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On Dark and Deceptive Representations of Non-Actual Games

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Abstract

This paper provides an introduction to fake games. Based on the concept of fictional games, or non-actual games that are presented to be imagined, I define fake games as non-actual games that are presented with the intention to trigger false beliefs in the existence of the game or its presented mechanics and story. First, I clarify the notion of fake games by comparing it to fictional games. I discuss how some representations of non-existent games blur the boundaries between fiction and lies. Such games are not clearly embedded within works of fiction and are presented without a clear context to help readers decide whether they should believe or imagine the game to exist. I discuss games that are represented through fake/fictional gameplay, paraludic material, or metaludic material. Lastly, I clarify the potential purposes fake games can serve. I distinguish darkly designed fake game representations from deceptively designed ones. The former have the intention of deceiving people into making certain decisions. Fake game advertisements, for example, aim to trick people into downloading mobile games that lack the features showcased in the ad. Deceptively designed fake game representations, on the other hand, deceive players with the aim of giving rise to aesthetically valuable experiences. Players' false beliefs could, for example, give rise to interesting emotional responses.

Keywords

Fiction; representation; imagination; dark design; deceptive design; fake advertisements; metaludic; paraludic

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In one of the trailers for *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), player-character Ellie is shown sneaking through enemy territory, when suddenly her mouth is covered by a hand. While struggling at first, Ellie seems to realize something, turns around slowly, and whispers: "What the hell are you doing here?" The screen then cuts to her 'attacker', Joel, her surrogate father, who looks at her and replies, "You think I'd let you do this on your own?" (see PlayStation, 2019, 02:18–02:38).

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This trailer is a lie. In the actual game, the one who comes to Ellie's aid is her friend Jesse, not Joel. In fact, at the point in the game shown in the trailer, Joel is long dead and buried, brutally murdered by the woman that Ellie is chasing to take revenge on. The game implied by the trailer, one where Ellie and Joel team up once again to take on hordes of infected and hostile humans, does not exist.

Introduction

In *Fictional Games: A Philosophy of Worldbuilding and Imaginary Play*, Gualeni and Fassone define fictional games as "playful activities and ludic artefacts conceptualized as part of fictional worlds" (2023, p. 2; see also Gualeni, Fassone, & Ford, 2025, p. 1). An example of this is Holochess, a holographic board game shown in the *Star Wars* movies (2023, p. 47). They add that "[f]ictional games are meant to trigger the imagination of the appreciator of a work of fiction and cannot actually be – or at least were not originally meant to be – played" (2023, p. 2). This definition of fictional games aligns with how fiction is usually characterized within the philosophy of fiction: as that which mandates *imaginings* instead of beliefs. The function (or, depending on who you ask, the intention) of works of fiction is to stimulate their appreciators to entertain in thought what is represented in these works, but "non-assertively" so: without a commitment to the represented states of affairs being actually the case, or to the uttered sentences being true (Carroll, 1990, p. 80).[1] Defining fiction in terms of its connection with imagination has the advantage of clearly distinguishing fiction from *lies.* Even though lies also present content that is untrue, the liar's intention is different from that of the fiction author, because lies are not meant to prompt imaginings, but (false) beliefs in the presented content.

When it comes to representing non-actual games, this distinction between fiction and lies presents an interesting possibility: that of *fake games*, or games that do not actually exist, but are presented with the intention of making people believe that they do. In this paper, I discuss fake games and give examples of different kinds of games that could be considered fake, such as the non-existent *The Last of Us Part II* implied in the actual game's trailer. First, I clarify the notion of fake games by comparing it to fictional games and discuss how some game-representations arguably blur the boundaries between fiction and lies. Such games are not clearly embedded within works of fiction or conceptualized as parts of fictional worlds. As such, these games are presented without an unambiguously clear context to help readers decide whether they should believe or imagine the game to exist. I then discuss the potential purposes that fake games can serve. I distinguish darkly designed fake

[1] This definition of imagination is meant to contrast it to belief, which could in turn be seen as the assertive entertainment of thoughts, with a commitment to the content of the thought being veridical or actually the case.

games, presented with the intention of deceiving people into making certain decisions, from deceptively designed fake games, which deceive players with the intention of giving rise to aesthetically valuable experiences.

Contextualizing fictional and fake games

Fictional and fake games are both types of non-actual games: they do not exist in our world as formally complete ludic artefacts but are merely represented as existing. Whereas fictional games are presented to be imagined as actual games, however, fake games are presented with the intention of being believed to be actual.

Interestingly, following these descriptions, some of the fictional games discussed by Gualeni and Fassone can more precisely be described as 'fictionally fake games'. Take for example Cups, a "fictional card game played in the television series Friends (S6E06 – 'The One on the Last Night'; Schwimmer 1999)" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 36). In the episode in question, the character Chandler invents Cups and makes his friend Joey believe that it is an actual game. He does this with the intention of playing Cups against Joey and losing money to him. Cups is by no means an actual, formally complete game: Chandler keeps changing and adding rules on the spot to make Joey win. For the viewer of Friends, Cups is a fictional game, conceptualized as a part of the fictional world of Friends. For the characters within this world, however, Cups is a fake game: it is a game that does not actually exist (as a formally complete ludic artefact), but is presented by Chandler with the intention of making Joey believe that it does. Chandler is, quite frankly, lying, and the representational content of his lie happens to be a game, hence making this game a fake one.

Vice versa, and admittedly somewhat tongue-in-cheek, I invite the reader to think about the concept of 'fakely fictional' games. Take, for example, the videogame Big City in Louisa Bastiaens' eponymous novel (2008). This game, and the brutally hierarchical society depicted in its gameworld, reflects the values of its player community, which keeps modding the game based on their current needs and interests. As it is a game that does not actually exist but is part of the fictional world in the novel, it is clearly a fictional game. And it is a *fake* fictional game, because I lied: the novel *Big City* does not exist. I intended to make you falsely believe that Big City was a game that was mandated to be imagined to exist.

Obviously, the cases described in the previous two paragraphs are unconventional. However, they do show that a game being fake or fictional does not depend on any characteristic of the presented ludic artefact itself, but merely on its context or mode of presentation. One and the same game that does not actually exist could be fake or fictional (or even both, on different narrative levels), depending on whether it is represented to be believed or imagined to exist. Most of the time, when we are dealing with a representation of a non-actual game, it is quite clear that we are supposed to merely imagine this game to exist. After all, as is evident in Gualeni and Fassone's

various examples, such games are most often presented as parts of works of fiction (out of the 92 fictional games they mention, only 2 are *not* parts of works of fiction or embedded in fictional worlds: Mornington Crescent and Three-Cornered Pitney, (2023, p. 189; 192)). We are unlikely to mistakenly believe games like Holochess in Star Wars to exist, because they were clearly contextualized within stories that we are unlikely to mistake for non-fiction.

What to do, however, when such a clear fictional contextualization is missing? Many games that are arguably fictional are not explicitly conceptualized as parts of worlds of fiction, or even presented within a work of fiction, despite Gualeni and Fassone's descriptions of fictional games implying that that should be the case. Take, for example, Suzanne Treister's visual artwork series 'Fictional Videogame Stills', which are fictional screenshots of videogames created with Deluxe Paint II software on an Amiga computer in 1992 (see Figure 1). Or take the X (formerly Twitter) account 'This game does not exist' (@thegamesarefake), which is described as an ongoing game concept art exhibition to which everyone can submit artful renditions of games that do not exist.

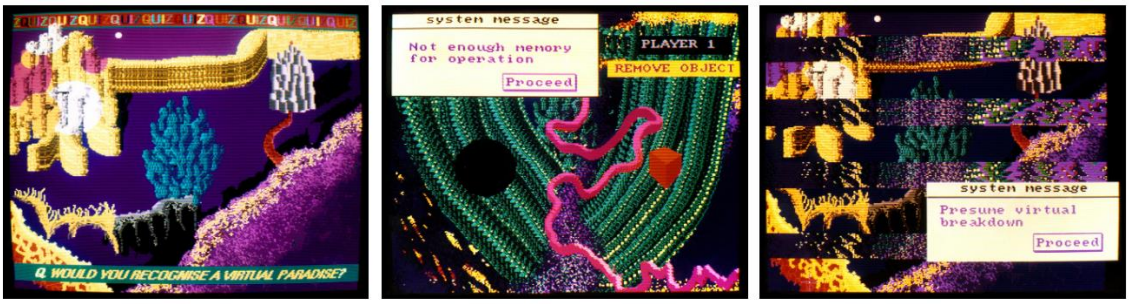

Figure 1. Three photographs from Suzanne Treister's "Fictional Videogame Stills" series.

These are examples of representations of games that do not actually exist. In fact, all these examples involve two of the most important characteristics of fictional games that Gualeni and Fassone describe: their incompleteness and related unplayability (2023). These games are incomplete in the sense that many aspects of their rules, storyworlds, and goals are left unspecified. In fact, we can never figure out exactly what these games entail, as the works in which they appear simply do not (and are not meant to) give this information. The games are unplayable, because they are not truly present, but merely represented. Not only are their rules underspecified, but they also lack the necessary interactivity to allow for a true player experience.

Yet, as stated before, the inherent qualities of represented games do not help us determine whether we are dealing with a fictional game or a fake game: both kinds of non-actual game are incomplete, unplayable, and merely represented to exist. To make this distinction, we need to figure out the intention with which the game is presented: to make us believe or imagine that it exists. Returning to the two examples above, it is arguably safe to say that both feature fictional games. Suzanne

Treister called her photograph series “Fictional Videogame Stills”. This is a clear indication that, although she did want to make her renditions of arcade games believable and authentic-looking (see also Treister, 2006), she also had fictional intentions when creating them. As Treister explicitly presents these images as fictional, she likely wanted her audience to imagine (and not believe) the depicted games to exist. The case of the X account “This game does not exist” is similar. Their handle @thegamesarefake seems to suggest that this account presents its followers with fake games. Yet, the very announcement that the games are fake and do not exist makes sure that followers are not deceived about the existence of the games. Ironically, by announcing that the represented games are *fake*, this account assures that viewers of the posted images will imagine what these games are like, without any (misguided) belief that they are real, thus making the games *fictional* instead.

These cases show how non-actual games are not always presented through works of fiction or as parts of fictional worlds, making it potentially harder to distinguish fake from fictional. The two examples above feature games that are presented through isolated, pretend-screenshots. Non-actual games can also be presented by other means that are not discussed by Gualeni and Fassone, who solely focus on fictional games presented in works of fiction. In the following sections, I present three such means, with the aim of further clarifying fake and fictional game representations.

Fictional and deceitful gameplay

Gualeni and Fassone write that fictional games are meant to be imagined by appreciators of fiction and cannot actually be played (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 23). Yet, it is important to note here that fictional games can be either pretend-played or fictionally played (see also Van de Mosselaer, 2025). Think, for example, of Mornington Crescent, a game that was first featured in the BBC Radio 4 comedy show *I’m Sorry I Haven’t a Clue* in 1978 (Bateman, 2011, p. 72). Players of this game take turns declaring the name of a London Underground station such as Piccadilly Circus, Blackfriars, or Hampstead. The winner of the game is the first player who manages to announce ‘Mornington Crescent’. Of course, one could do this immediately on their first turn. But the point of the comical radio show is to give rise to the semblance of an actual, complete game being played. That is: players constantly refer to complex rules that they make up on the spot. In the episode of 8 December 2003, for example, one player describes his choice for Regent Street as a “definitive lateral bridger” and explains that the next player could "reverse on this if the situation is right". He adds that his move is characterized by a “double value”, which is very useful early on in the game.[2] This is a clear example of pretend-play: rather than playing by actual rules, a fictional game is implied through the player acting *as if* they are playing by

[2] See ‘Mornington Crescent (2003-12-08)’ from *I’m Sorry I Haven’t a Clue*, BBC Radio 4 on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsPeyHq5Mgk (02:03-02:28).

existing rules. Gualeni and Fassone rightly discuss this game as fictional (2023, p. 36). Note, however, that this game is not embedded in a fictional world or a work of fiction. Rather, it *projects* a fictional world: through absurd fictional gameplay, the radio show implies a fictional world where the laughably complex game Mornington Crescent actually exists and makes sense to its players.

Figure 2. Fake gameplay for Hero Wars (Nexters, 2016), found in what was most likely the first 'pull the pin' fake game ad (Mago, 2020, p. 137).

Like fictional games, fake games cannot actually be played because they do not exist. They can, however, be presented through deceitful gameplay. Deceitful gameplay or representations of fake gameplay are meant to trigger beliefs that a certain game can be played as shown, while the game actually implied by said gameplay does not exist or cannot be played in that way.

An example of deceitful gameplay is found in *Undertale* (Fox, 2015). In this game, players are rewarded with EXP (a common abbreviation of 'experience points' in games) upon killing monsters, which allows them to increase their in-game LV (commonly used as an abbreviation of a player-character's "level"). This heavily implies killing to be desirable. Yet, at the end of the game, it is revealed that EXP actually

stands for "EXecution Points," and LV for "Level of Violence," both of these being a measure of the player's immorality rather than their skill. Thus, through deceitful gameplay, *Undertale* presents players with a game that does not actually exist: a game in which players get experience points and increase in level when killing. As this is done with the intention that players believe this game to exist, we can interpret this deceitfully presented game as a fake one.

Deceitful gameplay is also often found in so-called fake gameplay advertisements. Zdenko Mago defines these as ads "which promote the game by depicting gameplay footage that does not, however, reflect actual essential gameplay of the promoted game" (2020, p. 135). The ads show apparent recordings of people playing games that do not actually exist, such as typical mobile game "pull the pin" puzzles (see Figure 2).[3] Interestingly, fake gameplay advertisements often contain contradictions, as game mechanics are inconsistently applied or the shown puzzles are unsolvable. This shows once again that fake games are similar to fictional games in that they can be inconsistent, unplayable, and incomplete, with the difference being that fake gameplay is meant to mandate beliefs in the existence of the game rather than imaginings.

Fictional and fake paraludic material

Secondly, non-actual games can also be presented paraludically, through material surrounding the game that is (falsely or fictionally so) supplied by the designers and publishers of the game. An interesting example of this is *Vermis I - Lost Dungeons and Forbidden Woods* (Plastiboo, 2022), an official guide for a game, *Vermis*, that does not actually exist. As the book itself (see Figure 3) does not clearly indicate that *Vermis* does not in fact exist, it somewhat blurs the boundaries between fake and fictional. That said, readers of the book are unlikely to come into possession of this guide or read it without knowing that *Vermis* does not exist. The Hollow Press website where one can buy the book states that "It could be considered an official guide of a game that doesn't exist, since it's not a game at all!" For obvious reasons, it is also impossible that any reader would buy the book because they are actually in need of guidance while playing the game. Arguably, *Vermis* is a fictional game, presented to be imagined to exist for entertainment purposes (see also Timvig, Engqvist, & Dan-

[3] For an exhaustive discussion of fake game ad characteristics, see Moradzadeh and Kou (2024). It is noteworthy that these authors focus on the actual games that are connected to fake game advertisements, i.e. the playable artefacts that one can download when clicking on these ads. They define fake games as "games promoted with content that fails to accurately represent their actual gameplay" (2024, 22). Yet, this definition betrays that said games do have "actual gameplay", thus making them actual games that are simply misrepresented in ads. This paper, instead, aims to discuss the games that are presented in these ads, i.e. the fake ludic artefacts that are implied to exist in these ads, but do not actually exist as playable games.

ielsson, 2025 for a more extensive discussion of *Vermis* as a fictional game). The Hollow Press website describes the guide as an artbook that presents a "pure act of world-building". In this sense, *Vermis* is similar to the fictional games presented through screenshots in Treister's Fictional Videogame Stills series and tweets by @thegamesarefake, except for the fact that Vermis is presented through fictional paraludic material instead.

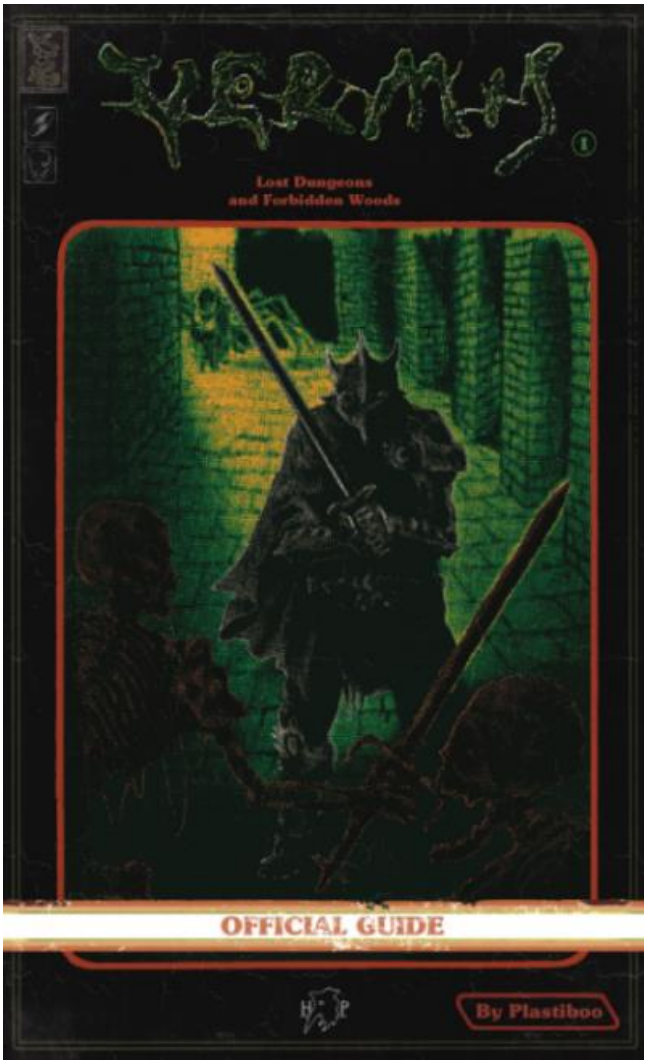

Figure 3. The cover of *Vermis I - Lost Dungeons and Forbidden Woods (Official Guide)*.

Some more unambiguously fake games are presented similarly through fake paraludic material, such as fake advertising material. Very often, these are part of so-called fake game leaks, in which a counterfeit trailer or would-be advertisement poster might be presented as official game material made available before it was meant to be officially released. Most of the time, these are fan-made. Sometimes, however, fake paraludic material is provided by game creators themselves. Think, in this regard, of the trailer for *The Last of Us Part II* mentioned in the introduction to this

paper, which deceivingly presents a game where Ellie and Joel team up. Another example is the fake game *Goat Simulator 2*, which does not exist, but is heavily implied to exist by the official titles of the other two games in the series, *Goat Simulator* (Coffee Stain Studios, 2015) and *Goat Simulator 3* (Coffee Stain North, 2022), and especially by advertisements for the latter game.

Note that paraludic material (and fake games in general) are only treated as fake in this paper if they are 1) made with the intention of presenting a non-actual game and 2) made with the intention of making people believe that the game exists and has the features that are presented. In "Ludic Unreliability and Deceptive Design," Gualeni and Van de Mosselaer (2021) present the case of the game manual of *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo R&D4, 1987), which contains a mistake, thus making people believe that the game functions differently than it actually does. While this case satisfies the second condition, it does not satisfy the first one: the creators of the manual did not intend to present untrue information. This happened by accident. As such, unlike *Vermis I* and the discussed trailer *The Last of Us Part II*, this manual is not fictional or fake but merely flawed.

Fictional and fake metaludic material

Lastly, non-actual games can also be presented through broader metaludic material, or material that offers information about the game but not published by its own creators. Examples are FAQ's, fan wikis, or forum discussions that contain lies or fictional information about games. An especially interesting example of this could be found on the subreddit dedicated to the game *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022) before it was released. In September 2019, this Reddit subforum was populated by fans who were eagerly awaiting the game's release. At that point, not much was known about the game yet. A short announcement trailer had been published, and fans believed the game would be similar to FromSoftware's previous games. At first, fans wildly speculated about what the game would be like. After a while, however, this practice turned into a forum-wide game of make-believe, where people started pretending that *Elden Ring* had already been released, and they were playing it. Posts popped up of people praising the game design, lamenting the difficulty of bosses, and asking other players tips about the best builds and strategies. Many posts detailed players' struggles against the game's first boss, the completely made-up Glaive Master Hodir. Any new fan stumbling upon these posts was likely to be quite confused, as posters were especially good at creating believable gameplay descriptions.

This case is interesting to discuss in the context of this paper because it helps to clarify the difference between a game *being* fictional/fake, and its *being taken as* fictional/fake. That is, we can arguably call the 'Elden Ring' that was pretend-presented on this subreddit a fictional game: posters seemed to have the main intention of revelling in communally shared daydreams and humorous parodies informed by the

discourse that typically surrounds FromSoftware's actual games (fictionally struggling players were often told that they should just "git gud") (see also Van de Mosselaer, 2025, for a further discussion of this example as a pretend-played fictional game). But this fictional intention was not clear to everyone. Indeed, many commenters kept pointing out that posts were 'fake', and that their authors were lying, because the game had not been released yet. In fact, after a while, the subreddit's moderators decided that posts about pretend-Elden Ring had to be marked as 'fake lore', thus creating a context where the metaludic discussions were more easily recognized as fictional (and to be imagined instead of believed).

Clearer cases of fake metaludic discussion are so-called game myths, or urban legends surrounding games. Brunvand (1996, p. 730) defines an urban legend as "an apocryphal contemporary story told as true but incorporating traditional motifs and usually attributed to a friend of a friend (FOAF)". He adds that these legends "are somewhat bizarre unverifiable stories, plausible nonetheless because they are grounded in certain verifiable facts" (1996, p. 730). Urban legends about games abound and are often shared widely online. Most often, these game myths ascribe fake features to existing games. Think, in this regard, of the myth that Luigi is a playable character in *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo EAD, 1996), that the Pokémon Mew is hiding under a truck in *Pokémon Red* (Game Freak, 1996),[4] or that completing *Banjo-Kazooie* (Rare, 1998) in less than 10 hours would give access to bonus content. Games that have these characteristics do not actually exist. Likely, these urban legends started out as lies and were spread further by those who falsely believed them.

Sometimes, however, the very existence of a non-actual game is posited by an urban legend. *Polybius,* for example, was an arcade game said to have been released in several suburbs of Portland, Oregon, in 1981 (de Vos, 2012, p. 8). The game was addictive and known to cause intense stress and nightmares. Moreover, it is said that men dressed in black would frequently collect data from the arcade machines. Shortly after the game's release, however, the game disappeared without a trace. *Polybius* is probably a hoax or a fake game, beliefs in which have been caused by what de Vos calls a contemporary internet legend (2012, p. 8). Vague metaludic discussions are all there are to *Polybius*, which most likely never existed.

To conclude this section, the distinction between fictional and fake games is based on the intent with which these non-actual games are presented: respectively to mandate imaginings or beliefs about the game in question. When non-actual games are presented as parts of works of fiction, the intent for appreciators to imagine these games to exist is quite clear. However, these games can also be presented without a clear context: through fake or fictional gameplay, paraludic material, or metaludic

[4] Notably, in the remake of this game, *Pokémon FireRed* (Nintendo, 2004), designers added an underwhelming "Lava Cookie" item near the truck in reference to the famous urban legend. More about this and other "urban game legends" can be found on the 'Gaming Urban Legends' fan wiki: https://gaming-urban-legends.fandom.com/wiki/Gaming_Urban_Legends_Wiki.

material. In these cases, the intent underlying the game's representation is frequently misinterpreted, like when people take professional wrestlers to participate in actual, non-fixed competitions.

This shows that fictional games, approached without the necessary literacy or contextualization, can have the very same impact as fake games. But what are the effects of fake games exactly? And why would anyone want to deliberately produce false beliefs about games? In the following section, I focus on these questions, discussing the purposes that fake games can serve.

The purpose of fake games

Gualeni and Fassone (2023) discuss the roles that fictional games can play at length. They acknowledge that the purposes of fictional games are just as various as the purposes to which fictional works can be put. They mention fictional games' "speculative, transformational, political, meta-reflexive, misleading, comic, utopian and estranging qualities" (2023, p. 6). Most often, fictional games serve narrative functions, fleshing out the fictional world in which they appear or the characters that play them. Additionally, as shown in the previous paragraphs, fictional games cannot only flesh out fictional worlds, but also entirely project them. This is the case for fictional games that do not appear within fictional works, such as Treister's images and Mornington Crescent, but still imply a fictional world in which these games are actually played. In sum, the purposes of fictional games are related to the intention with which they are presented: to make people imagine these games (and the worlds in which they are played) and so stimulate reflection or bring about entertaining narrative, emotional, or even transformative effects.[5]

What, however, could the purpose of *fake* games be? That is, what reason could someone have to stimulate *false beliefs* in people, such as the belief that Joel plays a bigger role than he actually does in *The Last of Us Part II*? Many instances of fake games are somewhat aesthetically uninteresting in that they are simply cases of trolling, or "deliberate, deceptive and mischievous attempts to provoke reactions from other users" (Golf-Papez & Veer, 2017, p. 1336). Fake game leaks or misinformation on fan-made wikis often serve no purpose besides entertaining their creators by eliciting emotional responses both from those who believe the lies and those who see through them. Below, I discern two categories of fake games that serve further purposes, depending on the reason one had for lying about the game's non-actual nature. Both differ from mere trolling because the fake game is presented either to manipulate people into making further decisions (often leading to financial

[5] See also *Eludamos*' special issue on Fictional Games (edited by Gualeni, Fassone, & Ford (2025), https://doi.org/10.7557/23.161) for further discussions of particular fictional games and how they contribute to (the experience of) the works in which they appear.

gain for the liar), or to give rise to experiential and emotional effects that are in the interest of players.

Dark design

Frequently, the presentation of fake games can be explained as a type of dark design. Maier and Harr describe this as follows: "Dark design patterns have a conscious component of deceit intending to nudge people toward making a certain decision. By intentionally implementing such manipulative techniques, user values are deemphasized in favour of processes that profit the business" (2020, p. 192). Specifically applying this to game design, Zagal et al. talk about dark game design patterns as patterns "used intentionally by a game creator to cause negative experiences for players which are against their best interests and likely to happen without their consent" (2013, p. 7).

The fake gameplay advertisements discussed above are clear examples of the dark use of fake games. Mago calls this advertising strategy especially creative but risky, as the lies can generate more game installs, but also frequently lead to negative game reviews when players find out about the deceit (2020, pp. 143–144). It is clear, however, that the lie has already served its purpose once negative reviews are written: the game has reached a larger audience of potentially new players (who might even make use of in-game microtransactions).

Despite being mostly dark and unethical, the fake games presented in fake ads have theoretically interesting connections to actual games. Firstly, Mago notes that once the fakeness of so-called "pull the pin" games became more widely known, developers started to produce games that were actually based on the fake mechanics. This shows a process that is similar to the fictional-to-actual-game transitions described in Gualeni and Fassone (2023, pp. 29–30). Just like fictional games such as Pai Sho, a boardgame presented in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (Dimartino & Konietzko, 2005–2008), have been translated into actual games, fake games like "pull the pin" minigames shown in fake advertisements were translated into actually playable mobile games such as *Pull Him Out* (Lion Studios, 2020). In fact, this fake-to-actual transition can be leveraged for market research. Game developers can, for example, deceitfully announce a future game by making a Steam page for it without actually having the intention of creating said game, unless the fake game garners enough attention.

Secondly, some darkly fake game advertisements garner so much attention that they become regarded as aesthetically pleasing artefacts in themselves or even as canonically part of the actual game they misrepresent. An interesting example are the fake advertisements for the mobile game *Merge Mansion* (Metacore, 2020). Many of this game's early advertisements showed story elements that could not be found in the actual game. Despite this, the fan community often regarded these advertise-

ments as canonical, using them to understand the game's story.[6] The evermore suspicious behaviour of the in-game grandmother, for example, was frequently interpreted based on this character's depiction in the game's advertisements. It led to some speculating that the grandmother was, in fact, a cannibal (see rhymeswithloop92, 2023).

Such hermeneutic endeavours by players reveal an interesting aspect of fake game interpretation: while fake gameplay or game mechanics are often dismissed as dark deceit, fake presentations of game stories are often enjoyed and taken seriously instead. That is, while players usually get angry about fake presentations of ludic elements, they often tend to try and incorporate fake narrative elements when imagining the fictional game world. This curious discrepancy in player reactions certainly merits further research. I am willing to hypothesize here that this difference in appreciation of fake gameplay elements and fake narrative elements has a lot to do with the nature of fiction interpretation. If we are deceived about gameplay elements, it means that the actual gameplay is inconsistent with the gameplay that we expected. This is annoying, as the beliefs that we had are shown to be wrong and we need to reject them. If we are deceived about narrative elements, however, it just means that the fictional world is inconsistent with what we were already imagining to be true in this world. What we encounter is a fictional inconsistency and we are well-equipped to deal with those without having to deny either of the conflicting elements. In fact, especially when interpreting videogames, we already do this all the time (see Van de Mosselaer and Wildman, 2021). Matravers (2015, 131–135) lists different strategies we can use for this. One example is the rejection strategy, in which we consider the inconsistent fictional information to be the consequence of a misreport by the narrator/focalizer. For example, the fact that *Merge Mansion*'s grandmother was a jailed criminal in the ads, but not in the original game's story, could easily be explained through this rejection strategy: we experience the in-game story through the eyes of a doting granddaughter, who is easily deceived by her cunning and only apparently innocent grandmother. The in-game story could be interpreted as a misreport of the true fictional events, which were revealed in the game ads.

The case of *Merge Mansion* is especially interesting as the game advertisements that misrepresented the game's narrative got quite popular among the game's community. We can speculate that this (as well as potential investigations into their deceitful advertising strategies) is the reason why the game designers decided to incorporate more of the narrative content depicted in these initially fake ads into the actual game. Earlier levels of the game, which originally did not feature any explicit mention of the criminal activities of the grandmother that were evidenced by the ads, now have clear references to grandma being a bootlegger, being investigated by special agents, going to jail, etc. In light of the ads, entire in-game storylines were seemingly

[6] This is also mentioned in the fan-made *Merge Mansion* wiki: https://merge-mansion.fandom.com/wiki/Advertisement.

added, while previous storylines that were inconsistent with the ads were retconned.[7] It is also noteworthy in this regard that Metacore has significantly raised the budget for more recent, narrative-heavy ads for *Merge Mansion,* where the grandmother has been portrayed by Kathy Bates, and the police officer who investigates the old lady's activities by Pedro Pascal.

In the context of this paper, the brief history of the (at least initially) fake *Merge Mansion* ads reveals an important aspect of fake game appreciation, which will be further addressed in the next part: the potential for players to find aesthetic value in deceitful game representations.

Aesthetically pleasing deceptive design

Many disappointed players interpreted the fake trailer for *The Last of Us Part II* as dark design. Reddit user Bigfoex (2023) laments the fact that Naughty Dog "had to trick their audience to get people to get the game", taking the lies in the trailer as proof that the studio already knew that the game's actual story was flawed. Indeed, falsely presenting the popular character Joel as having a major role in the game might have contributed to the game's success.

Alternatively, however, *The Last of Us Part II* trailer can be interpreted as an instance of deceptive design, as defined by Gualeni and Van de Mosselaer: "in deceptive design the designer deceives the players in order to provoke certain aesthetically valuable emotional responses in them" (Gualeni & Van de Mosselaer, 2021, p. 3). Deceptive design involves lies, or deliberate misrepresentations of a game to its players, with the goal of creating an interesting player experience by provoking surprise, confusion, excitement, estrangement, or a combination of such responses. As such, deceptive design differs from the dark design strategies discussed in the previous paragraph. While dark design negatively impacts the deceived with the intention of bringing profit to the deceiver, deceptive design has the express purpose of offering the deceived with aesthetically interesting experiences.

The lie in the *The Last of Us Part II* trailer can be interpreted as deceptive design because it interestingly influences players' experiences of the actual game. Players who have seen the trailer would be less likely to expect Joel to die before the scene depicted in the trailer has come to pass. This further supports the (already high) shock value of Joel's early in-game death. Furthermore, some players note how the trailer made them spend "almost half of the game confused and in denial that Joel died"

[7] Note that it is very hard to keep track of what changes have been made to the narrative of *Merge Mansion*. The preservation of previous storylines that have now been removed is entirely dependent on players remembering and talking about these. An overview of some of the changes made, presumably because the initially fake ads for this game got so popular, are found on the previously mentioned Reddit thread started by rhymeswithloop92 in 2023: https://www.reddit.com/r/MergeMansion/comments/11tv61k/the_game_lore/.

(murcialagoXO in a comment to the above-mentioned Reddit post by Bigfoex, 2023), until the scene from the trailer came to pass differently than it did in the trailer. In this sense, the trailer might have motivated a specific and fitting emotional experience of the game: one in which players move through the gameworld disoriented and baffled, not unlike player-character Ellie.

Gualeni and Van de Mosselaer (2021) describe several other instances of aesthetically interesting lies in games. They describe, among other deceptive games, *waldo.io* (Big Breakfast Collective, 2019). This game pretends to pit players against other players, thus providing them with the thrill of multiplayer competition. In reality, the 'other players' that are shown in-game are just NPCs: no actual online connection is established by the game.

Several examples of fake games described above might also better fit the deceptive rather than the dark category. Coffee Stain Studios deceitfully implying the existence of *Goat Simulator 2* fits within the trolling, glitchy, and absurd gameplay of the *Goat Simulator* games. Anyone who went online to look for the non-existent second game in the series likely had a giggle about the studio's comic deception. And even game myths such as the one about *Polybius* might have been created for aesthetic purposes, as so-called *creepypasta*, or online horror legends that are often presented with the aim to trigger frightening (or: entertainingly thrilling) beliefs.

Conclusion

This paper's aim was to introduce fake games, showing that the budding field of fictional game studies (see Gualeni, Fassone, & Ford, 2025) can be usefully complemented by the study of other non-actual games. I compared fictional games, or non-actual games that are presented to be imagined, to fake games, defined as non-actual games that are presented with the intention of triggering beliefs in the existence of the game and/or its presented mechanics and story. Although oftentimes presented with the sole purpose of deceiving people for monetary gain, fake games can also be aesthetically interesting. Urban legends about certain game features can motivate players to embark on communal investigations of the gameworld, which importantly shape the way the game in question is played. Deceitful trailers might candidly lie about the nature of a game to put players in the right kind of mood to fully appreciate the game's emotional impact, or make them reflect on their own interpretative processes. Even fake game representations that were originally created with dark intent, such as fake game advertisements, could serve aesthetic purposes. They can, for example, provide players with snippets of story that do not actually happen in-game, but are used by players when reconstructing the game's canonical story. In fact, creatively used, fake games can likely play all the roles fictional games can play according to Gualeni and Fassone (2023, p. 6), evoking effects that

are “speculative, transformational, political, meta-reflexive, misleading, comic, utopian and estranging”.

As such, I hope this paper provides a new way of investigating non-actual or deceptively represented games as an aesthetically relevant category. Moreover, this discussion of fake games raises many questions for further research. As the present paper mainly focused on aesthetic evaluations of fake games, not much has been said about the ethical aspects of fake game representations, or the connection between both. One could also question what the interesting (aesthetic or moral) differences are between fake games that are entirely made up (such as, presumably, *Polybius*), and ones created by ascribing fake characteristics to games that exist (such as the fake version of *Pokémon Red* where Mew can be found under the truck). In this regard, another interesting line of research could pertain to the differences between false representations of game mechanics, on one hand, and false representations of narrative or fictional elements on the other. Both are frequently deceitfully represented in game advertisements. Yet, the reception by the player community, as in the case of *Merge Mansion,* seems to be quite different when it comes to misrepresented mechanics and misrepresented story. The same seems, at least at first sight, to be true for the potential legal repercussions for the deceit, as regulations focus mostly on misrepresentations of games’ mechanics and performance rather than their story. In short, fake games are aesthetically interesting, potentially morally problematic, legally complex, and undoubtedly a rich source for future research.

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