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Still Self-Involved: A Reply to Patridge

In an earlier paper (Robson & Meskin (2016)) we argued that videogame fictions were what we termed "self-involving interactive fictions" (hereafter "SIIFs"). That is, that they are fictions which are, in virtue of their interactive nature, about those who consume them. So, for example, when a player of *Dark Souls* chooses to have her avatar attack a skeleton with a sword (rather than, for example, attacking in some other manner or beating a hasty retreat) we argue that this not only makes it fictionally true that the avatar attacks the skeleton with her sword but also fictionally true that the player herself performs this same action.[1] We also offered a number of considerations in defense of this view. Most significantly, we argued that certain aspects of our talk and thought concerning videogames, especially descriptions of game play which seem to refer to players as inhabiting the fictional world of the video game, are best explained by the SIIF view.

Stephanie Patridge has, however, recently criticized our arguments for the claim that videogames are SIIFs, claiming that "our linguistic practices in ludic contexts are more complicated […] than Robson and Meskin recognize" (xxxx) and that "the ludic nature of video games operates to limit the sort of imaginative self-involvement identified by Robson and Meskin" (xxxx). In this paper we argue that, while many of Patridge's claims concerning videogames and our interactions with them are correct, the considerations she highlights are not in tension with the positions we argued for in our earlier paper.

While Patridge is critical of our arguments she is also keen to highlight that she agrees with us on a number of points. For example, she emphasizes that she is not aiming to "show that SIIF is a flawed or uninteresting category, nor that video games are not SIIFs" (xxxx), and she agrees that there is a sense in which it is often fictionally true that a player performs various actions by virtue of her interactions with certain videogames. She does, however, highlight some areas in which she takes her view to conflict with ours. The most important

[1] Of course, as we highlight in the earlier paper (2016: 171), these things will typically only be true in a particular token playing of the game.

of these relate to our linguistic practice concerning videogames, but Patridge also appeals to the phenomenology of videogame play and to our alleged failure to distinguish between playing a game and role playing it.[2]

First, Partridge points out that we frequently mix first-person and ludic language when we talk about game playing (xxxx). She then argues that this ludic language (which appeals to game concepts that are not part of the relevant fictional worlds associated with those games) serves to "pull away from the sort of self-involvement" that we identify (xxxx). Second, the self-involving language we *do* use is often replaceable by "more indirect and distancing" language (xxxx). And this replaceability—the fact that first person and indirect language are equally acceptable when talking about game play-- suggests that there is significant "imaginative distance between players and avatars" (xxxx).

In terms of the phenomenology of gameplay Patridge suggests that the experience of videogame play does not support the SIIF view. In particular, she describes her own typical videogaming experience as one of focus on game mechanics and a concern for puzzle solving, not one of "first-person imaginative identification" (xxxx).

Finally, Patridge argues that the SIIF view "collapses the distinction between playing a game and role playing it" (xxxx). When playing certain games – typically MMORPGS – some players role play their avatars. In such cases, Patridge suggests, they do seem to imagine that they are their avatars. However, she argues that this is very different from ordinary game play and that the SIFF account fails to respect this distinction.

Before responding to these worries, it is important to stress that we agree with Patridge that our thought and talk regarding videogames is a more complex matter than

[2] Patridge also briefly discusses our contention that the SIIF view plays a role in explaining the moral panic associated with video games. She suggests that our diagnosis 'may be right' about certain infamous cases, but that these cases (that is, ones in which even experienced players feel moral unease) are atypical ones (xxxx). Given this, there must be more to the story about moral unease than the self-involvement that the SIIF view posits. We agree. As we stated in the earlier essay, the self-involving nature of video games is only a partial explanation for the moral panic associated with them (Robson and Meskin 2016: 170).

some of our earlier discussion might suggest. However, we do not believe that these complexities cause any problems for our account.

To begin, it should be noted that the kinds of linguistic features Patridge highlights are also commonplace in other kinds of fiction. Consider, for example, childhood games of make-believe. Here a child will often quickly move from claims that are straightforwardly internal to the world of the fiction ("one of the pirates shot me") to those which are about the mechanics of their particular game ("now I have to lie down and not move until the next game") to those which mix the real and the fictional ("next time the pirates kill me I have to go home for dinner"). Similarly, we may say of an actor on stage playing Othello that he is about to kill Desdemona, that he is overacting, that he owes us five pounds and (only a little more unnaturally) that he better pay back the money he owes us after he's finished killing Desdemona. Surely, though, such considerations give us no reason to doubt that it is fictional that the child has been shot by a pirate or that the actor on stage is Othello.

What about Patridge's claim that "in many cases where we naturally use what looks like self-involving language, we could have just as easily used ludic language that is more indirect and distancing without confusion" (xxxx)? We are happy to agree that such paraphrases are often possible. Again, though, this seems to be a general point which applies (*mutatis mutandis*) to our interactions with many different kinds of fiction. Further, and more fundamentally, the availability of such paraphrases does nothing to undermine our interpretation of the linguistic data.[3] Merely showing that we *could* avoid first person fictional claims in our thought and talk concerning videogames (or even that some people

[3] In our original paper we considered a paraphrase strategy which maintained that all of our apparently self-involving claims concerning videogames are merely shorthand for certain claims external to the fiction. According to such a view "an assertion such as 'Bill beat Galactus' is merely an elliptical way of expressing something like 'Bill cleared the final boss of *Marvel vs. Capcom* 3'" (Robson & Meskin (2016: 169). A position of this kind *would* be in tension with our SIIF view, but we argue (Ibid. 169-70) that there are a number of reasons to reject such a positon.

actually do so) does not, in itself, give us any reason to believe that such thought and talk isn't prescribed by the videogames in question.

Turning now to the experience of videogames, Patridge emphasizes the extent to which she (and many other videogame players) often focus on the ludic features of those games. Does this create a problem for the SIIF view? Again, we do not believe that it does. The arguments in our original paper don't depend on any particular view about player focus or the 'feel' of gameplay. Nor do we deny that players frequently attend to game mechanics. So, why might this appeal to a focus on ludic features be taken to undermine our view? Perhaps Patridge's concern is that our genuinely identifying with an avatar – such as, to use her example, Kaitlin in *Gone Home* – is in tension with our consciously paying attention to the ludic features of the game. And there is, we concede, a sense in which this is true. However, we will argue that this in no way undermines our view.

Although we never used the term "identification" in our original paper it might seem reasonable to suppose that our SIIF view requires such identification between the player and her avatar (since we claim, for example, that the avatar's actions are often fictionally her own and that her avatar "is fictionally her" (Robson & Meskin (2016: 168)). However, this conclusion only follows on certain understandings of what identification consists in. The term "identification" can be used in a number of very different (and sometimes theoretically loaded) ways. If all that is meant by saying that the player identifies with her avatar is that she is prescribed to imagine that the avatar is her, that it is fictionally true that she performs many of her avatar's actions, and so forth, then this is indeed something which we are committed to accepting. However, there isn't even a prima facie tension between identification of this kind and our primarily, or even exclusively, focusing on the ludic features of the game in question. In any fiction there will be many fictional truths which we *never* consciously focus on, and the fact that a player is prescribed to imagine something is perfectly compatible with their failing to do so.

It seems then that the kind of identification which Patridge has in mind must involve something more demanding, and she does talk about imagining that I am my avatar in a

"robust" sense (xxxx). Perhaps, then, she has in mind something more like the kind of identification which certain kinds of actor experience with the characters they are playing. That is, the kind of identification which arises when they aim to treat the character's emotions, aims and so forth as (in some sense) their own. This might, for example, involve striving to *feel* a character's anger toward their apparently unfaithful lover or to *want t*heir character's schemes and plots to succeed. And Patridge is certainly right to worry about whether identification, understood in this way, is compatible with thinking about how best to exploit the ludic systems of a game to our advantage or with discussing our own personal woes with a guild-mate while questing in a MMORPG. (Just as it would be difficult for the actor playing Othello to identify in these ways with his character while worrying too much about how the audience was receiving his performance or about how he will pay back the money he owes us.) Further, we agree that there is something philosophically interesting about considering the ways in which focus on "the ludic nature of videogames" might "limit the sort of imaginative self-involvement" (xxxx) we are capable of with respect to them. We do not, however, see any reason to take our SIIF view to be committed to the claim that players of videogames typically feel, or are typically prescribed to feel, identification of this kind with their avatar (even in cases where such avatars are present). Rather, many videogames allow us to identify with particular characters in this way – with some making it significantly easier than others – without prescribing that we do so.

Finally, does the SIIF account collapse the distinction between game play and role play? In our earlier paper, we argued that this was not the case (Robson and Meskin 2016: 176-177, fn 29). We stand by that view. Although one may imagine that one is a character in both ordinary game play and role play, there are other crucial differences between the two cases; most notably the behavior that one is engaged in when one participates in the two activities. For example, as Patridge (xxxx) notes, a player who is role playing their videogame character might "adopt speech patterns and in-game behaviors that they think that a character like theirs would have". Needless to say, this is not a standard mode of ordinary game play. But the SIIF view has no trouble making sense of this. As we discuss in our earlier paper (Robson and Meskin 2016: 168), players' imaginings will often be fairly

minimal and a player can be prescribed to imagine – and, indeed actually, imagine – that she is her avatar without imagining anything about such things as her avatar's speech patterns or character traits.

Perhaps more importantly, the SIIF view is a view about imagination and fictional truth, not about behavior. And the significant difference between the role-playing case and ordinary game playing case is behavioral. One way of putting this would be to say that the role playing case involves much more *pretense behavior*—as opposed to mere imagining—than does mere game playing. Someone who role plays as their character may, for example, pretend to be that character when communicating with other players (adopting their speech patterns, mannerisms and so forth) whereas a typical game player would not. However, our SIIF view is completely silent with respect to the appropriateness (and existence) of such behavior in ordinary game play.

We have argued, then, that the agreement between Patridge and ourselves is even more pervasive than she suggests. Indeed, we don't take issue with any of the substantive claims in her paper. Our only fundamental point of disagreement concerns the implications of our SIIF view. In particular, we have argued that Patridge is mistaken in taking the features she highlights to be in tension with the kind of self-involving interactivity we postulate.

References

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