

Fake VS Fictional Games: On Dark and Deceptive Representations of Non-Actual Games

Nele Van de Mosselaer

Tilburg University

n.vandemosselaer@tilburguniversity.edu

One of the trailers of *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog 2020) shows the character Ellie sneaking through enemy territory. She is suddenly joined by Joel, her surrogate father, who tells her he has come to aid her (see PlayStation 2019, 02:18–02:38). This trailer is a lie. In the actual game, the scene shown in the trailer plays out differently, as Joel is, at that point in the narrative, long dead. The game implied by the trailer, one where Ellie and Joel team up once again to fight zombies, does not exist. It is an example of what can be called a *fake game*. In this presentation, I introduce fake games by contrasting them to games that are, instead, fictional.

In their book *Fictional Games*, Gualeni and Fassone define fictional games as “playful activities and ludic artefacts conceptualized as part of fictional worlds” (2023, 2). They add that fictional games are meant to be imagined to exist and cannot actually be played. This definition aligns with how fiction is usually characterized within philosophy of fiction: as that which mandates *imaginings* instead of beliefs (Walton 1990, 41). Defining fiction in terms of its connection with imagination has the advantage of distinguishing fiction from lies. Lies equally present untrue content, but are meant to prompt beliefs instead of imaginings. When it comes to representing non-actual games, this distinction between fiction and lies presents an interesting possibility: that of **fake games**. These are games that do not actually exist, but are presented with the intention of making people falsely *believe* that they do.

The games that Gualeni and Fassone discuss in *Fictional Games* are clearly fictional and not fake, because the authors focus only on games that are presented in works that are unambiguously works of fiction. Yet, there seem to be non-actual games that are meant to be imagined, yet are not part of fictional works. An example of this can be found in *Vermis I - lost dungeons and forbidden woods* (Plastiboo 2022), a book that is advertised as the official guide for a game, *Vermis*, that does not exist. Rather than being embedded in a fictional world, this game implicitly evokes one. This shows how representations of non-actual games can blur the boundaries between fiction and lies, because they are presented without a clear context to help readers decide whether they should believe or imagine the game to exist.

In my presentation, I analyze three ways of presenting non-actual games that are not mentioned by Gualeni and Fassone and that can also give rise to *fake games*:

- Firstly, non-actual games can be presented through **fictional/fake gameplay**. Mornington Crescent is an example of a game that is presented through fictional gameplay: participants pretend-play this game, which is characterized by absurd

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

© 2025 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

rules recorded in non-existent manuals pretend-employed in play (see Gualeni and Fassone 2023, 36). Fake game advertisements, on the other hand, often contain non-actual games that are presented through fake gameplay. Mago defines such ads as promoting the game “by depicting gameplay footage that does not, however, reflect actual essential gameplay of the promoted game” (2020, 135). Mobile game “pull the pin” puzzles are a typical example of this (see Figure 1).

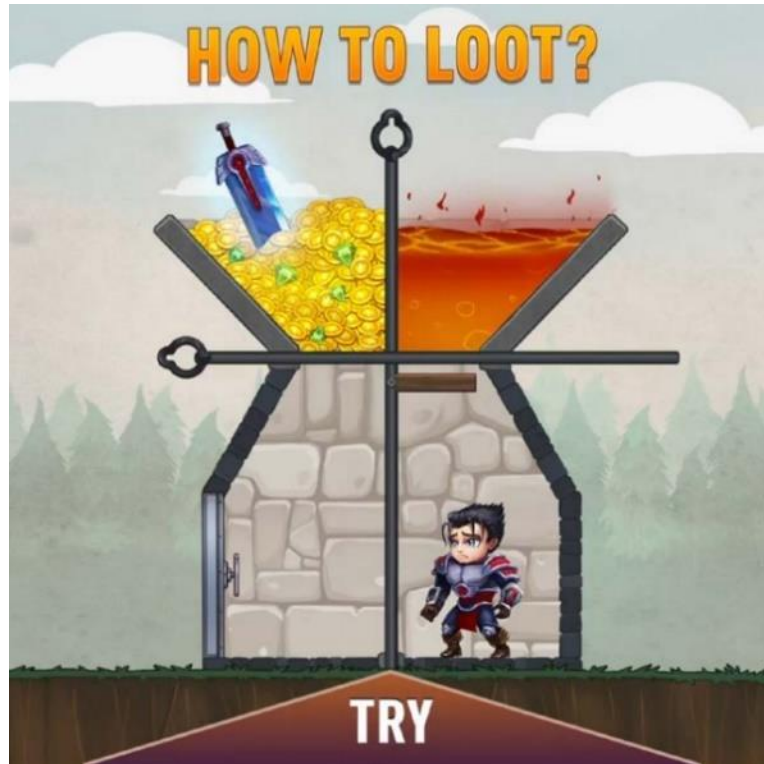


Figure 1. Fake ‘pull the pin’ gameplay in an ad for *Hero Wars* (Nexters 2016)

- Secondly, non-actual games can be presented through **fictional/fake paraludic material**, or material that is supposedly supplied by a game’s designers or publishers and gives (fake or fictional) information about their game. The aforementioned book *Vermis I* - (Plastiboo 2022) is an example of fictional paraludic material. The trailer of *The Last of Us Part II* can be interpreted as fake paraludic material, as it lies about the game that it presents.
- Thirdly, non-actual games can be presented through **fictional/fake metaludic material**, or material that (falsely or fictionally so) offers information about a game but is not published by its own creators. A remarkable example of fictional metaludic material was the subreddit dedicated to *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware 2022), years before the actual game was released. Redditors communally pretended to be playing it already, creating an elaborate, fictional version of *Elden Ring* through discussions of their pretend-gameplay. Examples of metaludic presentations of fake games are game myths, such as the myth that Luigi was a playable character in *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo 1996), or the urban legends surrounding the mysterious (and probably completely made-up) arcade game *Polybius*.

In *Fictional Games*, Gualeni and Fassone discuss the aesthetic value fictional games can add to the narratives in which they are embedded. What value, however, could the above-mentioned false representations of games have? In the last part of this paper, I discuss **potential purposes of fake games**. I distinguish darkly designed fake game representations from deceptively designed ones. **Darkly designed fake game-representations** have the intention of deceiving people into making certain decisions (Maier & Harr 2020). Fake game advertisements, for example, aim to trick people into downloading mobile games by showcasing gameplay that is not present in the actual game.

Deceptively designed fake game representations, on the other hand, aim to give rise to aesthetically valuable experiences (Gualeni & Van de Mosselaer 2021). I will show this through several examples of aesthetically interesting lies about and in games. The deceitful *The Last of Us Part II* trailer, for example, can interestingly influence players' emotional experiences of the actual game. After all, players who saw the trailer would be less likely to expect Joel to die before the scene depicted in the trailer came to pass. The deceitful trailer thus further supports the shock value of Joel's early in-game death.

To conclude, I argue that, while fake games representations have the express purpose of deceiving people, they can give rise to all the aesthetically valuable effects that Gualeni and Fassone ascribe to fictional games. Creatively used, fake games' effects can be just as "speculative, transformational, political, meta-reflexive, misleading, comic, utopian and estranging" (2023, 6).

Keywords

Fake games, fictional games, fiction, lies, fake advertisements, imagination, dark design, deceptive design

REFERENCES

- FromSoftware. (2022) *Elden Ring*. [PlayStation 5]. Tokyo: Bandai Namco Entertainment.
- Gualeni, S., & Fassone, R. (2022). *Fictional Games: A Philosophy of Worldbuilding and Imaginary Play*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Gualeni, S., & Van de Mosselaer, N. (2021). Ludic Unreliability and Deceptive Game Design. *Journal of the Philosophy of Games*, 3(1).
- Mago, Z. (2020). Fake-vertising and Mobile Games: Case Study of 'Pull the Pin' Ads. *Communication Today*, 11(2), 132-147.
- Maier, M. & Harr, R. (2020). Dark Design Patterns: An End-User Perspective. *Human Technology*, 16, 170-199.
- Naughty Dog. (2020). *The Last of Us Part II*. [PlayStation 4]. Sony Interactive Entertainment.
- Nexters. (2016). *Hero Wars*. [Android]. Nexters.
- Nintendo EAD. (1996). *Super Mario 64* [Nintendo 64]. Nintendo.

Plastiboo. (2022). *Vermis I - lost dungeons and forbidden woods*. Hollow Pres.

PlayStation. (2019, September 24). The Last of Us Part II – Release Date Reveal Trailer | PS4 [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/II5UsqP2JAK?si=f7gkzR1Xr719y-aC>

Walton, K.L. 1990. *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.