Article

Video Game Fictions: A Dual-Work View

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Video games fictions are interactive: some of the content is set by the game designer and some is set by the player. However, philosophers disagree over how this interaction is reflected within the fictional content of video games. First, I will show that games and playthroughs are two distinct works of fiction with their associated fictional content. Second, I argue that players engage with both fictional works when playing a video game. They imagine the fictional truths associated with the game and those associated with their playthrough. Thus, I defend what I will call a Dual-Work View of our engagement with video game fictions. To do so, I show that games have accessible fictional content, that games are distinctively incomplete fictions, and that players engage with this distinctive incompleteness. My goal is to offer a clear account of the fictional content of video games.

Keywords: games, playthroughs, fiction, truth in fiction, video games.

Introduction

Within the opening sequence of The Last of Us, we learn that a mutant fungus is turning humans into zombies. Fortunately, it is not actually the case that a deadly fungus threatens humanity, but it is fictionally true in the narrative presented to us in the video game. In the world of The Last of Us, there are propositions that we take to be true: it is true that survivors of the virus live in militarized quarantine zones, it is true that a thirteen-year-old girl named Ellie is immune to the virus, and it is true that a smuggler named Joel will escort her to a rebel-run hospital. There are also things that are false in the world of The Last of Us. For example, it is false that the virus has a cure, that the zombies are harmless, and that Joel’s daughter survives the initial outbreak.

The truth and falsity of fictional propositions is not unique to video game fictions. However, as opposed to most novels and movies, much of the fictional content of video games is set by the player instead of the game designer. Since both design decisions and player input contribute to what is fictionally true, video games are interactive fictions.

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The interactive nature of the game goes hand in hand with a distinctive kind of incompleteness. For example, as Joel and Ellie escape the Boston quarantine zone, the player who controls Joel will decide whether to kill the patrolling soldiers or simply sneak past them. In the fictional world of *The Last of Us*, it is neither true nor false that Joel kills the patrolling soldiers. It is also neither true nor false that he sneaks past them. But as the player makes a choice about how Joel will escape, this incompleteness will be resolved. This is importantly different from the kind of incompleteness that results from a lack of information. For example, Joel’s blood type is not specified in the game, but the player is not asked to make a choice about his blood type and will not resolve the incompleteness related to it.

Interactive fictions ask the player to fill in some of the gaps in the narrative. But philosophers disagree over how exactly this interaction is reflected within the fictional content of the game. For example, Grant Tavinor argues that because video games are interactive, the boundary between the fictional content generated by the game and the fictional content generated by the player is blurred. He believes that the player can affect what is true of the game as a work of fiction (Tavinor 2005; 2009). Additionally, Marissa Willis argues that because video games are incomplete, players are never directly engaging with the fictional narrative of the game but only with the narrative that they themselves generate through gameplay (Willis 2019; 2020). In other words, players do not imagine that the fictional content of the game is true; they only imagine the fictional truths of their playthrough. They both hold what I call a Single-Work View of our fictional engagement with video games: there is only one work of fiction that we imaginatively engage with when playing.

I will argue against their views. Despite the interactive nature of video games, there are clear boundaries between the content of the game and the content generated through gameplay, and so there are two ontologically distinct works of fiction that emerge from our gameplay: the game and the playthrough. More importantly, our engagement with the former is distinct from our engagement with the latter. We can differentiate two features of a player’s engagement with video games: they experience the game as an incomplete fictional work and their own playthrough as a partially resolved narrative. Thus, I defend what I will call the Dual-Work View of our engagement with video game fictions.

But before this, a couple of preliminary remarks. I am mostly concerned with games that contain rich fictional content, such as *The Last of Us* and *Mass Effect 3*, as opposed to games such as virtual tic-tac-toe, Tetris, or solitaire. This paper will focus on video games as fictions, but I do not argue that video games are merely fictions or that they can be reduced to fictions. I am interested in what we could say about games, their interactivity, and the player’s engagement by limiting ourselves to an analysis of a game’s fictional content, setting aside purely ludic elements such as rules and how they could
mediate our experience with games. And so, much of what I argue for will also apply to other interactive fictions. It just happens that video games are the richest kind of interactive fiction we have access to.

Second, since most of the philosophical work on video game fictions is framed through Kendall Walton’s theory, an overview of the terminology and concepts he introduces in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990) will be necessary to start us off. According to Walton, representational art possesses “the social function of serving as props in games of make-believe” (1990, 63). When we interact with a fictional work, we allow the representations to guide our imagination and pretend that the fictional world depicted really exists, as a child does in a game of make-believe. When we read a book, watch a movie, or play a video game, we imagine that what is depicted is true. And so, each work of fiction can be associated with a fictional world—distinct from our own—where certain things are true and certain things are false, as described by the work of fiction.

A proposition is fictionally true of a work of fiction if the work conveys “a prescription that it is to be imagined by appreciators” (1990, 208). For example, “Oedipus is the son of Jocasta” is true in the work *Oedipus Rex*. It is necessary to imagine that the proposition is true to appreciate the work and understand what is happening on stage. Similarly, a proposition can be false if there is a prescription not to imagine it when engaging with a work of fiction. For example, we should not imagine that “Oedipus is the brother of Jocasta” while watching a performance of *Oedipus Rex*. We would be getting something wrong about the fictional world if we did. We will call propositions that are true in virtue of being prescribed by a work of fiction “work truths.” A spectator who is properly engaging with a work of fiction imagines many similar propositions to be true, and the set of propositions is the work-world related to the fiction.

But Walton believes that there is another way in which a fictional proposition can be true. What some philosophers call “game truths,” which I will refer to as “engagement truths,” are true in virtue of the appreciator’s engagement with the fictional work, or in other words, true in their own game of make-believe.¹ For example, “I am watching Oedipus gouge out his own eyes” is true only in virtue of my watching a performance of *Oedipus Rex*. Since some fictional propositions are not specified in the work, a viewer is also permitted to imagine all kinds of things about the fiction. For example, I could imagine that Oedipus’ blood type is A+. It would be true, in my own game of make-believe, that his blood type is A+. I would also not be getting anything wrong about the

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¹ A note on terminology: I will use “engagement truths” to refer to what others call “game truths.” This is because I want “game” to unambiguously refer to video games, as works with associated work truths and engagement truths. Walton refers to engagement truths as “game truths” since they are true in our game of make-believe. The game-related terminology is maybe one reason why so many video game scholars have attempted to apply Walton’s theory to the fictional content of video games. But I would rather we avoid confusing terminology such as “the game’s game truth.”
play’s fiction since there is no prescription to imagine anything about Oedipus’ blood type. For Walton, emotional responses to the work are also true in the engagement-world. For example, “I pity Oedipus’ fate” might be true for some spectators during a performance of *Oedipus Rex*.

And so, we will consider works of fiction to be props that prompt the imagining of fictional worlds. However, it seems like this definition encompasses much more than what our ordinary use of the term “works of fiction” would encompass. For example, we might intuitively consider two distinct performances of *Oedipus Rex* to be adaptations of the same work of fiction. However, since each performance prompts different imaginings, the Waltonian framework requires that we consider them to be two distinct works of fiction with their own fictional worlds. “Oedipus is blonde” might be true of a performance in which a blond actor portrays Oedipus and “Oedipus is a brunette” might be true of another performance, for analogous reasons. By associating a work of fiction with each performance, we can avoid some inconsistencies in what is true in their respective fictional world. One important takeaway of this is that each performance, in virtue of being a work of fiction, now admits both work truths (fictional propositions that are true in virtue of being prescribed by a work of fiction) and engagement truths (fictional propositions that are true in virtue of our engagement with a work of fiction) (Meskin and Robson 2012, 209).

**Playthrough Fictions**

Before I argue that we imaginatively engage with two works of fiction when playing a video game, I must establish that there are two ontologically distinct works that emerge from our gameplay. In this section, I motivate a distinction between games and playthrough, on which the Dual-Work View rests.

In a game, some narrative elements are set and cannot be altered by the player’s virtual actions. For example, Joel’s daughter will die at the beginning of *The Last of Us* whenever the game is played, since her death happens in a cutscene where the player cannot control the characters. Fictional propositions in novels and movies are usually similar: the fictional work asks us to imagine that the facts it presents to us are true, and those facts cannot be altered by the viewer or the reader. But since video games offer interactive gameplay, players can alter certain features of the narrative when their input determines what happens on the screen. So, how are the player’s actions affecting the fictional content of the game?

According to Grant Tavinor (2005; 2009), videogames blur the distinction between what is true of the game and what is true of the player’s engagement with the game. As they advance through the story and make choices that affect the narrative, the player “contribute[s] to the content of the fictional world” (2005, 33). As Joel escapes from Boston’s quarantine zone, the player has a choice to either kill the patrolling soldiers or
sneak out undetected. It is up to the player to decide how to proceed. If they choose to kill the soldiers, the fictional proposition “Joel kills the soldiers” becomes true only in virtue of the player’s engagement with the game. And yet, since this choice leads to Joel killing the soldiers on the screen, according to Tavinor, it is affecting what is true of the game as a work and thus what the player must imagine to be fictionally true. For Tavinor, there is a single fictional work that we engage with when playing video games. The game’s incomplete fictional content is slowly made more determinate as we progress through the game, since our actions resolve the narrative. As Tavinor puts it, “the [engagement]-world effectively projects into the work-world because of the fictional interaction” (2005, 33). There is only one fictional work to speak of—the game—but two kinds of fictional truths associated with it: work truths and engagement truths.

However, there is an alternative way of thinking about interactivity that does not blur the distinction between the work and our engagement with it. Meskin and Robson suggest that we separate the game and its fictional content, from an individual playthrough and its fictional content (Meskin and Robson 2012). The distinction they argue for allows us to identify two works of fiction with their own distinct fictional content. They write: “Nothing that players do when playing Grand Theft Auto III makes anything fictional in Grand Theft Auto III the game” (2012, 214). What a single player does on their copy of Grand Theft Auto III will not affect the game itself since each copy is an instance of a multiple. The player’s progress is usually recorded in a save file separate from the game. This makes it possible to start a new game with no recorded progress or completely delete previous progress by erasing the save file. Thus, those changes do not affect the game itself. When a player’s action affects the narrative elements of a game, they are making things true in their own playthrough, recorded in a save file, and not modifying the underlying structure of the game. Robson and Meskin explain that when we consider how the player’s actions are affecting the game’s narrative, “the relevant [truths] must be the [truths] associated with individual [playthroughs] of the game” and that while “it is true that the player actions make a difference to the work worlds associated with individual [playthroughs this] does not show that [engagement] worlds project into work worlds or that the distinction between the two kinds of worlds is fuzzed or blurred” (2012, 214). With the proper distinction between games and playthroughs, there is no blurring of the work-world and the engagement-world as Tavinor claims since the player cannot modify the fictional content of the game.²

² In single-player games the narrative presented on the screen is hardly coherent. If I play as Joel in The Last of Us and fail a level, I will see Joel die on the screen and suddenly come back to life at the beginning of the level. Surely, it cannot be that “Joel dies and comes back to life” is fictionally true every time I fail. Rather, this would mark the start of a new playthrough. And so, it is useful to think of a player’s sanctioned playthrough which would be a coherent narrative that includes their recorded progress and not their failed attempts. For more on this kind of incoherence, see Hogenbirk, Hoef, and Meyer (2018): the authors argue that incoherency is not a part of the narrative, but a matter of how the player interprets the fiction.
I agree with Robson and Meskin: video game players cannot alter the fictional content of a game, but they can affect what becomes fictionally true in their individual playthrough. A player can make it fictionally true that Joel, the character they control, kills the soldiers in their playthrough of *The Last of Us* by pressing a series of buttons on their controller. But that should not affect the game as a work since we can now distinguish between two fictional works: the game and the playthrough, each with their own distinct—but related—fictional content. There is going to be a lot of overlap between the fiction of the game and the fiction of the playthrough. After all, much of what is true in a game cannot be altered by the player and thus becomes true in a playthrough when the player reaches the corresponding point in the narrative. It is true *both* of the game and of the playthrough that Joel’s daughter dies during the initial outbreak of the virus since her death is decided by the game designer and is unaffected by the player’s choice. Even playthrough truths are limited by the possibilities that the game offers us: in a specific playthrough it is either true that Joel and Ellie sneak out undetected, or it is true that they kill the patrolling soldiers. It cannot be true that they fly out on a magic carpet, for example. Suduiko explains how we might understand the truths associated with each work: the game is “the possibility structure, which contains all possible events” and the playthrough is a possible narrative which is derived from this possibility structure (Suduiko 2018). I will have more to say about how games and playthroughs are related later in this essay.

With this distinction in mind, it becomes clear that playthroughs guide our imaginative engagement when playing a game. If the player makes a choice that affects the narrative, then the resulting fictional propositions become true in the playthrough. We see our choices represented on the screen and what we see and hear becomes a prop in our game of make-believe. For example, if “Joel kills the patrolling soldiers” is true of my playthrough, then I shouldn’t worry about hiding while sneaking out of the quarantine zone. My choice resulted in a narrative where the patrolling soldiers are dead, and thus I must imagine that the patrolling soldiers are dead. As I continue playing, I can explore the area without fear of being caught. It is straightforward to me—and unchallenged as far as I know—that playthrough fictions feature in the player’s imaginative engagement. To argue for a Dual-Work View, the burden falls on showing that we engage with games as well as playthroughs, which will be the focus of the rest of this essay.

**Game Fictions**

My goal is to motivate a Dual-Work View of our engagement with video game fictions. In other words, I will show that when playing a video game, we imagine elements from the fictional content of our own playthrough and elements from the fictional content of the game itself. To argue for the later claim, I will show that (1) games have accessible fictional content, (2) the game’s fictional content is distinctively incomplete and (3) we imagine that distinctively incomplete content when playing a game. Only by
imagining both the fictional content of a game and the fictional content of our own playthroughs can we fully explain our engagement with video games and other interactive fictions.

**Games Have Accessible Fictional Content**

So far, we have established that both games and playthroughs bear fictional content, and that some propositions can be true of a playthrough but not of a game. For example, “Commander Shepard is the Commanding Officer of the Normandy SR2 starship” is true of the game and every playthroughs of *Mass Effect 3* since it cannot be altered by the player. However, at the beginning of our playthrough, we choose the gender of our main character, Commander Shepard. “Commander Shepard is female” is true in some playthroughs, and “Commander Shepard is male” is true in others. Video games and playthroughs have distinct fictional content: games are incomplete and so neither “Commander Shepard is male” nor “Commander Shepard is female” is true of the game *Mass Effect 3*. However, playthroughs are partially resolved and so, in a specific playthrough, either Commander Shepard is male or Commander Shepard is female. I will argue that players engage with both the fictional content of the game and the fictional content of their playthrough. Since we are still working with a Waltonian framework, we engage with the fictional content of a work by using the work as a prop in a game of make-believe, meaning that we imagine the fictional content presented in the work to be true.

But before doing so, we must establish that games do have fictional content that is accessible to the player. A work of fiction is accessible when we can engage with it, or, in other words, use it as a guide in our imaginings or as a prop in a game of make-believe. So, what would it mean for a game to be inaccessible? We might think that a game is just a collection of potential fictions that are only accessible through different playthroughs. Marissa Willis, for example, argues that video games do not serve as props in make-believe. She argues that the fictional content of a game does not generate propositions for us to imagine, and so that we do not engage with the fictional content of a game directly. While she agrees that both games and playthroughs bear fictional content, she claims that “what is actually encountered during play is not the video game itself, but an instance of the video game, a playthrough, just as what is encountered during an outing to the theater is not *Hamlet* itself but an instance of *Hamlet*” (Willis 2019, 49). Willis specifies that “*Hamlet* itself” is meant to refer to the play that is outlined in the script. Further, Willis believes that “a video game is instanced every time it is played not just by a machine but by a player […]; [and] playthroughs are the way in which video games are instanced” (2019, 45). Because “video games do not have easily accessible scripts, [they] cannot be encountered as props apart from their playthroughs. The closest thing video games have to a script is the complex code which a machine uses to run the game” (2019, 49). Even if Willis accepts that both games and playthroughs bear
fictional content, she claims that the fictional content of the game is not accessible to the player at all and that they can only engage with the fictional content of their own playthroughs.

But I don’t think that’s right. First, Willis is assuming that the video game player would parallel the audience member of a play, but video games are strongly interactive while most theater outings are not, or at least not as interactive as video games. Video game players have the agency to make things true of their playthrough. And so, while it might be tempting to compare a video game player to the audience of a performance, their role might be closer to a director’s since both have some agency to affect what happens in the game or on the stage. For example, in a performance of *Hamlet*, the director can choose the costume worn by the actor who portrays Hamlet. Even if we grant that audience members do not encounter *Hamlet* “itself” while watching a performance of it, a director does encounter *Hamlet* (the play as outlined in the script) as they must read the script to adapt their own performance through casting, stage settings, and costume choices. A director does not merely encounter the instance of *Hamlet* that they direct, but also encounters the work of fiction outlined in the script. The performance and the script are distinct works of fiction since they prescribe imagining different fictional truths. And so, the director encounters two works of fiction when putting up their production: they imagine the fictional content of the script (which they must adapt), and they imagine the fictional content of their production (as they are creating it). Similarly, a video game player does not merely encounter their playthrough but engages with the fictional truths of the game to create their own playthrough.

Even if we compare players to directors in the *Hamlet* analogy, Willis might still be right. Plays have scripts that directors can use to put up a performance, but she argues that video games do not have a similarly accessible work that would serve as a prop for make-believe. But to me, this is where the analogy between plays and games becomes less useful to us. An informed audience member is perfectly capable of distinguishing between the written script and elements of a performance. They can do so if they are familiar with the script itself. So, when an actor delivers a line (“To die, to sleep—To sleep, perchance to dream”), we can recognize that it is fictionally true of both the script and of the performance that Hamlet utters those words, and we can also recognize that it is true of the performance but not of the script that Hamlet wears a pink feathered hat while delivering the line. That is because we know that there is no requirement in Shakespeare’s script that Hamlet wears this exact costume during that scene. A viewer who did not read the script could not make a similar conclusion since, for all they know, it could be mandated in the script that Hamlet wears a pink feathered hat.

Video games are different, which brings me to my second point: the player, for the most part, knows what choices they are making as they are making them. In some interactive dialogue, the player can see the options from which they can choose. In an open-
world game, the player can choose from a list of available quests. But there is also a very basic sense in which video games make their structure known to us: by making what is happening on the screen responsive to the player’s input. If I press left on my keyboard and my character moves to the left on the screen, I can make some deductions about what I made true. Moreover, if I am exploring and reach the bounds of the playable area, my character might be stopped by an invisible barrier. I am then in a position to know that the game is limiting what could be true in my playthrough: in this case, it cannot be true that I walk in the area that is out of bounds. And yet, some games can mislead the player’s sense of agency. For example, the choice of Commander Shepard’s gender could affect some of the dialogue options later in the game without any clear link between Shepard’s gender and the dialogue options. But what is important to my argument is that interactivity is still very explicit in some parts of the game, specifically the parts in which they are making a choice. And so, players do not need access to a script or a code to understand that some truths are mandated by the game designer and some truths are up to them, even if they won’t have a full picture of the possibility space and the consequences of each choice they make. I will come back to this later in this essay, but to sum up what we have so far, the theater analogy fails because the fiction of a game is directly accessible through the playthrough whereas the fiction of the script is not directly accessible through a performance.  

It will become clearer that games have accessible fictional content once we see that players must be engaging with the game’s fictional content apart from the playthrough’s fictional content. I defend this claim by showing that the game fiction is distinctively incomplete and that the player is engaging with an incomplete fiction in the next two sections respectively.

Games Are Incomplete Fictions

If games have fictional content, what would that content look like? First, there are propositions that are true in every single playthrough, no matter what the player does. Those propositions are true of the game because they are set by the game designer. If we understand games as possibility spaces, then those propositions have a probability of one (Suduiko 2018). Second, and more interestingly, are the choices that are given to the player. The game designer prescribes the options that are given to the player and those choices are true of the game. For example, Commander Shepard can only be male

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3 Conventions play a large role in making the distinction between script-truths and performance-truths as well. For example, I might know that Shakespearian scripts traditionally specify dialogues, sometimes spell out intonation and movement, but rarely describe the costumes actors should wear. And so, I can make a more educated guess about what is mandated by the script and what is only true of the performance without reading the script beforehand if I am familiar with those convention. The same is also true of games where conventions are used to guide the player, for example, with forced internal monologues when the player attempts to leave the area where they need to be for the game to progress (“I am forgetting something here!”).
or female (and not, for example, intersex or non-binary). Both options—and no other option—would be true in the game as a possibility structure. In a rejoinder to Willis, Martin Ricksand briefly points to the possibility of incompleteness in the fictional world of the game: “Commander Shepard’s gender is incomplete in the game: Shepard is either male or female, but it is not fictional that Shepard is male, nor that Shepard is female” (Ricksand 2020, 101). Ricksand is right to point to this possibility, as Willis agrees: there is a kind of incompleteness in the choices given to us which is tied to the interactive nature of video games.

Nathan Wildman and Richard Woodward explain what is so distinctive about the incompleteness of interactive fictions by contrasting it to two kinds of incompleteness that can be found in novels, movies, and other non-interactive fictions. First, fictional incompleteness can be “permissive” when the appreciator is not required to imagine a proposition. For example, there is no prescription to imagine that Ron has an even number of freckles in the *Harry Potter* fiction, but a reader might want to imagine that is it true. In those cases, the fiction does not prescribe the reader to imagine a proposition, but there is also no prescription to imagine anything whatsoever about the number of freckles on Ron’s face. Second, fictional incompleteness can be “prohibitive” when incompleteness plays a central role in our imaginative engagement with the narrative. For example, it is unclear at the end of *Inception* whether Dom, the dream-invading protagonist, is in a dream world or the real world. Dom uses a spinner to know which world he is in: if the spinner stops, he is in the real world but if the spinner keeps going, he is in a dream world. The final scene of the movie cuts right before the spinner would stop, leaving the audience wondering if Dom finally made it back to reality. The ambiguity is part of the fictional content. In cases like this one, there is no prescription to imagine that Dom is in a dream world, no prescription to imagine he is not in a dream world (as with other kinds of incompleteness), but there is a prescription *not* to imagine that he is in a dream world and a prescription *not* to imagine that he is not in a dream world. In other words, the viewer is not permitted to respond by imagining what they want, as they would in cases of permissive incompleteness (Wildman and Woodward 2018).

The incompleteness of interactive fictions is distinctive because it falls somewhere in the middle. Wildman and Woodward argue that players must engage with the incompleteness that is distinctive of interactive fiction, even if they are allowed to solve it in whichever way they choose. And so, the incompleteness in interactive fictions is both permissive and prescriptive. On the one hand, a reader who does not imagine that Ron has an even number of freckles while reading the *Harry Potter* series is still engaging with the fictional content of the novels, but a player who does not imagine Commander Shepard’s gender to be either male or female is failing to engage with the game that they are playing. After all, the player must choose Shepard’s gender to move past the character customization screen and start playing the game. On the other, a viewer who does
imagine Dom being in a dream world is failing to understand why the uncertainty is so important within the narrative of *Inception*. But a player is permitted to imagine Shepard’s gender to be female since the incompleteness can be resolved either way. In Waltonian terms, there is no prescription to imagine that Commander Shepard is female and there is no prescription to imagine that Commander Shepard is male but there is a prescription to imagine that Commander Shepard is either male or female (Wildman and Woodward 2018). The incompleteness of interactive fictions is thus a distinct kind of incompleteness. Wildman and Woodward call it “forced choice incompleteness,” but I will call it simply “choice incompleteness.”⁴ There is, then, a distinctive kind of incompleteness that is unique to interactive fictions: choice incompleteness. Creators of interactive fiction must specify certain choices to be part of their narrative and players must engage with those choices and are permitted to choose from the options given to them.

To sum up: a game’s fiction contains narrative elements that are set by the game designer and cannot be altered by the player, but it also includes the possible choices that game designers allow the players to make. If it is up to the player whether p is true in their playthrough, then we can say that it is true *in the game* that either p or not-p, but it is not true in the game that p, and it is not true in the game that not-p. The player is allowed to choose either p or not-p but is required to make that choice. Games have accessible fictional content, and the fictional content of a game is distinctively incomplete. What is left to argue is that games prescribe imagining incomplete fictional truths.

**Players Engage With an Incomplete Fiction**

The narrative elements that result from the choices that we make are clearly guiding our imaginative engagement with video games. Because players resolve the incompleteness of the game, the playthrough that they generate is not incomplete with respect to the resolved matters. In my playthroughs, it is determinately true that Shepard is female and that Joel kills the patrolling soldiers because I already made those choices. And so, there is a prescription for me to imagine that Shepard is female, and that Joel kills the patrolling soldiers. In a response to Ricksand, Willis agrees that the fictional content of the game could be incomplete, as we’ve shown. However, she argues that since players are only engaging with the fictional content of their own playthrough, they only imagine the resolved fiction. Players can imagine Commander Shepard’s gender to be male or they can imagine it to be female (Willis 2020). She writes: “In *Mass Effect*, Commander Shepard’s gender is indeed indefinite. However, I maintain that when I play *Mass Effect*, in that playthrough, on screen, in the prop which mandates that I make-believe, Shepard’s gender is not indefinite. I am not prescribed to make-believe

⁴I want to include choices that are not forced on the player such as choosing to complete optional side quests. We might think that those non-forced instances are not prohibitive in the same way, but since exploration is usually part of gameplay, the player is still choosing to engage or not to engage with optional content.
both p and not-p without their conjunction. I am merely prescribed to make-believe that p (in this case, that Shepard is female)” (Willis 2020, 105). Willis is committed to a Single-Work View: even if she agrees that games and playthroughs have distinct fictional content, she maintains that we only engage with one work of fiction, the playthrough.

But what is the player asked to imagine as they are making their choice? I believe that the incompleteness of the game must figure in the player’s imaginative engagement when they are making choices that will alter the narrative. Willis overlooks the changes in what is prescribed to make-believe before and after the choice is made: I agree with her that the playthrough prescribes that we imagine the definite (or as I’ve been calling it, resolved) gender after we make that choice, but why should a player imagine Commander Shepard as female before their choice is made? When choosing the gender of their character, it is not true (yet) that Shepard is female. The player can even go back and forth between the two gender options before settling on a choice and making it true in their playthrough that Shepard is female. Even if a player did imagine that Commander Shepard had a determinate gender before making their choice, it seems like they would not be properly engaging with the work since the game, as a work of fiction, does not give us any indication that Shepard is determinately female.

Here’s an alternative: before they make their choice, the player is imagining that the fictional content of Mass Effect 3 is incomplete in regards to Commander Shepard’s gender. After all, since the player is asked to resolve this incompleteness, the incompleteness itself must be part of their imaginative engagement. Just as Inception’s incompleteness is central to our understanding the work, so is the incompleteness of a game’s fiction. And so, if the game’s fiction is incomplete in regards to Shepard’s gender, we must imagine it to be incomplete to be able to resolve it.

Let me clarify two things about my claim. First, I am not saying that players must imagine every instance of choice incompleteness. After all, there are open-world games where the player has too many choices to reasonably consider. Even more so in tabletop role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragon where the possibilities are practically endless. There are far too many choices to expect a player to attend to all of them. But I do not think that this undermines my argument. A chess player who is deciding on their next move might have countless options to consider. And if they are thinking ahead, to their second or their third move after that, the possibilities grow exponentially. But just because there are countless possible moves on a chess board does not mean that the player is not required to consider some of them. The player can and should limit themselves to the moves that pragmatically allow them to reach their goal. The same is true of video games where the possibilities seem endless. Players have specific goals that limit the choices that they attend to. While there are seemingly limitless possibilities in some open-world game, my argument does not entail that the player must attend to eve-
ry single possibility. I only show, and only need to show, that the player must be engaging with some of the relevant fictional incompleteness of the game.

Second, and relatedly, I quickly mentioned that some playthrough truths are not clearly the result of our choices, for example, when Shepard’s gender changes some dialogue options throughout the game without a clear indication of the link between our choice about Shepard’s gender and the dialogue options available later in the game. Again, it is not necessary that the player understands every point in the narrative at which the fiction is incomplete, but rather that when they make a choice, they know that the game’s fiction is incomplete with respect to the choice that they are making. There are also choices in a game that have no consequence on the narrative whatsoever, but they are still choices that the player must make, and so are still prescriptions to imagine incomplete fictional content. If we are to think of games as possibility structures, the point is not that the possibility structure is completely revealed to the player but rather that the player knows that they are engaging with a possibility structure which reveals itself at some points throughout their gameplay.

This brings us to the first advantage of a Dual-Work View: there is an important explanatory difference between playing an open-world game and playing a more linear game. For example, games like *Skyrim* and *Fallout 4* are importantly different than games such as *Life is Strange* and *Mass Effect 3*. In an open-world game, the player is free to roam the world as they please and think about which questline to follow, which cities to visit, which skill to train, and much more. In a linear game, the player follows a story in which they are given discrete choices and must consider how those specific choices will affect the narrative. My account can explain this difference: the scope of the incompleteness gives the player a different sense of agency because, as I argue in this subsection, players must attend to the incompleteness of a game’s narrative. If I am choosing between hundreds of possible quests to complete, I am imagining many different ways the narrative could unfold. But, if I am given three dialogue options to choose from, the scope of what I am asked to imagine is importantly narrower. If our imaginative engagement was limited to a playthrough, the different choices would not figure in what we would imagine. Since a playthrough is resolved, its fictional content does not represent the possibilities given to the player but only the one where the choice is made. According to my view, open-world games are distinctive because we imagine the incomplete narrative of the game: the constant requirement to imagine an incomplete fictional world gives us a great sense of agency. And so, by arguing that games have choice-incomplete fictional content, and that we must engage with this fictional content, we can better explain the difference in experiencing the fiction of a linear game and the fiction of an open-world game.

A second advantage of the view is the need for an explanatory difference between playing a game and watching someone play a game. The player and the viewer each
attending to different aspects of the visual representations on the screen. A player might be interested in solving a puzzle in *Portal 2* or defeating a boss in *Final Fantasy VII*. When they do so, C. Thi Nguyen argues, they find pleasure in their ability to get through a level in a video game: certain games are designed to give the player this specific experience. “The [chess] player has access to their agency from a first-person perspective. They are the ones who analyze the situation and discover that particularly effective move. They have access not only to the aesthetics of the chess move itself, but also the aesthetics of the process of generating that move” (Nguyen 2019). But a spectator, as opposed to a player, is not solving puzzles or defeating monsters. They are merely spectating, finding pleasure in the player’s actions by observing them. They might be interested in how the player solves the puzzle, but they do not have access to the token mental process of generating the solution. By giving a Dual-Work account of our engagement with video games, we can explain this distinction: the player is attending to the different choices that are given to them and imagining the incompleteness of their chess board or their video game in order to decide on their next move. However, the spectator does not need to attend to those choices since they are not playing the game. Of course, they might still do so by thinking about what they would have done in the player’s situation, but it is not required. In other words, the player must imagine the incompleteness of the game to decide on their next move. However, a spectator can limit themselves to imagining the completed playthrough.

Finally, it might be worth discussing the upshots of the Dual-Work View on related issues in games studies. The idea of incompleteness in a game is not new, but game theorists often think that incompleteness is distinct from the fictional content of the game. Espen Aarseth, for example, writes that “a fiction that must be tested to be consumed is no longer a pure fiction.” Since games allow the player to “explore the simulated world and establish causal relationships between the encountered objects,” he believes that the term “interactive fiction” is simply meaningless (1997, 50-51). Additionally, Jesper Juul argues that a game contains both “fiction” and “rules” and that those two elements can come apart. He believes that there are fictional elements that are not implemented in the game rules. For example, objects that we cannot interact with serve a purely fictional purpose by serving as a prop in the game world. Rules can also exist independently of the fictional elements of the game. For example, a character that has multiple lives can respawn at the beginning of a level but there is no fictional explanation for it. The distinct interactivity of video games come from fiction and rules working together: there are fictional cars that we can drive, fictional guns that we shoot, etc. Juul shares Aarseth’s intuition: purely fictional elements are static portions of a video game that are imposed on the player and rules are what allow the player to manipulate what is happening on the screen.
But this does not need to be where we draw the boundaries of fiction. Both Juul and Aarseth believe that fictions describe imagined worlds, and that fictions prompt us to imagine what has happened and what is happening in a fictional world. But I don’t see why fictions could not also prompt us to imagine what could happen. When we attend to the incomplete fictional content of a game, we imagine the different ways a work of fiction could progress. And just because a work of fiction can progress in different ways does not make it any less of a work of fiction. After all, even outside of games fictions can evolve and change. An author can edit and revise their manuscript, a director can change their stage setting, and an actor can choose to portray a character in their own unique way. And so, the fictional elements of a video game do not need to be static, as Juul and Aarseth assume. We can understand the interactivity of video games even if we were to limit our analysis to their fictional content. All we need is to shift of understanding of the player as one who consumes the fiction, to one who creates the fiction. However, this last point is best left for future work.

Here is what we’ve established so far: if we accept the game/playthrough distinction, as we should, then we must maintain that players engage with the fictional elements of their games in addition to the fictional elements of their playthroughs during gameplay. Here’s why: a game’s interactivity manifests itself in the fictional content of the game, through choice incompleteness, whereas playthroughs are non-interactive resolved narratives. Since players are engaging with the interactive nature of the game, then they must be engaging with the fictional content of the game.

**Conclusion**

Let me end by illustrating how the fictional truths related to Shepard’s gender change before and after the player makes a choice. Before they choose Commander Shepard’s gender, the player imagines that it is not a settled matter whether Shepard is male or female. It seems wrong to say, “He is the Commander;” or, “She is the Commander,” since the gender is not decided yet. The most appropriate way to refer to Shepard seems to be “he or she.” However, after the choice is made, it is now true in the individual playthrough that Commander Shepard is a woman. The player must imagine that Shepard is a woman since she is represented as a woman in their playthrough. It would be wrong to say, “He will save the galaxy,” since that would not match up with the representation on the screen: it is fictionally false that Shepard is a man. Before the choice is made, there is a prescription to imagine the incomplete fictional content of the game. After the choice is made, there is a prescription to imagine the completed fictional truth.

It might also be worth discussing how, at a single point in the game, the player uses both the game and the playthrough as props in make-believe. At the end of *Mass Effect 3*, Commander Shepard has a choice to make that will alter the fate of the galaxy. As
they make their choice, the player imagines the fate of the galaxy to be incomplete since the choice is not made yet, but they also imagine that Shepard’s gender is a settled matter since that choice was made at the beginning of the game. And so, in that one moment, both games and playthroughs play a role in the player’s fictional engagement. The player imagines both the incompleteness of the fate of the galaxy (which is part of the game) and the resolved gender of Commander Shepard (which is part of the playthrough). To continue with our linguistic illustration, as the player makes their choice at the end of the game, it would be appropriate to say, “She could save the galaxy.” In contrast, it would be wrong to say that “He could save the galaxy,” because Shepard is a woman in our playthrough. Referring to Shepard as “he” would be to ignore what the playthrough asks us to imagine. It is also wrong to say that “She saved the galaxy,” because the player did not make a choice yet. Referring to an incomplete action as already decided would be to ignore what the game asks us to imagine. And so, we see how both games and playthrough work as props in make-believe at different points during gameplay.

Video games are rich interactive fictions. There are fictional truths that are associated with the game, and fictional truths that are associated with playthroughs. Playthroughs are importantly distinct from games since players decide what to make true in their specific playthrough but cannot affect what is true in the game itself. Additionally, the fictional world of the game is distinctively incomplete whereas this incompleteness is resolved in playthroughs in which the player makes certain choices. To properly engage with interactive fictional works, the player must imagine that the fictional narrative of a game is incomplete and resolve the incompleteness through their input. This results in two distinct aspects of their experience: players experience the game by attending to the choices they must make, and players experience their own playthrough by imagining the resolved narrative that they are advancing through. Players engage with two fictional works: the game as an incomplete fiction and their playthrough as a resolved narrative. This Dual-Work View is in a better position, than a Single-Work View, to explain the difference between open-world and linear games, the player’s sense of agency, and the difference between playing a game and watching someone else play a game.

**Games**

Naughty Dog (20130). *The Last of Us*.

**References**


