This is a draft version. The final version of this paper was published as a chapter in *Being and Value in Technology,* Terrone E. and Tripodi V. (eds.). Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 163-186. See https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-88793-3_8.

Breaking the Fourth Wall in Videogames

Nele Van de Mosselaer

"Part of the early work in any medium", Janet Murray writes, "is the exploration of the border between the representational world and the actual world" (1997, p. 103). Referring specifically to people's inability or even aversion to cope with increasingly elaborate simulations of (virtual) reality, she adds that we always need "time to get used to any increase in representational power. During this time one of our main activities, as creators and audience, involves testing for the boundaries of the liminal world" (Murray, 1997, p. 103). Although Murray specifically talks about difficulties in distinguishing the actual from the represented in our interactions with any relatively new, representational medium, the issues she raises are still relevant with regard to videogames, which can hardly be described as "new" anymore. Philosophers and game scholars are still unable to reach a consensus on the "fictionality" or "actuality" of (our interactions with) the virtual environments, characters, and events that can be found within videogames

[END OF PAGE 163]

(cf. Aarseth, 2007; Sageng, 2012; Robson & Meskin, 2016; Chalmers, 2017; McDonnell & Wildman, 2019). At the heart of the issue is the specifically interactive way in which digital technologies allow us to represent and experience fictional worlds. The way in which videogames allow for interactions between actual players and fictional characters at first sight seems to defy the inherent ontological barrier that delineates the actual world from merely represented, fictional worlds (cf. Van de Mosselaer, 2018a).

This chapter discusses how digital technologies complicate the distinction between the actual world and fictional gameworlds by focusing on situations in which what Murray calls "the boundaries of the liminal world" are foregrounded (1997, p. 103). More specifically, I will discuss so-called "fourth wall breaks" within the experience of fictional gameworlds. For this purpose, I will first define the videogame experience as a self-involving, interactive fiction experience, based on Kendall Walton's account of fiction (1990). Afterwards, I will describe how the inherent interactivity and self-referentiality of videogame fiction might seem to complicate the conceptualization of the fourth wall within the videogame context, but actually offers new ways of breaking this imaginary wall.

1 Virtually Representing Fictional Worlds

Before I discuss the boundaries between the actual world and fictional gameworlds, I want to describe how videogames represent such fictional worlds. For this, I will make use of Kendall Walton's make-believe theory of fiction. I will first give a general sketch of this theory and then apply it specifically to videogame fictions.

In *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Walton writes that something is a fiction when it has the function of serving as a prop in a game of make-believe (1990, p. 51). Make-believe games are, according to Walton, the key to understanding fiction. He models his entire fiction theory on the make-believe games children play. A famous example he describes is that of two boys, Eric and Gregory, playing a game in which they pretend that every tree stump they see is actually a bear (1990, p. 37). Eric and Gregory

[END OF PAGE 164]

agreed on a certain principle of generation ("all tree stumps are bears"), according to which fictional truths are generated based on real features of actual objects. The tree stumps function as props: objects that truly exist, but prompt certain imaginings within the game of make-believe. Such props make sure that the imaginings of people interacting with these objects are not just free-floating fantasies: they are both structured and constrained by the features of the prop (1990, pp. 38–39). When Eric and Gregory observe a particularly big tree stump, for example, they will imagine as a result that there is a big bear in their vicinity. Moreover, the make-believe game played by Eric and Gregory is a reflexive one: they themselves also become props in this game. Whenever they run away from a tree stump, they imagine of themselves that they are running away from a bear.

Walton says that the appreciation of representations or fictions (he uses these terms interchangeably) involves precisely these kinds of constrained make-believe games. To understand how we appreciate representational works of art, Walton says we need to look at the specific way in which we imaginatively participate in these works (1990, p. 208). When reading a novel, watching a play, or looking at a painting, for example, we play make-believe games in which we use the novel, the actions of the actors, and the painting as props. The entirety of truths that are generated within such a make-believe game, form what Walton calls a " fictional world" (1978a, 10). In this process, certain principles of generation are always in play and structure our imaginings. Just like the size of the tree stumps determined the size of the imagined bears, the objective features of representations determine what kind of imaginings are appropriate when appreciating them. Moreover, just like in Eric and Gregory's game, the make-believe games played by appreciators of works of fiction like novels and movies are reflexive or self-involving according to Walton:

> What is not so obvious, but of very considerable importance, is that viewers and readers are reflexive props in these games, that they generate fictional truths about themselves. Many of their actions, like those of participants in children's games, are reflexive props

> as well. And as in the case of participants in children's games, it is in a first-person manner that appreciators are to, and do, imagine about themselves; they imagine, from the inside, doing things and undergoing experiences. (Walton, 1990, pp. 213–214)

[END OF PAGE 165]

One famous example Walton gives us of such appreciator involvement is that of Charles, who watches a horror movie about a terrible, green slime monster. Walton describes how the green slime oozes across the screen, towards the camera. As a consequence of this, Charles imagines of himself that he sees the slime and that he is in danger of being attacked by this slime (Walton, 1990, p. 242). Charles himself thus becomes a reflexive prop in his game of make-believe. He generates fictional truths about himself (so-called "de se imaginings"), such as being part of the world depicted in the movie, being threatened by the slime, and being fictionally afraid (Walton, 1990, p. 242). Walton claims that all fiction appreciators are similarly involved in the fictional worlds they experience through work of fiction. Appreciating fiction, he writes, always entails participating in it (1990, p. 213).

Walton's idea that appreciators of fiction are always also participants in the fiction has been heavily criticized within the philosophy of fiction. Derek Matravers, for example, denies that representations necessarily involve their audience in the world they depict. He points out that, while Walton uses the examples of the reflexive make-believe games played by Charles, Gregory, and Eric as an archetype to explain all of our interactions with fictions, these examples are actually more of an exception (Matravers, 2014, p. 116). After all, in most of our interactions with fictional works, such as paintings, movies, and novels, we are not involved in the represented content whatsoever. Only when a work asks us to involve ourselves in the world it depicts, it can be said to mandate reflexive make-believe games. This is the case when, for example, there are asides (dramatic situations in which characters communicate directly to the audience) or other instances of the fourth wall being broken, through which the audience becomes involved in the fiction. As Walton believes that we are always part of the imagined world when experiencing fiction, his theory seems to imply that asides to the audience or a breaking of the fourth wall are "intrinsic to engaging with representations" (Matravers, 2014, p. 116). Most works of fiction, however, do not force us to be part of the fictional world they represent. The *Green Slime* is an exception because the movie gives the impression that the slime is looking and coming at the spectator, so that it becomes fictional that spectators are in danger. However, unless there is such a breaking of the fourth wall, there

[END OF PAGE 166]

is no prompt at all for appreciators of movies, novels, or plays to imagine of themselves that they are watching or somehow involved in the depicted content. Tey are simply not part of the make-believe game that needs to be played to interpret this content (cf. Currie, 1995, p. 179). Walton's theory seems unable to make the distinction between a detached and a participatory way of appreciating fictions, as his make-believe theory already assumes that

"[a]ppreciation of representational works of art is primarily a matter of participation" (Walton, 1990, p. 213).

This aspect of Walton's make-believe theory proved to be generally unpopular among scholars investigating our experiences of noninteractive representational works such as movies and novels. Yet, his emphasis on participation in appreciating representations is also the reason why Walton's theory was extensively applied to videogames (cf. Tavinor, 2009; Bateman, 2011; Robson & Meskin, 2012; McDonnell & Wildman, 2019). "Given that participating with videogames is also primarily an act of engaging with a representational prop," Tavinor writes, "[Walton's] theory of fiction is entirely apt to capturing the nature of the fictive practice involved in videogames" (Tavinor, 2005, p. 30). Chris Bateman remarks that Walton's descriptions of the make-believe games played by readers of novels and viewers of movies gesture at something "players of digital games are intimately familiar with", since videogames allow us to enter their fictional world and experience it from the inside (Bateman, 2011, p. 167). Within the videogame experience, digital technologies are employed as props mandating reflexive make-believe games (cf. McDonnell & Wildman, 2019). The videogame player is cued into imagining not only a fictional world based on what appears on the screen, but also their own involvement and interactions within this world. As Robson and Meskin write, videogame players are, just like Charles in the make-believe game that Walton describes, "almost invariably characters in the fictional worlds associated with video games" (Robson & Meskin, 2016, p. 167).

Videogames offer specific props for players to imagine this kind of self-involvement. Trough the figure of the avatar, for example, players are invited to imaginatively identify with a character in the fictional world (cf. Tavinor, 2009, p. 70; Robson & Meskin, 2016, p. 168). Haptic feedback of input devices can help in this identification process: when the

[END OF PAGE 167]

avatar is hit by bullets, for example, players can be made to feel this through the rumbling of the controller. Moreover, players also use the real actions they perform on these controllers, and the graphical representations they thereby create on the screen, as props to imagine that they are actually performing actions within the fictional world (cf. Van de Mosselaer, 2018b). Videogame manuals and interfaces are even made to reflexively explain how the player's actual actions are related to the fictional actions of their avatar in the game world. They spell out what Walton calls the principles of generation of fictional truths (1990, p. 38). They might clarify, for example, the relation between "pressing X" and "jumping", which shows how players can generate the fictional truth that they are jumping in the fictional world by performing an action in the actual world. In other words, the videogame experience is a prime example of how digital technologies can be used as cues for de se imagination.

2 A Virtual, Fourth Wall?

Having discussed how videogames represent interactive, fictional worlds, I now want to focus on the imaginary boundary of these worlds: the so-called fourth wall. The concept of the fourth wall was originally used with regard to theatre (Diderot, 1947). It referred to the convention of imagining an invisible wall between the audience and the fictional world represented on the stage. Through this wall, the audience peeks into the fictional world of the play, while remaining unseen by the characters. A fourth wall break happens when the characters can suddenly see through this wall too and somehow acknowledge the world beyond it or the artificiality of their own world.

Nowadays, the concept of fourth wall breaks is used to refer to any instance in which fictional characters somehow prove to have knowledge about the world outside of their fiction (cf. Conway, 2010, p. 147). There are two especially common ways in which works of fiction break the fourth wall. First of all, characters can break the fourth wall by addressing or somehow interacting with the appreciator of the fictional work they are part of. In such instances, this appreciator is no longer a passive observer, but is involved in the fictional world and the characters'

[END OF PAGE 168]

adventures in it. As Walton puts it, such fourth wall breaks make for make-believe moments of interaction between the appreciator and one or more of the work's characters (Walton, 1990, p. 235). Secondly, works of fiction can break the fourth wall by self-referentially revealing their own artificial, fictional, or mediated nature. They can do so by having characters refer to their author, address the fact that they are part of a fictional narrative, or acknowledge the technological apparatus supporting the fictional world (such as the camera or boom microphones in movies) (Conway, 2010, p. 147). By doing this, such works acknowledge, from within their narrative, their own status as fictional narratives made-up for actual audiences to enjoy.

Many game scholars have discerned a problem when it comes to applying the concept of fourth wall breaks to videogames. Videogames are interactive, representational works that are inherently characterized by involvement of their appreciators, which is usually taken as a characteristic of works that break the fourth wall. The concept of fourth wall breaks originally used to refer to those situations in theatre where characters are suddenly able to observe and engage with the audience. Conway points out how this description of fourth wall breaks poses a problem for their occurrence in videogames, as videogame players simultaneously "fulfil the dual role of audience member and performer on stage" (2010, p. 146). The distance that previously existed between the audience in the actual world and the characters in the fictional world is, within the videogame experience, thus diminished to the point where one person, the player, exists in the two worlds at the same time. Videogames inherently allow players to take on a fictional role and influence the fictional events in the worlds they represent. Moreover, this kind of interaction presupposes a kind of self-referentiality. Videogames make it clear to their players how they can and should interact

with their software and hardware and they typically do this in a metareferential way that reveals their own mediality. “As interactive systems”, Jørgensen writes, “digital games must provide system information to the player, and one way to do so in a clear and unambiguous manner is to give extra emphasis to the mediation process itself” (2013, p. 125). Jørgensen here not only refers to the many symbols that appear on the screen and overlay the fictional world, such as health bars and indications of which button

[END OF PAGE 169]

the player should press next, but also to game characters who, for example, state that they are “overburdened” when a player picks up too many items. Such metareferences and reflexive statements, Jørgensen concludes, are inherent to “the way games work” (2013, p. 126).

This inherent interactivity and self-referentiality of videogames has led many game scholars to claim that the concept of the “fourth wall” is not applicable to our experiences of fictional gameworlds. The existence of a fourth wall in videogames, or at least one that is intact, is therefore often altogether rejected. Klevjer, for example, claims that “game fictions are not delineated by a ‘fourth wall’ as in film or literature” (2006, p. 59). Jørgensen agrees, stating that “[t]he presence of a player who has the agency to affect the content of games necessitates a constant breaking of any imagined wall that separates the game reality from the actual world” (2013, p. 125). Similarly, Brown writes that “the fourth wall’s position is already compromised by the control system or interaction device’s existing outside of the diegesis” (2012, p. 163). Weise, in this regard, describes the technologies that make the representation of gameworlds possible as “umbilical cords”, connecting actual players with fictional worlds (2008). According to him, it is more useful “to think about the boundary between player and fiction as an elastic membrane” rather than a wall (Weise, 2008). Kubiński concludes that it would be reasonable to say that “the concept of ‘breaking the fourth wall’ is not quite accurate in the context of video games” (2014, p. 135).

3 Misconceptions About the Fourth Wall

Before discussing my take on fourth wall breaks in videogame fiction, I want to address some of the ambiguities and misconceptions that can at times confuse discussions about this subject. The first one concerns the kind of “interaction” between actual people and fictional worlds that is enabled by fourth wall breaks. Some work on fourth wall breaks seems to suggest that these breaks allow actual connections to form between the actual and the fictional world, and that they actually make it possible for real people to interact with fictional entities. Klevjer, for example, explicitly talks about the “fourth wall” as “the ontological boundary of fiction”

[END OF PAGE 170]

(2006, pp. 113–114). If understood like this, however, it would become necessarily and inherently impossible to "break" this barrier. Kendall Walton describes how cross-world interaction between the actual world and fictional world is, by definition, impossible, because of the "logical or metaphysical barrier between them" (1978b, p. 11). Peter Lamarque stresses that there is a logical gap between the actual world and fictional worlds, and " fictional characters as such can never cross these logical barriers" (Lamarque, 1981, p. 299). Alex Neill talks about an ontological gap between fiction and reality, which precludes any rivalry or physical interaction between us and fictional characters (1993, p. 4). Indeed, how would a reader of *Harry Potter* even try to warn the wizarding world of an impending Death Eater attack? How would these Death Eaters ever be able to hurt this reader? As we belong to vastly different planes of existence, such endeavours are simply impossible.

Note that this is even true for videogames: we do not *actually* fight aliens when playing *Mass Effect* 2 (BioWare, 2011), but are only mandated to imagine fighting aliens (cf. Van de Mosselaer, 2018a). Likewise, I have never truly shot a zombie, as these monsters simply do not exist. In the guise of Ellie, the player-character in *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), however, I have fictionally shot hundreds of zombies. And with that I mean that I have pressed the R2 button hundreds of times, causing representations of dying, infected creatures on my screen. In other words, the best fictional works can do is mandate appreciators *to imagine* that the barrier between the actual world and the fictional world is overcome. Digital technologies are specifically apt to do this, as they can offer the player very advanced props (input devices, haptic feedback, VR headsets that show a perspective on a gameworld based on the player's head movements, etc.) for imagining their presence within a represented world. But the ontological barrier between worlds remains unbroken, and what Walton writes remains true even for videogames: "What happens in the fictional world—what fictionally is the case—can indeed be affected by what happens in the real world. But one person can save another only if they live in the same world. Cross-world saving is ruled out, and for similar reasons so is cross-world killing, congratulating, hand-shaking, and so forth" (Walton, 1990, p. 195).

[END OF PAGE 171]

Understanding fourth wall breaks as breaks of the "ontological boundary of fiction" is thus quite problematic, as it seems to suggest that fourth wall breaks actually allow fictional characters to cross the boundary to the appreciator's world, or vice versa. In *Mimesis as Make-Believe,* Walton specifies that fourth wall breaks only "bring the appreciator into the fiction" in the sense that it becomes *fictional* "that the reader or spectator is noticed or addressed or offered a drink or threatened" (Walton, 1990, p. 233). That is: fourth wall breaks make it fictionally true of the appreciator that they live in the same world as the fictional characters, thus making some fictional interactions possible between those characters and the (fictional version of) the appreciator.

In light of this, Conway's "reformulation" of the fourth wall in videogame contexts seems hardly original. He writes that games have the unique potential to "not only break the fourth

wall, but to expand it, relocating it entirely behind the player, as a tool of immersion" (2010, p. 153). He describes examples of "how the videogame complex does not break the fourth wall, but instead expands the fourth wall, as the player is now placed by the designer within the boundaries of the game fiction" (2010, p. 147). Yet, as discussed in the previous paragraph, this is simply what always happens when a fourth wall break occurs: the fictional world is expanded so as to include the viewer or spectator, of whom it becomes fictionally true that they are somehow interacting with a character.

Secondly, the frequent claims that fourth wall breaks are hard or even impossible to conceptualize within videogame contexts also seem to be misguided. As mentioned before, scholars often argue that, if it is true that videogames always represent fictional worlds in a way that is self-referential and involves the appreciator, then the fourth wall is either never present (Klevjer, 2006, p. 56) or always broken (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 125). Although Walton did not treat videogames in his analysis of representational works, he already addressed the problem of what "fourth wall breaks" (in the form of "asides") might mean for fictional works that already involve their appreciators within the world they represent.[1] Thus,

[END OF PAGE 172]

Walton asks: if we already belong to the world of a fiction anyway, "why should there be anything special or remarkable about asides?" (1990, p. 233). The answer Walton gives to this question applies equally well to fourth wall breaks in videogames:

> Part of the answer lies simply in the fact that being recognized or addressed in real life marks a significant change in one's social situation. (Think of a student suddenly called on in class or a lecturer picking out someone in the upper gallery and speaking specifically to him.) One feels included in a manner one wasn't previously. An aside makes it fictional that the appreciator is included similarly. This change may be important, but it doesn't consist in the appreciator's suddenly being drawn into a fictional world to which until then he did not belong. (Walton, 1990, p. 233)

Thus, fourth wall breaks do not occur when works of fiction simply involve the appreciator in the represented world, but rather when they do so in a manner that is new or unexpected, because it breaks with the previously established conventional relation between the real and the fictional.

Having discussed these misconceptions about the fourth wall, we can conclude that the fourth wall has often been misconstrued as an occurrence in which the ontological boundary between the fictional and the actual world is somehow broken. Neither fourth wall breaks nor interactive works of fiction can break such an ontological boundary, however, but can at

[1] As discussed before, Walton was convinced that all experiences of fiction involve de se imaginings: an appreciator of a fictional work is always also a participant in the fictional world represented by this work. Even if we do not agree with this thesis, what Walton says is certainly true for interactive fictional media such as videogames. Also, even though Walton indeed did not analyse videogames [footnote resumes on page 173:] in *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, he does mention "interactive fiction for computers" once in this work, in a footnote to his discussion of fourth wall breaks (1990, p. 235).

most mandate the imagining of cross-world interactions. Fourth wall breaks are thus not ontological breaks, but rather phenomenological ones: they change the way in which an individual appreciator experiences the world represented in the work. They are moments in which the work of fiction refers to its own mediality or involves their appreciators in the fictional world in a way that is new or unexpected by the appreciator based on the conventions of the particular medium in which they occur. This means that the interactivity and self-referentiality that is inherent to interactive fictional media such as videogames does not automatically entail a constant breaking or a total absence of the fourth

[END OF PAGE 173]

wall. And this, in turn, means that fourth wall breaks need not be rephrased or even deemed impossible to apply to videogames. The next part of this chapter will thus be a discussion of videogame situations that can be deemed fourth wall breaks.

4 Fourth Wall Breaks in Videogames

As Murray writes, investigations of fourth wall breaks are explorations of the boundary conventions of the representational medium in which the fourth wall break occurs (1997, p. 103). If we want to discuss fourth wall breaks with regard to videogames, we must look at situations in which the conventional interaction with the fictional gameworld is somehow disrupted. As discussed before, this conventional interaction always somehow entails metareferences or in-game representations that reveal the game's mediality and how it is supposed to work. Such self-references are not unexpected curiosities, but rather conventional aspects of how games work (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 126). Conventional interactions with videogames also entail self-involvement of the player. Players take control over an avatar or proxy within the gameworld and can influence fictional events through this figure. Whatever fourth wall videogame players imagine there to be, it is not one that would impede them from being fictionally involved in the gameworld in this way.

Fourth wall breaks thus occur in videogames when the conventional interaction with fictional gameworlds, and the self-referentiality and self-involvement this entails, are somehow disrupted. Examples of this abound. First of all, even though the agency of the player, in the guise of the player-character, does not entail any break of the fourth wall, creative ways of representing the relation between player and avatar can cause such a break. Conway, in this regard, describes how the character Sonic in the game *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sega AM3, 1993) will get impatient with the player if they do not press any buttons for a long time. Sonic will then "cross his arms and tap his feet, gesturing at the player in frustration, before eventually walking off-screen, resulting in a game-over (Conway, 2010, p. 148). What makes this a fourth wall break is not the fact that the player controls a character within the fiction, as this is conventional, but

[END OF PAGE 174]

the fact that this character acknowledges the fact that he is being controlled by the player.

Secondly, fourth wall breaks can happen through unusual uses of interface elements. As already discussed, self-referential interface elements that give the player necessary information on how the game works do not necessarily entail fourth wall breaks. Even though their presence on the screen is a constant reminder of the game's mediality and its status as a mere game, they are not usually experienced as disruptive by players (cf. Jørgensen, 2012). Rather, they are quite unproblematically interpreted as giving information about the fictional world, but not belonging to this world themselves. Health bars, for example, mandate players to imagine their character being healthy or rather close to dying, but do not mandate players to imagine that an actual bar is floating above the heads of their character within the fictional world. Thus, a fourth wall break can happen when this conventional use of interface elements is somehow disrupted. This happens, for example, in *Kingdom Hearts II* (Square Enix, 2005), when the character Stitch quite literally jumps on the player-character Sora's health bar and starts licking it, "healing" Sora in the process.

Thirdly, even though players are used to interacting with game systems when exploring fictional gameworlds, the technological apparatus supporting the videogame experience can be used for breaking the fourth wall. This happens, for example, when Mr. Resetti in *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo EAD, 2001) threatens to delete the player's save fle, as if the fictional character is aware of the fact that his entire world is contained into a fle on a computer. Game designers can also deliberately make it seems as if their game malfunctions or crashes by having the game show visual anomalies. Such digital artefacts that resemble the visual aspects of real computer glitches are also called "glitchalikes" (cf. Moradi, 2004, p. 10; Gualeni, 2019). One of such glitchalikes appears in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady Studios, 2009) when Batman meets his enemy Scarecrow. Upon approaching Scarecrow, the screen suddenly freezes and the game seems to glitch. By using such a glitchalike, developers foreground and disrupt the media- fiction relationship that is inherent to videogames, but that is often taken for granted by players as a conventional part of gameplay.

[END OF PAGE 175]

Another exceptionally creative example of using the computermediation of videogames to break the fourth wall can be found in the game *Undertale* (Fox, 2015). At the beginning of this game, players are forced to fight the lovely and motherly character Toriel to be able to proceed. After killing her, they meet the game's antagonist Flowey, who informs them that they are a monster for choosing to kill Toriel, while they could have spared her. Quite often, players react to this information by quitting the game, going back to a previous checkpoint on their savefile, and repeating the encounter with Toriel, this time sparing her. When they meet Flowey after letting Toriel live, however, he says the following:

> Clever, verrrryyy clever. You think you're really smart, don't you? In this world, it's kill or be killed. So you were able to play by your own rules. You spared the life of a single person. Hee hee hee…But don't act so cocky. I know what you did. You murdered her. And then you went back, because you regretted it. Ha ha ha ha… You naïve idiot. (Fox, 2015)

While it is unproblematic that Flowey addresses the fact that the player killed Toriel (as this was an in-game event), it is very unconventional that he can also comment on their actions outside of the game. Flowey apparently knows about the player quitting the game and opening a previous state of their savefile, which are things that happened outside of the world of *Undertale*. Flowey thus breaks the fourth wall.

Although many more examples could be discussed here, we can already conclude that fourth wall breaks in videogames do not happen constantly, even though videogames are inherently self-referential and interactive. They only happen when this self-referentiality and interactivity occur in a way that breaks with previously established conventions of the medium.

5 A Unique Fourth Wall?

Many scholars have called the specific ways in which videogames can break the fourth wall "unique" or "complex" because of the way the boundaries between the fictional and the real are always blurred within

[END OF PAGE 176]

videogame play (cf. Klevjer, 2006; Weise, 2008; Conway, 2010; Jørgensen, 2013; Kubiński, 2014). Yet, many of their arguments seem to be supported by a misunderstanding about the concept of the fourth wall. As I argued, fourth wall breaks in videogames, just like in all other (noninteractive) representational artefacts, consist of a break in the *conventional* relation between the real and the fictional world. Even though this conventional relation between the real and the fictional might be different when interacting with virtually represented worlds than when experiencing the fictional worlds described in novels or shown in movies, the fourth wall can still be defined based on this relation. As Murray says, every medium simply has its own "boundary conventions" that will decide when a fourth wall break occurs (1997, p. 103).

That does not mean that there is not anything unique about fourth wall breaks that can occur within videogames, however. Up until now, both within this chapter and wider academic discourse, fourth wall breaks have mainly been discussed as disruptive events that happen to an audience when they appreciate a work of fiction. Works of fiction that feature fourth wall breaks represent fictional events in such a way that their appreciators will be invited to imagine, at a point, that they and the characters described in the work are part of the same world (either because the character addresses them or mentions their own artificial nature). In this regard, fourth wall breaks have been understood as disruptive elements that are inherently present in fictional works and that audiences simply come across while appreciating these works.

In the last part of this chapter, I want to show how appreciators can take on a more active role in the occurrence of fourth wall breaks in videogames. Moreover, I want to suggest the

possibility of fourth wall breaks that are initiated not from within the work or by the work's creator, but rather by the mischievous player.

6 Two-Directional Fourth Wall Breaks

Whereas non-interactive media very often have fictional characters address actual appreciators, causing the fourth wall to crumble, the reverse seems impossible: when it comes to appreciators trying to address

[END OF PAGE 177]

(or interact in any way with) fictional characters in novels or movies, the wall seems indestructible. As interactive fictional media, however, videogames allow for breaks of the fourth wall that are more interactive in nature. In this regard, Agata Waszkiewicz makes a distinction between one-directional and two-directional fourth wall breaks within videogames. While one-directional fourth wall breaks consist in fictional characters who address the appreciator (and are thus the kind of breaks that can be found even in non-interactive fictional media), two-directional breaks are situations in which the player is not only addressed, but also invited to participate (2020). Waszkiewicz describes the latter using an example from the game *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, 1998). When meeting the enemy Psycho Mantis in this game, this character wants to prove his psychokinetic power and asks the player to put their controller on the floor. He then waves his hand across the screen, "moving" the controller across the floor by making use of its rumble function. Afterwards, Psycho Mantis faces the player in a battle that can ultimately be won by the player if they unplug their controller and put it in the "Player Two" slot. Psycho Mantis then cries out that he is now unable to read the player's mind. The fourth wall break is thus two-directional: while the player is addressed by Psycho Mantis, they also have the power and means to answer, not just within the gameworld and in the guise of a player-character, but as themselves, through interaction with their actual console (Waszkiewicz, 2020).

Walton already mentioned this possibility of such "two directional" fourth wall breaks when talking about the interactive moments created by asides. As he focuses primarily on non-interactive fictional media such as literature and film, however, he emphasizes the severe limitations that are usually inherent to such interactions:

> It is rarely fictional that the appreciator carries on an extended conversation with a character, or that he and a character make eyes at each other or exchange more than a glance or two. There is an obvious practical reason for these limits. When the artist constructs her work, she determines, once and for all, what fictionally her characters say and do. But different appreciators will behave differently in front of the work; what fictionally they say and do, what they choose to attend to and how, what they mutter under

[END OF PAGE 178]

> their breath will vary greatly, and some will behave in ways the artist did not foresee. So the artist cannot ft her characters' responses to what, fictionally, the appreciator says or does. (Walton, 1990, p. 235)

Similar to Waszkiewicz, Walton then acknowledges that at least two kinds of fictional media can perfectly be customized to account for multiple possible reactions of their appreciators: improvisational theatre and interactive fiction for computers (Walton, 1990, p. 235). Although Walton does not elaborate on this, it is easy to see how actors in improvisational theatre can respond to whatever reactions they receive from the audience during an aside. Videogames, moreover, can achieve the same effect through the careful programming of their software. Fourth wall breaks, as a result, can become prolonged moments of interaction, instead of mere abrupt disruptions of fiction that happen to appreciators.

7 Appreciator-Initiated Fourth Wall Breaks

Just like all the previous examples of one-directional fourth wall breaks, the two-directional fourth wall breaks that were just discussed are explicitly designed into the fiction experience by its creators. The appreciator can only actively participate in fourth wall breaks such as the Psycho Mantis one because they are first invited to do so by the videogame. In this last part of the chapter, I want to suggest that players can also *initiate* fourth wall breaks, regardless of these fourth wall breaks being anticipated by (the designer of) the game. This might seem like a strange suggestion. In literature or film, it would be simply impossible for appreciators to initiate fourth wall breaks. When a reader or spectator starts talking to a character within the fictional world, this would simply not entail a fourth wall break, because this interaction is not fictionally acknowledged within the work. When a spectator suddenly starts shouting at one of the characters in a play, the situation is somewhat different. Whether or not this disruption entails a fourth wall break then seems to depend on the reaction of the actors on stage. A fourth wall break only happens when these actors, still in the role of their character, acknowledge the audience member's utterance. In general, we could say that the occurrence of

[END OF PAGE 179]

fourth wall breaks in literature, movies, and theatre always depends on the willingness of the fiction creator.

In videogames, however, appreciators can break the fourth wall in ways that are not anticipated by the videogame's designer.[2] This possibility for appreciator-initiated fourth wall breaks arises because players are not only actual people who know about the technology

[2] In their chapter in *Transgressions in Games and Play*, Mortensen and Navarro-Remesal already hint at the possibility of players breaking the fourth wall for other players in multiplayer games. They describe situations in which "the fourth wall is assaulted with direct addresses and in-jokes to break the unity of the ludo- fiction" (2019, p. 37).

on which the game runs, but also take on the role of fictional characters within the fictional world. Players, as Conway already noted, take on a dual role as both audience member and performer (2010, p. 146). This brings about the weird situation in which a fictional character can undertake actions within a fictional gameworld that are motivated by knowledge of the artificiality of this world. Whenever the actual player reveals the technological apparatus underlying the fictional gameworld from their position within this world, this entails a fourth wall break, because this act will always be acknowledged by at least one fictional character: the player-character.

In *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (Naughty Dog, 2007), for example, players found out that, by aiming their gun in a certain way while standing next to a wall, they can eventually move through these walls. Doing this, they will often end up in unfinished locations in the gameworld that were never meant to be seen. Due to the obvious unfinished nature of these locations, the game reveals its own mediality as, in this case malfunctioning, software. But it only does so because the player, in the guise of a character in the gameworld, caused it to do so by misusing the game. And this player-character, by moving through these visually estranging spaces, fictionally acknowledges the existence of these locations. The player, actively and quite uncalled for by the game or its designers, thus broke the fourth wall.

Such player-initiated fourth wall breaks are not rare occurrences. Many videos on YouTube show players interacting with games in ways that were not intended by the game designers, and that show of ways to "break the fiction". Doctor Kill's "Let's Play Ocarina of Time Super Wrong" YouTube series (2015), for example, shows of ways in which players can misuse

[END OF PAGE 180]

the game *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD, 1998) to achieve comic or useful in-game effects. These videos can be interpreted as a behind-the-scenes documentary of the game, approached from within the gameworld itself. In the first video in the series, Doctor Kill, talking about the player-character Link from a first-person perspective, shows how a creative use of the in-game bomb items can be used to push Link out of the boundaries of the gameworld, showing parts of this world that should not at all be reachable in play. Aarseth, in this regard, talks about "transgressive play" or occurrences in which the player breaks out of the role that was designed for them to fulfil by the game's designers (2014, p. 132). Note that this description is already reminiscent of fourth-wall breaking characters who step out of their fictional role to acknowledge their own fictionality or (the audience in) the extra fictional world. The reason why this kind of transgressive play has not, up until now, been recognized as instances of breaking the fourth wall is because many game researchers took these situations as examples in which players do not interact with games as fiction, but rather as digital artefacts. Sageng, for example, writes that "the fictional pretence can peel entirely of if there is reason to think that it does not matter to the player" (Sageng, 2012, p. 230). If it is true that players who misuse games by approaching them purely as digital constructs do not at all interact with these games as fictions, then a fourth wall is never formed, and fourth wall breaks cannot take place. However, I suggest to look at these

situations from a different perspective. More specifically, I suggest not to treat speedrunners or otherwise mischievous players as altogether disregarding the game's fictional world, but rather as interacting with this world in a way that is heavily informed by, and self-referentially reveals, the fictionality and mediality of this world.[3] In other words: the fictional pretence does not

[END OF PAGE 181]

peel off entirely in the way they play, but this way of playing rather inherently involves fourth wall breaks. Another example that can clarify this are the speedrunning players of *Sekiro* (FromSoftware, 2019), who found ways to manipulate the game into rendering their avatar as if he is underwater while he is not. This enabled them to swiftly swim through the air from one location to another. The way players talk about this particular game exploit already reveals a certain fictional component to it: they talk of "airswimming" or being able to "fly", sometimes even referring to this power as a very special kind of "shinobi technique" (Whalen, 2019). It is true that, in this process of airswimming, the depicted fictional world loses coherency and is revealed to be a mere manipulable digital construct. But such incoherency and overt mediality are inherent to fourth wall breaks in any medium. When a movie character like Deadpool suddenly turns to the audience and starts interacting with them, for example, it is hard to make fictional sense of this (does he see the audience? Is he talking to a camera? Why cannot the other characters see us too?). Likewise, when Bugs Bunny gets into a fight with his illustrator, it is hard to truly care for him or the fictional world in which he lives, as both have just been revealed to be mere drawn constructs. In a similar way, the speedrunners of *Sekiro* reveal the fictional world of this game to be a mere piece of malfunctioning software. This, however, does not change the fact that the player still somehow interacts with this fictional world, and breaks its fourth wall in the process: namely, by taking on the role of a ninja who can swim through the air.

8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the concept of fourth wall breaks, understood like breaks of the conventional relation between the real and the fictional world, is perfectly applicable to interactive fictional media like videogames. The use of digital technologies makes players imagine not only a fictional world, but also their own involvement within these worlds. Moreover, these technologies typically instruct players on how to interact with them by

[3] I do acknowledge that there are extreme cases in which game objects are interacted with while completely disregarding their fictional aspects. Examples of this are so-called game data mining or the reverse engineering of games, in which people look through a game's code (without even entering the game or its fictional world) or investigate how the game was made to find out what the use and functions of the game's objects are. Whenever a game's world is entered from a player perspective, however, there will always be an, albeit very minimal, fictional dimension.

showing on-screen, self-referential information. As self-referentiality and self-involvement of the appreciator are inherent to

[END OF PAGE 182]

videogames as virtually mediated fictions, they do not as such entail fourth wall breaks. They can, however, be creatively used to break the fictional gameworld's fourth wall. More importantly, virtually mediated fictional worlds such as those of videogames allow for creative interactions through the fourth wall from both the fictional characters' and the actual player's perspective. Due to players taking on the dual role of an external observer of the fictional world and a character within this world, they gain the power to break the fourth wall themselves. While videogames have often been said to be the first fictional medium to which the concept of the fourth wall is not applicable, I argue that they might be the first fictional medium that allows their appreciators to break this wall.

Due to the scope of this chapter, I have not addressed every puzzle that is connected to this phenomenon of appreciator-initiated fourth wall breaks, which deserves further attention. First of all, there are obvious differences between character-initiated and player-initiated fourth wall breaks. When a character breaks the fourth wall, they do not do so due to having any knowledge about the actual world or their own fictionality. At most, they are scripted to fictionally have such knowledge. In fact, when a movie character is designed to break the fourth wall by addressing spectators of the movie, it will still do so even when the movie is being played in an empty room. When a player, in the guise of a player-character, breaks the fourth wall, on the other hand, this action is motivated by real knowledge about the game as an artefact. This has two interesting consequences. First of all, the fourth wall break is less unexpected for the player who initiates it based on their knowledge of the gameworld as an artefact, thus losing the feeling of surprise that is often considered to characterize such breaks. Yet, despite their expectedness, player-initiated fourth wall breaks are still characterized by a disruptiveness, simply because the way the fictional world is represented during unconventional play is often visually weird and overtly technologically mediated. Secondly, the appreciator-initiated fourth wall break seems more true to the descriptions of fourth wall breaks as instances in which fictional characters somehow prove to have knowledge about the world outside of their fiction. After all, the player-character's fourth wall breaking actions are truly motivated by knowledge about the extra-fictional world: knowledge this character has because of its relation to the player. Undoubtedly, more can

[END OF PAGE 183]

be said about the repercussions this kind of character-appreciator relation has for the boundaries of fictional gameworlds, especially regarding the ways in which these boundaries can be transgressed.

Lastly, I have briefly mentioned how player-initiated fourth wall breaks can be regarded as a subcategory of transgressive play (cf. Aarseth, 2014). Games, Aarseth writes, are "machines that sometimes allow their players to do unexpected things" (2014, p. 132). Transgressive

play is such unexpected behaviour, which he describes as "a symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game, a (perhaps illusory) way for the played subject to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself" (2014, p. 132). In the case of player-initiated fourth wall breaks, such acts of rebellion are specifically aimed at the game's fictional world. As such, they are a testament to the kind of freedom players, in contrast to appreciators of movies or literature, have when playing games. As virtually mediated works of fiction, the videogame experience offers players the freedom not only to interact with the fictional content of the game and to decide how events will play out within the fictional gameworld, but also to interact with and transgress the very boundaries of that fictional world itself.

References

Aarseth, E. (2007). Doors and Perception. Fiction vs. Simulation in Games. *Intermediality, 9*, 35–44.

Aarseth, E. (2014). I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player. In *From Literature to Cultural Literacy* (pp. 180–188). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bateman, C. (2011). *Imaginary Games*. Zero Books. BioWare. (2011). *Mass Effect 2.* PlayStation 3: Electronic Arts.

Brown, D. W. (2012). *The Suspension of Disbelief in Videogames*. PhD thesis. Brunel University School of Arts.

Chalmers, D. J. (2017). The Virtual and the Real. *Disputatio, 9*(46), 309–352.

Conway, S. (2010). A Circular Wall? Reformulating the Fourth Wall for Videogames. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds, 2*, 145–155.

Currie, G. (1995). *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science*. Cambridge University Press.

[END OF PAGE 184]

Diderot, D. (1947) [1758]. On Dramatic Poetry. In *European Theories of the Drama* (B. H. Clark, Trans.). New York: Crown Publishers.

Doctor Kill. (2015). Let's Play Ocarina of Time Super Wrong. *Youtube.* https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLctnNKgSZgBzyu07wv3oi iQLNAIxOwuRI

Fox, T. (2015). *Undertale*. PC: Toby Fox.

FromSoftware. (2019). *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice.* PlayStation 4: Activision.

Gualeni, S. (2019). On the De-Familiarizing and Re-ontologizing Effects of Glitches and Glitch-alikes. *Proceedings of the 2019 DiGRA International Conference*, Kyoto.

Jørgensen, K. (2012). Between the Game System and the Fictional World: A Study of Computer Game Interfaces. *Games and Culture, 7*(2), 142–163.

Jørgensen, K. (2013). *Gameworld Interfaces*. MIT Press. Klevjer, R. (2006). *What is the Avatar? Fiction and Embodiment in Avatar-based Singleplayer Computer Games*. PhD Thesis. University of Bergen.

Konami Computer Entertainment Japan. (1998). *Metal Gear Solid.* PlayStation, PC: Konami.

Kubiński, P. (2014). Immersion vs. Emersive Efects in Videogames. In D. Stobbart & M. Evans (Eds.), *Play, Theory, and Practice: Engaging with Videogames*. Inter-Disciplinary Press.

Lamarque, P. (1981). How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions? *The British Journal of Aesthetics, 21*(4), 291–304.

Matravers, D. (2014). *Fiction and Narrative*. Oxford University Press.

McDonnell, N., & Wildman, N. (2019). Virtual Reality: Digital or Fictional? *Disputatio, 11*(55), 371–397.

Moradi, I. (2004). *Glitch Aesthetics*. Bachelor Thesis. Huddersfeld, UK: University of Huddersfeld. Retrieved November 22, 2018, from http://www.oculasm.org/glitch/download/Glitch_dissertation_print_with_pics.pdf

Mortensen, T. E., & Navarro-Remesal, V. (2019). Asynchronous Transgressions: Suffering, Relief, and Invasions in Nintendo's Miiverse. In K. Jørgensen & F. Karlsen (Eds.), *In Transgression in Games and Play* (pp. 27–44). Press.

Murray, J. H. (2017). *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. The Free Press.

Naughty Dog. (2007). *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune.* PlayStation 3: Sony Computer Entertainment.

Naughty Dog. (2020). *The Last of Us Part II.* PlayStation 4: Sony Interactive Entertainment.

[END OF PAGE 185]

Neill, A. (1993). Fiction and the Emotions. *American Philosophical Quarterly, 30*(1), 1–13.

Nintendo EAD. (1998). *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time.* Nintendo 64: Nintendo.

Nintendo EAD. (2001). *Animal Crossing.* Nintendo 64: Nintendo.

Robson, J., & Meskin, A. (2012). Fiction and Fictional Worlds in Videogames. In J. R. Sageng, H. J. Fossheim, & T. M. Larsen (Eds.), *Te Philosophy of Computer Games* (pp. 201–217). Springer.

Robson, J., & Meskin, A. (2016). Video Games as Self-Involving Interactive Fictions. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 74*(2), 165–177.

Rocksteady Studios. (2009). *Batman: Arkham Asylum.* PlayStation 3: Eidos Interactive.

Sageng, J. R. (2012). In-Game Action. In J. R. Sageng, H. J. Fossheim, & T. M. Larsen (Eds.),*The Philosophy of Computer Games*(pp. 219–232). Springer.

Sega AM3. (1993). *Sonic the Hedgehog*. Sega System 32: Sega.

Square Enix. (2005). *Kingdom Hearts II.* PlayStation 2: Square Enix Product Development Division 1.

Tavinor, G. (2005). Videogames and Interactive Fiction. *Philosophy and Literature, 29*(1), 24–40.

Tavinor, G. (2009). *Te Art of Videogames*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Van de Mosselaer, N. (2018a). How Can We Be Moved to Shoot Zombies? A Paradox of Fictional Emotions and Actions in Interactive Fiction. *Journal of Literary Theory, 12*(2), 279–299.

Van de Mosselaer, N. (2018b). Fictionally Flipping Tetrominoes? Defining the Fictionality of a Videogame Player's Actions. *Journal of the Philosophy of Games, 1*(1). https://journals.uio.no/JPG/article/view/6035

Walton, K. (1978a). Fearing Fictions. *Te Journal of Philosophy, 75*(1), 5–27.

Walton, K. (1978b). How Remote are Fictional Worlds from the Real World? *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 37*(1), 11–23.

Walton, K. (1990). *Mimesis as make-believe: On the foundations of the representational arts*. Harvard University Press.

Waszkiewicz, A. (2020). Together They Are Twofold': Player-Avatar Relationship Beyond the Fourth Wall. *Journal of Games Criticism, 4*(1). http://gamescriticism.org/articles/waszkiewicz-4-

Weise, M. (2008). Press the 'Action' Button, Snake! The Art of Self-Reference in Video Games. *Game Career Guide* 25. https://gamecareerguide.com/features/652/press_the_action_button_snake_.php?page=1

Whalen, A. (2019). 'Sekiro' Flying Guide: How to Swim Trough the Air With 'Shadows Die Twice' Glitch. *Newsweek.* https://www.newsweek.com/sekiro-flying-guide-glitch-shadows-die-twice-game-1392259

[END OF PAGE 186]