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How Can We Be Moved to Shoot Zombies? A Paradox of Fictional Emotions *and Actions* in Interactive Fiction

How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina? By asking this question, Colin Radford introduced the paradox of fiction, or the problem that we are often emotionally moved by characters and events which we know don't really exist (1975). A puzzling element of these emotions that always resurfaced within discussions on the paradox is the fact that, although these emotions *feel* real to the people who have them, their difference from ›real‹ emotions is that they cannot motivate us to perform any actions. The idea that actions towards fictional particulars are impossible still underlies recent work within the philosophy of fiction (cf. Matravers 2014, 26 sqq.; Friend 2017, 220; Stock 2017, 168). In the past decennia, however, the medium of interactive fiction has challenged this crystallized idea. Videogames, especially augmented and virtual reality games, offer us agency in their fictional worlds: players of computer games can 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. In a parallel to Radford's original question, we might ask: how can we be moved to shoot zombies, when we know they aren't real? The purpose of this article is to examine the new paradox of *interactive fiction*, which questions how we can be moved to *act* on objects we know to be fictional, its possible solutions, and its connection to the traditional paradox of fictional emotions.

Videogames differ from traditional fictional media in that they let their appreciators enter their fictional worlds in the guise of a fictional proxy, and grant their players agency within this world. As interactive fictions, videogames reveal new elements of the relationship between fiction, emotions, and actions that have been previously neglected because of the focus on non-interactive fiction such as literature, theatre, and film. They show us that fictional objects can not only cause actions, but can also be the intentional object of these actions. Moreover, they show us that emotions towards fictions can motivate us to act, and that conversely, the possibility of undertaking actions within the fictional world makes a wider array of emotions towards fictional objects possible. Since the player is involved in the fictional world and responsible for his actions therein, self-reflexive emotions such as guilt and shame are common reactions to the interactive fiction experience. As such, videogames point out a very close connection between emotions and actions towards fictions and introduce the paradox of *interactive fiction:* a paradox of fictional *actions*.

This paradox of fictional actions that is connected to our experiences of interactive fiction consists of three premises that cannot be true at the same time, as this would result in a contradiction:

1. Players act on videogame objects.

2. Videogame objects are fictional.

3. It is impossible to act on fictional objects.

The first premise seems to be obviously true: gamers manipulate game objects when playing. The second one is true for at least some videogame objects we act upon, such as zombies. The third premise is a consequence of the ontological gap between the real world and fictional worlds. So which one needs to be rejected?

Although the paradox of interactive fiction is never discussed as such within videogame philosophy, there seem to be two strategies at hand to solve this paradox, both of which are examined in this article. The first strategy is to deny that the game objects we can act on are fictional at all. Espen Aarseth, for example, argues that they are *virtual* objects (cf. 2007), while other philosophers argue that players interact with real, computer-generated graphical representations (cf. Juul 2005; Sageng 2012). However, Aarseth's concept of the virtual seems to be ad hoc and unhelpful, and describing videogame objects and characters as real, computer-generated graphical representations does not account for the emotional way in which we often relate to them. The second solution is based on Kendall Walton's make-believe theory, and, similar to Walton's solution to the original paradox of fictional emotions, says that the actions we perform towards fictional game objects are not real actions, but *fictional* actions. A Waltonian description of fictional actions can explain our paradoxical actions on fictional objects in videogames, although it does raise questions about the validity of Walton's concept of quasi-emotions. Indeed, the way players' emotions can motivate them to act in a certain manner seems to be a strong argument against the concept of quasi-emotions, which Walton introduced to explain the alleged *non*-motivationality of emotions towards fiction (cf. 1990, 201 sq.).

Although both strategies to solve the paradox of interactive fiction might ultimately not be entirely satisfactory, the presentation of these strategies in this paper not only introduces a starting point for discussing this paradox, but also usefully supplements and clarifies existing discussions on the paradoxical *emotions* we feel towards fictions. I argue that if we wish to solve the paradox of actions towards (interactive) fiction, we should treat it in close conjunction with the traditional paradox of emotional responses to fiction.

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