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Player engagement with games: formal reliefs and representation checks

Abstract

Among the direct parallels and contrasts between traditional narrative fiction and games, there lie certain partial analogies which provide insights of their own. This paper begins by examining a direct parallel between narrative fiction and games – the role of fictional reliefs and reality checks – before arguing that from this a partial analogy can be developed which resembles these features but stems from a feature that distinguishes most games from most traditional fictions: the presence of rules. The paired concepts of *formal reliefs* and *representation checks* are introduced with the aim of explaining how rule-based considerations can alter the ways in which players engage with games.

1 Games containing fictional narratives

Games[i] frequently involve fictional narratives – this should be uncontroversial, and is obvious at least for the sub-category of computer games.[ii] Clearly in a game such as *BioShock[iii]* a story is told, in this case progressing through a shipwreck, a stranding in a submarine city, various discoveries and conflicts, and a dramatic final escape. However it takes little to recognise that another sub-category, board games, can be included within this. Consider *Agricola*, which presents the following introductory description:

> Central Europe, around 1670 AD. The Plague which has raged since 1348 has finally been overcome. The civilized world is revitalized. People are upgrading and renovating their huts. Fields must be plowed, tilled and harvested...[iv]

This presents us with a kind of story to supplement the bare rules of the game. The player collects and spends resources, building enclosures for animals, ploughing fields, growing their family, etc.; on turn 1 the player oversees two people in a two-room house, and by turn 14 they may oversee up to five people whose house sits on a much-developed farm.

There are of course differences in the role played by narrative between these two games – the basic narrative sequence for *BioShock* is necessary for minimal engagement by any human player, which is not true for *Agricola*. A human would be simply unable to react appropriately to the tasks in *BioShock* without treating actions as something like make-believe versions[v] of, e.g., exploring spaces or fighting enemies. On the other hand a human could complete *Agricola*'s key tasks with only an appreciation of the bare rule-set – that a resource is worth *n* points at the game's end is comprehensible without considering what the resource is intended to represent. Even if to most players it is easier to understand why condition *A* yields 3 points per tile while condition *B* yields 5 when condition *A* represents a wooden house and condition *B* a stone house, this isn't required, and the most relevant reason for the difference in value is that condition *B* requires more investment of the game's finite resources.

Nevertheless I would insist that the narrative perspective is at least strongly encouraged, and plausibly *prescribed*, in both cases. If we do nothing beyond stacking relative values, not only are

we less likely to enjoy the game, there is a significant sense in which we fail to engage with it appropriately – board game designers take pains to design artwork, add caption text, give prompts in rulebooks, etc., with the intention of getting players to engage with the game's narrative aspects, and to refuse to thus engage is to depart from an integral aspect of the game. The fact that the mode of presentation between computer games and board games is broadly different does not entail a significant difference in the role of fictional narratives.

Of course some games do not invite a fictional narrative attitude at all – when playing noughts and crosses (or, for a computer game example, consider Nintendo's *Brain Training* games[vi]), we would be hard-pressed to construct any narrative beyond the mere pattern of moves. I could recount the 'story' of some victory, but this would consist of little more than a lit of moves ('I opened on the top left, they responded with...') which lacks any plausibly fictional component. Indeed there is a scale – I can construct only the vaguest fictional narrative for games like chess or Go, involving some notion of armies engaging in combat, and it would be strange to accuse the chess player who thinks of the Knight as nothing more than the piece that moves *thus* of failing to properly engage with the game. Nonetheless such narrative readings of chess are available, and one might take them to be enriching.

I will from now on take it as established that both computer games and board games can encourage players to imagine them as in part narrative fictions of a sort – furthermore, that this encouragement can vary in strength, and that for some games this imagination is not just licensed but prescribed.

2 Fictional reliefs and reality checks in fiction and in games

Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2013) introduces a pair of useful concepts for understanding how our engagement with fiction shifts – focusing primarily on film (though literature is by no means excluded), Vaage notes that various techniques are employed by creators[vii] to enable us to continue to engage where we might otherwise experience the oft-discussed phenomenon of 'imaginative resistance' (see, e.g., Moran 1994; Gendler 2000, 2006), e.g., to emotionally engage with characters with whom we might otherwise fail to engage. For instance, when watching *Breaking Bad*[viii] I emotionally engage with Walter White, a manufacturer and distributor of an immensely damaging drug, a person with nothing but contempt for much of humanity, and a murderer.[ix] I would struggle to relate to a real-life equivalent, but a range of techniques bring the narrative's fictional nature to prominence, freeing me to engage extensively without feeling the need to distance myself from the character. Examples might include prominent use of soundtrack, highly stylised cinematography that draws attention to the unusual perspective, or drawing the audience's attention to unusual or unrealistic aspects of the plot. Where this happens – where creators intentionally draw attention to a narrative's fictionality to alter the manner of audience engagement – we have an instance of *fictional relief*.

Fictional reliefs have a companion concept: the *reality check*. In order to drive our engagement in different directions, e.g. toward considering actions' implications in terms of their wider social impact, a fiction may employ techniques to encourage us to treat the narrative as more like a series of real events (Vaage likens our engagement in such cases to typical engagement with documentaries). To return to *Breaking Bad*, while people addicted to crystal meth are often

presented in darkly comic ways that distract from the impact that the drug has on real users, we are sometimes brought starkly back to reality – when seeing a person brutally murdered for drug money, or seeing Walt watch silently as someone dies because their death would be convenient, we are encouraged to confront the circumstances much more as though they were real. We can no longer safely engage in the quiet-man-turned-criminal-mastermind fantasy and, temporarily, we are required to censure Walt as we would a real individual. Where creators intentionally portray fictional content in a way that more closely resembles non-fiction, we have an instance of a *reality check*.

Since, as covered in §1, games can clearly have a narrative element that accords with fictional status, it seems to follow that the same techniques are available to the creators of games, but for completeness let us confirm this. Fictional relief seems to operate in computer games when, for instance, blood can be switched off, violence is animated in a cartoonish way, or features of soundtrack, narration, etc. remind us that we are in the midst of a fiction. Reality checks can also be found at various points in computer games: in *BioShock*, 'Little Sisters' are highly stylised under a 'creepy child' horror trope (and thus are largely unsympathetic) until their monstrous 'Big Brothers' are defeated. The player is then presented with a choice between killing them or saving them, with the former generating a greater bonus. When the choice is presented, the little girl is brought into the centre of the frame, her face shown to the player in high contrast as she cowers (Figure 1). The player is clearly intended to feel some pressure on their decision – though the reality check is not as strong as it could be, since if the player chooses the 'harvest' option they are spared the sight of the resulting corpse. However we are temporarily drawn away from the more fantastical elements of the game, and at that point feel less comfortable with the kind of violence that had previously been simply accepted in the course of standard gameplay.

Figure 1: An example of the 'harvest'/'rescue' choice in *BioShock*.

Board games are less straightforward in this respect, but let's start with fictional reliefs. We are presented especially fictionalised circumstances in various games where the real implications of our goals are problematic: e.g. in the timeline-altering game *Chrononauts*,[x] one character's victory condition is to *cause World War III*. The goal is made comedic rather than threatening by having iassigned to 'Squa Tront', a hyperintelligent cockroach. We might see another in the stylised presentation of *Pandemic*[xi] - here players battle to eradicate disease outbreaks that threaten the planet, but graphic depictions of illness, or even descriptions of symptoms, are notably absent, with the game's aesthetic much 'cleaner' than it might plausibly have been.

Are there reality checks in board games? Though they are less obvious, I think they can be identified quite clearly. Consider again *Agricola* – one's choices when determining how to maximise points may involve securing insufficient food to feed one's family at the harvest, upon which a 'starvation token' is received. In service of gaining points we may do this voluntarily, but we are encouraged to see this particular points trade-off as an especially serious failing. Notably the game's design could clearly be tweaked to make us feel either better about such decisions (e.g. by re-describing the same condition as a penalty for failure to pay a tithe on one's land), or worse (e.g. by requiring us to remove a 'family member' piece, representing their death from starvation). Another form of reality check comes in games like *Werewolf*[xii] that involve group decisions to condemn player characters to death: in this case, the group must decide who among them they think

is a werewolf, as the aim of the game is to kill the werewolves before they kill the villagers. This process is typically drawn out, to give the greatest opportunity for guilt on the part of the accusers (indeed exploiting feelings of guilt about victimisation can be a good survival strategy for players).

We have seen in this section that games can play with perceived fictionality using fictional reliefs and reality checks much as traditional fiction can; neither medium engages the audience in a fixed manner. Questions about the different purposes served by these features, and the different ways they might manifest, in narrative fiction and games will be left aside for now. Instead, we will now explore a feature which is analogous to fictional reliefs and reality checks but is distinctive of games.

3 Formal reliefs and representation checks

Now we are in a position to articulate the analogy that is this paper's main concern. Games do not just play with the fictionality of our attitudes to the events represented: the involvement of rules,[xiii] and the demands on a successful rule-set (e.g. excluding any strategy that blatantly dominates all others, or allowing gameplay to be sustained without frustration for some salient period) require us to sometimes suspend that fictional attitude not by moving toward a more *realistic* attitude, but by moving toward a *formalistic*, non-representational attitude. The task of this section will be toxplicate this feature through an analogy to the pair of concepts explored in *x*2.

Let's first return to board games. *Agricola* has within its rule-set certain requirements on the acquisition and retention of 'animal' tokens: roughly, one must build fences to create pastures, and without a dedicated pasture for a type of animal, one cannot acquire that animal. Furthermore, at each harvest, animals breed, increasing their numbers. However, two elements of the rule-set are notable: first, each player may have one animal outside this system as a 'pet', placed in the player's house; and second, regardless of the number of animals a player has, their stock only ever increases by one of each kind per harvest (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Animal tokens in *Agricola*: from their three cows, three pigs, and four sheep, this player will receive just one of each in the next harvest.

We have already observed that *Agricola* encourages a fictional attitude to the events within: we are encouraged to fictionally treat the sheep tokens as sheep, the fence tokens as fences, and the turn-cycles as annual cycles punctuated by harvests where our success or failure as farmers, and our family's prosperity, will be determined (these, especially the tokens, seem good candidates for 'props' in line with Walton 1990). However there are limits to this: were I to engage consistently, I would be puzzled by the suggestion that I might keep one of these animals in my house as a pet. Imagine the mess! I would also be alarmed by the failure of my breeding programme to respond to scale: how would we explain the fact that, whether I have two sheep or eight, I acquire only a single extra sheep each year? If we supposed that there was some fixed level of narrative engagement licensed by the game, it would follow that either (i) these places where representation breaks down are failures in the game, or (ii) the game does not aim at representation beyond that which is consistent with these oddities.

But I do not think that either outcome can be correct. Against the first possibility, *Agricola* is highly regarded as a board game, and we can appreciate why these rules feature in the game (especially the lack of scale in animal breeding – it seems plausible that this would unbalance the game). Against the second possibility, from which it would follow that the other elements in the game that depict coherent parts of a world are irrelevant to its quality, we can clearly see aspects of the game where the fictional narrative is pleasing: the careful planning and building of enclosures, the increasing pressure as one approaches the harvest, wondering whether too much effort spent extending one's house has left too little time to work the fields, are part of what makes the game engaging. If *Agricola* consistently maintained such significant detachment from a coherent narrative, it would fail to achieve the goals that it evidently sets for itself as a game.

Since neither consequent is plausible, the antecedent must be false: there cannot be a fixed level of engagement in a case like this. But importantly, the variation in engagement we see cannot be adequately explained using the concepts of fictional reliefs and reality checks. If this was a case of fictional relief, the fictional attitude would have to become *stronger*, but the harder we try to place the example within the context of the fiction, the *less* coherent it seems. Nor can this be a reality check, since to think of such cases as more like reality would be worse still for our ability to comprehend them.

It is to account for this feature of games that, analogous to the notion of fictional relief, we should introduce the concept of *formal relief*. This occurs where the formalist or rule-centric elements of a game take precedence and we are accordingly encouraged to suspend or weaken our representational engagement with the game. In other words, where creators intentionally draw attention to a game's rules-based elements to alter player engagement, this is formal relief.

To demonstrate that this feature is not particular to the board game format, we will pause to again consider computer games. The most widespread instance of formal relief in computer games, I would suggest, is in the tutorial feature that forms an important part of many computer games. In order that first-time players be able to complete the complex tasks required of them in the game proper, many games must provide some sort of tutorial for learning which commands result in which actions, and gaining general understanding of game mechanics such as the extent and types of motion possible. Some games, especially strategy games or those which consist of isolated, repeatable chapters, may have a tutorial situated within a simplified model of the game that allows the demonstration of certain features, which therefore doesn't interfere with the game's narrative. However it is not uncommon for a tutorial to be built into the game itself, either in a single segment forming the start of gameplay or in smaller segments distributed throughout early gameplay. Such sections frequently 'break the fourth wall', with non-player characters instructing the player character on which commands to enter, and even if this is not done explicitly the player will likely be asked to do quite arbitrary things in order to test commands. Once again, treating these as part of the narrative would damage the game's narrative smoothness and possibly even its coherence as a world, but we accept these departures as part of what it is to enjoy the game.[xiv]

Another example is seen in mini-games, where the creators place another game *within* the game for the sake of the player's enjoyment. Sometimes these are plausible within the game's structure – for instance, it could be represented as a game played between characters in the world (as in the card game *Triple Triad* in *Final Fantasy VIII*[xv] - see Figure 3). Even these often stretch the

bounds of plausibility - the *Final Fantasy VIII* player is encouraged to play the mini-game even when ostensibly they are locked in a desperate struggle to save the world, and the mini-game displays puzzlingly metafictional features by including key characters as cards despite this perspective presumably being alien to the fictional world depicted (since they do not know they are in a story). However there are also many examples that are hard to treat as representing genuine aspects of the world at all. Returning to *BioShock*, the means of 'hacking' machines in the game-world involves the completion of an against-the-clock, tile-based puzzle game – it would be patently ridiculous to imagine the character completing any such puzzle within the game world in order to unlock containers or shut down security devices (this can be contrasted with the means of unlocking chests in, e.g., *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*,[xvi] which is a representation of lock-picking, albeit an abstract one).

Figure 3. A battle with the 'Guardian Force' Ifrit (L), and a round of the mini-game Triple Triad featuring the Ifrit card (R).

Are both tutorials and mini-games therefore either inherent weaknesses in a game or features that set the game's representational standard? No: tutorials enhance enjoyment when designed well by smoothly improving the first-time player's grasp of how to play the game, and for more unorthodox games are necessary to enable any play at all; for mini-games it's even clearer, since they are almost by definition unnecessary for gameplay, so it would otherwise be mysterious why the creators would ever include them. These features in a computer game provide formal relief.

We might expect that if fictional reliefs have an analogue in formal reliefs, there ought also to be an analogue for reality checks – I contend that this is exactly right. If games can drive us *away* from treating something representationally, they can also drive us *toward* treating it representationally. This is common sense, since otherwise either we would have to believe that some inherent tempering force keeps us seeing games as representational or games would be constantly in danger of collapse into being viewed formalistically. However we can do better, and show this by example.

When are we encouraged to foreground the representational aspect of board games? Some earlier examples can serve us in this respect. Recall the possibility of 'starvation tokens' in *Agricola* – these might function as minor reality checks, but even without ceasing to engage with gameplay *as a fiction*, players can be expected to shy away from starvation tokens to a degree that outstrips their impact on points. The goal of the player may be to accumulate points, but the goal of the character the player *represents* in the game is to survive and hopefully thrive in a world of subsistence faring, and for that character, failing to feed their family is a greater failure than is failing to farm any pigs. There are also many instances where we are encouraged to make decisions not so much as game-players, but more as characters – in a game like *Dead of Winter*,[xvii] for example, different player characters are portrayed differently, and while these representations are sometimes reflected through game mechanics, it is expected for players either to outstrip the character's nature as reflected by their specific mechanics by taking additional actions they see as consistent with the character, or to decide on certain actions completely independent of game mechanics because they seem fitting to the character. A game's creators may encourage this kind of behaviour weakly by using back story, token style or something else 'cosmetic', or strongly, by providing rules that incentivise certain actions that are consistent with the depiction of the character. Where this is encouraged – where

creators intentionally portray content in a way that more closely resembles narrative fiction – we find what I call *representation checks*.[xviii]

Representation checks occur in more obvious ways in computer games – the precise mechanics of a game are in many cases opaque to a player either because of the disconnect between the command as input by the player and its implementation within the game's engine, or in a more basic way because a human cannot in real time compute and understand precisely what will happen. In *Baldur's Gate*[xix] a player can in theory consult most of the dice-based rule-set on which the game is based and can determine that they have, say, a 35% chance of damaging a particular enemy, though they are not invited to do so except perhaps in certain high-stakes scenarios, whereas when entering the command to shoot at goal in *FIFA 19*,[xx] the complex rules regarding outcome are not made available to the player at all except by broad inference. Generally when we are encouraged to take a decision with consequences especially difficult to access in the circumstances, this functions as a representation check: we are invited to take action based not on the *player's* strategy *for* the game, but on the *character's* goals *in* the game. This is especially common in games with a roleplaying element – the player may be presented with options in dialogue whose impact on gameplay is entirely opaque. The player who consults a walkthrough whenever presented with such a choice could plausibly be described as failing to engage fully with the game.

Conclusion

In this paper I began by indicating the relevance of narratives to a wide range of games and applying this to a direct analogy between *fictional reliefs* and *reality checks* in narrative fiction and in games. This led to the recognition of an additional way in which our engagement with games can be influenced: *formal reliefs* invite us to suspend consideration of the game-world, for instance to focus on strategy, whereas *representation checks* invite us to reduce our focus on game mechanics and to take actions as though they are entirely part of a fictional world, not conditioned by the game's success conditions. We have not here gone as far as to explore, except by example, what techniques are employed by creators to signal formal reliefs and representation checks – further work to examine these, to flesh the concepts out in line with the explication of their analogues as presented by Vaage (2013), would be valuable. Nor has it been part of our aim here to speculate on how these different mechanisms of varying player engagement balance against one another, but by recognising these additional kinds of variation in engagement we open up the possibility of further exploration of their finer details and dynamics. Furthermore, the recognition of the important complexities that rules can introduce to engagement opens up the possibility of assessing other kinds of fictional work for rules-based influences.[xxi]

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[i] This paper focuses on *computer games* and *board games* as they are interestingly different sub-categories which benefit from exploration, and in the latter case because the category is under-explored (as observed in Nguyen 2017, 3). The case might be more easily made using roleplaying games, but their relationship with fiction is so close that it is more informative to set them aside for the most part.

[ii] One could go further and identify games as a particular kind of interactive fiction as explored, e.g., by Willis 2019 and by Wildman and Woodward forthcoming – as observed in both works, both computer games and board games can fit this description. The details of interactivity do not make a material difference to my point here, however, so I will simply assume a broad acceptance of their interactivity.

[iii] Dir. Ken Levine, published in 2007 by 2K Games.

[iv] *Agricola*, designed by Uwe Rosenberg. Original publication in 2007 by Lookout Games; English publication in 2008 by Z-Man Games.

[v] This description follows Walton's (1990) influential account of fiction as make-believe, though nothing of key importance hangs on the specifics. Given that our discussion will encompass cases where our attitude looks less like make-believe, one might consider an account like Currie's (1990) more appropriate, but it is my intention to remain neutral on such points here.

[vi] e.g. *Dr Kawashima's Brain Training*, dir. Kouichi Kawamoto, published in 2005 by Nintendo.

[vii] This terminology is not Vaage's: I use 'creators' for neutrality between the various stakeholders that can significantly influence films, literature and games, intending to subsume authors of fictions within this category alongside directors, actors, game designers, etc..

[viii] Dir. Vince Gilligan, broadcast 2008-2013 by AMC.

[ix] One way to characterise the situation is to see Walt as a 'rough hero' in the sense described by Eaton (2012). Eaton's account is, I think, problematic in the extent to which it renders moral engagement central to our

engagement with fictional characters, which is brought out in Eaton's dialogue with Carroll (2013). Nevertheless the idea is helpful for identifying a feature which has the potential to interfere with our imaginative engagement.

[x] Designed by Andrew Looney. Published in 2000 by Looney Labs.

[xi] Designed by Matt Leacock. Published in 2007 by Z-Man Games.

[xii] Designed by Dimitry Davidoff. Original publication date unavailable.

[xiii] As Nguyen (2020) notes, not all games involve rules. This account is therefore not aimed at claiming that either rules, or the features they enable, are either necessary or sufficient features of games, but rather we are attending to one of games' more distinctive features. Alternatively this could be seen as an exploration of the features of Suitsian games (see Suits 1978) that are also fictional narratives.

[xiv] Note that this is not to say that a tutorial cannot be an aesthetic flaw: tutorials can be realised more or less effectively. I do however hold that the success of a tutorial does not simply track its coherence within a narrative structure.

[xv] Dir. Yoshinori Kitase, published in 1999 by Square.

[xvi] Dir. Ken Rolston, published in 2006 by Bethesda Softworks.

[xvii] Designed by Jon Gilmour and Isaac Vega. Published in 2014 by Plaid Hat Games.

[xviii] There is in fact a notable flexibility here: the same feature can, depending on context, function either as a formal relief or as a representation check. An example from a roleplaying game is instructive: in *Dungeons and Dragons*, across several editions, a player character who belongs to the 'Paladin' class must adhere to a moral code, otherwise they lose their distinctive abilities. In ordinary circumstances this seems to be a representation check – the rules give the player a good reason to make their character enact actions that fit the fictional profile of the character type. However it may also act as a formal relief – the player might feel that as far as the narrative is concerned a certain moral failing in their character would be appropriate and interesting, but the fact that this would make their character strategically useless gives a strong, and acceptable, reason not to do so. My thanks to BLANK for pointing this feature out to me.

[xix] Dir. James Ohlen, published in 1998 by Interplay Entertainment.

[xx] Published in 2018 by EA Sports.

[xxi] As well as potentially bringing in interactive fictions such as 'immersive theatre', one could also consider interesting applications to the way in which, say, magic tricks are presented to their audiences. My thanks to BLANK for this observation.