

Metafiction in Videogames

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Abstract: There have been doubts about the existence of metafiction within videogames. It may be related to the paucity of research that grounds metafiction as a game relevant term. This discourse will briefly define what metafiction is and explore the existence of metafiction within fiction. In doing so, it will separate metafiction in videogames from credits and in-game instructions. A description of four types of metafiction in videogames (emergent metafiction: fiction that reveals itself to the player, immersive: fiction that brings the player into the fiction, internal: character-to-character, and external: designer-to-player) is discussed. Ultimately, the implication of metafiction in videogames is illuminated, and its potential impact on the future of game design summarized.

What Metafiction Means

Metafiction within literature, while many people may be unaware of the term itself or its use within writing, is an accepted convention. It appears that there has yet to be a single definition for what metafiction is and its role within writing, yet it can be generally said that authors and writers acknowledge its presence such as explored in Waugh, 1984 and Currie, 1995. For the sake of metafiction within videogames, our operating definition: "Metafiction is fiction that points out its own fictionality." In other words, fiction that is self-aware. This definition deviates from other interpretations, which can be excessively inclusive. A good example is the inclusion of internal metafiction: the belief that fiction within fiction is metafiction. Such as a book written about a character writing a book, or a reader reading a book. While these works may exhibit a few of the traits found in metafictional pieces, this cannot be not included within the category of metafiction because the fiction in question never admits its own fictionality. On the other hand, an important term that is associated with metafiction is 'the fourth wall' or more specifically, 'breaking of the fourth wall.' This term comes from Greek plays where various characters might speak to the audience directly, to provide them with opinions or to refresh plot points. As a stage has three walls, the audience provides the fourth wall, and admitting the fictionality of the play by actors talking to the audience breaks the unstated barrier between them. This action is essentially metafiction.

Defining Metafiction for Videogames

Within our working definition of metafiction, 25 game encounters are included in this examination of metafiction. Much like metafiction in writing or in film, metafiction in videogames is self-admitting fiction: a metafictional videogame will bend the fourth-wall, testing the boundaries of Huizinga's magic circle, without breaking the fiction. There needs to be some clarity though about what qualifies as metafiction in videogames, to separate it from metagaming and to define it within the boundaries of videogames.

First, metafiction in videogames must be fiction. Much like how we don't count the opening credits to a movie as metafiction or the publisher's information to a book as metafiction, we should not classify the menu screen and pause menu as metafictional encounters in videogames. Likewise, we should not claim that tutorials and in-game instructions are metafictional. While these instances do closely resemble metafiction, and some may actually breach the boundaries of metafiction, simply being provided in-game instructions does not make an in-game encounter metafictional in nature. To support this, we must examine the purpose of these encounters. When reading a book, or watching a movie, there are a number of conventions one must first grasp to fully understand the narrative and structure of the artifact: to read a book, you first must understand the language in which it is written, and you must understand the organizational structure of the writing. The majority of written fiction does not include instruction manuals on grammar and vocabulary within their pages because readers have already learned the accepted conventions for story reading. This same analogy applies to movies. All movies take advantage of conventions that the audience has learned to expect and understand how to interpret. As an example, many movies make use of time skips, saving the viewer from dull car rides, meals, and bathroom breaks. The passage of time is implied. Yet when we come to videogames, an interesting anomaly occurs concerning the unique changing conventions of games. While many games make use of similar control schemes for movement, most videogames use the keyboard and controller buttons for different purposes, and therefore include in-game instructions to define the purpose of the buttons. Such instructions are not metafiction but rather a product of a medium with constantly changing conventions.

While videogames do have an active player role in the fictionality of the game, movies and written stories have a level of interactivity as well. Movies, being the most passive of the three mediums, requires an audience member's attention to exist: the story will continue to play out on screen regardless of if the audience is watching or not, but

for the medium to be internalized by the audience, it must be watched. Therefore, there is a required level of participation for the story to exist. For written fiction, the participation takes on a different role. A story in written form will cease playing as soon as the reader, or audience, stops reading the story. This is much like how a videogame stops when paused. Yet, in a written story, all the imagery, while some may be suggested by way of cover art, is formed within the audience's mind. Videogames may have more freedom of control and maneuverability, but written stories are in fact extremely free in terms of images and appearances. Written stories are extremely interactive. While videogames do have a level of player control over the narrative, so do movies and written stories.

As a final note on defining metafiction in videogames, there is a difference between metafictional videogames and metagaming. While metafiction retains the definition stated above, metagaming is utilizing outside knowledge to influence in-game decisions. For example, if before playing a game, Player A knows that Player B is aggressively offensive, yet is poor at managing defense, Player A may use this prior knowledge to his advantage to win the game.

The Four Types of Metafictional Encounters in Videogames

Defining metafiction within videogames narrows us down to actual metafictional encounters. While collecting the 25 examples, four types of metafictional videogame became clear: that of emergent, immersive, internal, and external (see Figure 1). These categories also act like a sliding scale, as encounters that exhibit metafictional tendencies overlap to varying degrees.

| Type of Metafiction | Key Attribute | Example |
|----------------------|------------------------|--|
| Emergent: <u>Em</u> | Fiction Revealed | Character breaches 4 th wall |
| Immersive: <u>Im</u> | Player Immersed | Incorporates player into fictional world |
| Internal: <u>Int</u> | Character-to-Character | Situational Irony |
| External: <u>Ext</u> | Designer-to-Player | Cameo Appearance of Developer |

Figure 1: Metafiction types.

Emergent Metafiction

Emergent metafictional is seen in encounters where the game admits its own fictionality to the player. An example would be if a character were to address the player with "welcome to our game, player! I hope you enjoy your stay." It is an in-game breach of the fictional world to reach out to the player. Menu screens and in-game tutorials do not count as this type of metafiction, nor metafiction of any type; the differences will be explained after this section on the four types.

Immersive Metafiction

Immersive metafiction incorporates the player, more or less in their role as player, into the fictional world. An example would be a game where the player is viewed as a god presiding over a population of NPCs who are aware of the player's ability to turn off and on their world with the flip of a power switch. This type of metafictional encounter makes use of the player's position and relationship to the game to bring them into the narrative and incorporate their unique position as part of the fiction.

Internal Metafiction

The third type of metafictional encounter is internal, or character-to-character, metafiction. An example would be an in-game scenario where one character says to another "Ever feel like we're just bad guy NPCs in a game, waiting for a hero to show up and just slay us?" In of itself, this type of metafictional encounter is self-contained. While it does address the fictionality of the game world, it is different from the other three, as it never fully breaches the fourth wall, but more simply alludes to it. This type of metafictional encounter is the most used for situational irony.

External Metafiction

The fourth type of metafiction is external. The word 'external' may be a tad deceiving, as the metafiction does exist within the game. Rather, it is the message being conveyed that is external. It is usually a message from the developer, or any member of the production end, directed to the player. An example would be if the player stumbles into a room in game and comes across some graffiti spelling out "Thanks for playing! –Dev. Team." The information, while it exists within the game's world, is often not acknowledged by in-game characters and acts as a secret message. Most Easter Eggs in games are of this type. External metafiction is also most likely to be confused with

in game menus due to the nature of the external developer-to-player dialogue.

Data Collection

The cataloging system used to collect data on these metafictional encounters was surveymonkey.com. Survey-monkey was chosen because of the easy access to collect and examine data regardless of computer or location. To be clear, the author identified and recorded all games included in this study. The games were not collected through the online survey rather the site was simply used for its accessibility and download capabilities. Initially, basic game information was collected, such as the games titles, dates released, and ESRB rating. Then using Grace's Game Type and Game Genre, both game type and genre were collected for all 25 examples (see Figure 2). After gathering these general data, more specific data related to metafictional encounters of each game were collected, including a general time each encounter lasted, the specific encounter time, the nature of the encounter (out of the four types stated in the previous section) and a transcript of the encounter or a description if there were no in-game words exchanged.

| Name of Game | Release Date | Type of Metafiction | | | |
|---|----------------|---------------------|----|-----|-----|
| | | Em | Im | Int | Ext |
| Majestic | July 31, 2001 | | X | | |
| Evidence: The Last Ritual | Oct 16, 2006 | | X | | |
| Tom Clancy's <u>EndWar</u> | Nov 4, 2008 | | X | | |
| Lifeline | Jan 30, 2003 | | X | | |
| <u>StarTropics</u> | Dec 1, 1990 | X | X | X | |
| The Sims 2: <u>FreeTime</u> Expansion Pack | Feb 26, 2008 | | | X | X |
| The Stanley Parable | July 27, 2011 | X | X | X | |
| Animal Crossing: City Folk | Nov 16, 2008 | X | X | X | |
| The Simpsons Game | Oct 30, 2007 | X | X | X | |
| Mario Party 2 | Dec 17, 1999 | | X | | |
| Luigi's Mansion | Sept 14, 2001 | X | | | X |
| Batman: <u>Arkham</u> Asylum | Aug 25, 2009 | X | X | | |
| Max Payne | July 23, 2001 | | | X | |
| Crash Bandicoot 2: Cortex Strikes Back | Oct 31, 1997 | X | | X | |
| Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem | June 23, 2002 | X | | | |
| The Secret of Monkey Island | Oct, 1990 | | | X | |
| Super Smash Bros. Brawl | Jan 31, 2008 | | | X | |
| Donkey Kong Country | Nov 21, 1994 | | | X | |
| Metal Gear Solid 2 | Nov 13, 2001 | X | | X | |
| Tekken 3 | March 22, 1997 | | | X | |
| Metal Gear Solid | Sept 3, 1998 | X | | X | |
| I MAED A GAM3 WITH ZOMBIES!!!1 | Aug 16, 2009 | X | | | X |
| Marvel <u>vs</u> Capcom 3 | Feb 15, 2011 | X | | X | |
| <u>Runescape</u> | March 17 2004 | | | X | |
| <u>Jak</u> 3 | Nov 9, 2004 | X | | | |

Figure 2: Examples.

Implications for Videogames and Conclusions

On collection and examination of 25 examples of metafiction in games amenable to categorization through a classification system of metafictional encounters, it is safe to say that metafiction does exist within games. The implications of its existence in videogames are significant in that it underpins the realization that videogames can, and often do, tell stories. Metafiction can only exist within mediums that tell stories as metafiction is fiction that is self-conscious of its own fictionality. Not all games tell stories, but many do. Although the player is needed in the right time and location in game for a metafictional encounter to occur, only games that have metafiction within them beforehand can harbor metafiction to be discovered. This means that, although the player does have a hand in shaping the story of the game by participating, the player has no control over the precept whether a game's story is metafictional or not; it reveals an instance of players limited control and that players cannot create it themselves.

The implications of metafiction existing in videogames portend a significant impact on the future of videogames. Additional research may elucidate the potential for deepening stories, and increasing player immersion within the game. The acceptance of metafiction within a game, the ability of a game to acknowledge its own fictionality (its own ersatz) while still remaining within the bounds of acceptable play, and not violating the player's trust, could be used to draw players in and facilitate smoother game functionality. There is the possibility to phase out menu screens and tutorials and, in their place, use immersive metafiction to transform these previously breaching paus-

es and disillusion into streamlined immersive gameplay.

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