

Player Engagement with Games: Formal Reliefs and Representation Checks

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ABSTRACT

Alongside the direct parallels and contrasts between traditional narrative fiction and games, there lie certain partial analogies that provide their own insights. This article begins by examining a direct parallel between narrative fiction and games—the role of fictional reliefs and reality checks in shaping aesthetic engagement—before arguing that from this a partial analogy can be developed stemming from a feature that distinguishes most games from most traditional fictions: the presence of rules. The relation between rules and fiction in games has heretofore been acknowledged but not examined in detail, giving an impression of a tension that is constant. However, the paired concepts of *formal reliefs* and *representation checks*, once introduced, allow us to explain how rules and fiction interact to alter the ways in which players engage with games in a dynamic but limited way.

I. GAMES CONTAINING FICTIONAL NARRATIVES

Games frequently feature fictional narratives. This should be uncontroversial, and is obvious at least for certain subcategories of game; it has been noted that “even a cursory observation shows that many videogames do involve narratives” (Tavinor 2009, 20).¹ Clearly in a game such as *BioShock*² a story is told, in this case progressing through a shipwreck, a stranding in an undersea city, various discoveries and conflicts, and a dramatic final escape. However, it takes little to recognize that another subcategory, board games, can be included within this. Consider *Agricola*, which presents the following introductory description: “Central Europe, around 1670 AD. The Plague which has raged since 1348 has finally been overcome. The civilized world is revitalized. People are upgrading and renovating their huts. Fields must be plowed, tilled and harvested.”³ This sets up a story to supplement the bare rules of the game. In the guise of a farmer, the player collects and spends resources, builds enclosures for animals, ploughs fields, grows their family, and so forth; on turn one they oversee two people in a two-room shack, and by turn fourteen they may oversee up to five people whose house sits on a much-developed farm.

There are of course differences in the role played by narrative between these two games—the basic narrative sequence for *BioShock* is, I would argue, necessary for even minimal engagement by any human player, which is not true for *Agricola*. A human would be simply unable to react appropriately to the tasks in *BioShock* without treating events in the game as something like fictional versions of, for example, exploring spaces filled with objects or fighting enemies that are launching attacks.⁴ On the other hand, a human could complete *Agricola*’s key tasks with only an appreciation of the bare rule-set—that a resource is worth n points at the game’s end is comprehensible without considering what the resource is intended to represent. Even if it is far easier for typical players to understand why condition A yields three points per tile while condition B yields five when condition A represents a wooden house and condition B a stone house, this is not required, and the strategically important

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reason for the difference in value is that condition *B* requires more investment of the game's finite resources.

Nevertheless, I would insist that the narrative perspective is at least strongly encouraged, and plausibly *prescribed*, in both cases. If we do nothing beyond stacking relative values, not only are we less likely to enjoy the game, there is a significant sense in which we fail to engage with it appropriately—board game designers take pains to design artwork, add caption text, give prompts in rulebooks, and so forth, with the intention of getting players to engage with the game's narrative aspects, and to refuse to thus engage is to depart from an integral aspect of the game. The fact that the medium differs between video games and board games does not entail a significant difference in the role of fictional narratives. In taking this perspective I intend no commitment on questions of “ludology vs. narratology,”⁵ where the former position insists on the primacy of rules over fiction in theorizing about games, and the latter the converse: it is enough for my purposes that there are *some* games for which aesthetic engagement requires fictional engagement and I confine my attention to these. While I reject the claim that fiction in games is characteristically “highly subjective, optional, ambiguous ... and subject to discussion” (Juul 2005, 121), to cede this point would merely restrict the analysis to a smaller range of narrative-focused games rather than ruling it out entirely.

Of course, some games do not invite a fictional narrative attitude at all—when playing noughts and crosses, we would be hard pressed to construct any narrative beyond the mere pattern of moves (or in the video game sphere, there are clear cases such as the puzzle game *2048*,⁶ which requires only the manipulation of numbered tiles, as well as cases featuring fictional characters but no ... narrative such as Nintendo's *Brain Training* games⁷). I could recount the “story” of some victory, but this would consist of little more than a list of moves (“I opened on the top left, they responded with...”) that lacks any plausibly fictional component. Indeed, there is a scale—I can construct only the vaguest fictional narrative for games like chess or Go, involving some notion of armies engaging in combat, and it would be strange to accuse the chess player who thinks of the knight just as the piece that moves *thus* of failing to properly engage with the game. Narrative readings of chess are available, one might take them to be enriching, and there seem to be more and less appropriate readings (it is less appropriate to imagine the pieces as participants in a group dance), but no reading is required for proper aesthetic engagement.

I from now on assume that both video games and board games can encourage players to imagine them as in part narrative fictions of a sort, and that for some games “the fiction is not a mere *gloss* on the game ... [but] is essential to the functioning of the game” (Tavinor 2009, 95). That games can themselves be works of fiction, and therefore artworks, is widely accepted (see, e.g., Nguyen 2020; Smuts 2005; Tavinor 2009, 2011).⁸

Before moving on, a note on focus is in order: this article focuses on *video games* and *board games* as they are interestingly different yet related subcategories that benefit from consideration together, and in the latter case because the category is underexplored (as observed in Nguyen 2017, 3). The case might be more easily made using tabletop roleplaying games, but their relationship with fiction is so close that it is more informative to set them aside.⁹ However, in focusing on these subcategories I do not intend to claim that they constitute a precise philosophically interesting category. The analysis to follow is intended to apply to any game that is also a work of fiction, where this is taken to be stronger than merely *having fictional content* since some games merely *license* fictional engagement—I take a game to be a work of fiction when it *prescribes* engagement with its fictional content. Or to put this another way, when full “absorption” in gameplay in Nguyen's (2020) sense requires fictional engagement.

II. FICTIONAL RELIEFS AND REALITY CHECKS IN FICTION AND IN GAMES

Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2013) introduces a pair of useful concepts for understanding how our aesthetic engagement with fiction shifts—focusing primarily on film, though literature is by no means excluded, Vaage notes that various techniques are employed by creators¹⁰ to enable us to continue to engage where we might otherwise experience failures of aesthetic engagement such as the phenomenon of “imaginative resistance” (see, e.g., Gendler 2000, 2006; Moran 1994). For instance, when

watching *Breaking Bad*¹¹ I emotionally engage with Walter White, a manufacturer and distributor of an immensely damaging drug who has nothing but contempt for much of humanity, and furthermore a murderer.¹² I would struggle to relate to a real-life counterpart, but a range of techniques bring the narrative's fictional nature to prominence, freeing me to engage extensively without feeling the need to distance myself from the character. Examples might include prominent use of soundtrack, highly stylized cinematography that draws attention to unusual perspectives, or drawing the audience's attention to curious plot elements (such as the recurring pink teddy bear of *Breaking Bad* season 2). Where this happens—where creators draw attention to a narrative's fictionality to affect the manner of audience engagement—we have what Vaage calls *fictional relief*.

Fictional reliefs have a companion concept: the *reality check*. In order to drive our engagement in different directions, for example toward considering actions' wider social impact, a fiction may employ techniques to encourage us to treat the narrative as more like a series of real events (Vaage likens our engagement in such cases to typical engagement with documentaries). To return to *Breaking Bad*, while people addicted to crystal meth are often presented in darkly comic ways that distract from the impact that the drug has on real users, we are sometimes brought starkly back to reality—when seeing a person brutally murdered for drug money, or seeing Walt watch silently as someone dies because their death would be convenient, we are encouraged to confront circumstances much more as though they were real. We can no longer safely engage in the quiet-man-turned-criminal-mastermind fantasy and, temporarily, we are expected to censure Walt as we would a real individual. Where creators portray fictional content in a way that more closely resembles nonfiction to affect audience engagement, we have a *reality check*.

Since, as per Section I, games can have a fictional narrative component, it seems to follow that the same techniques are available to the creators of games, but for completeness let us confirm this. Fictional relief seems an appropriate description of various common features in video games, for instance, when blood can be switched off, violence is animated in a cartoonish way, or features of soundtrack, narration, and so forth emphasize to us that the circumstances are fictional. Reality checks can also be found at various points in video games: in *BioShock*, “Little Sisters” are heavily stylized under a “creepy child” horror trope (and thus are largely unsympathetic) until their monstrous “Big Brothers” are defeated. The player is then presented with a choice between killing them or saving them, with the former generating a greater bonus. When the choice is presented, the little girl is brought into the center of the frame, her face shown to the player in high contrast as she cowers. The player is clearly intended to feel some pressure on their decision¹³—though the reality check is not as strong as it might be, since if the player chooses the “harvest” option they are spared the sight of the resulting corpse. However, we are temporarily drawn away from the more fantastical elements of the game, and at that point feel less comfortable with a degree of violence that had previously been simply accepted in the course of standard gameplay.

Board games are less straightforward in this respect, but let us start with fictional reliefs. We are presented especially fictionalized circumstances in various games where the real implications of our goals are problematic: for example in the timeline-altering game *Chrononauts*,¹⁴ one player character's victory condition is to *cause World War III*. The goal is made comedic rather than threatening by having it assigned to “Squa Tront,” a hyperintelligent cockroach—it would present differently as the goal of, say, a violent nihilist. We might see another in the stylized presentation of *Pandemic*¹⁵—here players battle to eradicate disease outbreaks that threaten the planet, but graphic depictions of illness, or even descriptions of symptoms, are notably absent, with the game's aesthetic much “cleaner” than it might conceivably have been.

Are there reality checks in board games? Though they are less obvious, I think there are clear cases. Consider again *Agricola*—one's choices when determining how to maximize points may involve securing insufficient food to feed one's family at the harvest, upon which a “starvation token” (which yields negative points) is received. In service of a long-term strategy, we may do this voluntarily, but we are encouraged to see this particular point's trade-off as an especially serious failing. Notably, the game's design could clearly be tweaked to make us feel either better about such decisions (e.g., by redescribing the same condition as a penalty for failure to pay a tithe on one's land), or worse (e.g., by requiring us to remove a “family member” piece, representing their death from starvation). Another form of reality check comes in games like *Werewolf*¹⁶ that involve group decisions to condemn player

characters to death: in this case, the group must decide who among them they believe is a werewolf, as the aim of the game is to kill all the werewolves before they kill the villagers (except of course for those players who are werewolves!). This process is typically drawn out, to give the greatest opportunity for guilt on the part of the accusers for treating the accused as liars and traitors—this despite the fact that in the context of the game it is *mandated* of some of them to lie and betray, and therefore not surprising that this behavior would be suspected even if as a matter of chance the accused was assigned an “honest” role. Indeed, exploiting feelings of guilt about victimization can be a good survival strategy for players—as either a villager *or* a werewolf, I may try to elicit sympathy for my position, pointing to the cruelty of sentencing someone to death on scant evidence beyond an intuitive sense of who is suspicious. In such games I have both honestly and dishonestly bemoaned people’s tendency to suspect me of lying, and in either case facts about emotional states are imported from outside the game setting.

We have seen in this section that games can play with perceived fictionality using fictional reliefs and reality checks much as traditional fiction can; neither medium elicits aesthetic engagement in a fixed manner. Further questions about the different purposes served by these features, and the different ways they might manifest, in narrative fiction and games will be left aside for now. Instead, we explore a feature that is analogous to fictional reliefs and reality checks but is distinctive of games. As we will see, while their dual make-up of rules and fiction has been remarked on (see e.g., [Juul 2005](#), [Tavinor 2009](#), which are discussed further below), it is only by appreciating how dynamic their interplay is that we can fully recognize the complexity of engagement with games.

III. FORMAL RELIEFS AND REPRESENTATION CHECKS

Now we are in a position to articulate the analogy that is this article’s main concern. Games do not just play with the fictionality of our attitudes to the events represented: the involvement of rules,¹⁷ and the demands on a successful rule-set (e.g., excluding strategies that blatantly dominate all others, or allowing gameplay to be sustained without frustration for some salient period) may require us, if we are to sustain engagement, to temporarily suspend that fictional attitude not by moving toward a more *realistic* attitude, but by moving toward a *formalistic*, nonrepresentational attitude. The task of this section is to explicate this feature through an analogy to the pair of concepts explored in Section II.

Let us first return to board games. *Agricola* has within its rule-set certain requirements on the acquisition and retention of “animal” tokens: roughly, one must build fences to create pastures, and without a dedicated pasture for a type of animal, one cannot acquire them. Furthermore, at each harvest, animals breed, increasing their numbers. In many respects, here and in other games, there is a relation of support between the rules and the fictional content: through the game’s specific “valorization of the possible outcomes” ([Juul 2005](#), 40), with points awarded and success accorded to the collection of certain tokens, the fictional status of certain players as running successful farms and others as struggling to feed their family is reinforced. In games that actively seek to create a high-pressure atmosphere this is yet more notable: in *Pandemic* one turns over cards from the “infection deck” to see where new outbreaks will occur, with “epidemic” cards marking the transition of the game to a higher difficulty: understanding how these rules function gives the player a stronger sense of growing fictional peril.

To return to *Agricola*, however, two elements of the rule-set demonstrate a tension: first, each player may keep one animal outside this system as a “pet,” placed in the player’s house; and second, regardless of the number of animals a player has, their stock only ever increases by one of each type per harvest. We have already observed that *Agricola* encourages a fictional attitude to the events within: we fictionally treat the sheep tokens as sheep, the fence tokens as fences, and the turn-cycles as annual cycles punctuated by harvests where our success or failure as farmers, and our family’s prosperity, will be determined. However, there are limits to this: were I to engage uniformly, I would be puzzled by the suggestion that I might keep one of these animals in my house as a pet. Imagine the mess! I would also be alarmed by the failure of my breeding program to respond to scale: how would we explain the fact that, whether I have two sheep or eight, I acquire only a single extra sheep each year? If we supposed that there was some fixed level of fictional engagement licensed by the game, it would follow that either (1) these places where representation partially breaks down are failures in the game because they aim at but do not reach that fixed level, or (2) such games do not aim at representation beyond

a level of coherence and intelligibility that allows aesthetic engagement to be unaffected by such oddities (i.e., the level they aim for is fixed but *low*).

But I do not think either outcome can be correct. Against the first possibility, *Agricola* is well-regarded as a board game, and we can appreciate why these rules are important to the game (especially the lack of scale in animal breeding—removing this would plausibly unbalance the game).¹⁸ Furthermore, it is difficult to endorse this option without the consequence that simulation is the ideal for all games, which, notwithstanding its sheer implausibility, would have undesirable outcomes such as that board games are inherently inferior to video games. While highly realistic board games exist, for example the notorious *The Campaign for North Africa: The Desert War 1940–43*,¹⁹ even these cannot approach the *richness* of content that is available to video games.²⁰ To exclude the second possibility we need to consider two options. It would follow either that the other elements in the game that depict a more coherent, more intelligible world are irrelevant to aesthetic quality, or that the game can aim to depict a world containing isolated incoherent or unintelligible aspects. But we can clearly see aspects of the game where this coherence is pleasing: the careful planning and building of enclosures, the increasing pressure as the harvest approaches to work the fields at the expense of other projects, are part of what makes the game engaging. If *Agricola* uniformly maintained such significant detachment from a coherent narrative, or if it abruptly engaged in arbitrary departures from a coherent narrative, it would fail to achieve the goals that it evidently sets for itself as a game. But it does neither—its departures are limited, and targeted.

Since neither consequent is plausible, we should reject the antecedent: there cannot be a fixed level of engagement in a case like this. But importantly, the variation in engagement we see cannot be adequately explained through fictional reliefs or reality checks. Clearly this cannot be a *reality check*, since appeals to features of actuality would only make the situation harder to interpret. But if this was a case of *fictional relief*, the fictional attitude would have to become *stronger*, yet our difficulty accommodating the situation is not merely with coherence with actuality, but also with the internal coherence of the fiction itself. Within the fiction of *Agricola*, it makes sense to say that fences are needed to stop the animals from escaping, and it would make sense to say that the more animals you have, the faster their numbers will grow, *except* that rule balancing requires us to suspend this attitude.

It is to account for this aspect of games that, analogous to *fictional relief*, we should introduce the concept of *formal relief*. This occurs where the formal or rule-centric elements of a game take precedence and we are accordingly licensed to suspend or weaken our representational engagement with the game. In other words, where creators intentionally draw attention to a game's rules to affect player engagement, this is formal relief.

To demonstrate that this feature is not particular to the board game format, I now pause to again consider video games. A widespread instance of formal relief here, I would suggest, is found in the tutorials that form an important part of many video games. In order that first-time players should be able to complete the complex tasks required of them in the game proper, many games must provide some sort of tutorial for gaining general understanding of game mechanics such as the extent and types of motion possible. Some games, especially strategy games or those that consist of isolated, repeatable chapters, may have a tutorial situated within a simplified model of the game that allows the demonstration of certain features, which therefore does not interfere with the game's narrative. However, it is not uncommon for a tutorial to be built into the game itself, either in a single segment forming the start of gameplay or in smaller segments distributed throughout. Such sections frequently “break the fourth wall,” with nonplayer characters instructing the player character on which commands to enter, and even if this is not done explicitly the player will likely be asked to do quite arbitrary things in order to test commands. Once again, situating these straightforwardly within the narrative would damage the game's narrative smoothness, but we accept these departures as part of what it is to enjoy the game. Note that this is not to say that a tutorial cannot be an aesthetic flaw: tutorials can be realized more or less effectively. However, the success of a tutorial does not simply track its coherence with the narrative. There are instances of very well-integrated tutorials, such as *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*,²¹ but many successful tutorials involve far more artifice, such as *Fallout 3*,²² in which among other things the player completes a test whose answers determine their character's starting stats. Furthermore, a tutorial can be well-integrated within the narrative and yet be a bad tutorial, often because it makes it very difficult for the player to figure out how to do what they want!

Another example is seen in mini games, where creators place another game *within* the game for the sake of player enjoyment. Sometimes these are plausible within the game's structure—for instance, it could be represented as a game played between characters in the world, as in the card game *Triple Triad* in *Final Fantasy VIII*.²³ Even these often stretch the bounds of plausibility—the *Final Fantasy VIII* player is encouraged to play the mini game even when ostensibly they are locked in a desperate struggle to save the world, and the mini game displays puzzlingly metafictional features by including key characters as high-value cards despite this perspective presumably being alien to the fictional world (since the characters do not know they are in a game).²⁴ However there are many examples that are hard to treat as representing genuine aspects of *any* world. Returning to *BioShock*, the means of “hacking” machines in the game requires the completion of an against-the-clock, tile-based puzzle game—it would be patently ridiculous to imagine the character completing any such puzzle within the game-world in order to shut down security devices or unlock containers (this can be contrasted with the means of unlocking chests in, e.g., *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*,²⁵ which clearly fictionally represents lock picking).

Are both tutorials and mini games either inherent weaknesses in a game or features that set the game's representational standard? No: tutorials enhance enjoyment when designed well by smoothly improving the first-time player's grasp of how to play the game, and for more unorthodox games are necessary to enable *any* play; for mini games it is even clearer, since they are almost by definition unnecessary for gameplay, so it would otherwise be mysterious why creators would ever include them. These features in a video game provide formal relief by dint of being recognizable departures from the fictional aspect of the game, licensing greater focus on the “challenge” aspect of the game. Just like, as Vaage notes, genre conventions establish certain events as fictional reliefs (e.g., the inspiring comeback from a pummeling in a martial arts film, or the chance meeting in a romance film), genre conventions within games establish norms around formal reliefs. In the right context, these render questions like “What is happening in the game-world now?” misguided.

It is important to note that the general prospect of tension between rules and fictional content has previously been discussed. For instance, Grant Tavinor (2009) disagrees on the above point, saying instead that “[u]nrealistic fictions are part of the baggage that we must leave at the door when we enter the fictional world to play a game” (99). If this is intended to suggest that any such “baggage” is simply a flaw that we must tolerate, it undersells the potential of games, as I have tried to show. Tavinor elsewhere suggests that perhaps we must “quarantine the gameplay fiction from the narrative fiction” (118), but does not say more about the conditions under which this happens, so the current article can be seen as clarifying and expanding on this idea. Another prominent strand of investigation is the discussion of “ludonarrative dissonance” first discussed in a game critique by Clint Hocking (2017), however this is largely understood as a *mistake* in games, and the tension—between the viewpoint expressed by a game's fictional content and that implied by the kind of gameplay it encourages—involves a broader conception of a game's overall “message” than is required here.²⁶ Elsewhere, Jesper Juul (2005) discusses so-called “incoherent game-worlds” with reference to features like point-scores and having multiple “lives,” but there are two respects in which this treatment does not resolve the current issue. First, the notion of incoherence Juul appeals to seems too strong (see Hogenbirk, Marries van de Hoef, and Meyer 2018), since it misleadingly suggests that we are being asked to imagine something that is *unimaginable* or *contradictory*—games rarely seem to feature genuine contradictions, and we could usually offer *some* interpretation of what is going on. Second, Juul's resolution of such conflicts is that rules trump fiction, which might work because Juul's focus is on what is *true* in the game (as observed in the above-mentioned critique), but this does not help us to understand how such matters affect *aesthetic engagement*.

By exploring the analogy to fictional relief, however, we are better able to recognize the complexity of the relationship between rules and fiction. This aspect of our engagement is *dynamic* and *limited*: our greater focus on the rules is temporary, allowing us to return to engaging with richly articulated fictional content once the rules cease to make demands on us, and we can only go so far before we *lose* our ability to engage with the game as a fiction. Just as constant, unprincipled flights of fancy would break the limits of fictional relief by divorcing representation so far from our actual judgments as to undermine interest entirely, beyond the limits of formal relief the player will cease seeing

the represented content as at all important to the game, leaving their playing experience something akin to graphically complex draughts.²⁷

We might expect that if fictional reliefs have an analogue in formal reliefs, there ought also to be an analogue for reality checks—I contend that this is exactly right. If games can drive us *away* from treating something representationally, they can also drive us *toward* treating it representationally. This is common sense, since otherwise we would have to believe either that some inherent tempering force keeps us seeing games as representational or that games are constantly prone to collapse into being experienced formalistically. However, we can also do better and show this by example.

When are we encouraged to foreground the representational aspect of board games? Some earlier examples can serve us in this respect. Recall the presence of “starvation tokens” in *Agricola*—these might function as minor reality checks, but even without ceasing to engage with gameplay *as a fiction*, players can be expected to shy away from starvation tokens to a degree that outstrips their impact on points. The goal of the player may be to accumulate points, but the goal of the character the player *represents* in the game is to survive and hopefully thrive in a world of subsistence farming, and for that character, failing to feed their family is a greater failure than failing to farm any pigs. Even if a player chooses this option, should they go on to win, this win will likely be characterized by the players as the work of a ruthless soul, committed to success at any cost. There are also more explicit instances where we are encouraged to make decisions less as players, and more as characters—in a game like *Dead of Winter*,²⁸ for example, different player characters are portrayed differently, and it is expected for players to reflect the character’s nature by taking actions simply because they seem fitting to the character. This is especially true where there are multiple routes to success. A game’s creators may encourage this kind of behavior weakly by using back story, token style or something else “cosmetic,” or strongly, by providing rules that incentivize actions that fit with the depiction of the character. Where this is encouraged—where creators portray content in a way that draws attention to a game’s fictional elements to affect player engagement—we find what I call *representation checks*.²⁹

Representation checks occur in more obvious ways in video games—the precise mechanics of a game are in many cases opaque to a player either because of the disconnect between the command as input by the player and its implementation within the game’s engine, or in a more basic way because a human cannot in real time compute and understand precisely what will happen. In *Baldur’s Gate*³⁰ a player can in theory consult most of the dice-based mechanics to which the game system roughly corresponds and determine that they have, say, a 35% chance of damaging a particular enemy, though they are not encouraged to do so except perhaps in certain high-stakes scenarios, whereas when entering the command to shoot at goal in *FIFA 19*,³¹ the complex rules regarding outcome are not made available to the player at all except by broad inference. Generally, when we are encouraged to take a decision with consequences especially difficult to access in the circumstances, this functions as a representation check: we are invited to take action based not on the *player’s* strategy for the game, but on the *character’s* goals in the game. This is especially common in games with a roleplaying element—the player may be presented with options in dialogue whose impact on gameplay is entirely opaque. The player who consults a walkthrough whenever presented with such a choice could plausibly be described as failing to engage fully or as intended, especially in games like *The Banner Saga*,³² which follows the desperate attempts at survival of a whole caravan of characters against an apocalyptic threat and presents so many choices in dialogue that frequent checking would substantially undermine gameplay. A comparison might be made with the controversy within the gaming community of using cheats to beat games designed to be very difficult,³³ or looking up maps for games that exclude these intentionally.³⁴ Here, concerns are typically less with rule breaking or norm breaking, since (outside of tournaments) little of consequence hangs on the choice, and more with experiencing the kind of engagement intended by the game’s creators.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article began by indicating the relevance of narratives to a wide range of games and applying this to a direct analogy between *fictional reliefs* and *reality checks* in narrative fiction and in games. This led to the recognition of an additional way in which our engagement with games can be influenced: *formal reliefs* license us to suspend consideration of the game world, for instance to engage with actions and

events as strategies, whereas *representation checks* license us to reduce our focus on game mechanics and to see actions and events as though they are entirely part of a fictional world, not conditioned by game status. These features allow us to build on the tensions observed in accounts like Juul (2005) and Tavinor (2009), and to reach a more fine-grained and dynamic appreciation of the relationship between rules and fiction.

We have not here gone as far as to explore, except through example and indication of the role of genre conventions, what techniques are employed by creators to signal formal reliefs and representation checks—further work to examine these, to flesh the concepts out in line with the explication of their analogues as presented by Vaage (2013), would be valuable. Nor has it been part of our aim here to speculate on how these different mechanisms of varying player engagement balance against one another, but by recognizing these additional kinds of variation in engagement we open up the possibility of further exploration of their finer details and dynamics. For instance, the exploration of aesthetics and agency in games in Nguyen (2020) may help to sharpen our understanding of when formal reliefs work: when they contribute to an aesthetically valuable exercise of agency. Furthermore, the recognition of the important complexities that rules can introduce to engagement opens up the possibility of assessing other kinds of fictional work for rules-based influences.³⁵ Regardless, however, this exploration has demonstrated that there is much to be gained from considering how the different components of complex categories like games interact.³⁶

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END NOTES

- 1 One could go further and identify games as a particular kind of interactive fiction as explored, for example, by Robson and Meskin (2016), Wildman and Woodward (2018), and Willis (2019)—as observed in the latter two articles, both video games and board games can fit this description. The details of interactivity do not make a material difference to my point here, however, so I simply assume a broad acceptance of their interactivity.
- 2 Dir. Ken Levine, published in 2007 by 2K Games.
- 3 *Agricola*, designed by Uwe Rosenberg. Original publication in 2007 by Lookout Games; English publication in 2008 by Z-Man Games.
- 4 Broadly speaking, this description follows Walton’s (1990) influential account of fiction as make-believe, though nothing of key importance hangs on the specifics and while one might consider another account such as Currie (1990) more appropriate, I remain neutral on such points. On specific issues such as player actions in games (see, e.g., Meskin and Robson 2012, Sageng 2012, Matsunaga 2016, and Van de Mossalaer 2018) and player desires (see, e.g., Kind 2011, and Van de Mossalaer 2020) there has been considerable debate of, and expansion on, the Waltonian gloss, but my concern is with aesthetic engagement in general rather than with how we describe actions and desires that occur in the context of that engagement so I also remain neutral on these issues.
- 5 See Nguyen (2017, §3) for a survey of the ludology/narratology debate.
- 6 Designed by Gabriele Cirulli, published in 2014 by Solebon LLC.
- 7 E.g., *Dr Kawashima’s Brain Training*, dir. Kouichi Kawamoto, published in 2005 by Nintendo.
- 8 It should be noted that there is dissent from this view, for example, in Rough (2018)’s argument that nothing can be both a game and an artwork.
- 9 Nguyen (2020, 6) points out that at least some tabletop roleplaying games have been claimed to not be Suitsian games (see Suits 1978), and accordingly largely leaves them out of that monograph. Suitsian game status is not important to my argument, but it is nonetheless useful to minimize the risk of misplaced objections based on treating the account as applying to works that are in some sense not games.
- 10 This terminology is not Vaage’s: I use “creators” for neutrality between the various stakeholders that can significantly influence films, literature, and games, intending to subsume authors of fictions within this category alongside directors, actors, game designers, and so on.
- 11 Dir. Vince Gilligan, broadcast 2008–2013 by AMC.
- 12 One way to characterize the situation is to see Walt as a “rough hero” in the sense described by Eaton (2012). Eaton’s account is, I think, problematic in the extent to which it renders moral engagement central to our engagement with fictional characters, which is brought out in Eaton’s dialogue with Carroll (2013). Nevertheless, the idea is helpful for identifying a feature that has the potential to interfere with aesthetic engagement.
- 13 This example is discussed elsewhere both for its emotional and its ethical relevance, for example, by Tavinor (2009) and by Robson and Meskin (2016, 171).
- 14 Designed by Andrew Looney. Published in 2000 by Looney Labs.
- 15 Designed by Matt Leacock. Published in 2007 by Z-Man Games.
- 16 Designed by Dmitry Davidoff. Original publication date unavailable.
- 17 As Nguyen (2020) notes, not all games involve rules. This account therefore does not claim that rules, or the features they enable, are either necessary or sufficient features of games, but rather we are attending to some of these games’ more distinctive features.
- 18 These considerations also suggest that this should not be seen as a case of ludonarrative dissonance, as noted later in this article.
- 19 Designed by Richard Berg. Published in 1979 by SPL.

- 20 This difference reveals a limitation in [Tavinor's \(2009\)](#) account, which focuses on video games: Tavinor foregrounds the graphical richness enabled by more modern games in a way that suggests that this is their overriding source of value. The popularity of modern indie video games, which often substitute richness for elegance, gives the lie to this view, not to mention the many classic video games that are of great aesthetic value, and for which the value of modern reimaginings are, at the very least, controversial.
- 21 Dir. Hidemaro Fujibayashi, published in 2017 by Nintendo.
- 22 Dir. Todd Howard, published in 2008 by Bethesda Softworks.
- 23 Dir. Yoshinori Kitase, published in 1999 by Square.
- 24 A brief observation on metafiction: within traditional fiction, metafictional aspects are strong candidates for fictional reliefs as their self-referential nature explicitly draws attention to the fact that what we are engaging with is fictional. In the case of games, though, any metafictional content is likely to be at the same time both a fictional relief *and* a formal relief, as it is hard to envision how something could be appropriately self-referential but only with respect to its status as a fiction or as a game.
- 25 Dir. Ken Rolston, published in 2006 by Bethesda Softworks.
- 26 A literature review of ludonarrative dissonance is given in a blog post by Frédéric [Seraphine \(2016\)](#). As noted there, an exception to the view of ludonarrative dissonance as inherently negative can be found in [Ballantyne's \(2015\)](#) discussion; this, if accepted as a development in discussion of the phenomenon, would open up the possibility of seeing this article's project as investigating a fine-grained species of nonpathological ludonarrative dissonance.
- 27 A related idea is also discussed in [Stear \(2017\)](#), examining the tension between our caring about the outcomes of competitive games and our recognition that they do not really matter. Stear's account critiques views that invoke make-believe, which might suggest that it is also well-placed to deal with these phenomena that are not captured by fictional relief. However, there are two related reasons that something other than Stear's account is needed: (1) despite engaging with make-believe attitudes, Stear's focus is on the idea that we make-believe *that game outcomes matter* rather than on fictional content, making the account better adapted to sports than to the category we're examining here, (2) the simplicity of the attitudes make Stear's appeal to Vellemanian meta-desires plausible in a way that does not seem to extend comfortably to complex fictional engagement.
- 28 Designed by Jon Gilmour and Isaac Vega. Published in 2014 by Plaid Hat Games.
- 29 There is a notable flexibility here: the same feature can, depending on context, function either as a formal relief or as a representation check. An example from a tabletop roleplaying game is instructive: in *Dungeons and Dragons*, a player character who belongs to the "Paladin" class must adhere to a moral code, otherwise they lose their distinctive abilities. In ordinary circumstances this acts as a representation check—the rules give the player a good reason to make their character enact actions that fit the fictional profile of the character type. However, it may also act as a formal relief—the player might feel that as far as the narrative is concerned a certain moral failing in their character would be appropriate and interesting, but the fact that this would make their character strategically useless gives a strong, and acceptable, reason not to do so. My thanks to Nathan Wildman for pointing this feature out to me.
- 30 Dir. James Ohlen, published in 1998 by Interplay Entertainment.
- 31 Published in 2018 by EA Sports.
- 32 Dir. Alex Thomas, published in 2014 by Versus Evil.
- 33 This became the focus of substantial attention with *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (dir. Hidetaka Miyazaki and Kazuhiro Hamatani, published in 2019 by FromSoftware), which was notoriously difficult. The final boss was the subject of an article by [Davenport \(2019\)](#), whose defence of making the game easier attracted outrage from parts of the gaming community.
- 34 There are some fine distinctions that cannot be explored in detail here. For instance, "let's play" videos (which show some or all of a game playthrough) are popular for multiple reasons and might be considered aesthetically valuable, but I would argue that we can bracket off cases of watching a "let's play" as a separate kind of experience. On the other hand, the *use* of "let's play" videos to aid players may run the gamut from producing a substandard experience of the game (consider how the experience of a mystery or puzzle game would be impacted), to usefully supporting play (for, e.g., the player trying repeatedly to perform something very difficult who is unsure whether they are doing something wrong or suffering from a glitch). Cheats and mods also raise their own complexities: the player who uses these to a high degree need not have a substandard experience of the game, but it does seem to be nonstandard.
- 35 As well as potentially bringing in interactive fictions such as "immersive theatre," one could also consider interesting applications to the way in which, say, magic tricks are presented to their audiences. My thanks to Hannah Kim for this observation.
- 36 My thanks to two anonymous referees for helpful feedback, and to participants at the University of Central Oklahoma Workshop on Philosophy of Games for a range of thoughtful questions and suggestions.