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How Can We Be Moved to Shoot Zombies? A Paradox of Fictional Emotions *and* Actions in Interactive Fiction

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Abstract: How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina? By asking this question, Colin Radford introduced the paradox of fiction, or the problem that we are often emotionally moved by characters and events which we know don't really exist (1975). A puzzling element of these emotions that always resurfaced within discussions on the paradox is the fact that, although these emotions *feel* real to the people who have them, their difference from ›real‹ emotions is that they cannot motivate us to perform any actions. The idea that actions towards fictional particulars are impossible still underlies recent work within the philosophy of fiction (cf. Matravers 2014, 26 sqq.; Friend 2017, 220; Stock 2017, 168). In the past decennia, however, the medium of interactive fiction has challenged this crystallized idea. Videogames, especially augmented and virtual reality games, offer us agency in their fictional worlds: players of computer games can interact with fictional objects, save characters that are invented, and kill monsters that are clearly non-existent within worlds that are mere representations on a screen. In a parallel to Radford's original question, we might ask: how can we be moved to shoot zombies, when we know they aren't real? The purpose of this article is to examine the new paradox of *interactive fiction*, which questions how we can be moved to *act* on objects we know to be fictional, its possible solutions, and its connection to the traditional paradox of fictional emotions.

Videogames differ from traditional fictional media in that they let their appreciators enter their fictional worlds in the guise of a fictional proxy, and grant their players agency within this world. As interactive fictions, videogames reveal new elements of the relationship between fiction, emotions, and actions that have been previously neglected because of the focus on non-interactive fiction such as literature, theatre, and film. They show us that fictional objects can not only cause actions, but can also be the intentional object of these actions. Moreover, they show us that emotions towards fictions can motivate us to act, and that conversely, the possibility of undertaking actions within the fictional world makes

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a wider array of emotions towards fictional objects possible. Since the player is involved in the fictional world and responsible for his actions therein, self-reflexive emotions such as guilt and shame are common reactions to the interactive fiction experience. As such, videogames point out a very close connection between emotions and actions towards fictions and introduce the paradox of *interactive fiction*: a paradox of fictional *actions*.

This paradox of fictional actions that is connected to our experiences of interactive fiction consists of three premises that cannot be true at the same time, as this would result in a contradiction:

1. Players act on videogame objects.
2. Videogame objects are fictional.
3. It is impossible to act on fictional objects.

The first premise seems to be obviously true: gamers manipulate game objects when playing. The second one is true for at least some videogame objects we act upon, such as zombies. The third premise is a consequence of the ontological gap between the real world and fictional worlds. So which one needs to be rejected?

Although the paradox of interactive fiction is never discussed as such within videogame philosophy, there seem to be two strategies at hand to solve this paradox, both of which are examined in this article. The first strategy is to deny that the game objects we can act on are fictional at all. Espen Aarseth, for example, argues that they are *virtual* objects (cf. 2007), while other philosophers argue that players interact with real, computer-generated graphical representations (cf. Juul 2005; Sageng 2012). However, Aarseth's concept of the virtual seems to be ad hoc and unhelpful, and describing videogame objects and characters as real, computer-generated graphical representations does not account for the emotional way in which we often relate to them. The second solution is based on Kendall Walton's make-believe theory, and, similar to Walton's solution to the original paradox of fictional emotions, says that the actions we perform towards fictional game objects are not real actions, but *fictional* actions. A Waltonian description of fictional actions can explain our paradoxical actions on fictional objects in videogames, although it does raise questions about the validity of Walton's concept of quasi-emotions. Indeed, the way players' emotions can motivate them to act in a certain manner seems to be a strong argument against the concept of quasi-emotions, which Walton introduced to explain the alleged *non-motivationality* of emotions towards fiction (cf. 1990, 201 sq.).

Although both strategies to solve the paradox of interactive fiction might ultimately not be entirely satisfactory, the presentation of these strategies in this paper not only introduces a starting point for discussing this paradox, but

also usefully supplements and clarifies existing discussions on the paradoxical *emotions* we feel towards fictions. I argue that if we wish to solve the paradox of actions towards (interactive) fiction, we should treat it in close conjunction with the traditional paradox of emotional responses to fiction.

Keywords: interactive fiction, videogames, paradox of fiction, virtuality, emotion, action

How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina? By asking this question, Colin Radford introduced the paradox of fiction, or the problem that we are often emotionally moved by characters and events which we know don't really exist (cf. 1975). The main focus in the debate on the paradox of fiction is undoubtedly the problematical fact that we can feel emotions the intentional object of which we know to be merely fictional and thus non-existent. However, another puzzling element of these emotions that always resurfaced within discussions on the paradox is the fact that, although these emotions *feel* real to the people who have them, their difference from ›real‹ emotions is that they cannot motivate us to perform any actions. Indeed, many philosophers who tried to formulate a solution to the paradox of fiction prided themselves in also explaining the non-motivationality of our emotions towards objects we know to be fictional (cf. Lamarque 1981, 302; Carroll 1990, 86; Walton 1990, 201 sq.; Yanal 1999, 60 sq.; Suits 2006, 374 sq.).

In the debates on the paradox of fiction, the truth of the idea that we cannot act on fictional objects is always readily assumed. Ever since Kendall Walton noticed an asymmetry between our psychological and physical interactions with fiction in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (cf. 1990, 196), the idea that actions towards represented fictional objects, characters, or situations are impossible has been crystallized in what Derek Matravers calls »the consensus view« within the philosophy of fiction (2014, 26). As Peter Lamarque summarizes:

Kendall Walton has reminded us of the logical oddities of our relations with fictional characters. For example, we can talk of them affecting us but not, in any straightforward way, of us affecting them. They seem to be able to induce in us sorrow, fear, contempt, delight and embarrassment. But we have no comeback with them. We cannot thank them, congratulate them or frighten them, or help, advise, rescue or warn them. (1981, 292)

The idea that the appreciator of representational works cannot affect the fictional world within this work in any way still underlies recent work within the philosophy of fiction. Derek Matravers, for example, claims that there are no actions available that could influence or manipulate represented objects, situations, or persons (cf. 2014, 26 sqq.) and Kathleen Stock argues that all possibilities of

action towards invented particulars characterized in fiction are obstructed in the same way actions towards past particulars are obstructed (cf. 2017, 168).

In the past decennia, however, the medium of interactive fiction has clearly challenged this crystallized idea, and shown it to be outdated. Videogames, especially augmented and virtual reality games, specifically offer us agency in their fictional worlds. As such, videogames seem to be direct proof that the old intuition is faulty: players of computer games *can* interact with fictional objects, save characters that are invented, and kill monsters that are clearly non-existent within worlds that are mere representations on a screen. In videogames, we see that there is not a mere psychological relation between the player and the fictional world, but also a physical one. When encountering a zombie in a dark hallway, players are not only moved to fear these monstrosities, but also to undertake certain actions, to run away from the monsters, shoot them, and save their friends from them within the game world. Indeed, after such an encounter, players can often be heard saying things like »I shot the zombie!«. In the past years, the popular augmented reality game *Pokémon Go* made players go out and run around in the real world in search of Pokémon to catch. In even more immersive *virtual* reality games, we can enter the fictional world and manipulate its fictional objects with our own bodily movements. But how to explain actions that seem to be motivated by and performed on fictional objects, assuming that the player is never deceived into thinking that the world of the videogame is real? In a parallel to Radford's original question, we might ask: how can we be moved to shoot fictional zombies or catch fictional Pokémon, when we know they aren't real?

At first sight, videogames only seem to make the paradox of fiction an even more complex problem: we can not only be made to feel paradoxical emotions towards fictional characters or events, but they can also motivate us to undertake *actions*, even when we fully know they are not real. On the other hand, however, a more in-depth analysis of this new element of action in our experience of interactive fictions might usefully supplement and clarify existing discussions on the paradoxical emotions we feel towards fictions. Firstly, I will describe the new elements that characterize interactive fictions such as videogames. Secondly, I will investigate what consequences these elements might have for the paradox of fiction as it has traditionally been discussed. I will argue that videogames as interactive fictions reveal new elements of the relationship between fiction, emotions, and actions that have been previously neglected because of the focus on non-interactive fiction such as literature, theatre, and film. Videogames raise new questions about appreciators' possible (emotional) interactions with fictions, since they give their players the opportunity to manipulate the fictional world by performing actions, which might be motivated by the emotions they feel towards

fictional characters or events. As such, videogames introduce the paradox of *interactive fiction*: a paradox of fictional emotions *and actions*. In a third part, I will investigate the so-called paradox of fictional actions and two possible solutions to this paradox.

1 Videogames as Interactive Fiction

Just like literature, movies, and theatre, videogames can present their audience with fictional worlds and stories. The clearest difference between videogames and these traditional fictions, however, is that videogames are inherently *interactive*: they allow their players to perform actions that influence what happens in the world they depict. Moreover, the narrative development in videogames often *depends* on these actions of the appreciator (cf. Thabet 2015, 42), as the story is shaped by what players choose to *make fictional* with their actions in the game's world (cf. Wildman/Woodward 2018, 112 sq.). Videogames grant their players agency within the fictional world they present, by giving them control over a character within this world. In videogame philosophy and studies, this character is called the avatar or the player-character (cf. Tavinor 2009, 205), to refer to the complex of player and character together, or: the videogame character as it is animated by the player through his actions on a controller. Note that this character need not be explicitly represented within the game world. Many racing games, for example, don't show the drivers of the cars with whom the player is to identify, while they still clearly imply which fictional role the player fulfils.¹ During their playing of videogames, gamers thus *identify* with (overtly represented or merely implied) fictional characters and often refer to them in the first person, in statements like »I shot a zombie« or »I won the race« and statements that betray the player's immersion in the game world, such as »I am in a spaceship«. As such, videogames are not only interactive in nature, but also, »in some important sense, about those who consume them« (Robson/Meskin 2016, 165). Videogames as a fictional medium thus introduce many new elements in the fiction experience: interactivity, the appreciator's agency in a fictional world, identification with a (player-)character, immersion, and self-involvement.

¹ In this regard, Chris Bateman's distinction between the representation of the avatar and the function of the avatar is quite interesting. He uses the term »doll« for the way the avatar is represented in a game and the term »avatar« to refer to the role the player fulfils in the game's fictional world. As he says, »we act in fictional worlds even without a doll, and thus strictly speaking the avatar must not be a representational prop at all« (2011, 106).

Although there is a lot of disagreement about whether and which games truly are fictions, many authors seem to agree that videogames have both fictional and non-fictional elements. One of the most influential descriptions of this characteristic of games can be found in Jesper Juul's *Half-Real. Videogames between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*:

[V]ideo games are two different things at the same time: video games are real in that they consist of real rules with which players actually interact, and in that winning or losing a game is a real event. However, when winning a game by slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon but a fictional one. To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world. (2005, 1)

Not every emotion felt by a videogame player is then paradoxical, because not all of them are aimed towards fictional aspects of the game. The elation and frustration players feel when winning and losing videogames, for example, are not always directed towards fictional events within the game world, but are very often unproblematically caused by real beliefs about real situations (cf. Tavinor 2009, 133). Gamers can feel elation when they believe to have achieved the highest score or succeeded in executing a difficult button combination. They can feel frustrated because they lost progress and have to start over. These emotions do not involve the paradox of fiction. Likewise, not every action performed by a player of a videogame is performed on fictional objects. Videogame players can open menus and load or save their games without thereby necessarily interacting with fictional objects. As Jesper Juul would argue, these players are interacting with real aspects of the game, merely manipulating computer-generated objects by following preprogrammed rules. Juul's distinction between the real and the fictional in games is often hard to make out, since many seemingly real and rule-based elements of videogames might be masterfully embedded in the fictional world of the game.² Juul's theory nevertheless shows that not all felt emotions and not all performed actions of videogame players need to be discussed here, because not all of them are aimed at the fictional elements of games and are thus paradoxical.

To conclude, videogames let us enter their fictional worlds in the guise of a fictional proxy, which we identify with and perform actions through. And, although videogames arguably contain non-fictional elements, they also seem

² An example is *Prince of Persia*, in which you can save your game by drinking at a fountain. Insofar as the player interacts with the fountain, she interacts with a fictional object, but insofar as her intention is to save her current game state, she interacts with the real rules and real data of the game.

to allow players to interact with fictional objects: they let us pick up guns, race spacecraft, help aliens, shoot zombies, etc. These interactions give rise to a new twist on the infamous paradox of fiction.

2 The Paradox of Fictional Emotions 2.0

Now that we have discussed the elements that distinguish videogames from non-interactive fictional media, we can investigate what consequences these new elements have for the paradox of fiction. Let us for this purpose look at one of the most famous examples of the paradox of fiction: Kendall Walton's description of Charles, a scared viewer of a horror movie:

Charles is watching a horror movie about a terrible green slime. He cringes in his seat as the slime oozes slowly but relentlessly over the earth, destroying everything in its path. Soon a greasy head emerges from the undulating mass, and two beady eyes fix on the camera. The slime, picking up speed, oozes on a new course straight toward the viewers. Charles emits a shriek and clutches desperately at his chair. Afterwards, still shaken, he confesses that he was ›terrified‹ of the slime. (1990, 196)

Now imagine Walton's example in a videogame setting: Charles is playing a horror game about a terrible green slime. He is shocked when a green slime monster suddenly comes creeping towards him on the screen. Charles shrieks in terror and hurriedly moves the control stick on his controller to run away from the slime. After seeing that it is much faster than he is, he fears for his life, turns around and starts pounding the monster with his fists. The monster moans in pain, but manages to kill him. Afterwards, still shaken, Charles sighs: »That's the fourth time it killed me.« Although quite similar to the original one, Charles's situation has many new, interesting elements when the fictional work he is experiencing is *interactive*.

First of all, we clearly recognize the paradox of fiction in this videogame situation. Just like the green slime from the movie, the game slime is not real but still manages to make Charles afraid. In both cases, Charles does not only fear the slime, but he seems to fear it because he feels *threatened* by it. Walton's original green slime example was considered to be quite unusual, because movies don't often make us scared *for ourselves*. Derek Matravers rightly argues that Walton's Charles example depends on a violation of the conventions of representation (namely, a breaking of the fourth wall) (cf. 2014, 116). De se emotions like fear for ourselves are, however, very common in videogaming. Because of the active role players have in the fictional world and the way they identify with

a player-character that is part of this world, they might have emotions about the way fictional beings relate *to them*. As Tavinor remarks, the emotions we feel when playing videogames can be »more strongly focused on our own role in the developing fiction than are the emotions appreciators have for traditional fictions that are essentially sympathetic or empathic in form« (2005, 39). Note that the Charles who played the horror videogame said he was fearing for his *own* life and reported that the slime killed *him*. While watching a movie or reading a novel, first-person statements like these would be exceptional and depend on violations of convention, but they are very common and quite normal in videogame practice (cf. Matsunaga 2016; Robson/Meskin 2016). Moreover, while emotions like fear for ourselves in our experience of non-interactive fiction can often be dismissed as automatic affective reflexes (cf. Carroll 2003, 524), they seem more problematical in interactive fictional situations. Charles's feeling of being threatened by the videogame slime was not merely an affective reflex triggered by sudden movements on the screen, but a consequence of his imaginative presence in the fictional world. While our emotions in non-interactive fiction experiences are most of the time emotions we feel *towards* the fictional world from the outside, the emotions we feel when engaging with interactive fictions often depend on *our* (player-character's) *relation* to the things and events within the fictional world.

Secondly, when Charles runs away from the monster or turns around to hit it, he seems to be motivated to do so because of a *fictional* event and a *fictional* monster. As Matravers points out, it is not unusual for a fictional work to motivate us to undertake certain actions. For example, a good fiction film set in India might inspire its viewers to visit this country (cf. 2014, 26 sqq.). Matravers adds, however, that even if fictional situations often lead their appreciators to undertake actions, these actions can never be performed *within* that fictional situation, or on the fictional objects within that situation (cf. *ibid.*). But this seems to be exactly what happens in videogames: videogame players' actions are not only *caused* by objects, characters, or events in a fictional world, but also *performed* on these fictional particulars. Charles manipulates the fictional situation with his actions: he tries to make sure he is not caught by the monster, and might even manage to injure the fictional slime.

Lastly, Charles's actions seemed at least partly inspired by his *fear* for the fictional monster: it was his fear that made him hurriedly move his control stick away from the monster and start mashing his attack button when the monster came too close. Imagine a less anxious Charles who doesn't fear the slime monster, but rather feels anger towards the creature because it already killed him three times before. It is likely that this Charles would not be similarly motivated to use his control stick to run away from the monster, but would rather move the stick

towards the monster and start pressing his attack button more deliberately. Emotions towards a certain videogame character can actually influence the actions players perform towards this character, even though emotions towards fictions are often considered to differ from real emotions in that they don't motivate any actions towards their objects (cf. Friend 2017, 220). Conversely, videogame actions can also influence the emotions felt by the player. The fact that players can enter and influence the world of the game makes a wider array of emotions possible whilst interacting with the videogame world (cf. Tavinor 2005, 39). Contrary to non-interactive fictions, videogame fictions can cause *guilt* and *shame* in their appreciators. A game like *Undertale*, for example, can make the player feel guilty or ashamed about their murderous actions, by only revealing that no character in the game *needed* to be killed for the player to proceed when the player has most likely already done so.

To conclude, the traditional paradox of fictional emotions does not seem to cover all the problems that are associated with our experience of interactive fictions. Whereas emotions towards fiction used to be discussed as feelings completely isolated from any possibility of action, videogames show that there might be a strong connection between emotions towards and actions performed on fictional worlds. The passiveness that was associated with emotions towards fiction in the past appears to not be a consequence of the fact that these emotions are felt towards *fictional* objects and characters, but to be a consequence of the fact that these emotions have only been investigated with regard to non-interactive fictional media, which obviously do not allow for any action towards their fictional objects. As Grant Tavinor concludes: »[T]he traditional focus has been on narrative fiction where causal interactions with fictional worlds are not evident. Interactive videogames thus allow us to see how the paradox of fiction is not distinctive to ostensible emotional relationships to fictional worlds but a more general one concerning our interaction with fictional worlds.« (2009, 141) If we focus on interactive fiction, another paradox emerges, which is quite similar to the paradox of emotional responses to fiction and possibly connected to it. In the next paragraphs, I want to take a closer look at this specific paradox associated with our experience of interactive fictional works, which raises the question how it is possible for us to *act* towards objects we know to be fictional.

3 A Paradox of Fictional Actions

Videogames grant their players agency in a fictional world, by letting them shoot zombies, catch Pokémon, etc. Videogame players thus act on and influence fictional worlds. As described in the introduction, however, there is a long-standing tradition in the philosophy of fiction of denying the possibility of action towards objects or characters we know to be fictional. It is often treated as a defining feature of fiction that it is impossible for the appreciator to influence what fictionally happens in the fictional world. Kendall Walton discusses this as our physical isolation from fictional worlds: »We cannot kiss or kick or save something that is believed or wished or said or denied to exist but does not; neither can we interact in any of these ways with something that exists only fictionally« (1990, 205). Peter Lamarque and Alex Neill respectively talk about a logical and an ontological gap between the real and the fictional in this context (cf. Lamarque 1981, 292; Neill 1993, 4). Thus, a new paradox arises, consisting of three premises that cannot be true at the same time:

1. Players act on videogame objects.
2. Videogame objects are fictional.
3. It is impossible to act on fictional objects.

Which one of these needs to be rejected? The first premise seems to be obviously true: playing videogames consists of manipulating the game objects presented to you as a player through your actions on a controller. The second premise needs an important nuance: as argued by Juul, not every object in a videogame is necessarily fictional (cf. 2005). Objects such as menus, health bars, or arrows showing you where you should go next are not always part of the fictional world of the game. However, most objects represented in videogames, such as doors, zombies, guns, or other characters, are often considered to be fictional, in the sense that their existence in the fictional world needs to be imagined. And since we can often act on these objects, we often seem to act on fictional game objects. The first two premises then contradict the third one, which states that it is impossible to perform actions on fictional objects.

There seems to be an obvious way in which this third premise is false: authors of fiction act on fictional objects all the time, when bringing them into existence during their acts of creation. However, the ›actions‹ on fictional objects mentioned in this third premise refer not to authorial actions of creative imagination, but to actions performed on fictional objects without exercising authorial control over them. These are the actions Lamarque talks about when he says it is impossible to help, warn, or save characters like Anna Karenina (cf. 1981, 292). Indeed,

a reader of *Anna Karenina* who wants Anna to survive might very well write her own fan fiction in which this happens. However, this person has then not truly *saved Anna*, but merely created a different Anna. What is deemed impossible in this third premise is the performance of actions on fictional objects over which we don't have authorial control, like the fictional objects that are presented to us in works of fiction. But can we still hold on to this premise, knowing about interactive fictions such as videogames? Are videogames not proof that we can also act on fictional objects in this way? The paradox might be solvable by conceding that actions towards fictional objects are possible after all, similar to how the traditional paradox of fiction could be solved by saying that we can be moved by objects without believing in their existence. And yet, the paradox of actions seems to be harder to solve than the paradox of emotions: while it might be understandable how we can feel real emotions towards objects we know don't really exist, but have vivid thoughts or imaginings about (cf. Lamarque 1981, 293; Carroll 1990, 80), it is hard to see how we could actually *act* on objects that only have imagined existence. Indeed, within existing discussions on the paradox of fiction, this third premise is never questioned. But then what *do* players do when they shoot zombies in a game?

There are two strategies to solve this paradox of *interactive* fiction. The first one is to deny that the game objects we can act on are fictional at all (cf. Aarseth 2007; Sageng 2012). The second one is based on Walton's make-believe theory, and, similar to Walton's solution to the original paradox of fictional emotions, says that the actions we perform towards fictional game objects are not real actions, but fictional actions (cf. Tavinor 2009; Robson/Meskin 2016; Thabet 2017, 42). Both of these will be discussed in the following paragraphs, assessing not only their capacity to solve the paradox of fictional actions, but also their ability to account for the relation between emotions and actions towards fiction.

3.1 Acting on Virtual or Real Game Objects

In »Doors and Perception. Fiction vs. Simulation in Games«, Espen Aarseth supports the first and third premises, saying that videogame players can fight dragons in videogames, although acting on fictional objects is impossible. To solve the paradox, he argues against the second premise by saying that videogame objects such as those dragons are not fictional, but virtual (cf. 2005, 39). He states that »games may well contain fictional content. But they also contain content that is different from the elements we recognize from older media. These elements are ontologically different, and they can typically be acted upon in ways that fictional content is *not* acted upon« (ibid., 36, emphasis original). These ele-

ments that can be acted upon are, according to Aarseth, *virtual* elements: »In short, games are not fictions, but a different type of world, between fiction and our world: the virtual« (ibid., 39). Aarseth's refusal to call videogames fictional is undoubtedly the result of his unwavering conviction that it is impossible to act on fictional objects. Instead of taking videogame players' actions as proof that actions towards fictional objects are possible after all, he denies that the objects players act on are fictional. This is why he says that videogame doors that cannot be opened are fictional doors, and doors (that may be represented in the same way in the game world) that can be opened are virtual doors (cf. ibid., 42). Aarseth's theory makes the so-called paradox of interactive fiction disappear by negating the second premise: every game object acted upon is not a fictional, but a virtual object.

However, Aarseth makes use of a strikingly simple dictionary definition of fiction in his article, that describes fictions as »invented phenomena« (ibid., 38). This definition not only fails to explain the difference between what Aarseth calls invented, fictional doors that cannot be opened and equally invented virtual doors that can be opened, but also seemingly ignores the history of philosophy of fiction, in which many philosophers have come up with better and more explanatory definitions of fiction than »invented phenomena«. There seems to be a consensus within the philosophy of fiction that, for something to be called a fiction, there needs to be a mandate to imagine it (cf. Matravers 2014, 21). Indeed, the game objects that Aarseth calls »virtual« objects also fit this description: when we shoot a zombie in a videogame, there is a mandate to imagine that the thing we defeated was an actual, dangerous and scary monster. The only reason Aarseth provides to deny that game objects we can act upon are fictional, is to explain we can act on them. His argument can then be shown to be circular: Aarseth says it is impossible to act upon fictional objects. Therefore, the invented game objects we act upon must be virtual. But what does it mean to be virtual according to Aarseth? To be invented and able to be acted upon. Aarseth's new ad hoc concept of the virtual does not seem to help us: why would acting on virtual objects be less problematic than acting on fictional objects? Instead of creating a new, confusing, and vague ontological category of »the virtual«, it still seems easier to accept that there are fictional objects that allow for interaction. In the next part of this paper we will take a look at a strategy for solving the paradox of interactive fiction that allows that videogame objects are fictional objects, the true existence of which needs to be imagined, and which *in some way* can be acted upon.

First, it should be noted that there is an important way in which videogame objects are virtual. Namely, when we take the prefix »virtual« to mean »rendered by a computer« (Castronova 2005, 294). Virtual objects are then computer-gen-

erated graphical representations of objects consisting of pixels or 3D-models (which may include preprogrammed affordances for action). Some philosophers and videogame scholars then argue that, when we perform actions on game objects, we merely manipulate computer-generated graphical representations as is made possible by the rules or coding of the game (cf. Juul 2005; Sageng 2012, 231).³ Such manipulations would not give rise to any paradox, because it would mean we are performing real actions on real (virtually generated) objects. This, however, does not seem to correspond to player experience, especially when we take into account how *emotional* players may be about certain characters. Players of *Pacman* don't just fear the pixelated shapes that end their game when these pixels touch their avatar; they fear the *ghosts* that will *kill them* when they come too close. Players of *Mass Effect* don't just play well because they want to have more 3D-models depicted in the final scene of the game; they want to *save* all the characters they came to regard as their *friends*. Just like Radford remarks that the emotions we feel for fictional characters are truly felt *for them* (cf. 1975, 75), the same seems to be true for the actions we perform towards fictional characters. As previously said, player actions towards fictional characters are very often motivated by the emotions we feel towards them, which seems to indicate that these actions and emotions share the same intentional object. When we save our team members in *Mass Effect*, we want to save *the people we care about and sympathize with*, not some computer-generated construct. Our emotional interactions with game objects generally betray that we do not treat them as the really existing, computer-generated objects they are, but interact with them as *fictional* characters embedded in fictional worlds and stories. Virtually represented objects can thus be experienced as *fictional* objects, since they engage the players' imagination.

Instead of being a new category besides ›fictional‹ and ›real‹, the virtual thus seems to mark a mode of presentation in which fictional stories can be conveyed. As Tavinor says, virtual and fictional are then noncontradictory categorizations: a fictional gun in a videogame is presented through the virtual medium, so that the gun is »virtual as well as fictional« (2009, 46). Virtual representations are, just like words in literature and moving images in film, one of many ways in which fictions can be presented. And just like words and moving images, the virtual medium has its very own possibilities and influences the way we imagine the fictional world. While words leave a lot to the imagination of the reader, and moving images provide us with more visual information about the imagined world, virtual or computer-generated fictional worlds allow us to enter them,

³ Sageng argues that the intentional object in player interaction shifts »from the pictorially represented to a real graphical environment that the player can causally interact with« (2012, 231).

often in the guise of a computer-rendered proxy, and explore them by acting (as this proxy). But, however interesting the effect of the used media on our interactions with fictional worlds may be, there is still a problem: we know the virtually represented team members we come to love in *Mass Effect* are as fictional as Anna Karenina, but still pity them when they are in trouble. Our interactions with virtually represented fictional characters is thus as paradoxical as our interactions with literary fictional characters are taken to be (or even more so, as they not only invite us to psychological, but also physical interactions). Our questions still stand: Why do we fear and pity characters we know don't really exist? And what does it mean when a player says she rescued her team members from an exploding space station, while she knows that both her team and the space station don't really exist? In the following part I will investigate a strategy to solve the paradox of interactive fiction that, contrary to Aarseth, does treat videogame worlds and characters as *fictional*.

3.2 Videogames, Make-Believe, and Fictional Actions

Another strategy for solving the paradox of interactive fiction is based on the theory of fiction described in Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Walton, at least for certain purposes, treats ›fiction‹ and ›representation‹ as interchangeable (cf. 1990, 3), which would mean that most or perhaps all videogame objects are fictional objects (cf. Robson/Meskin 2012, 207). As such, this strategy supports the second premise, which says that (many) videogame objects are fictional objects. However, as has been said before, Walton was also convinced that it is impossible to perform actions on objects we know to be fictional, as there is an unbridgeable physical gap between fiction and reality (cf. 1990, 205). He thus also accepts the third premise: it is impossible to act on fictional objects. Walton, however, adds something to this statement: even if it is impossible to *truly* influence fictional events and act on fictional objects, we might *fictionally* influence them and act on them (cf. *ibid.*, 195). The Waltonian strategy to treat the paradox of interactive fiction thus denies that when we are manipulating videogame objects through our actions on a controller, we are also *truly* manipulating the fictional objects that are represented by those videogame objects. While we can *truly* press X and make some representation of a zombie disappear from our screen by creating a representation of a bullet in the right spot, we can only *fictionally* kill a fictional zombie. The paradox of interactive fiction is solved when we say gamers never truly interact with fictional worlds, but can do so *fictionally*.

Although Walton is convinced it is impossible to influence the fictional worlds and act on the fictional objects in the representational works we appreciate, he

does have an elaborate theory on pretence and children's games of make-believe, in which he explains how it might be possible to perform *fictional actions*. His most famous example is that of two children playing a game in which they pretend tree stumps are bears (cf. *ibid.*, 37). They use the tree stumps as props in a game of make-believe to imagine that there are bears. These props allow for physical interaction: when the children hit a tree stump, they can use their real action of hitting this fictional proxy of a bear as a prop to imagine that they are hitting a bear. By running away from the tree stumps, they make it fictionally true of themselves that they are running away from bears. In other words: they are *fictionally* running away from bears. As Tavinor remarks, Walton's theory of children's make-believe can also describe the videogame experience: »Given that participating with videogames is also primarily an act of engaging with a representational prop, such a theory of fiction is entirely apt to capturing the nature of the fictive practice involved in videogames« (2005, 30). And indeed, both in the philosophy of videogames and videogame studies, an, often largely Waltonian, concept of fictional actions is used to describe what players are doing when they say they are, for example, shooting a zombie, while knowing fully well they never truly met one (cf. Velleman 2008; Tavinor 2009; Bateman 2011; Matsunaga 2016; Robson/Meskin 2016).

Videogames can thus be described as a Waltonian prop. The graphical representations on the screen can be used to imagine that the depicted events are really experienced by the player. Moreover, players can use the real actions they perform on controllers and the graphical representations they thereby create as a prop to imagine that they are actually performing actions within the fictional world. Videogame manuals are even made to explain how the player's real actions are related to fictional actions in the game world. They spell out what Walton calls the »principles of generation« of fictional truths (1990, 38), by stating relations between »pressing X« and »jumping«, which shows how players can generate the fictional truth that they are jumping in the fictional world by performing an action in the real world. Thus, when asking a player what she is doing, she might answer »I'm shooting a zombie«. In this case, it is not strange at all to ask her »Yes, but what are you *really* doing?«, asking her about her *real action*, or specific *skill* in manipulating the controller. The player will most likely immediately understand this question and answer, for example, that she is »pressing the R1 button, while aiming with the right joystick«. Videogame players seem to do exactly what Walton suggests players of make-believe games are doing: they use themselves and their own actions as reflexive props to imagine they are performing actions within the fictional world of the videogame. We can then rephrase the three discussed premises to eliminate the paradoxical elements:

1. Players *fictionally* act on videogame objects (by using the real actions they perform via some form of controller as props to make-believe that they are performing actions on videogame objects).
2. Videogame objects are fictional objects.
3. It is impossible to (really) act on fictional objects.

This might solve the paradox of interactive fiction. As such, Kendall Walton's make-believe theory is often revisited in attempts to explain the paradoxical actions a player performs, although this theory didn't enjoy a lot of support in the debates on the paradox of fictional emotions (cf. Friend 2017, 218).

The beauty of Walton's theory is then that it can explain actions towards fiction the same way as it has always explained emotions towards fiction. Just like when Charles said he was »terrified of the green slime«, the gamer who says he »killed a zombie« is playing a make-believe game. In both cases, the self-report is fictional. As Tavinor says, »[t]his shows that as well as fictional attributions of intentional, emotional, or cognitive attitudes toward fictional worlds, gamers may also make fictional attributions of causal interactions with those worlds« (2009, 141). Walton says that appreciators of fiction who seem to feel certain emotions towards fictional objects, characters, or situations, are actually only using the feelings they have as *props* to pretend that what they are feeling are emotions towards these fictional particulars (cf. 1990, 242sq.). Charles became a reflexive prop in his own make-believe game and imagined himself to be near the green slime, thus imagining himself to be fearful of the monster. In reality, however, Charles did not experience fear, but only quasi-fear: his feelings of fear were part of the make-believe game he was playing. Quite similarly, videogame players become reflexive props, imagining themselves to be their avatars in the game world and imagining of their real (controller-manipulating) actions that they are actions in the fictional world, performed on fictional objects by their fictional proxies. In reality, the actions they say to perform are *fictional* actions. To feel emotions and to perform actions towards fictional objects, appreciators of fiction must, according to Walton, (imaginatively) become a part of the fictional world themselves, using their real selves, their feelings, and their actions as props in games of make-believe. Although Walton never talks about videogames in *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, his conclusion about the possibility of actions in fictional worlds seems especially relevant in the interactive fiction context: »What happens in the fictional world – what fictionally is the case – can indeed be affected by what happens in the real world. But one person can save another only if they live in the same world. *Cross-world* saving is ruled out, and for similar reasons so is cross-world killing, congratulating, hand-shaking, and so forth« (ibid., 195). Acting in videogames' fictional worlds is then only possible when

we enter these worlds in the guise of a fictional character, making the actions we perform as this character equally fictional.

Walton's theory might neatly explain our (only *apparently* real) emotions and actions towards fiction by making both of them part of the fictional world (as *quasi*-emotions and *fictional* actions). Moreover, the beauty of Walton's make-believe theory is that it rids us of two paradoxes with one theory. The downside of this, however, is that the solutions this theory offers to both paradoxes might not be equally valid. While interactive fiction experiences show the usefulness and explanatory power of Walton's make-believe theory when it comes to fictional actions, they also seem to demonstrate the inadequacies of Walton's concept of quasi-emotions. In the next section, I will argue that the Waltonian approach to fictional emotions, which was formulated to explain our experiences of non-interactive fictional media, does not usefully describe the strong connection between our emotions and actions towards fictional objects as it is revealed in our experience of interactive fiction. As such, although the make-believe theory offers a solution to the paradox of fictional actions, this theory does not seem to adequately describe all our interactions with fictions.

3.3 Fictional Actions and Fictional Emotions

When we look at Walton's green slime example more closely, there seems to be a difference between emotions towards fiction such as Charles's fear and actions done towards fictional objects such as those of the videogame player. When we would ask Charles what he feels when watching the slime, he would undoubtedly answer that he is scared. In that case, contrary to the player action case, it would seem ridiculous to ask Charles »Yes, but what are you *really* feeling?«. Charles would probably be quite baffled, and answer yet again that he is scared. While it is clear that we can talk about fictional actions in the videogame case because gamers perform *real* actions, such as the pushing of buttons, of which they pretend they are actions done by their fictional proxy within the fictional world, it is not equally clear why we would need the notion of fictional or quasi-emotions to explain the emotions appreciators of fiction might feel. While no sane gamer would ever argue that *they really* killed zombies, rescued their team members in space, or rode a dragon over Mordor, it does not seem to be weird at all when they would insist that *they really* feared the zombies, were concerned about their team members in space, or felt bad when their dragon was mercilessly killed by orcs. While players of videogames can only *act* within the fictional world of the game through the player-character within this world (*they* didn't really eat a ghost, Pacman did), players do not ascribe their *emotions* to fictional characters: these

emotions are truly theirs.⁴ As such, we might say that it is fictional that players shoot zombies (they don't really do this, they just push buttons), but it is not as easy to say that it is only fictional that players fear these zombies. While Walton's theory on fictional actions proves useful when applied to videogames, it also puts his theory on fictional emotions in perspective, showing quasi-emotions to not be as useful and phenomenologically intuitive as the concept of fictional actions.

Moreover, one of Walton's arguments for calling emotions towards fictions ›fictional‹ or ›quasi-emotions‹ was that they cannot motivate to any action: »[T]o insist on considering Charles's non-motivating state to be one of fear of the slime, would be radically to reconceive the notion of fear. Fear emasculated by subtracting its distinctive motivational force is not fear at all.« (1990, 201 sq.) This argument is still used to distinguish emotions towards fiction from ›real emotions‹ in recent discussions on the paradox of fiction (cf. Friend 2017, 220). However, videogames show us that these emotions *can* have motivational power, as the emotions felt by gamers guide their behaviour and the actions they decide to perform. A player who is fearful of zombies might want to try and stealthily walk past the monsters, while a player who doesn't feel this fear might just run towards them with a shotgun. Or, as Tavinor describes his fearful experience of playing *System Shock 2*: »Occasionally, when I was getting low on health and ammunition in the game, I got myself into situations where faced by a formidable foe, all I could do was panic. My ability to deal with the situation briefly left me, and I would hurriedly run away« (2005, 37). Moreover, contrary to our pity for Anna Karenina, our pity for videogame characters in need might actually motivate us to help these characters. As such, videogame emotions can motivate actions, which makes it seem unnecessary to talk about quasi-emotions in interactive fiction cases.

A possible counter to the presented argument is that Walton's distinction between quasi-emotions and real emotions is still useful, since we can call emotions ›quasi-emotions‹ when they do not motivate to undertake any real actions, but can only stimulate us to undertake *fictional* actions: our fear for videogame zombies does not (usually) make us run away from our TV, but rather makes us steer our character in the game world away from the monsters. Our fear for videogame zombies could then be quasi-fear because it does not motivate us to *really* run away, but to run away *in the game*. However, it isn't clear why we would need the new mental state of *quasi-emotions* to explain these in-game actions. More

⁴ This is most clear in cases where the player knows something the character she is controlling does not know (for example when replaying a game). The player might know a zombie is going to pop up at any moment, while the character she controls is still making jokes and acting aloof. Cases like this one show that the emotions players feel, contrary to the actions they perform, cannot simply be said to be the emotions their character feels.

likely, the emotions we feel in either real or fictional situations can always be explained as *real* emotions, but their motivational powers depend on the different contexts in which they arise: real emotions combined with beliefs about our context might lead to real actions, while real emotions combined with imaginings about our fictional context might lead to fictional actions.

It was not entirely fair of Walton to say that all emotions towards fictions are only *quasi-emotions* *because they are not motivational*: how *could* they be, when Walton only took into account traditional literature, theatre, and film, which don't give us opportunities for action or for influencing their fictional world?⁵ Videogames give their appreciators the possibility of manipulating the fictional world and events through their actions. Therefore, they might show us that there is no reason to talk about ›quasi-emotions‹ versus ›real emotions‹, since our behaviour towards fictions can be explained by our real emotions towards fictional contexts, which combined with imaginings about a non-interactive fictional world might not allow for any useful action (how would you even *try* to save Anna Karenina?), but combined with imaginings about interactive fictional worlds (and our fictional proxies within these worlds) might cause us to perform fictional actions. The conclusion is then that Walton's concept of ›quasi-emotions‹ still seems counterintuitive and redundant when it comes to the emotions appreciators of (either interactive or non-interactive) fiction might feel, but his concept and explanation of fictional or make-believe actions helps us a long way towards solving the paradox of interactive fiction.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, I hope to have shown that, in this age of new technologies and growing possibilities for videogames and augmented and virtual reality games, which are ever more bridging the alleged ontological gap between the fictional and the real, it is wrong to take for granted that causal interactions with fictional objects are logically impossible. Videogames allow us to act in fictional worlds through fictional proxies and show that the emotions we feel towards fictional objects can be closely related to the actions we undertake. Consequently, videogames as interactive fictions not only involve the paradox of emotions, but also raise the question how we can be moved to *act* on objects we know to be fictional.

⁵ I say ›traditional‹, because there are instances of interactive literature, such as »Choose Your Own Adventure Books«, interactive (improvisation) theatre, and interactive film, in which readers and viewers can make story determining decisions.

This paper introduced the paradox of interactive fiction and a starting point for discussing this paradox. Aarseth's strategy of denying that videogames are primarily fictional and describing the non-existent objects we act towards as virtual seemed to be based on an unhelpful circular argument. Moreover, describing videogame objects and characters as real, computer-generated graphical representations does not account for the emotional way we can relate to them. A Waltonian description of fictional actions explains our paradoxical actions on fictional objects in videogames, although it also raises some questions about the validity of Walton's concept of quasi-emotions and the relation between these quasi-emotions and the fictional actions players perform. It seems that if we wish to solve the paradox of actions towards (interactive) fiction, we should treat it in close conjunction with the traditional paradox of emotional responses to fiction.

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