Game Studies through 'Conceptual Games': The case of *Doors*

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ABSTRACT
Can games be used to communicate theoretical knowledge that is relevant to game studies? Like conceptual works of art, some games are designed to convey intellectually significant ideas in ways that are not exclusively linguistic. Drawing from art theory, we argue that the kinds of ideas one can experience practically and first-hand through 'conceptual games' can be of three kinds: socio-political, philosophical, or self-reflexive. Conceptual games that take a self-reflexive stance in particular communicate knowledge about games themselves, about their expressive conventions and their relationships to players' expectations. While the quality of being self-reflexive does not by itself grant a game the status of a theoretical contribution to game studies, there are self-reflexive games that explicitly address theories and texts in the field. Among the few existing examples of self-reflexive games that were deliberately developed as scholarly contributions to game studies, *Doors (the game)* (Gualeni & Van de Mosselaer 2021) is discussed and analyzed as a particularly relevant case study.

Keywords
conceptual games, self-referentiality, meta-referentiality, emersion, conceptual art, game design, game criticism, doors.

1 – INTRODUCTION
Can games be used to communicate theoretical knowledge that is relevant to game studies? In this paper we argue that some games do not merely function as case studies or experimental testbeds in academic games research but can also feature as scholarly contributions in their own rights. In section 2, we will more generally discuss the possibilities and advantages of using artefacts to convey ideas in relation to theories on the cognitive value of the experience of (conceptual) art. On those premises, the third section of this paper will show how games, as playable conceptual works, can also have significant cultural and cognitive value in their capability to mount socio-political, philosophical, and self-reflexive claims. On these theoretical premises, the fourth section of our paper will concentrate its attention on conceptual games that interactively disclose self-reflexive perspectives. Those games will be discussed as granting players access to first-hand, experiential knowledge about games themselves, about their expressive conventions, and their relationships to players' expectations. While the quality of being self-reflexive does not by itself grant a game the status of a theoretical contribution to game studies, there are self-reflexive games that explicitly address theories and texts in the field and can be considered valuable conceptual additions to them.

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Among the few examples of existing attempts at developing and communicating game studies knowledge through self-reflexive games, *Doors (the game)* (Gualeni & Van de Mosselaer 2021) will be analyzed as a particularly interesting case study in section 5.

Through the analysis of cases of conceptual game design in *Doors*, we will advance the idea that an epistemic approach that is exclusively linguistic (i.e. presented in written or oral form) might be unsuitable to deal with various classes of humanistic knowledge. In that respect, we will argue that playable artefacts might provide a corrective to the linguistic bias in game studies in particular (see Gualeni 2015; 2018). Accordingly, this paper also functions as an invitation to game scholars to be open – where suitable – to share their knowledge and criticism through the creation of self-reflexive conceptual games [1].

2 – THE MEANING AND COGNITIVE VALUE OF THE EXPERIENCE OF ART

To introduce a discussion on how artefacts can be used to communicate theoretical ideas, we find it useful to take a closer look at how such communication has been approached within the creation of conceptual works of art, which Sol LeWitt described as creations where "the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work" (1999, 12). Take, for example, Joseph Kosuth's 1965 conceptual work *One and Three Chairs* (see Figure 1). This particular artwork consists of three objects placed next to one another: a picture of a chair, an actual chair, and a print-out of a dictionary definition of the concept of 'chair'. With reference to Plato's theory of Ideas, Kosuth's work implicitly presents the audience with the question: which among these can be considered the real chair? Is the picture of the chair a representation of the actual, wooden chair? And if so, could we say the same about the actual chair in relation to the abstract idea of a chair (represented by its textual description)? By placing these three objects next to one another, "Kosuth turns a simple wooden chair into an object of debate and even consternation" (MoMALearning).

Kosuth's work is an example of artworks that are intended to have *cognitive value*. *One and Three Chairs* is an artefact that helps us question the relationships between language – the word 'chair' – pictures, and their referents. Kosuth did not particularly care for the material and aesthetic qualities of *One and Three Chairs*, but rather created this work to be communicative. This is emphasized by the fact that *One and Three Chairs* is a procedural work of art: every time it is exhibited, it is set up based on instructions that were formalized by the artist. For *One and Three Chairs*, Kosuth indicated which elements needed to be present (a chair, a picture of this chair, a dictionary definition of 'chair', and a white wall), but he did not specify what kind of chair needed to be used. Every time it is exhibited, the artwork might look different, as different chairs could be used. Kosuth's piece can thus be unambiguously recognized as a conceptual work of art as it is clearly "the idea, and not the art object, that is at the heart of artistic experience" (Goldie and Schellekens 2007, ix).

Figure 1: Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965).

Schellekens points out that conceptual pieces like *One and Three Chairs* can disclose a kind of understanding that is different from that which can be communicated linguistically (2007, 81). What is, according to her, uniquely valuable about conceptual works of art is that they make a point by materially *instantiating it*, offering their audience a "personal first-hand experience" of it (ibid., 86). These artworks thereby grant their audience an understanding of a certain subject that could arguably not have been gained by merely describing the subject to them. Compare this to a situation in which someone tells you what discrimination is, or rather in which you somehow experience discrimination yourself, thus also granting you a practical, situational understanding of it. This yields a difference in knowledge that is sometimes described as 'knowledge-that' versus 'knowledge-how' (Carter & Pritchard 2015).

According to Schellekens, conceptual artworks challenge the audience to engage with ideas in ways that go beyond merely thinking of them (ibid.). In other words, conceptual art encourages us to enter into a "thought-provoking relationship with the piece" and to engage, both emotionally and imaginatively, with the ideas it represents (ibid., 83). Schellekens describes the kind of understanding that results from such a process as "inviting increased sensitivity towards or engendering a more profound comprehension of the idea and its ramifications" (ibid.). The cognitive value of conceptual art, she concludes, lies in its ability to yield *experiential knowledge*, as a conceptual work of art breathes "life into the idea it seeks to represent by making us grasp the idea phenomenologically" (ibid., 83). According to Schellekens, this idea can be a socio-political one, a philosophical one, and/or one about art itself (ibid., 76). *One and Three Chairs* could exemplify works of art that have both philosophical and self-reflexive value, in that the work both instantiates Plato's theory of the forms and questions the often-ambiguous relations among the representation, the meaning, and the production of works of art.

Like in Kosuth's work, the ideas communicated through conceptual works of art are often about art itself. Works that take that conceptual path can be said to be self-reflexive in the sense that they are concerned with "questioning the nature of art, art-making, and art appreciation" (ibid., 77). A work of art can prompt its audience to question what art is, for example, by presenting appreciators with an object that is hard or controversial to interpret as such. An infamous example of this self-reflexive strategy can be recognized in Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (see Figure 2), where a common urinal turned upside down and signed with the name "R. Mutt" is exhibited as a work of art. Artworks can similarly raise questions about the art experience by challenging the way in which appreciators habitually interpret represented objects. This is the case in René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (see Figure 2). This work shows that the object depicted in this painting is, despite what we are likely to call it, not an actual pipe. Once again, it is clear that works of art like *Fountain* and *The Treachery of Images* communicate ideas in an experiential way by deliberately leveraging phenomena of cognitive dissonance in their audiences. These works are also self-reflexive, in the sense that they deliberately and often flippantly address ideas and raise questions concerning the meaning, experience, and cultural value of artistic expression and representation in general. Self-reflexive kinds of conceptual artworks, Goldie and Schellekens write, can thus be conceived as "enacted thought experiments" (2009, 9) in that they confront their audience with their preconceptions about art and representation, and test the validity of these preconceptions by expressively leveraging ambiguous, dissonant, and paradoxical experiences.

Figure 2: Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) and René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1929).

There is one important difference between Duchamp's *Fountain* and Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*, which lies in what Goldie and Schellekens call the "discourse-dependence" of these works (2009, 127). Both artworks can be said to have cognitive value in the sense that they deliberately make a specific and intellectually relevant point. As is typically the case in cognitively valuable artworks, understanding these points "depends in one way or another on background knowledge that cannot be gained through inspection of the physical object or the physical record of the performance alone" (ibid.). Merely grasping the perceptual qualities (such as the shapes, colors, and sizes) of (the material form of) these artworks is unlikely to make appreciators think about, respectively, the definition of art and the treacherous nature of representation. The proper and full experience of both of these works is dependent on some written or spoken communication: "they depend on discourse, either as part of the work itself, or a surrounding or background discourse or narrative, in order to be properly appreciated" (ibid.). In the case of Duchamp's *Fountain*, the cultural background that underlies the work is the traditional way in which art had been defined up until that point. Duchamp cheekily submitted this work for exhibition to the Society of Independent Artists, which promptly rejected it on the basis that *Fountain* was "by no definition a work of art" (Goldie and Schellekens 2009, 12). In the case of *The*

Treachery of Images, the discursive context that is necessary to properly understand the message of the work is hinted in the title of the work itself, but also in the sentence within the painting that informs the viewers that *"Ceci n'est pas une pipe"* ("This is not a pipe"). Together with these linguistic clues, the painted pipe is meant to lead the audience to the counterintuitive realization that what is shown is not, in fact, a pipe. This experience prompts the audience to think about how representation works [2]. The difference between *Fountain* and *The Treachery of Images* thus lies in the particular way in which they depend on discourse. Duchamp's work relies on background contextual information that is not given as part of the work. Magritte's painting is more self-sufficient when it comes to the idea it represents: the discourse on which the appreciation of this idea depends is (at least in part) presented as part of the work.

In this section of our paper, through examples and theories of (conceptual) art, we focused on the cognitive value of artefacts. In particular, we emphasized the practical and first-hand knowledge of certain ideas and theories that certain artefacts can experientially disclose for their appreciators. We recognized these works as being 'self-reflexive' when those ideas and theories are directed towards the artefacts themselves, the process of their creation, and their cultural value. Lastly, we described two ways in which self-reflexive, cognitively valuable artefacts can relate to the background context from which their meaning emerges. The discourse on which the appreciation of artefacts depends might be either implicitly presupposed by the artefact or explicitly incorporated in the experience of the artefact itself. In both cases, the artefact can be used to address, comment on, criticize, or satirize the discourse upon which its appreciation depends. From this perspective the next sections of this paper will specifically discuss games and video games as intentionally created artefacts and will focus, in particular, on their uses and possibilities as self-reflexive works.

3 – ON THE COGNITIVE VALUE OF GAMEPLAY

To discuss whether games and video games are works of art is often controversial if not downright pointless. Instead of doing that, our paper will take the less contentious perspective according to which games are playful, interactive artefacts that – like artworks – can have cognitive value. In analogy with the previous section, the way we will discuss cognitive value in relation to games will not include trivial aspects of our relationships with those artefacts such as their requiring cognitive effort to be understood and interacted with, or the obvious fact that games can communicate ideas that are narratively and mechanically relevant in the context of gameplay. Information such as "a green mushroom means an additional life for the player-character" or that "as Marika's King Consort, Radagon became the second Elden Lord" is likely valuable for the player, but that does not mean that the games in which this information is communicated have cognitive value. After all, both statements only have cognitive value relative to their respective fictional gameworld: they do not directly offer or indirectly facilitate the acquisition or the production of knowledge that transcends the game itself. Instead, what we refer to when talking about games' cognitive value is their capability to deliberately and experientially add to our understanding of some intellectually relevant point or perspective that is independent of the game in question. A game can thus be recognized as cognitively valuable when it was created to communicate an idea (or set of ideas) that – in line with how Schellekens discussed conceptual art – can be of a socio-political kind, philosophical, and/or about games themselves (also see Gualeni 2022).

An example of a game with this kind of value can be identified in the experimental, philosophical video game *Something Something Soup Something* (Gualeni et al. 2017). In its effort to present philosophical ideas such as the notion of 'family resemblances' and make players experience the ambiguity that is often involved in categorization tasks, the game asks its players to serve soups to human customers. In this dystopian

futuristic gameworld, however, food is cheaply produced elsewhere by aliens and teleported to Terra. The conceptual challenge at the core of this game consists in the fact that aliens do not have a clear idea of what humans mean by the word "soup." Once the aliens send what they think are soups through a teleporting device, players find themselves in the puzzling situation of having to either serve or discard potential soups sent by the aliens with no information to make those decisions apart from their own preconceptions of what can or cannot be considered soup.

Figure 3: To the left, an overview of the dystopian kitchen of *Something Something Soup Something* (2017), and to the right an example of a food item in the process of being discarded by the player.

Something Something Soup Something could thus be described as a conceptual game in that its design in terms of gameplay, aesthetic, and narrative are subordinated to experientially communicating a philosophical idea. The game prompts players to formulate and reconsider their understanding of soup as well as what elements and qualities are involved in the decision to accept or reject the items produced by the aliens (such as their constituent ingredients, their temperature, their thickness, or the containers and the utensils they are presented with, see Harrington 2017 & Gualeni 2018). A game like *Parable of the Polygons* (Hart & Case 2014) can similarly be identified as a conceptual game, this time with socio-political cognitive value, as its design serves the interactive explanation of social phenomena like segregation and structural racism. As should be evident in the two examples presented above, conceptual games could be useful educational tools in a variety of fields and disciplines.

In analogy with self-referential works of art, games can also deliberately disclose experiential knowledge about themselves and the limitations and expressive conventions that characterize their media form. Self-referential games and their conceptual value will be explored in particular detail in the next section, with a specific focus on their potential to function as academic output in the context of game studies.

4 – SELF-REFLEXIVE CONCEPTUAL GAMES AND THEIR USE IN GAME STUDIES

The expressive potential of self-reflexive playable artefacts is not a particularly new theme in game studies or media studies more in general. The idea that games, and digital games in particular, can playfully disclose claims about themselves as well as their own medium and genre-related conventions has been attracting the interest of scholars for at least the past two decades. In recent years, the cultural value of self-reflexivity in games has been explored by Bonello Rutter Giappone (2015) and Van de Mosselaer (2022) in relation to their comedic effects. It has also been discussed in ways that relate to modern and postmodern art themes of 'estrangement' and

'defamiliarization' by scholars like Gualeni (2016; 2019), Backe (2019), and Waszkiewicz (2020).

In his 2016 paper titled "Self-reflexive videogames", Gualeni defines self-reflexive video games as titles "that are deliberately designed to materialize [...] critical and/or satirical perspectives on the ways in which video games themselves are designed, played, sold, manipulated, experienced, and understood as social objects." These games, he argues, typically raise self-reflexive points in ways that employ a combination of aesthetic and linguistic modes of communication. The joined use of linguistic information and first-hand interactive experience is particularly central to the communicative strategy of the experimental video game *Doors (the game)* (Gualeni & Van de Mosselaer 2021). The fifth section of this paper will discuss in detail how those aspects of the game experience work together to raise self-reflexive points.

In line with Goldie's and Schellekens's reflections on the value of conceptual art, Gualeni considers self-reflexive video games to have cognitive value as enacted thought experiments: they are experiential thinking aids that specifically invite the player to take a detached (and often critical) stance towards games, their expressive conventions, their expected modes of use, their production practices, and their cultural value. The independent game *Syobon no Action* (also known as *Cat Mario*; Chiku 2007) is a clear example of a humorous, self-reflexive video game (see Figure 4).

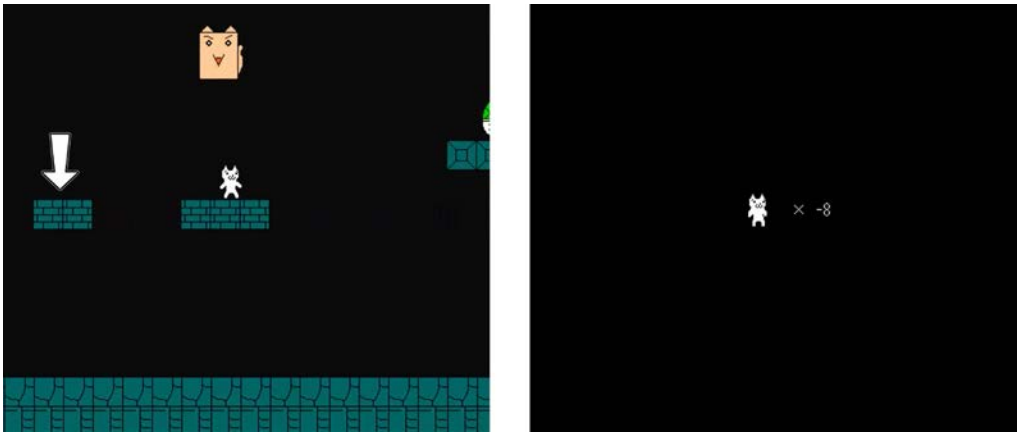

Figure 4: Two screenshots taken from *Syobon no Action* that offer clues of its deceitful and unreliable design. In the picture on the right, the game informs the players that they currently have negative eight lives.

Deceptively leveraging its aesthetic resemblance to the classic arcade game *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo R&D4 1985), *Syobon no Action* evidently signals that its gameplay will be firmly rooted in the 2D-action-platformer tradition. Going against this implied premise, however, the game soon breaks each and every convention of the genre, pulling the metaphorical rug under their audience's feet, leaving players confused and estranged. At every step of the experience of gameplay, *Syobon no Action* asks its audience to adopt a skeptical, quizzical stance towards established game conventions (including, if not mainly, the idea that the conscientious game developer has a duty to making games that are meaningful and pleasant for the player).

Another frequently invoked example of this self-reflexive use of gameplay is offered by Davey Wreden in his *The Beginner's Guide* (2015), an adventure video game that explicitly invites and guides the player to reflect on the expressive potential of games,

and on the often-problematic relationships between game makers and players. As a particularly original strategy in discussing those themes through a conceptual work, the author of *The Beginner's Guide* communicates his personal email to players during gameplay and encourages them to get in touch and share with him their thoughts and opinions about the conceptual points raised in the game.

On the basis of the examples of self-reflexive games presented above, and in analogy of what we already observed in relation to conceptual works of art, one could argue that every self-reflexive game inevitably contributes to game knowledge and theories about games. In that light, one could also embrace both the development of those games and the experience of their gameplay as two modes of engagement with the discipline of game studies that have the quality of not being exclusively linguistic.

Yet, we want to stress that while the quality of being self-reflexive might grant games the status of scholarly contributions to game studies, it does not necessarily make them *works of game studies* themselves. Both *Syobon No Action* and *The Beginner's Guide* are excellent illustrations of game studies ideas and concepts. These games are conceptual games, as they grant their audience experiential knowledge of some game studies-relevant ideas. On the other hand, a player is unlikely to understand how these games criticize or question dominant game studies discourse unless this player is already familiar with it. The way these self-reflexive games are dependent on game studies discourse is thus similar to how Duchamp's *Fountain* depended on art discourse: even though the experience of the artefact is meant to be a reflection on the relevant discourse, this discourse is not itself explicitly given as part of the experience.

There are some self-reflexive games that deliberately reference and comment upon theories and perspectives in the scholarly field of game studies. This often happens by means of their explicitly citing game studies sources and references. We argue that these games can less controversially be considered playable academic works as their gameplay explicitly and discursively communicates game studies knowledge. Their explicit discourse dependency makes them more similar to Magritte's *Treachery of Images* then they are to Duchamp's *Fountain*. What that means is that these games offer both discursive and experiential game studies knowledge without assuming player familiarity with such concepts and ideas. Players are thus invited to compare their own experience of an idea to its discursive expression. Among the most notable examples of such games are:

- ***Game Feel Demos*** (Swink 2008): a set of self-reflexive mini-games that function as playable companions to the author's 2008 book *Game Feel*.
- ***The Metagame*** (Zimmerman et al. 2011): a card game whose gameplay involves discussing opinions about art, media, entertainment, and game design.
- ***Necessary Evil*** (Gualeni et al. 2013): a philosophy-inspired action video game about the centrality of player experience in game design.
- ***The Game of Video Game Objects*** (Juul 2021): a playable essay about how players make sense of game objects.
- ***Doors (the game)*** (Gualeni & Van de Mosselaer 2021): a point-and-click self-reflexive adventure about how things (for example doors) are represented in games, which is going to be the focal case-study for the rest of this paper [3].

In interviews and release notes that are related to the games listed above, the developers often advance the conviction that in-game experiences and interactions are suitable channels to communicate ideas and intuitions, especially when they concern the

experience of gameplay and are rooted in one's personal engagement with a game. Conceptual playable artefacts can thus be understood as providing a corrective to the epistemic bias in game studies that appears to exclusively value knowledge that is abstract and mediated by language. In the next section, we will focus our attention on a self-reflexive, conceptual game in particular (*Doors*) and discuss some of its in-game situations, elements, and interactions to exemplify how games of this kind can be used to experientially and interactively address theories and questions that are relevant to game studies.

5 – PLAYABLE GAME STUDIES: SILLY QUESTIONS ABOUT *DOORS (THE GAME)*

As already introduced, Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* experientially discloses a certain point on how representation works. By means of the sentence "this is not a pipe" written under the painterly representation of a pipe, Magritte prompts the audience of this painting to take a step back, and look at the work for what it ultimately is: paint on a canvas. In an interview with Claude Vial, Magritte said: "[c]ould you stuff my pipe? No, it's just a representation, is it not? So, if I had written on my picture 'This is a pipe,' I'd have been lying" (Magritte 1979, 642).

Now imagine the following: what if it were possible to represent a pipe in a way that does make it possible to stuff it with tobacco, to smoke it, and to turn it around in one's hand? What if we represented a pipe virtually, as a computer-generated interactive model? Surely, this would raise many additional and interesting questions about its representation. Is the virtual pipe more of a pipe than Magritte's painted one? Is the virtual pipe even a represented pipe to begin with, or does it belong to a separate category of simulated objects? And if so, what makes a simulation different from traditional forms of representation? These questions are central to the conceptual game *Doors*. Although the game focuses on doors, and not pipes, Magritte's inspiration for the game is clear throughout. *Doors* is evidently designed to stimulate players to reflect on how objects (and doors in particular) are represented and understood within digital games [4].

Doors takes place somewhere in fictional England, in a quirky inn where the door to one of the rooms has mysteriously disappeared. Players control an unusual detective (an academic: a philosophy professor), who has been tasked to solve the case of the missing door. To enter the inn and start their investigation, players must first open the front door of the building (see Figure 5). Upon successfully performing this in-game action, players are rewarded with an achievement. The achievement's description reads "Congratulations! You opened the front door to the inn!" Immediately afterwards, the game – having a philosophical inclination – questions its own statement and propose an alternative interpretation for the interaction: to be more accurate, the achievement text continues, it was not really the player who opened the door, but rather the player-character. Besides, the player did not really open a door. Instead, they just inputted a certain command into a machine by means of a controlling device. And lastly, the achievement text argues, one could even go as far as saying that there was not even a door involved in the interaction, but merely a group of pixels that was meant to evoke a door in the player's imagination. The game thus questions whether it would not be more fitting to say that the player, taking on the role of the protagonist of the game, used their cursor to interact with a virtual model of a door and thus fictionally opened a door that is represented to exist in the fictional world of the videogame?

Figure 5: A screenshot of *Doors (the game)* taken in front of the entrance door to the Doors inn.

This interaction is a good illustration of the cognitive and communicative strategy of *Doors*: it is an interactive essay that playfully confronts players with paradoxes and troubling questions concerning the representation of eleven in-game doors (see Figure 6). Every one of these questions is preceded by a specific experience of the player, in which they approach the in-game door in a way that they deem appropriate based on their personal game literacy and interpretation of that particular, represented door. Moreover, every door-related question is coupled with references to game studies papers which provide viable answers. The above-mentioned door is linked to Sageng's (2012) chapter on in-game actions, Matsunaga's (2016) analysis of what it means when players declare that they perform certain actions within game worlds, and Van de Mosselaer's (2018) argument that actions performed within videogames are fictional actions.

Figure 6: A screenshot of *Doors (the game)* showing all the kinds of doors that are conceptually addressed in its gameplay.

The player's encounters with the eleven in-game doors are thus structured into three parts, the combination of which is relevant to the cognitive value of playing *Doors*:

1) The practical interaction with a certain in-game door.
2) A question about this door interaction that is both raised by the player's experience, as well as explicitly formulated in the description of the achievement that the player receives for this interaction.
3) A list of references to works within game studies that could be used to understand the specific kind of interactive experience elicited by the door in question.

The order in which the three experiences listed above are disclosed by the game is not coincidental. First, players come across different kinds of door-representations while they are immersed within the fictional gameworld. The players' relationships with the doors are initially grounded in their conventional and intuitive mode of engagement, and not yet 'tainted' by the theoretical questions and arguments that the game offers them later on. After this initial approach, the game presents players with specific questions regarding the experience of interacting with a particular door. The questions that *Doors* raises in this second stage are not bundled with prescriptive answers, but are instead very similar to what philosophers of fiction would call "silly questions" (Walton 1990, 176) [5]. Silly questions call attention to apparent paradoxes, contradictions, and cognitive dissonances within represented content, but they are not to be taken seriously when appreciating this content. Ordinarily, appreciators are unlikely to even notice the inconsistencies these questions are about (ibid.). Indeed, players of digital games are not normally concerned with the fact that they are interacting with pixels, or that they are utterly unable to set in-game doors on fire even though they are represented as being made out of wood. When immersed in games, these questions are indeed inappropriate and distracting. In *Doors*, however, these questions are deliberately "emersive" (i.e. they purposely reduce immersion, see Kubiński 2014). They are explicitly and self-reflexively foregrounded as part of the game experience to help players take a detached, critical view on their interactions with in-game representations (causing what Khaled 2018 calls a 'reflexive experience', also see Frasca 2001 and Larsen & Kampmann Walthers 2019).

Lastly, *Doors* makes its discourse-dependence on game studies texts explicit. Theoretical concepts that are relevant to understand a particular interaction with a door are presented to players in the achievement texts. Some of the relevant knowledge about themes like 'referentiality', 'virtuality', or 'representation' is thus embedded within gameplay, emphasizing the discourse-dependence of the experience. Moreover, as shown in Figure 7, the achievement texts contain references to work within game studies that the player might want to read to learn more about theories and arguments that are relevant to the experience of a particular door. This design decision is evidently meant to encourage players to reflect on their first-hand game experience, and to critically evaluate game studies theories in light of this experience. Similar to how Magritte juxtaposed the representation of a pipe with a linguistic and seemingly contradictory information regarding the represented pipe, many achievement texts in *Doors* are critical about popular perspectives in game studies concerning aforementioned themes such as the representation of in-game objects or what qualifies something experienced within the gameworld as 'virtual'.

Figure 7: A screenshot of *Doors (the game)* showing the in-game achievement text for the 'conventional door'.

To further show how this tripartite experiential structure allows players to think about a variety of problems and questions regarding the representation of objects within virtual environments, we will analyze two additional doors that can be encountered in *Doors*. The first door we want to discuss is one that is completely unresponsive to anything the player does. Even though this door looks like all the other, interactive doors in the game, the in-game cursor does not change when hovering over it, not suggesting any action possibilities to players (see Figure 8). Nothing happens when this particular door is clicked on: unlike other doors in the game, it does not open upon player interaction, nor does a message pop up saying that the door in question is locked.

Figure 8: A screenshot of *Doors (the game)*, showing a futile attempt to perform in-game actions on/with the non-interactive door.

This particular door was intentionally designed to elicit frustration in its players. This is because any player of *Doors* will only find out that this door is a "non-interactive" door after they have already approached it in-game, tried to open it, and got no response whatsoever from the game. Indeed, the in-game achievement relative to this door is not bestowed on players until the very end of the game, when it pops-up regardless of whether players actually clicked on the door.

The question that accompanies this door is whether this in-game door can truly be called non-interactive if it is encountered within an interactive environment. After all, as the player's experience will likely show, the non-interactivity of the door is only discovered upon approaching the door, clicking on it, and generally by acting towards it. The reference that is mentioned in the achievement of this non-interactive "background door" is Aarseth's paper "Doors and Perception: Fiction vs. Simulation in Games" (2007). In this paper, Aarseth writes that there are two kinds of doors that can be found in games: fictional doors, which are non-interactive background elements, and virtual doors, which simulate the behavior of actual doors within the given gameworld (2007, 42). According to Aarseth's theory, the door discussed in the last two paragraphs would arguably be the only fictional (and non-virtual) door in the game, as it is "non-interactive." Aarseth would add that this door behaves just like doors in non-interactive fictional media, such as unused doors in films, or closed doors in paintings (ibid.). *Doors* prompts its players to question this proposed dichotomy of in-game doors. Despite the fact that the "background door" does not react to their actions, it is still true that players can click on this door or move the player-character towards it or make it stand in front of it. Such actions are impossible to undertake towards doors within non-interactive media such as films and paintings. As such, the game's "background door" experientially raises some theoretically interesting questions: Can any object that is represented within the interactive, virtual context of a game ever be called "non-interactive"? And what is the difference, in terms of their fictionality, between game doors that can be interacted with and doors that are unresponsive to player input? Can some in-game doors be considered more fictional than others?

A second door we want to focus on is a door that cannot even be encountered within the gameworld. At one point during gameplay, players find a magnetic keycard in the basement of the inn. When clicking on this object, the keycard is collected and appears in the player-character's inventory. Typically, players would take this event to imply the existence of an in-game door that can be opened with this keycard. This is initially confirmed in the text corresponding to the achievement for having collected it. "Why else would the designers of this game put the keycard there?", players can read there. Once again, players are likely to be frustrated by this encounter, as the keycard does not actually open any of the doors in the game's titular inn, nor does it serve any other function within the fictional gameworld. Rather, the keycard was put in the game with the purpose of confronting players with their conventional (and maybe also naïve) willingness to assume that any object within an artefactual environment must have a meaning by virtue of its very artifactuality. In terms of academic references, this achievement description cites Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni's (2020) paper on the implied designer of digital games, which describes how players ground their interpretations and uses of in-game objects on what they infer the designer might have intended with these objects. In this particular in-game situation, *Doors* prompts players to reflect on this inferential and interpretive process by presenting them with a red herring: a key that corresponds to no door in the game and has, therefore, no use apart from deception. In their interaction with the "implied door", and nudged by the corresponding achievement text, players are likely to question their own stance towards the keycard, the door that is implied by it, and their expectations towards both. It is also relevant to observe that, in this occasion, the game explicitly uses emersive strategies to make players aware of their own expectations and interpretive processes: in the last

line of the achievement text for this door, the designers meta-fictionally address the player directly and suggest the possibility that the keycard was only put into the game because the designers intended to make a point about game interpretation. Players are thus explicitly invited to reflect on the in-game door from a perspective that is external to the gameworld and to observe this world as a suspicious and perhaps unreliably designed artefact.

6 – CONCLUSION

Can all forms of knowledge be presented linguistically? This paper relies on the belief that there are insights and intuitions that cannot be suitably communicated in ways that are exclusively linguistic, nor can be paraphrased without significant epistemic loss (also see Davies 2008, 10-11). Starting from the theoretical premise that some forms of knowledge are irreducibly experiential, our text discusses theories on the cognitive value of the experience of conceptual art. The possibility for an artefact to grant its audience (or its users) experiential access to self-reflexive ideas was identified as a particularly interesting example of a non-linguistic approach to knowledge and communication: those works can, in fact, deliberately provoke questions concerning art and representation in their recipients, and can instill doubts about the cultural role of the artist and/or on the social value of artworks themselves. The ideas and feelings elicited by those works are experienced in practice and engaged with at a personal level. They cannot, therefore, be fully captured by language or suitably rendered in intersubjective discourse. Similarly, self-reflexive game experiences were recognized in this paper to be useful in communicating game-related ideas to their players in ways that are rooted in their lived experience, their backgrounds, intuitions, and expectations. These conceptual games afford, in other words, cognitive situations and disclose experiential kinds of knowledge that transcend the possibilities offered by the forms of mediation commonly used in game studies. When a game experientially offers knowledge that directly and discursively refers to theories and notions in game studies, then there is no reason why that game cannot be considered an academic work of game studies. Moreover, precisely because of this combination of discursive and experiential knowledge, we argue that such a game efficiently and vividly expresses game studies ideas and encourages players to approach them critically.

We discussed *Doors (the game)* (Gualeni & Van de Mosselaer 2021) as an example of a self-reflexive game which is evidently created with the intention of communicating game studies knowledge. Some exemplary in-game situations, elements, and interactions taken from *Doors* were analyzed to exemplify how conceptual games can be used to address theories and questions in the field in ways that are also experiential. By discussing *Doors* as a virtuous example, our hope is that this paper also functions as an invitation for game scholars to be open – where suitable – to share their game-related knowledge and criticism through the creation of self-reflexive conceptual games.

To also play the devil's advocate, we are aware that the production of self-reflexive games (regardless of how small) is arguably more labor-intensive than writing texts. If that were not enough to dissuade game scholars from making games as academic outputs, it is also evident that game production requires forms of knowledge and familiarity with a variety of tools that are not, or at least not yet, common among researchers in the field. We want to be clear on this point: this paper does not present conceptual, self-reflexive games as the ultimate medium to generate or communicate game studies knowledge. We acknowledge that there are also evident downsides and disadvantages in the use of those games in academia. Some of those shortcomings can emerge in relation to phenomena of ludic unreliability such as software malfunctions and unexpected player behaviors. And that is not all: when making self-reflexive games as game studies outputs, scholars must also consider the medium's rapid obsolescence,

the need to maintain their playable work accessible and functioning, and the degrees of familiarity with computers as well as medium-specific literacy that they inevitably require of their audience.

That said, we believe that the steep price to pay to make and maintain those games can be worth its while due to the expressive and epistemic advantages they offer. As argued in the previous sections, such playable artefacts are already providing a corrective to the linguistic bias that still pervades game studies.

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ENDNOTES

1 - A similar invitation is evident in Bogost’s 2012 book *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing*, where the activity of constructing artefacts is discussed as a viable and much neglected humanistic practice that “entails making things that explain how things make their world.” (93)

2 - Both artworks add a specific, experiential dimension to the cognitive value that the discourse they depend on would have in isolation. Having someone experience these artworks arguably has an added cognitive effect compared to merely asking them whether “a urinal could be art” or stating that “a represented pipe is not a pipe.” *Fountain* facilitates the appreciators by potentially eliciting the experience of surprise or even frustration in their audience who see a urinal presented as a work of art. The experience of *The Treachery of Images* prompts users directly to question their own laxity in consistently separating things from their representations.

3 - It is relevant to observe how the idea of self-reflexivity is already present and evident in the very titles of the playful artefacts in this list. To the various examples cited here, we could have also added the humorous, experimental game *Game Studies* (Barr & Lessard 2016). Our decision not to include Barr & Lessard’s game rests on the fact that, technically speaking, *Game Studies* does not seem to be a deliberate effort to offer game knowledge. Although the game clearly depends on game studies discourse, referencing concepts such as “the magic circle”, it does not explain, address, or discernibly criticize these ideas. For players who are not familiar with ongoing debates in game studies or technical lexicon, the game is unlikely to achieve its comical effects (or any conceptual effect, for that manner). And for players who are ‘in the know’, the game is a collection of playable vignettes that reference and mock game studies ideas, but not add or reflect on them.

4 - By extension, the game invites players to reflect on the representations of virtual objects in general. That is, *Doors* was designed to make players think about how they interpret and act towards objects that are interactively presented to them by computers.

5 - The idea of “silly questions” refers to inquiries that are “pointless, inappropriate, out of order” (Walton 1990, 176), as they have no answer within the world of the fiction. An example of such a question is “How can Othello find the time and inspiration to react to his wife’s death in such magnificent and eloquent verse in Shakespeare’s play, if he is actually not a great poet and also greatly distressed at the moment of that reaction?” Walton comments that to dwell on such questions is irrelevant to the appreciation of the work under consideration, and would only distract appreciators from the represented content.