

bly do turn around, the game penalizes you with a truly chilling second death rattle as Eurydice dissociates and blows away, ashes to ashes and pixels to pixels.

But then the screen restarts, and here we begin to see some of the limitations of the platformer as a medium of artistic adaptation. When you must replay a certain fiendish screen 25 or 30 times, that death rattle begins to lose its emotional impact, and, rather than contributing to the experience of the mythic narrative, the artificial, repetitive gameplay calls attention to itself as such, and accordingly distracts from rather than furthers any aesthetic effect. There remain, however, moments of cleverness to the adaptation even in the most artificial of “video game” moments, as when Orpheus first picks up his gun: weaponless and still above-ground, the first enemy the player encounters is a snake, as good mythologists will know the slayer of Eurydice. After acquiring your weapon on the next screen, you can return to the previous screen and shoot the snake dead, but the act will, of course, provide little consolation, as is probably the point. Still, how much that serpent has lost when we must describe it as an s-shaped sprite that takes three hits to kill, rather than with that sly, shockingly matter-of-fact hexameter “occidit in tulum serpentis dente recepto [she fell, struck in the heel by a serpent’s tooth]” (Met.X.10).

There is always a kind of loss or “lossiness” in converting a narrative from one medium to another; the hope is that, with the help of representational strategies unique to that medium, the adaptation can compensate by adding something new to the retold tale. Novel-to-film adaptations demonstrate this necessary loss most plainly, as editing, audio, and mise-en-scène must, for example, make up for the necessary compression of plot detail and the reduced capacity to communicate interiority. Although Cavanagh has found one creative mechanism to invigorate the myth in the new medium of online gaming, his version also suffers from a common “lossy” pitfall of narratives adapted to video game settings, namely, the conversion of Orpheus’ means of achieving his goal—charming the Underworld denizens with his music—into the ubiquitous fantasy violence of the shoot-’em-up. This is not to say that I would have preferred boss challenges more on the model of “Greek Lyre Hero,” but forcing the player to “charm” Cerberus and Hades at gunpoint seems destructive to the power of original myth, even if in toto the game itself is not.

*Don’t Look Back* remains most interesting as an attempt at a serious adaptation not because of the retro

graphics or the brooding ambient music, but because it manages the rare feat of incorporating aspects of the narrative into the experience of playing the game itself. In other words, what could potentially be regarded as “artistic” about the game is not restricted to cut-scenes or visuals; compare EA’s Dante’s Inferno, which has been damned with faint praise as a compelling architectonic realization of Dante’s hell. See, for example, Professor Arielle Saiber’s praise of the game’s “surface” (Gordon), or more generally Roger Ebert’s infamous remarks about the artistic aspirations of gaming, in which he concedes only that “a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience” but cannot make one “more cultured, civilized, and empathetic” (931). To be sure, Cavanagh’s adaptation never outperforms Monteverdi or exceeds the sheer pathos of the phrase “gemina nece [double death, twin murder]” (Met.X.64), and the real measure of its artistic (or not) achievement may lie in how any given player receives the platforming-temptation conceit—as simply clever, or something more. Regardless, *Don’t Look Back* remains an important object of attention for scholars interested in game studies or the “games as art” debate, as well as those interested in unconventional 21st-century adaptations of our ever-mutable myths.

#### Works Cited

- Ebert, Roger. *Roger Ebert’s Movie Yearbook 2007*. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2007. Print.  
Gordon, Jon. “Dante Scholar Considers New Video Game Based on the *Inferno*.” Interview with Arielle Saiber. Publicradio.org. American Public Media, 17 Feb. 2010. Web. 14 July 2010.

## ***Year Zero* [music album + video game]**

Lars Schmeink

- Nine Inch Nails. *Year Zero*. Interscope. Halo 24. 2007. 42 Entertainment. “*Year Zero* Case Study.” 42Entertainment.com. 1 Oct 2010. 11 Feb. 2011. <http://www.42entertainment.com/yearzero/>.

EVEN BEFORE industrial rock act Nine Inch Nails (NIN) released their album *Year Zero* in April 2007, an accompanying viral marketing campaign had already begun to create a buzz for the album online but also offline by February 2007. 42entertainment, a strategy

company that creates immersive entertainment for commercial products, marketed the album and developed an alternate reality game (ARG) that allowed fans to enter the narrated world of the album. An alternate reality game is an interactive puzzle-solving game that is played both on- and offline across many media with thousands of players cooperating to gather clues and thus propel the game forward. The game designers continuously manipulate and disperse clues while players all over the world try to overcome the game's challenges and solve its puzzles. The main purpose of the *Year Zero* ARG was playing the game and finding clues in order to unveil the future history described by both game and album and to collect as much information as possible on the narrated events to come.

The album describes the dystopian world of 2022, or "Year Zero," by presenting sixteen tracks, each of which is textually not much more than a momentary snapshot written from the viewpoint of one character. Through the textual vagueness of the sixteen modular songs, the narrated world of the album remains opaque unless the reader/listener also becomes a player of the ARG. Players needed to manipulate websites and email-addresses as well as find and solve offline problems. Memory sticks containing song material and cryptic files were found at concerts, spectral analysis of which revealed further websites of the game. Hidden messages on t-shirts revealed parts of the game, as did a telephone number hidden on another memory stick. Fans calling this number were directed to a specific time and location where a van handed out packages with mobile phones, which in turn were called to reveal a secret concert location. When the concert was then theatrically stormed by in-game police troops, the ARG reached its climax. By providing all of these clues, across media and national borders, the game slowly unfolded a postmodern patchwork narrative of a dystopian future in which a fundamentalist Christian U.S. has increased national security and begun surveillance of its own citizens after several terrorist attacks on Los Angeles. In this narrative world, the U.S. government has issued the addition of a drug called Parepin to the public water supply as a countermeasure against biological warfare, even though the drug also acts as a mood-dampener and psychotropic, and the population lives in constant fear of its own government. Any kind of opposition towards these measures is deemed subversion and eliminated with all means necessary. A resistance starts to develop and acts out against the oppressive regime.

*Year Zero* must be seen as a concept album on a dystopian future. Together with the ARG, the album provides enough indexical or encyclopedic information to assemble a future alternate history clearly within the dystopian genre traditions. The mechanism by which the 2007 reality is informed of the future reminds of the techniques used in classical utopias/dystopias, such as a historical manuscript or the record of a traveler, only inverted to reveal the future: by the use of an unidentified technology a dissident group, called The Resistance, sends information along a time shift in the internet and allows the contemporary readers/players to explore the future society. The outsider's perspective is necessary for the dystopian critical commentary to function and by playing the game and actually becoming part of it, a total immersion of the player within the game world is facilitated and allows for the decisive moment of agency to be acted out. What happens in the future is up to us in the present. The utopia/dystopia depends literally upon our actions. By incorporating the future possible world in a game as immersive and interactive as an ARG, the dystopian imagination advances from cautionary tale to directive for action. Players not only think about changing the future, they also actively participate in such a change.

The game and album together function as examples of convergence culture and cross-medialization. Without the interactive communities of Web 2.0, the game, which needed to be played simultaneously in Los Angeles, London and Tokyo, could simply not have functioned. As such, the *Year Zero* experience provides ample material for discussing the role of agency, community and social responsibility within a dystopian/utopian context. The nature of the game as dispersed on the Internet really offers tremendous possibilities for students to use and hone their research skills and experience online communities as global and self-organized. Last but not least, the thematic discussion of the *Year Zero* universe can provide students with an understanding of surveillance, loss of freedom and religious fundamentalism, and might be juxtaposed in a discussion with the thematically similar *Little Brother* by Cory Doctorow or even George Orwell's classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. ■