

# **University of Europe for Applied Sciences**

Faculty of Art+Design  
Game Design



Bachelor Proposal

## **Gaming Beyond the Walls**

### **What is the Fourth Wall in Videogames and How to Break it**

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# 1 Abstract

This paper would like to explore the meaning of the fourth wall in video games and how to breach it. It would investigate the meaning of the fourth wall using the frames from traditional passive media and LARP communities and attempt to define the boundaries of a video game. This study would also provide an extensive analysis of games that have attempted fourth wall breaks to figure out what makes them tick. The games that would be put under scrutiny would be Daniel Mullin's *Pony Island* and Hideo Kojima's *Boktai* series. However, there will be mentions of other games like *Inscryption*, *One Shot* and the *Metal Gear Solid* series throughout the paper to serve as alternate references. This paper hopes to potentially establish a better understanding of the fourth wall in video games and possibly provide a basic guideline on how to approach developing them as well as push the boundaries of ways players interact and play a game.

The project that would accompany this paper would be a short narrative driven game that attempts to incorporate as many fourth wall-breaking elements as possible. The game would consist of mechanics that require the player to act beyond the confines of the video game's digital controls, pushing the line on ways games can be interacted with by their players in an attempt to breach the fourth wall. The mechanics would unfortunately be limited to the hardware possibilities of a laptop or a desktop computer due to limited resources, but I would be interested to look into affordable technical hardware that can add to the fourth wall-breaking experience. Some possibilities could include modified pen drives or the incorporation of the player's mobile phone through an accompanying mobile application into the game play experience.

## 2 Introduction to the Topic

The concept of the fourth wall was first coined by french philosopher Denis Diderot in the 17th century. According to Diderot, the fourth wall acts either as conscious division dividing the actors and the drama from its viewer or as an invisible screen through which the two join together into the joint experience of the theatrical moment.<sup>1</sup> I believe this definition still holds true to this day for medias that are consumed passively, for example: books, theatre, movies and television shows. But there poses a problem when trying to apply this concept towards video games due to their interactive nature.

In the words of Newman, the player is considered both the actor and the audience in a game.<sup>2</sup> To explain this further, the player can be considered the "actor" as the actions they take influences the "stage", which is the field or area the game is taking place in. On the other side, the player can be considered an "audience" as they are also the entity that experiences the game by watching the consequences of their actions unfold in front of them. Due to this lack of separation of the "actor" and "audience" in games, the current definition of the fourth wall seems to have fallen apart.

There has been research about defining the boundaries of a game in the recent years through Huizinga's concept of the magic circle. The concept has been expanded by Salen and Zimmerman into the realms of video games with their book "The Rules of Play". They defined how the magic circle frames a distinct space of meaning that is separate from, but still references, the real world<sup>3</sup> thus highlighting the boundary between "game" and "reality" that could potentially serve as the video game's definition of the fourth wall.

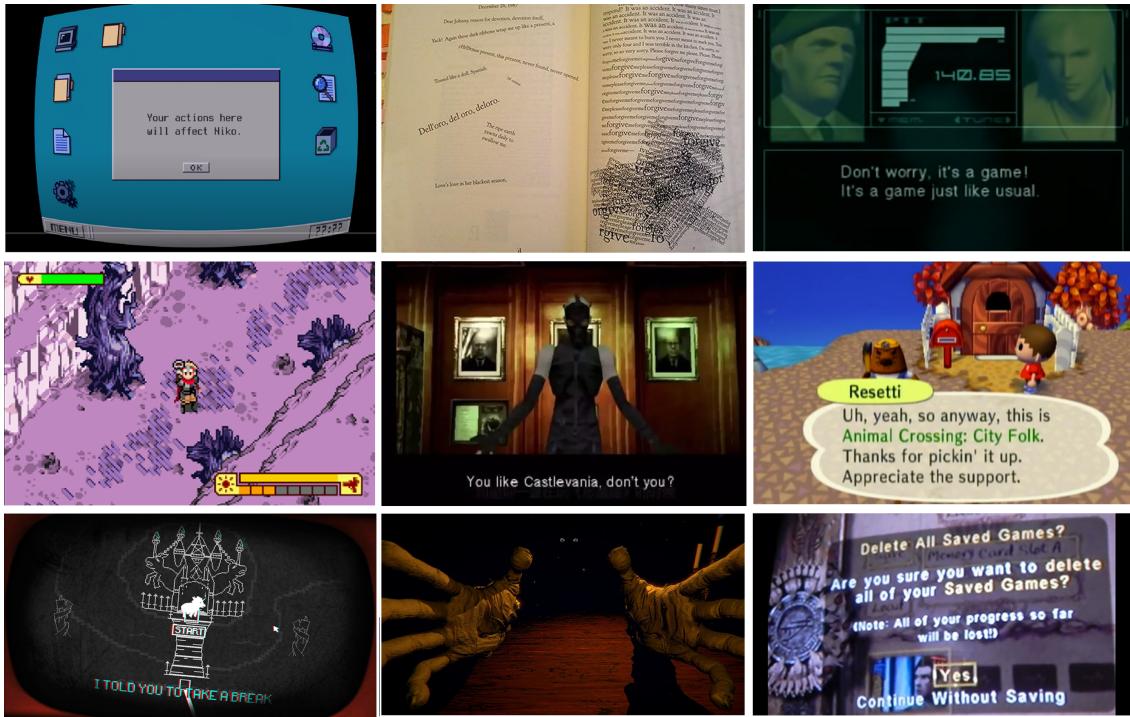
Thus this paper would mostly focus on the field of a video game's mechanical design as its core research topic, specifically into the modification and fracturing of the boundary between "in-game" and the real world. Some of the games that would be the most relevant to this particular topic would be the Boktai series produced by Hideo Kojima and Pony Island by Daniel Mullins. As their main mechanics in the games purposefully touch upon the fourth wall for various purposes. Other possibly relevant games would include The Metal Gear Solid 1, One Shot, Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem and Inscription. This list of games would be subjected to changes depending on further research upon the topic.

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1. Charles T. Wolfe and J.B. Shank, "Denis Diderot," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2024, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2024).

2. James Newman, "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame - Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames," *Game Stud.* 2 (2002), <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:34837874>.

3. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (MIT Press, 2004), 672.



### 3 Relevance to the Field

- **Thesis:** This thesis is relevant to the academic pursuits regarding the media of video games as it is crucial to recognize the distinction between other medias in relation towards it and possibly figure out if a new definition is needed to create a better understanding on the rapidly expanding medium of video games.
- **Project:** Developers are always looking for ways to push the limits of their games to surprise and excite their players. Introducing game mechanics or features within their game that encroaches beyond the confines of it's self as a digital program is still a rather niche concept that is used sparingly in video games. I would like to explore how far can the concept be taken and how it could be incorporated as a main mechanic of a game.

## 4 Personal Motivation

I have always enjoyed games that not only exceed my expectations, but are able to subvert my preconceived understanding and introduce a new perspective on the very act of *play* in video games that I have not considered before. I am also personally curious on the ways these games are designed which could invoke a certain sense of existentialism in people as they question and prod the lines between the in-game world and the real world. Overall, I think this particular niche in the games industry has a tendency to pioneer new ways video games can be played and that is an incredibly exciting prospect for me.

## 5 Method(ology)

### 5.1 Theory

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1. Introduction
  - 1.1 What is the Fourth Wall in media?
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3. Fourth wall-breaking design elements
  - 3.1 Direct address of the Player
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  - 3.3 Multiple narrative layers
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  - 3.5 Specialized technical hardware
4. Dissecting example games
  - 4.1 Pony Island / Inscription
  - 4.2 The Boktai Series
5. Conclusion
6. References

### 5.2 Project

For the project, I would like to work on a small-scaled narrative driven game consisting of one main fourth wall-breaking mechanic in Unity. I would start by throwing a bunch of ideas on a wall, compile them onto a Miro board and pick out the most interesting ones. I would proceed to take two of the best ideas and create an estimate working pipeline on Codecks, then head on towards quickly prototyping both versions. After a play testing session, I would garner the feedback and focus on one prototype to go through the production phase. There would be another play testing session at the end of the production phase where I would gather the feedback and begin post production's refine, polish and bug fixes until submission.

## 6 Timeline

Time	Actions
Week 1	Reading, research and introduction
Week 2	Further reading and building Chapter 2
Week 3	Research on games, noting down common design elements
Week 4	Play/ Research example games in depth
Week 5	Finishing
Week 6	Proofreading and Submission
Week 7	Initial project setup and early prototyping
Week 8	Playtest and refine main game concept
Week 9	Research and develop fourth wall-breaking mechanics
Week 10	Continue developing those mechanics
Week 11	Create art assets
Week 12	Continue developing assets
Week 13	Build the game
Week 14	Thorough playtesting sessions
Week 15	Incorporate feedback
Week 16	Review project
Week 17	Bug fixes and polish
Week 18	Bug fixes and polish

Table 1: Project-focused (6 weeks/12 weeks) planned timetable

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### 7.1 Other Media

1. Boktai: The Sun is in Your Hand
2. Inscription
3. Metal Gear Solid 1
4. One Shot
5. Pony Island
6. Eternal Darkness: Sanity’s Requiem

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