




## Transforming the Chaos: The 'Writing' Experiments of the Post-digital Ludic Writer

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## Transforming the Chaos: The ‘Writing’ Experiments of the Postdigital Ludic Writer

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**Abstract:** The multimodal writer does not simply write a poem or piece of fiction, but also architects a dynamic, ludic space in order to ‘publish’ the piece. This article examines the literature associated with “literary-ludic hybridity” (Ensslin 32–33) whilst also offering critical reflections on my own playful experiments in digital writing, namely in the creation of *Viole(n)t Existence*. This process of autoethnographic evaluation revealed that some of the precise writing challenges faced by multimodal, literary-ludic writers were not examined as closely as those of ‘traditional’ print writers. Whilst Barnard (2017) acknowledges that both hardware and software date quickly and multimodal writers must be invested in new innovations, the implications are not fully elucidated. The realities are that this hardware and software can change even before the creative piece is finished. From my own experience, the creative process evolved to be far more complex than that captured by the terms ‘drafting’ or ‘editing.’ It involved producing and assessing a collection of iterations which move between digital and physical spaces, and blur digital, personal and cultural bodies, whilst trying desperately, ultimately phantasmorgically, to move towards an ever elusive ‘final’ piece. This form of writing practice demonstrates Alexenberg’s (10) understanding of the postdigital. Postdigital ludic writers must engage in many playful, creative experiments, thus simultaneously creating postdigital, posthuman archives, which are all in constant metamorphosis.

**Keywords:** ludic, writing practice, digital literatures, postdigital, posthuman

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Since the 1960s the term ‘ludic’ has been applied to playful behaviours and is often used within the context of gaming (Raessens 2014). This article seeks to apply the term to a superficially non-gaming context, interrogating how ‘ludic’ might explain playful forms of writing practice, specifically those experimenting with hybrid,

multimodal styles and techniques, whilst also utilising the Internet in some way, either as part of the structure of the work or as a mode of dissemination. This article is particularly interested in works of multimodal hypermedia, sometimes referred to as ‘literary games’ (Ensslin), where there is already an established precedent for applying the concepts associated with games to interpreting texts.<sup>1</sup> This article’s central concern is to focus on the playful practices associated with the creation of game-like texts, which involves the design and architecture of multimodal, digital elements and often utilises web content.

Using my experience of multimodal ludic writing practice as a case study, this article will examine how these writing acts intersect with Web 3.0 networks and platforms. The ‘consumption’ of literary games by physical networks (other writers, live audiences, mentors, for example) and digital ‘friends’ or ‘followers’ is challenged, arguing instead that audience engagement with these forms of writing requires interaction and participation due to the requirements of the core functionality of the very platforms on which they can be found.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it asserts that this form of engagement is a form of creativity in itself: actively ‘prosuming’ (Jenkins et al.), that is simultaneously producing and consuming rather than passively consuming. Digital users (instead of ‘readers’ or ‘audience’) become active collaborators in the writing practice once it is dispersed amongst digital platforms that comprise the unpredictable Internet network. This means that the writing develops in new ways and takes on different shapes (and by this, I mean those unforeseen or initially unintended by the original writer),<sup>3</sup> moving in multiple directions and adding to its multimodality as a result of liking, commenting, sharing, modifying by ‘friends’ and ‘followers’ – behaviours which themselves might also be considered types of ludic writing practice. We can say with some certainty that once the writing is published on such a platform, it is an unpredictable creation on an unknowable networked trajectory.

Social media engagement is a fundamental part of our contemporary digital culture and social life (Fuchs), so ludic writing practice in this sense exemplifies contemporary creative and artistic behaviours, whilst also being inextricably linked to the realities of our social norms and interactions. This intersection between art and popular culture<sup>4</sup> suggests that this type of practice has the potential not only to generate writing that is informed by social discussion and conversation around the themes and issues explored within the writing, but also that the modes of these discussions enter into the work to become fundamental aspects of its composition. Ludic writing practice might help to develop new knowledge of writing tools and methods, writing forms, digital functionality and also of the society that creates and interacts with it. Therefore, the experience is formative with transformative potential: writers and collaborators use technology rather than being used by it.

## 1. Defining Ludic: Understanding Games, Play and Culture

As noted, the concept 'ludic' and its relationship to games is not entirely new, being rooted in a rich history of critical discussions on the purpose and value of such cultural activities. These included Socratic and Platonic philosophies on playfulness; praise in the royal courts for playful activity; both the Enlightenment and Romantic epochs' acknowledgment and evaluation of art as playful activity which might reveal the purest potentialities of human behaviour; and later, those games which supported education and strategy, and which became part of warfare (Cassone). This cultural heritage no doubt contributed to 20<sup>th</sup>-century discussions and debates over the seriousness of games, including the now oft-cited seminal works of both Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, both of whom worked to define games, play and their respective recognisable characteristics. Neither author yields distinct and operational conceptualisations, producing instead further pluralities and, to some extent, dichotomies of definitions and understandings. This opacity, arguably, not clarified any further by the need to recognise video gaming as a significant cultural phenomenon, acknowledges that games have infiltrated 'real life' and are not just for gamers (Ask). The point is that despite the proliferation of this phenomenon, contemporary scholars in this field (Fuchs et al.; Raessens 2014; Deterding, for example) still cannot agree on a single, consistent register to articulate their interrogations.

For clarity, then, this article begins by recognising that smart technologies and the Internet have helped to construct a "ludic age" (Zimmerman); that is to say, our contemporary digital culture is gamified and our experiences of it are ludic. Arguably more so than ever before (Deterding), and especially within the pervasive context of Web 3.0,<sup>5</sup> the boundaries of the 'game' and 'real life' blur as culture expropriates and utilises playful, or ludic, activities and behaviours as both latent and manifest definitions of and interactions within the social system. Put simply, this article argues that the gamification of culture, that is thinking of life as a game, permeates society through the process of ludification, that is, playful behaviours, interactions, and experiences within playful networks.

Previous discussions of games and serious activities have asserted separation and opposition between the two, a clear and observable dichotomy. Caillois argued that games could not be mistaken for real activities and vice versa, and that game-related behaviours are not taken seriously by society or culture because they do not change concrete behaviours, instead having only a connotative function. Taking a moment to consider these conclusions in relation to digital writing forms, there is clear evidence of the separation between traditional, canonical literary forms and hypermedia and literary gaming. Regardless even of the digital aspect, experimental, hybrid multimodal forms have struggled to secure academic recognition despite its rich literary legacy<sup>6</sup> as they are still often pejoratively referred to as 'avant-garde,' 'genre-bending' gimmicks or fads. The conclusion, then, is that playful writing,

whether digital or otherwise, has only a liminal function: it is able to subvert traditional structures, but only temporarily. This echoes Huizinga's conclusions: whilst recognising the "double-task" of play to engage with both imagination and the material, he concludes that play is ultimately a "free activity" different to ordinary life, as it is fixed by a specific context with limits of time and place and "play spirit" is ephemeral.

It seems pertinent to re-evaluate these conclusions within the context of our contemporary digital culture, which, as established, might be considered gamified. We cannot assume that we have returned to the liminal function of games and play when previous limits and separations imposed on society have since been erased by the lived realities of our gamified digital existence. For this purpose, digital multimodal writing operates in a very 'real' gamified cultural context. This form of writing and its unknowable future iterations, once published on digital platforms and networks, are not bound by a limited space or "magic circle," an argument that served to strengthen Huizinga's point about the unproductive nature of games. Nor are they motivated by a clear purpose or end goal. When writing in this digital multimodal form, utilising social media, writers and users collaborate within the endless networked structures of Web 3.0 as fundamental parts of their lived reality. They therefore engage in the playful practices and behaviours which are representative and symptomatic of that reality or culture. The principles commonly associated with play are that it is unproductive, since it produces nothing in everyday life; trivial, because it is not believed to embody deep cultural meaning; and arbitrary, because it cannot be compared to 'real life.' These principles have all contributed to the understanding that play is separate and ephemeral (Cassone). Yet, in the context of digital gamified culture, play is not only representative of, but actively produces our everyday lived existence and social life within this contemporary context; it manifests itself as realistic practices, behaviours and norms which help us to navigate our often chaotic and erratic experiences of this culture intelligibly.

This reveals the potential for ludic values to extend beyond typical game contexts and autotelic principles (as outlined in the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi), demanding critical attention be paid to the relationship between games and society as a cultural phenomenon. Further, it is useful to apply Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskij theory of culture, as suggested by Vincenzo Cassone, as an approach for considering how ludic behaviours may shape and be shaped by gamified culture. There is an abundance of evidence demonstrating how the Internet, and more precisely its current iteration Web 3.0, is inextricably linked to our lived experiences and our understanding of many contemporary cultural spheres. Typologies include health and fitness goal-tracking applications for smart phones; digital scoring systems in education; rewards and incentives in the workplace; 'checking-in' as part of leisure or entertainment pursuits. All of the applications are accessible through smart devices, such as phones, tablets, laptops and 'home hubs'

such as Google Home Hub. This semiotic structure or “self-description system” (Lotman and Uspenskij) produces “self-interpretations” through evaluating and differentiating between the texts, discourses and behaviours produced by the culture itself; it also works to translate new texts, discourses and behaviours, being able to interpret them through the semiotic system it seeks to understand. Mari-liis Madisson (qtd. in Cassone 5) argues that self-description systems are the result of “master metaphors.” Web 3.0 underpins our contemporary gamified culture; acting as master metaphor, it is both a “mirror and lens” for a culture, simultaneously describing itself whilst also providing ways of looking at and making sense of things from within that structure, that which is ludic.

It is clear, then, that play arises in the contemporary gamified age, which is underpinned by a pervasive Web 3.0. Play is required to traverse the dynamic cultural interplay between web platforms and complex relationships between networked Internet, humans and social contexts (Barassi and Tréré). Play proliferates in this arguably rhizomatic structure (Landow 58), engaging with experiments in both form and function resulting in ‘real’ material implications. Play has a sense to it and is enacted in all seriousness, such as the need to achieve recognition by peers through social media content creation; at the same time, it cannot be separated from radical openness, such as the often unpredictable fun of continually modified viral memes. In this sense, the “magic circle” is a fundamental part of the ordinary world: function and fun are not in opposition but connected via various digital platforms, networks, or, to continue with rhizome theory, plateaus (Deleuze and Guattari). There is also clear evidence of the blurring and hybridisation of these plateaus (Fuchs; Jenkins et al.). Therefore, play is simultaneously objective and experiential, demanding participation, interaction and collaboration not only as a necessity for navigating the transient forms and structure of digital gamified culture, but also to discern and engage with its perpetually metamorphosing functions and applications.

To offer a specific example of this, we might consider contemporary identity politics as a digital game involving the creation and maintenance of playful simulations that are dispersed across multiple digital platforms and thus blur distinctions between human and machine. Users construct ambiguous, complex, digitally networked and ultimately ludic personae online. They seek (as a way of communicating, as an act of social belonging and acceptance, as validation) and are actively encouraged (by family, friends, educators, employers, entertainers) to create plural identities that adopt different forms and characteristics dependant on the platform, its purpose and functionality, and to continue to maintain and even reinvent themselves. By generating content for these platforms, these personae demonstrate identities ‘in action.’ Here, there is no discernible boundary between the ‘game’ and real life. Ludic identity construction is a valuable social norm integral to the operations of our culture, and it is therefore a formative experience (Raessens 2006). It is both a mirror and lens.

If we accept that games are a powerful framework applicable to our everyday reality, where human activity and behaviour is ludic, then we should also acknowledge the potential of games and ludic activity to change this reality. Indeed, ludic activities have been proven to reduce stress, help with conflict resolution, relieve isolation; effects with the potential to redeem or transform society. Jane McGonigal makes a convincing argument for the features of games (objectives, choice, freedom to experiment, effort-based rewards) and their ability to tackle a whole range of social problems because they encourage us to rethink daily activities, focus on individual needs, create positive reactions and emotions. Thus, they appear to have a central role in understanding the operations of our contemporary culture, further strengthening the argument that games and ludic behaviours are what is necessary to explain our human experience and should be taken seriously as the dominant cultural paradigm. This also means acknowledging that ludic modes of thinking and discourse are required to represent and interpret this paradigm, which is perhaps trickier to comprehend considering play does not require a fixed or stable outcome. As discussed, we have moved beyond autotelic principles: it means change and dynamism. This might be perceived as problematic as the only means of articulating our culture, yet in using playful discourses or modes of expression we also acknowledge the changeable and frenetic nature of our existence. For example, social media profiles require frequent changes in ‘status:’ ludic writing which articulates our experience.

This suggests that every playful interaction within the game structure is also an invention, or a reinvention moment, as we have the power and the freedom to choose and experiment. The precise reverberations of this remain unclear. Ian Bogost argues that regardless of gamified culture and its playful networks and activities, the platforms associated with Web 3.0 are produced by capitalism and are thus tools of oppression. Meanwhile Lasse Juel Larsen and Bo Kampmann Walther provide a more optimistic view that suggests play itself is a creative, productive freedom with endless possibilities with potential implications for the game; thus, rather than the game as a subset of play, there is a fluctuating synergy between the two. It would seem naïve then to assume that the outcomes or implications of ludic activity were homogenous or equally spread within the cultural framework. However, if we somewhat distil the focus and assess one gamified paradigm, digital multimodal writing practices as a specific form of playful creativity, we might proficiently identify and interpret at least some potential outcomes and effects of game dynamics and ludic behaviours.

## **2. Literary-Ludic Texts and Multimodality: Establishing a Context for Ludic Practice**

My interest in play as a literary and aesthetic tool began in the early 2000s after feeling drawn as a writer and literature academic to the Modernist shift in focus from

content to form as experiments with generic and conventional expectations. The experiments effectively drew attention to the fragility of traditional artistic structures and institutionalised forms of representation. This led to the discovery of the avant-garde, including Dadaism and Surrealism, which proactively used art as a political tool to interrogate bourgeois society. These explorations also turned to examples of the postmodern. It was interesting to examine how writers used the game, or the rules of literature (language, grammar, syntax, metaphor, form, genre for example) to play: to challenge and subvert readerly expectations. This occurred whilst also studying media and culture, with a particular interest in digital futures and the implications for both humans and machines. Both literature and media as academic disciplines led to a special interest in how literature and technology intersect through a lens of poststructuralist theories and concepts, namely Roland Barthes' ideal text (qtd. in Landow 53), Claude Levi-Strauss' bricolage, and Jacques Derrida's (qtd. in Landow 54) deconstruction and intertextuality. These academic interests led to the discovery of hypertext: a form of literature published on digital spaces in the 1990s which utilised specific software packages to create an interactive text composed of overt and covert text and image hyperlinks (Ensslin). This type of text created a digital text and space that users were free to explore through play, navigating their own unique pathway as they discovered hyperlinks by the movement and click of the mouse they operated. Each 'reading' experience is different and therefore the text cannot be furnished with an 'ending;' it ends when the interactive 'reading' session ends. In this sense the user becomes a part of the text and its potential; hypertext is polysemic and users must derive their own meanings.

During the research journey, I began discovering that hypertext had never made it 'mainstream:' the work of George Landow provided a very good account of both the advantages and disadvantages of this new mode of digital writing, providing discussions from both an academic and writerly position. Discussions and debates included how hypertext could never replicate or replace the experience of reading a physical book; the literariness of these types of (media) text; and the appearance of concrete evidence of obtuse poststructuralist theory. However, not accounting for the fact that fundamentally writers and readers did not have easy access to the hardwares and softwares required to produce and interact with such texts (such as web browsers or the programme, Storyspace).

However, hypertext did not disappear, indeed the form was greatly influenced by the democratisation of the Internet, the invention of the world wide web and, the exponential rise in popularity of video games: their design, composition and user experience. This saw the next development of hypermedia: a multimedia, audio-visual hypertext structure composed of hyperlinks, still and moving images and soundscapes (Ensslin). Digital literature emerged as a genre in its own right and continued to grow as writers experimented with digital combinations of kinetic and concrete poetry, code, user interactivity (mouse clicks, typing commands, integrating tools to measure bodily responses), the construction and blurring of 2D



and 3D spaces, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its mechanics, whilst also working with the rules and expectations of the traditional literary ‘game.’ Astrid Ensslin provides a detailed account of the development of the genre and defines various forms of “literary game,” which is succinctly defined thus:

games that exhibit specific ludic mechanics and implement them through digital technologies. These ludic mechanics can either be embedded in a (digital-born) literary work or form the basis of an art game featuring literary (poetic, narrative, or dramatic) structures and strategies. [...] It is only recently, with the evolution of digital media as a platform for artistic and creative experimentation, that true literary-ludic hybridity has begun to flourish and proliferate [...] (32–33).

There are now multiple well-established academic, critical frameworks for decoding and interpreting these literary-ludic texts; frameworks which combine traditional literary close reading (that is, assessing the use and integration of the ‘rules’ of literature) with ludological techniques (that is, the playful, or ludic elements) such as evaluating ergodicity (or non-trivial interactions with the text (Aarseth)), navigational iconicity, narrative analysis of the construction of multi-linear pathways and networks within the text, and assessment of user hacking and modification of the text; and representational features such as the symbolism of audio-visual components and user interface design.

As a media and culture academic, the terms ‘ludic,’ ‘gamification,’ ‘ludic turn’ kept appearing as part of the pursuit to define and interrogate the contemporary digital age, its manifestations and implications. As a literature scholar and poet, it seems important to explore and interrogate what ‘literary-ludic hybridity’ might actually mean and look like for writers, as well as products for analysis. It is worth recognising that a digital multimodal writer does not simply write a poem or piece of fiction, but also has to architect a dynamic space, demanding interactivity, to ‘publish’ the piece. However, it was noted at an early stage of playful experiments in creativity that the implications and realities of this challenge were not as frequently discussed or examined in the academic literature relating to literary-ludic hybridity, even though there was acknowledgment that literary-ludic writers also often became software innovators. Josie Barnard (2017) notes that both hardware and software date quickly and that digital multimodal writers are invested in becoming adept with technological innovations, yet they do not explore the precise implications they may have on writing practice. Writers acquire new skills in digital and media literacy as part of writing practice only for it to change before a piece is finished, the implication might be that the work is a ‘draft’ as opposed to ‘finished;’ a previous iteration of what eventually becomes the ‘final’ piece. Barnard’s (2017) insight seemed to ignore the possibility that writers are not simply drafting one complete or finished piece, but pieces in constant metamorphosis that come together as whole

archives of creative material. This would suggest that the compilation and curation of this archive and ludic interaction is also part of the practice. This would pose questions about identifying the 'end' of the creative practice for digital multimodal writers.

The work of Lyle Skains (2019) has been useful for scholars and writers in this sense, acknowledging the layering of metaphors and the dynamic nature of narrative that is bound within the materiality of a literary-ludic text. The work of N. Katherine Hayles also serves as a useful reminder that the literary-ludic writer produces a material artefact which emerges across multiple layers of digital materiality and evidences how multimodal resources have been assembled and deployed. For this author, these insights have been particularly percipient given the attention paid to understanding the intuitive and sometimes spontaneous nature of literary-ludic writing practices and behaviours, particularly the acknowledgement that these types of writers often engage with and utilise their chosen medium as a result of their own experiences, rather than skills acquired through formal training. That said, a writer's developing understanding of these media may be integral to the practice of writing itself: the writing practices inform their understanding of the chosen media, and also the implications of chosen media for the writing practices and the potential 'finished' texts. These implications cannot be foreseen before writing in this way, with this media.

This increased awareness of how variations in hardware and software enable the literary-ludic writer the opportunity to develop their craft simultaneously lead to a more nuanced insight into media capabilities and literary-ludic practices with each new multimodal iteration (Skains 2019). This type of media awareness and analysis is useful not only for identifying the material aspects of the digital text(s), but also signals a move towards a more punctilious engagement with how their changing and disparate nature affect the writing practices of the literary-ludic writer.

Traditional publishing affords some sense of gratification to a writer: someone else thinks the work is 'good,' the publisher promotes the work, ensures that it is stocked in bookshops and, essentially, that it finds a readership; thus, there are measurable markers of success (reviews and sales figures, for example). There seems to be little in the discourse relating to measuring the success of literary-ludic texts and associated writing practices. Barnard recognises that this linear model is not as straightforward in this digital context, "re-positioning writer, publisher, bookseller and reader" (2017, 276), whilst also noting Kim Wilkins' (qtd. in Barnard 2017) comments on the investment digital writers put into managing their own social media profiles and websites. Of course, this can help to promote the writer and their work, but it also takes time and energy away from the work. The writers of digital texts essentially seemed to take on the responsibility of publishing their work themselves (i.e. the process of architecting the publication space that has dictated the need for writers to produce their own software programmes) and therefore finding their own readership. The production of many various creative outputs

might affect a writer's workflow, with additional and new editing and drafting stages, now digitised and dispersed across the many various networks of Web 3.0.

Despite there now being a recognisable literary-ludic canon with award-winning examples and creators, in the main, digital writers still did not seem able to measure the 'success' of their work, especially considering a work that centres on potentially endless interactivity, polysemy and collaborative play. It became interesting to see how a writer might account for this part of the practice, that is to say, the drafting and recording and measurement of success in relation to the editing and production of the dynamic, playful components of the text. It seemed unsatisfactory as a writer to not have insight into the readers,' or in this context users,' experience of the writing created, and not to have 'sight' of the interactions, connections and potential collaborations being experienced online and how they might modify the writing and the writing practice. Real-life accounts of the interactivity, participation or collaboration with users seemed missing from the discourse, again focussing on the final piece rather than how it came to be.

It also seemed that there might be evidence of hybridity here: user generated content for social media platforms as part of the digital multimodal creative output. Again, this did not seem a factor extensively explored in the literary-ludic discourse. Barnard's (2015) account on Twitter as an archival tool is useful in part: Twitter posts recording thoughts, ideas and stimuli that may end up in creative pieces. Yet the article does not explicitly mention how this content might become part of the creative work as a direct result of the media literacy of both writer and users, for example as part of that archive of digital creative output mentioned earlier, nor does it consider the potential hybridity between user-generated social media content and the creative writing. For example, comments on posts might include links to further research or inspirational sources, but they may also have been recorded as 'found' elements in the final work that capture the social interactions between writers and users. They might also be considered a form of creative non-fiction where memoir or autobiographical elements and fiction and imagination blur. For example, posting to a personal social media account might be perceived as an act of identity, as previously noted (Raessens 2006). If the content is published to a professional profile, this raises questions about how the multimodal ludic text intersects with that personal profile. This intersection may be perceived as a different 'chapter' of the 'autobiography'. It may also create another level of hybridity related to themes of personae, identity construction and authenticity of personhood explored in the creative output, which may be in tension with the experiences or themes expressed in other forms of user generated content.

Following on from the work of Skains (2019) in particular, the aim of this author is to add to the discussions which recognise and articulate the experiences of literary-ludic writers by identifying a useable and agile register which accounts for these particular writing tools, methods and encounters, and is informed by their own practice-based research. Practice-based research perceives the creative

practice and the output of this practice as the sites of critical investigation, with the intention of developing artistic practices, both for the individual and the field (in this case digital literatures), whilst also contemplating new theoretical contributions to knowledge (Skains 2016); it is both process and product (Sullivan).

### **3. Defining Postdigital Ludic Practice: Experiments in Writing**

The author's initial experimentations with digital form, even though rudimentary as a result of a fairly basic practical digital skillset and the availability of hardware and software, provided a lot of scope for evidencing those previously mentioned theoretical perspectives, whilst also suggesting how the ludic mechanisms of the text might evidence purposeful, formative play. Yet the focus of these experiments was textual analysis (narrative, ludological, semiotic, for example) and did not address the various, intricate playful stages of the creative practice itself. This analysis did not account for the playful engagement with writing tools or methods, nor reflect the experimentation with other forms of artistic and digital activity. It also did not account for the interactions with users or other creatives as an integral part of the process.

Barnard (2017) notes that the future of writing must account for technological shifts in process and practice. As a writer and academic, getting closer to understanding the possibilities and challenges afforded to digital multimodal practice dictated the need to record and reflect on the various stages of the creative process itself; to "test the possibilities" (Millard and Munt, qtd. in Barnard 2017, 277) of the tools and methods of a multimodal ludic writer (Barnard 2017) rather than just engaging in literary-ludic analysis of the final creative output. This practice-based method comprises specific types of observation and analysis, again informed by the work of Skains (2017), those being: self-directed ethnomethodology during composition involving continual notetaking, journaling and reflective commentary that try to make sense of the practice as it happens, and media-specific analysis of these observations, which may include semiotics and critical theories of narratology.

Once various stages and experiences of the writing practice had been recorded, these observations and analyses might produce a functional register for the characteristics and features of ludic practice, much in the same way that there is a recognisable and functional register associated with 'traditional' pen and paper linear methods; for example, 'draft,' 'edit,' 'cut,' 'workshop,' 'feedback loop.' Although it is perceivable that a writer's intentions limit the objective outcomes of this practice-based method, it is important for the critical interrogation of a writer's own experiences and processes. In the context of digital writing this is all the more valuable and advantageous, as a literary-ludic writer can 'lose' their work to the network in unpredictable and at times phantasmagorical ways. The process of accounting for these iterations and encounters harnesses the potential to

make these experiences intelligible and articulatable, thus contributing new insights in this type of writing practice.

This is not to say that this ‘new’ register would abandon this already established discourse. As previously outlined, literary-ludic writing is composed of both ‘traditional’ literary elements and digital, playful ones; the blurred boundaries of analogue-digital hybridity would need to be reflected in any functional register. Essentially it would need to recognise and account for ludic writing practice as a postdigital activity. Mel Alexenberg (10) explains that the postdigital reflects a fundamental need for artists and creative practitioners to assert their humanity in their use of digital technologies. This is achieved through the interplay between cyberspace and physical space and, the digital, biological, cultural and spiritual. This may occur in social, creative, physical and media-augmented spaces, bringing together various aspects of our everyday life; blurring the boundaries between technology and practice and, haptic, sensory and kinaesthetic experiences. There is also a keen focus on peer production: postdigital creatives produce “alternative media” through participation and interaction, operating in a “network world” which actively invites collaboration. This results in dynamic, hybrid artforms, where process and practice are formative experiences (Alexenberg 33). This paradigm synchronises precisely with the earlier definition of how ludic characteristics and behaviours manifest within our contemporary gamified culture.

Two years ago, I set out to create a literary-ludic text, soon realising that this was a bigger challenge than initially perceived. Over the period of a year, the process of recording and collating all of my ludic experiments began on the understanding that it might help to move the writing project, entitled *Viole(n)t Existence*, forward. *Viole(n)t Existence* is gender-informed work (Mencia), discernible in the fact that I identify as female, and *Viole(n)t Existence* interrogates the pluralistic and often contradictory nature of female experiences in a commitment to the author’s own personal feminism. Of equal importance is the commitment this text makes to acknowledging the work of notable female scholars in the field such as Hayles, Alice Bell, Ensslin, Maria Mencia and Skains, as the outcome of a transdisciplinary, decentralised practice-based approach which interlaces (social, cultural and personal) histories, technologies, practices with the creative and the critical. The outcomes then are more than the sum total parts of *Viole(n)t Existence* as a digital text. These ‘experiments’ contribute to the vital work female academics do in an attempt to decolonise the field of digital literature, which continues to be predominantly male (Mencia 143-146).

The practice-based observations and analysis revealed that the following activities at times took place individually, sometimes together, but did reoccur at various stages of the writing process throughout the twelve months. The record of tools and methods was critically reflected upon before forming this case study and emerging register. The immediate observation was that unlike writers’ tools of the

past, which have been “simple and discreet” (Barnard 2017, 279), this postdigital ludic practice was increasingly complex, discursive, recursive and capricious. “Emerging” is used here to account for the further experiments and assessments necessary to capture the perpetually changing landscape of activities associated with postdigital ludic practice. Needless to say, there can be no doubt that a definitive, exhaustive, hierarchical list is not possible, as this could not account for the myriad freedoms and challenges posed by the composition of literary-ludic form.

However, it was concluded that there were three ubiquitous activities, which (re)occurred repeatedly, even when initially difficult to discern, at various stages of the writing process. These activities served to interact with and bolster other creative approaches. Identifying and categorising these activities and devices would provide a useful source for literary-ludic writers, especially as these methods might be considered unique to postdigital ludic practice and the production of literary-ludic texts.

#### 4. Postdigital Ludic Practice: An Emerging Register of Tools and Methods

**Vigorous movement:** the writer is required to navigate and negotiate virtual and physical networks; spaces which demand shifting perspectives of time and space. These networks change scale and shape incessantly, therefore, there is no choice but to also change form, direction and perspective endlessly. Being alert to the chaos of networks requires ‘vigorous movement;’ in order to perceive any sense at all, tools, methods and arguably the writer themselves might be perceived as chaotic. There is no right or wrong way to move and, inevitably, there is always another move to make. This ensures that the writing practice is a dynamic experience, both embodied and cognitive.

This method is evident in *Violen(t) Existence* as movement on the page: some of the writing ‘moves’ between creative non-fiction prose and lyrical poetry. It is also physical movement, as I was filmed performing poetry at times and in locations where a formal poetry reading had been neither promoted nor scheduled; this surprised the ‘audience,’ particularly as I continued to move around the spaces whilst ‘performing.’ These videos can also be accessed via my YouTube channel and featured alongside other short films of the same poems, this time performed at scheduled spoken word events. This is vigorous movement through virtual and physical networks; the writer and the ‘work’ move in different spaces, at different times, in different forms.

**Reciprocal performing:** the writer is required to perform within virtual and physical networks: they are always participating. The writer alternates between various personae: writer, reader, artist, user, host, audience, mentor, scroller, content generator, architect, novice... These do not occur in binary opposition; theirs is a pluralistic performance mediated at times by the performance(s) of others. This writer

must acknowledge that continued mutual exchanges are necessary for movement amongst networks. To an extent, this could be considered a predictable feature of ludic practice, providing some reassurance within the chaos. It might also be considered a “remedy” for writer’s block: if a writer does not know what to say or do themselves, they can seek inspiration and knowledge from ‘conversations’ with others.

As detailed previously, I have performed ‘Viole(n)t Existence’ in multiple ways, and these ‘acts’ continue to define and redefine the work. The performance has been shaped by three distinct audience groups. First, there were those who expected my performance and responded through their non-verbal feedback to my voice, tone, pitch, and volume. Second, there were those who were not expecting my performance, inadvertently informing my vocal style and delivery in new ways. Finally, there were those I could not have predicted: the users of the Internet. Each of these audience types has contributed uniquely to the evolution of the performance, influencing its presentation and reception in varied and often unexpected ways.

**Prescient transparency:** postdigital ludic writing practice challenges the idea that a literary work can be finished or understood; there is no final signified. The actions outlined make it clear why this cannot be possible: the writer is always moving, always performing; so too is the writing. The writer can account for the challenges posed by polysemy with openness about the literary-ludic texts’ simultaneously complimentary and contradictory iterations and manifestations; being clear about the tools and methods used in its developments, as and when these emerge and evolve; making problems visible within the text. Postdigital ludic practice is informed by a self-aware, self-critical consciousness which contributes to the continuous turbulent shifts and developments in practice and form.

The multimodal content which forms *Viole(n)t Existence* includes digital manifestations of the writing published in the small poetry collection, *Violet Existence* (Broken Sleep Books, May 2022). These ‘texts’ coexist: the writing performs on both the printed and digital page; this is made clear and highlighted to the digital reader via links to the publisher’s website. Where the writing in *Violet Existence* can no longer change shape, the digital presentation, *Viole(n)t Existence* continues to perform as a digital archive connected to various evolving digital networks, including social media profiles and online reviews of the analogue version.

The following list of tools and methods was also recorded to varying degrees and concluded to be integral to the dynamism and experimental nature of postdigital ludic writing practice. In making this assessment, Caillois’ four play types were considered: *alea* (chance), *ilinx* (causing dizziness or ‘vertigo’ perceived in this instance as the potential excitement but also ‘anxiety’ produced by the complexity and unpredictability of networks), *mimicry* (make-believe or role-play) and *agon* (competition). Each of the following actions were considered to evidence at least one of these play types to some extent, ensuring that the approach was ludic and

synonymous with the creative process for literary-ludic texts. They are written in the continuous present because these activities are ongoing and do not operate in discreet stages as in standard writing practice; they operate in elastic overlapping circles. Indeed, the author's literary-ludic project is not 'finished,' therefore neither is the writing.

**Architecting:** literary-ludic texts comprise many multimodal elements that may be disseminated across many platforms. To weave and splice these elements together, a postdigital ludic writer must configure the work's "ludic mechanics" (Ensslin 11–12) and pathways creating a complex digital space that connects these dispersed elements and pathways. This activity ensures that the text is ludic and interactive.

*Violen)t Existence* is a digital archive which consists of a home site, built using open-source software through WordPress and hyperlinks to multiple social networks, blog entries, lyrical essays, news sources, journal articles and websites. The content across all platforms is multimodal. The postdigital ludic writer not only creates the literary 'text' but must plan, map and build its multiple digital components and connections.

**Prospecting:** referring to activities and approaches associated with 'mining' physical and virtual networks for the benefit of the writing practice, the reciprocal community of creatives and the literary-ludic text. As a postdigital ludic writer, I actively pursued prospects which would extend my writing (researching themes and issues) and my networks (making physical and virtual connections).

**Foraging:** whilst prospecting, the writer must 'forage' unfamiliar territories, exploring the unknown and potentially uncomfortable. They must allow themselves to be surprised by unexpected physical and virtual places and spaces. Although I had not initially perceived that the performance of my writing in unpredictable circumstances (that being times and locations) might be inspirational or formative for future writing developments, it nevertheless was for numerous reasons.

When performing my work in a context not promoted as a 'Reading' or 'Event,' a context not expected by the people in the space, I was more nervous. This audience was not expecting my performance and, it was something I had not tried before. Naturally this affected my performance style and delivery, as compared with my 'typical,' scheduled spoken word performances. This led to a different reading of the poems even for me, the writer: how might these unpredicted responses be reflected and represented in their digital iterations? The digital presentation of the poem on the webpage, when compared to its printed version, echoed the variations observable in different YouTube videos of the same poem performed in various locations. These digital renditions captured the audible and visual changes across performances. The poems on the digital page attempt to account for the variations in pitch, volume and breath which can be witnessed when comparing the various live performances. Thus, these poems also perform differently across digital and printed pages, in that their typography is also different.



**Fossicking:** the networks yield a lot of material and can produce endless directions for the writer to pursue. The writer must be able to collect and archive research, fragments, pieces, and traces without judgment. Any pejorative decision would contradict the principle of prescient transparency, which is essential to the creative process. Fragments that are used can also be recycled, sampled across networks and used to create layers and loops which may orientate users through their literary-ludic text and its various pathways. The writer is guided only by their intuition, their networks and the evolving potential of the fragments that will create the work and provide intrinsic value. In this regard, I had to research, record and respond without commercial intent; that is to say, *Violen)t Existence* is not driven by the commercial success of *Violet Existence*, nor as a ‘publication’ in its own right.

**Synaesthetic synchronicity with machines:** the writer must be ‘in sync’ with technology, using it to produce and record bodily senses and stimulations. The writer should move and talk with machines, learning to appreciate both their human and machine bodies as interconnected intuitive systems which extend the writer’s capacities, potentialities and therefore movements and senses. This is achieved when the writer uses machines to remix their own voice or manipulate their physical appearance; this modifies the writer’s physical presence within the text and evidences a networked body combined of writer, machine and ‘body’ of digital work.

In addition, *Violen)t Existence* not only represents my performance through audio-visual elements, but also combines the voices and ‘performance’ of Siri and my Google Home Hub. The answers to research questions provided by these digital ‘assistants’ not only suggested new research pathways, but their responses were recorded verbatim, using a smart phone, and then integrated into the digital text, as another persona performing within the text. These sound files were also sampled and remixed with my own voice and at times, overlaid with royalty free music and ambient sounds recorded whilst out walking to create a soundscape within the work.

**Haptic consciousness:** attempting to structure and understand all the collected fragments and research, juxtapositions, nonlinear and multilinear pathways, and network interactions, the writer engages in tactile thinking when probing and investigating their archives and intentionally physically and cognitively reacting to stimuli. This is a process of fluid brainstorming where the writer can take some control over the material, deconstructing it and working it into a new shape. This is evidenced through mixed-media crafting as a response to fragments and including them as multimodal elements in the text, as explained in the previous example.

**Asynchronous dispersion and dissemination:** as noted, the postdigital ludic writer is not primarily motivated by traditional publishing; therefore, the writer must take on the role of disseminating the work and dispersing it across virtual

and physical networks themselves. These actions are 'out of synch' in that there is no precise or right way of sharing the work, again becoming another ludic experiment. The writer can instantly post fragments of their work to multiple platforms simultaneously, whilst also scheduling physical performances in the future. My own experiments have included different combinations of distribution opportunities: utilising my YouTube channel; using my X/Twitter profile to draw attention to new content; using MS Teams to create space for online performance and, through the shared screen function, integrating multimodal visual elements into the performance.

**Acquiescing to the networks:** a postdigital ludic writer must accept that they have no control over the text once it is amongst networks. Relinquishing control and embracing the unknown empowers the writer: once they have let go of a text, they are free to pursue another; setting the text free can reveal new understanding in the functionality of the networks, its structures and patterns; it may also create and strengthen reciprocity. Continued capitulation can help to develop trust and a sense of intimacy amongst vast, public networks. In recent live performances, I have asked the audience to shout out their first thoughts immediately after I have spoken; I have then integrated these responses into the next digital iteration of the text, treating them as 'found' material.

As already noted, this cannot be considered a finite list; after all, it is only based on one experience. It does, however, provide a starting point for further discussions on specific tools and methods that manifest as postdigital ludic writing practice with a purpose of creating digital, multimodal literary-ludic texts. These terms are meant to reflect the omniscience of the postdigital ludic creative practitioner to create a body of work which functions as an assemblage of metamorphosing networked fragments.

It is worth remembering that providing a functional register for postdigital ludic practice has a dual purpose: to offer practical tools and methods for writers, and to contribute to the discourse on theoretical modes of literary-ludic analysis. It is therefore a creative-critical hybrid practice.

## 5. Postdigital Ludic Practice: Posthuman Transformations

Postdigital ludic writing is symptomatic of liquid modernity (Bauman), where "destructive creation and creative destruction converge in the same act" (43). Postdigital ludic writing highlights the progressive loss of representational capacity in mass society, which has resulted in the disenchantment and dissolution of political symbolism (Dayan), leading to a lack of faith in traditional political processes. In this context, this writing practice radically ruptures the structure of this communication through its commitment to breaking with the structures of conventional creative writing and traditional canonical literature. It therefore recreates a social space that

connects the writer and their users in new ways (Kombarov 5). This humanises the space and generates a creative environment (Garnier) which extends to the body of the audience as they too rediscover public space and a perceptible social existence.<sup>7</sup> This mobilises users to take an active and participatory role as new territories are made thinkable, made possible (Segura-Cabañero and Simó-Mulet). As discussed, postdigital ludic practice is collaborative and its manifestations produce a body of work marked by both creative individuality and collective construction. These types of interactions with the network operate at deep levels of human experience, beyond dominant imaginaries to establish new ways of facing human experience (qtd. in Aladro-Vico et al.). Each reciprocal action is an act of social intervention catalysing a transgressive symbolic (re)construction of reality that liberates both postdigital ludic writers and users, or ‘collaborators’ from commodified views of life, instead adopting playful, generous visions and potentialities which enable all participants to become aware of their own power.

Digital networks are ready-made communities for postdigital ludic writers and their collaborators to participate in. Initially the postdigital ludic writer might share and post material with their ‘friends,’ other creatives and organisations, each with their own digital presence or footprint with the potential to share the work more widely, outside the writers’ original network. Due to Web 3.0 algorithms, posts, likes and comments place the work in the sight of an audience that would not typically find themselves engaging with literary-ludic content, yet now find themselves watching a video via Twitter, for example and all that is required for participation and evaluation is Internet access; affective bonds manifest and are mediated through these sharing features (Karppi). Whoever originally posts the video builds their own digital infrastructure around that post, which helps to spread and sustain its presence amongst a wider circulation in unpredictable ways, thus arguably furthering the potential of and commitment to counter-discourse.

Postdigital ludic writing operates within rhizomatic networks that accumulate political allies: the wider the video spreads, the more potential it has to change minds (Somers-Willett). At this point, we may once again remind ourselves of the commercial nature of such platforms and ask whether, when operating within these conditions, it is possible to be subversive or transgressive at all. Yet the online audience persistently engage in critical exchanges, posting thoughts and contributions about the content. Social media platforms and their associated software tools provide critical outlets for digital users, where conversations about the writer, writing, literary-ludic writing, identities, experiences and reception in varying degrees and sometimes uncritical ways are clearly evidenced, and thus stimulate additional, even unconscious socio-political discussions.

Postdigital ludic writing takes place between complex networks, intersecting networks of data and technology that move from one body through technology to other bodies, feeding-forward into future patterns of collective activity (Tucker 35–40). The online space amplifies the work to large networks outside of traditional

institutions and organisations, building relationships and communities where a single recognisable political agenda or movement is not always pronounced, evidenced, nor important; digital multimodal texts diffuse amongst a myriad of haphazard, seemingly aimless and thus obfuscated exchanges touching a wide array of progressive issues (Chepp 47). This type of practice has the potential to connect writers and collaborators with numerous local, national and global organisations all accessible through networks, in coordinated and uncoordinated ways, to take collective action on- and offline.

What emerges from these exchanges is a decentralised network of horizontal communications which are non-hierarchical and centred on the group, rather than individuals, and are thematically unknown in advance, even to the original ludic writer. Even if the writer declares a central, identifiable theme or set of core values in their work, these may be altered or obscured once the work is made live in the digital network, where there is no explicit leader with a specific obligation; this in and of itself can be considered a political act. Postdigital ludic practice creates the potential for a nuanced, expansive, on- and offline network of communities to cultivate, knowingly or not, transgressive potential, therefore it constructs political spaces. For these reasons, postdigital ludic practice is a significant cultural phenomenon, even though, paradoxically it inherently challenges culture as it is not restricted by subjectivity and language and instead prioritises creativity, playfulness and innovation. Seemingly resisting definition by its nature, it is useful to consider postdigital ludic practice within the context of posthumanist thinking, which acknowledges the viral process of destroying the self, the social system and communication in order to create open possibilities (Wolfe).

This article has suggested how postdigital ludic practice disturbs, displaces and disrupts the status quo, the dehiscence of, for example, literature, art, culture, or identity to create the extensive potential for resisting the permanence of any hegemonic structure or discourse. It utilises some of these structures (e.g. literary form), privileged terms (e.g. 'writer') and discursive modes of power (e.g. social media platforms) only to contaminate and transform them.

Therefore, it is simultaneously and paradoxically an act of destruction and recursive creation, where self-referential autopoiesis is made possible. Autopoietic systems, or 'bodies' function as a network of destruction and transformation which through their interactions can continuously regenerate, whilst also being able to recognise the processes which produced them (Valera). These bodies are only possible because they are part of both open and closed systems; they are recontextualised posthuman bodies, sometimes organic, sometimes digital, sometimes multidimensional virtualities, liberated to negotiate subversive potentialities and creativities, which perpetually stimulates an "intensive politics of becoming" (Ruffolo 20). The practice transcends debates and analyses of subjugated subjectivities, subjects-as-beings, and Cartesian philosophy through language. Instead, it creates systems of continuous production that expose and reframe, without giving primacy to

articulating a 'self.' As such, postdigital ludic practice involves the deconstruction of culture and identity, generating and regenerating new bodies which, by this principle of "openness from closure" (Wolfe xxi), makes such acts culturally representative: what appears to separate us from 'culture' connects us to that culture.

Postdigital ludic practice is a multiplicitous assemblage of playful experiments and spaces. These networked 'bodies' continue to produce ongoing tensions which compromise stable conceptions of the individual 'writer' and 'culture' (Massumi 814). This practice is not so concerned with what these 'bodies' are, but what they do, that is, oppose power through the playful creation of new discontinuous political connections. Thus, the practice does not simply (re)produce meanings but articulates the potential for producing perpetually metamorphising creative desires for their own playful sake. That is to say that writers and collaborators do not need to identify and define political transformations specifically or precisely; engaging in playful practice for intrinsic value (rather than extrinsic such as seeking publication, for example), even if appearing fruitless, is a valuable transformation in itself.

This article has attempted to recognise the potential of postdigital ludic practice by articulating some of the tools and methods which informed the experience of the author. To reiterate, this is not to be considered a definitive discourse but a starting point for postdigital ludic writers who wish to engage in playful experiments with digital writing and the composition of hybrid literary-ludic texts, acknowledging that this form necessitates revisions of 'traditional' writing practice helping writers "to engage effectively and productively with new media technologies" (Barnard 2017, 286). As noted, postdigital ludic practice demands self-reflexivity so that writers are able to (re)orientate themselves within perpetually shifting networks (of 'friends,' platforms, hardwares and softwares), therefore it is a practice that will certainly continue to change shape. This article also hopes to contribute to the on-going theoretical discussions associated with play and literary-ludic form.

This article paid careful attention to the 'problems' of defining play, as imaginative and illusionary experimentation naturally resists stable definition. It might therefore be difficult to grasp the significance of postdigital ludic writing, yet, as this article has examined, this might be considered its social function. This practice does not prioritise one hegemonic system or 'body' (writer/reader, page/internet publication, oppressive capitalism/creative freedom, for example); therefore, it has the potential to create bodies which change shape and direction continuously, and these bodies might be considered transformative networks or spaces. This sense of disunity and heterogeneity reconceives privileged notions of 'writing' and 'human' as emerging and multiplicitous rather than defined by single ideal definitions or perspectives. These 'imperfections' are why it is useful to consider postdigital ludic practice as an assemblage of posthuman experiences with the potential to catalyse new 'becomings,' which paradoxically may help writers and their collaborators to make sense of their chaotic everyday experiences and

existence. Continued discussions of this potential, as well continued reflections on the perpetually shifting tools and methods of the practice, are required to continue the assessment of postdigital ludic practices.

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## Notes

- 1 For more on games as a mode of analysis, see: Ciccoricco 2007a; 2007b; Bell; Bell et al.; Ryan and Costello; Tosca.
- 2 This was initially recognised by Jenkins in relation to the “convergence culture” which emerged as a result of participatory web functionality associated with the Web 2.0 iteration of the Internet, where web content flowed across multiple platforms and social media platforms emerged, demanding user generated content.
- 3 This was defined by Barthes as the “writerly text” (14).
- 4 This might be interpreted as the blurring of a traditional canonical boundary perhaps, yet moreover technology, specifically the internet has allowed for greater and further-reaching interactions between people and the unknown (unknown information and content; unknown ‘friends’). Writing in this context therefore must involve the unknown and relinquishing control of? the ‘art’ to the unpredictable nature of contemporary digital culture.
- 5 An Internet experience which incorporates the interactive experiences of Web 2.0, whilst acknowledging the next phase of web evolution already in progress: one that creates the potential for the machine to process and catalogue data in a manner similar to humans (Rudman and Bruwer).
- 6 This is noted by Ensslin (24–25) who acknowledges playful subversions and transgressions offered by modernism, the avant-garde (Dadaism and Surrealism, for example) and the Situationist International movements.
- 7 As opposed to the previously noted decentred, dislocated existential angst associated with postmodern decentring, as defined by Hall and du Gay.