

# Mirror World, Minus World

## Glitching Nabokov's *Pale Fire*

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### ABSTRACT

*This article considers different experiences available to the reader of Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire by exploring the novel through concepts familiar from videogaming, such as the warp, the glitch, and the Let's Play, developing particular parallels with the Nintendo game Super Mario Bros. All of these potential modes of experience are comprised in the playerly text, which serves as a conduit linking together a work's past, present, and future readers.*

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This is the problem facing modern writing: how to breach the wall of utterance, the wall of origin, the wall of ownership? (BARTHES 1974, 45)

V<sup>L</sup>ADIMIR NABOKOV OPINES IN ONE OF HIS *LECTURES ON LITERATURE* that “one cannot read a book; one can only reread it” (1989, 3). His own works of fiction foreground, even fetishize, the process of rereading, with readers expected to continually revise their interpretations in light of the new information doled out by the author. Some readers, understandably, find this hermeneutic troublesome; typical is Zadie Smith, who finds that reading Nabokov means “becom[ing], in essence, Nabokov’s double . . . [in] what amounts to a reader’s mimeograph of the Author’s creative act” (2009, 52–3).

For this reason, Nabokov is regularly placed at one pole of a hermeneutic spectrum, often with Roland Barthes on the other—where the latter posits the death of the author, the former carries out, if not the *death* of the reader, then at least her subjugation, or perhaps conscription. Though this picture is exaggerated,<sup>1</sup> a reader of Nabokov certainly gets the grunt work in the collaborative labor of storytelling:

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1. On both sides: see below, and also GALLOP 2011, which links Barthes’s pronouncement to the author’s own physical mortality and the reader’s desire for the author now dead.

When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation. (1980, 3)

Reading is plowing: an arduous preliminary that must be completed if the field is to bear fruit. And yet, this same Nabokov is often regarded as one of the fathers of interactive fiction thanks to his novel *Pale Fire*, which disrupts the steady linearity of prose by providing the option to hop between pages via a series of parenthetical cross-references. This is to make of the reader not a co-author, but a subsequent editor: each arranging his own *Pale Fire*, all so many distinct instances drawn from the same printed matter—a strategy appropriate for a novel in which the central battleground is editorial policy.

In an effort to reconcile these two figures and their conflicting logics—the Nabokov who graciously permits interaction, and the Nabokov who imperiously demands imitation—I will borrow from the language of programming to present *Pale Fire* as a drama of patching and overwriting; moreover, as an experience very near what we can today recognize as a videogame: available to multiple, often conflicting modes of play, and also susceptible to (and indeed conclusively shaped by) programming errors, or glitches. In making this case I will set aside the often-made argument for *Pale Fire* as a precursor to hypertext, instead developing parallels with the 1985 Nintendo game *Super Mario Bros.*, before going on to examine approaches to “playing” *Pale Fire*. Ultimately, I will attempt to sketch out a basis for a hermeneutics of glitching—reading for, and through, errors in texts neither readerly or writerly, but rather *playerly*.<sup>2</sup>

## The Critical Edition

*Pale Fire* takes the form of a critical edition of a poem by the same name, the last written in this life by eminent poet John Shade. After a madman murders Shade, enthusiastic incompetent Charles Kinbote appoints himself editor of this posthumous project through the simple expedient of swiping the manuscript off of Shade’s still-cooling corpse. After wheedling

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2. For a prior, less expansive use of “playerly text”, see LEE 2009; his formulation has much in common with Espen Aarseth’s “cybertexts” (1997, 1). For a non-Barthesian “Play-Text”, see BOHMAN-KALAJA 2007.

permission to publish from Shade's distraught widow, Sybil, Kinbote flees town for a faraway cabin retreat, the better to write his apparatus without disruption.

Kinbote begins with a descriptive bibliography and calendar of composition; though he does not provide similar materials for his own work, it is possible to piece together much of his schedule.<sup>3</sup> For instance, the bizarre remark on the first page that "There is a very loud amusement park right in front of my present lodgings" (NABOKOV 1989, 13) must date from his arrival at the cabin, for soon after he will discover that the source is actually a radio belonging to other campers. Other parts of the Foreword, such as his comments on page proofs and galleys, are necessarily emendations; as these precede a later reference to the "carrousel" that he believes to be part of the amusement park, it is clear that the document is patchwork, with blocks of text inserted where necessary; any errors or contradictions are roughly altered or entirely ignored.

This writing practice reflects Kinbote's perpetually evolving framework of paranoid delusion, at the core of which is his secret identity: Charles Xavier, exiled king of Zembla. During his few months of acquaintance with Shade, this fantasy metastasizes into obsession, to the point that he believes Shade is actually writing this story (NABOKOV 1989, 296). Though at first devastated to discover the poem makes no reference to exiled kings from any land, Kinbote soon begins overwriting Shade's text with his own, using the Commentary to detail the circumstances of his overthrow and exile, while also tracking the progress of the dimwitted assassin, Jakob Gradus, charged with murdering the king. Yet according to Kinbote, it's Gradus who kills Shade—meaning that, as Brian Boyd points out, the entire assassination arc must be a later addition to Kinbote's increasingly complex mythology. An upgrade, perhaps, or at least a software patch, such as one might undertake with a computer's operating system—an attempt to paper over the gaps that have been revealed within the previous version. Further investigation reveals the marks of other, earlier patches made to explain the ridicule Kinbote endures at the hands of faculty and students, with each tormentor an agent of his ongoing persecution (BOYD 2000, 99–102). In undertaking this process of patching, Kinbote foregrounds his own experience of reading Shade's *Pale Fire*, while attempting to control the response of the readers and re-readers to follow. But Kinbote continually undermines the image of the confident, caring martyr-scholar that he wishes to project, showing himself to be a peeping-Tom, a sexual predator,

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3. For a timeline, see FRIEDMAN 2008; see also PILON 1974.

a future suicide. Eventually the regal depiction collapses amid the crystalline delusions of the commentator's increasingly obvious madness; out of the chaos of his fantasies a new conceptual framework emerges—that of Kinbote as creepy paranoid outcast—that provides another patch over the entire narrative.<sup>4</sup>

But while the Zemblan narrative proves woefully inadequate as an interpretive framework, it is nonetheless a measure of Kinbote's success (and Nabokov's sleight-of-hand) that readers must still enter the text by way of his Foreword—even if few follow his directive “to consult [my notes] first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as [you go] through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture” (1989, 28). Rather, readers find themselves confronted with a still earlier choice occasioned by another round of Kinbotean overwriting: whether or not to follow a cross-reference given in the Foreword. The choice seems slight but is momentous: while following the reference may at first appear to reaffirm Kinbote's control of the text, as it connects to the story of how he came into possession of the manuscript, it also begins to destabilize the narrative, in Kinbote's description of his approach to Shade's house as “resembl[ing] a lean wary lover taking advantage of a young husband's being alone” (NABOKOV 1989, 287). The comment links further to that on lines 47–8, which reveals the pattern of trespassing and voyeurism through which Kinbote terrorizes the Shades. Through the juxtaposition of these two comments, that description transmutes into the horrific prospect of sexual predation and degradation, as Kinbote by his own admission “indulge[s] in an orgy of spying which no considerations of pride could stop” (NABOKOV 1989, 87).

A citation directing the reader back to the Foreword seems to mark off a circular loop, balancing the depiction of Kinbote between eager scholar and creepy neighbor. But the note on lines 47–8 opens onto two others, line 62 and line 691: the former detailing Kinbote's paranoia and persecution mania and the latter revealing his secret identity through a “slip” into the first-person (NABOKOV 1989, 247). These notes are further interlinked, with line 62's note calling back to the note on 47–8, and pointing also to 691, so that the only exit from the recursive cross-references is into the recognition scene. Kinbote's apparent purpose is to provide a shortcut through his text, enabling the reader to swiftly reach that revelation of his disguised

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4. The 2011 pseudo-documentary Gingko Press edition of Shade's poem *Pale Fire* attempts to revert to a “stable build”—undoing all of Kinbote's would-be upgrades.

kinghood. But the effect on the reader is instead to crystallize the notion that Kinbote is a madman; those who follow the chain of cross-references find awaiting them upon their return to the Foreword a darker Kinbote, less jovial and more threatening—the patch that would have been provided nearly at the end of a linear experience of *Pale Fire* instead supplied almost at the beginning.

## The Warp Zone

The videogame parallel here is to the “warp”, defined here as any movement by the player from one position to another without traversing the space between. Warps have been part of videogames from their earliest days; the first game widely recognized as such, Steve Russell’s *Spacewar!*, included a warp (or “hyperspace”) button that moved the ship from its position to another, randomized spot on the single-screen battlefield (KENT 2000, 19). The warp *zone*, meanwhile—as a specific spot on the game map that activated a warp effect—became prominent in early 1980s arcade games, with the open side tunnels on *Pac Man* clearing the way for later, grander warps that allowed expert players to skip entire levels. Likely the best-known of these warp zones is that found in Level 1-2 of the 1985 Nintendo game *Super Mario Bros.*, in which a plumber named Mario falls down a pipe and finds himself in the Mushroom Kingdom, where he is called upon to confront the evil lizard-king Bowser and rescue Princess Toadstool. This quest would normally require the traversal of 8 different “worlds”, with 4 levels apiece (designated World 1-1, 1-2, [ . . . ], 8-3, 8-4). By judicious use of warp zones, though, Mario need only go through 8 levels in all. This procedure is exactly what Kinbote attempts to do via the cross-references in his Foreword and Notes. Where his initial overwriting of Shade’s poem provides the reader with a leisurely account of intrigue and movement across a variety of settings, the cross-reference patch allows the reader, should he choose, to skip directly to the confrontation with the villainous king. The warp becomes, in Ian Bogost’s term, a “unit operation” of *Pale Fire*—each cross-reference a “general instance of procedural expression”, which taken together form “a configurative system, an arrangement of discrete, interlocking units of expressive meaning” (2008, ix).

But with the implementation of this procedural expression comes also added uncertainty, not limited solely to whether or not the reader will make use of the warps. The warp as unit operation has always been perilous because of the element of randomization it introduces to the game. For

instance, in *Spacewar!*, while the warp button *could* leave a player's ship in an advantageous position, it could also dump it into the sun (KENT 2001, 19). In *Super Mario Bros.*, the danger of the warp is not tied to game mechanics, but rather to instabilities within the game's code, which reveal a corresponding instability in the narrative. If Mario enters the warp zone not by going over one particular wall, but rather by walking through it, and then goes down the pipe that formerly led to World 4, he will find himself instead in the "Minus World",<sup>5</sup> so named because it appears not as World 1-1, or World 8-1, but rather as World -1. It seems to be a standard level, but the pipe at the end, instead of leading to any exit, deposits Mario back at the beginning again. To escape, the player must either sacrifice all her lives, or reset the system. This loop parallels the structure of the game as a whole: even after Mario defeats Bowser and rescues the Princess, the game makes him start all over again. Whether Minus World or Mushroom Kingdom, the only available exit is suicide.

So, too, with Charles Kinbote and the mirror world of Zembla. The writing and overwriting of his ever more elaborate narrative of paranoid delusion is an exercise in prolonging the inevitable—while readers are never far from a passage tracking Gradus's progress, the more plausible threat of suicide, and the overwhelming loneliness leading Kinbote in that direction, can get lost amid the adventure. The series of warps strips the narrative down to its essential affective arc: from elation, to despair, to the formation of a compensatory delusion. The effect of funneling readers toward the kingdom revelation is to make them party to a very long suicide note—just as Mario will, eventually, be left to die, whether by neglect, or just having the world turned off around him, so too will Kinbote eventually face his fate, and enter the uncertain reprieve of death.

## Let's Play

Death is "uncertain" in *Pale Fire* not least because Kinbote's reprieve lasts only so long as the reader of the book waits to return to it. Just as Mario, after plummeting down a bottomless pit, finds himself back at square one, so too even as Kinbote is plummeting toward the earth *sans* parachute, he is already being prepared to, in Shade's words, "live on, fly on, in the reflected sky" (НАВОКОВ 1989, 33). While it may seem that suicide will release him from the loops of his own delusions, it ultimately just returns

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5. See [http://www.mariowiki.com/Minus\\_World](http://www.mariowiki.com/Minus_World), for a GIF of the process.

him to the start, to await another reader (or the same reader as another) to activate the narrative loop.

Given this central mechanism, and Nabokov's own insistence on the importance of rereading, it's unsurprising that many critics have documented, sometimes exhaustively, their actual process of going through the book—a form of captured experience referred to in videogame criticism as a “Let's Play” (or LP).<sup>6</sup> One such take is Mary McCarthy's contemporary review-essay in *The New Republic*, which asserts the existence of multiple story “levels” within the novel, beginning with the tale Kinbote tells, and the “real, real story, the story underneath” (MCCARTHY) of Kinbote's madness—and, furthermore, that neither level can be accepted as definitive. In this it functions as a “trap for reviewers” (MCCARTHY), or at least those reviewers who cannot extract themselves from Nabokov's narrative structure.<sup>7</sup> By identifying multiple experiences available within *Pale Fire*, she initiates the process of opening the book up to be explored in a variety of modes.

Where McCarthy provides something like an introductory manual—mapping out the basic shape of the book, pointing out a few potential paths for further investigation—Boyd in his study *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* provides a full walkthrough: not one, but *three* trips through the text, covering the main narrative arc, as well as several “sidequests”—content (such as finding the hiding place of the Zemblan Crown Jewels: cf. BOYD 2000, 99–102) that does not bear on the main narrative, but which may be deciphered by explorers looking for additional challenges. In revisiting the text beyond the “end” of the book, beyond even the deaths of its two main principals, Boyd also delves deep into what videogamers would call “postgame content”, material that only opens up for exploration once the main objective has been achieved.<sup>8</sup> While each successive pass through the text still ends with a confrontation against an

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6. Originally emerging around 2004 as a means of revisiting childhood games, the form quickly developed into a highly varied genre. Many examples are available at the Let's Play Archive ([lparchive.org](http://lparchive.org)), or the Internet Archive ([archive.org/details/lets-play](http://archive.org/details/lets-play)).

7. A number of contemporary critics of *Pale Fire* became thus entangled, typified by Dwight Macdonald's assertion that the novel was “the most unreadable I've attempted this season” (qtd. in PAGE 1982, 25). Macdonald's language is telling: to read is to “attempt”, perhaps to fail—but any failure is the author's fault, not the critic's.

8. For more on sidequests, 100% gameplay, and alternate modes of gaming completion generally, see NEWMAN 104–13.

authorial and authoritarian figure—first Kinbote, then Shade, and then, finally, Nabokov himself—there is an attempt to find different exit points, to avoid the Minus World loop in which Kinbote (as well as the reader) finds himself trapped.

In his initial read-through, Boyd takes the cross-reference warp in the Foreword (2000, 19–24), obtaining the knowledge of the “ultimate truth [and] extraordinary secret” (НАВОКОВ 1989, 215) of Kinbote’s regal identity before moving forward through the remainder of the text, continuing to take the warps where possible, noting along the way wherever events or words seem somehow wrong, or inconsistent with the project at hand. Boyd reads, as it were, for the *errors*; if Kinbote’s project is, as I have argued, akin to that of a programmer patching buggy code, then Boyd is a playtester, seeking out the bugs that remain, the errors that cannot be patched over. The greatest of these is that there never was a Jakob Gradus: Shade’s killer was instead Jack Grey, a criminally insane asylum escapee who fires on the poet by mistake. With this, Kinbote’s madness is confirmed beyond any doubt, and readers see “through the mirages of his madness glimpses of unexpected inadmissible truths, not only that he is mad, but that he is invented” (BOYD 2000, 61). Having confronted and exposed the villainous king, Boyd takes the exit, prepared for another pass through the terrain of the text.

If, like the assassin and the regicide plot, Kinbote himself is manufactured, the questions dominating a rereading must be what else is manufactured, and—as McCarthy anticipated—the identity of the manufacturer. The question of authorship within *Pale Fire* is a vexed one, dating back nearly as far back as the book itself.<sup>9</sup> Initially, most readers trust the textual provenance given by Kinbote in the Foreword—that Shade is responsible for the poem, and Kinbote for all other material; the latter even inserts a disclaimer to that effect early on to absolve his publisher of liability for any error in the book (НАВОКОВ 1989, 18).<sup>10</sup> But as the disparity between his Zemblan delusions and the “real” world of Shade and Wordsmith College grows ever wider, a new symmetry seems to emerge: points of correspondence between apparatus and poem that lead many critics to surmise that

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9. BOYD 2000 summarizes the dispute up through early 1998 (114–6). For a more recent account, see DEREWAL AND ROTH 2009, though others have provided alternate answers to the question since, such as ALLDAYE 2012.

10. The disclaimer appears, appropriately enough, immediately before an editorial error.



Shade (or, far less often, Kinbote<sup>11</sup>) must be the author of the entire work. Have we gotten to the final confrontation, only to discover a further presence lurking beyond?

The question is of particular importance for Boyd because when his biography *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* was published, he was one of the leading proponents of the Shadean theory. But in his later book he reverses position or, rather, navigates through it, finding a new strategy for reading Nabokov's work—one that preserves Kinbote's output, while still allowing Shade some influence over the words the troubled professor puts to page. In short, Boyd proposes that Shade, after his murder, helps Kinbote craft the assassination narrative that will make sense of the slaying within the latter's structure of delusion—a structure already heavily shaped by another “shade”, John's daughter Hazel, who provides Kinbote with the initial idea of Zembla as a means of communicating with her father following her suicide.<sup>12</sup> The not-so-departed bring to bear on Kinbote's writing their wisdom and experiences—and also a limited knowledge of future events: herself a suicide, Hazel expresses sympathy with Kinbote's future course of action by building into the Zemblan fantasy a valorization of death by one's own hand (BOYD 2000, 169). This curiously hybridized method of textual transmission will allow Kinbote to embrace the only escape from his delusory loops—but it will also provide the reader a way to move beyond Nabokov's seemingly enclosed narrative.

## Ex Ponto

This development emerges from a passage Boyd once regarded as indisputable proof of the Shadean theory, an envoi Nabokov added as comment on the book's new index: “As John Shade says somewhere: ‘Nobody will heed my index, I suppose, / But through it a gentle wind *ex Ponto* blows’” (1991, 445). Boyd only fleetingly revisits this passage in *The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, but following his argument there, one wouldn't begrudge Shade his

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11. In *Worlds in Regression*, D. Barton Johnson attributes authorship not to Kinbote, but to Kinbote's “real” identity: a scarcely-mentioned background character, V. Botkin (70). Another alternative is that Nabokov troubles the dual-author model while leaving the true authorship fundamentally indeterminate; see in particular MCHALE, 18–9.

12. Cf. 149–87; note the “other routes” Boyd charts as alternate means of hitting on this strategy—it isn't necessary to follow his specific play-through in order to reach this point.

status as Kinbote's collaborator; given the playful, dry humor pervading the Index, there is a possibility that he could be responsible for nearly all of it.

But in this case the envoi would also be postmortem, with the "some-where" taking on an additional meaning, that of Shade in a sort of limbo. This sense is heightened in his allusion to "*ex Ponto*"—a phrase proverbial for "in exile", derived from epistolary verse composed by Ovid during his forced relocation to Scythia on the Black Sea, in which he simultaneously bewails the crudity of his surroundings and brags of writing poetry in the "barbarian" Scythian tongue. The Shade depicted in *Pale Fire* might have come by this poem in the original; Nabokov, however, would certainly have had it via Pushkin, who wrote a verse response, *To Ovid*, while himself exiled by the Black Sea. Nabokov spent the majority of his life in exile from his homeland, exile which began on the Black Sea, in the Crimean village of Livadiya. He also produced a celebrated English translation of and commentary on Pushkin's verse-novel *Eugene Onegin*, the structure of which, down to the ratio of commentary to verse, is reflected in *Pale Fire*—laying out a complex web of association by which the great sages of the language might guide the steps and words of another "exile", Charles Kinbote.

Is *Pale Fire* Nabokov's own "gentle breeze *ex Ponto*", dedicated to his literary hero Pushkin, emerging out of his extended American exile? Perhaps—but at the very least Nabokov's deployment of Shade's allusion would seem to locate it in the tradition by which Pushkin can talk to Ovid, Nabokov to Pushkin, Shade to Nabokov: a mirror-reversal of the usual flow of poetic influence, made possible through the applications of a succession of reader-rewriters. "Nabokov determines the patterns of [his characters'] worlds", Boyd writes, "precisely because he in turn suspects that something beyond him shapes his world and ours" (2000, 242). The process of authorship is never one-sided, never just the caricatures of the Barthesian reader or the Nabokovian writer—but neither is it just a two-fold partnership between these parties; authorship is manifold, a shifting flux that is at once the entire network, past, present, and future, of contributors and consumers of any given text, as well as the particular cross-section of that network brought to bear at a particular moment by a particular reader.

John Shade in his final poem recorded similar suspicions, writing of cosmically distant beings, "aloof and mute, / Playing a game of worlds" (NABOKOV 1989, 63). Who can these be but players of Shade's text, of Kinbote's, of Nabokov's, enacting and extinguishing these lives, being enacted and extinguished in turn? Even without being particularly aloof, Shade as a reader of Kinbote's output playfully draws attention to worlds beyond by

reaching out through the *Pale Fire* critical edition, using textual alterations to gloss his own lines despite his editor's dedicated misinterpretations. In fact, it's Kinbote's egregious errors that open up for Shade (and Nabokov, and all subsequent readers) this game of the beyond—something Shade unknowingly anticipated in finding his poem's "real point, [its] contrapuntal theme" in a typo (NABOKOV 1989, 62).

The poet devotes most of his poem's third section to this discovery. Following a near-death experience in which he glimpsed a vision of a white *fountain*, he is astonished to read a newspaper account of a woman who has apparently seen the same thing in similar circumstances—only to discover later that it was an error: the woman had seen a white *mountain*. "Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!" he muses, as he considers whether or not to "stop investigating my abyss" (NABOKOV 1989, 62). This will become apparent as an echo of Kinbote's situation only later, yet the solution Shade hits on here is valid across all narrative levels: to read for such "topsy-turvical coincidence[s]", seeking "some kind of correlated pattern in the game" (NABOKOV 1989, 63). This marks a shift in hermeneutic, from reading for identity and confirmation, to reading for *error*—then coordinating or otherwise repurposing these misbegotten revelations. Or, as Shade puts it, "Making ornaments / Of accidents and possibilities" (NABOKOV 1989, 63).

## The Glitch

Approaching a text this way, however, turns reading into something like *glitching*: a term used by videogamers to describe a mode of gameplay in which the player actively seeks out and exploits programming errors and oversights. This play can be carried out in a variety of ways—some, like the *Minus World* glitch, triggered from within the game world; others by altering the software or hardware—but all can be recognized within Nabokov's own definition of reading given above. Whether the lines are those of code, or of the pixels on the display, the glitcher laboriously moves her eyes through screen after screen, learning in terms of space and time what the game is about—and more importantly (for game and book alike), what it is about to *do*.

This is oddly reminiscent of the hermeneutics of Roland Barthes, or at least the Barthes of *S/Z*, for whom reading was affirmative forgetting—forgetting not as "defect" or "error" but an assertion of plurality and multiplicity, "play which is the return of the different" (1974, 11, 16). Like Nabokov, Barthes insists on rereading: "those who fail to reread are obliged to read

the same story everywhere”; like him too, glibly denying the possibility of “reading” alone, “as if everything were not already read: there is no *first* reading, even if the text is concerned to give us that illusion” (1974, 16). He also insists the rereading is undertaken not “for some intellectual advantage”—“to understand better, to analyze on good grounds”—but “actually and invariably for a ludic advantage”: to play the game better (1974, 165).

Barthes’s suggested approach—cutting a story into “brief, contiguous fragments” he calls *lexias*—produces a text that shares a physical resemblance with *Pale Fire*, and especially to Kinbote’s labors (Cf. CHUPIN 2002). And while Barthes’s bracketed numbers do not warp in the same way Kinbote’s do, nonetheless his description of meaning-making processes such as the Antithesis proceeds in glitchy terms: “every passage through the wall of the Antithesis [. . .] thus constitutes a transgression” which the narrative maps onto the mediating body (BARTHES 1974, 27, 28). Movement through a seemingly solid wall is one of the most desirable glitches to trigger, as it holds out the promise of shortcuts or access to otherwise unreachable territory. But this literal transgression can pose a threat to the integrity of the game’s code—in extreme cases, even rendering the game unplayable.<sup>13</sup> This, Barthes would note, is the same risk posed by attempts to breach or leap over that “wall without a doorway”, antithesis (1974, 65). When two antithetical elements are brought into contact, “there is an explosive shock, a paradigmatic conflagration” that results in the destruction and scattering of the “excess”—the meaning itself (BARTHES 1974, 66). The punishment for this transgression is, of course, death—but a death deferred, inevitable, looming.

Nabokov’s Kinbote and Balzac’s (or Barthes’s) Sarrasine find themselves in similar predicaments: while only the latter faces the specific contagion of castration, both are caught in a looping process continually reinscribed upon text and body alike. For Barthes,<sup>14</sup> this marks the “readerly” mode of textual engagement; he counters with a “writerly” mode that proceeds from evaluation rather than reiterative demonstration (1974, 3). As Leslie Hill points out, the distinction between the two modes is never as sharp after the study’s opening statement, amounting ultimately to a moment of “hesitation” when approaching a text, an evaluation of the need for evaluation:

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13. Such as the “Missing NO.” glitch in *Pokémon Red and Blue*, which can render a game cartridge inoperable (cf. NEWMAN 116–20).

14. At least the Barthes of *S/Z*; in later years he would move toward ever less final expressions of textual engagement (cf. HILL 120–37).

Indecision not only precedes evaluation; it also renders it perpetually provisional. Evaluation . . . is paradoxically never an original, found act; it is always separated from itself, deferred and divided, always therefore a transvaluation, which, as such, contains at least two distinct moments: a pause and a gesture, an effacement and an inscription, an interval and an act. (HILL 2010, 108)

In order to separate itself from the readerly's endless loop of self-reinscription, the writerly must also reinscribe itself endlessly. Both modes are thus akin to Kinbote's situation, to the *Minus World*: they are inextricably glitched. The distinction between the two modes can only *mean* (something, anything) if they are already grounded in a more expansive mode of textual engagement, one suited to the exploration of "the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages": a mode suited to "the infinite play of the world" (BARTHES 1974, 5). Call it the *playerly*; or, to map back onto Barthes's terminology, the *texte jouable*.

Playerly engagement begins before the decision to accept or resist a text, at the moment of hesitation in the face of infinite possibility. From this moment, the readerly and the writerly are but two of the innumerable modes of play available to the reader—and pursuing one does not foreclose upon the others. This is the sort of playful reading that *Pale Fire* encourages and dramatizes—a point that may be proved by any classroom of students given the book to read. Some will opt to read the book straight through, cover to cover, accepting Kinbote's Zembla narrative at face value. Others will take the cross-reference warps, in a more or less dedicated fashion. Others still will fashion their own warps, riffing the pages, skipping around haphazardly.<sup>15</sup> Some will fail to finish it, or to open the book at all. Though some of these textual encounters will likely prove more pedagogically productive than others, nonetheless they are all valid modes of engaging with the playerly text—which, if it is to cohere at all, can only do so as the sum total of all such interactions, even (or especially) those which seem failed or abortive. After all, no interpretations that will emerge from this hypothetical classroom are likely to be as wildly mistaken as Kinbote's—yet it's those which provide the occasion for the book we know as *Pale Fire*; including, if we play along with Boyd, the opportunity for John Shade to further the misinterpretation of his own work from beyond the grave.

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15. As Barthes notes, this radical method of textual navigation—*tnesis*, or "skipping"—was not just available to readers of "classic texts", but was ubiquitous and perhaps inevitable (1975, 10–1).

“Any history of the book”, D. H. Mackenzie found, “must be a history of misreadings” (1999, 25). At any given moment the book (or the text more broadly construed) is an anticipation of misreadings, fertile ground for the errors that will shape the thought of future generations—and in turn the ornaments they make “of accidents and possibilities”, as Shade says of the players of the game of worlds (НАВОКОВ 1989, 63). This, ultimately, is why the hypertextual model of *Pale Fire* is of limited use in exploring the novel—not because it’s erroneous in any way, but rather because it’s unnecessarily static.<sup>16</sup> Recent research on *Pale Fire* and hypertextuality has usefully explored the *design* of Nabokov’s fiction, yet produces a *Pale Fire* already tied to a particular mode of play.<sup>17</sup> While the book can certainly be read as a collection of interlinked lexia, it can also be read front to back; it can also be read—borrowing from common alternate objectives in video-game Let’s Plays—for maximum speed, or for 100% completion (completing all sidequests), or as a basis for further creative endeavor.

Additionally, the novel can be *glitched*: exploited by a reader looking for places in the text where the walls of utterance may be breached. This is to read along with John Shade, who develops out of a typographical error a hermeneutics targeting “not text, but texture; not the dream / But topsyturvical coincidence, / Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense” (НАВОКОВ 1989, 63). The greatest revelations may come not from any personal vision or sage counsel, but through errors: a typo here, a misreading there leading to wild flights of imaginative and critical play. There may be guardrails to interpretation, but that does not preclude the possibility of plunging headlong through them, and plummeting to the earth below. *Pale Fire* not only dramatizes this sort of fatal misinterpretation, but also shows how readers continue on afterwards, how they fly on in the reflected sky.

Despite the authoritarian reputation Nabokov cultivated, *Pale Fire* is a book that, built in and on error, radically undermines the writing of *any* text, including Barthes’s writerly text. Writing opens up spaces beyond control, where we are open to both the “gentle wind *ex Ponto*” from previous generations and the interventions of future rewriters. They are *at* play in our texts, just as their interpretations—however erroneous—are *in* play. To read, or to write, whether for the first time or the hundredth,

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16. The “*Pale Fire* as proto-hypertext” model may actually get things backwards—given that Ted Nelson, the inventor of hypertext, sought and received permission from Putnam in 1969 to use the novel as a demonstration of his invention’s potential, one might as easily speak of hypertext as post-*Pale Fire*.

17. See especially ROWBERRY 2012.

is to take a cross-section of this multiplicity of meaning. It is impossible to reread, because the text is never the same twice; it is impossible to read anew, because the text has already been read and rewritten ad infinitum. This disconnect marks a glitch in our own processing routines, both entry into and potential exit from a Minus World that Nabokov and Barthes play and replay in their own ways—as all readers do also in their own.

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