

1 Article

# 2 Approaches to Game Fiction Derived from Musicals 3 and Pornography

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6 **Abstract:** This paper discusses the construction of consistent fictions in games using relevant theory  
7 drawn from discussions of musicals and pornography in opposition to media that are traditionally  
8 associated with fiction and used to discuss games (film, theatre, literature etc.). Game developer  
9 John Carmack's famous quip that stories in games are, like stories in pornography, optional, is the  
10 impetus for a discussion of the role and function of fiction in games. This paper aims to kickstart an  
11 informed approach to constructing and understanding consistent fictions in games. Case studies  
12 from games, musicals and pornography are cross-examined to identify what is common to each  
13 practice with regards to their fictions (or lack thereof) and how they might inform the analysis of  
14 games going forward. To this end the terms 'integrated', 'separated' and 'dissolved' are borrowed  
15 from Dyer's work on musicals which was also later employed by Linda Williams to discuss  
16 pornographic fictions. A framework is laid out by which games (and other media) can be  
17 understood as a mix of different types of information and how the arrangement of this information  
18 in a given work might classify it under Dyer's terms and help us understand the ways in which a  
19 game fiction is considered consistent or not.

20 **Keywords:** games; videogames; video games; game fiction; game narrative; game storytelling;  
21 pornography; musicals; ludonarrative dissonance

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## 23 1. Introduction

24 This paper sets out to establish the common links between humanities theories applied to  
25 musicals, pornography and games and to identify the ways in which game fictions can be understood  
26 to be constructed around the formal aspects of games. This research is particularly concerned with  
27 cases where fictional consistency might be more reliably achieved in a game. This research was  
28 undertaken using a humanities approach because understanding fiction in musicals and  
29 pornography in relation to the structure of games and the experience of fiction by players is not an  
30 empirical problem with a quantifiable answer. Many have identified gaps between the fictions and  
31 rules-oriented qualities of games (Polansky, 2015; Tocci, 2008; Juul, 2005; Hocking, 2007; Murray,  
32 1997) and the understanding of these gaps is a prime concern here. Often neglected are those media  
33 which, I will argue, have structural similarities to games and thus could reveal much about how they  
34 operate alongside fiction. Since games are examined here as a vector for fiction (consistent or  
35 otherwise) it may be worth looking at how fiction does not comfortably gel with formal processes in  
36 other media. Fictional inconsistencies are not unique to games and other media also feature different  
37 types of information that may not always mesh. In the course of this research many cases were  
38 examined where fiction is broken or played with by its author: breaking the fourth wall; metafictional  
39 stories; and cases where fictional plausibility is stretched to the breaking point. While games are often  
40 compared to film, theatre and literature in order to understand them as media for storytelling I  
41 believe it may be more fruitful to take a more general approach and look at games as media for  
42 relating fictional information. Two practices, musicals and pornography, stand out alongside games

43 where fiction is often challenged by the formal affordances of their media. Like games, these practices  
44 are not primarily associated with telling stories and even challenge traditional notions of fictional  
45 representation.

## 46 2. Musicals and Pornography

47 Linda Williams once observed that 'it is commonplace for critic and viewers to ridicule narrative  
48 genres that seem to be only flimsy excuses for something else - musicals and pornography in  
49 particular are often singled out as being really about song and dance or sex.' (Williams 1999, 126). In  
50 a similar way, game fictions can often be interpreted as just an excuse, they exist for the game's own  
51 sake. Pornography, musicals and games are all forms that can be enjoyed apart from a fictional  
52 context and it is surprising that they are not compared more often given their remarkable structural  
53 similarities. For pornography, games and musicals an explicit narrative is arguably optional and their  
54 formal structure means that they often come across tensions when trying to convey fictional  
55 information. Fiction in pornography is fraught with difficulty when reading it mostly due to the  
56 nature of pornography and its audience. Like games, there are those who would question whether  
57 there is even any need for any kind of fiction, narrative or story in pornography. Game developer  
58 John Carmack made the infamous analogy that 'Story in a game is like a story in a porn movie. It's  
59 expected to be there, but it's not that important' (Kushner 2003, 120). However, this does not detract  
60 from the fact that there are audiences that engage with stories in both games and pornography. It  
61 merely highlights an interesting commonality which I argue is one of many. The formal core of each  
62 is related to the sense pleasures of sound, sexual arousal and victory rather than storytelling.<sup>1</sup>

63 To make sure there is no confusion at this stage I define music as organised sound which is  
64 chosen for performance (prerecorded or otherwise) and musical theatre and film (hereafter referred  
65 to as musicals) as productions that use music as a foundation for exploring a narrative or theme. My  
66 definition of musicals does not presently include opera as Taylor (2012) notes that the two are very  
67 distinct forms and so the theoretical discussions of musicals presented here are not necessarily  
68 applicable to opera. I define pornography as any material made in any medium for the primary  
69 purpose of instilling or aiding sexual desire and/or arousal in its audience. Notice that these  
70 definitions neither include nor exclude the possibility of fictional information in music or  
71 pornography (yet in practice they very often exclude it). I realise that these definitions are quite broad  
72 and that I will be discussing many cases that function in different ways. A pornographic pin-up  
73 functions differently to a pornographic film or erotic literature but all examples will come under my  
74 definition of pornography. My discussion of musicals is similarly broad as I will primarily be  
75 discussing examples from musical theatre but also of classical compositions and popular musical  
76 genres. These extra examples, even though they are music, do not strictly fall in the same realm as  
77 musicals. However, this diverse range of case studies still provide useful comparisons to the ways in  
78 which fiction functions in games. Games, musicals and pornography are all practices that are not tied

<sup>1</sup> The thing that caused me to see a link between these very different practices was the revelation of the inseparable role repetition plays in games. Repetition is also a hallmark of musicals and of pornography. Oliver Sacks, in his study of the cognition of music, emphasises the importance of repetition in music:

There are, of course, inherent tendencies to repetition in music itself. Our poetry, our ballads, our songs are full of repetition. Every piece of classical music has its repeat marks or variations on a theme, and our greatest composers are masters of repetition; nursery rhymes and the little chants and songs we use to teach young children have choruses and refrains. We are attracted to repetition even as adults; we want the stimulus and the reward again and again, and in music we get it.' (Sacks 2007, 47).

Similarly, when discussing video games in relation to other media, Dovey & Kennedy observe '...no other kind of cultural consumption requires this kind of repetition. Instead we find it in cultural activities where musicians or sports players are called upon time and again to repeat actions in order to achieve a preferred performance or a kind of virtuosity' (Dovey & Kennedy 2006 cited in Kirkpatrick 2011, 100).

79 to a particular medium and so a caution is raised here not to confuse my discussion in this section as  
80 making definitive claims about any of the media these practices use. They are only discussed to help  
81 understand how fictions function in cases similar to games (where fiction is not strictly necessary or  
82 of primary focus).

83 Take the concept of a pin-up for example. In a pin-up illustration or photograph a model is  
84 displayed in either an abstract or fictional setting. In the case of a pin-up which describes a limited  
85 fictional world, the significance of the fiction is a curiosity. The mere appearance of erotic stimuli  
86 (typically the nude or partially-clothed human body in an erotically charged scenario) is enough for  
87 pornography to fulfill its function. Either the fiction enhances the pornographic function (as in the  
88 case of a particular role-playing or uniform fetish) or it serves as 'window-dressing' a non-vital bonus  
89 that gives the pin-up a degree of distinctiveness from other pin-ups. Likewise, it could be said of a  
90 game that as long as the design of a game is functionally adequate and ludically compelling then the  
91 fictional world of the game is also 'window dressing'. In both cases, the fictional aspect may not be  
92 as separate as we imagine.

93 Pornographic films of the latter half of the 20th Century, as documented by Linda Williams  
94 (1999), would more commonly feature narratives specifically structured around erotic subject matter.  
95 In the film *Insatiable* (Stu Segall 1980) the plot centres on a wealthy and powerful woman's quest to  
96 have satisfying sex. In this instance a fiction gives explanation for the formal pornographic elements  
97 (i.e. the revelation of sexual stimuli to the audience). While these more fictionally explicit films do  
98 exist, the majority of pornography rarely features a narrative. The sub-genre of porn parodies (Simon  
99 George 2003) and the hardcore feature films that Williams (1999) examines are seen as exceptions to  
100 the norm when compared to more 'gonzo' films or non-fictional sex scenes. Modern games have also  
101 had a similar trajectory regarding narrative where a heavy focus on story is marketed as a unique  
102 selling point as in games such as *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010) or *Gone Home* (Fullbright 2013)

103 Williams (1999) notes that in pornography a formal structure, similar to that found in musical  
104 theatre, is at play. Drawing from '*The Film-maker's Guide to Pornography*' (Ziplow 1977), Williams  
105 shows how 'numbers' and narrative work in parallel in pornographic films. These numbers are not  
106 unlike the formal musical numbers that exist in musicals (duet, solo etc.). Distinct from narrative,  
107 numbers merely describe a formal template on which narrative may or may not be transcribed. In  
108 pornography, according to Ziplow, the numbers are:

- 109 1. Masturbation
- 110 2. Straight sex
- 111 3. Lesbianism
- 112 4. Oral Sex
- 113 5. Ménage a Trois
- 114 6. Orgies
- 115 7. Anal sex
- 116 8. S&M

117 While this is by no means a comprehensive list of numbers it is clear that these numbers do not  
118 prescribe many specifics about fiction. Likewise, in musical numbers such as a solo, duet or ensemble  
119 number, fiction is not yet established, only the formal musical structure is described. We can see  
120 similarities in games where a boss fight, hub-world or puzzle can be thought of as numbers which  
121 do not prescribe any specific fictional information but might serve as the foundation for it later.

122 In music, and more prominently in musicals, fiction is communicated alongside formal musical  
123 information. Typically, a distinction can be made between music and lyrics, and in the case of  
124 musicals this extends to stagecraft, dance choreography, libretto, acting and costumes. The question  
125 is, where is fiction communicated in music? Lyrics can be read as making fictional statements that  
126 are merely set to music but in some cases can be abstract as in doo-wop, wordless choir or scat  
127 singing. Can music itself make fictional statements? Ludwig van Beethoven's sixth symphony -  
128 '*Pastoral Symphony*' - (Beethoven 1951) is often cited as an example of music that features no lyrics yet  
129 represents a fictional setting. This is known as 'program music' which is thought of as having  
130 'content', as opposed to 'absolute music' which is purely abstract, non-representational and textless

131 (Dahlhaus 1989). Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* features titles for each movement which describe  
 132 different aspects of an idyllic countryside and the music itself features identifiable sounds such as the  
 133 imitation of bird-calls and the sounds of thunder by musical instruments (See Fig. 1). While some  
 134 instrumental music integrates these aspects of fictional representation, a large proportion of music  
 135 features very little explicit fictional information partially because it does not need to in order to  
 136 function as music in much the same way as pornography or games do not need fiction to function.  
 137 An example of a musical without a fiction would be the abstract segment of *Fantasia* (Joe Grant and  
 138 Dick Huemer, 1940) depicting Bach's *Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor*.

The image shows a page of a musical score for the sixth movement of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, 'Pastorale'. The score is for measures 130 to 138. The woodwind parts are clearly labeled: Flute (Nachtigall), Oboe (Wachtel), Clarinet (Kuckuk), and Bassoon. The flute part is marked 'cresc.' and 'tr.'. The string parts are labeled V.I., V.II, Vla., Vlc. soli, and Vlc. e Cb. The score is in F major and 6/8 time. The page number 'H. 31 612' is visible at the bottom.

139

140 Figure 1 - Excerpt from VI Symphonie F Major "Pastorale" Op.68. showing the musical approximation  
 141 of bird calls (nightingale, quail and cuckoo). by Ludwig van Beethoven (1951).

142 Richard Dyer (1992) has suggested that the formal non-representational parts of music are in  
 143 contradiction with representational signs in musicals making them a contradictory medium. 'What  
 144 film musicals do, he proposes, is to manage these contradictions so that superficially they seem to  
 145 disappear.' (Taylor 2012, 10). Music theorist Millie Taylor has suggested that the discontinuity of  
 146 musical theatre is where the pleasure they offer may be derived. Musicals take on an unrealistic  
 147 almost escapist sense about them due to how the formal aspects rule over the narrative. Taylor  
 148 describes how romantic couples in musicals can be identified by the fact that they have a similar vocal  
 149 range which compliments one another (2012, p.27). Other character archetypes are often signified by  
 150 their musical performance showing a unique connection between formal music and fictional  
 151 information. Taylor's analysis of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman 1975) shows how  
 152 musical styles inform us about characters.<sup>2</sup> This connection may make it easier for audiences to  
 153 intuitively understand the fiction of a musical without having to feel that the fiction is an excuse for  
 154 the music to happen as is often the case in pornography.

<sup>2</sup> Pop is virginal and conventional and so Brad and Janet sing in this style. This contrasts with Dr. Frankfurter's sexually deviant and flamboyant glam rock style or Eddie's rugged and manly rock and roll vocals and so on.

155 Richard Dyer developed a theory about how different musicals work and categorised them into  
156 three broad types: integrated, separated and dissolved (Dyer 1992, 28; Williams 1999). These terms  
157 were applied to pornography by Linda Williams (1999, 160) and perhaps the concepts they discuss  
158 can also be applied to game fiction given their marked similarities. According to Dyer, integrated  
159 musicals are musicals where the songs are directly woven into the narrative. This is usually done by  
160 naturally setting up a fictional explanation that cues a song (as opposed to spontaneously bursting  
161 into song in any given context) or by making the songs part of the diegesis. In other words, characters  
162 are given reasons for why they might be singing, as in *Chicago* (Fred Ebb & John Kander 1975).  
163 Separated musicals are ones where narrative and number have no relation and characters frequently  
164 express their thoughts and feelings through song but for no apparent reason as in *Grease* (Jim Jacobs,  
165 Warren Casey & John Farrar 1971) or *West Side Story* (Leonard Bernstein & Stephen Sondheim 1957).  
166 Dissolved musicals are musicals where the fictional world is fantastical to a point of being utopian.  
167 The nature of dissolved musical fiction is such that singing is a means of dealing with the fictional  
168 world and metaphorically represents a character's existence in relation to the narrative via music (an  
169 example could arguably be *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming 1939) as seen through the lens of a  
170 childish protagonist's imagination). In dissolved musicals the world is so pleasurable that it seems to  
171 call forth music but not 'for no reason'. It is just how things operate in that utopian fictional universe  
172 (Dyer 1992, 30).

173 Linda Williams' took these three categories of musical and noted similarities to the way that  
174 narrative and number are connected in pornographic films. Integrated pornography gives fictional  
175 explanations for why characters have sex. Separated pornography does not bother with fictional  
176 explanations for sex or often any kind of fiction at all. Lastly dissolved pornography features  
177 characters in a fictional world where sexual congress and promiscuity are commonplace.<sup>3</sup> It would  
178 be simple to transpose the categories of integrated, separated and dissolved narratives to games and  
179 the analogies are clear. However, the concern of this research does not stop at the identification of  
180 texts that feature gaps. Within pornography and music, techniques have been developed to adjust to  
181 the quirks of their own forms that attempt to sew together fictional information and the unique  
182 formalities of their respective medium.

183 In the case of music, mickey-mousing and sound painting are two that are used to signify  
184 something halfway between musical and fictional information (Taylor, 2012; Whalen, 2004). Mickey-  
185 mousing refers to the synchronised mimicry of a character's actions by the non-diegetic musical score.  
186 It is so-called after the musical scores of early Disney cartoons which helped signify scenes such as a  
187 character angrily walking away by a thumping rhythm that crashes over the background score.  
188 Sound-painting is a similar technique whereby the score is used to create rudimentary sound effects  
189 with musical instruments. The music in this case is used as a mimicry for a genuine sound such as  
190 birdsong or a punch. Foley recordings could be used in these cases but these sounds when played  
191 musically add to the musicality of the fictional universe and join what is seen and heard in a novel  
192 way.

193 In pornography, fetishes are often a way into fiction. Costume roleplay can naturally lead to  
194 many different narratives such as the fictional perversion of a nun used as a pretext to the religiously  
195 charged breaking of taboo. There are many common narratives found in pornography organised  
196 around different fantasies and fetishes. The accidental discovery of someone in a vulnerable or  
197 sexually compromising situation; the arrival of a workman to fix someone's pipes; or the seduction

<sup>3</sup> Williams highlighted that the connection between musicals and pornography demonstrated the similarities between how the human body is configured in both practices. However, I would like to emphasise that they are closely related structurally. "This extended analogy to the musical has allowed us to assess qualities of body performance that, although inherent to hard core, are often overlooked because sex, in contrast to song and dance, appears so natural and unperformed. I have therefore emphasized the reverse of the truism that dance in the musical is really about sex by suggesting the ways in which sexual numbers are like dance; in showing how sexual performances are choreographed, placed in a scene, and deployed within a narrative context, I have tried to get beyond the "fact" of sex to its rhetorical function in texts." (Williams 1999, 270)

198 of a young person by an experienced one. These are all fictions that are not required for pornography  
199 to function yet they attempt to meld fiction with that function in order to enhance that function. These  
200 melding attempts are not always successful but it points to one thing being clear. There are multiple  
201 parts of these media, of which fiction is one part, where stable fictional consistency is achieved by  
202 making sure non-fictional parts, not only do not conflict but, actively combine with fictional ones.  
203

### 204 3. Defining Information in Games

205 Let us suppose that in pornography and musicals there is information that can be termed  
206 fictional information. Obviously (and especially in the case of music) it is possible to have abstract  
207 pieces that either forego fiction (such as 'absolute music' as categorised by Dahlhaus (1989)) or are  
208 representative as a matter of document (as in 'gonzo' pornography or commonly amateur  
209 pornography). These cases are not being ignored but for now let us focus on the fictional information  
210 as it exists in certain cases. This fictional information may be consistent or inconsistent but it is there.  
211 The question turns to what other information is communicated if it is not fictional? In games, this  
212 information is commonly associated with rules and rules are often established as a separate or  
213 opposite category to fiction by game scholars (Juul 2005; Salen & Zimmerman, 2003) but having  
214 examined other media more closely it is perhaps more proper to say that it is a type of information  
215 common to all forms of media. The rules of a game are certainly a part of this other type of  
216 information (as they can't really be said to be describing fictional events directly) but the sense is that  
217 it doesn't stop there. In music this other information could be said to be the 'formal conventions'  
218 of music: time signatures, tempo, harmony and other concepts (primarily from western music theory).  
219 Yet I would suggest that it is not just the abstract information that describes a medium but rather the  
220 medium itself that communicates this other type of information. It just so happens that most media  
221 can also communicate fictional information alongside their native and inherent character (which may  
222 be why the discussion has centred on a dualistic interpretation of how games function - rules versus  
223 fiction). For lack of a better word I suggest that the information unique to a medium might be termed  
224 'significant' as a means of differentiating it from fictional. While fiction can certainly be thought of as  
225 significant (in the colloquial sense) to a novel or film there also exist films and books that contain no  
226 fiction but still represent things with information unique to that medium (i.e. the information is  
227 organised on pages or rolls of film stock). Etymologically, one can take a derived meaning of  
228 'significant' from its Latin roots: *signum*, meaning 'distinguishing feature' (Jones 2016, 182) and *fico*,  
229 'I make' (Jones 2016, 39). *Signa + ficant* thus means 'a quality that makes distinct'. Without this  
230 information there is no medium, thus it is *significant to that medium*. The notes of Beethoven's 6th  
231 Symphony are presenting us with significant information which helps to represent, but is not  
232 actually, the fictional information of the work. The erotic stimuli of the human body and its display  
233 in pornography could be considered the significant information that may lead us to imagine a fiction  
234 surrounding various sexual acts. So it is with all fictional works. However, when there is a gap  
235 between significant and fictional information (at least in the cognition of the audience) fictional  
236 inconsistencies may be experienced.

237 This analogy could be applied to the concepts of separated, integrated and dissolved fictions in  
238 musicals. Separated fictions often feature apparent fictional inconsistencies as the significant form of  
239 the musical has little to no conceptual or contextual connection to its fictional content (although this  
240 is not to say they are qualitatively better or worse than other fictions – a fiction can be inconsistent or  
241 good, consistent and bad simultaneously). A solution here is to just take separated musicals at face  
242 value and ignore the potential disruptions or inconsistencies or embrace separation as an aesthetic  
243 decision (e.g. parody, metafiction, satire etc.). Integrated musicals feature a conceptual and contextual  
244 union between the two and dissolved musicals operate in a fictional world in which the significant  
245 aspect is a natural part (e.g. it is expected in the world of the musical for one to burst into song). The  
246 goal for fictional consistency in games, it seems, would be to focus on how to integrate and dissolve  
247 fictional and significant information together rather than leave them separated.



248 In summary, significant information is so called not because it is more important than fictional  
249 information but because it holds significant meaning to the medium it is communicated by, which  
250 cannot be classed as explicitly fictional. For games, significant information refers to information that  
251 describes the operation of a game, how it is played and what is ludically possible and/or legal. It can  
252 be thought of as the rules of a game however this is not the only thing it covers. While the rules  
253 certainly do constitute significant information there are cases where significant information is not  
254 explicit and can even be hidden from players. Significant information is information that relates only  
255 medium-specific meaning that is not otherwise fictional. In a game, it consists of the rules, goals,  
256 situations and materials for the playing of a game. Thus we have a name for the component that is  
257 commonly referred to as 'game' or 'rules' within the model. As a bonus, this also lets the model be  
258 freed from just discussing games.

259 To give a practical example of significant information: before beginning a game of Monopoly  
260 players might discuss which version of Monopoly they will play with (digital or analogue?), whether  
261 they are playing the game with a time limit, whether trading should be allowed, how best to  
262 determine who goes first or what the rules for rolling doubles or getting out of jail should be. All of  
263 these discussions revolve around significant information. In a video game some significant  
264 information is usually hidden from the player due to the fact that they are partially automated.  
265 Explicit information about hitboxes, frame data, statistical information and other (partially) hidden  
266 information is significant but is usually approximated, guessed at or not considered by a (human)  
267 player during play. What is certain is that without significant information there is no game.

268 Fictional information is a little easier to define. It is information that pertains *only* to the fictional  
269 world of a work (in short, its fiction). Generally speaking, the fictional setting, fictional events,  
270 characters, flavour text/dialogue, art assets or character names can all be considered fictional  
271 information. A practical example of fictional information would be the fact that the character Mario  
272 (in *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo EAD 1996)) has an Italian accent and wears overalls. There is no  
273 practically ludic purpose for why this should be but it does give the character some recognisable  
274 traits and provides information about the world of the various games in which Mario stars. To  
275 simplify further, one can think of significant and fictional information influencing the statements we  
276 make about games. For instance, 'I lost the game' would be a significant statement. 'Stanley died'  
277 would be a fictional statement. Fictional information does not often depend on qualities specific to a  
278 medium and so, in this way, it is not significant. As with significant information, we can now rename  
279 fiction as specifically 'fictional information' within our model.

280 Fiction (as distinct from fictional information) is a little harder to define. There is an agreed  
281 understanding of what it means in most cases but for the sake of this discussion it should probably  
282 be pinned down before misunderstandings accumulate. Walton (1990), Ryan (2001; 2007) and others  
283 (Castaneda, 1979; Fine, 1982; Howell, 1979; Woods, 2009) have encountered similar ambiguities in  
284 their examinations of definitions that oppose fiction to reality, non-fiction or truth. Walton uses it  
285 quite broadly and interchangeably with the term 'representation' and links it closely to imagination.  
286 It is not restricted to literary fictions and includes all forms of depiction. Ultimately Walton does not  
287 settle on a definition as the very word is so ambiguous that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to  
288 come to an agreeable definition that is not incredibly vague or restrictively narrow. One thing Walton  
289 does focus on is the idea of fiction as possessing the function of '*servicing as a prop in games of make-  
290 believe*' (Walton 1990, 91). This is to say that fiction is simply an anchorage point from which the  
291 audience's imagination may develop a 'game of make-believe' which, in practice, can be as simple as  
292 viewing a painting and imagining that its depictive content exists in a fictional world.

293 Marie-Laure Ryan (2001, 109) assesses Walton's theory of representation as a game of make-  
294 believe stating: 'The assimilation of representation to fiction and the definition of the latter as a prop  
295 in a game of make-believe make the embarrassing prediction that texts designed to elicit belief, rather  
296 than make-believe, are not representations'. If belief (versus make-believe) is a condition on which  
297 we judge the fictionality of a text, as Walton (1990) suggests, then we must scrutinise whether  
298 something is understood to be fiction because we make-believe that it is so, or assess it as something  
299 other than fiction because we are led to genuinely believe it. Ryan writes that 'make-believe' 'often

300 confuses, two distinct phenomena: (1) regarding texts that describe obviously made-up situations as  
301 report of true facts (“willingly suspending disbelief”); and (2) engaging in an act of imagination...’  
302 (Ryan 2001, 110) the latter of which does not necessarily involve fiction. Ryan suggests that the  
303 concept of mental simulation is helpful in analysing what make-believe might be understood to be.  
304 Imagination as an act of simulation is situated as both similar and different to fiction because of the  
305 intended usage and the quality of what is imagined. In Ryan’s (2007) discussion of a definition of  
306 narrative, she suggests that the status of fiction is partially a question of authorial intent.

307 If... we are presented with unknown texts and asked: “is this fiction or nonfiction,” our answers  
308 will be right or wrong, because they will not be an assessment of what the text is all about, but a  
309 guess of the author’s intent. Fictionality is indeed a type of game that authors invite readers to  
310 play with texts: a game variously described as make-believe, suspended disbelief, or immersion  
311 in an imaginary world. The same text could, at least in principle, be presented as a creation of  
312 the imagination or as a truthful account of facts, and we must be guided by extra-textual signs,  
313 such as generic labels (“novel,” “short story”) to assess its fictional status. Because judgments of  
314 fictionality affect what the reader will or will not believe, they are much more important than  
315 judgments of narrativity. (Ryan 2007, 32)

316 Fictional information comprises all of the information in a game that is exclusively fiction (as  
317 opposed to significant information). What determines its status is somewhat dependent on reading  
318 the creator’s intent and is partially informed by intersubjective convention such as Ryan’s example  
319 of ‘generic labels’. Fiction’s function, as Ryan and Walton note, can differ greatly depending on the  
320 context it is presented in and for what purpose its audience seeks it out.

321 What counts as fiction will depend on how its maker intended or expected it to be used; or on  
322 how, typically or traditionally, it actually is used; or on what uses people regard as proper or  
323 appropriate (whether or not they do so use it); or on how, according to principles, it is in fact to  
324 be used (whether or not people realize this); or on one or another combination of these (Walton  
325 1990, 91).

326 As is clear from Walton and Ryan’s work, fiction covers many things and defining it becomes a  
327 muddy task. I understand it to be identified in much the same way Walton’s representations are  
328 defined: as a prop in a game of make-believe. To put it succinctly (but by no means conclusively)  
329 *fiction is information that is constructed by an author for the sake of imagination (and not necessarily belief)*  
330 *by an audience.* The audience (in the case of musical, pornographic or game fictions) can arguably  
331 ignore the fiction of those works in preference of the significant information each of these provides.  
332 In the case of games this can take the form of subversive or purely instrumental play (such as speed-  
333 running) but ignoring fiction is not unique to games. Ignoring the significant information in any of  
334 these cases is arguably impossible given that it is to do with the very medium these practices are  
335 communicated through. One could arguably play on a lower difficulty or skip sections of gameplay  
336 but these decisions are not always made in preference of fictional information and still require some  
337 interaction with a system that is rooted in significant information. Likewise, it would be unusual if  
338 not impossible for the audiences of pornography and musicals to ignore the significant information  
339 unique to each in favour of their fictional information.

340 In order that our observations about the structure of fictions in musicals and pornography might  
341 be of use to games it is worth discussing some case studies that might come under my appropriation  
342 of Dyer’s terminology. What is the structure of an integrated or dissolved game?

#### 343 4. Case Studies – Integrated and Dissolved Games

344 Jesper Juul correctly identifies level design as an aspect of games that has potential for fictional  
345 consonance: ‘The level design of a game world can present a fictional world *and* determine what



346 players can and cannot do at the same time. In this way, space can work as a combination of rules  
 347 and fiction' [Juul's emphasis] (2005, 163). Further to this he states: 'Level design, space and the shape  
 348 of game objects refer simultaneously to rules and fiction. This is a case in which rules and fiction *do*  
 349 overlap' [Juul's emphasis] (Juul 2005, 188-189). As an example, if there is a fence that physically blocks  
 350 the player in the world then ludically the fence prescribes a rule that the player cannot walk through  
 351 the fence. The fence is also fictionally a fence and its depiction prompts the player to imagine that a  
 352 fence exists in this fictional world and all that that implies. This dual nature of level design is usually  
 353 unremarkable as the connection between significant and fictional information is made automatically  
 354 and effortlessly. The physical layout of a game level naturally makes fictional statements.

355 I would like to take this principle of level design a step further and consider how Dyer's  
 356 terminology reflects the structure of games. The three types of musicals (as recounted by Taylor  
 357 (2012)) presented a useful way of thinking about how fiction relates to musicals. The terms  
 358 'separated', 'integrated' and 'dissolved' refer to the different ways in which significant information  
 359 may connect to a fictional world in a given work. To clarify, separated games are those where the  
 360 fictional information and significant information are divorced from one another. Integrated games  
 361 and dissolved games are those where the fictional and significant information are joined to create a  
 362 mostly consistent imaginable world. 'Dissolved' describes integration that is so all-encompassing that  
 363 even seemingly abstract game mechanics are simply another part of a stylised fictional world. For the  
 364 purposes of elaborating on world-building in games, I will apply these terms to several case studies.  
 365 I propose *Dark Souls* (From Software 2011) as an example of an integrated game and *Beat the Beat:*  
 366 *Rhythm Paradise* (Nintendo SPD & TNX Music Recordings 2011) as an example of a dissolved game.  
 367 Specific case studies of separated games are not explored in this paper, but it is suggested that,  
 368 currently, the majority of games constitute separated fictions in which the fictional and significant  
 369 information have little to no overlap. A more in-depth study of separated games (specifically those  
 370 that reflexively engage with fictional inconsistency) alongside other separated fictions is needed to  
 371 determine the full use of Dyer's terminology for games and whether separation constitutes a problem  
 372 for games or if it is simply a different aesthetic consideration.

373 *Dark Souls* is set in a dark fantasy world which tasks the player with exploring a dangerous and  
 374 dying world that exists in the aftermath of various conflicts between dragons, gods and humans. A  
 375 key plot device in the game is the existence of a curse of the undead. This curse spreads much like a  
 376 disease and the player begins the game locked in an asylum to which the cursed are sent. The curse's  
 377 main symptom is that the cursed person cannot perish upon death. Instead they resurrect near  
 378 bonfires, doomed to undeath. This process of continually dying takes its toll on various characters in  
 379 the world, often resulting in them losing their sanity. If a cursed one completely loses their sanity  
 380 then they become 'hollow', a hostile, undead shell of a person.

381 This curse makes for an intriguing plot device in *Dark Souls* but it also has significant, mechanical  
 382 implications<sup>4</sup>. Since the player character is cursed they cannot die in the permanent sense and will  
 383 always return to a bonfire (functionally the checkpoints of the game) upon 'death' - fire being implied  
 384 to be the magical source of all life. This shows a remarkably rare case of player character death and  
 385 apparent resurrection being given a fictional explanation. This is not to say that every game system  
 386 must be explicitly tied to a fictional explanation, only that the player is directed towards a potential  
 387 explanation rather than their imagination be left frustrated by a lack of information.<sup>5</sup> Cursed ones

<sup>4</sup> A similar conceit where repeated death is fictionally integrated can be found in the role-playing game *Planescape Torment* (Black Isle Studios 1999)

<sup>5</sup> Other notable explanations are given to account for game systems that normally go unexplained. At one point the player's character meets Solaire of Astora a knight who introduces the summoning mechanic whereby players can summon, or be summoned by, other players with a 'soapstone' to help one another. To explain this Solaire states that

The flow of time itself is convoluted; with heroes centuries old phasing in and out. The very fabric wavers, and relations shift and obscure There's no telling how long your world and mine will remain

388 are also branded with a darksign by which they are recognised. This darksign, a symbol featured in  
 389 the *Dark Souls* logo, is also a usable item within the player's inventory. Upon 'using' it, players will  
 390 die losing all their accumulated souls and humanity (two forms of currency in *Dark Souls*) and  
 391 resurrect at a bonfire. Interestingly, using it is almost never advantageous, it is almost always  
 392 preferable to die in the conventional way.

393 In *Dark Souls*, death features prominently as a theme and as a ludic event. To strengthen this  
 394 connection the conceit of the curse of the undead resolves tensions relating to the apparent  
 395 resurrection of the player-character upon death. Juul (2005) recalls an example of such a tension in  
 396 the explanation players give for Mario's ability to apparently resurrect through the use of extra lives  
 397 in *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo Research and Development 1, 1981). He argues that, while the fictional  
 398 world of *Donkey Kong* is fairly simple to imagine (a gorilla has kidnapped Mario's love interest):

399 It is harder to understand why Mario has three lives: Being hit by a barrel, by a fireball or by an  
 400 anvil should reasonably be fatal. Furthermore, the player is rewarded with an extra Mario at  
 401 10,000 points. This is not a question of Donkey Kong being incomplete, but a question of the  
 402 fictional world being incoherent or unimaginable. While, technically, any world can be  
 403 imagined, and we could explain Mario's reappearance by appealing to magic or reincarnation,  
 404 the point here is that nothing in Donkey Kong suggests a world where people magically come  
 405 back to life after dying. [Juul's emphasis] (Juul 2005, 123-130)

406 Death (and the implicit structural repetition that follows) is rarely factored into the fictional  
 407 world in a game. If anything, it is the most common disruption of a player's experience of fiction  
 408 (Tocci 2008). One of the earliest examples of a designer acknowledging this effect death has on games  
 409 can be found in the *Zak McKracken and the Alien Mind-benders* (Lucasfilm Games 1988) manual where  
 410 the Lucasfilm game design philosophy reads:

411 We believe you buy games to be entertained, not to be whacked over the head every time you  
 412 make a mistake. So we don't bring the game to a screeching halt when you poke your nose into  
 413 a place you haven't visited before. In fact, we make it downright difficult to get a character  
 414 "killed". We think you'd prefer to solve a game's mysteries by exploring and discovering. Not  
 415 by dying a thousand deaths (Moriarty 2015).

416 Brian Moriarty (2015) points out that Lucasfilm did this to best competition at the time and as an act  
 417 of good will towards players who were often given intentionally frustrating puzzles to pad the play  
 418 time of relatively expensive graphic adventure games. However, the relevant point is clear that death  
 419 can be distracting. Failure necessarily commands the attention of the player and so can take attention  
 420 away from the fictional world. Game designer David Cage notes how he finds 'game over' screens  
 421 distracting when considering the narrative and offered another approach to reconciling failure with  
 422 fiction (Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences 2017). In David Cage's game *Heavy Rain* (Quantic  
 423 Dream 2010), players control four characters involved in a murder mystery. The player's choices and  
 424 skill determine the outcomes of the narrative and if a playable character dies, the narrative continues  
 425 another character's story without them. There is not just one path to incorporating the structural  
 426 quirks of games into their fictional worlds but player failure is tricky to account for. The graveyards  
 427 and resurrection mechanics in *World of Warcraft* are highlighted by Klastrop (2008) as another  
 428 example of death being aesthetically incorporated into the fictional world.

in contact. But, use this [white soapstone], to summon one another as spirits, cross the gaps between  
 the worlds, and engage in jolly co-operation! (From Software 2011)

This accounts for how enemies reappear upon sitting at a bonfire, how players are able to join the worlds of  
 other players and also speaks, fictionally, to the disturbed situation of the world.

429 *Dark Souls* would seem to provide an explanation for what is left as incoherent in *Donkey Kong*  
430 and the games that Lucasfilm derides. Juul notes player's responses to the *Donkey Kong* case: 'In an  
431 informal survey of *Donkey Kong* players, all players explained the three lives by appealing to the  
432 rules of the game: With only one life, the game would be too hard' [Juul's emphasis] (Juul 2005, 130).  
433 Juul follows this train of logic to suggest that as long as we focus on the rules, the game is not  
434 incoherent, we merely shift the discussion to rules. In practice, the seemingly inconsistent  
435 interruption of death in the course of gameplay is something that regular players of games can be  
436 said to be literate in. It is not such a jarring inconsistency that we classify these 'incoherent' games as  
437 aesthetically deficient because we are used to 'reading' death as a normal process of ludic failure.  
438 However, *Dark Souls* shows that it is possible to marry constant death with a consistent fiction and  
439 so we might ask what is stopping any game from achieving this rare feat? What is the structural  
440 meaning of death within games given death's dual purpose as fail state and dramatically-charged  
441 fictional occurrence? How different information in games overlaps (or doesn't) is what needs to be  
442 understood. In any case it is clear that *Dark Souls* is achieving integration through its explanations for  
443 how death operates in its world. We could say that *Dark Souls*' fictional and significant information  
444 are integrated in much the same way Williams (1999) states 'narrative' and 'number' can be in  
445 pornography or as Dyer (1992) does in musicals.

446 *Beat the Beat: Rhythm Paradise* (hereafter referred to as *Rhythm Paradise*), on the other hand,  
447 features a universe that is dissolved. The game's fiction revolves almost entirely around the  
448 mechanics and goals of the game. In *Rhythm Paradise* the player plays through various rhythm-based  
449 minigames that require them to tap out a beat or repeat a call-and-response rhythm. These minigames  
450 usually feature a framing device that gives context for the action they must perform. The subsequent  
451 fictions that result from these framing devices are usually absurd or comical but still help the player  
452 intuitively understand the game. One infamous example is set during an interview with a  
453 professional wrestler. 'Ringside' has the player control a wrestler's responses during a post-match  
454 interview (See Fig. 2). They have three responses that are all rhythmically signaled by a fictional  
455 occurrence. If the interviewer asks a question (via a pseudo-nonsense rhythmic refrain: 'wubba-  
456 dubba-dub, is that true?') to which the player must nod to, on the beat, by pressing a single button.  
457 If the interviewer expresses enthusiasm for the wrestler (indicated by her statement 'Woah, you go,  
458 big guy!') the player must tap the button twice in quick rhythmic succession to raise the wrestler's  
459 arm and perform a bicep flex. Lastly if the crowd of journalists yells 'pose for the fans!?' the player  
460 must press two buttons simultaneously to pose for a picture, again on the beat of the accompanying  
461 musical track.

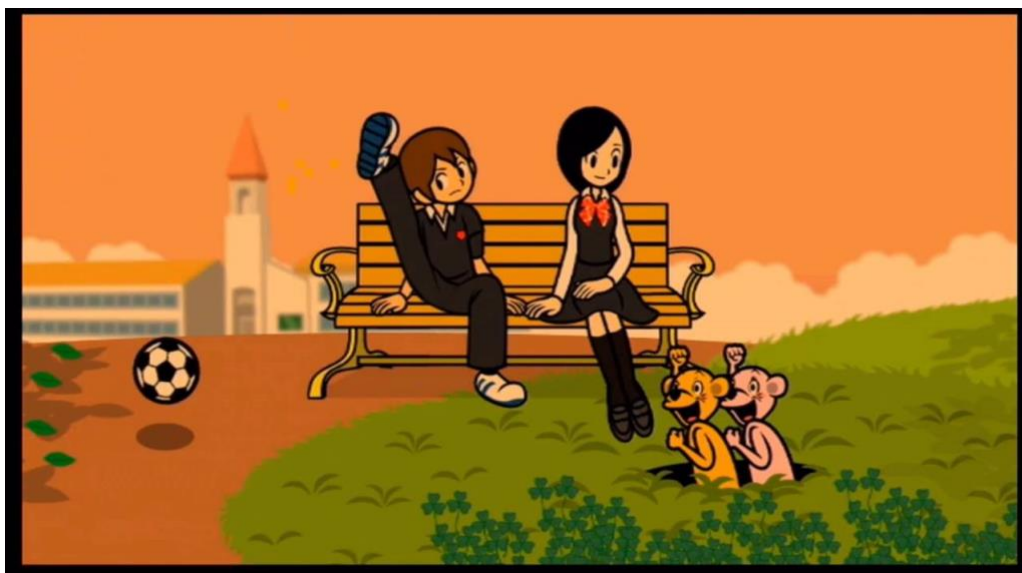


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Figure 2 - Wrestler interviewed in 'Ringside' from *Rhythm Paradise*. by Nintendo SPD & TNX Music Recordings (2011).

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Another example from *Rhythm Paradise*, 'Double Date' involves a couple of high-school students on a date near a sports field (See Fig. 3). For whatever reason, the female student is fascinated by a couple of weasels in the ground nearby. As the couple sits on the bench various types of ball bounce from the sports field and threaten to startle the weasels which in turn upsets the girl potentially ruining the date. The player plays as the male student and is required to kick the balls away so as not to disturb the date. Each ball's bounce denotes a particular rhythm which the player must 'kick' the last beat.



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Figure 3 - Kicking balls in 'Double Date' from *Rhythm Paradise*. by Nintendo SPD & TNX Music Recordings (2011).

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*Rhythm Paradise's* fictional set-ups are very simple but allow for an entertaining frame in which to understand the purely formal rhythmic challenge of the game. While it could be argued that the fiction doesn't make sense (the Ringside reporter's comments are gibberish) one has to look at the context in which the fiction takes place. *Rhythm Paradise* (to the extent that it presents a continual fictional universe) concerns a fiction which surrounds rhythm in a highly unrealistic manner. However, realism is not the same as consistency (although they are related in some cases). One clue

481 to this is how the beginning of the Ringside game shows an establishing shot of the stadium where  
482 the interview takes place. As the music starts up the entire stadium literally pulsates to the rhythm  
483 of the beat. This is not realistic but it shows how the significant information of the game naturally  
484 flows alongside its fiction. Indeed, they are dissolved. Not only does the fiction and significant  
485 information inform each other (as is the case in *Dark Souls*), they are related so much that the fiction  
486 is essentially overtaken by significant information, giving it an abstracted and quasi-fictional status.  
487 It is simply a natural part of this world for rhythmic movements and situations to unfold in everyday  
488 events. *Rhythm Paradise* does not seem realistic or sensible when assessed alongside our reality but it  
489 is certainly internally consistent when observed in its dissolved context.

490 Rhythm, as we know, incorporates repetition, one of the hurdles to clear to achieve fictional  
491 consistency in a game. Repetition has been acknowledged as a structural certainty and potential  
492 problem in various areas of game design (Kirkpatrick 2011, 186-187; Grodal 2003; Andersen 2016;  
493 Quinn 2015). Grodal in particular stresses the repetitious experience of a video game as similar to the  
494 same repetitive requirements of musical appreciation:

495 ...this aesthetics of repetition is based on the sequence: first unfamiliarity and challenge, then  
496 mastery, and finally automation. The experience is thus in some respects similar to the way in  
497 which we enjoy music—musical appreciation is also strongly based on repeating the listening  
498 process until it has reached a stage of automation. (Grodal 2003, 148)

499 *Rhythm Paradise* taps into repetition in a natural way. *Rhythm Paradise's* mini-games all account  
500 for the need, fictionally, for there to be a depiction of the repetition the player mechanically engages  
501 in - in this case it is the rhythm of the game's music. Ringside uses the frame of an interview, an event  
502 likely to have its own structural repetitions (e.g. question, response, question, response, photo  
503 opportunity etc). Double Date (while it makes little sense in a comparable real-world scenario) is set-  
504 up so that a repetitive series is plausible and will require an equally repetitive series of actions (being  
505 set near a sports field, balls are likely to interrupt the date and since balls are most quickly removed  
506 by kicking them, the player and character are called upon to kick them away). *Rhythm Paradise*  
507 features a world that is completely about rhythm, and thus repetition. Each character is wholly  
508 involved in some musical or rhythmic activity regardless of an explicitly musical context. Even nature  
509 itself is shown to be rhythmically motivated (in minigames such as Micro-row where bacterium  
510 pulsate to the beat). The fictional and significant information here are totally aligned and thus we can  
511 say that *Rhythm Paradise* is a dissolved game.

## 512 5. Conclusion

513 Musicals and pornography have provided a novel means of analysing game fictions and  
514 developing some medium-agnostic terminology (fictional and significant information) for discussing  
515 fictional structure in games (and potentially other media). Williams' work on pornography shows  
516 that there is a solid theoretical precedent for importing Dyer's terminology to describe another  
517 medium and the games examined here indicate there is a good fit for the same terms within game  
518 studies.

519 *Dark Souls* and *Rhythm Paradise* form internally consistent fictions because they frame their  
520 fictional information and significant information in a congruent way. Repetition, for instance, does  
521 not prescribe worlds just like that of *Rhythm Paradise* where every fictional depiction is slavishly in  
522 service of repetitive rhythms. Rather, a game should have plausible reasons why the same enemies,  
523 actions and objectives keep occurring, and these reasons should factor into the world-building itself.  
524 Repetition is not appropriate to fictionalise in *every* case. Plausible circumstances in a game should  
525 cue imagination to interpret repetition as natural. The 'numbers' of repetitive dialogue, animations,  
526 level design and many other aspects of games all risk incurring disruptive experience of the fiction,  
527 as they do in musicals or pornography. Death and repetition are two frequently encountered states  
528 within games due to their structural make-up and integration or dissolution of these states with the

529 fiction of a game is difficult to navigate. This is not to say that every fictional world in a game should  
 530 focus on death or repetition but should be able to offer plausibly imaginable reasons for at least some  
 531 of the structural features of games.

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