

“Our player friend here... they already hold the key...”: Redefining Genre Limits in *Inscription*.

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INTRODUCTION

As games become increasingly complex year after year, it is not surprising to see games blend genres of play in order to push the limits as currently defined by genre conventions. It is, however, not as common – though not unheard of – to see games blend media genres, such as interactive fiction, YouTube videos, and will intentionally ‘break the fourth wall’ to enforce a layer of meta-interactivity. *Inscription* (Daniel Mullins Games 2020) is one of these games that intentionally pushes the limits of the multiple genres, creating a larger puzzle that expands outside of the game and adds to a larger gaming universe across the games by the same developer. While the game is a stand-alone narrative, there are several hints and genre-bending activities that have spiralled many theories and amplified the fanbase’s sense of a communal scavenger hunt to discover the current – and potential future – overall lore. Not unlike other ground-breaking multimedia works like *House of Leaves*, *Inscription* relies on the remediation of the genres it implements: by adjusting the expectations of both the deck-builder and the escape room genres to create an eerie cross between the two with very real in-game consequences for each action taken, coupled with the interactive fiction elements of discovering lost footage in-between the different Acts of the game, *Inscription* accomplishes much of what Katherine Hayle (2002) indicates is accomplished by *House of Leaves*: “it recuperates the vitality of the novel as a genre by recovering, through the processes of remediation, subjectivities coherent enough to become the foci of the sustained narration that remains the hallmark of the print novel” (781). *Inscription* creates an expansive narrative that spans beyond the limits of the game itself. While this game has made quite the impact on the larger gaming community, as indicated by the numerous accolades and generally positive reception (Mahardy 2021; Kerr 2022), it has received little scholarly attention. As the game’s narrative alone makes it compelling for analysis, this paper seeks to analyse its use of intermediality and genre-blending, through an ontological approach, to categorize and synthesize where and how its lore is established and extended beyond the limits of the in-game universe. In doing so, this paper will rely heavily on the research of intermediality on the genre-defying book *House of Leaves*, as the over all narrative is communicated through remediation and due to its impact on print media and will at times draw comparisons to predecessor horror games like *Eternal Darkness* (Silicon Knights 2002) that implemented fourth-wall breaking in a similar fashion. Further, this paper relies on the concept of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006) and intermediality (Fusch & Thoss 2019). As there has been little in terms of a scholarly discussion of this

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game, this paper will also rely on what other scholars have discussed about previous titles by the same developer, specifically *Pony Island* (2016).

Through the mixed-methods approach of blending content and rhetorical analysis from the field of media studies with close reading from literary criticism, this paper interprets how the narrative of *Inscription* relies on the use of transmedia storytelling to enhance and drive the plot forward, keeping players engaged with the story long after the game has been completed, as is the case with readers of *House of Leaves*. This paper begins with a literature review that defines the term genre-blending and media-blending within the context of video games and moves into the creation of a contextual framework of what is intermediality and remediation, using *House of Leaves* as an anchor for analysis. In other words, while a direct literary comparison of the two media is not necessarily the end goal of this paper, using the infamous *House of Leaves*, arguably one of the most well-cited postmodern examples of remediation and genre-blending, as a framework for understanding the effects of remediation, intertextuality, and transmediality in terms of genre-bending and genre-blending is important for establishing how *Inscription* accomplishes a similar outcome within the context of contemporary horror games. The paper then moves into an overview of the gameplay and mechanics used within *Inscription* that adhere to the principles of intermediality and remediation as set by the *House of Leaves* framework. With the parameters for analysis set in place, this paper will then focus on categorizing and synthesizing the mechanics and gameplay elements in terms of what is immediately present, what is initially hidden or made more clear upon multiple playthroughs, and what is hidden deep within the game's code, in order to analyse and interpret their impact on the overall narrative and lore. This paper proposes that the remediation and intermediality of the game creates a lasting impact that reveals the true 'horror' of the game, and establishes a much more complex story than what is initially apparent upon completing the game. Further, due to its genre-blending, the game relies on communal pathfinding (or, at the very least, going beyond the limitations of the gameplay and into the game's code or by passively interacting with the fanbase online) to discover its true narrative. This act of communal, collective production of the lore/story of the game extends beyond *Inscription* itself, as the community of fans online are regularly pulling in pieces from other games by the developer, which will be highlighted as an element of breaking established genre limitations within this form of media. In other words, while it is common for games within a series to have sequels and incorporate elements from previous games, *Inscription* is different in how it incorporates these elements, which is discussed through the content analysis section of the paper.

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