Conspiracy Thinking and Videogame Interpretation

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Videogame players can be surprisingly similar to conspiracy theorists. This is exemplified by the decade-long (and ultimately fruitless) search for the function of a certain door in *Shadow of the Colossus* (documented in Jacob Geller's 2019 YouTube video)*,* lore-books detailing the stories that can be "found" in obscure clues in games like *Bloodborne* (such as the 2015 fanmade book *The Paleblood Hunt* by the Reddit user known as Redgrave), and various game myths or urban legends about games that have spread widely online (one of the earliest being the untrue rumour that Mew could be found under a truck near the S.S. Anne ship in *Pokémon Red* and *Blue*).

Yet, whereas real-life conspiracy theorists are often judged for spreading their far-fetched narratives and creating epistemically hostile environments, videogame players are often praised for their inquisitive attitudes and for coming up with, sometimes equally far-fetched or even false, theories. One plausible reason for this is the fact that videogame players try to figure out what to *imagine to be true,* while conspiracy theorists are occupied with what to *believe*. In philosophy of fiction, beliefs involve asserting the truth or existence of their intentional object, while imagination consists of entertaining a proposition without commitment to its *actually* being the case (Carroll 1990, 80). As Kendall Walton wrote: "Imagining aims at the fictional as belief aims at the true" (1990, 41). With this, the difference between players and conspiracy theorists seems clear. A player might take it to be *fictionally* true that Mew is hiding under a truck. But a conspiracy theorist actually comes to *believe* certain things, such as the moon-landing being fake, which might have real and even dangerous consequences in the actual world.

In this presentation, we aim to show that, despite this belief/imagination distinction, the basic mechanics of conspiracy thinking and videogame interpretation are very similar. That is: while conspiracy theorists really do seem to *believe* their theories, the mechanics through which these beliefs come about are similar to how *imaginings* are usually generated while engaging with videogames as designed works of fiction*.* Our presentation focuses on comparisons of interpretative practices within game fandoms and conspiracy communities. We particularly focus on how the following three factors that influence interpretations in both communities:

1) Using players' interpretative efforts regarding the (useless) "Pendant" item in *Dark Souls* as an example, we first discuss how interpretative practices tend to involve a ***bias towards meaningfulness****.* Gameworlds are *artefacts:* they are environments that players know were intentionally created for them to experience and enjoy. This invites two kinds of interpretative attitudes:

  i. A hermeneutics of faith (Ricoeur 1970, 28), in which every seemingly innocuous detail of the virtual environment is interpreted as an attempt by its author to communicate something meaningful and worthwhile.

  ii. A hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur 1970, 32), where players take on sceptical attitudes and interpret games based on the assumption that these should be demystified and decoded, as they have hidden meanings.

Framed as such, players' interpretative practices clearly feature the intentionality biases, proportionality biases, and the pattern-seeking behaviours that are so noticeable in conspiracy theorists (Douglas et al. 2017). Both player and conspiracy communities are often shaped around shared efforts of finding/decoding meaning.

2) Using so-called "lore-research" about FromSoftware games by YouTubers such as Vaatividya as an example, we then discuss how interpretative practices are often influenced by a **desire for clarity**. In his 2022 paper on "The Seductions of Clarity", Thi Nguyen already points out how the "thought-terminating" sense of clarity typically makes both conspiracy thinking and videogame play particularly pleasurable. In this regard, we discuss the role of two types of incompleteness in interpretation. One type is the incompleteness or "gappiness" of our knowledge about a world (be it the actual one or a gameworld), which we desire to fix and fill in to attain a sense of clarity. This is contrasted with another kind of incompleteness: the aesthetically pleasing simplicity or "crispness" of worlds presented in games and conspiracy theories. Here, gaps in the story contribute to helpfully clearing the world of bothersome "ambiguities and complexities" (Nguyen 2020, 68).

3) Based on cases where players vehemently oppose or defend certain interpretations of game narratives, we finally discuss **the role of personal values and self-perceptions** in interpretative practices. Conspiracy communities are very often shaped by mutual affirmations and explorations of shared, treasured values (Wheeler 2020). Similarly, game fandoms often denounce/champion specific game interpretations based on shared ideas about gender distinctions, perceptions of the self as "elite" players, or political convictions.

By discussing these three aspects, we reveal and analyze the entanglement of the aesthetic and epistemic appeal of conspiracy-like interpretation, both in videogames *and* in real-life conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theorists and videogame-interpreters both set out to learn the truth about the actual world / the gameworld. Yet, their epistemic endeavors are often easily and quickly overwritten by more aesthetically motivated interpretations: interpretations that manage to give meaning to every encountered aspect of the world, that give a seductively clear explanation for various aspects of this world, and that fit within their already established self-narrative by confirming the values they treasure in life.

Keywords

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