

You Died. Play Again?
Examining the fictional content of videogames



Marissa Willis
Wycliffe Hall
University of Oxford

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Bachelor of Philosophy in Philosophy
Trinity 2017

Abstract

Videogames are often overlooked in philosophical discussions of art. But as philosophy of art has expanded over the years to include not only traditional arts like music, theatre, and painting but also contemporary arts like film and television, each has brought different challenges and opportunities to expand the way we think, and videogames present many such opportunities of their own. The focus of this work will be to examine the way in which videogames' interactive and player-centric nature can present distinctive types of fictional content. Videogames present a few unusual challenges to establishing what is fictionally true in them, and they also provide a few forms of fictional truth not commonly found in other works. I will examine these challenges and special forms of fictional truth in order to help establish videogames as an interesting and unique form of narrative art, worthy of the attention of philosophers not only for the fictional content which they present, but also for the way in which they present it.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. James Grant, at Exeter College, University of Oxford, for all of the advice, encouragement, and recommendations he gave me for both this project and my shorter essays, as well as so much good discussion in each of our meetings. It has been a pleasure working with you, and this paper would never have come together without your aid.

I would also like to thank my friends and family, especially my parents, who have always believed in and supported me in every way. Thank you for your encouragement, interest, and prayers. I could never have done this without you and I could never put into words how much you've done for me. I love you!

Although I haven't met them, I would like to thank the entire McElroy family, as well as the team behind *Extra Credits*. Not only did their various projects inspire much of this work, but they helped keep me going through my two years at Oxford when I genuinely wanted to give up. They gave me something to aspire to and always provided interesting content to consider, a friendly voice in my ears, and the encouragement I needed to zag on my depression, fail faster, and write about how games matter. Great job, McElroys, and great job, EC team!

Finally, although perhaps this should have been first, my thanks to Christ, the one who has empowered me not only to run the good race but to live and move and have my being, and given me the purpose to glorify and enjoy him forever. Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise him all creatures here below, praise him above ye heavenly hosts, praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

-Rissa Willis

Videogames¹ are often overlooked in philosophical discussions of art. They may be seen as either similar enough to film and television to be lumped together with other visual arts, or simply seen as not being a form of art at all. But as philosophy of art has expanded over the years to include not only traditional arts like music, theatre, and painting but also contemporary arts like film and television, each has brought different challenges and opportunities to expand the way we think. And videogames present many such opportunities of their own. The focus of this work will not be to prove that videogames are a form of art,² but rather to provide an account of the interesting challenges and new philosophical questions which videogames can pose when we assess them as works of fiction. Specifically, the focus of this work will be to examine the way in which videogames' interactive and player-centric nature can present distinctive types of fictional content.

Fictional content in general, that is to say that which is true within a work of fiction, may not always be established as straightforwardly as we would like. For example, in the *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, it is fictionally true that Sherlock Holmes lives at 221b Baker St. As this is explicitly stated in the text, it is easy to recognize. However there has been some debate over whether something like "Sherlock Holmes has a liver" ought to be considered fictionally true.³ But even on top of the challenges which most fictions face in this regard, videogames present a few additional challenges to establishing what is fictionally true in them. Videogames also provide a few unusual forms of fictional truth. I would like to point out these challenges and special forms of fictional truth in order to help establish videogames as an

¹ For the purpose of this paper I make no distinction between "videogames" and "computer games".

² For a good discussion this question see Robson & Meskin (2012), and Tavinor (2009).

³ See Lewis (1978), Walton (1990), and Friend (2017)

interesting and unique form of narrative art, worthy of the attention of philosophers not only for the fictional content which they present, but also for the way in which they present it.

As they are relatively new, there has not been a great deal of philosophical work done on videogames. However in the work which has been done, videogames have been described as a type of “‘self-involving interactive fictions’ (hereafter SIIFs)”,⁴ which are “‘fictions that, in virtue of their interactive nature, are about those who consume them’”⁵, unlike “‘canonical fictions’” such as film, television, novels, etc.⁶ Aaron Meskin, Jon Robson, Grant Tavinor, and Stephanie Patridge have written on the nature of SIIFs, and on videogames as SIIFs,⁷ and it is not the focus of this work to consider whether or not videogames are SIIFs. Rather, I wish to draw out how videogames’ self-involving and interactive nature affect their fictional content. I will do this by examining videogames first as interactive and second as self-involving, as each of these qualities presents its own challenge to establishing what is fictionally true in videogames. I will argue that videogames, as SIIFs, contain at least two special forms of fictional truth; fictionally true disjunctions, and fictional truths about the player.

In order to establish these claims I will first set out a basic ontological framework for videogames, to provide a better understanding of which entities, exactly, bear these sorts of fictional content. In doing so, I will establish some new vocabulary to help clarify thinking about these topics. This will reveal the first major challenge which videogames present: the variable nature of the playthrough.

⁴ Robson & Meskin (2016) 165.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Robson & Meskin (2016), Tavinor (2005), Patridge (2016)

Just as in other types of fiction, there are some things which it seems easy to point out as fictionally true in videogames. For instance, Mario and Luigi, from the *Super Smash Bros.* games, are brothers. Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* is British. And Commander Shepard, from *Mass Effect*, is human. However, one of the important differences between videogames and many other forms of art is that some other fictional truths can be vastly different each time they are played. Unlike a film or novel, a videogame can have a different main character, different action, or even a completely different plot every time it is played. And this is not just a matter of viewer interpretation. Because videogames are interactive and respond to player input, every time the game is played and the player provides different input the fictional action displayed on screen is different and changes accordingly, and this often seems to change whether or not certain things are fictionally true. For instance, when I play *Mass Effect* I can choose whether the main character, Commander Shepard, is female or male. Based on my choice, the game will represent Shepard as either one way or another, with different audio and visual cues based on my input. Because of this player freedom it becomes difficult to answer the question “in *Mass Effect* is Commander Shepard female or male?”. When I play *Mass Effect* the answer is “female”, however when my sister plays *Mass Effect*, the answer is “male”. Are either of us correct, or both, or neither? It seems as though the veracity of a statement such as “in *Mass Effect* Commander Shepard is female” can go either way. And this is not a lone example: videogames, as interactive fictions, rely on player input, and a vast amount of the content which the player encounters when playing a videogame may be different each time they play. This is even more the case for games such as *Minecraft*, which feature randomly or procedurally generated content, which is designed to be different each time the videogame is played regardless of player input.

It is often difficult to say what, if anything, is fictionally true in the videogame itself, as opposed to being fictionally true in just one playthrough of the game. “Playthrough” is how I will refer to the interactive audio-visual representation which is generated when a player plays a videogame, which may be different every time the game is played. (Other philosophers have at times used “playing”⁸ but I have chosen “playthrough”. This is to avoid confusing the act of playing a videogame with the representation which that act produces, which is what I call the “playthrough”). Chapter 1 will therefore attempt to sort out this question by examining the relationship between videogames and individual playthroughs of videogames, in order to identify the bearers of fictional content involved in videogames, before moving on to examine the special types of fictional content found therein. Chapter 2 will place my observations from chapter 1 into the wider context of the philosophy of art, specifically addressing the relationship between videogames and Kendall Walton’s theory of fiction. In presenting the challenges which videogames raise to his theory of make-believe, I will offer both videogames and their playthroughs as potential counter-examples to Walton’s theory, in that they both seem to contain fictional content for which his theory does not account. Chapter 3 will address a different challenge which videogames present, and deal with videogames not merely as interactive but as self-involving. In chapter 3 I will address the way in which games seem to be “about” the player,⁹ and generate far more fictional truths about their audience than those associated with other artforms.

Before I begin I must point out that while this will not be an inquiry into the content of any specific videogame, it will also not encompass every videogame. To limit the focus of this

⁸ Meskin & Robson (2012) 215

⁹ Robson & Meskin (2016) 165

study I will be dealing only with single-player games. Thus, while some of what is said may apply to games like *World of Warcraft*, *Second Life*, and other multiplayer games, including the multiplayer modes of games which also contain single-player content such as *Halo* and *Call of Duty*, these will not be the focus of this study. These games present many unique challenges of their own, such as the sharing of a make-believe space, but the subset of games which I will discuss is plenty to get us started.

Chapter I: Playthroughs and their Content

Sherlock Holmes lives at 221b Baker Street. Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father. Romeo and Juliet both commit suicide. Zeus is the ruler of Olympus. The Doctor is a Time Lord. Bruce Wayne is Batman. Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy fall in love. Cecil Palmer is a resident of Night Vale. Mario and Luigi are brothers. These are all fictional truths from different stories in different arts, from print, stage, speaker, and screen. They are all, in a sense, true, and in another sense false. It is not true, of course, that any real detective by the name of Sherlock Holmes lives or ever lived at 221b Baker Street, nor that Time Lords exist. However, we can say that these statements are true within the fiction of each of these stories. We can also say that some statements, such as "Darth Vader is not Luke Skywalker's father", are false, not only in that Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker aren't real people, but also in that it is false within the fiction of *Star Wars*. However, some fictional truths are not so easy to pin down.

It is not always easy to determine what is fictionally true in a work.¹⁰ For instance, as I mentioned in the introduction, there has been some debate over whether or not things like "Sherlock Holmes has a liver" are fictionally true, and if they are, how it is that they are made fictionally true, since it is never stated in Doyle's work that Sherlock has a liver.¹¹ These sorts of fictional truths are known as implied fictional truths, or indirectly generated fictional truths, as opposed to those which are explicitly or directly generated, such as "Sherlock Holmes lives at 221b Baker St."¹² There is much to be said in this debate over implied fictional truths, however in my investigation of fictional truth in videogames I wish to focus on a different type of fictional truth associated with videogames, one which is hard to pin down not because it is not

¹⁰ Some of the most influential works in the debate over fictional truth include Walton (1990), Lewis (1978), Currie (1986).

¹¹ See Lewis (1978), Walton (1990), Friend (2017).

¹² Walton (1990) 142

directly stated in the work, but because different and conflicting fictional truths can be explicitly established each time a videogame is played.

In most works the explicitly stated fictional truths stay the same each time the work is read, watched, etc. Darth Vader is always Luke Skywalker's father, and Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy always fall in love. With videogames, however, different and contradicting facts can be directly established as fictionally true each time the videogame is played. As mentioned in the introduction, "Commander Shepard is female" can be either fictionally true or false any time *Mass Effect* is played. When *Mass Effect* is played, however, Shepard's gender is not in an unspecified state: Shepard is either female or male, and is presented in a certain way depending on this state. Another good example might be the ending of *Bioshock*. *Bioshock* has multiple different endings, depending on whether or not the player controlled character, Jack Ryan, ever kills any of a specific type of other character, called Little Sisters, rather than choosing to save them. But it is not the case that in any given playthrough of *Bioshock* all possible endings are true. Either Jack Ryan saves all of the Little Sisters, or he kills one or more of them. However games like *Mass Effect* and *Bioshock* also include many fictional truths which are present in every playthrough. Commander Shepard, for instance, regardless of gender, is always a human being in every playthrough (and as many of the character of *Mass Effect* are aliens, this is notable). And whether *Bioshock* ends happily or has a frightening ending, Jack Ryan will always survive the end of the game.

Some games have even more variability in fictional truths. In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* almost the entire plot and everything about the hero is variable; in one playthrough the main character, called the Dragonborn, may be a female elf who slays the great dragon Alduin, while in another playthrough the Dragonborn might be a human man who instead joins the dark

brotherhood of assassins or becomes a werewolf and never slays Alduin, and in a third playthrough the Dragonborn might be an orc warrior who pursues crafting and spends all of their time collecting metal and other materials to improve their armour and weapons, which they hardly ever use. All of these are options within the game, and may be true in one specific playthrough and untrue in another. One of the only things that all playthroughs of *Skyrim* appear to have in common is that they all take place within the fictional land of Skyrim, for which the game is named, and the geography of this land stays the same.

Not all videogames have as large a set of variables as a game like *Skyrim* or *Mass Effect*, but most fall somewhere on a spectrum of variability. Games like *Skyrim* are extremely variable, and on the far edge of this spectrum, while other games, such as *Tomb Raider* or *Portal* are more rigid; different playthroughs of these games will be significantly more similar to each other than the various playthroughs of a game like *Skyrim* are. In *Tomb Raider* the basic plot of the game, including all of the dialogue between characters, is always the same. But things such as the route Lara Croft (the main character of *Tomb Raider*) takes, the weapons she uses to take out each enemy, and whether or not she finds all of the relics hidden around every level do change, and are up to the player's decision and skill. *Portal* is a puzzle game and is even more linear, but can still vary with respect to how long, or how many attempts, or even how many steps and shots the main character, Chell, takes to reach the end of each puzzle (all of which are metrics tracked by the videogame). In some playthroughs of *Portal* it is fictionally true that Chell solves every puzzle quickly and without mistakes, and in other playthroughs it is fictionally true that she takes her time and has to re-position many portals several times to get through each chamber. But it is not fictionally true that Chell does both.

If we are to ask what all is fictionally true in *Mass Effect*, *Bioshock*, *Skyrim*, *Tomb Raider*, *Portal*, and the like, it is unclear how we ought to answer. It is also unclear what it is that actually bears fictional content in the case of videogames: either individual playthroughs, which each firmly establish fictional truths but can all be different from one another, or the game itself in some way. Because of this, I will need to figure out what it is that bears fictional content in the case of videogames before I can address what this fictional content is like. In order to do this, I will begin this chapter by laying out a brief ontology of videogames, focusing on establishing how videogames are instanced, before continuing on to describe what types of fictional content may be found in videogames and their playthroughs and how these types may be distinguished. In the final section I will examine the way in which these different types of fictional truth are linked, and examine one last type of fictional truth which is not commonly found outside of videogames.

Videogames are multiple

Videogames can be described in several different ways. They are narratives, delivered through audio-visual representation, which respond to player input, all generated by a machine running a certain program. They are also forms of mass media, which are distributed widely and require a certain type of machine to play. Each of these different factors may affect what we should say about the bearers of fictional content in videogames.

In order to sort through these, it will be helpful to examine the different ways in which videogames are multiple. Artworks which are multiple are those which admit of and are normally encountered through instances; novels are instanced by their multiple copies, musical

works by their multiple performances or recordings, films by their multiple copies or screenings, etc.¹³ There are many different ways in which a work may be multiple, and videogames, as I will argue, are multiple in several different ways. These different types of multiplicity can provide different ways of viewing what an instance of a videogame is, and therefore should be able to help us start our search for fictional truths in videogames.

Videogames as programs

The first way in which videogames are multiple is typical of many forms of art with multiple instances, and applies to videogames as programs, of which many copies may be made. A videogame may be seen in one sense as simply a computer program. Like films and novels of which multiple books, DVDs, or digital copies may be produced, multiple copies of a videogame, that is the program associated with a videogame, can be made. These can be written onto compact discs or downloaded onto multiple machines via the internet, just like a film. We could say that each disc or download of the program is an instance of the videogame, just as every book or digital copy of a novel is an instance of the same novel.¹⁴

Viewing videogames as just programs which are instanced whenever a copy of the program is made makes sense in a way, as it is the program and associated digital content which is created and shipped out by game developer studios, copied, and sold to players. In the same way, we might say that each filmstrip or DVD of the film *The Princess Bride* is an instance of that film. However, viewing videogames and films in this way does cause some problems. After

¹³ Davies (1991) 156

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

all, as Davies points out, there is another very real sense in which the film *The Princess Bride* is not itself a filmstrip or DVD. It is an audio-visual representation which results from playing the filmstrip or DVD by the proper type of machine.¹⁵ The fact that both the filmstrip and DVD, when played by the proper type of machine, both result in the same audio-visual representation is an important part of what makes them all copies of the same film, *The Princess Bride*. Davies describes this type of art as “encoded works”, which must be decoded, usually by a machine. According to Davies, it is the decoded result (e.g. a screening of a film), and not the encoded artefact (e.g. a filmstrip or DVD) which is an instance of the work.¹⁶

In this regard, videogames are significantly like films. Just as there may be multiple copies of the film *The Princess Bride*, some of which are filmstrips designed to be run by a film projector while some are DVDs designed to be run by a DVD player, but all resulting, when played, in a screening of *The Princess Bride*, so there may be many copies of a videogame such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Some of these copies may be designed to run on an Xbox, while others are designed to be run on a PlayStation, and still others to be run on a PC. Some may be recorded on CD-ROMs, while others are not. But all of them, when run by their appropriate devices, result in the videogame *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

However, there are limits to this comparison. Videogames are like digital films in that they are encoded, multiple copies may be made of these encodings, and there may be slightly different versions of this encoding, each designed to be decoded by a different type of machine. However when a film is played by a machine this results in a complete screening: an instance of the film which is the same every time it is played, and presents all of the same fictional content

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 160-161

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

every time. When a videogame is run by a machine not as much happens, and not much fictional content is presented. The opening sequence may play, but then the game will wait for player input. This is because it takes more than a machine to run a videogame, it takes a player to play it. If we want to explain how and why it is that when I play *Mass Effect* and my sister plays *Mass Effect* we encounter different and sometimes opposing fictional truths, such as “Commander Shepard is female” and “Commander Shepard is male”, then saying that videogames are instanced by either the multiple copies of the programs associated with them or even by the result of running these programs on their appropriate devices will not be enough. Instead, I would say that a videogame is instanced every time it is played, not just by a machine, but by a player. This is what I refer to as a playthrough: The interactive audio-visual representation which is generated when a player plays a videogame. Playthroughs are the result of the combination not only of a program and a machine, but of a program, a machine, and a player. A playthrough, I would argue, is an instance of a videogame, and bears fictional content.

Videogames and performances

For insight into how this works and why it is important that playthroughs bear fictional content I will compare videogames with yet another type of multiple art. Works in the performing arts, such as stage plays, are not simply encoded for the use of a machine, but are themselves created and propagated as sets of instructions (scripts), which are instanced via performance. This is the type of art which is perhaps most similar to videogames. If someone were to view an encoded work without decoding it, while it might be understandable to an extent if they were trained in reading the code it is written in, such as computer code, it would be drastically different from encountering the work decoded. In the same way, reading a script or

sheet music is drastically different from watching a play or hearing a song. But unlike work decoded by a machine, a work which is instanced through a performance based on a set of instructions may have more variation between instances, because the content of the instances (performances) may not be completely determined by the instructions alone. When a film is played, that is, decoded by a machine, the resulting film is the same each time it is played, barring any technical troubles or major hardware changes in the process of decoding. However, each time a stage play is performed, some of the fictional content may change. As Davies notes “pieces specified via notated instructions are often much ‘thinner’ in properties than are the performances that instance them faithfully.”¹⁷ For instance, the script of *Hamlet* does not determine everything about *Hamlet* to the point where every production and performance of *Hamlet* would be identical in content if it followed the script faithfully. Every instance of *Hamlet* will contain certain fictional truths which are not contained within the script of *Hamlet*. For example, the script of *Hamlet* does not specify whether Prince Hamlet is taller than, shorter than, or the same height as Laertes. And yet, in every production of *Hamlet*, Prince Hamlet will be either taller than, shorter than, or the same height as Laertes. The play *Hamlet* does not specify this, but every performance of *Hamlet* must.

At first glance this seems almost exactly like videogames, and the problem posed at the beginning, of Commander Shepard’s gender in *Mass Effect*. Perhaps *Mass Effect* simply does not specify Commander Shepard’s gender, just as *Hamlet* does not specify Hamlet’s height. And just as Hamlet does have one specific height in every performance of *Hamlet*, so Commander Shepard has one specific gender in every playthrough of *Mass Effect*. Indeed, Meskin and

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 162

Robson bring up this analogy with theatre, writing that works in the performing arts and videogames have many similarities:

First, individual playings, like performances, are instances of multiples (games in the former sense; plays or dances or musical works in the latter case). And these instances are the means by which we typically have access to those multiples. Second, these instances (1) typically share much of the content of the multiples they are made from, and (2) typically exhibit relevant variation in content (i.e. differences between individual performances and individual playings are significant and underwrite evaluations). Third, these instances are produced in both cases by means of intentional actions – by players’ playing games in the former case and actors’ performing in the latter. Finally, the content of both kinds of instance is not determined solely by the pre-existing work but is, instead, partially dependent on the activities of others – the players or performers.¹⁸

This comparison between theatre and videogames is very useful, and should help us solve the question of what bears fictional content in videogames.

In theatre there seem to be at least two bearers of fictional content: The play itself, which is usually outlined by the play’s script, and the various individual performances of the play. There are some fictional truths which may be present in one performance of a play or another but are not considered part of the play itself, while there are other fictional truths which are part of the play itself, and thus also true in every faithful performance of the play. For instance, it is fictionally true that Hamlet says “to be or not to be, that is the question”.¹⁹ Not only is this fictionally true in any given performance of *Hamlet*, provided that performance is faithful, but it is also true in *Hamlet* itself. However, if we want to know whether or not it is fictionally true that Hamlet is taller than Laertes we cannot refer to *Hamlet* itself because the play does not specify. But we can refer to specific performances of *Hamlet* and say whether or not Hamlet is taller than Laertes in each performance.

¹⁸ Meskin & Robson (2012) 215

¹⁹ *Hamlet*, III.i

I will refer to these different kinds of fictional truths as play-truths (Hamlet says “to be or not to be”) and performance-specific truths (Hamlet is taller than Laertes). Plays themselves contain only play-truths, while performances contain both play-truths and performance-specific truths. In any particular performance it is not always easy to tell which fictional truths are play-truths and which are performance-specific, unless one has also encountered the same play through a different performance, or has read the script of the play (the instructions which the performers use when enacting the performance, whether this includes dialog or not). Play-truths are those things which are also fictionally true in the play itself, of which the performance is an instance. All play-truths are fictionally true in every faithful performance, but it is important to note that it is not the case that something is a play-truth simply because it is true in every extant performance of the play. For instance, if it so happened that every production of *Hamlet* ever performed starred a Hamlet who was taller than his corresponding Laertes, it would still not be fictionally true in *Hamlet* that Hamlet is taller than Laertes. And if a new production of *Hamlet* was cast with a Hamlet who was shorter than Laertes, this new production would be no less faithful than any other production.

I want to suggest that videogames function very similarly to plays when it comes to the bearers of fictional content. Just like plays, videogames have two bearers of fictional content: the videogame itself, and individual playthroughs of the game. Just like in plays, that which is fictionally true in the videogame itself is true in every playthrough of the game, but not everything which is fictionally true in the playthrough is true in the game itself. Thus, playthroughs contain two types of fictional truths: Those which are fictionally true in a playthrough but not in the game itself, and those which are fictionally true in both the playthrough and the game itself. I will refer to these as videogame-truths and playthrough-

specific truths. Just like with plays, videogame-truths are fictionally true in both the videogame itself and in every playthrough of the videogame, while playthrough-specific truths are not fictionally true in the game itself, but are fictionally true in the playthrough.

This difference between playthrough-specific truths and videogame-truths should help us answer many of the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter. For example, “Commander Shepard is female” is a playthrough-specific fictional truth, while “Commander Shepard is human” is a videogame-truths, true in *Mass Effect* itself. However, even establishing which fictional truths are which is not always as straightforward as it might be with theatre. When it comes to determining what all is fictionally true in videogames themselves, apart from their playthroughs, there are a few important differences between videogames and plays.

The trouble of identifying videogame-truths

Identifying most playthrough-specific fictional truths can be fairly easy. Anything which is different between two or more playthroughs may be clearly identified as a playthrough-specific fictional truth. However, as I will demonstrate, discovering videogame-truths, and telling the difference between these two types of fictional truth, can be difficult. And it is this difficulty which I hope to tackle here. I will do this by addressing a few of the major differences between videogames and the performing arts when it comes to fictional truths. Although videogames and their playthroughs may have a general structure much like plays and performances, the precise relationship between playthrough-specific fictional truths and videogames is not quite the same as the relationship between performance-specific fictional truths and plays. The differences which I will point out may seem small, but I will demonstrate

how in the end, they reveal an altogether different type of videogame-truth which is unlike anything typically found in works in the performing arts.

One of the important differences between plays and videogames when it comes to distinguishing videogame-truths from playthrough-specific fictional truths is that videogames don't tend to have easily readable scripts like most plays do. With a stage play one could potentially determine which things are play-truths, as opposed to performance-specific truths, along the lines of which are included in the script of the play. But with a videogame this is not a clear option. The "script" of videogames is not written in human language, like the script of a play. Instead, it is a complex system of encoded instructions meant to be read by a machine. And decoding this "script" produces neither a now-readable set of instructions similar to the script of a play nor a fully-formed performance. Instead it produces a videogame, which may be played, waiting for player input. And the fictional content contained within the videogame itself cannot be encountered except via a playthrough. As such it can be difficult to determine which of the fictional truths encountered during a playthrough are fictionally true in the game itself (videogame-truths) and which are playthrough-specific fictional truths.

One way in which we could go about determining this would be to play the game multiple times, generating multiple playthroughs, and compare them. Aspects of the game which are different in each playthrough are clearly playthrough-specific fictional truths. However we cannot say that all fictional truths which are present in each of our playthroughs are videogame-truths. It may be that some of the fictional truths which are present in all of our playthroughs are playthrough-specific as well, and remain constant in our various playthroughs by coincidence or accident, just like if every performance of *Hamlet* just so happened to feature a Hamlet who was taller than his corresponding Laertes. If it so happened that every time anyone ever played *Mass*

Effect they chose to make Commander Shepard female, that would not make Commander Shepard female in *Mass Effect* itself; it would not make “Commander Shepard is female” into a videogame-truth. Nor would it prevent any future playthrough of *Mass Effect* from featuring a Commander Shepard who is not female, or make such a playthrough somehow incorrect.

In order to avoid this chance of coincidence, it would be better to say that videogame-truths are those which are fictionally true in every possible playthrough of the videogame. However if we are going to use this definition, then when we must identify what “every possible playthrough” means, or if such a limit even exists. If we are going to figure out a way to systematically determine what all is fictionally true in the videogame itself (videogame-truths), by that which is fictionally true in every possible playthrough, then there must be at least a theoretical limit to the possible playthroughs of a videogame, so that we can appeal to all possible playthroughs, as opposed to all extant playthroughs, which may be similar by coincidence.

The limits of fictional freedom

Luckily, there is another way in which videogames and the performing arts differ which may prove helpful in this regard. Playthrough-specific fictional truths tend to be significantly more constrained than performance-specific fictional truths, since playthroughs of videogames are tied to computer-run programs. Performance-specific fictional truths fill in information which is un-specified by the play, and do so freely. If Hamlet’s height is not specified in *Hamlet*, then the Hamlet of any particular performance of *Hamlet* can be any height which the actor can portray. If Hamlet’s costume is not specified in a scene, then Hamlet may wear whatever the

costumers would like. There is significant freedom in this. Performance-specific truths can be constrained by the play, but not determined, or limited to a specified set of options. Rather, within the bounds set by the play itself, anything goes. For instance, in Hamlet's first scene he wears black.²⁰ This is true in the play *Hamlet* itself. And so, if the performance is a faithful performance, Hamlet will wear black in this first scene.²¹ This functions as a restraint, but does not fully determine what Hamlet will wear, only that it is something black. It could be a black cloak or a black coat or a black shirt or a black robe, or something else. The only constraint is that it must be something black. In every other scene in which details of Hamlet's clothing are not specified there is no limit to what Hamlet may wear. Playthrough-specific fictional truths, on the other hand, do not function in this way.

Unlike a performance of a play, everything which is fictional in a playthrough of a videogame, including the playthrough-specific fictional truths, must be something which the software and hardware running the videogame can handle. For instance, I have said that in *Mass Effect* Commander Shepard's gender is not determined or specified by the videogame itself, and that fictional truths such as "Commander Shepard is female" are playthrough-specific fictional truths. However, there are certain things about Commander Shepard's gender which are determined: Commander Shepard can either be female or male. Commander Shepard cannot, for instance, be any non-binary or unspecified gender. In a play in which a character had an unspecified gender, something like them being a non-binary gender or having a gender which remained unspecified in the performance would generally be an option. But in a videogame even

²⁰ *Hamlet*, I.ii

²¹ There is some debate over what makes a "faithful" performance. For the sake of my argument, I assume that faithful performances include all fictional truths which are contained within the script. For more on faithful performances, see Davies (1991a), (1991b).

fictional truths which the videogame does not fully determine, that is to say playthrough-specific fictional truths, are at least in part determined by the game. Another example of this which may be more directly contrasted with Hamlet might be character appearance. Some videogames allow the player to control the main character's physical appearance. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* for instance has a very robust character customization system. However, even if these customization systems offer an abundance of options, they are in the end still based on choosing options, as opposed to free creation. In *Dragon Age: Inquisition* there are only a certain number of hairstyles which the player may choose from. Nothing about the main character's hairstyle has any effect on the rest of the game. If *Dragon Age: Inquisition* were a play, then the main character's hairstyle could be whatever the cast and crew could fashion it into, as this detail is not determined within the work itself. However, because *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is a videogame, the main character's hairstyle, while not fully determined by the videogame, must be one of the 28 hairstyles which the game offers as options, and nothing else. Playthrough-specific fictional truths, while not entirely determined by the videogame itself, are partially defined by a set of options. Unlike performance-specific truths, playthrough-specific truths are limited by the software, and in the end by the hardware as well.

Performance-specific fictional truths and playthrough-specific fictional truths have a lot in common. Performance-specific fictional truths are not determined by the play itself, but are generated by the performers, within the constraints set by the play. Playthrough-specific fictional truths are not determined by the videogame itself, but are generated by the player, within the constraints set by the game. The difference is that while performers generate performance-specific truths freely within these constraints, players generate playthrough-specific truths by choosing from a list of set options, which are determined by the videogame. These options may

be very numerous, disguising the fact that the player is choosing from a list of options and giving the impression of free creativity, and indeed they may allow for some level of creativity in play based on how these options may be combined, but they are in the end limited.

A spectrum of free choices

To understand the importance of this limitation it might be helpful to compare videogames and plays to a few other forms of fiction which involve both established fictional content such as videogame-truths or play-truths and also player/performer generated content such as playthrough-specific or performance-specific fictional truths. I would like to create a spectrum, based on how free the player or performer is in generating playthrough-specific/performance-specific content. At the bottom of this spectrum, with the least freedom, are *Choose Your Own Adventure* books.²² These books were a series written for children which tell stories in the second person, (e.g. the main character is referred to as “you”). The plot of these stories and the main character’s fate is selected by the reader through a system of situational response choices. For instance, a page might say something like “While walking through the dark woods you come to a fork in the path”, followed with a choice and accompanying instructions; “if you turn right, turn to page 10. If you turn left, turn to page 15.” The pages referred to in these instructions would continue the story, based on the reader’s choice in direction. These books are essentially single-player games that just so happen to be written in English and printed on paper. They are games designed to be run and played by the reader both in the sense that a computer runs a videogame and in the sense that a player plays a videogame.

²² This is a series of books, the first of which was written by Edward Packard (1980).

They even have their own sort of program-like code, e.g. “if A, turn to page X.” Like videogames, these books feature something like playthrough-specific fictional truths, e.g. “you turn left”, and something like videogame-truths, e.g. “While walking through the dark woods you come to a fork in the path”. However, in *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, it is obvious that the player’s choices are extremely limited: they may only choose one of the responses presented by the book, and no other. If the situation was something like “Walking along in the woods, you come upon a huge brown bear!” and the choices were to (a) run away, (b) climb a nearby tree, or (c) play dead on the ground, then a fourth option such as (d) fight the bear with your bare hands is simply not available. Even though the text has not specified what the person’s fictional reaction is, that reaction cannot be just anything, but must be one of the presented options. The book has not completely determined the reader’s choice, but has narrowed it to only a few options. This is because the player’s response must be made in a way in which the book is designed to respond to input; in this case, there must be a follow-up page assigned to the desired action, describing what happens next depending on whether run, climb, or play dead is selected.

Videogames are next on our spectrum of freedom to generate playthrough-specific content. Videogames are significantly more complex than *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, but share a significant amount in common. Text games such as *Colossal Cave Adventure* and *Zork* share the most in common with these books, as both operate through text commands, and so it is easy to tell when the player provides a response or attempts to perform a fictional action which is unavailable to them. But even these games operate through typed commands instead of merely chosen ones, and have systems such as an inventory which affect the player’s options in a way which would be difficult to print in a book meant for a human to “run” like one “runs” a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book by following the instructions. Videogames feature very

complex systems that can allow for a great range of player freedom, and therefore a great variety of different possible playthroughs. But they are, in the end, also limited by the types of in-game action which the videogame allows. The main character of *Bioshock Infinite*, for instance, Booker DeWitt, has a lot of options when it comes to dealing with enemies; he has many weapons and strategies he may use and choose from. But trying to reason with them is not among them. Although the game does not specify how it is that Booker acts, it only allows that he acts in certain ways. And although there may be a great deal of freedom, this freedom is inherently limited.

Next on the spectrum are stage plays. Those who perform plays are significantly more free to generate performance-specific content than videogame players are when determining playthrough-specific content. When a play does not specify certain information, the cast and crew producing the play can specify it in any way in which they are able, provided only that it does not violate the constraints of the content which the play has determined. Performers are limited not by any set list of options of viable input choices, but by their own creative ability and production skill. When it comes to performance-specific content, if they can enact it on stage, they can make it fictionally true in their performance of the play. The only thing which the play itself determines is the play-truths. And while these may constrain the performance-specific truths to some extent, such as mandating that Hamlet wear black in his first scene, they do not set out options from which the performers must choose.

Finally, the form of narrative which I would place at the top of this spectrum is another type of game: tabletop role-playing games (RPGs), like *Dungeons & Dragons*. Players of *Dungeons & Dragons* are only truly limited by their imaginations, especially the imagination of one player, the Dungeon Master. *Dungeons & Dragons*, or *D&D* is a game played by a group of

people and is a form of collaborative story-telling, constrained by certain rules. One player takes on the role of Dungeon Master (or Game Master, often shortened to DM or GM). They act as the narrator of the story and determine the action of most of the characters. The main characters of the story however are each controlled by other players. Thus, in a game of *D&D*, a scene may occur in which one player, the DM, says to the others “A giant dragon blocks your path!”, and another player might respond “I shoot it with an arrow”. These responses are freely generated, and limited only by the player’s imagination of what the character which they control can do. Additional rules apply. In *D&D* this would be followed by the player wanting to shoot the dragon rolling some dice. If they roll well enough, their action is considered successful, and the DM might answer “you expertly shoot the dragon in the eye!” and if the player rolled poorly, the DM might respond “You shoot your bow, but the arrow glances off the dragon’s thick scales”. *D&D* itself is a system of play, involving using dice and other mechanics to help determine play, and can be used to tell any story which the players can think up. Because of this, most games of *D&D* consist entirely of playthrough-specific fictional truths, generated by the DM and by the other players. However, some players choose to use official *Dungeons & Dragon* campaign books, such as *The Lost Mine of Phandelver*. These books provide guidance to the DM, so that they do not have to make up the entire plot and everything which the other players’ characters encounter from scratch. Books like these still leave a lot of information unspecified, but do determine some information, which might be compared to videogame-truths. For instance, in a game of *D&D* based on *The Lost Mine of Phandelver* the leader of the goblins encountered early in the game is a Bugbear named Klarg.²³ Players acting as the Dungeon Master during a playthrough of *The Lost Mine of Phandelver* can choose to change this name, but if they do so

²³ *The Lost Mine of Phandelver* (2014) 15

they are no longer acting according to what little script they have. However even if players do want to play in a way which is highly true to books like *The Lost Mine of Phandelver*, all of the character actions are limited only by the imagination of the player's, the willingness of the Dungeon Master to allow for wild imaginings, and, in small part, by the dice which the players roll. I place these games above stage plays on the spectrum merely because they often involve wild stories which would be difficult to enact on stage.

Comparing videogames and plays to both *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, on the one hand, and *Dungeons & Dragons* games, on the other, helps to bring out what I mean by saying that there are limits to the variations present between playthroughs of videogames. In tabletop RPGs like *D&D* and in the performing arts playthrough/performance-specific fictional truths are constrained only by the imagination and skill of the individuals generating them. Because so much human creativity is involved, it would be impossible to determine what every possible performance of *Hamlet* or playthrough of *The Lost Mine of Phandelver* would look like, or what all fictional truths they would contain. In *Choose Your Own Adventure* books and in videogames, however, playthrough-specific fictional truths can only come in certain forms, which are also determined by the work. Players of these games only have certain options when it comes to which playthrough-specific fictional truth will be a part of their playthrough. In *Choose Your Own Adventure* books this is made obvious, as it is literally spelled out on the page: You either choose option A or option B, and continue on from there. Videogames occasionally do this just as explicitly. Games such as Telltale's *The Walking Dead* are built upon player choice in a very similar way to *Choose Your Own Adventure* books. However even when videogames do not openly display their limits, these limits still exist. Even in a game which seems to have a large amount of free player choice, such as *Skyrim*, there are only certain things which can happen.

All of this has at least two important implications: First, it means that there is a theoretical limit to the possible playthroughs of a videogame. If all playthrough-specific fictional truths are chosen from a set of options, then there are only so many combinations of options which can be made. Because of the sheer number of choices and options available, the number of possible playthroughs may be incalculably large, especially for games which include randomly or procedurally generated content, but the limit does exist. This should help us figure out how to differentiate between playthrough-specific fictional truths and videogame-truths.

Second, it means there is something present in the videogame itself other than just the straightforward fictional truths we have seen so far (e.g. “Commander Shepard is human”). The game also includes limits to what playthrough-specific truths can be. This, I propose, points us to a rather unique form of fictional truth, rarely found outside of videogames. I will deal with each of these in order.

Identifying videogame-truths

I have described videogame-truths as those things which are fictionally true in every possible playthrough of a videogame. It would be difficult to use a similar definition for play-truths, because it might not be possible to determine what all is possible in a performance, or what all possible performances include. But as I have shown, videogames, unlike plays, are limited by the capacities of the game and have, in theory at least, a limited number of possible playthroughs. And so, we may define videogame-truths as those things which are fictionally true in every possible playthrough of a videogame, safe in the knowledge that the range of possible playthroughs of a videogame is limited by the software and hardware necessary to run the game.

This definition of videogame-truths is I think technically correct. However, we must be careful using this definition as well, because of another important difference between videogames and the performing arts.

Unlike two performances of the same play, two different playthroughs of a videogame may vary widely in what I will call scope. In order to explain what I mean by this I will use an example. Imagine I play *Dragon Age: Origins* twice, generating two distinct playthroughs of the same videogame. *Dragon Age: Origins* is a rather long game with one central plotline, but much more content which may be perused or ignored as the player sees fit. However, after finishing the main plotline, the player may not go back to investigate all of the content that may have passed over before. In my first playthrough I only play through the central part of the game, completing all of the main missions but none of the side quests, and doing only as much exploring as necessary to reach the end of the plot. In the second playthrough I spend much longer in each area and section of the game, making sure that I experience everything which the game has to offer. In the first of these playthroughs I would miss out on learning certain fictional truths. For example, in *Dragon Age: Origins* the character Alistair has a sister named Goldanna. In the second playthrough I mentioned, the longer and more detailed approach, I would learn this fictional truth while playing the game. However in the first playthrough, which only plays through a small percentage of the game in order to finish the main plotline as quickly as possible, I would not learn of Alistair's sister Goldanna. Unlike with Commander Shepard's gender, which may vary between playthroughs, it is not the case that any fictional truth inconsistent with the claim that Alistair has a sister named Goldanna is presented by the shorter playthrough. There is no playthrough in which it is established that Alistair has no sister or in which his sister's name is not Goldanna. Rather, in some playthroughs the subject has simply not come

up. We can have one of two responses to this. Either A. It is not fictionally true within the first playthrough that Alistair has a sister named Goldanna, because this information is not revealed to the player, or B. It is fictionally true that Alistair has a sister named Goldanna in both playthroughs of the game, even though this fictional truth is never encountered in the shorter playthrough.

If we say that videogame-truths are constituted by that which is fictionally true in every possible playthrough of the videogame and choose option A, then we must say that since there is a playthrough in which it is not fictionally true that Alistair has a sister named Goldanna (namely, my shorter playthrough), then “Alistair has a sister named Goldanna” cannot be a videogame-truth, but must rather be a playthrough-specific fictional truth. However, this seems to severely limit the amount of information which can be counted as videogame-truths. It also raises the question of what counts as a playthrough for any specific game. Would it count as a playthrough of *Dragon Age: Origins* if I started the game but then turned it off one minute later and never played it again? How much of the game would I need to play in order for it to count as a playthrough? What if I encountered less than one percent of what I could have potentially encountered by playing the game? This kind of question becomes even more difficult with less linear games such as *Skyrim*, or *Minecraft*. These games do not have traditional endings whereby one may say one has completed the game in any playthrough, so there is even less of a standard by which to mark what counts as a possible playthrough of such a game. If that which is true in a playthrough only includes that which is portrayed to the player during a playthrough, and there is no limit to how much of the potential content must actually be portrayed to the player for it to count as a playthrough, then for most games almost nothing would count as a videogame-truth, including many things which we might normally say are true in the videogame.

However if we accept reading B, and maintain that it is fictionally true in any given playthrough of *Dragon Age: Origins* that Alistair has a sister named Goldanna, whether the player encounters this information during the playthrough or not, then these problems do not arise. If this is the case, however, then it is clear that if we are to identify videogame-truths, which are fictionally true not only in the playthrough but also in the game itself, as that which is fictionally true in every possible playthrough, then we must distinguish that which is fictionally true in a playthrough from that which is represented in that playthrough.

Present but un-portrayed fictional truths

If we accept this reading we must acknowledge that within a videogame there may be certain fictional truths which are present in the playthrough which are never represented to the player. This presents a bit of a challenge. At the start of this chapter I briefly mentioned implicit and explicit fictional truths. But these videogame-truths, which are fictionally true in every possible playthrough including those in which they are not portrayed, must be said to be fictionally true in many playthroughs in which they are neither directly stated nor indirectly implied. That Alistair has a sister named Goldanna cannot be implied from the shorter playthrough of *Dragon Age: Origins* in which it is never explicitly stated. And if this was the only playthrough available to us, there would be no reason to think that Alistair does have a sister named Goldanna. In each playthrough this fictional truth is either directly established or it is not represented at all. The only way in which I may learn that Alistair has a sister named Goldanna in the first, shorter playthrough is by finding it explicitly stated in the second more thorough playthrough of *Dragon Age: Origins*.

In order to provide a model for these fictional truths which, by their natures as videogame-truths, are present in every playthrough of a videogame whether they are ever represented to the player or not, I would like to compare videogames once again to another form of art. Just as these fictional truths can be accessed by playing a different playthrough, so some fictional truths in other works can only be accessed through other works in the same series. For instance, is it true in *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* that Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father? The fictional truth is never portrayed to the audience in this film, but is established in its sequel, *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*. If someone only ever watched the first of these films they would have no way of knowing that Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father. And yet, it is not the case that Darth Vader becomes Luke Skywalker's father in the second film, or that he was not, in fiction, Luke's father since before the first film. Playing a videogame but not discovering all of the fictional truths present within the playthrough may be comparable to watching just one film or reading just one book out of a series: There may be fictional truths which are fictionally true in the playthrough but not revealed to the player without further investigation, which may only be available through a separate playthrough.

Perhaps a more helpful way of identifying which fictional truths encountered in a playthrough are videogame-truths would be to include all fictional truths which are presented by any possible playthrough and never contradicted in any other possible playthrough. These truths, we would say, can be seen as always being fictionally true in any playthrough, whether they are represented to the player or not. Thus, the fact that Alistair has a sister named Goldanna is a videogame-truth: true in *Dragon Age: Origins* itself and also true in every playthrough of *Dragon Age: Origins* whether explicitly represented or not, because it is true in at least one playthrough and never contradicted by another. Meanwhile "Commander Shepard is female" is a

playthrough-specific fictional truth, and is not true in *Mass Effect* itself, because there are some possible playthroughs which directly contradict it. While neither of these fictional truths are represented in every playthrough of their respective games, and both are represented in some possible playthroughs and not in others, Alistair's sister can be either included or left out of a playthrough of *Dragon Age: Origins* but not contradicted, but Commander Shepard's gender can either be female or not female in any given playthrough.

This, then, is how I would identify fictional truths within a videogame. Fictional truths which are present in at least one possible playthrough and never contradicted in any other possible playthrough are videogame-truths, and are fictionally true both in the videogame itself and in all possible playthroughs, whether they are represented or not. Fictional truths which are present in at least one possible playthrough but are contradicted by at least one other possible playthrough are playthrough-specific fictional truths.

Fictionally true disjunctions

I now wish to turn to the second implication which I pointed out of playthrough-specific fictional truths being at least partially determined by the videogame itself, as they are based on a player's choice between specified options. As I have said, one of the ways in which videogames differ from the performing arts is that the variation between playthroughs in videogames tends to be significantly more limited than that between possible performances of a stage play. This is because everything which is fictional in videogame or its playthrough must be something which the software and hardware running the videogame can handle. Because of this, playthrough-specific fictional truths, unlike performance-specific fictional truths, are generated when the

player chooses between a set of set options, rather than developed freely within a constrained space.

Because of this, I would argue that there is something else present in videogames alongside the straightforward videogame-truths which we have seen, namely, fictionally true disjunctions. These are more complex forms of fictional truth which can be stated in the form “Either A or B is true”. The disjunction, I will argue, is true in the videogame itself, and when the game is played these dilemmas are resolved into playthrough-specific fictional truths, e.g. either “A is true” or “B is true” in each playthrough. Thus while “Commander Shepard is female” is not part of *Mass Effect* itself, as it is a playthrough-specific fictional truth, *Mass Effect* itself does include the full disjunction “Commander Shepard is either female or male”. And every possible playthrough of *Mass Effect* also contains this disjunction, as it is a videogame-truth. We can do this with other choices in videogames as well. In *Skyrim* the Dragonborn either defeats Alduin in Sovenguard or they do not. In *Tomb Raider* Lara Croft either finds all of the relics or she fails to do so, etc. Each of these disjunctions are true in every playthrough of their respective videogames, and never contradicted. By the definitions I have set up, this is enough to establish them as videogame-truths.

I should note that there are cases in which it is the videogame, and not the player, that resolves these fictionally true disjunctions, which are videogame-truths, into playthrough-specific fictional truths. The examples I have given all involve player choice, but some games have other elements which function in the same way, but depend on chance, and not player choice. For instance, in games like *Minecraft* which have procedurally generated maps, something like “either there is a spider in the cave or there is not” may be fictionally true. This is

resolved into a playthrough-specific fictional truth such as “there is not a spider in the cave” not by player choice but by an algorithm run by the machine which involves some level of chance.

Of course, we could go on indefinitely generating these kinds of disjunctions, if “or they do not” is always an option. For instance, one might think that in *Tomb Raider* it is fictionally true that either Lara Croft is British or she is not. However, there is no playthrough in which Lara Croft is not British. As such, even if this disjunction is fictionally true it is not informative, and it also does not function as something which lays out the options which the player or machine may resolve into playthrough-specific fictional truths. Because of this, we may limit our interest to those disjunctions in which every disjunct could be true in a possible playthrough. Thus we can say that “Either Lara Croft is British or she is not” is not a videogame-truth of *Tomb Raider* in the way that “Commander Shepard is either female or male” is a videogame-truth of *Mass Effect*, and is not fictionally true in a way which interests us. For the type of disjunction I am interested in, if “Either A or B” is fictionally true in a videogame, then there must be at least one possible playthrough in which “A” is true, and one possible playthrough in which “B” is true, and either “A” or “B” must be true in every playthrough.

This limit is important. Disjunctions of the more general kind, in which at least one disjunct is true in some possible playthrough and it does not matter if the other one ever is, can often be said to be fictionally true in other types of fiction: It may be fictionally true for instance that either Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker’s father or he is not. But there is no version of *Star Wars* in which Darth Vader is not Luke Skywalker’s father, so the disjunction is not true in the sense I am interested in. It is not fictionally true in the sense that it is true that the Dragonborn either kills Alduin or they do not is fictionally true in *Skyrim*. And it does not have any relationship to something like a playthrough- (or performance-) specific fictional truth.

These disjunctions can of course have more than two disjuncts. For instance, *Dishonored* has three distinct endings, and so it is fictionally true in *Dishonored* that either (A) Empress Emily leads the empire into a golden age of science or (B) Empress Emily takes the throne but is unable to save many from the rat plague or (C) Emily dies before taking the throne as Empress. We could also phrase each of these as “Either A or not-A”, “Either B or not-B” and “Either C or not-C” and achieve the same result, as if B is the case then both not-A and not-C are as well. In fact, we could re-phrase all fictionally true disjunctives this way, e.g. “Commander Shepard is either female or not female” and “Commander Shepard is either male or not male” are both fictionally true in *Mass Effect* just as “Commander Shepard is either female or male” is. It makes little difference how we choose to phrase this.

Fictionally true disjunctions of this kind, which define the different options from which playthrough-specific fictional truths are chosen, may not be wholly unique to videogames, but they do seem to be rare. The performing arts may include some level of fictionally true disjunctions of the kind I am interested in, such as the previously mentioned question of Hamlet’s height: Either Hamlet is taller than Laertes or he is not. However as I have said, most performance-specific content is significantly less limited than playthrough-specific content, and it would be impossible to gather a full list of disjunctives, such as “Either Hamlet is blond or not”, “Either Hamlet kneels to say his famous soliloquy or he does not” etc. Technically, these fit the description I have provided, in that it is true that there is doubtless at least one possible performance of *Hamlet* in which Hamlet is blond, and at least one in which he is not, and Hamlet is either blond or not blond in every performance of *Hamlet*. However, with videogames we could potentially give a full account of these fictional truths, as they are determined by what a machine can handle, whereas in the performing arts this would be difficult or impossible,

because the options are limited only by the creative ability of the cast and crew. *Dungeons & Dragons* games also do not seem to contain fictionally true disjunctions for the same reasons. *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, however, do. It is true in the example I gave that either you turn left or you turn right. And this is resolved by the reader, who chooses from these options, and generates something like a playthrough-specific fictional truth; either “I turn left” or “I turn right”.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the relationship between videogames and their playthroughs, and established several types of fictional truth which may be found in each. I first investigated the different ways in which videogames are multiple, and determined that videogames are instanced by playthroughs, which are the interactive audio-visual representation generated when a player plays a videogame. By comparing videogames to the performing arts, I determined that both videogames themselves and their playthroughs bear fictional content, which can be divided into many different sorts. There are playthrough-specific fictional truths, which are fictionally true in at least one possible playthrough but are contradicted in others, such as “Commander Shepard is female”. There are also videogame-truths, which are fictionally true both in the videogame itself and every possible playthrough of the videogame (whether they are represented in the playthrough or not), and may be defined as those things which are true in at least one possible playthrough and never contradicted in any other. These include both straightforward fictional truths such as “Commander Shepard is human” as well as disjunctions, such as “Commander Shepard is either female or male”. I have argued that fictionally true disjunctions of the type where “either A or B” is fictionally true iff (1) there is at least one

possible instance in which “A” is fictionally true, (2) there is at least one possible instance in which “B” is fictionally true, and (3) there are no instances in which neither “A” nor “B” are fictionally true play a critical role in how videogames function, as they are resolved by the player when the game is played to generate playthrough-specific fictional truths. It is these videogame-truths, including the disjunctions, which unite all of the different playthroughs of the same videogame, which can present very different and conflicting playthrough-specific fictional truths, and make them all instances of the same videogame.

While all of these types of fictional truth are not truly unique to videogames, seeing as something very like playthrough-specific content may be found in the performing arts, and fictionally true disjunctions may be found in *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, videogames provide a good way to examine them, and lead to some interesting conclusions, such as playthroughs including both un-portrayed fictional truths and also fictionally true disjunctions, which have not, to my knowledge, been discussed by philosophers. Because of this, I will spend chapter 2 examining some of the implications of my theory of the fictional content of videogames and their playthroughs within a wider view of the philosophy of art, to address the effect of my observations on some of the debates surrounding videogames as works of fiction, and on the nature of fictional truth in general, before moving on to a different challenge which videogames present, that of fictional truths about the player, in chapter 3.

Chapter II: Videogames and Make-Believe

In the last chapter I made several important claims about the nature of videogames and their fictional content. First, that players experience videogames through playthroughs, which are generated when a videogame is played. Second, there are three types of fictional truth in playthroughs, two of which are also true in the videogame itself. Playthroughs contain playthrough-specific fictional truths (e.g. “Commander Shepard is female”), along with two forms of videogame-truths, which are also true in the game itself: straightforward fictional truths (e.g. “Commander Shepard is human”) and fictionally true disjunctions (e.g. “Commander Shepard is either female or male”). Third, that because of the nature of videogame-truths and the way in which playthroughs may vary widely not only in content but in the amount of potentially accessible content which is actually portrayed in the playthrough, there may be some fictional truths present within a playthrough which are never portrayed to the player. And fourth, that when a videogame is played (generating a playthrough), the fictionally true disjunctions (which are videogame-truths) are resolved either by the player or the machine, resulting in playthrough-specific fictional truths. In this chapter I hope to place these claims within the wider context of the philosophy of art.

In order to do this I will focus on one specific theory of representational art, that of Kendall Walton, and how his theory of fictional truth may relate to videogames. Walton’s view of representational art is of course not the only theory of fictional content, but it is one of the most influential in recent years, especially in the philosophical debates surrounding videogames.²⁴ In addition to this, the idea of playing games is central to Walton’s theory. Walton

²⁴ See Tavinor (2005), Meskin & Robson (2012)

compares the appreciation of all representational art to a child's game of make-believe. And it seems that if any form of representational art is like such a game of make-believe, videogames are. If any theory of representational art applies to videogames, we might expect it to be Walton's. And if Walton's theory applies to any representational art, we might expect it to apply to videogames. I, however, will argue that it does not.

In this chapter I will provide a basic overview of the part of Walton's theory pertinent to videogames and fictional truths, and along the way I will point out the specific challenges which my own theory about fictional truths in videogames raises to Walton's. I will argue that both videogames and their playthroughs contain fictional truths not accounted for in Walton's theory. If the points I have made in the previous chapters are correct, then videogames and their playthroughs may both function as counter-examples to Walton's theory.

Waltonian Fictions

First, it is important to note that Walton's view of what constitutes a fiction is significantly broader than most everyday uses of the word, so much so that some authors refer specifically to "Waltonian fictions" or "Walt-fictions"²⁵ when discussing them. To Walton, all "representations" are fictions.²⁶ This includes many things which are not normally considered to be "fictions", such as portrait paintings, or even, in certain circumstances, children's toys. Walton establishes something as a fiction through a "functional account"²⁷, most famously defining representations, and thus fictions, as "things possessing the social function of serving as

²⁵ Meskin & Robson (2012) 201

²⁶ Walton (1990) 3

²⁷ Meskin & Robson (2012) 204

props in games of make-believe.”²⁸ Walton argues that when we engage with a representation we enter into a game of make-believe in which the representation serves as a prop. A game of make-believe is an exercise of the imagination which follows certain rules, often guided by props, which “are generators of fictional truths, things which, by virtue of their nature or existence, make propositions fictional.”²⁹ The most basic example which Walton presents of how props work is a scenario in which, while walking through a wood, someone decides to pretend that a tree stump is a bear.³⁰ This decision to imagine that the stump is a bear creates a “principle of generation” by which the stump, which functions as a prop in this game of make-believe, “mandates imaginings,”³¹ such as that there is a bear over there. Real details about the stump can also feature into the imagining, such as that the bear is five feet away from the forest path, or is old and gnarled in appearance. If the stump were carved to look even more like a bear, it might mandate further imaginings, such as that the bear has a sad expression on its face.³² Each of these mandated imaginings becomes fictionally true within the game of make-believe.³³ In this scenario the stump, carved or not, is a fiction, because it functions as a prop in the game of make-believe. In art many things can function as props by mandating imaginings in the games of make believe we chose to enter into when we engage with them: strokes of paint or ink, spoken or written words, the action of actors, the movement of light and colour across a screen, etc. can all prompt us to imagine certain things, and thus function as props, and are, therefore, Waltonian fictions.³⁴

²⁸ Walton (1990) 69

²⁹ *Ibid.* 37

³⁰ *Ibid.* 23

³¹ *Ibid.* 69

³² *Ibid.* 23

³³ *Ibid.* 39

³⁴ *Ibid.* 38

Are videogames Waltonian fictions?

Based on this broad outlook Meskin and Robson have argued that it should not be at all controversial that videogames are, at minimum, Waltonian fictions, as they function as props in games of make-believe.³⁵ To this, I would say that on my view it is for the most part specific playthroughs of videogames, and not videogames themselves, which are fictions in Walton's sense, and this makes a big difference. On my understanding, Meskin and Robson argue that the following claims are uncontroversial: (1) When someone plays a videogame they enter into a game of make-believe in which what they are seeing and hearing serves as a prop, generating certain fictional truths by mandating that they are imagined. (2) Based on this we can say that videogames function as props in a game of make-believe, and therefore (3) Videogames are Waltonian fictions. I agree with Meskin and Robson that the first of these premises should not be controversial, and the third is a straightforward application of Walton's view based on the second point. Point (2), however, conflates the playthrough and the videogames itself.

As I have argued, when a videogame player interacts with a videogame they generate a playthrough, which I have defined as the interactive audio-visual representation which is generated when a player plays a videogame. These playthroughs may be different each time the videogame is played, and none are identical to the videogame itself. Playthroughs are how videogames are instanced, just as stage plays are instanced through performances. And it is the playthrough which functions as a prop and mandates certain imaginings, not the videogame itself, which is not encountered except via a playthrough. It is therefore the playthrough, not the

³⁵ Robson & Meskin (2012) 2

videogame, which is a Waltonian fiction. Under this same view it is generally specific performances of a stage play which are fictions in Walton's sense of acting as a prop. The main difference between these is that plays also tend to have scripts which might function as props in their own way when read, while videogames do not.

This distinction between the videogame itself and its playthroughs brings out two important points. First, that individual playthroughs of videogames are in fact Waltonian fictions, and therefore Walton's understanding of fictions should apply to them. My argument on this would be similar to how I phrased Meskin and Robson's: (1a) When someone plays a videogame they enter into a game of make-believe in which what they are seeing and hearing serves as a prop, generating certain fictional truths by mandating that they are imagined. (1b) What the player is seeing and hearing when they play a videogame is a specific playthrough of that videogame (2) Based on this we can say that playthroughs of videogames function as props in games of make-believe, and therefore (3) Playthroughs of videogames are Waltonian fictions.

The second important aspect of this distinction is that videogames themselves are not Waltonian fictions, as they do not serve as props in games of make-believe. Videogames function rather as tools for generating Waltonian fictions of a certain type. When a player interacts with a videogame they generate a playthrough. These playthroughs share much in common with each other, as they are instances of the same videogame. They include all that is fictionally true in the game itself, but none of them are identical with the game itself, as each of them also contain playthrough-specific fictional truths, which the game itself does not.

This brings me to my first challenge to Walton's theory: Videogames are not Waltonian fictions, but they do have fictional content. As I argued in chapter 2, videogames contain all fictional truths which are fictionally true in at least one possible playthrough of that videogame

and are never contradicted by any other possible playthrough, including all fictionally true disjunctions in which “either A or B” is fictionally true iff (1) “A” is fictionally true in at least one playthrough (2) “B” is fictionally true in at least one playthrough, and (3) there are no playthroughs in which neither “A” nor “B” are fictionally true. The fact that videogames themselves have fictional content is important for two reasons. First, because it is the presence of these fictional truths in both the game itself and all playthroughs of the game that allows us to say that two playthroughs, which may contain very different playthrough-specific fictional truths, are both playthroughs of the same videogame (and therefore that two people who have both played different playthroughs of *Mass Effect* have both played *Mass Effect*). Fictional content is an important part of what makes each instance of a videogame an instance of that videogame. And second, as I shall argue later, because appealing to the videogame itself is the only way in which we can make sense of un-portrayed fictional truths in playthroughs.

According to Walton’s theory, fictional content belongs to those things which function as props in games of make-believe. But videogames have fictional content without functioning as props in games of make-believe. If I am correct that videogames have fictional content but are not Waltonian fictions, then videogames themselves may serve as a counter-example to Walton’s theory.

Videogames may not actually be the only counter-example of this kind. As I mentioned, stage plays themselves also do not seem to be Waltonian fictions, although their performances are, and their scripts may be. Another comparison I would like to make is with some serialised fiction, especially the chaotic world of comic books. Fictional truths like “Bruce Wayne is Batman” are present in many comic books, films, television, and more. But they seem to be a part of some larger fiction than any single comic, show, or film. This overarching fiction is

perhaps instanced by each of these individual works, but not identical to them, similar to the way videogames are instanced by but not identical to their playthroughs. As I will show in the next section, these kinds of overarching non-Waltonian fictions are important to how we consider fictional truth in both videogame playthroughs and instances of serial fiction. This is because videogames, as non-Waltonian bearers of fictional content, are not the only major challenge to Walton's view that videogames raise. Playthroughs, which are Waltonian fictions, present a challenge to Walton too.

Work world v. Game world

The aspect of Walton's theory which is by far the most discussed in philosophical debates over videogames is Walton's work/game distinction.³⁶ According to Walton there is an important distinction between the "work world", that is the fictional world presented by the work itself, and the "game world", or the fictional world of the make-believe game which we enter into upon engaging with that fiction.³⁷ For instance, it is fictionally true in the work world of *Pride and Prejudice* that Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy get married. Because of this, if two people, we'll call them Griffin and Rachel, both read *Pride and Prejudice* and play along with the make-believe, it will be fictionally true in both of the games of make-believe that they play that Elizabeth and Darcy get married. However, it may also be fictionally true in Griffin's game of make-believe that Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy had a lavish wedding, with a great number of guests and much excitement, while in Rachel's make-believe game world, the wedding may have been

³⁶ See Tavinor (2005), Meskin & Robson (2012)

³⁷ Walton (1990) 59

a smaller, more private ceremony. Neither of these are true in the work world of *Pride and Prejudice*, however, as the novel itself does not specify.

The work world and the game world share many but not all fictional truths, and game worlds are almost always more built out and filled in than work worlds. In fact, Walton says that “It is conceivable that very few or even none of the propositions fictional in an appreciator’s game should be fictional in the world of the work he appreciates.”³⁸ For instance, the podcast show *The Adventure Zone* provides very little physical description for most of its main characters.³⁹ Since *The Adventure Zone* is a purely audio based medium, no visual representations of the characters are presented by the work, and the creators choose not to describe them in detail. Because of this, it is for instance neither true nor false in the work world of *The Adventure Zone* that one of the main characters, Magnus Burnsides, has dark hair and dark skin. It is also not true within the work world that Magnus’ hair and skin are colourless. However, in each individual make-believe game worlds generated when each listener hears *The Adventure Zone* and imagines what Magnus looks like it may be true or false that Magnus has dark hair and skin. None of the make-believe game worlds are “right” or “wrong”, or more right or wrong than others, because none are more or less mandated by the work-world of *The Adventure Zone*. All are what Walton would call “authorized” game worlds.⁴⁰

This is very similar to the way in which each performance of a play or playthrough of a videogame may vary. Just as playthroughs contain both playthrough-specific fictional truths and videogame-truths, so make-believe game worlds contain both the fictional truths which are specified in the work world and also other fictional truths which are generated by the

³⁸ *Ibid.* 59

³⁹ *The Adventure Zone* (2014-present).

⁴⁰ Walton (1990) 60

imagination of the person playing the game of make-believe. But it is important to note that playthroughs and performances are themselves representations, and define what is true in the work world, and are not the same as this game world which Walton theorizes. Thus there are at least three layers worth looking at: The videogame itself, which includes all videogame-truths (e.g. “Commander Shepard is human”), the playthrough of the videogame, which contains all of these videogame-truths and also many playthrough-specific fictional truths (e.g. “Commander Shepard is female”), and finally the make-believe game world, which contains not only all of the fictional truths presented by the playthrough (playthrough-specific and videogame-truths alike) but also additional fictional truths imagined by the player, which might be something like “Commander Shepard is tired”, or “Commander Shepard has a brother”. Neither of these imaginings are mandated by the work world of the playthrough or by *Mass Effect* itself, but there is room for them in the player’s make-believe game world.

Walton also writes that it would be possible for a game world to contain a truth which is “unauthorized.”⁴¹ According to Walton “People can play any sort of game they wish with a given work,”⁴² meaning that although *Doctor Who* mandates that I make-believe that the Doctor is a Time Lord, I could very well make-believe that he is human instead. This would be a case of an unauthorized game of make-believe, as it is part of the function of *Doctor Who* as a prop to mandate the viewer to make-believe that the Doctor is a Time Lord, and not a human. Because of this possible variance between the work world and the many game worlds associated with it, Walton says that what is fictionally true in a work world is “what is (or would be) fictional in *any* game in which it is the function of the [work] to serve as a prop, and whose fictionality in

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 60

⁴² *Ibid.* 56

such games is generated by the [work] alone.”⁴³ Thus, as it is true in any game of make-believe in which it is the function of *Doctor Who* to serve as a prop and in which the species of the Doctor is generated by *Doctor Who* that the Doctor is a Time Lord, it is therefore fictionally true in the work-world of *Doctor Who* that the Doctor is a Time Lord.

Un-portrayed fictional truths

Walton’s definition of that which is fictionally true in the work world as that which “is (or would be) fictional in *any* game in which it is the function of the [work] to serve as a prop, and whose fictionality in such games is generated by the [work] alone”⁴⁴ highlights what is perhaps the biggest apparent conflict between my own view of fictional truths in playthroughs of videogames and Walton’s view of fictional truths in general. I have argued that videogame-truths may still be considered fictionally true in the work world of playthroughs in which they are never portrayed to the payer. I argue that some things, such as “Alistair has a sister named Goldanna” ought to be considered fictionally true in a playthrough even if it is never portrayed, and thus the player is not mandated by the playthrough alone to imagine it. For a playthrough which never reveals to the player that Alistair has a sister named Goldanna, it does not seem to be the case that “Alistair has a sister named Goldanna” is or would be fictionally true in every make-believe game world in which it is the function of that specific playthrough to serve as a prop. In fact if this was the only playthrough available to us, we would have no way of knowing that Alistair has

⁴³ *Ibid.* 60

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

a sister named Goldanna. It is only through other playthroughs that we receive this fictional information.

As I argued in the last chapter, this is very similar to the case of works which are parts of a series. For instance, it does not seem to be the case that “Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker’s father” is or would be fictionally true in every game world in which it is the function of *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* to serve as a prop. However “Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker’s father” is or would be fictionally true in every game world in which it is the function of *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* to serve as a prop, and because of the relationship of these two films, we know that it is fictionally true that during *Episode IV*, that Darth Vader was Luke Skywalker’s father, unbeknownst to us the viewers (or for that matter to Luke). Like videogame players who have played only playthroughs too narrow in scope to include all videogame-truths, viewers who have watched only *Episode IV* and not *Episode V* simply do not have all relevant information to understanding all of what is fictionally true in *Episode IV*, namely that Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker’s father. If we consider Darth Vader to be Luke Skywalker’s father in *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, or claim that it is fictionally true that Alistair has a sister named Goldanna even in a playthrough of *Dragon Age: Origins* in which this is never portrayed to the player, we cannot do so using Walton’s description of fictional truths.

Lee Walters uses this example when considering one of Walton’s other given definitions of that which is true in the work world.⁴⁵ Walters writes in response to one of Walton’s later essays, in which Walton reveals a “gap”⁴⁶ in his own definition of what it is for something to be fictionally true in the work world. Walton states his definition as: “A proposition is

⁴⁵ Walters (2017)

⁴⁶ Walton (2015) 17

fictional...just in case there is a prescription to the effect that it is to be imagined. More precisely, a proposition is fictional in (the world of) a particular work, *W*, just in case appreciators of that work are to imagine it, just in case full appreciation of *W* requires imagining it”.⁴⁷ Walton acknowledges this definition as “half right”⁴⁸ after providing several interesting counter-examples and challenges to his own definition, such as when a murder mystery story may trick readers into imagining things which are not fictionally true, or how the audience of a film is not to imagine that the background music is present within the fiction.⁴⁹ Walton admits in this essay “I don’t know how to fill the gap; I don’t know what, in addition to a prescription to imagine, is required to make a proposition fictional.”⁵⁰ Walters, in response to Walton, provides one more important counter-example, that of serialised fiction such as *Star Wars* in which information important to full understanding of one work is revealed in another, and attempts to provide his own solution to Walton’s gap.

Walters argues that given the fact that “Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker’s father” is true in *Episode IV* despite the film never mandating that the audience imagine this, “There is a work, *W*, such that there is some proposition, *P*, true in *W*, but proper engagement with *W* does not require one to imagine that *P*, at any stage.”⁵¹ Walters uses this counter-example to critique Walton’s account, but does not abandon it. Instead he offers his own “Waltonian”⁵² approach, proposing that

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 24

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 28

⁵¹ Walters (2017) 17

⁵² *Ibid.* 19

A proposition, *P*, is fictional in the world *A* of a particular work, *W*, iff there is some fiction *F* that concerns *A*, of which *W* is a part, such that appreciators of *F* are to imagine *P*.⁵³

To phrase this using *Star Wars* as an example: “Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker’s father” is fictional in the world *A* of *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, iff there is some fiction *F* (in this case *Star Wars* itself as a full series) that concerns *A*, of which *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* is a part, such that appreciators of the *Star Wars* series are to imagine “Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker’s father”. This proposed account of fictional truth, while complex, allows for works within a series to influence what is fictionally true within each other, while being recognized as individual works.

I believe that Walters’ account, or one like it, would also help to solve the problem of unportrayed fictional truths in videogames. Not only in that some games are serial in nature (There are currently 4 *Mass Effect* games, for instance) but also in that if we recognize each playthrough of a videogame as a representation having its own work world, we may substitute “playthrough” for “work”. For example, “Alistair has a sister named Goldanna” is fictional in the world *A* of a particular playthrough of *Dragon Age: Origins*, iff there is some fiction *F* (in this case the videogame *Dragon Age: Origins* itself) that concerns world *A*, of which that particular playthrough is a part, such that appreciators of the game *Dragon Age: Origins* are to imagine “Alistair has a sister named Goldanna”.

One difference between playthroughs of a videogame and episodes in a serial fiction in this regard is what it means for a work to be “part” of a fiction. For serial fiction this is often straightforward, as the fiction consists of a collection of works all concerning the same world,

⁵³ Walters (2017) 20. Walters provides a slightly longer definition than this to try and better include ongoing series, but this definition works well enough for videogames and *Star Wars*.

generally set in a temporal series; e.g. *Episode V* is set in the same world as *Episode IV*, but later in time. Playthroughs, however, do not vary in time, but rather in scope when it comes to whether or not certain videogame-truths are portrayed to the player. The amount of videogame-truths which are portrayed in a playthrough does not depend on the temporally-related position of the playthrough within a series of other playthroughs, but rather on the extent to which the player chooses to explore the fictional world. But the effect is the same. Just as *Star Wars Episode IV* does not provide all of the information of what is fictionally true in *Star Wars* or even in *Episode IV* itself, so one playthrough of *Dragon Age: Origins* may not provide all of the information of what is fictionally true in *Dragon Age: Origins* the videogame or even of that specific playthrough.

Another major difference between videogames and serial fiction in this regard is that serial fiction does not need to account for playthrough-specific truths. Walter's approach to fictional truth works well for videogame-truths, but would rule out playthrough-specific fictional truths. If we apply the same theory to a proposition such as "Commander Shepard is female", and say that this is fictionally true in the world *A*, of a specific playthrough of *Mass Effect* iff there is some fiction *F* (the videogame *Mass Effect*) that concerns *A*, of which the playthrough of *Mass Effect* is a part, such that appreciators of the game *Mass Effect* are to imagine that Commander Shepard is female, then the result is that "Commander Shepard is female" is not fictionally true within the work world of the playthrough. Because of this, I would instead accept a combination of Walton and Walter's views, to say that a proposition *P* is fictionally true in the world *A* of a particular work *W* iff either (a.) appreciators of *W* are to imagine *P* and full appreciation of *W* requires imagining *P*, or (b.) there is some fiction, *F* that concerns *A* of which *W* is a part, such that appreciators of *F* are to imagine *P*.

Both videogame playthroughs and serial fiction function as counter-examples to some of Walton's claims about fictional truth. However, they are claims that Walton himself recognises as incomplete. Walters' alternative approach to fictional truth may provide a good way to bridge this gap, and make room for un-portrayed fictional truths in both serial fiction and videogames, and my adaptation of Walters' approach would include playthrough-specific fictional truths as well. However, I would question whether Walters' approach is in fact "Waltonian",⁵⁴ because it brings us straight back to the first challenge I presented against Walton. Walters' account relies on the existence of "some fiction *F*,"⁵⁵ a fiction which appears to have fictional content but is not itself a Waltonian fiction. There do seem to be some things "such that appreciators of *F* are to imagine *P*", but I would argue that this is not because *F* itself is a Waltonian fiction and functions as a prop, but because *F* involves other instances (other works) which do. Neither *Star Wars* nor *Dragon Age: Origins* mandate imaginings in the way that Waltonian fictions do. *Star Wars* itself, apart from its individual episodes, is no more a prop than *Dragon Age: Origins* is apart from its playthroughs. Yet both *Star Wars* and *Dragon Age: Origins* have fictional content, and are important to understanding what all is true in each of their instances (playthroughs or episodes).

Conclusion

According to Walton, a fiction is something which functions as a prop, and something is fictionally true in a work when that work mandates that the appreciator of the work imagine it. Videogames, however, have fictional content without functioning as props, and their

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 19

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 20

playthroughs include many fictional truths which the playthrough alone does not mandate that the player imagine. Walton's theory cannot account for the fictional content of videogame or their playthroughs, and as such, both may serve as counter-examples to his claims.

I would like to point out that although I am not the first to suggest that videogames may cause problems for Walton's theory, the problems which I have pointed out are new. My claim is not, for instance, the same as Grant Tavinor's, who claimed that videogames "fuzz" or "blur" the game world/work world distinction by allowing the player to directly alter and be a part of the work world.⁵⁶ I agree with Meskin and Robson's response to Tavinor that although player's ability to affect the content of games is interesting, it does not "blur" this important line.⁵⁷ I will discuss the player's place in the playthrough and the game/work distinction more in the next chapter, but my claim that videogames are non-Waltonian fictions, and that they and their playthroughs are counter-examples to Walton does not rely on Tavinor's.

The philosophy of videogames is still a very new field, and there is still a lot of work to be done. In these first three chapters I have addressed the special forms of fictional truth which are the result of videogames' interactive nature, and addressed the challenges which videogames, as forms of interactive fiction, pose to Walton's account of representational art and make-believe. In the third and final chapter, I will turn to videogames not as interactive but as self-involving, and discuss another unusual form of fictional truth associated with videogames: fictional truths about the player.

⁵⁶ Tavinor (2005) 33

⁵⁷ Meskin & Robson (2012) 216

Chapter III: Fictional Truths about the Player

Now that I have laid out a basic ontology of videogames and their playthroughs and established three different types of fictional truth which may be found therein, I would like to inquire after another specific type of fictional truth, which is present in videogames (or, more accurately, in their playthroughs) and uncommon, though not unheard of, in other forms of art: fictional truths about the player. In this chapter I will turn away from the challenges of the videogame-playthrough relationship and turn to another challenging relationship which videogames present: the player to player-character relationship.

Besides the variable nature of playthroughs, one of the greatest differences between videogames and film, theatre, literature, etc. is the unique relationship between the audience (in this case, the player) and the fictional world and its characters. Many stories, especially in literature, tie their audiences' perspective to that of a main character or narrator, but videogames do something slightly different through the player-character. Player-characters are the characters in videogames over whom the player assumes direct control, and to whom the player's perspective is normally tied. They are usually (though not always) the main character or characters of a work, and some videogames have multiple player-characters which the player controls at various times. Tavinor describes these characters as the "player's fictional proxy in the game."⁵⁸ He points out that there seems to be a real sense in which the player is understood to fictionally "be" the player-character while playing the game, saying "The relationship between the player and their character does seem to be one of identity: if asked of a number of characters on-screen 'which one are you?' gamers do not hesitate to pick out their character."⁵⁹ The player,

⁵⁸ Tavinor (2009) 70

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

normally by pressing certain buttons on a controller or manipulating a computer mouse, or more rarely by making other actions in the real world, influences the actions and movements of their fictional counterpart in-game. The player-character's fictional actions and movements are represented for the player on screen, and it is through this character's fictional actions that the player influences the fictional world, shapes the playthrough, and plays the videogame.

This level of participation in storytelling, made possible by an identity relationship between the player and their player-character, is above and beyond the kind of participation which audience members can usually have with art, and is part of what allows videogames to be “Self-involving interactive fictions.”⁶⁰ I have so far focused on the interactive nature of videogames. As interactive fictions, videogames allow for the player to play a role in making certain things fictionally true about their player-characters. This is what can make each playthrough of a videogame different. I will now turn to their self-involving nature. I wish to more deeply examine how videogames' self-involving nature affects their fictional content, as videogames seem to rely on an interesting form of fictional truth not often found in non-SIIFs. I will do this by focusing on the player to player-character relationship.

The basic way in which the player to player-character relationship may shape the fictional truths present in a videogame is this: If the player and player-character are presented by the videogame playthrough as fictionally being identical, as Tavinor says,⁶¹ then by making certain things fictionally true of the player-character the playthrough seems to be able to make the same things fictionally true of the player themselves, in a way which most forms of art do not. This ability to mandate certain imaginings about the player themselves seems to be an

⁶⁰ Robson & Meskin (2016) 165

⁶¹ Tavinor (2009) 70

important part of what it means for videogames to be “self-involving”.⁶² According to Walton, these types of truths about the player should only be present within the make-believe game world.⁶³ However I will argue that videogames, as SIIFs, include these fictional truths in the work world of the playthrough.

In this chapter I hope to investigate the player to player-character relationship, enquiring into how the player imagines this relationship, how it is presented to them by the videogame, and what this means for the fictional content of the playthrough and the videogame. In short, I will argue that (1) When playing a videogame with a player-character, players do imagine that they are the player-character (2) This allows for the generation of various fictional truths not merely about the player-character, but about the player (3) These imaginings are mandated by the playthrough and (4) Fictional truths about the player are present in not only the make-believe game world, but in the work world of the playthrough as well. I will argue that all of these are true despite the fact that videogames also often mandate other imaginings which appear to conflict with a straightforward identity between the player and player-character.

Before continuing, I must point out that not all videogames have player-characters. Some games, such as *Tetris* or *Bejeweled*, do not seem to have characters at all, just puzzle pieces to manipulate. In other games, such as *The Sims*, or *Total War*, while there are characters, including characters which the player may at times instruct, none of the characters are tied to the player specifically, and the player may influence the world without using these characters. Just as I have narrowed the focus of this study from the start to single-player games, so the focus of this chapter will be narrowed to only those games which feature player-characters. It may be that

⁶² Robson & Meskin (2016) 165

⁶³ Walton (1990) 59

having a player-character is a necessary part of being a self-involving interactive fiction, but that is not a claim I mean to argue here.

Walton's theory of participation

Before diving into the unique way in which playing a videogame generates fictional truths about the player, I would like to take a quick look at how Walton describes the generation of fictional truths about appreciators of art in general. In the last chapter I offered both videogames and their playthroughs as potential counter-examples to Walton's theory, in that they both seem to have fictional content which they do not themselves mandate that their audience imagine. Nevertheless, Walton's theory is a valuable resource, and for the purpose of this chapter I will be using his definition of fictional truths, which he defines as "a proposition is fictional (in the world of) a particular work, *W*, just in case appreciators of that work are to imagine it, just in case full appreciation of *W* requires imagining it"⁶⁴. As both Walters and I have pointed out, this definition may need to be broadened if it is to include all fictional truths present in videogames and their playthroughs, but in this chapter I will be searching for fictional truths which do fit Walton's narrower description.

According to Walton, all appreciation of representational art involves some level of participation on the part of the audience. Walton's theory is based on the idea that in appreciating a work of representational art we play a game of make-believe significantly similar to the games of make-believe which children play. Walton points out that just as children's games involve participation, all appreciation of representational art involves participation in some way. When

⁶⁴ Walton (2015) 17

someone participates in a game of make-believe, they can “generate truths about themselves” and “are themselves props, reflexive ones.”⁶⁵ This means that in a typical game of make-believe such as Walton’s bear in the woods scenario, when Sydney sneaks behind the tree stump she generates the fictional truth that she is sneaking behind the bear, or that by shouting at the stump, Justin is fictionally shouting at the bear. Sydney and Justin are both the people playing the game of make-believe and also two of the props within this game, who generate fictional truths about themselves. In this respect, Walton likens participants in games of make-believe to “actors playing themselves”⁶⁶ and says that

Participants in games of make-believe are thus props, objects, and imaginers all three, intimately combined in one neat package. They prescribe imaginings – imaginings that are about themselves by virtue of the fact that they themselves do the prescribing – and it is to themselves that they issue these prescriptions.⁶⁷

Finally, Walton notes that when the players of a game generate truths about themselves, these imaginings are made in first person⁶⁸: Justin does not think “Justin is yelling at the bear”, but “I am yelling at the bear”.

Walton writes that appreciators of art normally participate in at least the minimal sense that they agree to bind themselves by the rules of the game of make-believe they enter into; to play the game as it is prescribed by the fiction for them to play. Walton argues that appreciators also generate fictional truths about themselves in their games of make-believe like children do.⁶⁹ One such fictional truth would be, while watching *Doctor Who*, I might imagine “I see the Doctor” when the actor David Tennant comes on screen. Another might be “I know that

⁶⁵ Walton (1990) 219

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 211

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 212

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 212

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 213

Sherlock Holmes lives at 221b Baker St.” These are fictional truths present in each person’s game world which are also about the imaginer. Some works can involve other fictions about the appreciator. For instance, the podcast show *Welcome to Night Vale* prescribes that the appreciator imagine that they themselves are listening to a local community radio broadcast in the small desert town of Night Vale, instead of listening to a podcast on their phone. Likewise *Gulliver’s Travels* prescribes that the reader imagine that they are reading a journal written by the fictional character Lemuel Gulliver, and not reading a novel written by the author Jonathan Swift.

As Walton notes, the type of truths which appreciators normally generate about themselves when appreciating art are still in a sense “distanced” in a way that those generated by children playing make-believe are not.⁷⁰ According to Walton there are two types of restrictions on the participation of appreciators of paintings, novels, etc. First, “there are fewer sorts of actions such that it can be fictional that the spectator performs them.”⁷¹ This means that while it may be fictionally true of the reader of *Gulliver’s Travels* that they read Gulliver’s journal (as opposed to Swift’s novel), *Gulliver’s Travels* cannot make it fictionally true that the reader is, for instance, walking around on Lilliput, or speaking with Gulliver himself. Children’s games of make-believe can include a broad range of actions like this, but most representational art cannot. Second, “fewer actions which the spectator might actually perform are easily interpretable as contributions to the game, as generating fictional truths.”⁷² In other words, when reading *Gulliver’s Travels* there is very little I can do to generate more fictional truths about myself. I can continue reading or stop reading. But if I try to take more actions, such as speaking out loud

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 224

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 225

⁷² *Ibid.* 225

in an attempt to communicate with Gulliver, they do not become part of the fiction. If I perform an action like walking around while reading, this, at most, means that I am fictionally walking around while reading Gulliver's journal (as opposed to walking around reading Swift's novel). Because the audience is passive, only rather passive actions can be fictionally true of them, and only rather passive acts such as reading, watching, or listening can generate fictional truths about them. Playing a videogame, however, is significantly less passive, and offers many more possibilities in both of these regards.

Participation with videogames

In both of these respects videogames are, perhaps unsurprisingly, significantly more like children's games of make-believe than most works of representational art are. The second is perhaps easier to see: most representational art does not require or allow for anything like a videogame controller. Videogame controllers use player's physical motions, whether they are pushing a button, moving a joystick, tilting a controller, dancing in front of a motion sensor, or in some cases such as *Pokémon Go!* even changing their position on the globe and walking through real space, to generate fictional truths. Videogames are significantly more interactive in this way.

While this is doubtless an interesting aspect of videogames and other interactive art, I would like to focus on the first of Walton's restrictions, that "there are fewer sorts of actions [in representational art, compared to children's games of make-believe] such that it can be fictional that the spectator performs them."⁷³ Unlike in children's games, the kind of fictional truths which appreciators of representational art normally generate about themselves are distant, passive, and

⁷³ *Ibid.*

observational; i.e. they imagine the propositions which they would express as “I see”, “I hear”, “I know”, “I believe”, “I am reading/listening to/watching” etc. (For the sake of brevity, I will hereafter refer to imaginings which are about the one imagining them by saying that players imagine “I x”, rather than clarifying each time that they imagine the propositions which they would express by these sentences. Thus whenever I refer to a player imagining something like “I am Commander Shepard” I mean that the player imagines the proposition which they would express by saying “I am Commander Shepard”, unless otherwise specified.) Videogames also generate these fictional truths, but they also seem to generate many others.

When I play *Mass Effect* I generate fictional truths about myself similar to those pointed out by Walton: “I see the Normandy”, “I hear Tali’Zorah’s voice”, “I know that Garrus Vakarian is a Turian”, “I believe that the Geth have souls” etc. However, when I play *Mass Effect* I also make many other things about myself, such as “I am wearing N7 armor”, “I am out of ammo”, “I missed the shot”, “I said I would save them”, “I chose not to shoot”, “I didn’t see the enemy behind me”, “I am talking to Anderson”, “I killed them”, and even “I died”. Many of these could be stated in a different way, and reference the player-character, Commander Shepard, instead of myself e.g. “Shepard is wearing N7 armor”, “Shepard is talking to Anderson”, “Shepard killed them”, “Shepard died”, etc. However this is not the primary way in which players speak about their gameplay. And, as Tavinor points out, while playing *Mass Effect* I can easily point to Shepard and say “That’s me.” Or “I’m that one”.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Tavinor (2009) 70

What are we to make of these first-person statements? In particular, are statements such as “I died” (or more accurately the propositions which we would express in this way) fictionally true, either (a) in the game world of each player or (b) in the work world of each playthrough?

Mass Effect features a story such that “Commander Shepard defeated the Reapers”. I would like to propose that *Mass Effect*, or at least each playthrough of *Mass Effect*, also in an important sense features the story that “You defeated the Reapers”, or “[Player] defeated the Reapers”, and players experience and are meant to experience the story of “Commander Shepard defeated the Reapers” and “I defeated the Reapers” as one and the same. My claim is that (1) When a player plays a videogame with a player-character they enter into a game of make-believe in which, among other things, they themselves are the player-character. That is, they make-believe (a) that “I am [player-character]” is true, and (b) that whatever is true of the player-character (such as “[player-character] died”) is also true of themselves (they imagine “I died”). (2) The player’s imagining of both of these fictional truths is mandated by the playthrough. And (3) Fictional truths such as “[player] is [player-character]” are fictionally true in the work world of the playthrough. This final point once again goes against Walton’s theory, and must be phrased carefully. But first, I must demonstrate that videogame players do, in fact, imagine that they are the player-characters of the videogames they play.

Phenomenological evidence

The claim that players do in fact imagine certain types of fictional truths when they play videogames is one which I will support with two forms of phenomenological evidence based on observation of videogame players and experience playing videogames. I will examine how

videogame players talk about what happens when they play videogames and how they emotionally react to playing videogames. Not all videogame players have identical reactions of course, and some may be far less inclined to react in the ways I describe. But the ways of talking and feeling which I will point out are at least an option for them. And if I am correct that imagining first person truths such as “I am Commander Shepard” are mandated by the playthrough, then we might describe those who do not talk or feel this way as being less willing to participate in the game of make-believe, or even as participating in “unauthorized” game worlds, in which certain fictional truths which are mandated by the work world are not represented in the game world as they should be.⁷⁵

The way players talk

The first source of evidence I would like to point out which indicates that players do imagine that they themselves are the player-characters when they play videogames is what I have already pointed out: The way in which videogame players talk about the player-character’s actions in games is often by using the first-person. When a videogame player recounts what happened when they played a game they do so by saying things such as “I jumped”, “I swung my sword”, “I said I would help”, “I placed the box on the pressure plate”, “I took the shot”, and even (in some cases repeatedly and very often) “I died”. Most of these statements could be made in a different form by making direct reference to the player-character instead; “Lara jumped”, “Hawke swung her sword”, “Ryder said she would help”, “Chell placed the box on the pressure-plate”, “Samus took the shot” or “Emily died”. However, players do not always speak this way,

⁷⁵ Walton (1990) 60

but often use the first-person instead. I would also say that there are also some actions, such as “I chose not to shoot”, “I did not see the enemy behind me”, or possibly “I missed the shot” which players might be particularly hesitant to attribute to the player-character rather than the player themselves e.g. “Elizabeth chose not to shoot”, “Evie did not see the enemy behind her”, “Jill missed the shot”, as this seems in some way like passing blame. Since the player exerts direct control over the player-character, saying something like this seems like an undo attribution of blame for something like a lack of skill or moral decision making to the player-character, when it belongs to the player.

Interestingly, players often continue using this type of language when describing fictional actions which the player-character performs but which the player themselves had little or no part in enacting. Actions such as jumping and shooting are most commonly performed by player-characters based on the player’s input through the game’s physical controls; these actions are thus chosen by the player. However in many games the player-character also performs some actions apart from the player’s control. This is most often via cutscenes, which are like short film clips or set-pieces which the player watches, and during which the player has no control over the action of their player-character or any other action in the scene. Some cutscenes, such as the final cutscene of *Mass Effect*, are playthrough-specific, while others, such as the cutscenes of *Tomb Raider*, are not, but are exactly the same each time the game is played. And while it would make sense for players to refer to the fictional actions which player-characters perform during cutscenes in the third person, e.g. “they said/jumped/missed/died”, players are still free to and often still do describe cutscene action in the first-person, e.g. “I said/jumped/missed/died” etc.

Pointing out the way in which videogame players tend to speak does not of course prove that they are correct to speak that way. However, it is a useful way to shed light on what players

are imagining when they play videogames, and that is what I am currently concerned with.

Players most likely speak in first-person with reference to the fictional actions performed by their associated player-characters because in the player's imagination they themselves are the person performing these fictional actions. The way which videogame players talk about their gameplay gives us a reason to believe that in their make-believe game worlds at least, "I am [player character]" is fictionally true.

The way players feel

The second source of evidence I would like to provide in favour of my claim that players do in fact imagine themselves to be the player-character when playing videogames is players' emotional responses to these games. Because of the player to player-character relationship, our potential reactions to videogames can be different than our reactions to other forms of representative art.

Videogame players can have all of the same emotional reactions to videogames as they can have to works of other kinds, such as a film. A player may be frightened of a monster, may love a hero, may hope that a desperate plan succeeds, may be sad at a character's death, etc.⁷⁶ Walton holds that the psychological responses we have to fictions can generate, or at least help generate fictional truths about us, that form part of the game of make-believe which we play. For instance, when I watch a horror film about a monster and feel afraid it is in Walton's view fictionally true in my make-believe game world that I am afraid of the monster.⁷⁷ In the same

⁷⁶ Some philosophers deny that we do normally feel fear, hope, etc. in response to fiction. (see Walton (1978), (1990), and Wilkinson (2000)). For the sake of simplicity, I write as if we do feel actual fear, etc. But nothing in my argument depends on this claim.

⁷⁷ Walton (1990) 241-249

way, when I play the horror game *Slenderman*, it is in Walton's view fictionally true in my make-believe game world that I am afraid of the antagonist, Slenderman. However, in addition to this there are also certain psychological reactions which players may have while playing videogames which are generally unavailable to appreciators of other forms of art. The two I would like to point out are personal pride and personal guilt. There may be more kinds of reactions which may be experienced through videogames and not through other forms of art, but I will be focusing on the personal guilt one may feel over a wrongdoing and the personal pride one may feel for triumph or a job well done. These feelings are necessarily self-referential, and rely on the player to player-character identity relationship.

It is not uncommon when engaging with a work of representational art for an audience member to feel pride or shame on a character's behalf. This may be akin to the way in which we can feel shame or pride on behalf of a friend or family member whose actions we either admire or condemn. However, these emotions are other-directed towards the characters. When watching the musical *Hamilton* I can feel something like shame over the title character's extra-marital affair, and how poorly he handles it, and something like pride at how Hamilton achieves his political goals, proves himself to General Washington, and celebrates the birth of his son. However I do not feel personally guilty or personally praiseworthy for any of these events. I do not feel like I myself had anything to do with making these portrayed events come about, that I have merited any praise or blame, or that I have any reason to feel guilt or pride for myself. I do not feel, in short, that this is about me. Instead, I feel shame or pride for Hamilton or with Hamilton in an empathetic sense.

Another kind of pride and shame we can feel when engaging with most types of fiction are those of association. This is especially easy to see in cases of association by nationality. For

instance, if an American watches a film in which the fictional Americans save the world or doom the world, even though the audience member is in no way responsible for these fictional events, they may feel a level of patriotic pride or shame. The same may occur along other cultural lines, depending on how fictional members of a certain race, gender, or other social group are portrayed or behave. This, too, is not as personal as the type of pride and guilt one can experience through playing a videogame.

Because of the player's relationship with the player-character, and because the player experiences the stories like "Shepard defeated the Reapers" and "I defeated the Reapers" as one and the same, the player's emotional response is experienced as a pride in oneself and one's own actions. Most videogames are built around this idea, and are designed to make the player feel powerful and successful; to feel pride in a job well done. When a player guides a player-character through a fight to save a town and slay a dragon, the player can feel pride, not only saying "I beat the game!" but also saying "I killed the dragon!" or "I saved the town!". Likewise with guilt. If my character commits an immoral act, I can have a reaction of guilt for my own actions: "What have I done?!" I might even ask in horror towards my own fictional actions. It is fictionally true that the player-character performed the act and is responsible, but since I imagine that I am the player-character, I also imagine that I committed the act and I am responsible, and may react towards this fictional truth.

This feeling of guilt based on the identification of the player with the player-character can apply even when it is not the player's input which causes the player-character to perform a certain act. As mentioned in the previous section, some videogames contain cutscenes or other sections in which the player-character performs fictional actions other than those based on the player's input. For instance, in *Bioshock Infinite* Booker DeWitt (the player-character) will

murder another character, Zachary Comstock, in a cutscene. Booker does not do so based on the player's input, and the player cannot stop Booker from doing so. However, if the player still holds to imagining "I am Booker DeWitt" during this cutscene, they may feel guilt over Comstock's murder.

I should clarify that I do not mean to imply that the player bears any actual moral responsibility, praiseworthiness, or blameworthiness for their player-character's fictional actions (or their role in them).⁷⁸ I mean only that players make-believe that they do, and respond to this imagined fictional truth about themselves with feeling. If Walton is correct, this response generates a truth about the player's emotions in the make-believed game world. But in any case, it is a form of psychological participation which is very often experienced by videogame players and rarely experienced in the appreciation of other forms of representational art.

If players did not imagine such things as "I am Commander Shepard" while playing videogames like *Mass Effect*, this type of emotional reaction, of personal pride or guilt, would not be available to them when considering the fictional actions of Commander Shepard. They might, like the audience of *Hamilton*, feel shame or pride empathetically with or for Shepard, but not feel personally responsible, blameworthy, or praiseworthy, as Shepard herself might. Instead, players do seem to feel these self-referential emotions towards player-character actions.

Based on this phenomenological evidence, it is clear that videogame players often do imagine that they themselves are the player-character and are performing the player-character's actions. Whether or not they ever utter "I am Commander Shepard" or the like, players of *Mass Effect* imagine that they are Commander Shepard, and the same applies to other games with

⁷⁸ Whether or not there are certain fictional actions which it would be actually immoral for a player to direct their player-character to perform is one of the most debated questions in videogame ethics. See Morgan Luck (2009).

player-characters. Thus we can say that “I am Commander Shepard” is fictionally true in the make-believe game world of the player. The next task then is to inquire whether or not this imagining is mandated by the work world of the playthrough and if so, how.

Games mandate the player/player-character identity relationship

Normally, when something which is imagined in the make-believe game world is mandated to be imagined by the work, we can simply say that the same fictional truths are present in both the game world and the work world. According to Walton, “A proposition is fictional (in the world of) a particular work, *W*, just in case appreciators of that work are to imagine it, just in case full appreciation of *W* requires imagining it.”⁷⁹ Thus, because full appreciation of *Doctor Who* requires that the audience imagine that the Doctor is a Time Lord, it is fictionally true in the work world of *Doctor Who* that the Doctor is a Time Lord, and it is fictionally true that the Doctor is a Time Lord in every authorized make-believe game world in which *Doctor Who* functions as a prop.

Unfortunately, there are some additional challenges which we encounter when attempting to discuss fictional truths about the player or audience. The first is one to which I have already alluded. The statement “I am [player-character]” itself, which the player imagines, cannot be true in the work itself. If this kind of fictional truth were present in the work it is unclear to what “I” would possibly refer, and whatever it referred to, it would not be the player. The message which playthroughs must deliver is instead basically “You are [player-character]”. I will therefore refer to the fictional truth, which I will argue is present in both the player’s make-believe game world

⁷⁹ Walton (2015) 17

and also the work world of the playthrough, as “[Player] is [player-character]”. In the next section I will flesh out what I mean by this. But first, I would like to briefly discuss this shift away from the first-person.

So far I have been treating first-person statements such as “I am Commander Shepard” and the propositions which we would express this way as one and the same, assuming that when Jane imagines “I am Commander Shepard”, Jane imagines “Jane is Commander Shepard”. And it is these propositions (such as “Jane is Commander Shepard”) which I will argue are true in the work world of the playthrough. However, it may also be important that Jane imagines not only “Jane is Commander Shepard”, but specifically imagines “I am Commander Shepard”. As John Perry writes, there seems to be an important difference between beliefs such as John Perry believing “John Perry is making a mess” and John Perry believing “I am making a mess”.⁸⁰ In the same way, there may be an important difference between Jane imagining “Jane is Commander Shepard” and Jane imagining “I am Commander Shepard”. I would argue that if Jane’s imagining “I am Commander Shepard” is in fact different than her imagining “Jane is Commander Shepard”, then while “Jane is Commander Shepard” is true in both the make-believe game world and the work world of the playthrough, “I am Commander Shepard” is true only in Jane’s make-believe game world. This is because it relies on what Perry calls a “Locating belief”,⁸¹ in this case the belief “I am Jane”. Nevertheless, the playthrough mandates that Jane imagine “I am Commander Shepard” by mandating that she imagine “Jane is Commander Shepard”.

⁸⁰ Perry (1993) 33-53

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 34

[Player] is [player-character]

When I say that “[player] is [player-character]” is fictionally true in a playthrough of a videogame, I mean to say that when Jane plays *Mass Effect* it is fictionally true that Jane is Commander Shepard, and when Ellen plays *Tomb Raider* it is fictionally true that Ellen is Lara Croft, not only in Jane or Ellen’s make-believe game worlds, but in the works themselves. This view directly clashes with part of Walton’s theory. Nevertheless, I will argue that “[player] is [player-character]” is fictionally true in the work world of the playthrough based on Walton’s own definition of what is fictionally true in a work: “A proposition is fictional (in the world of) a particular work, *W*, just in case appreciators of that work are to imagine it, just in case full appreciation of *W* requires imagining it.”⁸²

One of the primary ways in which Walton illustrates his work world/game world distinction - the difference between what is true in the work itself and what is true in the make-believe game world which appreciators enter into when they appreciate a work of fiction - is through the appreciator’s place in the game world. For instance, within the work world of *Doctor Who* it is true that the Doctor is a Time Lord. When I watch *Doctor Who* the show functions as a prop in a game of make-believe, mandating that I imagine certain things, including that the Doctor is a Time Lord. Thus “the Doctor is a Time Lord” is fictionally true in both the work world and my game world. However, it is also true within the game world that I, the viewer, see the Doctor. That is, when I see the actor who is playing the Doctor on screen, I make-believe that I am seeing the Doctor. I am not, however, a fictional character within the world of *Doctor Who* itself who sees the Doctor as a companion of his such as the fictional character Donna Noble

⁸² Walton (2015) 17

might. I am not part of the work world, but I am part of the game world. Within the game world it is true that I see the Doctor, but the same proposition is not true within the work world.⁸³ One of the effects of this can be seen when two different people, let's call them Travis and Teresa, watch *Doctor Who* (for simplicity we will say they watch it separately and do not communicate with each other about it). It is fictionally true in Travis' game of make-believe that Travis sees the Doctor, and it is fictionally true in Teresa's game that Teresa sees the Doctor, but it is not fictionally true in Travis' game that Teresa sees the Doctor, nor in Teresa's game that Travis sees the Doctor. Moreover, it is not the case that full appreciation of *Doctor Who* requires imagining either "Travis sees the Doctor" or "Teresa sees the Doctor". Neither Travis nor Teresa are a part of the work world of *Doctor Who* nor can they effect this work world by watching the show.

Videogames, however, are different. I would argue that full appreciation of Jane's playthrough of *Mass Effect* does require imagining "Jane is Commander Shepard", and that this imagining is mandated by the work. The key here is that full appreciation of *Mass Effect* itself does not require this imagining. Only appreciation of Jane's playthrough. If it were someone else's playthrough, then imagining "Jane is Commander Shepard" would not be required for full appreciation. When Andy plays *Mass Effect* for instance, it is not true in the work world of Andy's playthrough of *Mass Effect* that Jane is Commander Shepard, rather it is true that Andy is Commander Shepard. In each playthrough of *Mass Effect* it is true that "[player] is Commander Shepard", and "[player]" changes depending on who is playing the game, and generating the playthrough.

⁸³ Walton (1990) 59

One of the ways we can see this is by watching other people play. *Mass Effect*, *Tomb Raider*, and all of the other videogames which I have mentioned are all single-player games, so in each playthrough there is only one player. But it is possible to have more than one appreciator of a playthrough. Thus when Luke watches Ellen play *Tomb Raider* it is fictionally true in the work world of Ellen's playthrough that Ellen is Lara Croft. Luke, as a spectator and not the player, does not imagine "I am Lara Croft" or "Luke is Lara Croft" but rather "Ellen is Lara Croft". If Luke were watching someone else's playthrough of *Tomb Raider* whom he didn't know or know the name of, he still would not imagine that he was Lara Croft, but rather that "the player is Lara Croft".

Walton wants to keep fictional truths about the appreciators of a work out of the work itself in order to make sure that appreciators of works are never mandated to imagine things about other appreciators of the works. Videogames themselves get around this by making it so that every player plays their own playthrough, which does not rely on and cannot be changed by other playthroughs. But playthroughs, which are works themselves in the Waltonian sense, instead invite the player in, and do mandate that all appreciators imagine certain things about the player. They do not invite all appreciator into the work in this way. For instance, when Luke watches Ellen play *Tomb Raider* Luke does not become part of the work world of the playthrough because he is not the player. Watching someone else play a videogame may be compared to watching TV in this way. But Ellen, the player, does become part of the work world, as in Ellen's playthrough it is fictionally true that Ellen is Lara Croft.

Earlier I mentioned Walton's view that the games of make-believe which we play when engaging with fiction and appreciating art are unlike children's games of make-believe in that

“there are fewer sorts of actions such that it can be fictional that the spectator performs them.”⁸⁴

While videogames may technically allow for fewer sorts of actions than children’s games, which have no limits to their imagination, they feature significantly more “sorts of actions such that it can be fictional that the spectator performs them”⁸⁵ than other forms of art, and they do this by making the player a part of the work world of the playthrough itself. This is because a playthrough, as I said in chapter 1, is the result not only of a program being run on a machine, but of a player playing the videogame. Playthrough are, in an important sense, stories about the player who helps to generate them, as told through the story of the player-character.

The methods games use

I have argued so far that videogame players imagine “[player] is [player-character]”, a proposition which they would express by saying “I am [player-character]”, and that as imagining “[player] is [player-character]” is required for full appreciation of a playthrough, it is thus fictionally true in the work world of the playthrough, and not just in the player’s make-believe game world. The question now is how videogames go about mandating that the player imagine “[player] is [player-character]” or “I am [player-character]”. Some videogames do this by addressing the player as the player-character in direct second person. In *Dark Souls* for instance, the message which the player receives when the player-character is killed is not the typical “game over” but the words “YOU DIED” large and red upon the screen.⁸⁶ Not “your character died”, but “you died”. In a similar way, text adventure games such as *Colossal Cave Adventure*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 225

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Dark Souls* (2011).

function completely in second person, e.g. “You are standing at the end of a road before a small brick building. Around you is a forest.”⁸⁷ This is similar to the way that games of *Dungeons & Dragons* and other table-top roleplaying games function, in which one player, the Dungeon Master or Game Master, narrates a story to the other players, saying such things as “You enter the tavern”, “The troll swings its fist at you”, or “You attempt to cast the spell, but nothing happens” out loud. In these games, the player is simply addressed as the player-character, which helps to mandate the imagining “I am [player-character]”. However, not all videogames make this sort of statement outright, and most must find other ways to mandate that players imagine truths about themselves.

Most videogames with player-characters do not actually have to do much in order to effectively mandate that the player imagines that they are the player-character. Player-characters have become conventional, and are a common enough part of the medium that they require little introduction and less explanation. For the most part, the player-character is simply the character who moves when the player presses buttons. Videogames often start with tutorials, in which the player is provided with instructions such as “move forward and back by pressing the ‘W’ and ‘S’ keys”, or “use the right thumb stick to look around”. These instructions are not often given in such a way as to communicate that the player-character is themselves consciously aware of the player from whom they are receiving direction. The player does not tell the character what to do as one person may instruct another “walk forward”, “turn right”, etc. and hope that they are obeyed. Rather, the player assumes direct control of the player-character’s movements. In fact, in some of the best gaming experiences the controller itself is essentially forgotten,⁸⁸ and functions

⁸⁷ *Adventure* (1977).

⁸⁸ Nacke & Lindley (2008)

almost like an extension of the motor nervous system, delivering instructions which result in physical action, translating the player's movements such as pushing buttons into the player-character's fictional actions like swinging a sword. This connection is highly intuitive. The player-character may be introduced to the player, perhaps by a character-creation menu or by a simple "select your character" screen, but often they are given little to no introduction at all. In some games, the player-character does not even have to visibly appear on screen in order to be identified as the player-character, and thus fictionally identified as the player.

Videogames are often described as being either "first person" games or "third person" games. In videogames, "third person" and especially "first person" are usually used to denote the visual style in which a game is set. A videogame's visual style determines whether or not certain fictional truths such as "I see Samus Aran" are to be imagined, and can affect the way in which the player to player-character tie is represented.

First person perspective games include games such as *Portal*, *Bioshock*, *Call of Duty*, *Borderlands*, *Far Cry 3*, *Dishonored*, *Mirror's Edge*, *The Stanley Parable*, *Firewatch*, *Doom*, etc. In these games the player's point of view is set where the eyes of the character would be, leaving the character themselves either not visibly displayed, displayed only by a pair of forearms which move in and out of sight, or more occasionally displayed as a fuller human torso as seen from first person perspective when looking down. In some of these games, such as *Far Cry 3*, the player-character has a personal backstory, personality, voice, and character which is very fleshed out by the game. In others, such as *Portal*, the player-character is a "blank slate", a practically empty space designed so that the player may more easily identify the player-character as themselves without having to imagine additional fictional truths such as an appearance or personality unlike their own. These "blank" characters often lack voices, and sometimes lack

physical appearance altogether, such as in *The Stanley Parable*. First person perspective games attempt to be immersive, and aid in the imagining of “I am [player character]” by providing the player with a visual perspective similar to the perspective they normally have from their own bodies. Just like how when I take a step forward, my point of view and field of vision changes by moving forward in real life, so when I instruct Corvo Attano to take a step forward in *Dishonored*, the point of view and field of vision displayed on my screen moves forward through the fictional city of Dunwall as Corvo moves through it. And just as I cannot see my own face without the aid of a mirror, so I cannot see Corvo’s without similar aid.

Third person perspective games include games such as *The Legend of Zelda*, *Mass Effect*, *Tomb Raider*, *Super Mario Bros.*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Pac-Man*, *The Walking Dead*, *God of War*, *Banjo-Kazooie*, *The Witcher*, *Dark Souls*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Assassin’s Creed*, *Journey*, etc. These games often use a “chasing” or over-the-shoulder point of view, a static or scrolling view from one side, or a view which adjusts or may be adjusted to show the character in 360° at various times. In some of these games, such as *Tomb Raider*, the player character is a well-defined character who is the same in all different playthroughs, while in others such as *Mass Effect*, the player-character is created and customized by the player at the start of the playthrough, which can enhance the player’s feeling that the player-character is “them”. In either case, the player-character is identified as the character who the player sees moving around in response to their input through the game’s controls. When playing *Mass Effect*, for instance, I know that I am Commander Shepard simply because when I press the forward key it is Commander Shepard who runs forward, and when Commander Shepard is talking to someone

and I choose the button marked “Goodbye” it is Commander Shepard who tells them “I should go”⁸⁹ and ends the conversation.

A final category of games incorporate both first and third person visual styles. Some games, such as *Halo* or *Metroid Prime* are mainly set in first person but switch to third person for the film-like cutscenes or in certain other circumstances, while other games such as the modern *Elder Scrolls*, *Fallout*, and *Mount and Blade* games allow the player to switch between first and third person perspectives relatively at will. Regardless of which visual style is employed, however, the way in which videogames mandate that the player imagine “I am [player-character]” relies heavily on player intuition. This intuitive approach is very effective, however, as it is very rare for a player to be playing a single-player videogame and not know which of the characters they “are”, as Tavinor points out.⁹⁰

The tie between player-character and player can look different in different games, and is often very closely tied to the visual perspective chosen for that game, which determines whether the player-character is displayed to the player in a way which imitates the player’s normal perspective from their own eyes, or instead from a perspective which allows them to see the player-character more fully. In any of these, the primary way in which most games mandate that the player imagine that they are the player-character is through responsive motion: denoting the player-character simply as the character who moves when the player presses certain buttons. This relationship is also sometimes cemented through the use of direct address in the second person (e.g. “You”) or through allowing the player to customize the player character and make decisions about them.

⁸⁹ *Mass Effect* (2007).

⁹⁰ Tavinor (2009) 70

Challenges to imagining the player as the player-character

I have demonstrated that videogame players imagine fictional truths such as “I am Commander Shepard” while playing videogames, and have laid out how such imaginings may be seen as mandated by each playthrough. However, this imagined identity relationship is not always as straightforward as we might want it to be. And, indeed, the easiest way to challenge my view that playthroughs do mandate that the player imagine “I am [player-character]” would be to point out the ways in which many videogames may be seen as failing to do so, or even working against this cause. Many games, along with mandating that the player imagines themselves to be the player character, also mandate other imaginings which may be seen to conflict with this identity relationship, creating distance between the player and the player-character. Most of these are caused by a difference in perspective between the player and player-character.

The visual style which a videogame uses (either “first person” or “third person” perspective) does not often have a large effect on the narrative of a videogame, but they can create some problems. *Tomb Raider* for instance is visually set in third person. When Lara jumps, the player is to imagine “I jumped”. However, the way in which the player knows that Lara jumped is by watching her on the screen. The player watches Lara jump in a perspective which Lara herself could never have – watching from over Lara’s shoulder, able to see the back of Lara’s head. Based on this visual representation, the player is mandated to imagine “I see the back of Lara Croft’s head” (as opposed to seeing some coloured pixels on a screen). Despite this fact and the previously established mandate to imagine “I am Lara Croft”, the videogames does not seem to mandate that the player imagine that “Lara Croft can see the back of her own head”.

In fact it would be incorrect to imagine this. In situations like this it seems that although the player and player-character do share an imagined identity relationship, not everything which is true about one is true about the other, within either the player's make-believe game world or within the work world of playthrough.

These visually-based conflicts are not the only types of difference between the player and the player-character found in videogames. Most games function with a number of differences between what is fictionally true about the player and what is fictionally true about the player-character within the work world of the playthrough, despite the close relationship between them. For instance, many videogames give the player access to a great deal of fictional information which the player-character does not necessarily have access to in-fiction. This includes not only a third person perspective on the player-character, but also information such as menus, maps, character statistics, informational overlays, etc. The player is also sometimes privy to cutscenes which the player-character is unaware of, such as a scene set within the villain's secret base.

There are also the very rare but interesting occasions in which a player-character is allowed to directly address the player themselves as the player, breaking the fourth wall, as it were, and recognizing themselves to be the player-character of a videogame. *Deadpool* is a game which does this throughout. Deadpool himself, the player-character of the game *Deadpool*, is famous for being a comic book character who is aware that he is a character in a comic book, and so in *Deadpool* the game, Deadpool is aware that he is the player-character of a videogame. Deadpool not only addresses the player directly as the player and recognises that they are watching him on screen and pressing buttons to make him perform actions, but also comments on and interacts with some of the menus and other visual aspects not normally understood to be visible to the fictional character, such as achievement notifications or enemy health meters. The

final cutscene of *Tomb Raider II* is another classic example, in which Lara, before getting in the shower, looks straight to the player and addresses them, saying “Don’t you think you’ve seen enough?”⁹¹ before firing a shotgun towards the player. The player’s perspective then moves and points to the ceiling, no longer able to see Lara, as if the player is suddenly not Lara herself but a different character (not visible to the player) standing beside Lara, who have just been shot. In these moments it is hard for the player to continue to make-believe that they are the player-character while the player-character is addressing them directly.

Thus, despite the fact that videogames do seem to generally mandate that the player imagine “I am [player-character]” while playing the videogame, they also seem to at times mandate, authorize, and allow for a wide range of various other imaginings about the player which conflict with this central imagined identity relationship, such as “I see the back of Lara Croft’s head”, “I am watching the villain Saren in his lair”, or very occasionally even “I am being addressed by Deadpool”, etc. It is important to note again that none of these are mere factual differences between the player and player-character based on the fact that one is fictitious while the other is not. All of these are fictional truths about the player, present in both the make-believe game world and the work world of the playthrough. However their natural counterparts, which result from combining each with the overarching mandated imagining “I am [player-character]”, which would be “Lara Croft sees the back of Lara Croft’s head”, “Commander Shepard is watching the villain Saren in his lair”, or “Deadpool is being addressed by Deadpool” are not fictional truths present in or authorized by the work world of the playthrough.

⁹¹ *Tomb Raider II* (1997).

All in all, videogame players seem remarkably capable of ignoring these conflicts, especially when they are as commonplace as those created by third person perspective games. These differences in perspective exist in the background, and do not seem to get in the way of most players' ability to imagine that they are the player-character. Most videogame players have probably never even considered that it is odd that although they fictionally are Lara Croft when they play *Tomb Raider*, they can at the same time see the back of Lara's head, or, for instance, that in *Dragon Age Inquisition* they can place a location marker on the map to help them find their way, even though their player-character does not fictionally have that power. This is because these features of videogames have become so commonplace and customary as to not be noticed.

It is notable that almost all of these conflicts arise from aspects of the videogame which are put in place as aids to the player. Third person perspective is provided in order to help the player understand their character's movements, since they cannot feel their character's body movements as they might feel their own. Maps are provided to ease navigation and save player time, menus to improve the experience of interacting with the machine and its software, cutscenes to provide the player with information and context to aid understanding, etc. The one exception is when games directly break the fourth wall by allowing the player-character to address the player. In these moments videogames do seem to cease mandating that the player imagine "I am [player-character]", for a moment at least, while the player-character addresses them. These are clearly intended to be noticed, but the rest do not seem to be.

Because of this, I would label the questions raised by differences in perspective between the player and player character, such as "Can Lara Croft see the back of her own head?", as what

Walton calls “silly questions”.⁹² These questions are “pointless, inappropriate, out of order. To pursue or dwell on them would be not only irrelevant to appreciation and criticism but also distracting and destructive.”⁹³ Walton writes that “The paradoxes, anomalies, apparent contradictions they point to seem artificial, contrived, not to be taken seriously. We don’t need to take them seriously. Ordinarily we don’t even notice them.”⁹⁴ Walton provides several examples of such questions, such as why all of the diners in Leonardo DaVinci’s *Last Supper* sit on one side of a long table, instead of using both sides, how Othello, who is not an intellectual man, speaks in the lofty verse ascribed to him in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, why opera characters spend their last excruciating moments of life singing, or how even an “omniscient” narrator tells of events they could not possibly know about, including “they lived happily ever after”.⁹⁵ Most of these, Walton points out, are done for the audiences’ benefit,⁹⁶ and the same can be said of the paradoxical difference in perspective between the player and the player-character. Walton writes that “declaring a question to be silly does not answer it; it is an excuse, however legitimate, for not answering it”,⁹⁷ and says that in the generation of fictional truths

There is a principle of charity at work. The generation of fictional truths is sometimes blocked (if not merely deemphasized) just, or primary, because they make trouble – because they would render the fictional world uncomfortably paradoxical...Recognition of a question’s silliness, and so of one reason for disallowing or deemphasizing fictional truths that give rise to it, may depend on awareness of various demands to which the artist must respond....when, for instance, they are needed to make the fictional world accessible to the audience, or to enhance the appreciator’s games of make-believe.⁹⁸

⁹² Walton (1990) 174

⁹³ *Ibid.* 176

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibdi.* 175, 177

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 180

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 183

Fictional truths such as the player's ability to see the back of Lara's head seem like a perfect example of something which is "needed to make the fictional world accessible to the audience, or to enhance the appreciator's game of make-believe",⁹⁹ and does not need to generate the fictional truth "Lara Croft sees the back of her own head". As such, this should pose no threat to *Tomb Raider*'s ability to mandate that the player imagine "I am Lara Croft" (or "[player] is Lara Croft") while still imagining both "I see the back of Lara's head" and also "Lara does not see the back of her own head".

According to Walton "few works are safe from the determined paradox monger".¹⁰⁰ And there are a few other works which we might readily compare to videogames in this regard. Chief among these are other SIIFs, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. During a session of *D&D*, the players at times pretend to be their characters, either by speaking directly as their characters, e.g. saying "hail and well met!" as if speaking directly to another character, or by describing action, e.g. "I pick up the magic sword". At other times, however, the players interact with each other out of character, saying things like "I rolled an 18", "I have disadvantage on this move", or "The player's guide says that 'Zone of Truth' is a level 2 spell and I can only do spells from level 1." These interactions are important and affect the game, but are not generally understood to be a part of the fiction of which the player-characters themselves are directly aware. Nevertheless, they do not hinder players from switching seamlessly in and out of character. If, for example, Clint was playing *D&D*, and was playing as a character named Merle, Clint might in the course of the game say something like "I swing my war hammer at the goblin, and I rolled a 2."¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 178

¹⁰¹ In *Dungeons & Dragons* player-character actions are controlled by a combination of expressed intention and dice rolling; if a number which is too low (when compared to a set level) is rolled, then the player-character is unable to perform the intended action, and the Game Master will narrate a reason why, such as the enemy

Merle is the one swinging the hammer and Clint is the one rolling dice, yet Clint refers to both as “I”. Clint and Merle are, fictionally, one and the same. But this does not mean that Merle is aware that a 2 has been rolled or that this is the reason that his strike misses the goblin; Merle just knows that the goblin was too quick for him to hit. Cogburn and Silcox point out even more of these disconnects in *D&D*, saying “We cannot stress enough the omnipresence of this disconnect between character and player in RPGs.”¹⁰² And yet, this does not seem to stop anyone from playing, from imagining “I am [player-character]”, or from speaking and emotionally responding as if this were true.

Players of videogames are remarkably flexible in their imaginings of these matters. Because they imagine that they are the player-character while at the same time knowing that they are not, they switch in and out of their imagined status easily, often without noticing. Videogames are designed with people who have this ability in mind, and who do not get caught up in “silly questions”.¹⁰³ That is why games like *Tomb Raider* can mandate both “I am Lara Croft” and “I see the back of Lara Croft’s head” to be fictionally true, without also mandating “Lara Croft can see the back of Lara Croft’s head”, and not be misunderstood, and why these differences in perspective do not cause problems for my view, that “[player] is [player-character]” is fictionally true in the work world of the playthrough, and that the player is mandated to imagine “I am [player-character]” while playing the game.

Conclusion

dodging out of the way of a strike. A 2 is a very low roll, and so in this scenario Merle would be unable to hit the goblin effectively.

¹⁰² Cogburn & Silcox (2009) 5

¹⁰³ Walton (1990) 174

In this chapter I have argued that (1) When a player plays a videogame which features a player-character they enter into a game of make-believe in which, among other things, they themselves are the player-character. That is, they make-believe (a) that “I am [player-character]” is true, and (b) that whatever is true of the player-character (such as “Shepard died”) is also true of themselves (they imagine “I died”, etc.). (2) The player’s imagining of both of these fictional truths is mandated by the playthrough. And (3) That fictional truths in the form “[player] is [player-character]” (such as “Jane is Commander Shepard”) are fictionally true not only in the player’s make-believe game world, but also in the work world of the playthrough. I have also demonstrated several ways in which videogames mandate that the player imagine “I am [player-character]”, and addressed several challenges which videogames face in mandating this.

While Walton maintains that appreciators of representational art routinely generate fictional truths about themselves, such as “I see the Doctor”, videogames and their players greatly surpass other forms of art and other audiences in this regard. Videogames are significantly less restricted by both of the limits of imaginative participation which Walton defines,¹⁰⁴ and are significantly more like children’s games of make-believe than other forms of art. Compared to “canonical fictions”¹⁰⁵, videogames and other self-involving interactive fictions not only allow for more “actions which the spectator might actually perform...[to be] contributions to the game, as generating fictional truths”¹⁰⁶ but also significantly more “sorts of actions such that it can be fictional that the spectator performs them.”¹⁰⁷ Unlike the audiences of most other forms of art, videogame players are invited to become part of the work world of the

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 225

¹⁰⁵ Robson & Meskin (2016) 165

¹⁰⁶ Walton (1990) 225

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 225

playthrough itself, and routinely imagine, and are mandated to imagine, things such as “I saved the town”, “I defeated the dragon”, and “I died”.

Conclusion

If there is one thing which proponents of videogames find themselves repeating most often, if not in word than at least in sentiment, it is this: It's not "just a game". That is to say, we should not dismiss videogames outright as trivial or uninteresting merely because they are associated with entertainment or with children. Kendall Walton addresses the appreciation of all forms of representational art as involving the playing of a game of make-believe, yet that does not make us dismiss the appreciation of works like *Hamlet*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel as "just a game".

I have investigated the fictional content of videogames in order to better understand what sorts of things are fictionally true in videogames and to establish a vocabulary by which to discuss these fictional truths and discuss videogames as fictions. I have distinguished between the videogame and the playthrough; the playthrough being the interactive audio-visual representation which the player generates and interacts with when they play a videogame, and the videogames itself being the overarching fiction of which the playthrough is an instance. I have described several different types of fictional truth which may be found in playthroughs: playthrough-specific fictional truths, including fictional truths about the player, and videogame-truths, including fictionally true disjunctions, which are resolved to create playthrough-specific truths as we play the game. I have argued that some of these truths, namely videogame-truths, including the fictionally true disjunctions, are fictionally true not only within the playthrough but also within the videogame itself. I have argued that in order to understand all of what is fictionally true in any playthrough of a videogame, and to determine which fictional truths are playthrough-specific and which are not, we may often have to play several different playthroughs of the same videogame, just as we may have to watch several performances of the same play or

multiple episodes of the same series to fully understand the fictional truth present in each episode, or in the play itself. Through these arguments I have offered both videogames and their playthroughs as counter-examples to Walton's theory of make-believe, as each contain fictional content for which his theory cannot account. Finally, I have argued that unlike the fictions which Walton describes, videogames invite the player to be a part of the work world of the playthrough, and that fictional truths such as "[player] is [player-character]", "[player] killed the dragon", or "[player] died" are fictionally true not only in the player's make-believe game world, but in the work world of the playthrough itself.

Through all of these arguments I have, I hope, laid the groundwork for further study of videogames as challenging but rewarding works of fiction, setting up a basic ontology of videogames and developing the vocabulary by which to address the many different forms of fictional truth in videogames, as well as the playthrough itself. With this vocabulary philosophers should be better able to better examine not only the fictional content of videogames, but also the videogame/playthrough relationship, the player/player-character relationship, and also Walton's game/work distinction and how it applies to videogames. There is doubtlessly much more to be said about videogames as forms of art and works of fiction. I have taken a broad approach, addressing all single-player videogames and using key games as examples, and the groundwork which I have laid should help with both in-depth investigations of particular single-player games, especially those which toy with things like the player/player-character relationship or what counts as a playthrough, such as *Undertale*, as well as with research into multi-player videogames, which face many of the same challenges as single-player game plus a number of their own.

Videogames have become increasingly of interest to philosophers for the ethical questions and problems they pose, and these debates often draw out the worst in videogames. I hope that videogames can also be seen for the good they bring in allowing artists and designers to develop rich, interactive, self-involving fictions with a powerful and engaging perspective and a special connection with the player.

Bibliography

- Adventure or Colossal Cave Adventure*. 1977. William Crowther and Don Woods. Videogame.
- The Adventure Zone*. 2014-present. Griffin, Travis, Justin, and Clint McElroy. Maximum Fun. Podcast.
- Bartel, Christopher. 2012. "Resolving the gamer's dilemma" *Ethics and Information Technology* 14(1). 11-16.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2008. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Trans. J.A. Underwood. London: Penguin Books.
- Carroll, Noël. 1998. *A Philosophy of Mass Art*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Cogburn, Jon and Mark Silcox. 2009. *Philosophy Through Video Games*. New York: Routledge.
- Currie, Gregory. 1986. "Fictional Truth" in *Philosophical Studies* 50. 195-212.
- . 1988. "Fictional Names" in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 66. 471-488.
- . 1989. *An Ontology of Art*. London: Macmillan.
- . 1990. *The Nature of Fiction*. Cambridge: Uni. Press.
- Dark Souls*. 2011. Dir. Hidetaka Miyazaki. FromSoftware, Namco Bandi Games Videogame.
- Davies, Stephen. 1991a. *Definitions of Art*. Ithica: Cornell Uni. Press.
- . 1991b. "The Ontology of Musical Works and the Authenticity of their Performances" in *Noûs* 25: 21-41.
- . 2005. "Ontology of Art" in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*. Ed. Jerrod Levinson.
- Deadpool*. 2012. Dir. Sean Miller. Writ. Daniel Way. High Moon Studios, Activision. Videogame.
- Dragon Age: Origins*. 2009. Dir. Dan Tudge. Writ. David Gaider. BioWare, Electronic Arts. Videogame.
- Dragon Age: Inquisition*. 2014. Dir. Mike Laidlaw. Writ. David Gaider. BioWare, Electronic Arts. Videogame.
- Eilan, Naomi. 2014. "The You Turn" in *Philosophical Explorations* 17. 265-278.
- Friend, Stacie. 2017. "The Real Foundation of Fictional Worlds" in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 95. 29-42.
- Goodman, Nelson. 1976. *Languages of Art: An approach to a theory of symbols*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Lamarque, Peter, and Stien Haugom Olsen. 1994. *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: a philosophical perspective*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Lewis, David. 1978. "Truth in Fiction" in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15. 37-46.
- The Lost Mine of Phandelver*. 2014. Writ. Richard Baker and Chris Perkins. Wizards of the Coast LLC. *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure book.
- Luck, Morgan. 2009. "The gamer's dilemma: An analysis of the arguments for the moral distinction between virtual murder and virtual paedophilia" *Ethics and Information Technology* 11. 31-36.

- Mass Effect*. 2007. Dir. Casey Hudson. Writ. Drew Karpysyn and Luke Kristjanson. BioWare. Videogame.
- Meskin, Aaron and Jon Robson. 2010. "Videogames and the Moving Image" in *Revue Internationale de philosophie* 254. 547-564.
- . 2012. "Fiction and Fictional Worlds in Videogames" in *The Philosophy of Computer Games*. Ed. John Richard, Hallvard Fossheim, & Tarjei Mandt Larsen. Dordrecht: Springer. 200-217.
- Nacke, Lennart and Craig Lindley. 2008. "Flow and Immersion in First-Person Shooter: Measuring the player's gameplay experience". *FuturePlay 2008*, New York: FuturePlay
- Packard, Edward. 1980. *The Cave of Time*. London: W.H. Allen.
- Patridge, Stephanie. 2017. "Video Games and Imaginative Identification" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. 181-197.
- Perry, John. 1993. *The Problem of the Essential Indexical: and other essays*. Oxford Uni. Press.
- Portal*. 2007. Writ. Erik Wolpaw, Chet Faliszek. Valve, Electronic Arts. Videogame.
- Robson, Jon, and Aaron Meskin. 2012. "Videogames and the First-Person" in *Mimesis: Metaphysics, Cognition, Pragmatics*. Ed. G. Currie, P. Kotako, & M. Polorny. London: College Pub.
- . 2016. "Videogames as Self-Involving Interactive Fictions" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74. 165-177.
- Shakespeare, William. 2008. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Auckland: The Floating Press.
- The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. 2011. Dir. Todd Howard Writ. Emil Pagliarulo. Bethesda Games. Videogame.
- Tavinor, Grant. 2005. "Videogames and Interactive Fiction". In *Philosophy and Literature* 29. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins. 24-40.
- . 2009. *The Art of Videogames*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- . 2010. "Videogames and Aesthetics" in *Philosophy Compass*. Oxford: Blackwell. 624-634.
- . 2012. "Videogames and Fictionalism" in *The Philosophy of Computer Games*. Ed. John Richard, Hallvard Fossheim, & Tarjei Mandt Larsen. Dordrecht: Springer. 185-199.
- Tomb Raider*. 2013. Writ. Rhianna Pratchett & Susan O'Connor, Dir. Noah Hughes, Daniel Chayer, Daniel Neuburger. Crystal Dynamics, Square Enix. Videogame.
- Tomb Raider II*. 1997. Writ. Vicky Arnold. Core Design, Eidos Interactive. Videogame.
- Walters, Lee. 2017. "Fictionality and Imagination, Revisited" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 75. 15-21.
- Walton, Kendall. 1978. "Fearing Fictions" in *The Journal of Philosophy* 75. 5-27.
- . 1990. *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. London: Harvard Uni. Press.
- . 2015. "Fiction and Imagination – Mind the Gap" in *In Other Shoes: Music, Metaphor, Empathy, Existence*. Oxford: Uni. Press. 17-35.
- Wilkinson, Jennifer. 2000. "The Paradox(es) of pitying and fearing fictions" in *South African Journal of Philosophy* 19. 8-25.