

The Fictional Filter: How Videogames Challenge Traditional Paradigms of Fictional Reconstruction

O Filtro Ficcional: Como Videogames Desafiam os Paradigmas Tradicionais de Reconstrução Ficcional

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Abstract: This article discusses the concept of fiction in relation to the representational arts and argues that videogames introduce a new convention for fictional reconstruction, different from other paradigmatic conventions employed in more traditional art forms. We begin by providing an account of how fiction has been conceptualized in relation to the art of literature by author such as Searle (1975), Ryan (1980), and Iser (1993), and how it is conceptualized in the art of videogames following the theoretical propositions of authors such as Walton (1990), Juul (2005, 2014), and Thon (2016). We then propose the concept of “fictional filter” to designate an interpretive competence developed by players in their process of videogame literacy, which conditions how fictional worlds are to be reconstructed based on the semiotic representation presented by videogames. Finally, we argue for the validity of our proposed concept by employing it in the analysis of three historically removed games of similar genres: *Deus Ex* (ION STORM, 2000), *Fallout: New Vegas* (OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT, 2010), and *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2021). We were able to conclude that the concept of the fictional filter may be a useful tool in describing and discussing the poetical and aesthetical peculiarities of the art of videogames.

Keywords: fiction; videogames; fictional worlds; fictional filter.

Resumo: Este artigo discute o conceito de ficção em relação às artes representativas e defende que os videogames articulam uma nova convenção de reconstrução ficcional, diferente das convenções paradigmáticas empregadas em formas de arte mais tradicionais. Começamos por pensar o conceito de ficção como este é elaborado, primeiramente, por autores como Searle (1975), Ryan (1980) e Iser (1993) em relação à arte da literatura; e, posteriormente, por autores como Walton (1990), Juul (2005, 2014) e Thon (2016) em relação à arte dos videogames. Em seguida, propomos o conceito de “filtro ficcional” para designar uma competência interpretativa desenvolvida por jogadores no seu processo de letramento com jogos, a qual condiciona como mundos ficcionais devem ser reconstruídos a partir da representação semiótica apresentada por um videogame. Por fim, argumentamos a favor da validade de nosso conceito empregando-o na análise de três jogos historicamente separados, mas similares em gênero: *Deus Ex* (ION STORM, 2000), *Fallout: New Vegas* (OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT, 2010) e *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2021). Fomos capazes de concluir que o conceito de filtro ficcional pode ser uma ferramenta útil para descrever e discutir as peculiaridades poéticas e estéticas da arte dos videogames.

Palavras-chave: ficção; videogames; mundos ficcionais; filtro ficcional.

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Introduction

This article intends to argue that the art of videogames, having established itself among other art forms in our current media environment, introduces a new convention for the reception process related to the mental reconstruction/imagination of fictional worlds. We call this convention the “fictional filter” and define it as a dynamic interpretive competence responsible for guiding the selection of elements to be prioritized and occasionally excluded from a player’s mental reconstruction of a game’s fictional world. Therefore, our aims in this article are to demonstrate that videogames open new artistic possibilities of relating to fiction, and to begin to describe what these possibilities are. Furthermore, we intend to argue for the validity and usefulness of our proposed theoretical concept of the “fictional filter” by way of employing it in the analysis of three historically removed videogames and their respective (re)presented fictional worlds.

Our discussion is located in a broader debate pertaining to the definition of fiction, its role in the understanding of representational art forms, and its relationship with the notion of “game.” Therefore, our first section is dedicated to a review of theoretical accounts of fiction. We start by recapitulating previous theories of fiction developed in the artistic context of literature by authors such as John Searle (1975), Marie-Laure Ryan (1980), and Wolfgang Iser (1993). Then, we turn our attention to the theoretical propositions and revisions developed by Kendall Walton (1990), Jesper Juul (2005, 2014), and Jan-Noël Thon (2016), which broaden the notion of fiction and make it more appropriate for the discussion of other media objects and representational art forms, including videogames.

Our second section hypothesizes on how fiction is poetically composed and, in turn, aesthetically received and reconstructed in the art of videogames. Our considerations lead us to propose that videogames configure a particular way of relating to fiction – capable of challenging, to some extent, the conventions and expectations established for the process of fictional reconstruction in more traditional art forms. We propose the concept of “fictional filter” as a synthetic way of referring to this new reception paradigm adopted in the art of videogames, and explain its workings in detail.

The third and final section is dedicated to arguing for the usefulness of our proposed concept. We employ the fictional filter in the analysis of how fiction is materially represented and interpreted in three different games: *Deus Ex* (ION STORM, 2000), *Fallout: New Vegas* (OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT, 2010), and *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2021). These games have been specifically selected because, even though the three of them follow a classic RPG model centered on character customization, they also represent three historically distinct periods in the development of the art of videogames. In this way, we should be able to argue for the historical pervasiveness and significance of our proposed concept.

1. The concept of fiction: from literature to videogames

Attempting to define fiction beyond the more general notion of a semiotic construct whose referents cannot be found in the real world, John Searle (1975, p. 324) has famously proposed that fiction should be understood as a specific mode of communication based on *pretense* – taken not as deceit, but as overt performance. His account places the existence of fiction primarily under authorial intent (SEARLE, 1975, p. 325) – “fiction” being any statement enunciated by its author with this added layer of pretense –, and posits that in a work of fiction like a literary narrative, statements that refer to real/historical characters, places, and events are not fictional *per se*, because the author’s belief in them should no longer be considered strictly performed (SEARLE, 1975, p. 330).

A few years later, Marie-Laure Ryan (1980) improves on the overall cohesion of Searle’s *fiction as pretense* theory by bringing it into possible world theory. Although maintaining that fiction should be understood as a particular way of speaking/writing (RYAN, 1980, p. 410) – thus echoing Searle’s authorial intent –, Ryan prefers to understand fiction as an act of *impersonation*, which displaces it from a speaker who performs belief in something that is not real to a speaker that pretends to be someone else entirely, assuming a different identity in a different, nonfactual, alternate possible world. Since “alternate worlds may present various degrees of overlap with the real world” (RYAN, 1980, p. 413), all sentences in a fictional work can be considered equally fictional, even though they may refer to factually known people, places, and events.

But the insularity implied by an account of fiction that understands it as an alternate possible world has been criticized as potentially alienating fiction from the real

(WALSH, 2003). A different approach to fiction is provided by Wolfgang Iser (1993, p. 1-21), who rejects a binary dichotomy between reality and fiction in favor of a triadic relationship among reality, fiction, and imagination. Because of fiction's capacity to select and recombine disparate social, cultural, historical, and literary elements, Iser understands it as an inherently transgressive activity, capable of simultaneously crossing the boundaries of both reality and imagination. Erratic and shapeless in its nature, imagination is lured into form by fiction, thus acquiring a determinacy usually only afforded to reality; in the same vein, reality has its determinacy deconstructed, recombined, and ultimately questioned by the plasticity of fiction. In other words, the act of fictionalizing:

[...] leads the real to the imaginary and the imaginary to the real, and it thus conditions the extent to which a given world is to be transcoded, a nongiven world is to be conceived, and the reshuffled worlds are to be made accessible to the reader's experience. (ISER, 1993, p. 4)

This conceptualization of fiction as structured imagination is similar to the definitional approach employed by Kendall Walton (1990) in *Mimesis as make-believe: on the foundations of the representational arts* – a book where the transmedial and game-like aspects of fiction are exemplarily brought to surface. Walton defends that fiction happens whenever we are confronted by a rule or prescription (be it the product of an internalized convention or an explicit negotiation) which determines how something must be imagined: “a fictional truth consists in there being a prescription or mandate in some context to imagine something” (WALTON, 1990, p. 39). Following a logical model, the author rewords his explanation as follows: “If *p* is fictional, then should one be forced to choose between imagining *p* and imagining not-*p*, one is to do the former” (WALTON, 1990, p. 40). Walton's theory of fiction also takes a transmedial turn by admitting a significant intersection between “works of fiction” and the “representational arts” in general, including paintings, novels, plays and films. All representational works of art are considered by Walton to be “props,” that is, objects capable of instantiating fictional truths:

What makes it fictional in *La Grande Jatte* that a couple is strolling in a park is the painting itself, the pattern of paint splotches on the surface of the canvas. It is because of the words constituting *Gulliver's Travels* that fictionally there is a society of six-inch-tall people who go to war over how eggs are to be broken. (WALTON, 1990, p. 38)

A common trend that can be perceived in all previously considered accounts of fiction is a tendency to strongly associate the phenomenon of fictionality with some sort of social agreement. Searle (1975) and Ryan (1980) talked about authorial intent as one of the defining aspects of fictionality, whereas later authors prefer to recontextualize this social inclination as the product of a contract or as a learned schema of interpretation. Richard Walsh (2003, p. 115-116) understands fiction to be mostly defined by the interpretive disposition of recipients, which is conditioned by cultural, contextual, and paratextual cues. Likewise, Walton's account of fiction as regulated by shared prescriptions, or "principles of generation,"² invariably suggests a social configuration in which, similar to what happens in games, all individuals involved need to be aware of and follow the rules for fictional activity to effectively take place: "Anyone who refuses to imagine what was agreed on refuses to 'play the game' or plays it improperly. He breaks a rule" (WALTON, 1993, p. 39).

The convergence of both games and fiction into the notion of "rule" provides a promising common ground with, and a convenient point of transition to, the field of game studies. Fiction, especially, has become a staple of videogame theory ever since the publication of Jesper Juul's (2005) *Half-real: videogames between real rules and fictional worlds*; and has in fact been in close proximity to the study of games in general since Johan Huizinga's (1949) *Homo ludens: a study of the play-element in culture* first introduced the matter into the humanities. For instance, Huizinga's use of the notion of "magic circle" as a barrier defining the boundaries of play, which has found lasting repercussion in following academic writings, associates games to the seclusiveness of religious rituals and theatrical performances:

All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (HUIZINGA, 1949, p. 10)

² An explanation provided by the author regarding the concept of "principle of generation" reads as follows: "Props function only in a social, or at least human, setting. The stump in the thicket makes it fictional that a bear is there only because there is a certain convention, understanding, agreement in the game of make-believe, one to the effect that wherever there is a stump, fictionally there is a bear. I will call this a principle of generation" (WALTON, 1993, p. 38).

Therefore, a clear separation from ordinary life is the common ground shared by both traditional notions of play and of fiction. Roger Caillois (2001, p. 6), taking inspiration from Huizinga's work, maintains "separateness" as one of play's basic defining qualities; however, on the specific topic of games and fiction, Caillois (2001, p. 9) is famously reluctant to accept a possible intersection between the two, positing that play can either be governed by rules *or* by a fictional "as if" principle of make-believe.³ But such a relationship need not necessarily be interpreted as incompatible: as already mentioned, Kendall Walton's (1990) approach to fiction is one that could be said to unify both concepts by taking the "as if" structure characteristic of fictional truths as a rule that prescribes things to be imagined in a certain way.

Jesper Juul (2005) also rejects an intrinsic incompatibility between rules and fiction by contending that both structures are equally and concurrently present in videogames – a proposition also aimed at rejecting the dichotomy between "narrative" and "games" which dominated the field of game studies at his time of writing. Relying on Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's (2004) later reconceptualization of the magic circle, Juul (2005, p. 164-167) differentiates between the concepts of "game space", carved out by the magic circle of a game, and of "world space", referring to the entire space of a world that is either real or fictional. The main difference between the two concepts is that a "game space" exists *inside* the broader world in which a game is played, whereas a fictional world and everything in it should be considered a "world space" existing *outside* the space of the real world. The relationship between game and world space is quite straightforward in traditional non-digital games, seeing as a special "game space" is created in the real "world space." Some videogames, however, complicate this relationship by establishing both a fictional world outside the real world and a game space inside that fictional world space, as is often the case in videogames based on sports and championships.

Juul's (2005, p. 130-133) model, however, argues that although videogame poetics often calls upon fiction, it is not necessary nor required for it to do so. The author proposes that games should be classified into a typology with regards to their relationship

³ A possible solution to this problem is proposed by Gonzalo Frasca (2001, p. 4-11), who has suggested a slight revision in Caillois' concepts and terminology in order to differentiate between games that present rules which define winners and losers (*ludus*) and games that do not present this specific type of rule (*paidia*). Instances of fictional make-believe could be considered part of the latter without necessarily being part of the former.

to fiction: *abstract games* present no fiction whatsoever, which includes games like *Tetris*; *iconic games* present few fictional elements which are not articulated into a full world, like the kings and queens in a card deck; *incoherent world games* present a discernable fictional world which is often contradictory (e.g. the fact that Mario has three lives and that pawns and bishops in chess are confined to certain patterns of movement); and finally *coherent world games*, which present a stable fictional world.⁴ As becomes evident, this typology, which understands abstract games and fully representational (i.e. fictional)⁵ games to be two opposite sides of the same spectrum, somewhat hinders the compatibility argument between games and fiction.

Juul's extensive account⁶ of fictional incoherence in games is especially informative in this matter, as exemplified by Mario's three lives (2005, p. 123), the restricted moves of chess pieces (2005, p. 131), and the trope of invisible walls (2005, p. 165) – in summary, all game elements that are not satisfactorily explained by fiction alone “without resorting to describing the rules, props, or the real-world situation where the game was played” (JUUL, 2005, p. 141). The theorization of videogame fiction presented in *Half-real* tends to portray fictional elements and game elements as constantly fighting for stability and player attention, to the point that Juul considers the imagined reconstruction of the fictional world by players to be an optional activity: “I think the best explanation for incoherent world games is that by *game conventions*, the player is aware that it is optional to imagine the fictional world of the game. [...] We can agree to believe in the fiction, and we can agree not to” (2005, p. 141). *Half-real* admittedly represented a significant step in the remediation of the dichotomy previously established between games and fiction, but it is evident that it did not manage to escape from it entirely.

However, Juul's (2005) perception of videogame fiction as optional still hints at a peculiar characteristic of videogame representation. In a later revision of Juul's (2005) work, Jan-Noël Thon (2016, p. 106) argues that “incomplete and incoherent

⁴ It should be mentioned that Juul's (2005, p. 131-133) typology presents a total of five categories, the fifth of which is called “staged games.” This category refers to the specific instance of abstract or iconic games that can be found within a videogame's fictional world – which would make it somewhat similar to the concept of metadiegesis in narratological studies. Since we do not understand this category to be a distinct stage in the spectrum of videogame fictionality, we have left it out of our main argument.

⁵ In the chapter of his book dedicated to the matter of “fiction” in videogames, Juul (2005, p. 121-162) largely seems to equate fiction to the notions of representation (as opposed to abstract presentation) and semiotics. Although not all theories of fiction would agree with this approach, it should be noted that Walton (1990) adopts a similar stance by taking all representational art forms to be instances of fiction.

⁶ *Half-real*'s index (JUUL, 2005, p. 229) indicates six distinct segments throughout the book in which the subject of incoherent fictional worlds is elaborated.

representations do not necessarily result in incomplete and incoherent storyworlds,” positing that such inconsistencies should not be interpreted as optional, but rather require the application of a “medium-specific charity” on the part of players in order to determine which aspects of the semiotic representation should be considered highly relevant to the mental reconstruction of a given storyworld, and which should be considered less relevant or even irrelevant:

Put bluntly, it seems somewhat unlikely that a player’s decision to let the avatars of Halo or Alan Wake run in circles for half an hour contributes to the representation of the characters of the Master Chief or Alan Wake in the same way as, for example, the games’ cut-scenes do. (THON, 2016, p. 106)

It should be noted, however, that the transformative relation between a semiotic representation and the mental reconstruction of its fiction (what Thon calls “representational correspondence”) permeates all representational artworks and is by no means – nor could it ever be – one of total and direct equivalence. Different art forms and genres tend to stabilize specific conventions for representational correspondence, so that songs and dances in musical theater, for example, are not taken to be the literal way through which characters communicate to one another, but are instead interpreted as metaphorical, non-literal portrayals of characters’ thoughts and feelings. Similarly, literary works are not particularly inclined to detailed descriptions of physical objects/spaces, or to providing complete accounts of characters’ looks, actions, and motivations, leaving instead many granular elements to be imagined by the reader. These relations of correspondence, which mandate either filling in on the part of the recipient or a radical transformation of representational elements into fictional reconstruction, are widespread practices presupposed by any artistic genre.

Videogames are obviously not immune to these traditional correspondence conventions. To borrow a few of Juul’s (2005) examples, the restricted movement of chess pieces may not be understood as a literal restriction to be carried into the reconstruction of the fictional world implied by chess, but it could reasonably be interpreted, under a metaphorical light, as representing the different functions and levels of power/influence assumed by different social institutions in a war-ridden country. Similarly, the message “Warning! You are leaving combat area. Deserters will be shot” (JUUL, 2005, p. 165) – which, in *Battlefield 1942*, marks the invisible walls limiting player interaction with the world – could be reasonably (re)interpreted by players not as a literal warning message addressed to themselves, but as, say, a piece of information

known and upheld by the character they are in control of. The character is unwilling to leave the battlefield, and therefore it is fictionally coherent that the player should not be afforded the ability to leave the battlefield.

Juul's opinions on the matter have themselves evolved over the years. In a book chapter entitled *On absent carrot sticks: the level of abstraction in video games*, Juul (2014) incorporates games' rule-based affordances and limitations into his account of videogame fictionality. Fictional worlds are no longer evaluated in terms of their "incoherences"; instead, game elements and fictional elements are now classified in terms of their capacity to implement/explain one another: possibilities suggested by fiction may or may not be implemented into game rules (the latter resulting in limitations such as the impossibility of slicing carrots into sticks in the game *Cooking Mama*), and game rules may or may not be explained by fiction (the latter resulting in game-specific affordances as the infinite ingredients provided to the player in the same game). In either case, the interesting thing to note is that the "seemingly strange limitations that prevent video game players from making perfectly logical actions, such as cutting carrots into sticks or ordering takeout, are exactly the limitations that make video games part of the field of games" (JUUL, 2014, p. 190). In our view, this represents a theoretical shift from a semantically charged notion of inevitable incoherence between games and fiction to a more general admission of videogames' particular affordances and limitations as an art form in their own right.

2. The fictional filter

Still, we should inquire: under a more integrationist approach towards the notions of gameness and fictionality, what are we to think of the multiple deaths and resurrections of a main (player-)character, as exemplified by the three lives of Mario? Are these events not facts clearly represented as part of the fictional world? Similar and more nuanced examples abound in both old and contemporary videogames: in *The Last of Us* (NAUGHTY DOG, 2013), the character of Joel can be shot multiple times with no lasting consequences to his health – all damages are easily undone with the help of a health kit – but halfway through the game an accidental impalement with a metal bar leads to an infection that can only be cured with antibiotics administered to him by Ellie during a cutscene. Likewise, in *Spider-Man* (INSOMNIAC GAMES, 2018), the many lives the player supposedly takes by pushing people off skyscrapers does not seem to motivate a

reevaluation of Spider-Man's "no killing" policy as a superhero. Clearly, it is not only a matter of identifying which elements of the representation pertain to the rules of the game and which elements pertain to fiction: in videogames specifically, the player may be asked to systematically evaluate, prioritize, select, and even exclude certain representational elements from his fictional reconstruction, even if these elements are unambiguously presented as occurring inside the fictional world.

We propose that this specific interpretation procedure related to the art of videogames be called the "fictional filter." Instead of Thon's (2016, p. 106) general notion of "medium-specific charity," which can be applied to different art forms, the fictional filter is here understood as a fundamental interpretive competence developed by players in their process of videogame literacy. The fictional filter differs from processes of representational correspondence found in other art forms because, whereas all representational elements are traditionally taken to be relevant building-blocks in the making of fiction – even if they should not be interpreted literally –, videogames often require players to select elements to be prioritized and occasionally excluded from their reconstruction of a game's narrative and fictional world. This is what justifies its conceptualization as a "filter": it describes an interpretive convention which allows players to keep certain elements from crossing the permeable barrier connecting a videogame's semiotic representation to its fiction.

Furthermore, the fictional filter in videogames works less as a stabilized artistic convention and more as an interpretive competence developed over time. In the previously mentioned case of musical theater, the conventions which condition the interpretation of singing and dancing into the fictional world and narrative structure of a play are fairly well established into the genre and among its spectators. Fictional filtering in videogames, on the other hand, cannot be entirely predicted and regulated by conventions because there are no clear situations and spaces where this mode of fictional selection/exclusion is consistently expected to appear. While videogames do present liminal spaces which invite a more consciously heightened process of fictional filtering – e.g. tutorials, menus, character creation screens, HUDs, mini-maps etc. – none of these spaces are guaranteed to appear as part of the composition of any specific videogame and, when they do appear, the need for fictional filtering is not always consistent. This unpredictability factor demands a slight revision in Walton's (1990) fictional theory for the representational arts: namely that, in videogames, the rules which prescribe the ways

fiction is to be imagined are not inflexibly determined in advance, but demand instead constant filtering and engaged attention on the part of the recipient.

Therefore, the fictional filter is a dynamic competence aimed at stabilizing the recreated mental model of a game's fictional world, which mediates a player's contact with a videogame by way of selection and exclusion. It is an interpretive device that allows us to understand that: 1) although Mario is represented as having three lives, we should not interpret his fictional world as one in which magic resuscitation is possible, and we also should not understand any of our failed attempts at beating a level as official events taking place in Mario's fictional world; 2) injuries suffered in the fictional world of *The Last of Us* should not all be expected to carry the same narrative relevance and, consequently, cutscenes and events portrayed in them should be prioritized in our mental reconstruction of fiction and narrative; and 3) actions taken by the player in the role of Spider-Man should not be expected to considerably affect the broader transmedial characterization of Spider-Man. Remarkably, the fictional filter, in spite of being a flexible and dynamic interpretation device, is not a fully subjective construct, being instead conditioned by the sum of the representational and para-representational cues offered to the player. In this way, it is still capable of guaranteeing a good level of interpersonal correspondence between the fictional reconstructions of different players – so much so that few would be willing to argue, or so we think, against the consensus suggested by statements 1) through 3).

As a final note, it should be highlighted that, although we advocate here for the novelty represented by the fictional filter, we do not take this comparatively more flexible configuration of fictional reconstruction to be a completely unprecedented occurrence in the history of the representational arts. Post-modernist and avant-garde movements have, in the past, famously challenged the boundaries of fiction, narrative, and art itself. To take one example from literature, a metafictional novel such as Italo Calvino's (1982) *If on a winter's night a traveler* constantly defies, from its very first pages, the ability of fictional reconstruction of its readers. It does so by employing many techniques of fictional destabilization: it sometimes blurs the lines which should clearly separate real author and real reader from fictional characters; it presents readers with conditional sentences which prevent the reconstruction of a solidly determined chain of fictional events; and it oftentimes abandons previously established characters/situations and abruptly replaces them by something else – among many other techniques.

There is, however, a reason why works of art like those created by Calvino are considered exceptional – both subversive and innovative in the context of their respective artistic genres: because they recognize the paradigmatic conventions of a given art form and consciously decide to play with them, testing their very limits in the process. Our main argument is, therefore, not that videogames are the first artistic form to deliberately play with fictional ambiguity, but that they are the first art form to take fictional ambiguity as their *paradigmatic* mode of representational correspondence – a poetical configuration which, in turn, creates the need for the aesthetic competence of the fictional filter.

3. The fictional filter in three historically removed videogames

Deus Ex (ION STORM, 2000), often recognized for having popularized the term “immersive sim” in videogame discourse (BACKE, 2022), may be a good starting point from which to analyze how gameplay practices inform the mental reconstruction of fiction. The player assumes the role of a technologically augmented government agent in the year of 2052, working for the fictional UNATCO (United Nations Anti-Terrorist Coalition) in a political climate marked by social inequality and uprising. Starting a new game session will take the player to a simple character creation screen (Figure 1) in which skill points can be assigned, character appearance can be selected among a few predefined options, and the character’s “real name” can be inserted (although the code name “JC Denton” cannot be changed).

Figure 1. Screenshot of the character creation screen in *Deus Ex*.



Source: ION STORM, 2000

This screen, however, precedes the initial cutscene which marks the beginning of the game, and therefore is very clearly signaled as separated from *Deus Ex*'s fictional world. A more interesting example of fictional ambiguity comes with the tutorial level, accessed via the game's main menu under the option "training." Even though it fulfils a clear pragmatic function of getting new players acquainted with basic game mechanics and keyboard controls, the tutorial is still fictionally contextualized as a military drill in a training academy. The player-character receives orders from a supervisor to handle different tools, weapons, and devices, all the while being monitored through a conveniently positioned glass wall. The orders may encompass, at the same time, a fictional explanation regarding how UNATCO keeps their agents electronically informed of missions and objectives, and also a clear non-fictional piece of information regarding which keys to press in order to handle the game's interface (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Screenshot of the training level in *Deus Ex*, showing the glass wall and some fictionally ambiguous orders.



Source: ION STORM, 2000

Even transitioning between different training areas is a fictionally contextualized process: in order to explain why the player always starts a new area without any of the previously acquired items (which could interfere with the tutorial), the training center is interspersed with checkpoints in which a soldier demands: “Hand in your equipment. That’s right: no cheating” (ION STORM, 2000). This initial pre-official contact with the game already invites players to test their fictional filtering abilities by way of selecting which tutorial elements can be harmlessly imported into their mental reconstruction of character and world, and which should be kept at a nondiegetic⁷ level of interpretation.

The trend set forth by *Deus Ex*’s training level – namely, the deliberate fictional incorporation of elements which could otherwise be easily dismissed as not being part of the fictional world – will be carried into the main game. This movement is facilitated by the techno-futuristic setting of *Deus Ex*’s universe, in which human body augmentations readily invite some of the more computerized point-based elements of RPGs to be incorporated into fiction. For example, the on-screen display of immediately practical information – such as character health, available items, and cardinal directions – known as the Heads-Up Display (HUD), although a common convention of videogame design

⁷ The concept of diegesis, despite having been popularized in narrative theory by Gérard Genette (1980), is employed here through the medium-specific definition provided by Alexander Galloway (2006, p. 7): “The diegesis of a video game is the game’s total world of narrative action. [...] By contrast, nondiegetic play elements are those elements of the gaming apparatus that are external to the world of narrative action.”

which hardly requires further explanation, could here be recontextualized as data made available not only to the player, but also to JC Denton's technologically augmented vision.

In fact, one of the fictionally contextualized augmentations carried by Denton from the beginning of the game is "Infolink," a one-way communication device which "allows agents in the field to receive messages from Control, and to store and later retrieve relevant maps, conversations, and notes" (ION STORM, 2000). This purposefully refers players back to their seemingly nondiegetic menu, in which items, skills, goals, notes and previous conversations can be managed and reviewed. While consulting this menu, players have their access to the fictional world suspended – even to the point of fictional time being completely stopped –, which could at first motivate the interpretation that the menu is a game element dissociated from the fictional world. Denton's augmentations, however, explicitly bring it back into the fictional plane, therefore relying on the player's fictional filter to decide which aspects of the game's interface are accessible only to them, and which should be imagined as being accessible to Denton as well. This strategy, endemic to *Deus Ex*'s design, engages the fine-grained interpretation skills of the fictional filter, requiring the player to set apart representational elements which seem at first intertwined, and systematically assemble elements previously assumed to be disconnected.

Similar compositional practices, far from being relegated to the infancy of videogames, have prevailed in the art form throughout the years. Although the first game in the *Fallout* series dates back to 1997, *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) places us closer to videogame contemporaneity. Unlike the first two iterations of the series – which, in the same manner as *Deus Ex*, adopted character creation screens fictionally insulated from the game world itself –, *New Vegas* makes the option for a radically fictionalized approach. After an introductory cutscene in which the player-character is shot in the head, the game begins with their awakening a few days later in the office of Doc Mitchell. When the doctor asks for their name, the game is paused by a black text box in which the player, who at this point controls their character via a first-person identification, will be able to insert that information into the box (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Screenshot of the name selection text box at the beginning of *Fallout: New Vegas*.



Source: OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT, 2010

The minimalistic visual presentation, the explicit reference to the player-character as a “character,” and the interruption of the flow of fictional time are all elements which unambiguously suggest that the text box should not be considered a part of the fictional world, and therefore should pose no challenge to a traditional conception of fictional coherence. The most likely interpretation to be derived from these cues is that the text box is available only to the player’s eyes; and, consequently, that even though the player is choosing the character’s name in the course of gameplay, it should be assumed that, fictionally speaking, the character has been identified with that name throughout their previous life.

However, the second step in the process of character creation is less clear-cut. The doctor informs that he had to perform some sort of facial reconstruction surgery on the character after taking the bullet fragments out of their head. He then lends the character a mirror-like device (a “Reflectron”) so they can take a look at the results. The player is then presented to a fictionally contextualized screen (Figure 4) in which they will be able to change the sex, race, face, and hair of their character from the default options. In a clear contrast to the unambiguity of the name selection text box, this game element markedly engages the fictional filter of the player. The retro-futuristic feel of *New Vegas*’s universe, riddled with rusty laser weapons, do not admit the mental reconstruction of a fictional world in which a person’s appearance can be instantaneously transformed by hand-held

devices; and yet, this is exactly the situation being depicted in the audiovisual representation.

Figure 4. Screenshot of the “Reflectron” character creation screen in *Fallout: New Vegas*.

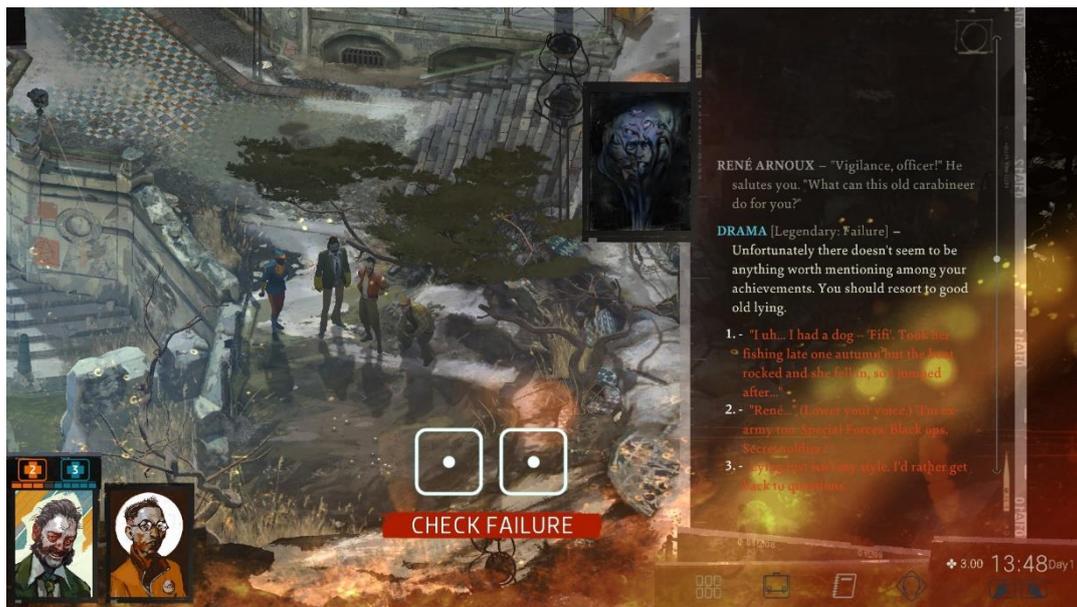


Source: OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT, 2010

The thing to note is that this apparent incoherence does not threaten the consistency of the fictional world nor the general immersive experience of the player. This is because a sufficiently proficient player is capable of relying on their fictional filter to seamlessly select and exclude certain represented elements from their mental (re)construction of the fictional characters, events and world of a videogame. In this case, players know that the final character image shown by the Reflectron should be fictionally considered in place of the first image, and that although the Reflectron exists as an actual device in the world of *Fallout: New Vegas*, it should be fictionally understood more as a mirror than as an appearance-changing piece of technology.

A decade-long temporal leap takes us to *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2021), arguably the most sophisticated of our examples when it comes to the composition of themes, narrative, and fiction. Being another RPG centered on character development and customization, *Disco Elysium* thrusts the player in the role of a mentally troubled cop investigating a murder whilst going through a severe case of amnesia caused by heavy drinking. This narrative framing puts character and player in similar positions, having to improvise their way through an unfamiliar neighborhood hostile to their presence.

Figure 5. Screenshot of a failed attempt at action in *Disco Elysium*, snake eyes being the worst possible result.

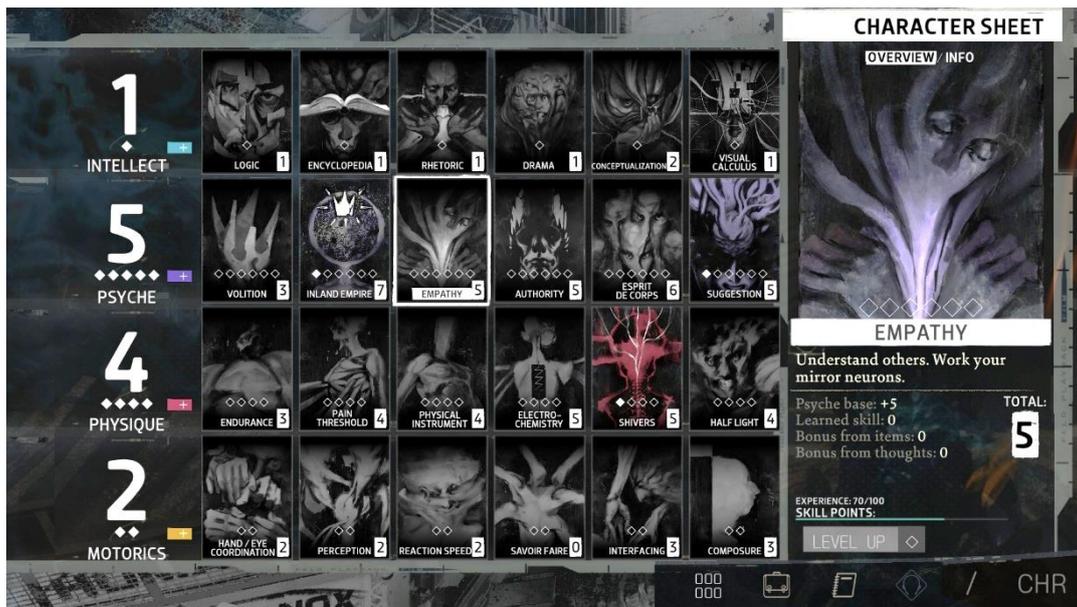


Source: ZA/UM, 2021

Disco Elysium often resorts to a very clear separation between fictional and non-fictional elements, which does not demand much filtering from players: initial character creation is presented before the beginning of the game; and skills, items and objectives are kept in their respective nondiegetic menus. Borrowing some of its gameplay and aesthetic appeal from the chance mechanics of classic tabletop RPGs, the game also calculates the player's chance of succeeding/failing at any major event, and even informs players of their success or failure through the familiar analogy of up-facing dice (Figure 5) – an element which is clearly not meant to be incorporated into the fictional reconstruction of the game's world.

Most notably, however, is how *Disco Elysium* personalizes player experience and builds its core gameplay – namely, through “intrusive thoughts” which take the form of characters capable of interfering in the player's exploration of space and interaction with other characters. Intrusive thoughts may be related to intellect, psyche, physique, or motor skills, and can be upgraded via skill points in order to better help the player-character in their journey. For instance, Empathy (related to psyche) is a character/ability which interferes during social interactions to help the player-character better understand others – providing insight on how other people might be feeling and why they might be feeling that way (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Screenshot of *Disco Elysium*'s character sheet, with “Empathy” highlighted on the right.



Source: ZA/UM, 2021

Generally speaking, interferences made by these special mental characters invite a much more familiar configuration of fictional reconstruction – one in which, although we know represented elements are important to the composition of the fictional world, we still need to distill and metaphorize much of them in order to make sense of our aesthetic experience. Since they are presented as constructs of the main character’s imagination, their reliability is always somewhat put into question, and players should therefore assume that the information they provide says more about the main character than about the world at large. However, their distinct personalities and oftentimes contradictory opinions on how to best handle a given situation may grant them some semblance of independence; and when their suggestions prove to be useful, that independence gets translated into reliability. Add to that the fact that *Disco Elysium*’s themes are not entirely unsympathetic to paranormality, and sometimes it might be hard to discern between an objective and a subjective account of the fictional world – which is, of course, the entire point. A good example is provided by Shivers (related to physique), a somewhat instinctual ability which lets you “tune into the city.” While exploring the streets of the neighborhood in which the murder has taken place, Shivers may intervene to give the player an intimate account of the city he is traversing, supplying the player-character with information he could not possibly know on his own – like what lies below the city surface, or what people might be doing in very far away buildings. It

is unclear to what extent this knowledge refers to the real city, or is purely a result of the main character's imagination.

Although none of these examples refer specifically to the practice of fictional filtering – being instead productive forms of semantic ambiguity commonly employed in other representational art forms –, the interesting thing to note is that, through their fictional filter, players are capable of differentiating these types of meaningful ambiguities from other, superficially similar, representational elements which are readily kept out of players' fictional accounts and thematic interpretations. A simple example of the latter comes in the form of fast travel, a type of instantaneous travel between pre-defined points of the fictional world which does not progress fictional time. The only way to use the feature of fast travel in *Disco Elysium* is to fictionally acquire the Martinaise postcard (which doubles as the game's map) in a bookstore, eventually making three fast travel points available to the player. Although the postcard is the fictional object through which we can access fast travel, players do not tend to ponder over the ambiguous magical nature of the postcard as a teleportation device, because their filter prevents this fictional possibility of interpretation from being considered. Therefore, the fictional filter operates at a level of poetic/representational selection which allows the players of a videogame to exclude certain unproductive fictional ambiguities from their interpretive considerations, while still being capable of identifying productive semantic ambiguities related to narrative themes.

Conclusion

In contrast to comparatively older representational art forms, such as literature and theater, videogames' relationship to fiction has always been somewhat contentious. One could argue that this is because the two forces which lie at the heart of videogames – namely, games and fiction – are opposites by nature, and cannot help but sometimes undermine each other when forced into contact. On the other hand, it could also be argued – as we do here – that videogames simply introduce us to a new paradigm of fictional representation and reconstruction, one in which the many elements composing the artwork must be contextually evaluated by recipients and occasionally excluded from their mental account of the fictional world. We further argue that this paradigm is eventually internalized into an interpretive competence here called the “fictional filter” – which, in spite of its dynamic and flexible nature, is intuitively applied by proficient

players in their reception process, and is capable of ensuring a fairly reliable level of consensus among different players.

Given that the fictional filter proved itself useful in the analysis of how fiction is reconstructed by players in three historically separate RPGs, we have come to the preliminary conclusion that it may be a pertinent theoretical tool to describe and discuss the poetical and aesthetical peculiarities of videogames. Since our article has prioritized a comparison between the theoretical traditions of literature and videogames, further research might be needed in order to more thoroughly investigate how other representational art forms and their respective fictional theories – such as cinema, graphic novels etc. – may relate to videogames. Moreover, future research could employ the fictional filter as an analytical tool in the context of other videogame genres, so as to further test its limits in terms of accuracy and usefulness.

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