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Videogames as Self-involving Interactive Fictions

1. Introduction

Our primary purpose in this paper is to highlight an underexplored and theoretically fruitful kind of fiction which we term 'self-involving interactive fictions' (hereafter 'SIIFs'. These are fictions which, in virtue of their interactive nature, are about those who consume them.[1] In this respect, they differ from what we will call 'canonical fictions'; that is, those items—novels, televised sitcoms, Hollywood blockbusters, and so on—which serve as prototypical instances of our concept of fiction. In order to better understand this undertheorized kind of fiction we will focus on the most prominent extant example of such fictions; videogame fictions.

In §2 we clarify some background issues and situate our claim with respect to the current literature on videogames and interactive fictions. In §3 we spell out in detail our central claim that a key feature of videogame fictions is their self-involving interactivity before going on to consider some arguments in support of our view. §4 focuses on a potential objection to our proposal based on Kendall Walton's account of fiction. Interactive self-involvement, the imagined objector claims, is common across all forms of fiction and thus does nothing to distinguish SIIFs from other fictions. This objection is misguided but still proves useful in highlighting some important aspects of our view. §5 focuses on the wider class of SIIFs. We argue that there is good reason to think that philosophical research into this wider class of fictions has the potential to be much more fruitful than research focusing solely on the folk category of the videogame.

2. Videogames and fiction

2.1 Videogame fictions

What kind of fiction are videogame fictions? Videogames provide the most prominent examples of SIIFs. Videogames are about us in virtue of our interaction with them. For this reason, we will argue, they stand in sharp contrast to *most* other kinds of fiction (even other kinds of interactive fiction) which are (i) rarely about those who consume them and (ii) in those rare cases where they are about their consumers are not so in virtue of their interactivity. This points to something important about videogames and highlights some crucial similarities between videogame fictions and some other under-theorised kinds of fiction.

There are, we admit, many other significant features which videogames possess. They are interactive in a number of senses, but—as we show below—much more can be said about the kind of interactivity the exhibit. The fact that they are ludic fictions – that is, that they are games – is, to some extent, informative but seems to leave something important out. For example, while certain parlour games such as *Mad Libs* and *Exquisite Corpse* also combine games with fictions, they do not do so in quite the same manner as videogame fictions. While a game of *Mad Libs* might be about the people playing it, it need not be. Consider, for example, a group of partygoers filling in a sentence about Mr. Blank doing some action blankly. They may each choose to imagine that they are the person described in this scenario but they need not do so and such imaginings certainly aren't prescribed. Finally, the fact that videogames are run on a computer doesn't seem to tell us anything significant about them.

Devices such as *ipad*s and Amazon's *Kindle Fire* are now commonly used to access a range of fictions from novels to films, and other non-videogame fictions such as *Project X* and *The Ghost of Vannevar Bush Hacked My Server* are fundamentally reliant on computer technologies.

Some may doubt our claim that videogames are SIIFs because they doubt that videogames are fictions. In response to this, we allow that some videogames (for example, *Tetris* and *Chessmaster*) are not fictions in any ordinary sense but have argued elsewhere that the majority of videogames are.[2] In brief, we claimed that on the most popular contemporary accounts of fiction, which categorize something as a fiction largely in virtue of authorial intentions to make an audience imagine or make believe certain contents, the vast majority of videogames will plausibly count as fictions.[3] Genre theories which appeal to a cluster of non-necessary features such as 'invented elements', 'claims that are not assertions' and 'narrative structure' will also, we suggest, do the same.[4] There remain, though, a number of problematic cases. Is *Puzzle Bobble* a fiction? Is *Forza Motorsport*? What about *Minecraft* in creative mode? Thankfully, we do not need to resolve such issues here. In this paper we will, unless otherwise indicated, use 'videogame' as shorthand for 'videogame fiction', and we will focus exclusively on examples of videogames which clearly fall into the class of fictions.[5] Deciding where exactly to draw the line between fiction and non-fiction is outside the scope of this paper.

Others may argue that we cannot distinguish videogames from *all* other fictions by appeal to their self-involving interactive nature. This we agree with. Videogames are by far the most prominent example of the class of SIIFs, but being a SIFF is not sufficient for being

a videogame. Our ultimate aim is not, however, to try and isolate some philosophically fruitful featured possessed by all and only videogames (indeed we do not believe that any such feature exists). Rather, we aim to use videogames as a case study to illustrate some of the important properties shared by the wider class of SIIFs. It is, we argue, ultimately this wider class of fictions which should be of theoretical interest to philosophers.

2.2 Extant accounts of videogame fictions

Serious philosophical attention to videogames is a relatively recent phenomenon but there have already been a number of attempts to explicate the nature of videogames and their relationship to other representations.[6] In our view the most promising extant account of this relationship is found in recent work by Grant Tavinor (2005, 2008 and 2009) who argues that videogames have a number of features which differentiate them from canonical fictions. In contrast to consumers of 'traditional narrative fictions', Tavinor (2005, 34) suggests that players of videogames can often influence what is true in the relevant 'work world' (i.e., the fictional world of the work itself). In addition, he argues that there is no clear distinction between what is true in the work world of a videogame and what is true in the various authorised 'game worlds' associated with it (i.e., the fictional worlds that are created by our engagement with the work). (As stated these claims clearly rely on something like Kendall Walton's (1990: 58-61) distinction between work worlds and game worlds, but they could be restated so as to avoid any commitment to controversial Waltonian theses.) We have already argued at length against Tavinor's second claim elsewhere; pointing to various examples where the game worlds associated with various videogames remain clearly distinct from the

corresponding work worlds.[7] With regards to the first claim our attitude is somewhat more ambivalent.[8] While Tavinor's claim is true, we will argue that it doesn't tell us anything important about videogames in particular rather than about interactive fictions in general. We will argue in §5, though, that a claim in many respects analogous to Tavinor's provides an essential element in understanding the nature of SIIFs.

2.3 Interactivity

Perhaps all fictions are interactive in some minimal sense—after all, they are designed for consumers to interact with them by, for example, reading, viewing or listening to them. On this minimal account of interactivity, a number of fictions written in the second person (e.g., Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*) might count as being about their consumers in virtue of interaction with them. But we take it that this is a fairly trivial notion of interactivity, and so would not wish to class such works as SIIFs. On the other hand, it is clear that videogames are interactive in a number of more substantive respects. They are, for example, interactive in the senses defined by Dominic Lopes in his work on computer art. That is, in accord with his 2001 account, they are artifacts 'whose structural properties are partly determined by the interactor's actions' and, in line with his slightly modified 2010 account, they 'prescribe that the actions of [their] users help generate [their] displays'.[9] These additional levels of interactivity allow us to easily differentiate the kind of interactivity found in videogames from the kinds of interactivity available in canonical fictions, and it is interactivity of the former kind which we will be our focus in this paper. Typical consumers of canonical fictions interact with them in the trivial sense mentioned above, but they have

virtually no influence over the structural properties of those fictions nor do they help generate their displays. But someone who plays a videogame such as *Bioshock* will influence what is true in the fiction and, hence, play a role in generating its display. (More precisely they influence, as we discuss at length below, what is true in the fiction of a particular playing of the game.) And even if it is the case that an audience member can affect what is fictional in a standard theatrical performance (for example, by running on stage and tackling the actor playing Othello as he advances murderously towards Desdemona), it is not the case that this sort of action is prescribed by those works.[10]

There are, however, many other examples of non-videogame fictions which are interactive in our more substantive sense: theatrical performances such as *Sleep No More* and Rupert Holmes's musical version of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, films such as *Kinoautomat* and *I'm Your Man*, and the fictions created by some of the fiction-making games (such as *Mad Libs* and *Exquisite Corpse)* we mentioned above.[11] But we maintain that such works are still importantly different from videogames and in the next section we will argue that this difference stems from the kind of self-referential interactivity which videogames and other SIIFs afford.

3. Self-involving Interactive Fictions

3.1 Understanding SIIFs

The self-involving interactive nature of videogames is best highlighted by focusing on the high degree of first-person discourse that is found in talk about our interactions with them.

Gamers typically make a variety of first-person claims concerning the games they are playing ('I defeated the dragon', 'I was killed by the creeper' etc.) and this is reflected in the use of the generic second-person in much videogame criticism.[12] We will argue that this talk should be taken seriously; the player's actions genuinely make things *about the player* true in the fiction of the videogame. In this way, engagement with videogames is somewhat more akin to childhood games of make-believe than engagement with canonical fictions. As Walton (1990, 209) notes, 'Children are almost invariably characters in their games of make-believe'. We suggest that videogame playing shares this feature—players are almost invariably characters in the fictional worlds associated with videogames.

Before we go on to defend this claim, we need to clarify it in one respect. Our claim is intended to apply only with respect to individual *playings* of the videogame rather than to the game simpliciter (just as some things are true within the fiction of a particular performance of *Othello* but not in the play itself). Imagine an individual, Amanda, playing a game of *Dark Souls 2*. In one sense it is clear that *Dark Souls 2* is not about her; the makers of the game have never met her, and the detailed descriptions of the game's plot found in videogames publications will never so much as mention her. We maintain, though, that Amanda's playings of *Dark Souls 2* will contain fictional truths *about her*.

What do we mean by this rather cryptic claim? Consider the following; when playing the game Amanda will make a variety of decisions such as whether her player character (or avatar) will fight some of the game's optional 'boss' characters, and whether it will join the noble Blue Sentinels or the considerably less noble Brotherhood of Blood. In our view, these decisions not only make certain things fictional concerning her avatar but also – given that

her avatar is fictionally her – make many of the same things fictionally true about her. If her avatar joins the Blue Sentinels then it is fictionally true that *she* joins the Blue Sentinels. If her avatar engages King Vendrick in combat then it becomes fictional that *she* attacks Vendrick. This account has, as we will explain in more detail below, a number of advantages. The most immediate of which is that it preserves the standard way in which players think and talk about their interactions with videogames. Before we defend this claim, though, some further clarifications are in order.

3.2 Avatars

We have claimed above that players generate fictional truths *about themselves* when playing videogames. It is important to stress that this is intended to be a general claim with respect to videogame fictions and, in particular, that it is not restricted to the previously discussed subclass of videogames where the player acts in the world of the videogame through means of her avatar. Tavinor (2009, 62) has claimed that in those cases where the player lacks an avatar 'they directly manipulate the fictive qualities of the game without taking on a role in that world'. However, we believe that, contra Tavinor, this kind of direct manipulation is almost completely absent from videogame fictions.

In some playings of *Dark Souls 2* the player makes it fictional that she is fighting Vendrick by making it fictional that her avatar is fighting him, and the same holds (*mutatis mutandis*) for other games with identifiable avatars. There are, however, many games where the player does not act via an avatar. Consider the science fiction racing game *Wipeout*. In a typical playing of *Wipeout* it is clearly fictional that the player's racing craft is performing in

a variety of ways; turning a corner, accelerating past a rival's vehicle or - given the rather lax safety standards of future sports - shooting it with a missile, but the player is never explicitly identified with any character in the game who performs these actions. Tavinor seems sympathetic to the view that in such case the player plays no role in the fictional world of *Wipeout* but, rather, directly manipulates what is fictional in that world. However, we think it more plausible that the player takes on the role of the fictional driver of this craft. Again, this can be motivated by considering the way in which players describe their actions in the game. They do not merely describe themselves as causing things to be true in the fictional world 'I made the other craft explode', they also typically talk in ways which indicate that they imagine themselves to be located within a particular racing vehicle; describing themselves as 'being hit by a missile', 'moving at breakneck speed' etc.[13] Players picture themselves as racers not as detached co-authors of a story about racing. It is instructive to compare this case to Walton's descriptions of a child's imaginings as they play with a toy truck. According to Walton (1990, 209), when a child 'pushes a toy truck too small actually to ride in across the floor, it is probably fictional that he is driving it' just as, on our account, it is fictional of the player in *Wipeout* that she is driving the racing craft.

Another feature of the toy truck case will also be useful in forestalling some objections to our proposal. The child's imaginings in such cases will tend to be very minimal; he will not typically imagine anything about how old the version of himself driving the truck is or how he came to acquire his heavy goods vehicle license. Similarly, in the *Wipeout* case it will typically not be the case that players imagine anything about themselves in the fictional world other than that they are driving, accelerating, firing

missiles, etc. For example, they will not typically imagine anything about their personality, appearance or how they came to be involved in anti-gravity racing.

However, while we think that Tavinor goes wrong in his attempts to explain the difference between games with avatars and those without, we agree that there is an important difference between the two cases which can be highlighted by considering two different forms of first-person imagining. Consider the difference between instances of make-believe where a child imagines that she is Superman flying and those where she imagines that she can fly like Superman.[14] In the first case the child imagines herself to be identical with a particular fictional character (Superman) who possesses certain fantastical abilities whereas in the second she merely imagines herself possessing the relevant abilities without also imagining herself to be identical with any individual (fictional or otherwise) distinct from herself. Those games with avatars, we maintain, are analogous to the former; we imagine that we are Chris Redfield shooting zombies in *Resident Evil 5* or the unnamed marine battling the demonic hordes of *Doom*. Games such as *Wipeout*, which lack avatars, are analogous to the latter kind of imagining; in these cases we imagine that we are doing things without also imagining ourselves to be identical to some further individual who performs those actions. Nevertheless, both kinds of videogame are still SIIFs since in both cases we make things true of ourselves in playings of the relevant videogames by virtue of our interactions with them. In some cases (those with avatars) we also make these things fictionally true of some identifiable fictional individual whom we imagine ourselves to be, whereas in others we do not. These differences are, however, irrelevant for our purposes.

3.3 Motivating SIIFs

Our primary argument for the claim that videogames are SIIFs is an a posteriori one based on the way players and observers of videogames typically describe events. If Bill were playing *Marvel vs. Capcom 3* and used Spider-man to defeat Galactus, then it would not seem out of place for Sally, having observed these events, to exclaim incredulously 'You beat Galactus by swinging at him on your web!' Here it is clear that Sally is joining in the make-believe game in which Bill is Spider-man and performs those actions which Spider-man performs on screen. Sally's comments here seem perfectly natural, whereas if Ben were watching an episode of *Doctor Who* and Sally were to exclaim 'you beat the Daleks with your sonic screwdriver' this would (excluding some highly atypical circumstances) be extremely odd. This is because the imaginary game in which Ben is the Doctor is clearly – to use a piece of Waltonian terminology – unauthorised. By contrast, it seems clear, from the naturalness of her remark in the *Marvel vs. Capcom 3* case, that Sally is authorised in imagining that Bill is Spider-man and *mutatis mutandis* that anyone else who observes Bill's playing of the game would be authorised in imagining the same thing.[15]

Crucially, though, these claims concerning the playing in question only hold with respect to Bill. If Sally were to proclaim 'I defeated Galactus' then she would clearly be making a mistake. The same applies to anyone who views Bill's playing; they will be authorised to imagine of Bill that he beat Galactus by swinging at him on a web but not authorised to imagine that this is the case of themselves or of any other individual. How should we account for this phenomenon? If we accept the SIIFs view then the answer is simple. By virtue of taking certain actions, Bill genuinely makes it the case that certain things

are fictional concerning himself in this particular playing. By contrast, Sally has not interacted with the videogame in the relevant ways and so fails to make equivalent claims fictional with respect to herself.

As such, we take the SIIF account to be a highly attractive explanation for some otherwise highly puzzling ways in which players think and talk about their interactions with videogames. It is, however, far from being the only possible explanation which could be offered. In particular someone might suggest that the relevant kinds of talk are not describing events within the fiction and, *a fortiori*, not describing the fictional actions of the player but that they are merely a shorthand for certain 'real world' claims concerning the player and her interactions with the game.[16] We could, for example, claim that 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'. Yet, we do not find this alternative explanation convincing for a number of reasons. First, given the availability of the SIIF explanation, there doesn't seem to be any reason to appeal to this form of paraphrase with respect to the relevant claims and, we take it, there is at least some advantage to taking the claims in question to be ordinary 'internal' discourse about a fiction. Second, the kinds of claim we are discussing are frequently made by players when they are deeply involved in the narrative of the game, and we suspect that this alternative explanation would imply that such claims were in considerable tension with this level of engagement (consider, for comparison, the difficulty of remaining emotionally involved in the plot of a movie while heavily focused on the technical details of the cinematography). Finally, it seems counter-intuitive to apply this paraphrase strategy only in cases of player engagement with the fiction and not in other instances of apparently straightforward fictional discourse about the game. We seamlessly

move from talking about what the player has done ('Bill beat Galactus') to what fictional characters in the game have done ('Galactus ran away') and then back to player action ('he ran after Galactus'), and the paraphrase strategy as proposed (that is, unless it was applied wholesale to all fictional discourse about the game) would treat this as involving unmarked and implausible shifts from internal discourse about the game to extra-fictional discourse about the game. And the suggestion that *all* fictional discourse should be understood as a shorthand for extra-fictional, (that is, real world) claims strikes us as even more implausible.) What's more, this appeal to ordinary thought and talk about videogames is far from being the only reason to accept the SIIF account. We will briefly discuss some further considerations in favour of the SIIF view below when outlining the relationships between videogames and other SIIFs. For now, though, we will merely highlight one such feature; the moral panic frequently associated with videogames.[17] While it is true that many other forms of popular art and culture have generated moral concern (e.g., comic books in the 50s, rap and heavy metal music in the 80s and 90s), we suggest that the essentially self-involving nature of videogame play contributes to the peculiar and persistent level of moral concern that it generates. For example, it is plausibly not just the representation of violence in a game such as the 'murder simulator' *Manhunt* that worries critics but the fact that it allows players themselves to fictionally engage in brutal murders.[18] Similarly, it is not merely the representation of prostitution and sexual violence that upsets critics of *Grand Theft Auto V* but, rather, the fact that players can themselves fictionally use the services of prostitutes and then assault them in order to take back the money that was paid to them. In our terms, player interaction with these games may make it the case that it is true in the fiction associated with a particular playing that the player has engaged in murder, assault or the

use of prostitutes. This degree of self-involvement plays a critical role both in the moral condemnation of games such as *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Manhunt* in the popular press as well as popular defences of these games.[19] In contrast, even when a piece of popular music (such as Robin Thicke's *Blurred Lines*) seems to glorify sexual violence, it very rarely represent its listeners as participating in this violence. And, hence, it is not hard to understand why videogame violence has been of particular concern to cultural critics.

By presenting such a (partial) causal explanation of the moral panic surrounding videogames we are not, of course, meaning to suggest that this panic itself is justified. Nor do we mean to claim that our SIIF view provides the only possible explanation for its existence. We merely suggest that it is a *prima facie* advantage of the SIIF view that it is able to provide *an* explanation for this initially puzzling phenomenon.

4. A Waltonian objection

4.1 Walton on fictional self-involvement

In previous work we criticized a number of other philosophers, most notably Tavinor and David Velleman, for claiming either that videogames either fail to be fictions on Walton's account or that they do not possess some key features ascribed to fictions in Walton's *Mimesis as Make-believe*.[20] One might worry, though, that there is a tension in our claiming that videogames differ from canonical fictions by virtue of their self-involving interactive nature given the Waltonian approach to fiction. If Walton is correct then our interactions with canonical fictions involve a degree of fictive participation that seems to undercut the

sharp distinction we have sketched above. For example, Walton's account entails that someone attending a performance of *Hamlet* fictionally listens to Hamlet's soliloquy. Moreover, on Walton's account of our emotional responses to fiction, it is typically fictional that we feel fear when watching the terrible monster in a horror film stalking its prey. It might seem, then, that if we accept Walton's account of fictive participation the differences we have highlighted between videogames and canonical fictions disappear—in both cases a consumer's engagement with a fiction makes things fictionally true concerning her. However, we will argue below that this objection misses the mark and that our proposed distinction is perfectly compatible with a robustly Waltonian account of fiction. Indeed, framing our proposal in Waltonian terms will make it easier to highlight some of the important consequences of our view. In order to do so, though, we need to first consider Walton's views in more detail.

4.2. Some Waltonian Machinery

It may initially seem extremely odd to claim that a performance of *Hamlet* makes anything fictionally true about us since *Hamlet* itself was written centuries before we were born and any performance of it we attend was likely planned in detail long before we ever entered the theatre. So, how does Walton justify his claims? A key part of the Waltonian story is the previously mentioned distinction between work worlds and game worlds.[21] A work world is the fictional world (or set of fictional truths) associated with the work itself, while a game world comprises the fictional truths associated with audience interaction with that work. So, for example, according to Walton (Ibid, 241-9) it is part of the game world associated with

our experience of a typical horror movie that we see the monster and are frightened of it; that is, these things are made fictionally true of us through our imaginative interaction with the work. But, of course, these propositions are not fictionally true in the work world associated with the horror movie (that is, they are not true in the representation itself); rather, they are fictionally true only in the game world associated with our viewing of it. In the case of canonical fictions our participation is limited merely to the game worlds associated with various fictions. It is not, for example, true in the work world of a performance of *Hamlet* that we listen to Hamlet's soliloquies even though this claim is true in the various game worlds associated with that performance. By contrast, we claim that in the videogame cases the player's interactions will make things true about the player in the work world of her playings.[22]

4.3 Participation in work worlds

To get a little clearer on the difference we are proposing consider the comparison between the guilt fictionally experienced when playing the videogame *Bioshock* and that fictionally experienced when watching the film *Man Bites Dog*. In the *Man Bites Dog* case it will – on Walton's account – be true in an authorised game word that the viewer fictionally feels guilty concerning her reactions in that same authorised game world, one in which they – much like the fictional documentary camera crew within the film – increasingly identify with Ben and become complicit with his actions.[23] Clearly, though, it is not fictional in the work world of the film either that we feel guilty or that we are complicit in Ben's actions. We play no role in the work world of the film whatsoever. In the first respect players of *Bioshock*,

are in exactly the same position. A player of *Bioshock* who fictionally partakes in various reprehensible actions within her playing – most saliently murdering the little sisters (innocent children whose fate plays a significant role in determining how the game's plot progresses) – will still feel guilty for such actions only in an authorised game world rather than in the work world.[24] However, crucially, we claim that the player's fictional guilt is in response to her actions in a work world rather than merely those in authorised game worlds. It is not fictional in the work world associated with *Man Bites Dog* that we are, in any sense, complicit with Ben's crimes but it *is* fictional in the work world of our less altruistic playings of *Bioshock* that we murder the little sisters for our own nefarious ends.[25] How can we demonstrate, though, that these things are fictional in the work worlds (of the relevant playings)? No straightforward proof of this claim is available but we will proffer an argument which, at the very least, provides strong prima facie reason to accept it.

What is true in the work world of a fiction is, more or less, equivalent to what is true in all authorised game worlds associated with this fiction (the 'more or less' is important here and we will consider a potentially damaging exception below). And it seems that – on the basis of our discussion above – we have good reasons to accept that the relevant claims are true in all authorised game worlds. To see this, return to the example of Sally watching Bill playing *Marvel vs. Capcom 3*. In this case we argued that it was fictionally true in both Bill's and Sally's game worlds that Bill had defeated Galactus. And, since Sally is no different from any other arbitrarily selected viewer of Bill's playing, it is true in all authorised game worlds associated with Bill's playing that Bill defeated Galactus.

4.4 A worry concerning work worlds

There is good reason, then, to treat the claim that 'Bill beat Galactus' as true in every authorised game world associate with his playing. However, while it is typically the case that what is true in all authorised game worlds is true in the work world this does not hold in all cases. In a standard theatrical performance of *Othello*, for example, each audience member will be authorised to imagine that they are watching Othello as he performs various actions. As such, even at those times when Othello is understood as alone and unobserved it will be fictional in every authorised game world associated with the performance that *someone* is watching Othello. Yet, Walton (1990, 60) resists the counterintuitive conclusion that it is thereby fictional in the work world that Othello is always being watched by arguing that we should restrict out attention to those game world truths whose fictionality is generated by the work alone. The claim that someone observes Othello is thus excluded from the work world, since this is not generated by the work alone but rather arises from our interactions with it. It may seem, then, that this condition is at odds with the story we have sketched above since the game world truths concerning Bill's playing of *Marvel vs. Capcom 3* are likewise made true by Bill's interactions with the work rather than merely by the work itself. As such, the objection goes, these claims would not be true in the relevant work worlds. Fortunately for us this objection is misplaced. In the *Marvel vs. Capcom 3* case – unlike the Othello case – the kind of interaction involved is *required for generating the playing itself*. If Bill had not performed the actions he did, then the playing would not exist (just as a performance of a play would not exist without the actors performing certain actions). Given that the playing does exist, though, it is no longer necessary for anyone to interact with it in order to generate fictional truths about Bill's battle with Galactus. Imagine that Bill saves a

recording of his glorious victory to replay later. It will still be true according to that playing that Bill beats Galactus even when the recording is not being viewed by anyone. But it would not be fictional in an unwatched recording of a performance of *Othello* that anyone sees Othello at those times when, according to the plot of the play, he is unobserved. Consider, for comparison, a play which is improvised largely on the basis of suggestions from the audience. Clearly there will be various things which are true in a performance of such a play only as the result of audience interactions of this kind, but it would be misguided to conclude from this that these truths are not part of the work world of the performance.

Our proposal that videogames are SIIFs is, then, compatible with a Waltonian approach to fiction. We turn now to consider the wider class of SIIFs.

5. The scope and significance of SIIFs

5.1 The scope of SIIFs

As a first example of non-videogames which plausibly qualify as SIIFs consider choose your own adventure books such as *Sugarcane Island*. It seems reasonable to suggest that in such works the reader fictionally makes various things true about themselves by virtue of their interactions with the books. Reasonable but not unavoidable. In our view, there are two prima facie plausible interpretations of what is occurring in works like *Sugarcane Island* (the full title of which is *The Adventures of You on Sugarcane Island*) only one of which entails that they are SIIFs. Firstly, when the book states, for example, 'You watch carefully for snakes'[26]

each reader/listener is to imagine of themselves that they are the individual in this position. According to the second interpretation, by contrast, we are only authorised to imagine such things of the individual who is, so to speak, 'driving'; that is the one who is making the relevant choices in the book. Only the second of these interpretations would allow *Sugar Cane Island* to qualify as a SIIF. On the first interpretation the work world of the 'reading' of *Sugar Cane Island* would be silent as to who is watching for snakes since there would, or could, be any number of incompatible game worlds in which each listener imagines themselves to be the sole watcher. On the second interpretation, though, each authorised game world will ascribe the property of watching to the driver and it will, therefore, most likely be true in the work world of that reading that the driver is watching for snakes.

Turning to a second kind of case, there are a number of interactive plays in which audience members play a role within the work world of a particular performance, and in some of these cases they will also make things true of themselves within this work world. This feature is probably most common in plays intended for young children but also features in more adult fare. Consider, for example, a performance of *Night of January 16th*. Here a number of audience members will be chosen to play the role of jury members and be asked to decide whether they believe the defendant, Karen Andre, to be guilty or not guilty. It becomes fictional in the work world of that particular performance that the relevant audience members are serving on the jury. Moreover, they are able, by virtue of their interactions, to make certain things true of themselves within the work world of the performance (for example that they find Andre guilty or not guilty).

A final example to consider is traditional (non-computerized) games with fictive content. The most obvious examples of this category being tabletop role-playing games (such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Polaris*) and 'live action' RPGs (such as *The Gathering*).[27] In such cases everyone is authorized to imagine of a particular player that they are performing the actions of their player character; fighting goblins and casting spells in much the same way that they are authorized to imagine certain things with respect to Bill's playing of *Marvel vs. Capcom 3*. Moreover, the distinctive linguistic phenomenon that we identify in videogame play finds a close parallel in these games too: for example, players in *Dungeons and Dragons* regularly talk as if they are the characters in the fiction and are performing the actions those characters perform.[28] Indeed these cases seem to provide the clearest case of extant non-videogame SIIFs.[29]

It is, of course, true that one finds a similar phenomenon in the case of other board games which do not, at least at first glance, seem to be SIIFs. So, for example, we might say 'I sunk your battleship' during a game of *Battleship*, and 'she took his knight' while watching a game of chess. Shall we treat these utterances as evidence that players make things true about themselves in the fictions associated with individual playings of those games? The first thing to say is that many such games are not fictions in any ordinary sense. Perhaps chess pieces count as representations in a Waltonian sense, but there seems to be little reason to associate a set of fictional truths (i.e., a work world) with the playing of each game of chess.[30] Insofar, then, as chess is not a fiction, it is not a SIIF. Perhaps Battleship, and other similar board games such as *Monopoly*, are like chess. If so, the pieces count as representations but there is no fiction associated with each playing and, hence, it is not a SIIF. Or perhaps there is, in fact, a fiction associated with the playing of each game of

Battleship—a work world wherein battleships are placed, attacked and sunk. If so, it is possible that *Battleship* as a SIIF. (If *Battleship* and *Monopoly* are fictions then they are substantively interactive fiction. As we have already seen, this would not entail that they are SIIFs. Nevertheless, we think they probably would count as such.)

Given the range of (non-video) games which plausibly qualify as SIIFs one might wonder at this point why we have chosen to focus on videogames in particular rather than on games in general or some other subset of games (e.g., fictional games). We did this, not because there is anything of particular theoretical interest about the category of the videogame (indeed, we will very shortly argue that there is not), but merely because they are the SIIFs which have, at present, received the lion's share of philosophical discussion. We will argue below that this focus on videogames has, in some respects at least, been misplaced but that the proper focus of philosophical attention should be redirected not towards fictive games in general but towards the broader category of SIIFs itself.

5.2 The significance of SIIFs

We have seen, then, that there is good reason to hold that all (or virtually all) videogame fictions are SIIFs but that the category of SIIFs includes a number of non-videogame fictions. Given this, someone might question why we should be interested in studying the class of SIIFs at all. After all, it appears as if an appeal to SIIFs is no more successful in differentiating videogames from fictions of other kinds than are the features – interactivity, being ludic, being computer generated – which we so briskly dismissed in §2. We think that this objection overstates matters somewhat, and it is clear that the class of SIIFs is closer to

being co-extensive with the class of videogames than is, say, the class of interactive fictions. Regardless, though, if our project was one of defining what it is to be a videogame (here and below we use the term 'videogames' in the ordinary 'folk' sense rather than in the stipulative way we used it above) or isolating some feature which separates videogame fictions from all other fictions then it is clear that we have not been successful. Yet, we do not believe that a project of this kind is the only philosophically interesting one in the vicinity.

To begin with, while it is unlikely that videogames are what Dominic Lopes (2010, 17) has called an 'appreciative art kind', there is at least some case to be made that SIIFs are. Lopes characterizes an appreciative art kind as a group of art works in which we 'normally appreciate a work in the kind by comparison with arbitrarily any other works in that kind'.[31] And this is not true of videogames. Many videogames – for example computerized games of chess – don't seem to qualify as art works at all. Further, even restricting our attention to those games which are more plausibly categorised as art works, some comparisons still seem extremely problematic. It is implausible, for example, that non-fiction videogames such as *Tetris* are normally compared in the appropriate ways to *Bioshoc*k or *Resident Evil*. By contrast, comparisons between tabletop RPGs and videogames are already commonplace and while an appreciative comparison between *Dark Souls 2* and the *Sugar Cane Island* might seem a little peculiar, it is certainly less strange than comparing either with a game of computerized chess. Still, we do not wish to hang too much on this claim and are happy to allow that SIIFs may not (at present) form an appreciative art kind.

Our more general worry is that there doesn't seem to be any good reason to think that there is anything interesting to be learned by studying what all and only videogames have in common since, on the one hand, videogames exhibit an overwhelming diversity of radically distinct forms (art/non-art, fictive in the ordinary sense/not fictive, etc.) and, on other hand, all that differentiates many videogames from equivalent non-videogames is that the former are run on a particular kind of technology. Since this latter difference is merely a matter of technological medium it is unlikely to have any philosophical import (for reasons already discussed at length elsewhere).[32] Videogames, then, are not an appreciative art kind nor do they comprise a philosophically interesting category. By contrast, we maintain that consideration of the category of SIIFs has the potential to prove far more fruitful.

We have already highlighted above a number of ways in which the study of SIIFs can contribute to our understanding of videogame fictions and our interactions with them. It helps us to explain certain peculiar ways of talking about our interactions with videogame fictions, to understand some of our reactions to them (in terms of, for example, moral panic) and to notice some of the important respects in which they differ from many other kinds of interactive fiction. We have also shown that a number of these insights can be extended to the broader class of SIIFs and these are far from being the only points of comparison. For example, it is worth noting that moral concerns, quite similar to the panic about videogames, have been associated with the most famous tabletop RPG, *Dungeons and Dragons*.[33]

Further, we think that a number of the most significant contributions made in recent years to the literature on the philosophy of videogames are best considered not as claims about videogames but, rather, as claims concerning SIIFs. Consider, for example, Tavinor's

(2005, 34) claim according to which videogame fictions allow consumers to influence what is true in the work world of the fiction. On the most straightforward reading of this claim it is, as we mentioned above, true but in a way which fails to tell us anything significant about the ways in which videogames differ from other interactive fictions. If, however, Tavinor's intent was to suggest that there is something distinctive about the kind of interaction with the work world which videogames afford – something not typically shared even by other interactive fictions – then we believe this is very close to the truth. Indeed, much of what we have said in this paper can be taken as an attempt to explicate this very feature. However, we have shown above that the feature in question is not distinctive of videogames as such but, rather, of the broader category of SIIFs.

Similarly, Florian Cova and Amanda Garcia (2015) have recently argued that while it is very rare for canonical fictions to present the consumer with multiple endings this feature is far more common with respect to certain interactive fictions.[34] Their explanation for this disparity is that the relevant kinds of interactive fictions (those well suited to presenting multiple endings) are ones which 'ask readers to play the role of a character in a story' (Ibid, 110-1). Whereas if we consider fictions (even interactive fictions) 'in which the appreciator is not addressed in the second person or asked to play a role within the story […] proposing multiple endings ceases to be the norm' (Ibid). We think the Cova and Garcia are on to something here but that they do not do enough to explicate the relevant class of fiction. (We have already seen, for example, that there are a number of works which address the appreciator in the second person – such as *If on a winter's night a traveller* – but which seem ill-suited to their purposes). We propose, then, that the class of SIIFs will, once again, be useful to us in trying to understand the feature they are attempting to highlight. To see this,

we need only consider the relative frequency of multiple endings in the examples of SIIFs we have discussed so far when compared to canonical fictions.

Finally, this new category can also shed light on some other, long neglected, varieties of fiction. Consider that the kinds of fiction we discussed in the previous sub-section – choose your own adventure books, tabletop RPGs and the like – have received very little in the way of theoretical treatment from philosophers.[35] But if what we have said above is correct, then this neglect is unjustified since these fictions will have a significant necessary – or at least standard – feature which is not found in canonical fictions nor even in many other examples of interactive fictions. Philosophical attention to the category of the SIIF will, then, help us to understand more about these under-theorized kinds of fiction – their nature, their proper means of evaluation etc. – and the important ways in which they can differ from other (interactive) fictions.[36]

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[1] Throughout this paper we will use 'consume' (and various forms of that word) as generic terms to refer to such activities as reading, watching and listening to various representations.

[2] See Meskin and Robson (2012) and Robson and Meskin (2012). In Meskin and Robson (2012) we suggested that even the exceptions we list above may well be fictions, but this is because we were focusing on Kendall Walton's highly inclusive sense of fiction which includes a range of items (toy trucks, photographic portraits, etc.) which aren't fictions in the folk sense.

[3] See, for example, Currie (1990) and Stock (2011).

[4] Such as Friend (2012).

[5] The most influential challenge to the claim that videogames are fictions is presented by Aarseth (2007). Aarseth argues that videogame worlds are virtual rather than fictional (or, at least, that they are hybrids of the two rather than pure fictions). However, we maintain that) there is no incompatibility between videogames being virtual in Aarseth's sense and their being fictional. For discussion, see Tavinor (2009).

[6] Espen Aarseth (2007) and David Velleman (2008), Meskin and Robson (2012), and Robson and Meskin (2012) explicitly discuss the relationship between videogames and (other) fictions. Aaron Smuts (2005) and Dominic McIver Lopes (2010, 103-20) discuss videogames and their status as art works. Berys Gaut (2010) and Meskin and Robson (2010) explore various relationships between videogames and the moving image.

[7] See Meskin and Robson (2012).

[8] We discussed this briefly in Robson and Meskin (2012, 443-4).

[9] See Lopes (2001, 68 and (2010, 36). They also meet Aaron Smuts' (2009, 65) conditions for being interactive in that a typical videogame '(1) is responsive, (2) does not completely control, (3) is not completely controlled, and (4) does not respond in a completely random fashion'.

[10] See Walton (1990, 194) for discussion of this sort of case.

[11] Note that all such fiction have one of the features that Tavinor claimed was distinctive of videogames: they all allow consumers to influence what is true in the relevant 'work world'.

[12] A single recent review of the game *Dark Souls 2*, for example, (http://www.gamesradar.com/dark-souls-2-review/) contains all of the following claims '*Dark Souls 2*'s world is an extremely dangerous place, one that forces you to be aware of your surroundings at all times', 'you don't have to slog through 30 minutes of territory you've already memorized just to press on should you die', 'sometimes you can kick down tree trunks to form bridges, or manipulate elements of the world that have a surprising effect on certain boss fights', and 'You will die many times in many ways'.

[13] For a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon see Gooskens (2010).

[14] For a discussion of different kinds of first-person imagining see, e.g., (Walton 1990, 28-35).

[15] Some viewers may not *know* that it is Bill's playing and, as such, would not be able to explicitly imagine these things as being true of Bill. They would, however, be authorized to imagine them as true of whoever generated that playing which is all that's required for our purposes.

[16] We owe this suggestion to an anonymous referee for the journal.

[17] http://www.boston.com/business/innovation/state-of-play/2014/02/the_great_video_game_moral_pan.html

[18] http://games.on.net/2013/02/manhunt-the-story-of-a-game-still-so-controversial-that-nobody-is-willing-to-talk-about-it-even-ten-years-later/

[19] See for example http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/27/grand-theft-auto-v-prostitutes-killed and http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2014/12/11/you-dont-have-to-kill-prostitutes-in-gta-v/.

[20] See Meskin and Robson (2012) and Robson and Meskin (2012).

[21] For discussion see Walton (1990, 58-61).

[22] It may seem that this talk of 'work worlds' commits us to the controversial claim that playings of videogames are art works in their own right. This is not the case, though, and it is important to note that, on Walton's view, work worlds are generated by a number of objects such as 'selfies' and perhaps even toy trucks (though Walton 1990, 61 remains agnostic about this) which most would be

reluctant to class as artworks. With respect to performances, Walton (1990, 51) clearly indicates that they pick out fictional worlds distinct from the worlds of the works they stem from: "In the case of *Macbeth* peculiarities of a particular performance—costumes, gestures, inflections—enjoin imaginings in addition to those prescribed by the work, so the performance is a prop also." Since the imaginings so prescribed are, unlike the ad hoc imaginings associated with Walton's case of make believing that tree stumps are bears, part of a fictional world and do not pick out game worlds (they do not involve fictional truths generated by viewers), they are properly seen as being part of a work world in Walton's special sense. As such our references to 'the work' below are not to be understood to imply that we take playings of videogames to be art works in their own right.

[23] Of course this particular example also depends, in several respects, on accepting some version of Walton's 'quasi-emotion' account. For further example which avoid such dependence see Meskin and Robson (2012).

[24] Indeed, as we discuss in Meskin and Robson (2012), that this very action will be part of what makes it true in the work world of the playing that the player's character is too morally reprehensible to feel any guilt with respect to such an action (212-3).

[25] Of course there are also many games in which we can fictionally act in morally reprehensible ways in the work world of certain playings but in which we do not typically feel guilt (and in which such guilt, even if felt, would not be prescribed). Consider, for example, a typical playing of *Dungeon Keeper* or a game of *Command and Conquer* played from the perspective of the villainous Brotherhood of Nod. Yet, these cases do nothing to undermine our claim since (as with other emotions prescribed by fictions) it is not only relevant what situations are presented but also in what *manner* they are presented. For more discussion of this point see Meskin and Robson (2012, 212-4). Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing us to address this issue.

[26] Taken from http://www.gamebooks.org/canediff.htm.

[27] See http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23877430 for a discussion of 'Larping'.

[28] For numerous examples see Slavicsek & Baker (2005).

[29] Does this collapse the distinction between playing the *Lord of the Rings* board game and role-playing in a *Lord of the Rings* live-action game? We do not think so—although one makes things fictionally true about oneself in both games, the way one goes about doing this is radically different in the two games (e.g., rolling a die in the former and engaging in mock combat in the latter). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for encouraging us to clarify this.

[30] For the same reason that, as mentioned above, *Chessmaster* is not a fiction.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Most prominently in Noël Carroll's (1996) discussion of the medium of film and the category of the moving image.

[33] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-26328105

[34] Note that we are not using 'interactive fictions' in Cova and Garcia's non-standard sense.

[35] Some notable exceptions include David Novitz (1996) on the art status of role-playing games and Cova & Garcia (2015) on choose your own adventure novels.

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