"Video Games Deny Themselves to Those Who Don't Earn It" is a piece of interactive fiction I wrote in order to explore aspects of power, truth, and interaction and context in digital fiction. The piece does not set out to tell a story in a traditional sense, but instead intends to highlight these ideas by creating a relationship between the seemingly sentient story itself and the reader, or a version of the reader made for the purpose of the story.

Even before the code of the piece is run, the experience begins. The code in which the piece is written is visible to the reader before it is run. In theory, it would be possible to examine this code and see, laid out before the reader, a map of all the states and conditions in the piece, rendering actual interaction unnecessary and undermining the "control" the piece exercises over its reader. However, this piece immediately denies this option to the player, as the text which would be displayed in the piece is encrypted into a cipher, and only decrypted when the piece prints it out when being run. Comments on the code have also been removed, so that any effort to understand the piece without playing it. However, as the encryption algorithm is extremely simple and is also a visible part of the code, it would be possible, if laborious, to decrypt the code. In this way, even this hostile act of seizing power from the reader is undermined, a theme which is reflected throughout the piece.

From the first decision point, the relationship between reader and story is explicitly examined and a power struggle begins. If the reader selects that they would like to leave the game, contrary to what the story said was allowed to them, they are denied and forced to make the "decision" again, until they give the correct answer. This hostile relationship continues as the story demands certain answers or disagrees about the truth of the matter with the reader repeatedly, and insists on its ability to create the truth, even about the reader's childhood. However, as the piece progresses, certain options, such as that in the *Fifty Shades of Grey*

branch, begin to illustrate that the piece "believes" itself to actually be a servant of the reader, unable to stop without the reader's permission, whereas the reader maintains the ability to simply not read. The piece and the reader have a complex, evolving power relationship, just as any reader of any piece and that piece do.

This power relationship inherently interacts with the notions of truth in fiction as well. As the piece discusses in its *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* branch, the piece has a complex relationship with truth, fiction, and lies. It only accepts certain information it knows to be true (such as the fact the name of the reader is Russell Williams), while railing against what it perceives as incorrect statements in the excerpt of Italo Calvino's piece, which itself claims things about the reader. However, it also makes its own (likely) fictional claims about the childhood of the reader, maintaining that it is the creator of truth in this, its own world, and that "Russell Williams" is really only a character whose reality it determines. Some truths, such as that the reader stops reading for a few seconds, it forces to be true in the real world by having time constraints in its display. This interaction of truth and fiction dependent on knowledge of and effect on the world in which the piece is being interacted with is only possible in interactive fiction, or at least fiction under very particular circumstances.

All of the complexity in these relationships between reader and piece is only possible because of the piece's ability to be context-aware, which comes from its limited context. The piece can insist on the name and circumstances of the reader because the piece is only published to that one person. It can have its internal map be explicitly made unreadable because of its manner of publication (and the lack of technical skills of its humble author to hide its inner workings). It even can play with the very requirements which caused it to be created, such as by having a timer which makes some states inaccessible until the game has been played for 15

minutes, the time necessary according to the rules of the assignment. Context gives the piece the ability to maintain an illusion of sentience which allows it to claim power over the reader. This idea is lampshaded in its "When You Are Old" branch, in which it highlights the difference between this piece's context and the context which this other piece, also written in second person, predicts.

This piece is short, and cannot possibly explore in depth all of these ideas. It should be considered more of a proof of concept by a technically unproficient coder. However, it does demonstrate many of the interesting values made available to interactive fiction. Perhaps, it has even more, though some discovery must be left to the reader.