Interacting with fiction?

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Introduction

When we play a videogame, do we really interact with fictional characters and objects? Do we really step into fictional environments? No surprising news here: the answer is a resounding 'No'. It remains to be explained, though, why these questions are not complete nonsense in the case of videogames, compared to what would be the case if asked regarding books, movies or paintings.

There is an obvious answer to that. A videogame is, after all, a game. And every game session is a process: a sequence of causally related events. Players cause certain events to happen, and in this way influence the outcome of the process; some other events, triggered by the computer and/or other players (through their use of computers) affect the players' activity in a number of ways. This clearly doesn't happen when we watch a movie, appreciate a painting or read a novel[1].

But things are not so simple. Most videogames present fictional environments populated by fictional characters (some of them controlled by the players) and objects. Contemporary games, thanks to rich representational capacities afforded by computer technology, are elaborate works of fiction, and at least in this sense they can be considered a new art form[2].

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[1] An exception might be interactive art. The relationship between works of interactive art and videogames should be explored in detail, but this is not the place to develop it.

[2] Tavinor (2009) offers a thorough discussion of the aesthetic qualities of videogames, as well as a number of philosophical issues related to fiction, ethics and emotions.

In this paper I investigate how fiction fits with the idea of interaction that is at the heart of the gaming experience, and how videogames can shed light on contemporary philosophical discussions about the status of fictional objects.

Really?

Everyday discourse is full of utterances that, taken at face value, seem to assume that it is possible to interact with fictional characters, objects and environments, as the following examples show:

> (1) I slayed the Orc.
> (2) The Nazi sniper just killed me.

Utterances like these are usual among computer and console gamers. What is the reason for people talking this way and being understood without raising eyebrows?

If, instead of focusing on reports, we direct our attention to what might be called the phenomenology of gaming, there is a strong feeling of taking part in the events that unfold during a game session. A player of *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) may feel that he – by controlling his character – really enters the city of Stormwind and meets other players there, or flies for the first time in the game. This phenomenological aspect is obviously stronger in first-person games, since in this case there is much less divergence between what the player perceives and what his character 'perceives'[3]. It is this aspect of gaming that offers grounds for accepting utterances such as (1) or (2) as true when reporting what happened in the context of a game session.

There is a reason for the strong phenomenological aspect of gaming. Playing a game is a real activity in which the player is engaged. So, in the context of a game session of *WoW*, the player is really – through his character – entering Stormwind, killing Orcs, flying, or what have you. And this can 'spill over' into other, more encompassing contexts. If I am skilled as a player, I can garner a reputation that goes well beyond

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[3] *World of Warcraft* is one of the games that allow the player to shift between a first-person and a third-person perspective, but at least in my experience of playing *WoW* the game works much better with a third-person view.

what happens in game sessions (ladder systems, and even tournaments, capitalize on this). Besides that, I can buy and sell stuff from the game (including game money and characters) exchanging it for real money.

This should not be very surprising: games, although somehow 'isolated' from other contexts of activity, can nevertheless have real effects outside their narrow domain. To give an example from a game that does not employ fiction: when Cristiano Ronaldo strikes a goal, it is something that he really does – even though something counts as a goal only in the context circumscribed by the rules of football that are in force during a game[4]. And this may have many real consequences outside the context of a game.

So it might seem that after all we really interact with fictional characters and step into fictional environments when we are playing games, contrary to what was stated in the introduction. But we need to be careful here, and take into consideration the ways in which different contexts relate to each other. Of course, creatures such as Orcs and places such as Stormwind are fictional in the sense (to be explored shortly) that they are not actual, concrete entities. However, in the context of a particular game, they seem to be real objects. Otherwise, how could we interact with them?

Making it fictional

The phenomenology of most videogames (and the grounds it provides for evaluating reports of gaming activity) seems to offer evidence of what would be their hybrid nature: real games in which the player engages with 'fictional worlds'[5]. This is not exclusive of videogames: pen-and-paper role-playing games, tabletop war games, and most children's games share this characteristic. They all are, with varying degrees of sophistication, games of make-believe. According to the classic formulation due to Walton (1990), most games of make-believe have an objective quality anchored in the use of props – objects that, according to the rules of a particular game, authorize the players to imagine certain things.

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[4] In this respect, games as real activities obey the rule 'X counts as Y in (context) C', which is the basis of John Searle's ontology of institutional facts (see Searle 1995).
[5] Juul (2005) offers extensive and elaborate arguments in favour of this view. See also Tavinor (2009).

Walton gives as an example a game in which children decide to treat as bears all tree stumps they are able to meet. The rule 'tree stumps are bears' authorizes them to imagine that, when they see a stump, they are seeing a frightening bear. So they might run away, wrestle with a stump, etc. And since all stumps are bears, this means that even stumps that are not seen by the children are also bears – so that the children may discover a 'bear' hiding somewhere and be surprised by this.

Of course the props in this case were not designed for that function. God didn't create trees to serve as props for games of make-believe. And games like that one are fleeting, one-off occasions. Things start to get interesting when we have formalized games, with objects whose primary function is to serve as props. In a complex tabletop war game like *World in Flames*, the players, through the use of props such as tokens, maps, dice and the rulebook, might be said to imagine themselves to be commanding huge military forces.

Fiction is an integral part of most videogames, and it is present ever since their beginnings, from the humble *Tennis for Two* through *Spacewar!* to *Pong*. Fiction clues players to many of the games' rules and also offers a context for making sense of the gaming experience. An argument for the hybrid nature of video games is forcefully defended by Juul (2005), who claims that video games are real games that employ fictional representations. A perspicuous formulation of this hybrid nature is offered by Tavinor (2009), according to whom crucial aspects of video games' gameplay (especially in the case of recent, representationally rich games) are 'encoded' in fictions. In videogames, in order to reach their goals, players imagine themselves playing tennis, slaying demons, raising families, leading civilizations to world domination, etc.

But is this the whole story? After all, as has already been pointed out, it seems that in the context of a game session we are really playing tennis, slaying demons, etc. This would be part of what means to be a game, and would offer a common framework for games of make-believe and games that do not have this trait. But the standard Waltonian reply is very ingenious: it is not true that we kill Orcs, enter majestic cities or fly. What happens in a game of make-believe is that we make it fictional that we do these and other things. So, instead of being true *simpliciter*, it is true in the fiction of a

game that the player engages in those activities[6]. Or, to put it another way, the props we use authorize us to imagine that we are doing whatever we are fictionally doing.

Can this approach to games of make-believe explain the feeling that the events happening in a game are real in its context (just as they are in the contexts of other kinds of games)? I am not going to address the issue of traditional games of make-believe, but in the case of videogames, is it correct to claim that we don't really interact with the entities and objects in the game, and that we only imagine doing so? In order to better appreciate what is at stake here, we need to address contemporary philosophical theories of fiction.

What fictional objects are not

The main difference between fictional entities in videogames and fictional entities in traditional art forms is that the former at least seem to be responsive to the players' actions – in fact, it is demanded that the players apparently interact with the entities presented by a game in order for it to unfold properly. This characteristic of videogames may help offering a contribution to the philosophical discussion of fiction.

Currently there are two main philosophical approaches to fictional objects (taking 'object' in its most general sense): (a) fictional objects as abstract objects; (b) fictional objects as imagined in games of make-believe (see Friend, 2007, for a comprehensive account of the current theoretical landscape). The most important difference between (a) and (b) regards the ontological status of fictional objects. The former approach claims that they exist, albeit as abstract objects; for the latter, however, fictional objects don't exist, being only imagined (mainly through the use of props) as part of a 'make-believe world'.

Regarding the possibility of interacting with fiction, neither (a) nor (b) would allow it. In the case of (a), this is obvious since we can't really interact with abstract objects, which are causally inert. According to (b), we just pretend that there are fictional

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[6] There is nothing extraordinary about the fact that players in a game of make-believe are part of the fiction that is warranted by the use of props (in fact, players themselves are props of a 'reflexive' kind). The example of the simple game with the tree stumps is a case in point.

entities with which we are interacting. Both (a) and (b) would give the same answer to the question, 'Can we interact with fictional objects?'. The answer, of course, is 'No'.

This is not a distinctive characteristic of the positions (very) briefly presented above. In fact, no account of fiction would maintain that it is possible to interact with fictional objects. The reason is that a fictional object is not both actual and concrete. It is not located in space-time, at least in the actual world. If we assume that the physical universe is causally closed, and interaction always involves causation, then it follows that fictional objects simply are not the sorts of things we can interact with.

Someone who defends position (a) will claim that fictional objects are actual, but not concrete: they are abstract entities. As for position (b), it claims that since fictional objects are not both actual and concrete, there is no such a thing as a fictional object: we only make it fictional that there is one[7]. So, even though a positive account of fictional objects is still a matter of strong controversy, there is at least a consensus regarding what they are not. But if we can't really interact with fictional objects, it remains to be known what it is we interact with while playing a videogame.

Interacting with what?

In the case of videogames, the answer would be something like, 'What we really interact with is a computer or a console, through the appropriate devices (such as mice, keyboards and controllers). The computer or console, given our input, renders a representation on a screen, and it is only through that physical interaction with the machine that we think we are really interacting with the characters, objects or environments displayed.'

To this, it might be objected that we need a more fine-grained description: what we are really interacting with are data structures physically implemented on a computer. The representations of fictional characters, objects and environments would be external

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[7] A third position would claim that a fictional object is concrete, but not actual; it might exist, but not in this world (or in another formulation, there is at least one possible world – not this one – in which it exists). And there is also a position associated with the work of Meinong, according to which fictional objects are not both actual and concrete and so don't exist, but we can nevertheless say that there are such objects. This is not the place to examine in detail all the currently available options.

appearances, so to speak, of these data structures. In this regard, the approach in terms of 'make-believe' would be promising, since data structures implemented on hardware are clearly props for a game (and we are talking about games, after all).

Let's assume that certain data structures implemented on hardware are props in games of make-believe. But these data structures, on the other hand, seem to be as good an example of abstract objects as they can be. In fact, they look a lot like abstract artefacts, in the sense of Thomasson (1999). Abstract artefacts, according to this view, are abstract objects that are metaphysically dependent on certain events, such as (in the case of works of art) their creation by authors and their reception by appreciators. It could be said, then, that videogames are abstract objects metaphysically dependent on production and use. And this being so, the same would apply to games' characters, objects and environments.

Videogames are computer programs; they are software. And one thing is sure: if computer programs are not abstract artefacts, nothing is. Now of course there is no way we could interact with a program in itself. The program must be physically implemented on a machine. But the details of its physical implementation are not crucial for it being counted as the same program. That is, 'multiple realizability' is an essential property of software: every program can be realized by at least two distinct physical mechanisms.

Consider the case in which my character slays an Orc in *WoW*, while I am playing at home on my computer, which is a Windows PC. A few days later, visiting a friend, I play the game on his computer, this time a Mac, and lo and behold, I slay the very same Orc. The same game and the same character are realized in distinct machines. But even in different game sessions on the same computer, the physical realization of the game need not be the same, because the allocation of memory may be (and usually is) distinct depending on the computer's resource management[8].

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[8] There is a technical difference between general-purpose computers and consoles, which are special-purpose computers. But nothing in principle would prevent us from emulating console games in other machines. After all, we are all doing this with classic arcade titles running on Java or Flash over the Internet.

So the Orc (which is standing here for any other game character) is not identical with any one of its physical implementations. But it must be physically implemented so that we can interact with it. A game's characters, objects and environments are parts of what might be called an Abstrtact Machine (AM) – a model of a complex process (itself including many sub-processes). When we play the game, we are interacting with an Implemented Abstract Machine (I-AM) which is the game when running on a computer[9].

An I-AM is as real as anything can be. It is an actual, concrete process taking place in the innards of a computer or distributed through a network. Implemented data structures, such as Orcs and other characters (as well as environments) are, in this sense, also real, at least in the context of a game running on a computer[10]. What happens then is that the player interacts with an instance (a physical implementation) of, say, an Orc. But the Orc itself is an abstract object which is not exhausted by its instances. Thanks to this, I can kill the same Orc in different game sessions, or replay the game as many times as I wish.

As a fictional character, the Orc is an actual, abstract object. It is an actual object because it is part of an actual computer program, which is an AM. And the program specifies that a certain dynamic object is an Orc. However, when I play the game I interact with an actual, concrete object (distributed over space and time) which is a physical implementation of the Orc. I do this by manipulating hardware such as mouse and keyboard, and my actions are triggered by the visual and auditory representations of the Orc on the screen, which constitute the interface through which I interact with the actual, concrete object inside the computer. And by interacting with the actual, concrete object, I imagine myself to be interacting with the actual, abstract one. It is in this sense that, in the contexts of the game sessions, I can kill the same Orc many times.

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[9] I owe a lot here to Aaron Sloman's distinction, presented in a number of recent presentations, between what he calls 'Virtual Machines' (VM) and 'Running Virtual Machines' (RVM). They can be accessed in http://www.cs.bham.ac.uk/~axs/misc/talks.

[10] Notice that a videogame can also include simulations of real objects, environments, or processes. But these simulations are also abstract objects, selecting some aspects of the real entities they simulate, according to design choices for the sake of gameplay. Their physical implementations are, however, real, and the observations in this paragraph also apply to them.

It seems clear then that videogames' characters, objects and environments are somehow in between the main theoretical frameworks for the study of fiction. As for the two currently dominant approaches to fictional objects – make-believe and abstract-object theories –, videogames may be understood as effecting a sort of cross-pollination. Fictional objects in videogames are actual, abstract objects (as parts of abstract artefacts). But in playing, we engage in a game of make-believe in which, through interacting with actual, concrete instances of those abstract objects (instances that serve as props), we imagine that we interact with the actual, abstract objects themselves (which is clearly impossible).

The purpose of this paper is not to provide a knockdown solution to one of the many philosophical problems raised by videogames (if this is at all possible), but rather to briefly present and discuss some issues in order to see how far we can get. If there is a solution, this might well be among the first steps towards it.

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