

# Fiction as Play: Reassessing the Relation of Games, Play, and Fiction<sup>1</sup>

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“The object of the present essay is to demonstrate that it is more than a rhetorical comparison to view culture *sub specie ludi*.”

Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (1955: 5)

## 1. Introduction

It is more than a rhetorical appeal to *auctoritas* to say that the object of the present paper is to propose a ‘return to Huizinga’: “All poetry is born of play” (Huizinga 1955: 129) – in essence, that is the position I wish to lend authority to here, if one allows the artistic license to take poetry as a *pars pro toto* for fiction. I suggest reassessing the relation of “game” and “fiction” in video games, and hope to demonstrate that a fruitful theoretical approach to this relation is to conceive of both as belonging to the larger category of “play”.

To be sure, the idea that games are a subcategory of play is far from new. In *Rules of Play*, Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 72f.) see both terms as potentially enclosing the other, depending on our leading cognitive interest: We might think of play as a specific aspect of games (i.e. the experience and practice of playing a game, in contrast to, say, the rule mechanics or cultural role of the game), or we might take games as a more formalized subset of play. Salen and Zimmerman unfold the latter by adding that game play is really the most constrained and well-defined set of behaviors in a three-tier nested set of

1. “being playful” as the broadest and most loose category (more or less coinciding with the so-called “lusory attitude” [ibid.: 99-101]),
2. “ludic activity” as an already smaller and more formalized group of activities, and
3. “game play” proper.

Formalization, explicit rules and the competitive strife for a predefined goal appear as the *differentia specifica* of games to play. (ibid.: 302-304)

As regards the origin of fiction in play, one might alternatively trace the notion back to Huizinga (1955), the Cambridge school of anthropology (Schechner 2003: 1ff.), or Friedrich Schiller’s *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (2005/1795). This paper itself calls upon five proponents of fiction-as-play theories, all esteemed figures in their respective fields. So if the notions of games-as-play (GAP) and fiction-as-play (FAP) are nothing entirely new, what new does the suggested games-and-fiction-as-play (GAFAP) approach provide? The answer lies with the ‘and’ between games-*and*-fiction, the conjunctive view of both GAP and FAP at the same time. Introducing play as their shared ground, this paper argues, offers several

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theoretical advantages to current thinking in game studies. Put differently, this paper turns around the current figure and ground of game studies and ask less for what makes video games *specific* than what *unites* them with other human practices. Fictional media and games, it is argued, are both refined socio-cultural descendants of play as we find it in animals and children; with other practices descending from play (like sports or ritual), they share a pragmatic socio-psychological convention that lends their meaning and performance bounded freedom, renders their consequences void or ‘negotiable’ and their events into ‘make-believe’ events.

I will unfold this argument in three steps. First, I will present the major current positions on the relation of games and fiction in game studies. In a second step, I will briefly outline what I hold to be the five main proponents of a FAP theory – in chronological order, Johan Huizinga, Gregory Bateson, Erving Goffman, Kendall Walton and most recently, Brian Boyd – and summarize their shared tenets.<sup>2</sup>

In a third and final step, I will sketch the major advantages of a GAFAP approach in comparison to current thinking on games and fiction in video games: countering the latent exceptionalism and essentialism of game studies; allowing to better address the commonalities and differences between games and other practices such as art, ritual, or sports; addressing the shared pragmatic license of games and fiction to be ‘without consequence’; addressing the shared experiential and semantic quality of ‘make-believe’; providing a functional, ontogenetic, phylogenetic and situational *explanation* for said license and quality; and finally, providing the ground for a coherent evolutionary and cultural history of play, games, and fiction.

Before I begin, a few cautionary remarks: Firstly, I will use a very loose interpretation of the linguistic triad of syntax, semantics and pragmatics as organizing structure of the ideas in this paper, where “syntax” relates to the formal, material properties and structures of a semiotic medium, “semantics” to logical or propositional form and meaning, and “pragmatics” to the use and position of the medium in everyday life. “Experience” is sometimes used to denote the phenomenological, experiential quality of perceiving and interacting with a certain medium in contrast to the more constrained logical semantic form and content.

Secondly, even though the linguistic difference play/game is not present in all languages, I make a clear separation between the free-form “play” prototypically present in animal or children’s play and the more formalized, culturally refined rule-bound “games” we know from e.g. board or card games, and I will use these two terms in this meaning throughout.

Thirdly, I explicitly do not intend to reanimate the ludology/narratology zombie here. I consider this debate to be of interest only to future historians of science who might wish to study how this ‘fratricide’ served as a necessary foundational myth of the discipline. Furthermore, if anything, it was an argument revolving around the *narrativity* of video games – whether they are structured like a narration (or not), and whether the ‘thematization’ or embedding of game rules in a narrative is a necessary component for their experience, analysis, or definition. From the outset, “fiction” was never really part of this debate (cf. Aarseth 1997: 84f.), and it bears repetition that although both have sometimes been equated, “fiction” and “narration” are two very separate concepts (Ryan 2008).

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<sup>2</sup> Another FAP proponent I will not address here is Stephenson’s *Play Theory of Mass Communication* (1967).

Put plainly, “narration” is about ‘telling a story’. It relates to

- a certain syntactical, formal quality of communications we might call “narrativity” (being organized and presented in a way we would recognize as ‘typical’ for stories),
- a certain semantic type of statement (a temporal sequence of events), and
- a certain pragmatic, explicit or implied communicative situation (consisting of a narrator relating a story to a narratee).

“Fiction”, on the other hand, is about the peculiar truth or reality status of certain actions and communications – often, though not necessarily, of actions and communications related in a narration. Again, we might differentiate

- a syntactical dimension, “fictionality” (“signposts of fictionality” [Dohn 1990], formal properties that allow us to tell apart, say, a fiction film from a documentary),
- a semantic dimension, usually called “fictiveness” (the logical or ontological status of the propositions expressed in a piece of fiction), and
- a pragmatic, situational grounding that enables fictional discourse in everyday life.<sup>3</sup>

In the following pages, I will use these terms as outlined here, and use “fictional media” to denote texts, films, comics, theatre plays etc. that present fictive events in a fictional form.

So to reiterate, this paper is about fiction, not narration; also, it will largely disregard the dimensions of syntax and semantics. I am neither interested in the narrative or fictional structure of games nor “the logical status of fictional discourse” in games, to use Searle’s (1975) phrase. Rather, what interests me here are *the shared pragmatics and experience of game and fiction*.

## 2. The relation of game and fiction in current game studies

If we think of game and fiction as categories depictable in Venn diagrams, four possible relations of the two readily present themselves:

1. game contains fiction
2. fiction contains game
3. fiction and game are separate, without (necessary) overlap
4. fiction and game (necessarily) overlap

Within game studies, only 3 and 4 have found real proponents. The first position – games somehow ‘contain’ fictions – can be associated with late modernist schools of literature like the French OULIPO, but is absent in game studies. One might think that position 2 – fiction ‘contains’ games – is more present, as it finds expression in common turns of phrase like “interactive fiction”, “interactive narrative” or “virtual theatre”. Such phrases point to the notion that video games are basically extensions of traditional fictional media like literature or film, just with something ‘added’ – that something being “interactivity”, “simulation”, “procedurality”, “ergodicity”, or some such. However, as critical re-readings of the ludology/narratology debate have shown (Frasca 2003, Copier 2003), this ‘extensionist’ position is really more a folk theory and forced misreading of certain authors than a position seriously proposed by any scholar.

The notion that fiction and games are separate – call this the ‘separatist’ position – has been proposed among others by Espen Aarseth. In his paper “Doors and Perception: Fiction vs. Simulation in Games” (2005), Aarseth attempts to disentangle the relation of game and fiction in video games by introducing another category, the “virtual” or “simulated”. Simulations, he

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<sup>3</sup> I am following Zipfel (2001) in this categorization of the aspects of fiction.

claims, are new and specific to video games and “ontologically different” to real or fictional entities as “we respond to them differently, they are constructed differently, and the social exchanges they are part of are different from the social uses of fiction” (Aarseth 2005: n.p.). “Fiction”, in Aarseth’s terms, amounts to signs representing fictive entities, and games often contain many of them. “Simulation”, on the other hand, relates to an element that can be “acted upon” as it is made of “a dynamic model that will specify its behavior and respond to our input” (ibid.). His example is a door that a player character can manipulate (simulation), versus a door that is merely part of background textures (fiction). In that logic, for each element within a video game, we can tell whether it belongs into the “simulation” bucket of game elements or the “fiction” bucket of fictional elements. That is, we can neatly separate out the “game” and the “fiction” part in any video game.

The fourth position – that the categories of game and fiction somehow ‘overlap’ in video games – has found its most articulate expression in Jesper Juul’s (2005: 1) influential *Half-real*: “a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world.”<sup>4</sup> This coming-together of rules and fiction is nothing accidental to video games, Juul holds, but an important productive dynamic for their experience: “Fiction cues the player into understanding the rules, and rules can cue the player into imagining a fictional world.” (ibid.: 197) Fictional worlds of video games tend to be “incoherent” due to the demands of the rules that produce elements or events not easily integrated into the fictional world (ibid.: 123). He goes on to claim that this “half-real” game-*and*-fiction quality sets video games apart from other games: “In having fictional worlds, video games deviate from traditional non-electronic games that are mostly abstract, and this is part of the newness of video games.” (ibid.: 1)

Although I basically agree with the points of both Aarseth and Juul – there is a difference between background textures and malleable, rule-modeled game elements, and today’s video games often do present more lavish audiovisual renderings of fictional worlds than traditional board games –, I also find their positions faulty insofar as both set out with an initial *separation* of game and fiction, to then recombine them in video games. As we shall see, on a *pragmatic and experiential* level, the playing of any game (and video game) is always already as fictional as the events related in a novel, just as the cueing of imaginary worlds (or their incoherency) is nothing new or specific to video games – it also pertains to more traditional games, as well as novels or movies or theatre plays. Returning to our Venn diagrams, this notion can be expressed by drawing a third circle around the categories of “game” and “fiction”. This circle containing both games and fictional media, I argue, is “play”.

### 3. Fiction-as-play: Five theorists

Most scholars of game studies will readily agree with Salen and Zimmerman that games can be understood as a subcategory of play.<sup>5</sup> The part of a GAFAP approach not so readily accepted (in game studies as well as in literary studies, media studies or philosophy) is that of *fiction-as-play*. Therefore, the first task of this paper appears to lend the FAP account substance and plausibility. To this end, I will call up the main defendants of this account and point out their

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<sup>4</sup> Note that Juul equates the narratology/ludology debate whether games ‘are’ or ‘contain’ *narration* with the question whether they ‘are’ or ‘contain’ *fiction*: “The main argument of this book, that video games are rules *and* fiction, is a response to a long history of discussions of whether games were one *or* the other.” (Juul 2005: 12)

<sup>5</sup> One notable exception is Thomas Malaby (2007, 2009). See Deterding (2009) for a rebuttal to Malaby’s argument against the anthropological universality of play and its antecedence to games.

large congruence both with each other and with the current state of ethology, anthropology, evolutionary and developmental psychology.

### 3.1 Johan Huizinga

I assume that readers of this paper will be familiar with Huizinga's general definition of play and therefore pass over it in favor of certain less well-known aspects that are of relevance here. Although the particular empirical evidence *Homo Ludens* builds on is obviously dated and often obsolete, its general theoretical premise of "the play element of culture" still holds. Huizinga observes that play is a pre-human phenomenon and indeed the cradle of human culture to the extent that already in animal behavior, play affords the transcendence of mere reflexes to *creativity* and *meaning* (Huizinga 1955: 1). Not all art is grounded in play, but the "musical arts" (including literature and drama) and "the manner in which [all arts, S.D.] are received in the social milieu" are play through and through (ibid.: 169). Play features a peculiar combination of repetition and variation; it stimulates the imagination and captivates attention (ibid.: 10, 4, 2). Its difference to the rest of everyday life is *social*, "marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course" (ibid.: 10; cf. Juul 2008 for a refutation of misreadings of Huizinga in this matter). Play is intertwined with (religious) ritual to the point of being almost indistinguishable. As play is the origin of ritual, so from play and ritual, art, science, and social order flow (ibid.: 5).

### 3.2 Gregory Bateson

Watching otters and monkeys play in a San Franciscan zoo in the early 1950s, Bateson observed that the communication of humans and animals alike takes place at several levels at once (see Nachmanovitch 2009 for a general appreciation of Bateson's work on play). There exists a set of *meta-communicative* rules *how* communications relate to what they denote. Bateson calls these metacommunicative rule-sets "contexts" or "frames", and considers *play* to be their quintessential prototype: A playful nip communicates that it is no real bite, but to be taken as an 'as-if' bite. Indeed, Bateson considers play to be a possible origin of symbolic communication in general: "the evolution of play may have been an important step in the evolution of communication." (2000: 181)

Frames are established by (mostly implicit) metacommunicative messages, like the message "this is play" implied in nipping instead of biting. Such framing messages define which messages belong and don't belong to the frame. They also set out "premises" (ibid.: 187) how to interpret the messages belonging to the frame. Bateson emphasizes that frames and metacommunications themselves are *not* communications – they belong to a logically different level: "*Play* is not the name of an act or action; it is the name of a *frame* for action." (Bateson 1979: 139). This is his major objection to *Homo Ludens*: Huizinga's 'definition' of play, Bateson criticizes, mixes up the logical level of a category or context of activity with the level of singular activities (Bateson & Stevens 1979).

The message "this is play" is a markedly "paradoxical" or "subjunctive" one, as it signifies both the presence and absence of and the identity and non-identity with that which it denotes: "Not only does the playful nip not denote what would be denoted by the bite for which it stands, but, in addition, the bite itself is fictional." (ibid.: 182) This quality is not peculiar to play 'proper' alone. Play, art, ritual, fantasy and histrionics "form together a single total complex of phenomena" (ibid.: 181). They all share the pretense quality of 'as-if' or 'sort-of': "the whole of fantasy, poetry, ballet, and art in general owes its meaning and importance to the relationship which I refer to when I say that the swan figure [in the ballet *Swan Lake*, S.D.] is a 'sort of' swan – or a 'pretend' swan." (Bateson 2000a: 34)

### 3.3 Erving Goffman

To a certain extent, sociologist Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974) is little more than a systematic explication and refinement of Bateson's frame concept for the multitudinous realities and interpretive layers of human social life. To collectively agree on "what it is that's going on here" (ibid.: 8) – is this line of people a military parade or a wedding procession or a carnival or a public theatre performance or ...? –, Goffman argues that we rely on socially acquired and shared conventions, "*frames*", that define situations and organize what we should and shouldn't pay attention to, how to interpret events, and how to act and react appropriately in each situation. In the co-orienting interplay of the participants' behaviors and interpretations, participants recognize, agree on and reproduce the 'right' frame of the situation. Frames can act or be 'layered' on frames. Such secondary frames Goffman calls "keys", "a set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (ibid.: 43f.). Metacommunicative cues, so-called "brackets", delineate the spatiotemporal boundaries of keys (think e.g. of the curtain opening or closing a theatre play or the word "novel" on the cover of a novel).

Goffman follows Bateson that even animals play and sees play as the earliest meaningful instance of "keying" (ibid.: 40ff.). "Make-believe" – the imitation or reenactment of another activity that decouples it from its usual function and consequence – is one of the most basic keys, and the three types of make-believe are social "playfulness" (ibid.: 48), "fantasy or 'daydreaming'" as an individual imaginary play (ibid.: 52), and "dramatic scriptings", which subsume "all strips of recorded personal experience made available for vicarious participation" (ibid.: 53): novels, movies, theatre play, television, radio, etc.

Make-believe activities are deeply "engrossing" (i.e. absorbing and directing attention to a projected alternate realm) and often organized around "engrossables" (ibid.: 46), objects or performances designed and used for that purpose – again, think of a theatre stage or a novel. Also, they are full of breaking and blurring of frames. Such "negative experience" is potentially enjoyable and therefore often intentionally created. It is enabled by the fact that all frame breaks remain inside the 'save' frame of play.

### 3.4 Kendall Walton

Within literary studies and philosophy, Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990) is arguably the most widely recognized FAP theory – to no small degree as his approach stands quite squarely to the 'normal science' account of fiction. Walton suggests to subsume fictional literature, movies, theatre plays, and notably paintings under the category of "representational art" which he holds to be fully fictional (ibid.: 2). Walton summarizes the core tenet of this approach as follows:

"The activities in which representational works of art are embedded [...] are best seen as continuous with children's games of make-believe. Indeed, I advocate regarding these activities as games of make-believe themselves, and I shall argue that representational works function as props in those games, as dolls and teddy bears serve as props in children's games." (Walton 1990: 11)

The function of such "props" is to prompt, anchor, focus and coordinate individual and shared imagination (ibid.: 19-21). This imaginative faculty of props goes back to what Walton calls "*principles of generation*": "rules about what is to be imagined in what circumstances", based on a given prop in a given game of make-believe (ibid.: 40). Principles of generation are part of a larger shared "convention, understanding, agreement in the game of make-believe" (ibid.: 38) that usually need not be learned or agreed upon in a given moment; the convention, or a "nearly irresistible disposition to acquire it" (ibid.: 41), is likely innate. Yet in the final

analysis, make-believe games remain context-dependent: “what principles of generation there are depends on which ones people accept in various contexts. The principles that are in force are those that are understood, at least implicitly, to be in force.” (ibid.: 38) The difference between fictional and non-fictional media therefore resides with their contextually acknowledged “social function of serving as props in games of make-believe” (ibid.: 69).

We usually feel uneasy to compare children playing with adults reading books, watching paintings or movies because the latter are thrown back to the more restrictive role of “appreciators” rather than “participants” in the game of make-believe at hand. It is more restrictive in two regards: “There are fewer sorts of actions such that it can be fictional that the spectator performs them. And fewer actions which the spectator might actually perform are easily interpretable as contributions to the game.” (ibid.: 225)

Interestingly, Walton also stands squarely to the other FAP theorists presented here, as he is less interested in the *pragmatics* of fiction than one might guess. *Mimesis as Make-Believe* draws its major impulse from the *semantic* project of analytic philosophy to reincorporate that “parasitic” (Searle 1975: 326) type of discourse that is the fictional into the simplicity of truth or falsehood, propositions and speech acts. Therefore, Walton attempts to lend fictional propositions an ontological existence independent of cognizers imagining them via the interaction of props and principles of generation (Walton 1990: 38, 42).

However, I believe one can leverage the pragmatic insights of his theory in disregard of the underlying semantic project. So to summarize, Walton holds that fiction and indeed, representational arts in general derive from children’s pretense play, and that all these “make-believe” activities are enabled by certain (likely innate) social conventions that are enacted in a given situation. Make-believe prompts and organizes shared imagination, and is “a pervasive element of human experience, important not just in the arts”, but “crucially involved as well in certain religious practices, in the role of sports in our culture” (ibid.: 7).

### 3.5 Bryan Boyd

In tune with the rise of “cognitive poetics” (Stockwell 2002), literary scholar Brian Boyd’s *On the Origin of Stories* (2009) attempts nothing less than a summative evolutionary account of art, narration, and fiction. Boyd posits that *art* is best understood “as a kind of cognitive *play*, the set of activities designed to engage human *attention* through their appeal to our preference for inferentially rich and therefore *patterned* information.” (ibid.: 85) The adaptive advantage of art is to train our faculties of pattern recognition and creative exploration of new thoughts and behaviors. Boyd follows proponents of “embodied” or “grounded cognition” that reasoning, memory, and imagination are essentially based on internal imaginative simulations of memories of embodied, multimodal experience (ibid.: 155f.).

*Narration*, anchored in linguistic or other external representations (like images or reenactments), is particularly attuned to prompting such multimodal simulations of *events* and their ‘strategic’, *social meaning* – intentions, hidden agendas, social relations; thus, narration offers the evolutionary benefit of easy social sharing of past experience. *Fiction* or fictional narration, finally, fosters cooperation by creating strong shared emotions and values through such shared pseudo-experiences, and enables cognitive and behavioral creativity by allowing us to explore counterfactual recombinations of experience (ibid.: 192-7). Key for the individual and social adaptive advantages of play, art, narrative and fiction is their ability to captivate and organize individual and shared attention, and to alternate between creative variation and learning-inducing repetition (ibid.: 99ff., 184).

The cognitive play of art, narrative, fiction, as our capabilities of symbolic and counterfactual reasoning, metacommunication, and theory of mind (i.e. understanding other beings as conscious, intentional agents) all originate in animal play: “Within the frame [sic] of play, animals make a first step toward the representation or re-presentation of the real that thought and language provide”. (ibid.: 180)

We can retrace this phylogeny of representation and art, narrative, and fiction in the ontogeny of children’s pretense play. Ontogenetically, pretense play precedes language and theory of mind. In early childhood, play, narration, drama and fiction are *one*. As Boyd summarizes the results of developmental psychologist Keith Sawyer’s longitudinal studies of childhood play: “For children, direction, narration, and enactment flow readily and naturally into one another. So long as the play-story [sic] continues, consistency of medium or mode does not matter.” (ibid.: 177)

Incidentally, Boyd’s account nicely matches with two other evolutionary approaches to play and games: Janet Murray’s recent “Cultural Theory of Gaming” (2006), and the behavior-diversification proto-cognition theory of play (or BD-PC theory) of Ohler and Nieding (2001, 2006). Ohler and Nieding start with Sutton-Smith’s (1997) evolutionary explanation of play as “adaptive variability” or “behavior diversification”: Play is a cognitive module that recombines standing behavior patterns, creating new patterns that potentially fit existing or new situations better. The proto-cognition part of their theory argues that in species with an evolved cognitive architecture – hominids and great apes –, the play module does the same thing for the “primary representations” of sensory input. By systematically recombining them, it allows one representation to be connected to another, instead of being coupled to immediate sensory input only. Played-on representations thus may trigger and refer to other representations – which affords imaginations or “secondary representations” decoupled from sensory input, as well as semiotic references.

In a slightly different vein, building on the work of developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello, Janet Murray argues that the core evolutionary achievement underlying human culture was the ability to form theories of mind thanks to “joint attentional scenes” (Murray 2006: 187), that is, jointly attending to the same thing, *knowing that* both sides attend to the same thing. Theories of mind are the origin of causal thinking as the first instance of recognizing hidden causes (intentions) for overt facts (behavior). Animals and humans are hardwired to enjoy play because play facilitates joint attentional scenes and the ability to engage in them. Games, Murray suggests, originated from this evolutionary moment as the representational medium that reinforces the exploration of joint attention, whereas stories originated from it as the medium that reinforces causal reasoning (ibid.: 193).

### 3.6 Summary

Let’s retrace in broad strokes the shared picture emerging from the preceding pages: All authors – with the notable exception of Kendall Walton – approach play and fiction from an anthropological angle. They agree that play, and more specifically, pretense play, is pre-human and anthropologically universal (ethology, developmental psychology and by and large, anthropology support this, see Handelman 2001, Goldman 1998, Ohler 1999, Burghardt 2005). It is deeply intertwined with ritual and formally characterized by the dyad of creative recombination and repetition. It focuses, absorbs, and organizes individual as well as social attention, cues imagination by means of objects, and likely has a foundational role in the evolution of symbolic and meta-communication, theory of mind, and thus, culture.



Playing objects, actions and communications gives them peculiar ‘sort-of’, ‘as-if’ or ‘make-believe’ form, semantics and experience. Anthropologist Alexander Alland (1977: 39) compresses this in the term “transformation-representation”; play transforms-and-thereby-represents another behavior (a nip is a slight alteration of a bite, thereby turning it into something that merely denotes a bite). The semantics and experience of the thusly transformed-represented changes profoundly, maybe best captured in anthropologist of religion André Droogers (1996: 53) definition of “the ludic”: “*the capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality*”. The nip is and is not a bite, we are and are not Cowboys and Indians in a game of Cowboys and Indians. Both the material and the meant, the sensual and the imagined, the factual and the fictive are co-present in experience.

Play temporarily suspends the usual function and consequence attached to behaviors and communications. We can do and say things in play without consequence because they are ‘only as-if’. This pragmatic and semantic decoupling and experiential subjunctiveness is what opens the safe possibility space for the creative, ‘playful’ recombination of behavior, cognitions and meanings. The extent of play – what objects, communications and actions belong and don’t belong to it – is situationally agreed upon (usually rather implicitly), signaled by metacommunicative cues. However, to function, such situational definitions and meta-messages need some shared social convention that allows us to recognize them, and to know how specifically to interpret a phenomenon in relation to the specific definition and meta-message. A playful nip means something different than a threatening nip. Bateson and Goffman call these conventions “frames”, Walton “principles of generation”.

Finally, play is the direct phylogenetic and ontogenetic origin at least of the “music” (Huizinga) or “representational” (Walton) arts and thus, fiction. Representational arts and thus, fictional media like novels, theatre plays, or movies present objects or performances (“props”, “engrossables”) to elicit and organize shared attention and imagination; they employ a continuation of the “frame” of play and metacommunicative cues that sets the engagement in them apart from everyday life by (a) transforming-representing the events they present into ‘make-believe’ events and (b) suspending their social function and consequence.

#### **4. Advantages of a GAFAP account for game studies**

For the sake of argument, let’s replace the term ‘fictional media’ in the paragraph above with the term ‘games’ or ‘video games’:

(Video) Games “*present objects or performances (‘props’, ‘engrossables’) to elicit and organize shared attention and imagination; they employ a continuation of the ‘frame’ of play and metacommunicative cues that sets the engagement in them apart from everyday life by (a) transforming-representing the events they present into ‘make-believe’ events and (b) suspending their social function and consequence.*”

Space forbids a more detailed comparison with current ‘normal science’ definitions of games and video games (e.g. Salen & Zimmerman 2004, Juul 2005). I will cover some aspects more extensively in the following paragraphs, but otherwise rely on the well-meaning reader to recognize the pervasive similarities of this depiction of fiction-as-play with current conceptualizations of (video) games and draw his or her own conclusions.

Now, if one grants that this GAFAP approach establishes a common denominator of games and fictional media, what does this mean specifically for video games, and the relation of games and fiction in video games? I see seven main advantages of such an approach: it deflates the exceptionalism and evades the essentialism of current game definitions; it addresses the shared properties of games and other performative, make-believe practices, specifically the pragmatic license to be ‘without consequence’ and the ‘make-believe’ transformation-representation; and it provides a coherent multidimensional explanation and history of play, fiction, and games.

#### *4.1 Deflating exceptionalism*

Thomas Malaby (2007) recently made a convincing plea against the “exceptionalism” of game studies. Partially to merit the existence of their own academic discipline, game studies often systematically overstated the specificity of (video) games to the point of incommensurability or even an *ontological* difference to other media and practices. But as with any theory, once the ties between two phenomena have been conceptually severed, it becomes incredibly difficult to make sense of their continuing relations – think of the mind/body dualism as a case in point. In contrast, a GAFAP account deflates the idiosyncrasy both of fictional media *and* games by tying them back to the very cradle of culture that is play, and stressing their unity with other performative or make-believe practices. In the words of Kendall Walton (1990: 7): “We will be able to see representationality in the arts as continuous with other familiar human institutions and activities rather than something unique requiring its own special explanations.”

Nowhere does this overstated difference and underappreciated unity of games with other practices become more apparent than in what is commonly spoken of as “the magic circle”. Let me quote the now-canonical passage of Huizinga (1955: 10):

“All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.”

Following Salen and Zimmerman (2004), game studies have taken this quote as a forceful articulation of a spatial border between games and everyday life, and ruminated on its nature and permeability ever since: “Although the magic circle is merely one of the examples in Huizinga’s list of ‘play-grounds’ [sic], the term [magic circle, S.D.] is here used as a shorthand for the idea of a special place in time and space created by the game.” (ibid.: 95)

Put differently, Salen and Zimmerman emphasized a figure-ground relation with “game” being the figure and “everything else” the ground. However, even a superficial reading of the passage above reveals that the figure Huizinga intended to contour was the larger formal *unity* of the situations he enlisted as belonging to “play” against the ground of the “ordinary world”: “The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., *are all in form and function play-grounds*” (Huizinga 1955: 10). “*There is no formal difference* between play and ritual” (ibid.), and again, a few pages later: “The turf, the tennis-court, the chess-board and pavement-hopscotch *cannot formally be distinguished* from the temple or magic circle.” (ibid.: 20, emphasis added in all cases). Sports, games, children’s play, theatre, movies, ritual: all are identical in their social form according to Huizinga – and the other FAP theorists mentioned above.

#### 4.2 Addressing the shared pragmatic license of games and fiction

One important part of the magic circle's 'setting apart' games from the rest of social life is that it lends games "negotiable consequences" (Juul 2005: 41): What we do in a game is usually freed from consequence, though we might re-attach consequences to their outcome (e.g. gambling for money).

Scholars of fiction and art have long argued that there must exist a social convention or "contract" that likewise sets fiction apart from everyday life and frees it from the demands of truth, consequence, liability, and economic value. In literary studies, Lejeune (1989) and Umberto Eco (1994) call this the "fictional pact". Constructivist media scholar S. J. Schmidt speaks of the "aesthetics convention" ("Ä-Konvention") and sees it in effect in all art (Schmidt 1980: 86ff., 148ff.). The production and appreciation of art and fiction is deemed free from questions of private or public utility; they may express notions and sentiments that, if expressed as an open letter, would be liable as lie or libel.

In short, games and fiction share the same pragmatic suspension of function and consequence: "it's just a game", "it's just a story". Where standard game definitions only state the existence of this pragmatic license for games (and fiction theories for fictional media), a GAFAP account readily acknowledges their shared appearance and more importantly *explains* it as deriving from the frame of play. This explanation is *functional* (explaining the adaptive value of play, fiction, games), *phylogenetic* (explaining its evolutionary origin), *ontogenetic* (explaining its development in an individual's biography), and it is *situational*: explaining how this license works, cognitively and socially, in a given play, gameplay, engagement with fictional media. Relying on the shared play/game/fiction convention, participants co-ordinate their behavior in and interpretation of the situation to agree on and reproduce 'what it is that's going on here', using metacommunicative cues that have been referred to in fiction theory as "signposts of fictionality" (Cohn 1990, Nickel-Bacon, Groeben & Schreier 2000).

#### 4.3 Addressing the shared 'make-believe' transformation-representation in games and fiction

Theories of the "fictional pact" not only note the severance of pragmatic ties of consequence, but also the severance of semantic ties of meaning. To quote Searle (1975: 326): "Now what makes fiction possible, I suggest, is a set of extralinguistic, nonsemantic conventions that break the connection between words and the world". This semantic quality is accompanied by an experiential disposition usually termed "suspension of disbelief" which we above described as the 'ludic': a ready acceptance of the subjunctive co-presence of factual and fictive, sensual and imagined. Sherlock Holmes does not really live in Baker Street (semantically, this is a fictive proposition), but for the course of engrossing ourselves in an Arthur Conan Doyle novel, we imagine a Sherlock Holmes living in Baker Street and let ourselves not be disturbed by our knowledge that (a) this is not factually true and (b) we are factually not in London observing him through a window, but sitting in a sofa parsing printed pages with our eyes. Our experience of Sherlock Holmes is a 'make-believe' experience. Likewise, if an actor in a stage play curses or strangles another actor, this is understood to be only a transformed-represented 'make-believe' cursing and strangling: semantically fictive, experientially 'ludic'.

This is true of games and video games as well: If we shoot someone in a first-person shooter, this is not only socially accepted because of some convention that treats games as 'without consequence'. We are not *really* shooting someone; it is just a transformed-represented enactment of shooting someone. And the shooting is harmless not only because it is represented: it is also a 'make-believe' representation. We would expect each other to react

quite differently if our control input and the screen output were knowingly connected to some drone in some war zone really shooting someone, or if the screen would show known-to-be real documentary footage of this having happened in the past – although in both cases, what we experience in front of the console would remain a representation. Likewise, if two players of a *Wii* boxing game transformed-representedly punch each other in front of TV and console and shout and cheer (“Take this!”, “I am so gonna’ finish you!”, “I hate you!” etc.), these are taken as non-literal ‘make-believe’ physical and verbal aggressions. One might say that in games, the frame of reference opened by the rules adds yet another experiential dimension of meaning co-present to sensory input, imagination, and factual and fictive meaning.

The obvious point of contention here are abstract games. If I place a checker on a backgammon board, surely that is a real checker and a real board, no representation, ‘make-believe’, or imagination involved? One possible (and a little unsatisfying) counter is that even abstract games depend on *symbolic* reasoning and communication built on a shared *framing* of the situation. The placing of a checker on a board has no meaning ‘as such’; it becomes meaningful only in relation to the shared frame of reference of the players (comprising of the agreement to engage in a game of backgammon, the shared knowledge of the rules, the placement of the other checkers, who’s turn it is, etc.). The placement of the checker *symbolically represents* (and materially anchors) a change of game states. As regards *imagination*, I do not intend to venture into the depths of the problem of symbol grounding here. But if one takes the position of embodied cognition, then any meaning is grounded in mental simulations of bodily, multimodal experience and in that sense, imaginative (Johnson 2007). Finally, one could say with some reason, I think, that the experiential gap between material object and symbolic meaning yawns larger in games (and artworks) than in other more conventionalized, naturalized uses of semiotic media like speech or writing. This is what Heidegger (1977) in his *Kunstwerk* essay meant with the opening between “Erde” [earth] and “Welt” [world] in works of art. The ‘*ludic*’ phenomenological flicker or co-presence of material and meant is more readily present in art works – and games.

Yet as I said, this answer is a little unsatisfying because every symbolic communication or cognition is ‘make-believe’ in this weak, derived sense. Can we construct a stronger sense? I would argue that we don’t necessarily need to for a GAFAP account to be coherent. The ‘point’ is not to level all differences between play, games, and fiction. Certainly, different media and different games *afford* (Gibson 1979) certain uses and experiences to a smaller or larger degree. Abstract games afford ‘make-believe’ to a lesser degree than e.g. role-playing games.

No, the ‘point’ of GAFAP is a shift in perspective that allows to better understand those different affordances. We should not conceive of make-believe and imagination as necessary conditions for defining play, fiction, or games, but rather as active potentials or dispositions. Again, they are explanatory, not descriptive: The make-believe and imagination-cueing disposition in play explains the great ease we show in taking even the most abstract, incoherent games as ready springboards of the imagination. Games *can* cue imaginary, fictive worlds *because of* the play disposition. Children’s play and games, just like children’s stories, are highly incoherent by adult standards, and still a fertile soil for deeply engrossing fictional worlds. How easy for a child to take the props of MONOPOLY and turn the game board into a racetrack with two playing pieces chasing each other around the curve! Would any child seriously consider the imagination of being a cowboy or Indian “optional” (Juul 2005: 141) to the experience and enjoyment of Cowboys and Indians? Even an abstract skill game of “who hits the floating bark on the river with a stone” can suddenly flip into Kamikaze fighters attacking and aircraft carrier. And although the phenomenology of board games remains to be

written, any avid board gamer will readily recall innumerable instances where game events afforded small individual or shared imaginings, role-plays, micro-narrations. Fictive and imaginary? Certainly. Incoherent? Most assuredly. In a word, *make-believe*.

The entailed *historical* shift in perspective is that the cueing of fictional worlds and their incoherency is nothing new or specific to video games. Video games re-instate or re-afford something always already present in play and games. It is more sensible (and intuitive, I think) to frame the cultural achievement of abstract games and the biographical development of adult and/or professional playing practices (Taylor 2006: 67ff.) as a progressive suppression of the make-believe potential and foregrounding of rule mechanics. Abstract games culturally refined and enhanced this aspect of play, just like fictional media refined and enhanced the make-believe aspect. Historians of the oldest surviving (supposedly abstract) games tell us that these games originally *were* symbolic of some other activity. To give but two examples: The oldest known board game, the Egyptian SENET, depicts the soul's journey through the netherworld (Piccione 1980). And the Chinese GO (or WEI-QUI) represents troop encirclements and was used for strategic training from its outset (Halter 2006: 19-21).

#### *4.4 Reconfiguring game definitions in a larger frame of reference*

Let us move our observations to a more abstract level. The pervasive formal identity of games with other practices noted by Huizinga poses a serious general challenge to game studies. For the currently fashionable 'textbook' attempts at defining games have happened in a kind of vacuum, either completely on their own regard or in comparison to play and 'boundary cases' like puzzles or role-playing games only (Salen & Zimmerman 2004: 73-80, Juul 2005: 29-37). They draw up lists of descriptive formal properties shared by all games, largely oblivious to the question whether these are sufficient to distinguish games from *other* human practices as well. For instance, current game definitions have a hard time telling apart "sports" and "games" (ibid.: 42).

But this is really only one example: Ritual, sport, art, fictional media, play are all thought to be engrossing, pursued voluntarily and for their own sake, patterned if not explicitly rule-based, transforming-representing, 'set apart' from everyday life, freed from consequence – just like games. Some of them even were or still are formalized contests: Sports certainly are, early Greek drama was a ritualistic competition with prizes (Schechner 2002: 31), and poetry began and remained deep into the histories of different cultures a contest of singers (Huizinga 1955: 190ff.). Does that mean that they were games? When is a game art, when art a game, or can something be both at the same time? What then *is* the difference of sports and games?

In short, the definitions of Juul or Salen and Zimmerman fail to incorporate dimensions of comparison – culture, history, meaning, experience, practice – that would allow answering such questions. Or the answers given are rather 'thin', sophistic word battles that tell us little about the *meaning* of phenomenon X being sport/art/whatever rather than a game. Finally, they don't even begin to address and make sense of the commonalities of all these practices. A GAFAP approach, on the other hand, opens said larger anthropological spectrum of comparative dimensions, and articulates the common ground of games, art, ritual, etc.

#### *4.5 Evading essentialism and false dichotomies*

A related set of problems arises with the formalist nature of current game definitions itself (see Bogost 2006, 2009 for a general critique of the ontology implied in the inherent formalism of current game studies). They proceed by teasing out an intensional list of formal properties whose extension, when applied to a sample of cases, would contain what somehow

is the supposed consensus to ‘feel right’ to be called a game, and exclude what is not: TETRIS, yes, puzzles, no, role-playing games, maybe? (Salen & Zimmerman 2004: 79-82, Juul 2005: 23-28) At least implicitly, this takes the shape of a genus-specifica definition of necessary and sufficient conditions.<sup>6</sup> The definition is supposed to allow easy discerning directly from the game artifact, and to get at something thought to be “the games themselves” (ibid.: 23, Salen & Zimmerman 2004: 75, 79) – note the essentialism already implied in the phrase.

The problem with such formalist definitions is their tendency to essentialize and reify the categories they construct. They populate the ontological zoo with abstract entities like “archetypes”, “epistemes”, “structures”, “game”, etc., which raises the double question ‘where’, on which ontological plane these entities ‘exist’, and how they can affect the observed phenomena from there (Liu 1989). Also, they demand the definite attribution of any entity to one and only one category. Something or the elements of something must ‘be’ *either* X *or* Y, in the present case: a game *or* not, a fiction *or* not, fiction *or* game, etc.

In recent years, more and more voices in game studies have articulated concern with the rigidity of this implicit essentialism and pushed for a more fluid, sociological, non-essentialist conceptualization of games less dependent on the game artifact (Copier 2007, Juul 2008). Ironically, the study of (literary) fiction went through a very similar maturation from (1) claiming an ontological difference between fiction and non-fiction, easily discernible from syntactic surface properties, to (2) analytic accounts that sought out a semantic rather than ontological difference, to (3) pragmatic accounts that state that the fiction/non-fiction distinction is really grounded in social conventions (Nickel-Bacon, Groeben & Schreier 2000).

Several scholars already suggested that one presented FAP theorist – Erving Goffman – could provide the foundation for a sociological theory of games (Pargman & Jakobsson 2008, Crawford 2009, Consalvo 2009, Deterding 2009), and indeed, the outlined GAFAP account offers a social, non-essentialist definition of play and fiction that can be equally applied to games. Whether something ‘is’ a play, a game, or a fiction depends on the shared social convention that is either individually perceived and reproduced or socially agreed upon and reproduced by the participant(s) in the given situation. It also dissolves the false fiction-*or*-game dichotomy by (a) pointing out the shared constants of both games and fiction and (b) again declaring this a matter of the situationally enacted convention. In the words of board game historian David Parlett (1999: 6): “How representational a game is depends on the level at which it is being played and the extent of the player’s imagination.”

#### 4.6 Providing explanatory power

The third disadvantage of current formalist accounts of games is that they remain purely *descriptive*. They do not provide an explanatory theoretical embedding whether and why the categories they construct are not just arbitrary linguistic decisions of nomenclature, helpful as they may be for clear academic discourse. In other words, they lack explanatory power – in contrast to, say, cladistic taxonomies of species that are supposed to meaningfully depict real evolutionary relations of ancestry between the different categories. Within the outlined GAFAP account, the categories of “play”, “game”, “fictional media”, “video game” do possess such strong explanatory power on four levels already introduced:

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<sup>6</sup> Juul’s (2005: 43ff.) handling of “borderline cases” leaves up to debate whether he rather has a Wittgensteinian family resemblance model in mind.

- *functional* – they explain the evolutionary adaptive value of play, fiction, and games: training of pattern recognition and social cognition, behavioral and cognitive creativity;
- *phylogenetic* – they explain the evolutionary and cultural origin and relations of play, games, and fiction in animal play;
- *ontogenetic* – they explain how and when play, games, and fiction develop in the biography of an individual from early toddler and pretense play through socialization;
- *situational* – they explain the cognitive and social mechanisms at work when we play, play a game, read a fictional book, watch a fictional movie, etc. (social enactment of frames, make-believe subjunctive co-presence of several layers in experience).

#### 4.7 Providing a coherent evolutionary and cultural history of play, games, and fiction

The phylogenetic and ontogenetic levels of explanation lead right to the last advantage of a GAFAP account. It provides the ground for a coherent evolutionary and cultural history of play, games, and fiction. Now origin stories are always contestable, and rightfully so – evidence is scarce and highly open to interpretation, and few if any could rightfully claim to possess a sufficient cross-cultural overview. But we need not determine whether drama, poetic song, ritual, story or games ‘came first’, whether one of them is “vertical” to another one, or all are “horizontal”, equally primeval human practices (Schechner 2003: 7). The important historical argument to be made is that all ground in play, that this fits with existing cultural histories of fiction (Rösler 1980, Schlaffer 1990), and that the multitude of today’s culturally different practices of playing, performing, gaming, fiction found can be delineated as culturally specific refinements, appropriations, transformations of the affordances of play.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper argued that the two prevalent theoretical notions of fiction in video games – video games ‘containing’ separate elements of fiction and game, or fiction and games ‘overlapping’ in video games – are ill-formed. We shouldn’t conceive of game and fiction as two initially separate categories that are then recombined (accidentally or necessarily) in video games. Rather, we should understand play as the shared ground of both games and fiction.

In comparison to Aarseth’s (2005) ‘separatist’ position, this GAFAP account deflates the strong, “ontological” difference between “fictional” background elements and malleable, rule-modeled “simulational” elements in video games. Rather than conceiving the simulated as “*different* [...] to our own world, and as different from fiction as [...] from other worlds” (ibid.), the worlds of fictional media, games, children’s play or religious experience are all seen as ontologically on par as instances of enacted play. All are transformed-represented make-believe, freed from pragmatic consequence, potentially cueing imaginations. Already in children’s games or board games, elements are malleable and rule-modeled. Also, whether something is “fictional” (in the sense of cueing imaginations) or “simulational” (in the sense of a malleable rule object) is not ontologically predetermined, but at least partially dependent on my (or our) enactment and interpretive focus while engaging in the game.

As regards Juul’s (2005) ‘half-real’ position, the suggested GAFAP account holds that the cueing of incoherent fictional worlds is nothing ‘new’ to video games, but historically present from earliest childhood play on. The intensity of engagement in this fictional world certainly depends as much on what the game artifact as prop affords in terms of rich and coherent sensory cues as on whether and how the player(s) engage in it – as Juul readily concedes

(2005: 130). The difference a GAFAP account marks here is that the cueing of fictional imaginations is not ‘optional’, somehow ‘secondary’ to some abstract ‘nature’ of games ‘as such’, but rather an always already co-present dimension of the experience of playing any game. ‘Originally’, games always already were ‘fictional’ in Juul’s use of the word.

To repeat, this by no means implies that there are no significant differences between play, fictional media, games, and video games. What a GAFAP account suggests is a shift of perspective that takes into view their larger anthropological commonalities, to better *explain* how they function and came to be, and to better articulate just what precisely does make each medium and practice unique.

To perceive games-and-fiction-as-play is to see what elements of play each respective medium reinforces and refines, and which elements recede into the background in exchange. Just as fictional media turned the “participants” of play into passive “appreciators” (Walton) to allow an author the control necessary for crafting a prop cueing a highly coherent, rich, multi-layered narrative and fiction, so abstract games muted the make-believe potential of play to not distract from the joys of strategic reasoning and competitive strife.

In the introduction, I characterized the ‘extensionist’ folk theory of video games as video games being ‘fiction + interactivity’. Understanding games and fiction as play, we might rephrase that formula a little: Fiction, in these terms, is ‘play – interactivity + rich coherent imaginary cues’; games are ‘play + explicit rules’; abstract games are ‘play + explicit rules – rich coherent imaginary cues’; and many of today’s video games are ‘play + explicit rules + rich coherent imaginary cues’. In a certain sense, video games realize the potential of play like neither games nor fictional media have done before. The bet is out which other element of play has to recede in return.

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