

# **On Fictional Games and Fictional Game Studies**

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STEFANO GUALENI, RICCARDO FASSONE AND DOM FORD

## Abstract

We explain the concept of *fictional games* and the theoretical and disciplinary progression that this special issue represents. We summarise the issue and the contributions within it.

## Keywords

Fictional games; fictional game studies; game studies; fiction; narrative

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The term *fictional games* indicates playful activities and ludic artefacts devised as part of fictional worlds (Gualeni, 2021; Gualeni & Fassone, 2022, p. 2). In our initial academic efforts to map and understand games that exist exclusively as fictions (our 2022 book titled *Fictional Games*), we—Stefano Gualeni and Riccardo Fassone—specifically emphasized the qualities of inaccessibility and unplayability of those pseudo-games. What we argued there was that fictional games can only be understood as games in an oblique, indirect fashion, as they are experienced as playable artefacts only by characters within a fictional world. In other words, these are games that exist solely as fictions and—for various reasons—cannot be played in the actual world (Gualeni & Fassone, 2022).

Fictional games can be encountered in books, movies, radio shows, TV series, theater plays, videogame worlds, and so on. Within those works of fiction, they serve aesthetic and narrative purposes rather than ludic ones. In our 2022 book, we focused on a few of these purposes that we considered crucial for understanding their narrative roles and broader social significance. We examined fictional games as devices that add detail and depth to fictional characters and as elements that make works of fiction feel richer and more vibrant. Fictional games, we noted, can also serve as opportunities for comedic relief and political subversion. In our book, we

also analyzed how fictional games serve cultural functions—such as working as ideological mirrors, utopian tools, evolutionary aids, and as meta-commentary on how we currently develop, discuss, play, and attribute social meanings to actual games.

From the outset, we knew that no single book could comprehensively cover all possible uses and meanings of imaginary games as fictions (and within fictions). Similarly, we were aware that the 92 fictional games cited and discussed in *Fictional Games* constituted only a fraction of a vast, culturally pervasive phenomenon. With that in mind, a couple of years after the release of our book, we issued a call for papers for a special issue of *Eludamos: Journal of Computer Game Culture* titled ‘On Fictional Games and Fictional Game Studies’.

Gualeni and Fassone were joined at this stage by our third editor, Dom Ford, whose prior work in myth and meaning-making (Ford 2024, 2025) brought his interest to this special issue’s focus. This reflects the expanding disciplinary and theoretical boundaries of the concept of fictional games.

As editors of this special issue, we invited scholars from various disciplines—primarily game studies, media studies, and literary criticism—to expand, refine, and critique our initial efforts to understand the pseudo-games we encounter in fiction. The results of this endeavor can be found in the following pages, which feature nine academic articles on aspects of fictional games that go beyond our book in several ways.

For example, in their study of *Vermis* (Plastiboo, 2023), a strategy guide for a roleplaying game that does not exist, Tim Timvig, Carl-Erik Engqvist and Karin Danielsson posit that fictional games do not necessarily need to be placed within a work of fiction, but can exist as stand-alone speculative artifacts. Their contribution titled ‘Bridging Fictional Game Guides and Imaginary Games’ challenges our original notion of what a fictional game is by extricating it from the confines of a fictional world.

Anh-Thu Nguyen’s piece focuses, instead, on the ideological and utopian functions that we recognized as central in many works of fiction to discuss the role of space and spatiality in game shows (and in *The Hunger Games* in particular). Relying on Michael Nitsche’s (2008) analysis of videogame spaces, in ‘Cheating Against the Machine’ Nguyen talks about gameshow arenas both as physical manifestations of hegemonic power as well as having the potential to cradle resistance and insubordination.

Instead of concentrating on fictional games as the playground for power struggle like in the previously mentioned article, Jaqueline Moran’s ‘This is the Best Game!’ homes in on the theme of resentment. Moran examines *The Best Game*—a fictional arcade game from the YouTube show *Bee and PuppyCat*—as a critique of the masculine, competition-driven reputation of arcade spaces in North America. Drawing on game studies, the history of video games, and theories on dance, she highlights how the game challenges conventional, capitalistic design principles, pushing back

against the idea of *striving play* (see Nguyen 2020) and common game-related practices like the training and performance evaluation of players.

Like *The Best Game* in Moran's analysis, Antranig Sarian's article questions dominant game design assumptions, but in the direction of transformation of traditional power structure (and emphasizing their fragility), rather than their rejection. His piece titled '*Despot: The Game that Looks Back*' examines *Despot*, the fictional game in Iain Banks' *Complicity* (1993). Instead of mirroring the protagonist's violence, *Despot* distorts it through procedural logic, offering an early critique of the quantified self in games.

Matthew Leggatt's thought-provoking piece examines the holodeck in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, particularly in the episode 'Hollow Pursuits' (Bole, 1990), where the addiction to virtual leisure of one of the Enterprise's engineers (Reginald Barclay) unsettles the rest of the crew. While past analyses in fiction studies focused on the holodeck as a narrative device, Leggatt's article 'Desire, Therapy, and "Play" on *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* Holodeck' links it instead to modern virtual reality gaming, highlighting its role in blurring reality, shaping desire, and exposing cracks in the TV show's utopian vision.

Much like *The Best Game* in Moran's analysis, Rory Summerley reflects on a fictional game that appears in a YouTube series. His piece 'Fictional Games as Parody' focuses on the use of fictional games for satirizing actual gaming conventions with an emphasis on humor and nostalgia. Summerley analyses the game played in the series, *Box Peek*, as a parody of transmedial gaming franchises, particularly *Pokémon*, using its fictional game to expose their inconsistencies.

In 'Fictional Videogames as Framing Devices', Julián Gutiérrez Carrera offers a close analysis of *Agony of a Dying MMO* (Hughes, 2021), a playable demo for a nonexistent PlayStation title which depicts the final moments of an (again, fictional) MMO game. According to the author, this fictional game frames actual MMOs as ruled playful spaces where different forms of social communication can take place.

Stefano Caselli and Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone offer an analysis of a fictional game that appears to mirror the labyrinthine nature of the fictional world it exists in. In their article 'Pandora's Labyrinth', they draw a comparison between the puzzle box and the literary genre of the detective novel, using this specific fictional game as a probe of the internal functioning and tropes of the genre.

Last but not least, Daniel Vella's piece examines the film *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072* (Fulci, 1984) through its deadly televised game show, the *Battle of the Damned*. His article 'The Greatest Extravaganza of Mortal Combat Ever Staged' articulates an understanding of the movie and its fictional game within Italy's historical and political landscape, emphasizing how the film ties imperial Rome to fascist ideology and critiques 1980s neoliberal media consolidation. Similarly to Nguyen's analysis of *The*

*Hunger Games'* arena, Vella examines the colosseum-set *Battle of the Damned* as a manifestation and extension of authoritarian control.

The selection of articles presented in this special issue thus belongs to a larger research pathway opened by our book. Both *Fictional Games* and this issue stand as proof that fictional games are a new and fruitful area of inquiry for disciplines game studies, literary theory, and the philosophy of fiction. That said, we are aware that a great amount of scholarly work still needs to be done in this area. While restricting the notion of fictional games to describe games found in works of fiction proved useful for setting the scope of our original inquiry, we believe it would also be beneficial to consider speculative, theoretical, nonexistent games that are not strictly embedded within fictional worlds. What we envisage, in other words, is a further broadening of our inquiry to encompass those made-up games that do not possess the status of proper fiction but instead circulate more informally as 'lore' in communities of fans or players.

A related consideration concerns the methodological aspects of analyzing fictional games. Is a game design analysis even possible for games that are unplayable and largely underspecified? Or is it rather the case that the researcher is somewhat compelled to 'complete' a fictional game in order to be able to analyze it? These questions were also addressed in a workshop titled 'Fictional, Fake, Nonexistent, Nonactual, Imaginary, Impossible, and Unplayable Games', which was held at the DiGRA 2025 conference in Valletta, Malta. The workshop tasked participants with discussing the nature and status of games that exist only in fiction or are otherwise unplayable, and with assessing the methodological challenges posed by these games.

To conclude, this special issue was conceived as a follow-up to our initial exploration of what remains a largely uncharted scholarly theme. By responding to—and expanding upon—the perspectives introduced in *Fictional Games*, the articles collected in this volume contribute meaningfully to our understanding of the cultural value and social meanings of games, regardless of their imaginary, fictional, or fake constitution.

We believe that the ideas and analytical tools presented here will be relevant to a broad range of scholars and practitioners interested in how game design contributes to the construction of fictional worlds, as well as to those exploring the role of narrative imagination in game development and analysis. Have fun!

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## Conflicts of interest

Dom Ford is an editor for *Eludamos* as well as a named editor for this special issue and co-author of the introduction.

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