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The Fictionality of Games and the Ludic Nature of Fiction: Make-believe, Immersion, Play

Even before fiction became established as a theoretical concept, its oppositional relation to belief was acknowledged in formulae such as "the poet nothing affirms and never lies" (Sir Philip Sidney) or [poetry requires a] "willing suspension of disbelief" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge). Both formulae are negative: the poet does not express beliefs, and readers ignore their actual beliefs in the non-existence of the creatures of the poets' imagination. So what does the poet do instead of expressing beliefs, and why do readers take interest in non-existing creatures? In the seventies and eighties, when the advent of ordinary language philosophy and more particularly of speech act theory launched a wave of inquiries into the nature of fiction, answers were formulated in terms of concepts strongly suggestive of games and of a playful attitude toward fictional representation: non-seriousness (Austin), pretending (Searle), make-believe (Walton, Currie). In this chapter, I explore the connections between games, play and fiction in three sections. The first discusses the make-believe approach to fiction; the second analyzes the notion of immersion as expression of the user's mode of participation in the fictional game of make-believe, assuming this is a valid way to define fiction; and the third asks under what conditions games can be considered fiction.

Make-believe

The original association of fiction with games of make-believe appears in Kendall Walton's seminal book, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (1990). As the title indicates, Walton's ambition goes beyond the definition of "standard," i.e. literary fiction, the focus of previous philosophical attempts at definition (Searle, Lewis). Through the notion of make-believe, Walton proposes a media-transcending theory of fictionality:

> In order to understand paintings, plays, films, and novels, we must look first at dolls, hobbyhorses, toy trucks, and teddy bears. The activities in which representational works of art are embedded and which give them their point are best seen as continuous with games of make-believe. Indeed, I advocate regarding these activities as games of make-believe themselves, and I shall argue that representational works function as props in such games, as dolls and teddy bears serve as props in children's games. (1990, 11)[1]

Walton uses the example of children playing a game in which they pretend that stumps are bears as model for literary fiction and pictorial representations. If the poles of literature and painting can be adequately explained by a common definition, all artistic hybrids of language and image—film, comics, theater, video games—will be automatically covered by the account. The game works like this: children decide among themselves—this is a highly social activity—that they are in a wilderness full of bears. Every stump in the (real) forest counts as a bear in the game, even the stumps of which the children are not aware, so that if they discover a new stump, there will be one more bear in the gameworld. It follows that the players have no complete knowledge of the gameworld: it contains surprises for them, but the more they play the game, the more they learn about its world. Once a bear has been discovered, the rules of the game allow some activities and prevent others: since a bear is a dangerous animal, players can try to capture

it, shoot it, or flee from it, but they cannot pet it or put a saddle on its back. By declaring stumps to be bears in the game, the children confer upon them the status of "props in a game of make-believe." Since this game does not have rules for winning or losing, its point lies in the richness of the imaginative activity inspired by the pseudo bears; this activity is a source of pleasure, and it can be said to be autotelic, despite the numerous educational advantages that psychologists ascribe to play (as well as to reading fiction). [2]Walton uses the term "fictional truths" to refer to the imaginings authorized by the rules of the game. Thus, "there is a dangerous bear near you and you are in danger" is a fictional truth in the game world if there is a stump next to the player, but "there is a cuddly toy that you can take to bed with you" is not. Here is Walton on fictional truths:

> When it is 'true in a game of make-believe,' as we say, [that Fred runs away from a bear], the proposition [that he runs away from the bear] is *fictional*, and the fact that it is fictional is a *fictional truth*. In general, whatever is the case 'in a fictional world'—in the world of a game of make-believe or dream or daydream or representational work of art—is fictional. (1990, 35; I changed the example to make it fit with the game I am discussing.)

A noteworthy feature of this passage is that the concept of fictional truth encompasses not only games of make-believe and representational works of art (and literary fictions, though Walton omits to mention them here), but also dreams and daydreams. If dreams and daydreams produce fictional truths, then a fictional truth is simply a proposition contemplated by the mind that is not true in the real world. But this spontaneous activity cannot be considered a "game of make-believe," because it lacks rules, and it lacks a prop that triggers these rules. The fictionality of dreams and daydreams is simply their imaginary, non-existing character, and this leads back to the common but informal conception of fictionality as untruth, as expressed in this statement: "the fiction that the earth is flat." If the notion of fictional truth is to do more than designate that which is not true in the real world, it must be connected to props. A prop in a game of make-believe is an object –doll, canvas, text, stump—whose function, according to Walton, is to prescribe imaginings by generating fictional truths. "Props are generators of fictional truths, things which, by virtue of their nature or existence, make propositions fictional" (37). Thus, I would erase "daydream" and "dream" from the above list of situations that create fictional truths, and limit the concept to the case of a communicative situation involving more than one participant, and resting on rules that are agreed upon by all sides. It is only in such conditions that fiction can be considered a *game*.

What then is the general rule that ties together all the games of make-believe that use a prop? Though Walton does not formulate it explicitly, I would suggest that this rule is "taking something for something else." Consider the following examples.

> (1) In the children's game of make-believe, the stumps are taken as bears.
> (2) In playing with dolls, the doll is taken as a baby.
> (3) In a theatrical performance or a film, an actor is taken to be Hamlet.
> (4) In a painting, splotches of color on a canvas are taken to be a ship or as a couple strolling by the ocean.
> (5) In a literary fiction, the proposition "Anna Karenina threw herself in front of a train" is taken to refer to true facts.

The nature of the convention that links the left to the right side is however not the same in all cases. In (1), the connection is a matter of mutual agreement; if one of the children decides to sit on a stump and pet it, she is breaking the rule of the game or maybe initiating another game. In (2), as Walton observes, the prop is not tied to a single game, but to whatever game the children may decide to play: feeding the baby, putting her to bed, spanking him. The manufacturers of the doll facilitate these games (and thus stimulate the imagination) by creating an object that bears an iconic resemblance to a baby, but it is only when it is used in a game that the doll becomes a baby in make-believe: the rest of the time it is only a three-dimensional image of a baby. In (3) convention and iconicity both play a role: the actor is cast as Hamlet by the production team, speaks the lines attributed to Hamlet in the play, and usually dresses in a way compatible with the spectator's idea of what Hamlet looks like. Iconic resemblance is the sole source of meaning in "game" (4) if this is indeed a game: it is because the painting looks like a ship that spectators perform operations such identifying the hull, the sails, the crew—all activities which Walton regard as contemplating fictional truths. This is a matter of semiotics, not of mutual agreement. Semiotic considerations do not work for (5): We cannot say that the reader assumes that in the fictional world Anna Karenina threw herself in front of a train by virtue of the semantics (i.e. symbolic meaning) of the sentence "Anna Karenina threw herself in front of a train." The sentence could be either nonfiction or fiction, depending on whether it appears in a report in the newspaper or in a novel, but its semantics, its mode of signification remains constant. It is by virtue of a contract between reader and author that it is taken to denote fictional truths, that is, make-believe facts.

Note however the asymmetry between (4) and (5). All visual representations, in order to be identified as that which they represent, rely on iconicity: therefore if (4) is a game of make-believe by which spectators pretend to see a ship, so are all pictures with identifiable content. [3]By contrast, verbal texts can be either fictional or not depending of a pragmatic rule independent of their mode of signification. This paradoxical situation is not an oversight but Walton's intended thesis: "The reader will notice that I have left no room for nonfictional depictions. Pictures are fiction by definition (works of fiction when they are works)" (351). While there is an "as if" at work in all five examples, the "as if" of (4) does not qualify it, in my view, as a game of make-believe, if by game one understands a behavior governed by rules agreed upon by all participants. Admittedly, the painter of a ship would probably want the painting to be recognized as a ship, though it is mere blotches of paint, but this recognition does not depend on the spectator's awareness of the painter's intent, as it would when deciding whether a verbal utterance aims at truth or at fictional truth. Yet even if the relevance of Walton's concept of game of make-believe is not as wide as he suggests, make-believe offers intriguing insights into the working of standard (i.e. culturally recognized) forms of fiction.

But what exactly is make-believe? For Walton, make-believe is the opposite of belief; it is a fake kind of belief. He distinguishes belief from imagining in the following way: "Imaginings aim at the fictional as beliefs aim at the true" (41). Derek Matravers has objected to this formula by observing that factual texts, which ask to be believed, also prompt imaginings; in fact it would be difficult to decide if a text is worth believing without first mentally contemplating the situation that it describes. According to Matravers, "All narratives are prescriptions to imagine" (2014, 18); therefore, a prescription to imagine is not an invitation to play a game of make-believe. There is no make-believe involved when I ask you to imagine what the world will be like if the global temperature rises by 2 degrees, but there is certainly an invitation

(prescription?) to imagine. The distinction between fiction and factual texts could perhaps be saved by saying that in fiction, imagining is an end in itself, while in factual texts, it is subordinated to making a decision about the truth of the text.

Another way to conceive make-believe is to regard it, following Searle, as pretense: we pretend that we are facing a ship when looking at a ship-picture, that John Smith is Hamlet, that "Anna Karenina committed suicide" is true." This is the "regarding something as something else" that I mention above. But this view runs into problems when fictional statements are true: reading *War and Peace*, we do not pretend that Napoleon invaded Russia, we know that it is true, both of the fiction and of the real world. Fictions are representations constructed on the basis of statements that can be either true of false in the real world, but are all true in the fictional world. Make-believe, then, could be conceived as "regarding as true of an alternate (that is, fictional) world."

Worth noting here is the recourse to the concept of fictional world. While this notion seems intuitive to most readers, philosophers aiming for maximally economical, and non-ambiguous formal definitions are wary of it, because of its vagueness. Gregory Currie, who has also proposed a theory of fiction based on make-believe (1990) rejects it outright as a violation of Occam's razor; world is not a formally definable concept and it is unworthy of a logical approach. His definition replaces "in the world" with "in the fiction," that is, in the work: "Anything that is true in the fiction is available for the reader to make-believe. A large part of playing a game of fictional make-believe is to work out what is true in the fiction, and hence what is appropriate to make-believe" (1990, 70-71). Walton frequently mentions fictional world, because the concept makes his task much easier (it makes more intuitive sense to say that a fictional truth is something that is true in a fictional world rather than in a "work" as Currie has it), but he is almost apologetic about the concept. A fictional world for Walton is not some kind of place or space, but a collection of fictional truths: "To speak of a fictional world is, in part, to speak of the class or cluster of fictional truths belonging to it" (1990, 62). Speaking of the world of a fiction is thus a shortcut for speaking of everything that is true in it, though defining what is true, whether of a world or of a work, has turned out to be a thorny problem. A phenomenological, rather than strictly logical conception of fictional world would say by contrast that a world is much more than a collection of propositions and their logical or pragmatic entailments, it is a representation constructed by the mind on the basis of the text (the prop) as well as on life experience and general knowledge, a representation that is much larger than the sum of its parts. When I imagine fictional characters, I do more than imagining the propositions that describe them, I imagine them as material bodies, surrounded by an environment, located in space and time and tied to other entities by networks of relations: this environment and these relations fully deserve to be called a world, and since this world is produced by a fiction, rather than being the one we inhabit, it is a fictional world.

Insofar as it acknowledges the global nonfactuality of a representation, describing fiction as a prop in a game of make-believe is a formal account that looks at the fictional world from the outside. It does not tell us what it is like to play the game, to experience the fictional world from the inside. For a phenomenological account of this experience, let us turn to the concept of immersion.

Immersion

Walton does not use the concept of immersion in relation to fiction, nor, to my knowledge, did anybody until Jean-Marie Schaeffer in his 1999 book *Pourquoi la fiction?* Yet Walton's ambition to explain the experience of "being caught in a story" (1990, 6) anticipates current interest in the phenomenon of immersion. Other metaphors under which immersion (itself a metaphor) has been studied are "being lost in a book" (Nell 1988), "entrancement" (also Nell), and "transportation" (Gerrig 1993). The notion of aesthetic illusion, popularized in the visual arts by Ernst Gombrich, can also be regarded as a precursor of immersion (Wolf 2014).[4] Yet it is to digital technology, more specifically to virtual reality (VR), that immersion owes it current popularity as a way to capture the fictional experience. In the early 90s, when VR was just a twinkle in its developers' eyes, it was conceived as "an interactive immersive experience generated by a computer" (Pimentel and Texeira 1993, 11). The metaphorical basis of immersion means absorption in a liquid element that differs from the user's normal environment; immersion therefore involves the replacement of the world, or reality, inhabited by the user with an alternate reality. The oxymoron of virtual (=non-real) reality refers to a computer simulation of non-existing or distant objects or environments that makes the user experience them as if they were real and present. The disappearance of the computer from active consciousness is therefore the basic condition of immersion. When trying to capture the exact nature of the experience, VR researchers often rely on literary comparisons, such as "being in an engrossing book", or Coleridge's already mentioned idea of "suspending disbelief" (Pimentel and Texeira 1993, 15). This idea of suspending disbelief suggests that immersion is the result of a deliberate attitude rather than an illusion. VR researchers Mel Slater and Maria Sanchez-Vives argue however that the disappearance of the medium is never complete: users only experience the presence of simulated objects when they remain aware in the back of their mind that they are perceiving a computer-generated image. In real life, we take the presence of the environment that surrounds us for granted and we do not reflect on it; in VR, by contrast, the experience of presence should become a cause of wonder and a potential source of pleasure. As Janet Murray writes: "It is in fact this double consciousness that makes VR so thrilling—our sense that the virtual world seems so real despite our knowledge that our feet are still planted in this world" (2020, 19).

Similarly, though fictional immersion consists of the feeling of inhabiting another world, it cannot be complete, for this would mean the loss of the ability to distinguish textual worlds from the real world. The danger of complete immersion has been illustrated by Don Quixote, who immersed himself so deeply in romance novels that his brain "dried up to such a degree that he lost the use of his reason" (Cervantes 1994, 58). Just as aesthetic illusion does not produce real illusion, but only an illusionist effect—an illusion of illusion—, immersion can only remain an aesthetic experience if the experiencer remains aware of dealing with a representation.

As a type of attention, immersion is very difficult to define. Schaeffer considers the experience a "black box," triggered by "cognitively impenetrable" "pre-attentional primers" (2005, 238) that evade introspection. Some mental processes conducive to immersion can nevertheless be identified. Users must be able to rely extensively on their life experience in their construction of the fictional world, or on their familiarity with the world of other texts of the same type. In the case of verbal texts, immersion depends on the ability to form mental imagery; once again, this ability depends chiefly on life experience, but it can also derive from the reader's familiarity with certain generic landscapes, such as that of fairy tales. To follow the evolution of narrative worlds, users must be able to construct so-called "situation models" (Zwaan 2005) of the states of affairs represented in the text, and to produce a dynamic simulation of the narrated events by regularly updating these models. Insofar as situation models are independent of the

exact wording of the text, they support the idea that immersion requires the disappearance of the medium or at least its bracketing out from consciousness. The experience of immersion may involve the phenomenon of motor resonance, through which the textual representation of the gestures of characters activates in the brain the same neural processes as the physical performance of these gestures in the real world (Speer et al., 2009).

Victor Nell, a psychologist who has studied immersion by interviewing passionate readers, stresses the effortlessness of the experience. Immersed readers slip easily into fictional worlds. The experience is hampered by difficult materials because "consciousness is a processing bottleneck, and it is the already comprehended messages…that fully engage the receiver's conscious attention" (1988, 77). This explains the popularity of long novels and multi-media franchises: having already performed the groundwork of building the fictional world, the mind can easily return to it, using the "already comprehended messages" as stepping stones. Poetry and short stories by contrast are anti-immersive, because as soon as readers have performed the necessary work to build their world (if indeed one can speak of world in the case of poetry), they are expelled from it until they re-read the text, a common, almost mandatory task with poetry. This notion of easy accessibility is not necessarily to the taste of literary critics, who may regard immersivity as the trademark of popular, or "genre" literature. As Nell writes: "Indeed, the richness of the structure the ludic reader creates in his head may be inversely proportional to the literary power and originality of the reading matter" (1988, 77-78). The more difficult a text, the more difficult it is to bracket out distracting stimuli from the external world.

The term of immersion can be understood either as intense concentration, or as a mimesis-based experience. In the concentration sense, you can be immersed in playing a concerto, in improving your golf swing, or in solving a rock-climbing problem. In the mimetic sense, immersion presupposes a representational work that constructs a world in which users relocate themselves imaginatively, and whose evolution they simulate mentally. Non-mimetic games, such as chess, only involve the concentration kind, while non-interactive narrative media such as verbal storytelling, theater and film only involve the mimetic kind. But the two kinds are not incompatible with each other: in a mimetic computer game, players can be both immersed in a fictional world and deeply absorbed in the kind of actions that enable them to progress in the game. The fusion of the two types of immersion is made possible by the players' identification with an avatar, which gives them the sense that it is *me* who performs actions and solves problems. This identification, which transports the player into the gameworld as an active and individuated member, rather than as a mere point of view as in standard narrative, explains the unmatched power of mimetic computer games to create immersion.

As a dominant type of mimesis, especially in fiction, narrative offers various types of immersion (Ryan 2015). Here are three particularly powerful forms. *Spatial immersion* is a model of space that enables audiences to follow the movement of characters and to attribute various symbolic meanings to different areas, and a sense of place that invites them to slow down their reading in order to take in the atmosphere, the mood, the sensory richness of the current setting, all that contributes to its imaginative presence. It is the need for spatial immersion that makes readers chose novels that take place in a certain location, and that inspires computer game players to explore the game world. *Temporal immersion*, an experience that can also be called narrative tension (Baroni 2007), resides in the burning desire to find out what happens next, and it covers the three fundamental narrative experiences of suspense, curiosity, and surprise (Sternberg 1992). *Emotional immersion* is the power of narrative to inspire affective reactions to the characters, such as feeling vicariously happy when good things happen to

characters one likes and sad when bad things happen to them, or conversely, happy when bad things happen to the villain and spite when he succeeds. The phenomenon of emotional immersion has inspired what is known in the scholarly literature as the fictional paradox: do non-existing characters inspire genuine emotions or only simulated (or fictional ones), and how come negative emotional responses such as pity for characters do not spoil the pleasure of fiction? The emotions we feel for fictional characters are not only of a different quality than the ones we feel in real life, it is also questionable whether fiction provides as rich a variety of emotions as real life: though readers may like certain characters, there is no fictional equivalent to being in love with a human being. While the emotions inspired by standard narratives are directed at the characters, computer games where the player must deploy skills also create self-directed emotions, such as triumph, pride, or dejection, depending on how the player succeeds in the game.

Is mimetic immersion specific to fiction? If we think of it in terms of experiencing a non-existing, text-produced world as if it were real, it certainly is. But if we think of it in terms of the intensity of the imaginative experience inspired by a representation, it is not. We can certainly be emotionally, spatially, and temporally immersed in a representation of the real world. Every representation creates a world-image; in the case of fiction, this world-image is largely autotelic; we engage with it for its own sake. In the case of nonfiction, of factual narrative, we use this representation to gather knowledge about the real world. Both fictional and factual representations require imagining, and there is therefore no reason the world-image projected by a factual text could not be immersive. This is the opinion of Kendall Walton:

> Some histories are written in such a vivid, novelistic style that they almost inevitably induce the reader to imagine what is said, regardless of whether one believes it or not. (Indeed, this may be true of Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Peru*.) If we think of the work as prescribing such a reaction, it serves as a prop in a game of make-believe" (1990, 71).

Walton does not use the concept of immersion, but it is clear that he regards make-believe as an immersive experience. The *History of the Conquest of Peru* is a prop in a game of make-believe because of the vividness of the reader's act of imagination. I think however that it is wrong to make this vivid imagining dependent on make-believe because it does not necessarily involve pretending that the false is true. In contrast to VR immersion, narrative immersion is not always based on "something passing as that which it is not."

We may in fact ask if fiction is intrinsically immersive. Knowing that the world represented by a work does not exist is detrimental, rather than conducive to intense involvement, because our lives are tied to the affairs of the real world and we have therefore a vested interest in these affairs. As Françoise Lavocat suggests, "It could be narration, rather than fiction, which leads to immersion, simulation and transportation, while fiction, on the other hand, leads to distance and disbelief" (2016, 73; my translation).[5] The immersivity generally attributed to fiction may thus come from the fact that most fictional works are narrative, rather than being due to fictionality *per se*. But fictional narratives have an immersive advantage over nonfictional ones, because they are not limited to reporting the knowable and documentable, and they can use a wider variety of narrative techniques that enhance the presence of their world to the imagination. If we combine the distinct immersive advantages of factual and fictional narratives,

we get the genre of creative nonfiction, or true fiction, which narrates basically true facts through the techniques of fiction. It is currently one of the most popular genres of writing.

Not only is immersivity not restricted to fiction, it is not necessarily a feature of fiction. I am not thinking of those fictions that try, but fail to immerse—a matter of artistic achievement—but of those that deliberately reject immersion. If the disappearance of the medium from active consciousness is a prerequisite of immersion, as the VR model suggests, then immersion is incompatible with self-reflexivity. But drawing attention to the signifiers and to the status of the text as a representation has been one of the dominant pursuits of postmodernism, not only in literature but in other media as well. A prominent example of this anti-illusionist stance is the French New Novel, as represented by Alain Robbe-Grillet, who in his manifesto *For a New Novel* (1965) rejects plot, a factor of temporal immersion, and characters, a source of emotional immersion, approving only of description because it promotes the visibility of *écriture*.

If factual representation can be immersive, and fiction non-immersive, one is entitled to ask whether there is a special relation between fiction and immersion. I suggest there is, though this relation is not binding. Deliberately non-immersive fictions are parasitic upon immersive fictions. They want to break the game of make-believe—but this presupposes that the game exists in the first place. Postmodernism is the product of a late culture that is obsessed with novelty, but feels that immersivity has been exhausted by realism; anti-immersive self-reflexivity represents therefore the only opportunity left for formal innovation. If we exclude deliberately anti-immersive, aggressively self-reflexive forms of fiction, the relation between knowledge and immersivity is inverted in fictional and factual narratives. The primary goal of factual narrative is to produce knowledge, and its immersivity, when present, is an extra bonus. With fictional narrative, on the other hand, immersivity is primary, and producing knowledge is an extra bonus. Non-immersive factual representation is still useful; non-immersive fiction is a failure, unless it teaches something interesting about itself through self-reflexivity . Therefore, fiction has a special relation to immersion.

Games and fiction

The make-believe conception of fiction regards children's improvised games of pretense as the urform and as the essence of fictionality, modelling on these games its analysis of the more culturally recognized types found in literature, film, theater and comics. Within this theory, it makes no sense to ask: are games of make-believe fiction, since their fictionality is presupposed by the definition. But the family of games is large and diverse. This raises the question of whether all games should be regarded as fiction, or only some of them—just like some, but not all verbal narratives and films are fiction.

To debate the fictionality of games, I propose to invoke the classificatory system outlined by French sociologist Roger Caillois, who distinguishes four types of games and two forms of play. The four types of games are *agôn* (competitive games, like chess and football), *alea* (games of chance, like roulette), *mimicry* (dramatic acting, or pretending to be pirates), and *illinx* (seeking dizziness, disorder and vertigo, as in base jumping or riding a roller-coaster). But the categories are not mutually exclusive; *agôn* combines with mimicry in avatar-driven computer games while competitive games can be decided in part by the throw of a die, as in Catan or Monopoly. In addition, Caillois distinguishes two kinds of play that form the opposite poles of a continuum. At one end is free improvisation, turbulence and gaiety, which he calls *paidia*; at the other end is submission to "arbitrary, imperative, and purposefully tedious conventions." "This

latter principle is completely impractical, even though it requires an ever-greater amount of effort, patience, skills, or ingenuity. I call this second component *ludus*" (2001, 13). *Paidia* games are often called sandbox games; they offer tools to the players for inventing their own scenarios, they do not have winners or losers, and they have a strong affinity for the mimicry category; in fact, I doubt that *paidia* can be non-mimetic. They are not without rules, but as Walton's stumps-as-bears example demonstrates, the rules are freely chosen by the players, and they prescribe that something should pass as something else, thereby enforcing mimeticism. The idea of *ludus* has been further sharpened by Bernard Suits when he defines games as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (Suits 2014, 43). These games have a precise goal, in contrast to *paidia* games, such as putting a ball into a net in soccer; but the rules prevent easy ways to reach this goal, prescribing instead difficult ones: in soccer, you must control the ball without using your hands (except for the goalie). In contrast to *paidia*, *ludus* games have rigid winning or losing conditions. Of the four kinds of games distinguished by Caillois, mimicry is the most obviously fictional, since it corresponds to Walton's games of make-believe. Similarly, *paidia* has greater affinities for fiction than *ludus*. I believe that all *paidia*-based games are fictional, but only some *ludus* games are. Here is why.

In order to be fiction, games must communicate something that could be, but is not believed. As prescriptive artifacts whose purpose is to propose specialized forms of agency—agency different from the pursuit of practical goals of everyday life—games rely on rules, but rules are not the kind of thing that can be true or false, believed or not-believed; rather, they are "in effect" or "not in effect" : for instance the rules of chess are in effect within the game of chess but not in everyday life nor within the game of go.[6] In the case of chess, the rules tell the players what actions are possible, and nothing else: players do not try to imagine the fear of the queen as the king is being checked.[7] When game rules offer nothing to the imagination, when the game goals are purely abstract (such as putting a ball into a net) rather than being states you would want to pursue in real life, they do not induce make-believe.

For a game to induce make-believe, and therefore to be fictional, the actions of the player must count as the performance of a recognizable type of real-world action. In other words, the game must be mimetic.[8] When I swing a tennis racket or move a piece in chess, I do nothing more than swinging a racket or moving a chess piece. In an improvised game of make-believe, by contrast, putting a doll in a crib counts as putting a baby to sleep, and running away from a stump counts as fleeing from a bear. In a video game, manipulating the controls can counts as rescuing princesses, killing dragons, opening doors with keys, casting spells on enemies, traveling through a world, equipping one's avatar with a sword—the list is endless. In an abstract video game like *Tetris*, manipulating controls also count as something else, namely making a shape fall into a space where it will fit snugly with other shapes, but this something else has no practical equivalent in real life. Killing dragons admittedly does not occur in real life either, but if dragons existed and threatened people, then killing them would have practical significance, while making a shape fall into a space where it forms a tidy row only has meaning because of the conventions of a game.

An early attempt to invest games with mimetic content was to decorate game boards, especially the boards of dice games played on monocursal labyrinths, such as *Chutes and Ladders* or what is known in French as *Le jeu de l'oie*, according to narrative themes. From *The Path to Good Life and Heaven* represented in the ancient Indian versions of this game, to the 17th century *Labyrinth of Ariosto*, which represented episodes of the poem *Orlando Furioso*, and to the 19th-century *Game of Life*, decorated games boards injected narrative interest into a set of

rules devoid of strategic interest because they allows few or no choices. I call these games pseudo-fictions, because the narrative themes of the board do not affect gameplay: as Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman have shown, they are all based on an abstract algorithm that consists of adding or subtracting randomly chosen numbers (determined by the throw of the dice) until one of the players reaches a certain total (corresponding to the number of the last square) regardless of the board decorations. *Labyrinth of Ariosto* could however be regarded as a prop in a game of make-believe, and therefore as a fiction, to the extent that it invites the players to impersonate the characters of Ariosto's poem and to recite parts of it when they land on certain squares. In this case the abstract board game is only a pretext for engaging in make-believe, and the players do not care about who is the first one to reach the final square.

The fictionalization of games received an enormous boost from computer technology. If computer games are so popular, it is because they create a multisensory fictional world and engage the player—whether or not he or she identifies with an avatar—in an activity that affects the development of this world. Abstract computer games, like Tetris or PacMan to some extent,[9] have become exceedingly rare once the technology was sufficiently developed to produce realistic gameworlds. Whether mimetic computer games rely on a scripted narrative content, as in what Jesper Juul calls games of progression, or allow players to create their own stories, as in simulation games like The Sims, each playing of the game produces a new set of fictional truths. But computer games are not the only ones that lure players with mimetic content and invite them to a game of make-believe; table-top role-playing games have been called by Olivier Caïra "les forges de la fiction", the breeding ground where fiction is being collectively produced through an interaction between the game master, the players, the rule book, and the throws of the dice. Similarly, strategic war games, a genre developed in the 19th century, simulate military operations both real and imaginary by means of props, dice, and a rulebook.

I have suggested that games can be either fiction or nonfiction, depending on the presence or absence of a mimetic dimension. But nonfiction is not necessarily non-mimetic; it includes factual representation, which shares mimeticism with fiction. The question now arises of whether games can be factual representations. Aren't war games based on real battles? Isn't there a genre of computer games, known as "serious games" (Bogost 2010) that attempts to arouse awareness of real-world issues, such as environmental damage and colonialism for *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019) or transgender experience for *Dys4ia* (Ensslin 2022)? Moreover, doesn't the metaverse of *Second Life* allow real-world communication, such as public lectures where supposedly true facts are offered for belief? My answer is that games can be either fictional or not, but they cannot be factual. Serious games are like didactic novels: they try to make a point about the real world, but by means of invented characters and situations. They don't say "this happened," but "this could happen, so draw some conclusions." Moreover, insofar as each playing of the game generates different fictional truths, it does not reveal individual facts, but only possibilities.[10] As for the *Second Life* example, I would say that *Second Life* is not really a game in itself but a set of tools for creating of a wide variety of worlds and social encounters, some of which are games and others are not. In some of these encounters, players pretend to be their avatars, and they build a space that promotes make-believe. In others, they conduct the affairs of the real world, and the function of the avatars is not to let participants pretend to be somebody else, but simply to represent them, just as participants are represented by their picture in a Zoom meeting.[11] When *Second Life* public events deal with the communication of facts, they are no longer games. Thus, games may be either fictional or nonfictional, depending on whether they are mimetic or abstract, and they can be "based on facts," like novels,

but they are never factual in the way documentary films and historiography can be. Just as we can learn some facts from realistic novels (for instance, to take an example from Currie 2020, learn from *War and Peace* that the French aristocracy spoke French), we can do so from some games, especially from "serious games," but this is a matter of fishing out isolated pieces of information, rather than granting belief to the game as a whole.

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[1] This view is echoed by Jean-Marie Schaeffer: "I am persuaded that one cannot understand what fiction is if one doesn't start from the fundamental mechanisms of "acting as if" —of ludic feint—and of imaginative simulation, whose genesis can be observed in the role-playing games and the daydreams [rêveries] of small children" (Schaeffer 1999, 11; my translation).

[2] On the benefits of play, see D.W. Winnicott (edited by Tuber 2008) and Sutton-Smith 1997; on the benefits of fiction, see Oatley 2011.

[3] Does this claim extend to photography ? In a 1984 article, Walton describes photography as a "transparent medium" that facilitates vision, just as glasses or telescopes do. According to this view, we see people or landscapes through photos just as we see stars through a telescope, without make-believe. Photos are therefore not fictional.

[4] It is worth noting that in an article defining aesthetic illusion, Wolf regularly resorts to the idea of immersion: "Aesthetic illusion consists primarily of a feeling, with variable intensity, of being imaginatively and emotionally immersed in a represented world and of experiencing this world in a way similar (but not identical) to real life" (2014, 270).

[5] Lavocat rejects this interpretation, but I find it very plausible, at least as far as narration is concerned.

[6] This restriction of rules to the domain of the game, which is separate from the domain of real life, explains why I do not agree with Jesper Juul's (2005) claim that video games are "half real" combinations of real rules and a fictional world. If game rules were real, they would apply in everyday life, which they obviously do not.

[7] I remember a computer game called Battle Chess that showed vivid battle scenes whenever a piece was taken. It taught children nothing about chess strategy because all they did was let their pieces be captured in order to watch the video. In other words, they treated the game as fiction.

[8] An alternate conception of fictionality, which does not require mimeticism and therefore accepts abstract games like chess as fiction, is offered in Caïra 2011.

[9] Some people regard the shapes that pursue PacMan as characters, more specifically as monsters, because they have names, but they lack individuality. The famous Heider and Simmel experiment (1944) has shown that people tend to narrativize the movement of abstract shapes by attributing intention and therefore characterhood to them; if this is the case, there may be no such thing as abstract games.

[10] Similarly, simulations are not factual representations, even though they can provide useful information for the real world, because facts concern what has already happened, while simulations deal with the possible.

[11] In fact, *Second Life* meetings can be regarded as a precursor of Zoom, and they have been eclipsed by it.

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