

"Good point. You separated the categories perfectly: raiders, slave buyers and slaves. We are of the third kind. We will always be of that kind, unless we have a small army at our backs. And, to be honest, not even with that, sometimes. Or, of course, as I said before, unless we become so affected by Rust, that our brains devolve and become like theirs. Again, sometimes not even then. About selling slaves, well, they need Nanthas, Crimson Dawn and other, more civilized factions of the wastelands to keep producing complex tools, weapons and the like, since they themselves are rarely capable".

You exhale.

[["I had another thing I wanted to ask you..."|14]]

20

She laughs out loud. "Oh my. I'm not religious, but I almost said 'my Goddess', just out of habit, with that one."

"You think it's that absurd? Maybe we could strike while they sleep, or poison their water and wait for them to get sick.", you say.

"I get it, you are new here, still full of hope. Trust me. Even if it worked initially, it wouldn't go well in the long run. We are desperately outnumbered, outskilled and out equipped, in the first place. I mean, we don't even know how many of them there are. And that is just one raiding party. A fraction of a bigger clan. No. Fighting is out of the question. If you want to survive this place, don't be noticed. That is the golden rule, always."

Her speech is so passionate and eloquent that you feel as though she thought about that dozens of times before, and had those debates internally, with herself, over and over again. You end up convinced.

"Is there something else you want to ask, Jamek?"

"Yes..."

[[Ask something else|14]]

21

"I am. Thanks for trusting my judgment on that one, Jamek. Now, is there anything else you want to ask?"

You nod and begin saying "About that..."

[[Ask something else|14]]

ACT II

You and Rhea travel for two or three days, surviving on the supplies you stole back at the raiders camp. Always alert, always looking over your shoulders. You gradually grow accustomed to her presence, and she, with yours. Nonetheless, you two barely talk lately. Sound echoes far in the desert plains, and, like most things, it is a risk.

Slowly the dryness in the air gives way to another kind of heat. One of dense and hot moisture. The more you advance, the more fog there is, and soon the sparse low vegetation becomes lush and thick green patches of land, dotted with the occasional palm tree. And then, just a few hours deeper into that strange, almost unbelievable landscape, there is no more sand. Only mud.

The chirping of crickets and the squeaking of frogs bid welcome to the new arrivals.

[[Go on|22]]

<center>**22**</center>

"First, we should dismantle the sled. Easier to travel that way.", Rhea says.

You nod in agreement and you both start the task.

"So, how many times did you travel through here?", you ask her.

"The same as you. Zero."

[["Wow, that's... encouraging. But I'm sure we'll be fine."|23]]

[["Are you serious? What the fuck is wrong with you?"|24]]

<center>**23**</center>

"I know, I know. I just didn't want you to be in panic even more than you already usually are. Sorry, Jamek."

"It's ok. I get it. Who am I to make demands? And besides, it's not like we have a choice anyway.", you respond.

"Exactly. Appreciate the composure. You are tougher than I thought", she says, smiling at you.

(-1 Rust)

[[Go on|25]]

<center>**24**</center>

"Hey, hey, chill, man.", she waves her hands.

"We are doomed. You're just a charlatan, you have no idea of what you're doing, do you?", you respond.

"Jamek, please, just listen."

You contain your frustration and let her speak.

"No, I never traveled through here. But I met people who did, and I read a lot and heard a lot of conversations. Isn't that what you did? Isn't that what we all did, back in the Empire? Just think, Jamek. If I was here in the wastelands for so long, would I still be so sane? So... myself?"

She is right. Both her physical and mental symptoms seem superficial, typical of the first stages of contagion.

Seeing that you are reconsidering, she continues. "Look, to be honest, I don't know exactly how long I've been here. But I can't be much more than you. A few months, tops. Are we good?"

You nod.

(+3 Rust)

[[Go on|25]]

25

You both resume the disassembling of the sled, and finish it within a few minutes. The atmosphere of the swamps somehow feel even more alien and inhospitable than the desert. The scorching sands are unrelenting and cruel, but at least there one can see cruelty coming from a great distance away. Here, in the Dread Marshes, it hides under every root, behind every bush.

[[Go on| 26]]

26

The stench in this place is horrible. Like a concentrated substance that encompasses every disease, every dying person's smell, every battlefield just after the massacre. You thought that it couldn't get much worse than the cell you woke up in back in the raiders camp, filthy and infested with rats. But there, even at basement level, at least there was a great measure of wind, always renovating everything it touched, never letting anything stay still. In the open fields and serpentine canyons of the desert there were also the presence of carrion eaters, be them vultures, savage canines, or… humans. Although dangerous, those agents of decomposition

played their part in the natural cycle of life, leaving a clean slate behind. Here death seems to linger for far too long.

The only commonality between both places, in that regard, would be, well, humans. Such a fragile word. *Hu-mans*. You bend and twist the sound of it in your head, and the more you think about it, the less meaningful it becomes. There is not much difference between a human and a vulture, certainly not in the wastelands, but, you now realize, not even back in the Empire.

The feverishly hot fog around you makes you dizzy and your head starts to ache. In this world, oases are drops of poison. Here, amidst the fetid smell and the menacing sounds of the swamp, everything seems to stagnate. Engineers back in the civilized world would call it a closed loop system. Almost no ins and outs of people or animals. Of any kind.

[[**Go on|27**]]

27

Three days of travel pass without any major incident. You and Rhea keep to the road, the safest and quickest path. Calling it a road is an overstatement, actually. It is a trail. Used by hunters, gatherers, and general travelers of the swamps. You studied a bit about the various different groups of smugglers that do business both with the Empire and the peoples of the wastelands. A profitable business, but also a dangerous one. There are special districts in the Walled Cities that tolerate their presence. But the life of one of those people is one of nomadism. Their only true home is being on the road. You wonder if out here, in the Wastelands, they also cover themselves head to toe, and use the same characteristic masks. It is one of the conditions for them to enter the Empire, but it could well be a common practice, an element of their culture and way of life itself.

Rhea spoke about these people on the first day. She said that they were not dangerous per se, but you never know. You two decided that if anyone ends up crossing your path, you'll hide in the vegetation a few meters away from the road until they pass. There was only one time you did that, at dusk, on the first day. But it ended up just being the case of some nocturnal animals waking up to their routine and making sounds a little bit too similar to human screams.

The wildlife here is as bizarre as one can imagine. There are reptilian things, like crocodiles and snakes. But they are very different from the drawings back in the Empire. As if the artists who drew them never really saw the creatures themselves, and were only told about them.

In the more dry regions, where the ground is firmer and more solid, it is common to see animal tracks. By the sound of howling in the late hours of the night, probably some kind of wolf. Both you and Rhea are glad that you only experienced vestiges of them, and not faced them directly. Of course, there are smaller game too. Mostly rodents, squirrels, and giant, bloated, leeches. These last ones seem nasty, but it is easy to outrun them.

There are a lot of birds too. Bats and owls mostly. Seeing their glowing yellow eyes shining at night is terrifying. But you got accustomed already. As to the dwellers of deep waters, you can only imagine what horrors they are.

You wonder how much of these strange beasts, that you only read about in tomes that are centuries old, are naturally like that, and how much of their strangeness is due to the effects of rust they have endured generation after generation.

[[Go on|28]]

28

Rhea motions for you to stop.

"Something's up ahead", she whispers.

You see it too, and it doesn't look good...

[[Approach|29]]

29

You nervously look around, trying to see if there's anyone else lurking nearby for a possible ambush. There doesn't seem to be.

You and Rhea make eye contact, then nod at each other, silently agreeing to keep going.

You do your best not to make a sound, and remain hidden, as you slowly approach the thing that made you stop and become alert. A wreckage. Some kind of caravan, probably of those smugglers you were thinking about earlier. Though the thing seems to have been a cart originally, it was modified and added upon so much that it now resembles a carriage, with a small cabin, door, windows and all. Or, more accurately, it would have been a carriage before being destroyed. It is toppled over to its side, with a third of it already sinking into the ominous dark waters of the swamp.

"The cargo is strewn about, whoever - whatever - did this, is not human. It wasn't sacked.", Rhea says, keeping her voice low.

As you go around the wreckage you see a trail of blood, as if someone heavily wounded dragged themselves. Or someone dead was dragged.

One of the wheels spins a little in a pendular motion, making an almost imperceptible cranking sound.

After you approach even more, this time, completing the entire perimeter around the carriage, you see a wounded man.

[[**Approach him|30**]]

30

One of his arms is severed and he desperately tries to press against the stub and stop the bleeding. Although he already lost a lot of blood, somehow he is still conscious.

You take the unlikelihood of that for a mixture of a few factors. First, judging by his clothes and his muscles, and the severed arm whose hand still grips a sword, he's probably some kind of warrior or bodyguard. A tough lifestyle breeds tough individuals. Secondly, rust may play a part in it, especially in the case of pain tolerance. And finally, plain and simple adrenaline. Life itself plays every card it can to delay death as much as possible, even though it has a guaranteed losing hand.

[[**Go on|31**]]

31

He breathes heavily, and each time it seems it will be his last. He's wearing a metal mask. Although the design is very different from those that you studied back in the university, it probably is indicative of a smuggler's clan typical headwear. You cannot say which clan, though.

A constant stream of blood tickles down from the mask's mouth hole. He coughs and spits blood.

"Looks like he's trying to say something", says Rhea.

You nod. "Lets sit him up so he can speak", you say.

[[Go on|32]]

32

You help the wounded man and sit himself up. Then you tear a piece of his clothing and tie it around the still bleeding stub in what is left of his arm. Rhea keeps a distance, her sharp gaze guarding the three of you for any potential threat beyond the bushes.

You were about to remove the man's mask, to facilitate his breathing and to hear him better. But he shoves your hand away with a quick movement of the arm he still has. Impressive. In his condition, that must have taken a lot of effort, and caused a lot of pain.

[[Remove his mask anyway|33]]

[[Respect his wish|34]]

33

You carefully remove the metal mask. Behind it, there's the face of a man who seems to be in his late thirties. very short hair and beard. Rough features, a few scars. Even though he is out here, in the wastelands, he doesn't have any apparent sign of rust.

He eyes you with hatred, then spits toward you, hitting your torso with a spout of his blood.

"Now I must kill you." He speaks with a hard accent that you can't quite tell the origin of. His voice seems weakened.

(+2 Rust)

[[**"Fuck you. You are in no position to make threats. Besides, I was only trying to help you, bastard."|35**]]

[[**"I'm sorry, I didn't think you would get offended that much. Here, let me put that back"|36**]]

34

"Sorry, I just thought that..." you begin.

"Mask stay". He interrupts you.

"Yes... of course."

There is a moment of awkward silence between the two of you. You realize he is not the talking type.

"So, my name is Jamek. Can I ask you some questions?" You say.

He nods in agreement.

(-2 Rust)

[[**Go on|Questions**]]

35

The man's expression gets even more severe. You almost don't duck away in time when he suddenly throws a dagger at you.

You heard stories about bees. These little creatures from the old world would launch a sting when feeling threatened, however bigger and stronger their target. But their bravery - or stupidity, depending on one's opinion - was even more significant, as the launching of their sting was always a last resort. It destroyed their bodies and ended up inevitably killing them a little after the attack.

That masked man did the same just now. He gave all that was left in him to try and end you. Lucky for you, he was already very weakened. Surelly, if that man was in his full capacity, you wouldn't stand a chance, even if Rhea helped you.

And that brings up in your mind an even scarier thought: what wounded him?

(+10 Rust)

[[Go on|37]]

36

He hesitates for a moment. You look away from his gaze. "Understood, understood. I will give you a moment to put the mask on", you mutter, stepping back and showing the palms of your hands to indicate you mean no harm.

The man says something that you can't comprehend, in his native language. In this context, it sounds like cursing. If directly at you, or at the situation as a whole, you can only imagine.

"Ready", he says.

You face him again. The mask is there. You realize he wiped the blood off of it with his clothes. There are still faint stains of red in some parts, but the metal visage looks much more presentable, much more formal, now.

"Can I ask you some questions?", you ask.

He nods in agreement.

[[Go on|Questions]]

Questions

His eyes stare at you behind the mask, silently but intently. You can tell it's taking all of his strength not to pass out.

[["Who are you?"|Q1]]

[[Point at his severed arm and ask "How did this happen?"|Q2]]

Q1

He laughs with his nose, and seems about to get a fit of laughter, then coffs, probably choking on his own blood. He recuperates shortly after, before you begin to think of helping him.

He breathes deeply.

"I am an 'ophick'. In your language it is 'warrior', or 'traveler'. To me they are the same thing. My name is Khoro."

You listen to him, expecting more, but it soon becomes clear that he is not the talkative type.

Q2

"That was a grojwh. A 'crocodile'?"

You nod, clarifying his doubt.

"He attacked me while I was urinating".

"Caught you by surprise then?", you say.

"Yes."

"And it fled?"

You swear you see a smile on his face, which is impossible, since the mask covers all of his features.

"It fled. Not gonna live long".

You look at the warrior's severed arm, than at the ground, and realize for the first time that a great amount of the blood spilled around is not his.

[["I have more questions"|Questions]]

Q3

"Traveling back to my clan. Bringing them my victories."

"Do you mean stories about your victories, or spoils? Like treasures and such, you know?", you ask.

"Yes. I know. I mean both. I mean more."

"How so?"

He sighs. "I don't know how to say it in your language. I don't know if you have the word for it."

"Can you try it?"

He looks around, as if thinking about something he could use as an analogy.

"I am like that arm." He says, pointing towards his own severed arm. "No. I am like a finger. My clan is the rest of body. Stronger… together. Buteven stronger rejoined."

"So you mean like, experience, knowledge?", you ask.

"*You* could call it that."

You understand that you will never truly understand, not in the same way that he does. You nod and thank him.

[["I have more questions"|Questions]]

<center>**Q4**</center>

"It is my real face." he says.

"And... Everyone in your tribe has one? Or just you?", you continue.

"Of course they all have one. It is their faces."

Not knowing if this strange dialogue is the fruit of mistranslation and misunderstanding of words and meanings, or if his belief and culture is exactly as he says, or even a combination of both, you decide to give up on the matter.

[[**"I have more questions"|Questions**]]

<center>**Q5**</center>

"Yes, I have. I want you to send me faster."

You raise an eyebrow.

"To the world of the dead", he continues.

"Are you sure?", you ask.

He nods. "Cut my throat. With my sword."

"And then...? Should we bury you? Cremate you?"

"No. Just leave me for the animals and the plants. I will return to the infinite."

"And your sword and mask?"

"Take them with you. I won't need my sword or my face after. Take anything else from the wagon, if you want. If you don't, someone will. Someone worse, maybe."

[[**"I have more questions"|Questions**]]

<center>**Q6**</center>

"Yes, knaish".

"K-naish?", you ask.

"'Outsider'", he says.

"You were going there, by any chance? Maybe we could help you."

He thinks for a long while, almost a minute. You almost begin to wonder if he died, or even fell asleep with his eyes open, but he blinks every few seconds.

"I cannot say where I was going. I thank your offer, but no. Now I am going to meet the dead."

You nod respectfully.

[["I have more questions"|Questions]]

37

The man breathes his last.

You stare at him for a while, reflecting on this encounter.

"There was nothing we could do for him", Rhea says, approaching.

You nod in agreement.

"We should get going, Jamek", she says.

The two of you quickly search the cargo before leaving. It's mostly trophies. Monstrous talons, fangs and skulls. You can't even tell the origin of half of them. He truly traveled a lot. There's also a lot of rings and necklaces. Probably the trophies of his human foes. Most of it is clearly from the various groups and factions of the wastelands, but, surprisingly, you find a few nanthian insignias and imperial dog tags. Surely all of that must be worth something, but neither you nor Rhea are very happy about the prospect of carrying even more weight. Besides, you wouldn't even know where and to whom you could sell all that stuff. After a quick consideration, you two decide the risk is too high and it would only slow down your travels. You add the few rations the warrior had to your own supply and prepare to leave.

[[Go on|38]]

<h1 style="text-align: center; color: red;">38</h1>

Rhea found a map amidst the fallen warrior's possessions, and is studying it. While she does that, you consider paying respect to the dead man.

[[**Lay his body on the ground and facing the sky, in a resting position, and put his severed arm near his body|39**]]

[[**Do nothing and just wait for Rhea|40**]]

<h1 style="text-align: center; color: red;">39</h1>

You do just that. It is a bit tiresome, the body is heavy and you were already tired from the journey, but after it is done, you feel better.

(-3 Rust)

[[**Go on|41**]]

<h1 style="text-align: center; color: red;">40</h1>

It's not like it would make any difference, anyway.

[[**Go on|41**]]

<h1 style="text-align: center; color: red;">41</h1>

There is another matter...

Will you take his mask and sword, or leave them with him?

[[**Take his mask and sword|42**]]

[[**Leave the mask and sword with him|43**]]

<h1 style="text-align: center; color: red;">42</h1>

It's not like he will need them anymore... They might be useful in the near future.

Besides, when you touch the sword handle, you feel as if you are doing the right thing. You are doing what he would have wanted, honoring him and his memory.

(-2 Rust)

[[Go on|44]]

43

You wonder if what moves you is your ethics (and if it's still that relevant to have ethics now), or if you just don't feel like using that stuff.

The mask is heavy, it would hurt your face and impede your vision greatly. Furthermore, the light of the sun, shining directly upon the metal would make it extremely hot on your face, and could even attract unwanted attention.

The sword, although a powerful tool, is almost useless in the hands of someone who doesn't really know how to use it, like yours or Rhea's.

Both morally and literally, these items might be a burden more than anything else.

[[Go on|44]]

44

Rhea waves at you from a distance, indicating it's time to go.

She is right. The first contours of twilight fall upon the already partially hidden sky above the swamps. Light and shadow dance their endless, timeless, dance, indifferent to all who watch them.

You can't help but smile. Despite all the suffering of the world, there is still beauty in it. And, contrary to the man you just left behind, you are still alive.

[[Go on|45]]

45

The two of you walked a few more hours, until it became too dark to see just beyond a few meters in front of you.

Luckly, Rhea found a massive hollow tree that could serve as shelter for the night. Its roots were long and thick, and have grown into a spherical-like shape, forming almost a small cave made out of wood.

After a brief discussion, where you said it was sketchy, that it could be the lair of some giant snake or something, and Rhea pointing out to the fact that, even though it wasn't completely safe, it was the *safest* around, you decided to go with it.

[[Go on|46]]

46

Just after you and Rhea settled inside your temporary shelter, it started to rain heavily outside. You had to give up one of your blankets to use as a type of curtain, hanging in the cave's entrance, just so the rain wouldn't pour in in great quantities.

"It's getting cold", Rhea said, embracing herself.

You nod.

"We should... maybe. Nevermind", she continues.

[["What?"|47]]

47

"Well, sleep close together. For heat", she says, touching your shoulder.

It's not the first time you two touched. But it's the first time it's intentional. Even through your clothes, her hand feels warm and comfortable.

She retreats a bit. "Sorry, I... Didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

[["It's ok."|48]]

She eyes you, then looks down, embarrassed**.**

[[**"It's ok, you are right. We should do this.... I mean, it's necessary, for survival, of course."|49**]]

[[**"Sorry, I'm just not accustomed with that."|50**]]

She looks at you intently for a moment.

"Yes, of course", she says, smiling, "for survival".

She covers her face, then begins to laugh.

"Sorry, I'm awkward, aren't I?", she says.

[[**"No, no. It's ok, it's just that I wasn't expecting that."|51**]]

[[**"Hey, we all are, aren't we?"|52**]]

"No need to apologize, Jamek. It was a bit out of nowhere from me. Sorry for being so direct. I'm not accustomed either, it's been a long while since I was... close with someone..."

You raise an eyebrow to her. She blushes.

"I didn't mean it like that! Goddess, I will just shut up now".

Before you can say anything, she starts speaking again.

"Sorry, I'm awkward, aren't I?", she says.

[[**"No, no. It's ok, it's just that I wasn't expecting that."|51**]]

[[**"Hey, we all are, aren't we?"|52**]]

<h1 style="text-align:center;color:red">51</h1>

Rhea laughs.

"You are so easy to caught off guard, Jamek"

She snuggles close to you. "Well, go on, I'm cold".

[[**"Embrace her gently"**|**53**]]

<h1 style="text-align:center;color:red">52</h1>

Rhea laughs.

"Well said, mister philosopher." Then she adds, with a wink: "Especially you and me."

She snuggles close to you. "Well, go on, I'm cold".

[[**"Embrace her gently"**|**53**]]

<h1 style="text-align:center;color:red">53</h1>

Your body and her's seem to fit perfectly into one another. Rhea pulls the blankets up, until they cover both of you up to the necks. She smiles briefly, yawns, then buries her face against your chest.

Her smell is good. You wonder why. You wonder how. There is little place for comfort, for cleanliness, beyond the civilized world. There is no place for intimacy like that either, for companionship. Even in the Empire. Most marriages there are arranged, and people are always suspicious of each other, always looking for signs of rust in others, worrying over the risk of others infecting themselves. But here none of that matters. You and Rhea both are already carriers of the disease, anyway.

You feel her chest move up and down, following her breathing. She seems serene, unpreoccupied in her sleep. You wonder if she's dreaming, and with what. The air exhaled by her nose touches your neck every two seconds or so. It's warm. It reminds you of your old home back in the Empire. Reading through the night in front of your fireplace in the cold of winter. The *mallura* bottle, the dark-red poncho. And besides the books and your own thoughts,

Clio, your cat, is there to keep you company. She was black, white and orange. You wonder what they did to her. Or if they even bothered to do anything. Or if they even noticed her at all.

The heavy rain outside has already turned into a storm. This will be a very different night from the others since you entered the marshes. The sounds of mosquitos buzzing or frogs croaking gave way to wind, rain and the occasional thunder. The moments when lightning breaks, the entire alcove where you are sheltered is illuminated by a dark-blue light, and you can see Rhea for a second. She looks like how you imagined the heroines from the stories you read in your youth.

Soon enough, sleep comes over you. The sleep of the tired, the wanderer, the exiled, the survivor, as usual. But, this time, not the sleep of the lonely.

(-5 Rust)

[[Go on|ACT III]]

ACT III

You wake up.

It's already morning and there are birds singing outside. You yawn and stretch. You pass your fingers through your hair, fixing it. You scratch your eyelids. You look around.

But Rhea isn't there.

[[Go on|54]]

54

You jolt up. All of yours and Rhea's belongings are where you left them last night. Only she is missing. That means she didn't abandon you. If she was going to do that, surely she would take as much supplies as possible with her.

No one, human or animal, discovered your little hideout and took her, otherwise, you would have woken up. Besides, why would someone take only her, and leave you and the food intact? The thought of a giant snake entering the alcove, silently slithering around Rhea's neck

and dragging her away passes over your head. No, no, that can't be it. There are no tracks. Even the stealthiest predator would leave some kind of clue behind.

Maybe she went out to urinate, you think, trying to calm yourself down. You are breathing heavily. Your chest seems to weigh more than it normally does.

What should you do?

[[**Call her out loud|55**]]

[[**Exit silently, then look for her|56**]]

55

In these kinds of situations the best thing to do is act as fast as possible, always assume the worst, and don't hesitate.

You get up and exit the alcove. The sunlight burns your eyes, but you keep them open anyway, scanning your surroundings for traces of her. Except that now the water level is much higher, everything around the tree seems unchanged, just like it was last night. Quiet, still, unmoving.

You scream out her name. Then focus your hearing, desperately expecting some answer. Only the wind, the fireflys, and some birds do. A water splash, probably the work of some frog, follows.

[[**Look for her in the surroundings|57**]]

56

Maybe it's not the greatest idea to get attention to yourself. Rhea herself always prioritized stealthiness. And that was largely what enabled you two to survive until now.

You get up and exit the alcove. The sunlight burns your eyes, but you keep them open anyway, scanning your surroundings for traces of her. Except that now the water level is much higher, everything around the tree seems unchanged, just like it was last night. Quiet, still, unmoving.

You give yourself a moment until your sight is fully functional, then focus your hearing as well. You move silently, attentively.

[[**Look for her in the surroundings|57**]]

57

You are no tracker or hunter. And even if you were, the biome here is especially difficult for that kind of stuff. Even with a sniffing dog it would be a hard task. There's just too much information, and overflowing of sounds, smells and visuals. Even the ground is difficult to walk, and barely leaves any footprints in most of the marshes extension. Especially now, after yesterdays' storm, and consequent flooding.

In fact, you find yourself islanded. The little hill which the tree you slept in is located is now surrounded by water. You wonder if it's traversable. Out here, waters are deceiving. Sometimes they look shallow, but are deep, and vice-versa.

You approach the shoreline with a big stick, and poke the water until you feel the stick touching the ground below. Then pull it out. Looks like the water would hit your knee. But it also could go deeper the further in you go. You think about using the sleds as some kind of improvised boat, but don't know how to make it work. It seems it would be too heavy to float. You think of climbing the tree, and trying to go over the small lake, through the dense vegetation up there. But that would risk a fall that would mean certain death. Besides, both options include the high possibility of invading some predator's hunting ground. In the case of the water, the crocodiles and piranhas; in the case of the trees, some aggressive monkeys, birds, and even, you heard about it once, giant spiders.

The nature around you is an eternal battleground, and you are just a civilian. It is a prison, a tomb.

You begin to think that maybe Rhea's fate was one of those you were imagining yourself in. Again, your heartbeat races, your pores sweat profusely, your hands shake. You even feel like you want to cry. You begin to look at the water, trying to discern if there is any kind of body floating. *Her* body. Or pools of blood. There's nothing afloat. But if there is blood, you cannot tell, since the surface is too dark anyway. A great measure of that water is probably blood and rust contamination anyway. Even calling it water is a definition stretch.

If Rhea really fell down there, there is nothing you can do about it. She is definitely gone.

[[**[Go on|58](#)**]]

58

You only knew her for a few days, you tell yourself. "Surely I won't miss her that much", "It's not like I haven't lost anyone before" and, the worst of them: "Our time was set anyway, sooner or later we would die, either in a violent encounter, or to the rust itself".

None of that helps.

In times like these one remembers good things. And you do, almost involuntary. When she laughed at a joke you made about the sisters of the church and alcohol. Her humming while she cooks or lights a fire. Her playful demeanor and ironic sense of dark humor. That time she told you how she won a card game tournament, and then sold the trophy to the woman who got second place. How, during your travels, she almost never looked behind her, except at the very end, when you were about to stop traveling for the day, as if she was measuring the progress you two made. How happy and proud she looked at those moments.

Then you remember last night, her warmth, the feeling of comfort and trust that you felt, and that you think she felt as well.

[[**[Go on|59](#)**]]

59

The terrible feeling that you lost her forever seeps into you. You try to calm down, to tell yourself that maybe she will be back at any second, or that if she's really gone, she would have wanted you to go on without her. But it's no use.

You fall to your knees and cover your face with your hands, as if trying to hide from the world. You feel the rust lines. Those intricate patterns of chaos that bury themselves in your skin. No, actually, now they are your skin. They were here weeks, even months, before now, and yet, you feel as if they are longer, thicker, and growing at every moment. A pulsating

amalgamation of physical and psychological maladies. A mark of shame, of corruption, of hatred.

And yet, despite it all, Rhea accepted you. She didn't fear or judge you. Your "monstrosity" echoed her own, and so, you were equals.

[[Go on|60]]

60

A long time passed where you just stood still, lost in your internal world, rocking back and forth between desperation and denial. And then, hunger started to kick in. Initially, you decided that it didn't matter, that you wouldn't fight anymore, and you would let whatever hunger, or whatever other factor that came first, kill you.

Slowly, you began to imagine that Rhea was still there with you, and what would she say and do. She would be preparing a fire, and cooking a meal, then thinking of ways to cross the water and exit the island.

And so, in her honor, you started doing just that. The waters of the swamp were hideous, but you and Rhea still used it, after boiling, of course. And so you did that. You decided to eat some kind of soup, something that she likes a lot. That she *liked* a lot.

The water on the pot reflected your face and you saw an exhausted man looking back at you. Sad, tired eyes that lost practically all of their brightness.

[[Go on|61]]

61

You wonder if Rhea had a similar experience. If she had other companions. If she lost someone to the wastelands. And how many. How many of those losses can one endure before fully succumbing to the rust?

You wonder if you will find someone you can trust and rely upon like her. You remember the masked warrior from before. The encounter with him was just yesterday, and yet it seems to have been ages ago. He seemed like a decent person, who wouldn't try to kill, enslave or torture you on sight. But he also seemed unwilling to interact too much with people

that were not from his tribe. Maybe that is the key for survival and longevity out here beyond the walls. Avoid others as much as possible.

The soup is ready. You eat it. You clean and put away the pot and the spoon. You extinguish the fire. You reenter the alcove, close the improvised curtain, fall to your bedroll and pass out.

[[[Continue|62]]]

62

You dream of your life before the rust took you. A successful, renowned scholar. People looked at you with respect. The most respect one can achieve in the empire when one is born a man and not royalty. Your works were well read and your colleagues both admired and envied you. You were often invited to give lectures in other universities aside from the one that you worked at. Sometimes even in other cities, with airship travel and stay included.

Your neighbors adored you. That old lady from across the street alway baked too much pie and gave you some pieces each week. The couple that lived in the house to the right received packages for you when you were not home. The bartender at the street corner entering your neighborhood always gave you extra chips, sometimes, when you were the only client present, even a shot on the house.

The sisters of the inquisitorum, responsible for policing and seeking out rust manifestations, almost never visited you. Not because they couldn't or because they didn't have the authority to, but because you were recognized as a role model citizen. They even let you enter the emperium librarium a few times, and consult archives that are deemed forbidden. With a *guide*, of course.

You dream of dinner parties, of book releases, of mild flirts with a few of your students. You dream of walks in botanic gardens and visits to museums. Of shopping for expensive clothes, of beautiful materials, with elegant colors and soft textures. Of seeing the baroness herself one time, during a rare official parade. Of going to circuses and operas. Of carriage rides through clean, wide, well lit, arborized, planned streets. Veins made out of cobblestone and steel through which ran the dreams of millions of souls, and the collective hope of one day

healing the world. A hope that few worked harder to achieve than you. A horizon, you now realize, that was never meant to be reachable.

[[Go on|63]]

63

The more you tried to unveil a permanent cure for rust, the more you inevitably had to flirt with ideas and practices considered heresy. The more "heretic" you became, the more vulnerable to manifest rust within you you became. And so eventually, it happened.

In truth, the Empire relies on rust to function. The fear of it, and, in consequence, the fear of being exiled to the wastelands, keeps its citizens in line. It takes 99% of the world to be hell for 1% to be paradise. And it really was paradise. Or, at least, the closest to it that could be achieved in our material world, with our mortal existence. Nothing was lacking for you, none of your necessities were neglected, and most of your desires were satisfied, within reason, and as long as they didn't hurt others, of course. The only compromise was, the Goddess and those who served her demanded absolute obedience.

In the end, there isn't much difference between the wastelands and the empire. At their core, those most civilized are indistinguishable from those most savage. We all end up being cogs in a machine so vast that we can't see the end off, and so intricate that we cannot not be a part of it. The empire and the wastelands are just different parts, with different functions, of the same machine.

You dream about the day you were accused. Of how the old lady from across the street looked at you with disgust, and the couple that lived in the house to the right, with hatred. Maybe it was one of them who denounced you. You dream of having your neck restrained by a metal contraption with long rods, so that one sister could pull you, and another could push you, both from a few meters away, since you were a contagious risk for others.

You dream of a small crowd of curious passersby that gathered to look at you, from a safe distance, while the inquisitorium sisters restrained and conducted you to the outer wall. You dream of a line of a dozen or so other people, receiving their judgments. Four of them chose death. They were pushed from the edge. Their screams echoed through the midday skies as they fell down. One of them must have been fourteen or fifteen, at most.

You dream of the sun hurting your eyes, and a sister that poked your back with the shaft of her spear everytime you would avert your gaze from the burning light, just to make you choose between one torture or another. You dream of being asked the question, and answering "exile". You dream of being thrown into an old wooden elevator with another half dozen people. Of how the elevator cage shook violently against the wind, barely holding itself together and on the verge of collapsing. You dream of a woman that had been crying so much that her eyes were red, looking at you, just before she silently let herself fall to her death.

[[**Wake up|64**]]

64

You jolt up. Sweating and panting. A fly that managed to enter the alcove buzzes loudly nearby, annoying you.

[[**Get up and go outside|65**]]

65

You wash your face, drink half a canteen of water, go take a piss. As you are urinating, you feel as if there is a very faint strange sound permeating the air.

[[**Try to sharpen your hearing and focus on the sound|66**]]

[[**Ignore it|67**]]

66

It sounds like... humming.

A soft and melodic voice echoes through the hot air. Humming turns into singing. You don't recognize the words. But music, especially beautiful music, like this, doesn't need to be understood to be appreciated.

You lose yourself in it, and almost forget what you were doing. A sudden spark of self consciousness washes over you, just enough for you to clothe yourself up.

You squint your eyes, looking for the source of the melody.

67

You finish urinating, trying to ignore the sound. You focus on other things. Like what will you eat today, how will you cross the water. Will you wait the flood out, or try to cross it anyway? How long would you need to wait it out? But, mostly, you think of what Rhea would do if she was here.

But the sound persists. It gets louder and louder. And now you realize it's a song. It echoes through the water and trees, and seems ever nearer.

68

You see it now. Among the dark brown water and the greens and yellows of the dense marsh vegetation, there is a human-like silhouette. It- no, *she* is swimming toward you, slowly, gracefully. Only her head and upper torso above water. She seems to be... naked. Her breasts are barely covered by the water of the lake.

69

Her hair seems to merge with algae and twigs, her skin glistens against the morning sun. Her eyes. Her eyes are... beautiful.

She swims in fluid, curved motions, almost like a dance. Her half-smile looks like an irresistible secret. You want to unveil it. But, above all, her voice is... intoxicating.

70

She stops a few meters away, almost reaching the shore. She opens her arms, then gestures for you to join her. For a fraction of a second you remember Rhea. You think that maybe it's her. No, no, it's impossible. They are completely different.

"Hey, sailor", the woman says.

Her voice sounds more like it's in the back of your mind than in the air around you.

"Come, come". You never heard anything sound more inviting, the perfect balance between serenity and lust.

If you have 10 or more Rust [[Go on|71]]

If you have less than 10 Rust [[Go on|72]]

71

You approach her until she's almost within reach of your arms. Now you can feel her scent as well. A sweet, flowery, inebriating scent.

Your trembling hand touches the side of her face. You expected a softness that would match the grace of everything else she showed you thus far. But, it wasn't soft. Her skin was scaly, coarse, full of almost microscopic dentitions. The palm of your hand and your fingers start to bleed.

A glimpse of sobriety washes over you and you pull your arm away. A moment too late. She launches forward and bites your hand. You feel a jolt of pain like you never felt.

You fall on your back, and see a trail of blood paint the sickly green sky of the marshes. The pinky and the ring finger of your right hand, as well as part of the hand itself, are gone. Your right hand is now a chaotic mass of bleeding flesh and severed nerves.

(+30 Rust)

She advances. Instinctively, you kick her her. Luckily, you hit her in the nose, or what would be a nose if she was human. She screams in pain and retreats. She hisses at you, and prepares to attack again**.**

[[Crawl away from her|75]]

[[Attack her with the sword|76]]] (Only if you have the fallen warrior's sword).

72

You realize her mouth doesn't move when she speaks. And even more alarming than that, the melody itself didn't stop, not even when she "spoke". Her voice and every sound coming from her flow simultaneously, without interrupting each other. They are unnatural, impossible to come from a human, Rust-ridden or not.

You take a few steps back, maintaining what you believe is a safe distance from her. She seems unable or unwilling to exit the water.

Realizing she failed to enchant you, her expression turns into one of rage. Her song becomes discordant, the symphony that was gently caressing your ears is now scratching violently. You cover your ears and walk further away from her.

[[**Attack her with the sword|73**]]**. (Only if you have the fallen warrior's sword)**

[[**Hide inside the tree|74**]]

73

You unsheath and hold the sword. Your hands tremble with nervousness. You never held a weapon before. A real weapon, and really intending on using it.

Her smile widens, as though she is challenging you, mocking you.

Her melody becomes discordant. Sharp and deafening. Torture to your ears. You feel a headache so strong that you think you will faint. You fall to your knees. A half real, half pretend gesture. You fake being unable to rise, or to pick up the sword. She approaches. Slowly, playfully. She stops and laughs. A laughter that returns to a more harmonious, pleasant, spectrum of soundwaves. She extends her claws, like a feline, pulls her hand back, readying it to fall into you and slash your face. At the last second...

You throw an uppercut against her, slashing her from right hip to left shoulder. Not deep enough to cut all the way, but certainly enough to kill. She stumbles back. Even for a creature who doesn't need to move her mouth to vocalize, you can see she is trying to say something, or maybe to scream at you one last time, or to cry for help. But her voice fails her, and her heartbeat follows soon after.

Your face is splashed with warm and fetid blood. You are panting, your chest feels like it's about to explode. And your hands tremble still. You stay there for a good ten or fifteen minutes, still on your knees.

(+10 Rust).

If you have 40 or more Rust [[Go on|80]].

If you have less than 40 Rust [[Go on|81]]

74

You run back to the tree.

The creature's humming stops, and she begins to laugh hysterically. If madness was a song, that would be what it sounds like. Your ears start to bleed. You head aches. Her symphony is so loud and strong that you begin to feel nauseous. You hold yourself in the fetal position, covering your ears, but it barely makes any difference. Your body is soaked in sweat. There are moments of unbearable heat, followed by moments of teeth biting coldness, and they just keep taking turns torturing you.

You feel as if the siren's song crushes the very air around you. Compressing your limbs, making your ribs press against your organs, in turn, giving you agonizing pains. Every second that passes it gets more difficult to breathe. You skip all grief stages and go directly to acceptance, as you make peace with the fact that you will soon die.

When you finally recover and look around, the creature is gone.

(+30 Rust)

If you have 40 or more Rust [[Go on|80]].

If you have less than 40 Rust [[Go on|81]]

75

Although severely wounded and in shock, the adrenaline kicks in, and you quickly stumble away from her. Your hand feels like it is burning. You instinctively hold it with your other hand. She looks at you, but doesn't advance beyond the shoreline.

She turns her gaze to her palm, and you see one of your fingers there. She smiles and then eats it. A deafening laughter echoes in your head, as she slowly, without breaking eye contact, swims backwards away from you, and into the infinite labyrinthine dark waters of the marsh.

(+10 Rust)

If you have 50 or more Rust [[Go on|80]].

If you have less than 50 Rust [[Go on|81]]

<h1 style="text-align:center; color:red;">76</h1>

Luckily, you kept the sword on your belt, just in case. You unsheath it, hold it with both your hands, and strike. It all happens naturally and without any thought.

The creature's face is slashed open. She swirls and screams in pain. Her powerful voice now has notes of surprise, fear, and desperation. Before she can react, you strike again. And again and again.

You don't feel tired. You don't even feel pain from your wound anymore. You stop when you realize that the sword was absent in your last strike. Only your hands, clenched around nothing, stroke the air. The handle slipped between your bleeding fingers, and your weapon fell on the ground nearby. Not that you would need it anymore, for the creature was decapitated.

(+10 Rust)

[[Go on|80]]

<h1 style="text-align:center; color:red;">80</h1>

Too much happened too fast. You feel your head throbbing, your vision blur. You try to stand up, to take a few steps, but your walking is erratic, chaotic. You fall.

The mud and damp grass stain your skin, already drenched in sweat. Your nose bleeds, along with whatever else injuries the recent encounter gave you.

Suddenly, your entire face seems to burst in pain, as if the impact of a hundred punches were felt simultaneously. You scream instinctively, pressing both your hands against your eyes. The world around you is spinning. Horizontal and vertical points of reference merge and overlap. Your entire skin scratches horribly. At first, you think it's the insects of the marsh, but there's nothing there to confirm that hypothesis. At least not physically.

Amidst all that suffering, a spark of rational thought passes through you, and you understand. You are having a rust overdose.

Soon after, you lose consciousness. Forever.

81

Despite all that just happened, you are relatively fine.

You tend to your wounds, both physical and psychological, the recent encounter gave you. You breathe deeply and drink an entire canteen of water. You start a fire, to dry yourself, and, maybe - hopefully, keep away predators like that siren.

(-5 Rust)

The rain is slowly stopping, and you predict that, at most, by tomorrow's morning, you could resume your journey. Looking for Rhea is useless, as much as it pains you to admit, she's probably already gone.

You don't have much time left. Nanthas is at least a week's worth of travel away, and you feel the rust spreading throughout your body.

A 100 Rust Reached

Something warm is running down your chin. You stick your tongue out and catch it. The sweet, addicting and irony taste of blood. You chuckle, realizing that pain doesn't affect you anymore. Nothing but the thrill of Rust does. A bestial growl echos across the wind. The monstrous hymn of an apex predator, of a being that knows no fear. Still, an eversmall part of you recognizes that that scream came from yourself. The you that is able to have those thoughts is rapidly vanishing. You feel a small tug in your arm, and when you turn your head down to look at it, you see a red mass of gnawed tendons. A piece of your skin is peeled off, extending from your forearm to your fangs. The scent is the best you ever felt.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this dissertation I reviewed briefly the definitions, histories and contexts of ergodic literature, electronic literature and two of its subgenres: hypertext fiction and interactive fiction, relying on the theoretical works of Aarseth, Hayles, Montfort, Murray, Slater and Moulthrop. I proposed a definition of branching narrative, a category of ergodic literature that would encompass works of both hypertext fiction and the gamebook mediums, as long as they are multiform and able to provoke the feeling of dramatic agency in the reader. That definition can also be applied to many works in the mediums of video games, especially RPGs with stories based on player choices and visual novels, and even audiovisual works like *Black Mirror Bandersnatch*. Of course, as said before, this definition, as well as all other aspects of this dissertation, is open to criticism and improvement.

I then wrote about my literary project, Ferrea, and my inspirations, goals and creative processes surrounding it. This part, which functions almost like a creative diary, is a particularity of the creative writing background that I have, as well as of the creative writing focus of my masters degree program. The entire second half of this dissertation consists of an excerpt of Ferrea (which is after these final considerations). There, I hope the reader not only realizes the finer details of branching narratives discussed in the first, theoretical half of this work, but also feel immersed, and have fun, or any other kind of emotional involvement. If not that, at least it will serve as an exemple, one way or another.

The discussions surrounding electronic literature and video games are still relatively young (the mediums themselves are very young) and there is a lot of heated debate about them. I believe that no single author or work will be able to give definitive, permanent answers or solutions to those debates. The best we can do is contribute and further expand the ecosystem, be it with works of theory or with literary pieces. In this dissertation I tried to do a bit of both. However successful or unsuccessful I was in that regard, if this work brings positive change to even one other person, I'd be happy and it would have been worth it.

In regards to the literary part of this dissertation, I hope to have provided a good example of game-book / hypertext fiction. I aimed at writing something that would be both entertaining and thought provoking, as well as being within the realm of the ergodic. Despite being relatively short (due to the nature and purpose of this dissertation), I hope it was enough to instill the feeling of dramatic agency in the reader/player somewhat. I know that there weren't many choices, and that few of them lead to major shifts in the story, but that was also a

choice. If I was to write drastically different paths in such a short page space, the experience of reading from start to finish might be even shorter, since, let's say, half of the text would be really used. I chose to deviate from the style of fighting fantasy books, such as *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*, where possibilities are many, and there are dozens of death endings along the way. Instead, I went with a structure more akin to Telltale's *The Walking Dead*, where there are fewer choices and a general "main path". Also, some of the consequences of choices usually come up later down the line of the narrative, and not immediately after. As said before, *Ferrea*, as it exists here, is a fragment of something that could be larger. It must be thought of as the beginning chapters of a book, or, borrowing from gaming terms, as a demo, or a vertical slice.

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