

Radical game fictionalism

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Keywords

Philosophy, fiction, fictionalism, games, ontology, social kinds.

RADICAL GAME FICTIONALISM

This research provides a philosophical analysis of the relationship between games and fiction and explores a position to be called “radical game fictionalism” that characterises this relationship as fundamental to the nature of games. Many philosophers and writers, including the sociologist Roger Caillois (1961) and the philosophers Bernard Suits (2014) and Kendall Walton (1990; 2015) have suspected that there is an especially close connection between fiction (and its psychological correlate, the imagination) and games. But the precise nature of this relationship, and its contribution or necessity to our understanding of gaming, is not yet clear. Hence, a fundamental question is this: just how deep is the connection between games and fiction?

Work on the fictive elements of videogames is now relatively common (Juul, 2005; Tavinor, 2009). *Game fictionalism* can be understood as the claim that at least some games utilize fictions to provide the material settings for games or to embody or realize the formal aspects of gameplay. Game fictionalism has now been widely applied to games to theorize gameplay and game narrative (Tavinor, 2009); the relationship of players and gameworld characters (Robson and Meskin, 2016); videogame playing and performance (Kania, 2018; Tavinor, 2017); and formal features of game fictions such as interactivity (Wildman and Woodward, 2018; Willis, 2019).

The thesis of game fictionalism is ambiguous however and needs further clarification if we are to understand its scope and credibility as a thesis. There are at least two discernable forms of game fictionalism.

Gameworld fictionalism is the claim that the worlds depicted in games, where they exist, are fictional. The world of Tamriel, like Tolkien’s Middle Earth, is a fictional world: it does not really exist but rather is an imaginative creation that is the setting for *The Elder Scrolls* series of videogames. Furthermore, gameworld fictionalism is the position that some game *media*—videogames, but also table-top games, card games, and board games—are with certain caveats properly understood as fictive media though which have been created *works of fiction*. Under this view, games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Catan*, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* depict fictional worlds, and to do so through their distinctive media, so that each comprises a work of fiction (or perhaps more succinctly, a *ludofiction*).

A second position is what I will identify as *radical game fictionalism* and is one that draws on the philosophical concept of fictionalism to make a claim about the social ontology of games. Fictionalism is a philosophical thesis that is often invoked to explain language with apparent ontological commitments that we might prefer to avoid because of our other avowed metaphysical views (Yablo, 2001). Philosophical fictionalism has been used in the context of mathematics, morality, fictional characters, and elsewhere, to explain the function of the language in these domains, and specifically how we might retain that function even while avoiding an ontological commitment to distinctive mathematical, moral, or fictional entities.

Drawing on this philosophical understanding of the term, radical game fictionalism is the position that language about games is not to be taken literally but is properly understood as a kind of fiction, and that this allows us to understand how such language functions without committing us to the existence of the apparent ontology of gaming activities (that is, the ontology of apparent *ludic entities*).

Radical game fictionalism is a much more ambitious thesis than gameworld fictionalism, because while it could make claims about the ontological status of the apparent worlds of games, it also may pertain to games without obvious fictional worlds, but with other ludic features such as moves, rules, and objectives. This paper presents and gives a partial defense of a strong thesis of radical game fictionalism. We will find that several arguments, similar to those that motivate fictionalism in other contexts, motivate radical game fictionalism.

The contribution made to game theory by this paper is that it moves beyond other familiar and plausible forms of game fictionalism to make the more radical claim that understanding of the ontology of games requires the consideration of fictionalism. If radical game fictionalism is credible, videogames are not only sometimes set in fictional worlds, but that are themselves fictions.

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