Gaming the Future: How Games Help Us Play What's to Come

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As a genre, science fiction (SF) has secured a venerable spot among our cultural products, especially in the global North, as a forward-looking form of entertainment that can be both engaging and politically and intellectually sophisticated, "an essential mode of imagining the horizons of possibility" (Csicsery-Ronay, 2012, p. 1). As Csicsery-Ronay explains, when faced with real-world scientific progress and its social impacts, we turn to SF—a fictional playground mirroring present or future scenarios—to explore these complexities, process our emotions (e.g., delight, anxiety, or grief), and even just engage in a safe space without losing touch with reality (Csicsery-Ronay, 2012). In essence, we temporarily transform our experiences into SF, allowing us to grapple with them in a way that feels more manageable. This potential is magnified when SF is presented through the medium of videogames, which are ideal vehicles for our speculative imagination, being what Bogost calls "modes of experience." In playing games, individuals assume roles on a spectrum of choice and agency, stepping into "the shoes of someone else" (Bogost, 2011). This type of embodiment is in part what makes the SF videogame form both strange and exciting, in that the player is required to think through, and act upon, matters within a SF framework, which is both liberating and limiting to them on a mental and mechanical level (Krzywinska & MacCallum-Stewart, 2009).

Despite the combined potential of the SF genre and videogame medium, however, many SF games are escapist rather than critical, treating SF elements as a given rather than as a subject worthy of critical exploration. Games like the *Mass Effect* series (2007–2012), *Starfield* (2023), and *Titanfall 1 & 2* (2014, 2016), for example, use SF elements and advanced technologies purely as aesthetic and gameplay functions, a backdrop to make the game more interesting for players. Of course, this is not always the case; recent games increasingly focus on hotly debated technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology, human augmentation and genetic engineering, and brain-computer interfaces, using these advancements as themes to prompt critical reflection on their ethical and societal implications. But what is it that these recent games are doing differently, and how do these choices maximize the speculative potential of SF videogames?

Drawing on Cameron Kunzelman's concept of "mechanics of speculation," I argue that the necessity of player action enables these games to act as virtual playgrounds, reflecting societal fears and hopes while also allowing players to experiment with

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potential futures. Kunzelman states that the players of SF videogames often face moments of uncertainty about what their actions will bring about next. It is precisely at such moments, he notes, that we see the "mechanics of speculation" at work. He defines this concept as "a way of affording a player the capability of thinking that the next moment, the next interactive microinstant, could produce anything at all" (Kunzelman, 2022, p. 4). When speculation happens in such a context, it exercises the human capacity to imagine the world as it is not, which can sometimes be radically different from what it actually is. The most important thing here is not the fact that the player's clicks might turn out to be meaningless due to the linearity of the choices afforded by the game; one still has to "*think* about what kind of world it [the player's clicks] *could* produce" (Kunzelman, 2022, p. 48).

To illustrate these mechanics, this study explores Zachtronics' *Eliza* (2019), a visual-novel-type game that portrays life in a world where AI is no longer a dream—a theme that has become even more relevant since ChatGPT went viral in 2022. Visual novel games allow players to choose how the narrative unfolds, and this narrative follows the character of Evelyn, a former software engineer who is working as a proxy, or human operator, for the eponymous AI-driven therapy program. Early chapters introduce the player to how the Eliza therapy sessions are conducted as Evelyn starts her new job as a proxy. We get to meet the different characters who come to the sessions, learning about their lives, problems, and whether the advice they received in previous sessions actually helped them or not. We also get to meet Evelyn's other acquaintances. Things progress in a rather linear fashion until one specific session where the player is given the option to either go off-script or just follow Eliza's suggested dialogue lines. From this point onward, the game provides several bifurcations in the narrative, amply contextualized by increasing information about Evelyn's past, the corporation behind the project, the series of events that led to the present circumstances, and Evelyn's associates, friends, and patients. These are the moments, I believe, where Kunzelman's mechanic of speculation is at work, as the more one learns about the characters, setting, and Eliza itself—and thus the more actively engaged one becomes in the game world's possibilities—the harder it gets to make dialogue choices haphazardly. In this way, the game encourages the player to think through the consequences of particular choices, which together address the ethical complexities at the intersection between AI and mental health.

When *Eliza* was released in the summer of 2019, advanced AI chatbots were relatively unknown, and they had just started being used as experimental tools that might help alleviate the ever-increasing demands in the mental health sector. The game, nevertheless, addresses some of the major concerns surrounding corporate-owned AI systems in mental health settings, including privacy, data transparency, and accountability, while also questioning the efficacy of such methods and whether they are being marketed fairly and truthfully (Plante, 2023). Although *Eliza* offers a compelling example, the scope of this study's analysis is limited due to its focus on a single game; future research could gain a richer understanding of this growing trend by examining a broader range of titles in the SF genre. Even so, this study reveals the evolving role of videogames as powerful tools, not just for entertainment, but for actively shaping and questioning the narratives that underpin our understanding of the evolving relationship between humanity and technology.

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