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Another Kind of Hell: Fundamentals of the Dystopian Short Story

Charles Holdefer

- 1 Dystopian literature has a long history and a secure place in the literary canon. Novels by Swift, Orwell, Huxley, Atwood and others have famously created elaborate taxonomies of imaginary worlds which are grotesquely compromised by their pursuit of an ideal. Confronted with such descriptions, readers are likely to react in the manner of Huckleberry Finn who, after hearing Miss Watson's description of heaven, concludes that he certainly does not want to go *there*. He even says he'd rather go to the "bad place" (12). This focus on a particular "there," this emphasis on an alternative place, is central to dystopian writing in longer forms.
- 2 The dystopian short story, however, operates according to a different economy. A form that places a premium on brevity does not have the luxury of an elaborate taxonomy of place. *Topos* is figured differently. The critic Wendell Harris, attempting to sketch out some basic differences between the nineteenth century novel and the rise of the short story, emphasized how the novel explores the relationship between individuals and a historical continuum, whereas the short story, comparatively speaking, tends to detach the individual from elaborate social and historical grounding in order to privilege a more inward focus (189-90). Because of this interiority, Charles May has referred to the short story as an inheritor of "the original religious nature of narrative" (*New Short Story* xxvi). Although one can qualify such descriptions or find exceptions, these generic outlines generally hold true for dystopian literature, too, while posing specific problems. If place counts for much in the dystopian novel, how is the transition to another type of emphasis—a crossing into a more allusive aesthetic territory—accomplished? How is an external world effectively internalized? Or, to put it familiarly, what happens when a tale relies less on the look of a place than on its "feel?"
- 3 Although this discussion cannot pretend to be exhaustive, I have purposely chosen a very eclectic range of short stories in order to illustrate an underlying commonality of the genre, a family resemblance that will tell us something about the form.¹ These stories are

Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (1948), a widely-anthologized fable about a ritual murder by stoning in a modern New England town; Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" (1961), a science fiction tale set in America in 2081 where universal equality is enforced by handicapping anyone who is above average; George Saunders' "Jon" (2003), a piece of speculative fiction about a luxury concentration camp where teenagers are experimental subjects for advertising research; and Jennifer Egan's "Black Box" (2012), a futuristic techno-thriller about a Jane Bondish character on a top secret mission in a very unfriendly environment.² These stories are all very different from one another in style, sub-genre and tone, as well as in the specific dystopian territories that they imagine. They arise out of markedly different historical and cultural contexts: Jackson relies on a neo-Puritanical ruralism; Vonnegut evinces a post-Orwellian Cold War sensibility; Saunders reflects on an era of hyper-consumerism while Egan offers a meditation on the globalized "War on Terror." In spite of these differences, however, it is possible to see how these stories share qualities of a particular kind of hell. I would like to begin by explaining what version of hell I am talking about, in light of some general theoretical observations about the short story genre, and then I will explore several of its more salient features which, in the course of dystopian satire, are often interrelated: namely, ritualized assaults in the name of a "positive" ideal which result in separating individuals not only from their autonomous selves, but also from one another.

Hell

- 4 "Hell" means many things, and its pertinence here is literary, not theological, though the former is conceptually indebted to the latter. Charles May's observation about the short story's connection to the religious inheritance of narrative is worth exploring, as are a few observations about traditional representations and understandings of this terrible place.
- 5 In *I Am Your Brother*, May points to two foundational myths from *Genesis*—the story of Adam and Eve being expelled from the garden, and Cain slaying his brother Abel—and their influence on Romantic literature, which in turn provided the impetus for the short story. In the narrative about Adam and Eve, humanity is separated from God and left to its own devices, to struggle and yearn for a lost wholeness that is now out of reach; in the narrative of Cain and Abel, we find a primal example of humans separated from each other, in an isolation so severe that it is possible to kill one's brother. With reference to the psychologist Jean Piaget and the philosopher Martin Buber, May theorizes that this anxiety of separation is a legacy of both infancy and culture, and that the short story, in its various manifestations, frequently enacts these myths, these ancient sources of anguish. "The central focus of the short story as a genre is the primordial story that constitutes human beings existentially—their basic sense of aloneness and their yearning for union" (*I Am Your Brother*). What is more, generic brevity is a constitutive element of how the story is *experienced*. The novel, for its length, tends to offer a narrative that naturalizes experience by appealing to a framework of time and reason, and in this sense reconciles the reader to some version of an imagined post-*Genesis* world; whereas the short story remains closer to source myths, fairy stories and folk tales, which are atemporal and share a space with dreams and whose allusiveness can leave the reader in an unreconciled state (May, *New Short Story* xxvi). In another context, Terry Eagleton has suggested that the commonly realistic mode of the novel is largely based on a "cognitive

form [which is] concerned to map the causal processes underlying events and resolve them into some intelligible pattern. The short story, by contrast, can yield us some single bizarre occurrence or epiphany of terror, whose impact would merely be blunted by lengthy realist elaboration" (196).

- 6 Such observations about genre are not a prescription for how a short story "should be" or, even less, an attempt to put forward an essentialist claim about what a short story "is." Rather, they are simply a general description of how the genre has frequently been practiced. To this description, I would like to add a few of my own observations about how these precedents play out in dystopian narratives, with specific reference to competing hellish visions.
- 7 The dystopian novel typically offers a sustained description of a place and its inhabitants; think, for example, of the complex organization of Dante's *Inferno*, whose critical editions usually include a map of nine concentric rings of hell, which helps the reader to visualize the place of torment. A considerable amount of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* is devoted to explaining and locating the social organization, institutions and ideologies of the Country of the Houyhnhnms, Oceania or the Republic of Gilead. They map out their own versions of Dante's hellish underworld.
- 8 The dystopian short story, however, because of the generic particularities described above, reflects another kind of hell, whose theological parallel refers to a conceptualization which is less available to being mapped. Instead of a place, this hell is a *state*. While rooted in a long tradition going back to Egyptian, Classical, Hebrew and early Christian teachings,³ this idea grew more widespread in the nineteenth century—notably, at around the same time as the rise of romanticism and the short story. This hell constitutes a "self-exclusion from communion with God," according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 1033). This sort of spatialization is of a different order from the belief (which still persists among some Protestant fundamentalists) in hell as a real place resembling depictions in the art of Hieronymus Bosch or in the fifth century theological arguments of St. Augustine of Hippo, who wrote about an underground lake of fire, brimstone and devils (*City of God* 21.10). In imagining hell less materially as a problem of "self-exclusion," we have crossed into a different kind of territory.⁴
- 9 My purpose here is not to promulgate a particular version of religious orthodoxy but to point out that this sense of exclusion or *separation* parallels Charles May's speculation about the short story genre, and that the dystopian short story could arguably represent an extreme example for which the term "hell" is a useful metaphor. According to Alice K. Turner, "The landscape of Hell is the largest shared construction project in imaginative history, and its chief architects have been creative giants—Homer, Virgil, Augustine, Dante, Bosch, Michelangelo, Milton, Goethe, Blake, and more" (3). The dystopian short story, I would argue, participates in this project, and recognizing the hellish dimension is part of giving the genre its due.
- 10 In the secular configurations of hell that I am describing, the individual is separated not from God but from the possibility, both physically and mentally, of an autonomous self. The fight to overcome "self-exclusion" often provides the necessary conflict in short story plots where characters struggle against a system that abuses them as they try to recover or defend their beleaguered selves. Thus the more general topographical (and novelistic) mode that construes hell as a place, or the metaphysical emphasis on a supernatural being, gives way to another mode, a personal focus, a more intimate locus.

Fictional settings (for instance, the village in “The Lottery,” the living room in “Harrison Bergeron,” the market research center in “Jon” and the Mediterranean backdrop of “Black Box”) are only cursorily described, in keeping with short story technique; but the physical and mental ruptures from autonomous selves experienced by Tessie Hutchinson, George and Hazel Bergeron, the teenager Jon and the unnamed secret agent in “Black Box” share a similar kind of misery, an experience of a dire state in regard to which, if one can paraphrase Huckleberry Finn in a more contemporary idiom, “you don’t want to go there.”

Ritualized Assault

- 11 Violence is subject to many representations in literature but my emphasis here will be specifically on ritualized violence in service of a calculated, impersonal ideal. The system or ideal does not have to be explained—indeed, in a short story, it might be explained only a little or not at all, and this element of mystery can make it all the more terrible or even flirt with the sublime⁵—but the dystopian short story makes it nonetheless clear that the violence is not by accident but rather by a design. Going back to Thomas More’s original version, Northrop Frye has identified descriptions of rituals as one of the main literary qualities of constructing a utopia (206), and the same technique holds true for its ugly evil twin, dystopia. The recurrent performance of a ritual helps to normalize a practice: in this case, customs of physical and mental assault.
- 12 “The Lottery” effectively dramatizes this aspect with a plot structured around an annual community social event whose sinister purpose emerges only gradually. The inhabitants of a village gather for a drawing to determine which of the citizens will be stoned to death. A precise protocol is observed, conducted by village elders and revolving around a black box of symbolic sobriety. The eternal cycle of seasons is evoked by a character named Old Man Warner who recalls the folk proverb: “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” (297). He defends the tradition and forms of the ritual while worrying about other villages abandoning the custom. Tessie Hutchinson “wins” the drawing (if such a term can be used) whereupon the entire community, from children with pebbles to adults with large stones, converge upon her. Although Tessie protests that “it isn’t fair” (302) when the stones rain down on her, the disturbing truth about this place is that she is, actually, quite wrong. The rules of the lottery were scrupulously observed and she was a willing participant in the ritual, surrendering her autonomy over her body to take on this risk—even running to the public square for fear of arriving late.
- 13 In “Harrison Bergeron,” the dark fable becomes farce as the “Handicapper General” imposes equality on all bodies, for instance requiring ballerinas to wear masks and to be “burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot” (8), lest they appear too pretty and graceful and make someone else feel inferior. George Bergeron has a canvas bag weighing forty-seven pounds padlocked around his neck, and his wife Hazel remarks that he has been acting a bit tired lately. George does not want to think about it, though, or rather, he *cannot* think about it, since his intelligence is way above normal so he is obliged to wear a radio transmitter in his ear at all times: “Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains” (7). In the course of the story while George sits in the living room and converses with his wife, his head is variously blasted with noises like “someone hitting a milk bottle with a ball peen hammer” (8); “a twenty-one gun salute” (9); “a siren” (9) and

“a rivetting gun” (13). The repetition of this equalizing technique amounts to a constant assault, and it blurs the distinction between autonomy over his physical self (George’s pain is such that he is regularly wincing or is “white and trembling [...] tears on the rims of his red eyes” [9]) and his mental self. The two are intimately connected. Despite his misery, though, George does not want to take measures that might provide relief; he excludes himself from the option, telling Hazel that he does not mind living with the canvas bag padlocked around his neck: “It’s just a part of me” (9). He defends his condition in the name of a higher principle: “If I tried to get away with it [...] then other people’d get away with it—and pretty soon we’d be right back in the dark ages again” (9). The ritualized assault on his person is done in the name of progress.

- 14 The measures in “Harrison Bergeron” are decidedly low-tech, whereas later short stories like “Jon” and “Black Box” rely on more sophisticated and intrusive devices. In George Saunders’ “Jon,” a select group of teenagers incarcerated at a marketing research center are fitted with “gargadisks” in their necks and their minds are conditioned with “Location Indicators” to provide them a worldview expressed entirely in advertising slogans and scenarios from brand-name commercials. The central conflict of the story arises when one of these teenagers, Jon, falls in love with another teenager, Carolyn and, in short order, she becomes pregnant. This very old-fashioned kind of trouble has no place at the forward-looking center, where the youths are supposed to be testing new products for the rest of the world and are themselves marketed as “TrendSetters & Tastemakers” (132). When a rift develops between the young couple about whether they should try to leave the center—again, the sort of problem which is not supposed to exist—one of the means for Jon to deal with the stress is by taking generous doses of a drug called Aurobon:

And the Aurabon® would make things better, as Aurabon® always makes things better, although soon what I found was, when you are hooking in like eight or nine times a day, you are always so happy, and yet it is a kind of happy like chewing on tinfoil, and once you are living for that sort of happy, you soon cannot be happy enough, even when you are very very happy and are even near tears due to the beauty of the round metal hooks used to hang your facility curtains, you feel this intense wish to be even happier, so you tear yourself away from the beautiful curtain hooks, and with shaking happy hands fill out another Work-Affecting Mood-Problem Notification, and then, [...] nothing in your facility is beautiful enough to look at with your new level of happiness [...] until finally one day Mr. Dove comes over and says, Randy, Jon, whatever you are calling yourself these days—a couple of items. First, it seems to us that you are in some private space not helpful to you, and so we are cutting back your Aurabon® to twice a day. (146-47)

- 15 Such social management by pharmaceuticals recalls the “soma-holidays” in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* but there is a difference. Here it is not only a matter of controlling individuals by chemical means and keeping them too placid for rebellion; there is also the question of work. Although Jon lives in a cosseted environment surrounded by the latest in fashionable products, he has a job to do, providing his superiors with valuable consumer data about his immature tastes. His mind and body are not only controlled but also *instrumentalized*. When Mr. Dove euphemistically refers to a “some private space not helpful to you,” of course he is really expressing his disapproval that Jon can occupy a private space that is not useful to *him*—and thus, by his reckoning, has no reason to exist.
- 16 In Jennifer Egan’s “Black Box,” the measures are even more intrusive. The tweets that comprise the narration function as a sort of instruction manual, written in the second

person, in which the reader learns that “A microphone has been implanted just beyond the first turn of your right ear canal” (87) or that you can “Reach between your right fourth and pinky toes (if right-handed) and remove the Data Plug from your Universal Port” (94). Such gadgetry as well as other devices turn the “citizen agent” into an object that, as the critic Bruce Stone has observed, “will be downloaded like a flash drive.” This is instrumentalization to the utmost, and other tweets explain the meaning of the story’s title: “Your physical person is our Black Box; without it, we have no record of what has happened on your mission” (95); and “Remember that, should you die, your body will yield a crucial trove of information” (97).

- 17 In order to facilitate this physical strain, violence to an autonomous mental self is a necessary condition. In the service of her mission, which is vaguely defined as fighting terrorism and “to perpetuate American life as you know it” (92), her personal memories can be dislodged or deleted. The most extreme example, however, concerns the interplay between physical and mental autonomy as dramatized by the “dissociation technique” (86). This technique, likened early in the story to a parachute, is reserved for moments in which the agent must bail out—not from an airplane, but from her conscious awareness, in times of great trauma. For instance, in the line of “duty,” she is raped, not once, but *twice*—the repetition ritualizes or “normalizes” the performance. The “Dissociation Technique” allows for a kind of extreme detachment that is supposed to help her get through it—or, at least, not let any sense of an autonomous self distract her from her mission. As Bruce Stone has remarked: “This brand of heroism is not just self-effacing, but self-extinguishing.”
- 18 The different cultural contexts of these stories are manifest. Jackson’s ritualized assault is, literally, a ritual, while Vonnegut, Saunders and Egan rely variously on mechanization, pharmaceuticals and digitalization for iterative effect. Despite these differences, both in kind and degree, there is nonetheless a common target, which remains unchanged across several generations of writers: the autonomous self.

Separation from Others

- 19 So far I have focussed on separation as a largely self-reflexive affair, but by now it should be clear that this is not a narcissistic manoeuvre, even if, in this version of hell, the human individual stands in for God. On another level, the damning separation is also enacted in relation to others, echoing Charles May’s allusion to the foundational story of Cain and Abel. This schism provides an added source of torment.
- 20 In “The Lottery,” Tessie Hutchinson chooses to give up her individual autonomy to participate in the village ritual and meld with the group. As mentioned earlier, it is only when the results turn out badly that she protests. It is too late to recover what she has lost, and she pays the highest price. But she has not only betrayed herself: significantly, in joining the community, she also can no longer relate to them as “others” whose difference would logically confer on her an alternative status and, conceivably, a different outcome. The entire category of “others” disappears and becomes imperceptible in a totalizing norm. As a consequence, Tessie inadvertently separates herself from a saving possibility. Her smothering proximity to the group is paradoxically alienating—such is the harsh experience of the besieged individual—who, the closer she comes, the farther she moves from a hopeful resolution. There is no suggestion in “The Lottery” that her

family is wilfully against her, but the winnowing process of the drawing situates them structurally as necessary participants in her doom.

- 21 In “Harrison Bergeron,” this distancing is all the more stark for taking place in the bland atmosphere of an American living room where a middle-aged couple watches bad TV. George and Hazel’s personal autonomy is under assault, certainly, in intimately painful ways. The Handicapper General, a Big Sister caricature named Diana Moon Glampers, has imposed her levelling discipline on their bodies and minds. But the plot turns on the amazing appearance of the Bergerons’ son, Harrison, on the TV screen, whose physical and mental superiority bursts forth in a moment of revolutionary transgression. Harrison is shockingly under-handicapped, “a genius and an athlete [...] regarded as extremely dangerous” (10). His parents recognize him (“My God—” said George, “that must be Harrison!” [11]) and mayhem ensues as Harrison declares himself emperor and claims a beautiful ballerina as his empress, whereupon they dance in an “explosion of joy and grace [...] neutralizing gravity with love and pure will” (13) until the Handicapper General herself, Diana Moon Glampers, takes charge of the situation and cuts them down with “a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun” (13). These would seem to be extraordinary events for George and Hazel to witness on a routine evening in their living room, except, the reader learns near the end of the story, George missed much of the action because he had stepped out to the kitchen to get himself a can of beer. That is, he lives in a state of being so disconnected from his son that he cannot bother to wait and see what will happen to him next. Upon returning to the living room, he asks Hazel why she is crying, and she cannot quite remember. It was just “something real sad” (13) she saw on TV, and George counsels her to forget it. Hyper-violence finishes as a deadpan joke, which is nonetheless serious, too, in that it dramatizes the distance of these individuals from each other, and how much their separation leaves them utterly alone and defenseless.
- 22 In “Jon,” separation is foregrounded by language. The narrator is a comically inarticulate young man whose problem is anything but funny. He and Carolyn are in love, but when she break frees of the testing center in order to give her baby a different kind of life, communication becomes a cruel test. Carolyn’s workaday “gargadisk” has been removed and, as a consequence, her previously imposed “Location Indicators” no longer function as before. There is no longer a shared frame of reference. Jon finds Carolyn’s letter unreadable and “sloppenly” (149), and her dialogue in a later scene is partly nonsensical. A conversation with another character who has tried to function without the Location Indicators describes the predicament of his thought processes as follows: “there are [...] places where things used to be when I went looking for them, brainwise, but now, when I go there, nothing is there, it is like I have the shelving but not the cans of corn” (138). Shortly after saying this, he becomes so frustrated that he flees the room, hitting himself hard in the face. The irony, though, is that people like Carolyn and the man missing his “cans of corn” are the ones that Jon, in his hellish isolation, eventually must try to emulate. Near the end of the story he concludes that his Location Indicators are the barrier to his ever reconnecting with Carolyn and he must give them up. It is not exactly a happy ending but “Jon” is the only one of these dystopian satires that offers a glimmer of hope, of the possibility of characters escaping their state.
- 23 “Black Box” teases out further ambiguities, for example about how desire can be constructed and manipulated by the dystopian forces. Some tweets to the citizen agent sound like standard agitprop sloganeering: “In the new heroism, the goal is to transcend individual life, with its petty pains and losses, in favor of the dazzling collective” (97); or,

“In the new heroism, the goal is to merge with something larger than yourself” (89, 91). But this agent is a more complicated character, with a past and a future which cannot be reduced to slogans. The unacknowledged offspring of a celebrity, she feels like a “fatherless girl” (88) and a central motivation for her actions is not at the service of the “dazzling collective” but is something more personal: a desire to prove to her oblivious father that she is a hero. She wants to reconnect with her past. As for her future, her African husband figures in her hopes; he is described as a successful immigrant who has embraced the American way of life and who now works for the security services. The “citizen agent” wants to be reunited with him and to have children. Again, this is the expression of a personal agenda. Yet the spatial representations of these two men complicate the picture. Her father seems as distant as the moon (“Fatherless girls may invest the moon with a certain paternal promise” [88-89]) while her husband, in his role with the government, might actively be putting her into peril and thereby reinforcing her hellish situation. Consider these tweets: “Your whereabouts will never be a mystery; you will be visible at all times as a dot of light on the screens of those watching over you” (89); and “Because your husband is a visionary in the realm of national security, he occasionally has access to that screen” (91). By the end of the story, lying bloodied and broken in the bottom of a boat, waiting uncertainly to be rescued, it is unclear whether she can ever recover or, if she survives, how much of her former self will be left to recover.

Conclusion

- 24 When Thomas More published *Utopia* in 1516 it was, according to his translator Robert Adams, partly a joke (vii). The title itself is a pun, meaning both “good place” and “no place.” More’s beliefs, notably his theological convictions about human nature, made it a foregone conclusion that heaven or something like it was not going to be found on this earth. Although their sensibilities are decidedly different from Thomas More’s, the authors of the dystopian short stories that I have discussed here reinforce that fundamental point, with a vengeance. Their depictions are, in a sense, admonitory. As Diane Johnson has observed, “Maybe there are people who read dystopian tales for self-improvement the way people used to read sermons” (24).
- 25 Despite their particularities of style, sub-genre and tone, these stories share a common view of a besieged self, which, once deprived of autonomy on its own behalf and in relation to others, enters a metaphorically hellish state. Hell is an extreme metaphor and, because of its theological roots, perhaps unfashionable; still, it captures features that more conventional narrative or psychological descriptions strain to address. Space limitations have restricted this discussion to a selection of American writers, but future study of dystopian short fiction could benefit from further and more detailed appropriations of this metaphor in a transnational context. Not only does the concept of hell serve as a comment on the particular society or system depicted by the authors, it also puts into relief, in a very stark fashion, some of the signature qualities of the short story genre, with its allusive, dreamlike appropriation of the human problem of being at home in the world. It takes a core quality, and enacts it fiercely.

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NOTES

1. Charles May has brought Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of "family resemblance" to literary genre studies. See *New Short Stories Theories xvii-xviii*.
 2. Egan's story first appeared on Twitter over a period of ten days in an experiment sponsored by *The New Yorker*, and it was written not in paragraphs but in a series of tweets of fewer than 140 characters. This article refers to a version of the story which was later published in conventional print form but which preserves the tweets' fragmented, lapidary presentation.
 3. See Alice K. Turner's *The History of Hell* (1995). Although space limitations do not allow me to go into more detail, Turner shows continuities between the Roman Catholic version described here and earlier descriptions from other traditions.
 4. Elsewhere in the *Catechism*, however, one can still find references to "Gehenna" and "eternal fire" (1034, 1035).
 5. "To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary" (Burke).
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ABSTRACTS

Les romans dystopiques décrivent en général un monde imaginaire qui a mal tourné ; la nouvelle dystopique opère bien différemment car elle se construit sur une échelle réduite. Le texte bref ne peut s'autoriser le luxe d'une description détaillée des lieux et le *topos* s'y élabore autrement, illustrant l'idée de Charles May selon laquelle la forme de la nouvelle s'apparente au mythe.

À partir de textes de Shirley Jackson, Kurt Vonnegut, Jennifer Egan et George Saunders, cet article a pour objet d'explorer quelques-unes des particularités de la nouvelle dystopique notamment dans sa présentation d'un « état » infernal qui affecte l'autonomie individuelle et les relations humaines. Ce type d'enfer permet non seulement aux auteurs d'émettre une critique sur une société donnée, il met également en relief, de façon saillante, quelques-uns des traits emblématiques du genre bref.

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Charles Holdefer teaches at the University of Poitiers. His essays have appeared in the *Journal of the Short Story in English*, *New England Review*, *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, *Antioch Review* and elsewhere. His short fiction has been published in the *North American Review*, *Los Angeles Review* and *Slice*, and he has also published four novels, most recently *Back in the Game* (2012).