

# **Fictionally Flipping Tetrominoes? Defining the Fictionality of a Videogame Player's Actions**

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*“I have never fought a goblin in real life, though fictionally I've fought many of them.”*  
(Tavinor 2009: 24)

We can save Little Sisters in *Bioshock*, help our team members in *Mass Effect*, kill orcs in *Shadow of Mordor*, and race spaceships in *WipeOut*. Players of computer games 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. But how should we understand these actions, which players say to perform while they are never *really* performed?

When describing situations as these, authors both in the philosophy of computer games and videogame studies often talk about *fictional actions* (Tavinor 2009; Matsunaga 2016; Robson and Meskin 2016; Velleman 2008). However, the concept of fictional actions is not always unambiguously or explicitly described and it is thus not always clear how this concept has to be understood. In this paper, I will use the case of *Tetris* actions to explore descriptions of fictional actions and discuss possible problems with existing views. I will first describe the Waltonian way of defining fictional actions and discuss how this would force us to call player actions in *Tetris* fictional. I will then assess two possible new conditions for fictional actions hinted at by Grant Tavinor, who refuses to call player actions in *Tetris* fictional actions. The first possibility is that the (non-)fictional status of videogame actions depends on the nature of the affordances to which the players react (Tavinor 2009; Juul 2005). I will argue that this condition does not contribute to a better description of fictional actions. Another possibility is that the player must take on a role in the fictional world for his action to be called fictional (Tavinor 2009). This idea will prove helpful. In the end, I will use it to formulate a new description of fictional actions that allows us to usefully talk about them in a way that not only corresponds to the player's experience, but also accounts for it.

## **Troublesome Fictional Actions**

Before we try and find ways to usefully describe fictional actions, we might ask ourselves: if fictional actions are so hard to describe, why do we want to talk about them at all? Although some theorists argue that videogame actions are best explained as the real actions of manipulating graphical objects via a controller (Sageng 2012; Juul 2005; Matsunaga 2016), I would argue we *need* fictional actions if we want to explain the gamer's experience. For example, when a gamer shoots a zombie in a videogame, she does so because she wants to kill the monster. It would be strange to say that she satisfies her desire by manipulating her

controller and making a representation of a zombie die. Her desire can only be satisfied by the action of killing the zombie, which is obviously something she can only fictionally do. Moreover, when a gamer emotionally reacts to one of her actions, like when she feels guilty for killing a certain character, it seems obvious that what she feels guilty *about* is her act of murder: a fictional action. When we cannot talk about what gamers *fictionally do* when playing games, their behaviour becomes hard to describe and impossible to explain. But then, of course, we need a clear idea of what exactly fictional actions are.

### **Fictional actions: a Waltonian framework**

In 1990, Kendall Walton wrote *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, in which he formulated his highly influential make-believe theory, which describes and explains our experiences of and interactions with works of fiction. Although Walton never mentions videogames in his book (he started formulating his make-believe theory in the 1970s), two elements of his theory seem to make it easily applicable to this new fictional medium. First of all, Walton argues that when we appreciate fictional works, we don't just observe their fictional worlds from without, but live in them, "together with Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary and Robinson Crusoe and the others, sharing their joys and sorrows, rejoicing and commiserating with them, admiring and detesting them. True, these worlds are merely fictional, and we are well aware that they are. But *from inside* they seem actual – what fictionally is the case is, fictionally, *really* the case" (1990: 273). He argues that appreciators of fictional works "imagine, from the inside, doing things and undergoing experiences" (1990: 214). As Chris Bateman remarks, Walton's descriptions of the make-believe games played by readers of novels and viewers of movies gestures at something "players of digital games are intimately familiar with", since videogames allow us to enter their fictional world and experience them from the inside in an even more straightforward way (2011: 167). Walton's theory thus seems especially appropriate to describe the videogame experience.

Secondly, Walton has 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 (1990: 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. Walton adds that all fictional works invite such make-believe games: a painting of a boat, for example, mandates a make-believe game in which the viewer sees a boat. This viewer then *fictionally* sees a boat (1990: 215). As Tavinor remarks, Walton's theory of make-believe is perfect to 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). Indeed, videogames seem to be the perfect 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.

Using this framework, we can not only describe when a player action is a fictional action, but also what exactly happens when she fictionally does something: a player performs a fictional action F when she uses her real action of manipulating a controller and thereby creating a graphical representation on the screen as a prop to imagine she really is doing F.<sup>1</sup> For example: a player performs the fictional action of shooting a zombie when she presses a button on her controller to create a representation of a zombie being shot on the screen and uses this action as a prop to imagine she is shooting a zombie. Walton's theory also might explain why players feel like they are performing the fictional action, since they use their own action as a prop to imagine that they are doing the fictional action.

However, Walton's definition of fiction is quite wide-ranging and tends to define more player actions as fictional than the authors who use it want to. The most typical example of this is *Tetris*. Both the game itself and the actions performed by players of *Tetris* would be fictional in a Waltonian sense. As Robson and Meskin write:

“Walton treats ‘representation’ and ‘fiction’ as interchangeable—at least for certain purposes (Walton 1990: 3). This suggests that—in Walton's sense—most (perhaps all) videogames belong to the class of fictions. Even *Tetris* plausibly involves Waltonian representation. Of course if Walton is right about depiction then this is easy to establish, since the game plausibly involves pictures of tetrominoes and, hence, mandates imagining of one's looking at the display that it is an instance of looking at those tetrominoes spin and stack. But putting depiction aside, it seems to us that when playing *Tetris* one is supposed to imagine manipulating the tetrominoes. If this is right, then even *Tetris* counts as a walt-fiction and not merely in virtue of it involving pictures.” (2012b: 207)

According to a Waltonian description, when a player plays *Tetris*, she pushes buttons, creates the representation of a turning tetromino, and imagines of her pushing of buttons that it is a flipping of tetrominoes. As many authors point out, however, it would be counterintuitive and unnecessary to call the actions a *Tetris* player performs *fictional*, as she only seems to be *really* manipulating the graphical shapes in this game (Sageng 2012: 229-230; Juul 2005: 167; Tavinor 2009: 24). Moreover, and probably even worse than the *Tetris* case, it is not exactly clear why opening a menu in a game wouldn't be a fictional action according to a Waltonian framework: the player uses her action of pressing a button as a prop to imagine that she is actually opening a menu. The fact that a Waltonian description of fictional actions seems to result in counting many more actions as fictional than authors in the philosophy of videogames and videogame studies want to, usually leads to a rejection of the Waltonian approach, often with explicit mention of *Tetris* (Tavinor 2009; Robson and Meskin 2016; Matsunaga 2016; Juul 2005).

This rejection has an important consequence though, as authors who want to reserve the idea of *fictional actions* to describe more ‘obviously fictional’ games, but think actions in *Tetris* need to be accounted for differently (namely, as *non-fictional* actions) seem to need a description of fictional actions which includes a condition that is not fulfilled by the act of flipping

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<sup>1</sup> John Richard Sageng describes player actions in representational games similarly, although he argues that the player's intention in this case is not to perform the fictional action, as I would argue, but to produce the representation of this action in the game (2016: 230).

tetrominoes, but is fulfilled by saving Little Sisters, shooting zombies, flying spaceships and the like.

### **Fictional Affordances**

One such condition can be found in Grant Tavinor's *The Art of Videogames*. Although Tavinor at first seems to agree with a largely Waltonian description of the player's experience (2009: 41), he never mentions Walton once when he finally describes player actions under the heading 'Acting in Game Worlds' (2009: 79-85). Here, Tavinor suggests a new condition that defines videogame actions as fictional actions:

“The possibility of fictional action comes about when various elements of the fictional environment are given the potential to cue game events: or what we might call *affordances for action*. [...] A *fictional affordance* in the case of a videogame is thus an interactive aspect of a fictive representation that determines what a player can *fictionally do*” (2009: 80).

Thus maybe, we might say a player's action is fictional when it is enabled by a fictional affordance, or an action possibility that is part of the *fictional* environment of the game. The player fictionally does something when she makes use of the *fictive means* the game provides her with (2009: 109).<sup>2</sup> In this description of fictional actions, Tavinor seems to depend on Juul's description of games as “half-real”, or consisting of rules and fiction. Affordances dependent on the rules of the game result in non-fictional actions, while affordances that depend on the fictional world of the game result in fictional actions. Opening a door in a videogame is then a fictional action because the possibility for this action is a part of the fictional world itself (the fact that, fictionally, there is a door, and it can be opened). Opening a menu in a game would not be fictional at all, because the possibility for this action is purely rule-based (“pressing start opens the menu”), and not embedded in the fictional world of the game. Tavinor himself indicates how this new description might fix the problem of being forced to call actions in *Tetris* fictional actions when he says that the interactive potential of the affordances in *Tetris* are completely exhausted by the formal structure of the game (2009: 108). In other words: in *Tetris*, the action possibilities of the player are completely determined by the rules of the game, without any fictive means being offered to the player. As such, the player is not fictionally, but *really* flipping the tetrominoes. Tavinor's description thus also aligns perfectly with the often-expressed intuition that actions in *Tetris* cannot be fictional because this game does not contain fiction (Sageng 2012: 229-230; Juul 2005: 167).

Tavinor's use of the concept of fictional affordances might offer a surprisingly simple definition of fictional actions that saves us from calling actions in *Tetris* fictional. When looking at more marginal cases, however, the new description of fictional actions as reactions to fictional affordances still raises some big problems. First of all, it is unclear what it means for affordances to be embedded in the fictional world of the game. On the one hand, Tavinor seems to shy away from using “fictional” in the Waltonian sense here, since he wants to exclude *Tetris* affordances from being interpreted as fictional. On the other hand, however, he does describe a fictional world in a videogame as a world with an imagined existence only (2009: 24). If that is the case,

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<sup>2</sup> This description is also used by Tamer Thabet when he introduces the concept of fictional actions in *Game Studies All Over the Place* (2017: 42).

who is to say *Tetris* does not have a fictional world? The representations of tetrominoes slowly gliding down our screen in *Tetris* seemingly should make us imagine there are blocks falling down. This could mean there is a fictional, albeit very limited, world connected to *Tetris*, in which blocks fall down and stack. In “Definition of Videogames” Tavinor admits an imagining of this kind might be present in *Tetris* and concludes that “*Tetris* is indeed an ambiguous case, and a great deal more argument would be needed to establish whether it is or is not a case of interactive fiction” (2008). But if one is unsure whether *Tetris* has a fictional world, it becomes impossible to decide whether its affordances are fictionally embedded or not. The distinction between fictional and non-fictional affordances on which Tavinor wants to base the distinction between fictional and non-fictional actions then becomes quite difficult to grasp.

Secondly, Tavinor’s description might do its job rather *too* well, as it may not only exclude *Tetris*-like cases, but also videogame actions that are intuitively fictional. An example might be found in *Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune*. Players of this game discovered that the player-character Nathan Drake, if moved around in a quite unconventional way next to a wall, could walk through these walls. This exploit is called ‘wall-clipping’. Note that it is not a *fictional* action possibility given by the fictional environment that Nathan can walk through walls. On the contrary, the fictional world of *Uncharted* is such that Drake is a human being and walls are impenetrable by both humans and bullets. It seems like Tavinor would agree that this kind of cheating is not a reaction to a *fictional* affordance, as he describes exploits as manipulations of games’ *encodings* or as taking advantage of *bugs* in the game (2009: 107). Thus, when we walk through a wall in *Uncharted*, we are not responding to an affordance that arises from the fictional world of *Uncharted*. We are merely making use of a bug in *Uncharted*’s coding. *Fictionally*, however, there does not seem to be a difference between a player shooting zombies in this game and a player walking through walls in this game. The only difference between both actions is that one, that of shooting zombies, is also part of the story world of *Uncharted*, while the fictional act of walking through walls is not. Tavinor would agree though, that being part of the story is not a necessary condition for being fictional (2009: 24), so that walking through walls can be fictional without belonging to *Uncharted*’s story. We can thus fictionally walk through a wall, without responding to a fictional affordance. As such, the description of fictional actions as reactions to fictional affordances does not seem to do the job we want it to, and moreover exchanges the problematical distinction between fictional and non-fictional actions for the equally problematical distinction between fictional and non-fictional affordances.

It is also worth noting that Walton’s make-believe theory provides us with concepts that could neatly explain the strange fictional behaviour of walking through walls. When walking through walls in *Uncharted*, we are using the game as a prop for a make-believe game in which it was never intended to serve as a prop. Walton calls this kind of make-believe game an *unofficial* game: what is true in this make-believe game was never meant to be fictionally true in the world of the videogame, but it is fictionally true in our personal playing of it (Walton 1990: 406). Thus, although wall-clipping in the world of *Uncharted* is an *unofficial* action, it is still an action we can *fictionally* perform.

### **Actions of a Fictional Proxy**

Although he does not really elaborate on it in detail, Tavinor suggests another condition by which we could identify fictional game actions, when he says: “In games without player-

characters, the player directly manipulates the fictive qualities of the game without taking on a role in that world” (2009: 62). Tavinor describes the player-character as “the player’s fictional proxy in the world of the game, allowing them the ability both to perceive and to act in the world of the game.” (2009: 60). Tavinor suggests that a player acts fictionally when she acts through an avatar, while she directly and really manipulates what is fictionally true in the game when she does not act through an avatar (as would be the case in *Tetris*).

Robson and Meskin retort that an avatar is not necessary at all for a player to perform fictional actions (2016: 168). They give the example of the racing game *WipeOut*. This game presents no avatar, but that doesn’t mean players of this game ‘directly manipulate what is fictionally true’. As Robson and Meskin argue, the player still performs fictional actions in the fictional world of *WipeOut*, as is made clear by the way players describe themselves, as “moving at breakneck speed” and “being hit by a missile”, etc. (2016: 168). An avatar thus doesn’t seem necessary for a gamer to be able to fictionally act. Robson and Meskin elucidate their claim by comparing it to a child’s game Walton discusses: “According to Walton (1990: 209), when a child ‘pushes a toy truck too small actually to ride in across the floor, it is probably fictional that he is driving it’ just as, on our account, it is fictional of the player in *WipeOut* that she is driving the racing craft” (2016: 168).

Robson and Meskin certainly seem to be right, contra Tavinor, that you don’t need an overtly represented avatar to make fictional actions possible in a videogame. The way they argue for this, though, is somewhat unfortunate, as their example of *WipeOut* still contains a very clear fictional role with which the player is to identify. *WipeOut* is a racing game, so it seems obvious that there is a mandate for the player to imagine that she is the driver of the racing spaceship. A different example, in which not only the representation of an avatar is absent, but there is not even character or object in the fictional world with which the player *can* imaginatively identify, might show that Robson and Meskin are actually on the same track as Tavinor: what is necessary for fictional actions is not an explicitly represented avatar, but that the player identifies with someone/something in the fictional world who can perform actions in that world.<sup>3</sup>

Tavinor himself provides us with examples of games without such a fictional role which the player is mandated to imaginatively fill: *Tetris*, *Age of Empires* and *Rise of Nations* (2009: 72). Another famous example might be *The Sims*. In these games, the player is granted agency not as an explicitly represented character in the fictional world (the player has no avatar), not as an implied character (there is no being in the fictional world with which the player is mandated to identify), but just as herself (the player receives an interface that lets her give real commands to represented objects/characters). As such, when this player says that she flips a tetromino, she must be *really* flipping a representation of a tetromino. She can make it *fictionally true* in the fictional world that a tetromino turns, but the action she performs is not itself part of that world and thus cannot be fictional. For a player to be able to *fictionally* act, and not just really

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<sup>3</sup> 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 (2011: 106). This is relevant here, as it seems to be Bateman’s “avatar” that is necessary for the performance of fictional actions, not his “doll”. Although Tavinor is not quite clear on this, his further discussion seems to suggest that he understands “avatar” as Bateman does (2009: 72).

manipulate the fictionally represented world from the outside, there must be someone or something in the fictional world who she can identify with.

However, as Walton says that if someone sees a painting of a boat, and imagines it to be a real boat, she is fictionally seeing a boat, the Waltonian might retort that if you flip a representation of a tetromino, and imagine it to be a real falling tetromino, then surely you must be *fictionally* flipping a falling tetromino. That is not necessarily true, however. Just like Robson and Meskin did, we can clarify this point by comparing such a player situation with a child's game of make-believe. Imagine a child who is playing with a doll, imagining it to be a toddler, but not imagining herself to be part of the fictional world she imagines. She might imagine, for example, that the toddler can walk on its own, by pushing the doll forward. The girl thus pushes the representation of the toddler, imagining it to be a real toddler, but she does *not* fictionally push the toddler: *fictionally*, the toddler is walking on its own.<sup>4</sup> In a very similar way, the player of *The Sims* can make the representation of a sim go swimming, imagining the sim to be a person who goes to swim, without fictionally making him go swimming: *fictionally*, in his own world, the sim is not forced by anyone to go to the pool. Similarly, the player of *Tetris* can make it fictionally true that a tetromino turns, without *fictionally* flipping it. Again, when a player does not imagine to be part of the fictional world, the performance of her actions cannot be either: her actions are real manipulations of the fictional world, but not fictional actions. We can thus formulate a new condition for fictional game actions:

A videogame player can only be said to perform a fictional action F when the player imaginatively projects into (the situation of) someone/something who does F in the fictional world of the game.

This not only fixes the *Tetris* problem, as shown above, but also the problem of the opening of a game menu being called fictional: as the player who opens the menu does not imaginatively project into someone (or something) in the fictional world who does the opening of the menu, it is rather a real manipulation of game elements.<sup>5</sup>

This new condition has a few important consequences. A first one is that this new description of fictional actions still allows us to interpret *Tetris* as representing a fictional world, albeit a very limited one, without having to say that *Tetris* actions are fictional. The reason that no fictional actions are performed in *Tetris* is not because this game has no fictional world, as many authors have argued (Tavinor 2009: 24; Juul 2005: 167; Sageng 2012: 229), but because no action a player of *Tetris* performs is done while imaginatively projecting into a character in the fictional world, even if there is one.

A second consequence is that the very same action in a videogame can be fictional or non-fictional. Take two players of *The Sims* who both, in their own playing of the game, make one of their sims go for a swim. One of them plays the game from an external standpoint, not imagining herself to be part of the fictional world that is inhabited by the sims (which probably corresponds to what *The Sims* mandates its players to imagine). Her actions make it fictional

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<sup>4</sup> Walton suggests this example, but doesn't elaborate on it after stating that without a mechanical doll, it would be hard for the girl to make it fictional that the toddler can walk on its own (1990: 226).

<sup>5</sup> Possible exceptions are games in which the menu *is* actually opened by the character the player controls. An example is *Grand Theft Auto IV*, which presents the game menu on the player-character's mobile phone.

that one of the characters goes swimming, but, as has been said, she does not *fictionally* make this so. The other player, however, pretends to be an evil god in his playing of the game. Indeed, the only reason why he makes the sim go for a swim is to subsequently take the ladder out of the pool, leaving the sim to hopelessly drown. This player not only makes it fictional that the sim goes swimming, but also *fictionally* makes the sim go swimming: it is the player who, in the guise of an evil, all-controlling god in the fictional world of the game, makes the sim go to the swimming pool.

The above is an example of how actions in a game without an overt avatar can be fictional or non-fictional depending on the approach and imaginings of the player. When there is no clear fictional role to play, players might make them up for themselves. Games that do have an overt player-character, however, clearly mandate the player to imaginatively identify with this character. Playing *Uncharted* without imaginatively identifying with Nathan Drake would not only be hard and quite weird (because, how would you play the game and what would you imagine instead?), but also a clearly unofficial make-believe game to play with this game.<sup>6</sup> As such, the fictionality of player actions is not entirely determined by the way the player decides to play or imagine: there are still proper ways a game is intended to be played, which would often be very hard or even impossible to reject in a personal playing of the game, and which decide whether and which actions in this game would normally be fictional or non-fictional.

Lastly, this discussion on fictional actions in videogames might reveal a potential criticism to Walton's theory. Walton said that readers and viewers are always making things fictionally true about themselves when appreciating a work of fiction (1990: 215). The person looking at the painting of a boat not only sees a fictional boat, but thereby also fictionally sees a boat, according to Walton. To appreciate the painting, the onlooker has to become part of the fictional world of the painting. Most videogames, however, introduce a whole new way of becoming part of the fictional world. Games like *Uncharted* let us enter their fictional world in the guise of a fictional proxy, in this case Nathan Drake. When we see something in *Uncharted's* world, we fictionally see it, made possible by the fact that we identify with someone inside the fictional world. When we see something in *Tetris*, however, it would be strange to say we are fictionally seeing something, because fictionally, there is no one in the world of *Tetris* watching the tetrominoes fall. Since Walton's theory says of *every* fictional work that it's appreciation causes de se imaginings, however, it cannot distinguish between games like *Uncharted* and games like *Tetris*.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

It is ultimately an element of Walton's make-believe theory that made his theory seem perfectly applicable to videogames, namely the idea that appreciators always *enter the fictional world of the work they appreciate* (1990: 273), that stands in the way of differentiating between games as *Tetris* and games as *Uncharted*. After all, we don't enter into the fictional worlds of all games

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<sup>6</sup> Another unofficial make-believe game would be to open the menu in *Uncharted*, and pretend that Nathan Drake is somehow performing this action, as the action of opening the menu is clearly not done by any character from within the fictional world of the game.

<sup>7</sup> We could possibly solve this by saying that, contrary to what Walton said, only works of fiction that mandate their appreciators to imagine that they are part of their fictional world (novels and movies that address their audience, or videogames that invite players to take control of some being in its fictional world), can make things fictionally true about them.



equally. While we quite obviously enter and influence the world of *Uncharted* from the inside, we only manipulate the (arguably fictional) world of *Tetris* from the outside. A *Tetris* player makes it fictionally true that tetrominoes turn, but does not fictionally flip them. Only actions players do from within, through a proxy in the videogame's fictional world, are intuitively interpreted as fictional actions. This allows us to formulate a new condition to add to the Waltonian description of fictional actions and make it compatible with our intuitive grasp of fictional actions: a videogame player can only be said to perform a fictional action F when the player imaginatively projects into (the situation of) someone/something who does F in the fictional world of the game. Of course, this condition alone does not *explain* what happens when a player fictionally acts, or how her real action is related to her fictional one. This is solved by adding this condition to the Waltonian description of fictional actions, which has already proven its worth by allowing us to explain the imaginative games the gamer plays using her own actions as props and how these games might differ from the official make-believe games a videogame was intended to serve in. The full new description of fictional actions then becomes: *a videogame player performs a fictional action F when the player imaginatively projects into (the situation of) someone/something who does F in the fictional world of the game, by performing a real action, such as the manipulation of graphical shapes through a controller, which the player uses as a prop to imagine that she (in the guise of the fictional proxy) is doing action F.*

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GRAND THEFT AUTO IV. Rockstar Games, Playstation 3, 2008.

MASS EFFECT. BioWare, Xbox 360, 2007.

MIDDLE EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR. Monolith Productions, PlayStation 4, 2014.

TETRIS. Pajitnov, Alexey and Vadim Gerasimov, PC, 1985.

THE SIMS. Maxis, PC, 2000.

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