

# **MMOG ONTOLOGY: HOW TO BE A FICTIONAL ANTIREALIST LUDIC REALIST**

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## **The problem**

I am not a fictional antirealist ludic realist myself, so the problem I am going to discuss is not my own. I have long ago (1996) committed myself to fictional realism, so the step to ludic realism was easy enough for me to take. But some people who are instinctively or by philosophical upbringing fictional antirealists are even so attracted to ludic realism. For them it is perhaps not so easy.

Fictional antirealism in my usage is the metaphysical position that fictional objects like made-up characters in a story are unreal in the sense that they can never be talked about nonfictionally: they cannot be referred to, and they cannot be quantified over. According to this position we cannot make assertions about Sherlock Holmes, for instance, neither by referring to him by that name nor by denoting him with a definite description like "the best known fictional character in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories." An attempt to designate an object as Sherlock Holmes is doomed to failure from the beginning because there is no such object<sup>1</sup>, and then we will fail to make an assertion about him: whatever we say it can have no truth-value. We indulge in make-believe again when we go into our reader's experiences as literary critics<sup>2</sup>.

Fictional realism in my usage is the opposite position that we can make assertions about some fictional objects. Ludic realism is the similar position that we can make assertions about some ludic objects, notably objects that are labeled "virtual" by Aarseth (2005).

Now, as I said, some people seem to be willing to endorse ludic realism while being opposed to fictional realism. They apparently see an ontological divide of great importance between the realms of the fictional and the virtual. Their reason for seeing it this way is the interactivity of

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<sup>1</sup> Everett (2005) argues against a position he calls "fictional realism" that we are in lack of identity criteria for fictional entities. As I see it, this is true of some but not all characters in a fiction.

<sup>2</sup> Walton (1990) seems to say that in effect. He doesn't say that a distinguished professor giving a learned lecture on the history of a certain literary character, say Dr. Faustus, that seems to appear in more than on work of fiction, instead of presenting a scientific hypothesis is actually making up a fictional story himself. But this seems to follow if there is no Dr. Faustus to refer to or denote.

computer games that sets them apart from<sup>3</sup> traditional narrative media<sup>4</sup>. First, on one hand, ludic entities influence us as players, in a MMOG like World of Warcraft through our avatars, and they do that in ways that are similar to the ways in which other players' avatars influence us. This might seem to endorse them with reality, but it does not in itself set them apart from fictional entities: the fictional destiny of a character in a traditional novel may for instance have a deep emotional effect on us. This is really remarkable: fictional entities seem to be causally relevant. How can this be so if they do not exist? Walton (1990) has tried to explain how, but I am not entirely satisfied with his explanation. Second, on the other hand, we influence the ludic destiny of virtual entities in a computer game by our actions, directly or through our avatars. This makes a difference, since we can apparently have no influence on the fictional destiny of characters in a traditional novel. Games, computerized or not, are interactive in the sense that besides being influenced by what is happening in them we also have an influence on this ourselves.

Let us take an in-depth view on this as it happening in an online game with many active players. I will use World of Warcraft as my example<sup>5</sup>.

First, there is the machinery of the game set in a social environment. The machinery can be analyzed on different levels, one level supervening on the next below. On the lowest level we have access to today are quantum-physical processes and other things we haven't yet fully understood. On a higher level there are mechanical operations performed by computers connected in a global network, with input from and output to the environment through interfaces. Supervening on all of this there is the distributed program execution, influencing and influenced by the behavior of the players. On the top level there are pictorial patterns displayed on players' screens accompanied by sounds brought to them by loudspeakers. Some temporal picture pattern series represent active players' avatars, and the players can by their physical action influence game events through them, in cooperation or competition with other players online as well as with some purely ludic characters *ex machina*, benign or malign.

Second, there are the players. They have a key role in this. There is also their extraludic ambience, but I shall not go into that.

Third, there are the fantasy dramas acted out in the players' minds while playing the game. There are two important questions to be raised in this connection.

One, to which extent are the fantasy dramas determined as fantasy by the machinery? It seems to me that there must be other determining factors as well; for instance a boy playing World of

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<sup>3</sup> This also brings them closer to traditional, noncomputerized games.

<sup>4</sup> Stage play (drama and performance art) makes up a field of its own, related in some respects to narratives and in other respects to games. A thorough discussion of the problem of ludic and fictional entities should also take account of the theater.

<sup>5</sup> Though I see World of Warcraft as a rather typical MMOG, I don't see it as representative of MMOGS as such, let alone of games in general. The results of my study, call them "R", warrant only existential generalization: there is a game of which R hold; the do not warrant universal generalization: R hold of all games. On the near-bottom levels there will even so be deep similarities between all computer games that set them apart from all noncomputerized games, but on higher levels the similarity between computer chess and traditional chess, for instance, will become much more evident than the difference between them. However, MMOGs like World of Warcraft are essentially computer games, and computer games of a special type in addition.

Warcraft may see an intended dragon of a special type as his mother while blasting it, possibly in cooperation with his sister on another computer, say, or he may see it as just another blob he has to lay dead to succeed, or to show his competence, according to circumstances of his extraludic life. Even so, the machinery constrains the fantasy life of active players, and these constraints are constitutive of the game as such and the reason we choose to play them instead of meditating, say, or doing some real work on our computers.

Two, to which extent, if any, do the fantasy dramas going on in the players' mind make a difference to what is happening to the pictorial objects on screen over time? I think they do that to a great extent, and that is one reason playing such games is attractive to so many. Playing them gives you the feeling you can achieve something.

The machinery is there to deliver some kind of imagery. To a certain extent the fantasy objects are determined by the machinery. To a certain extent they are free.

There are two main issues I want to raise here:

- 1) Is causal agency a mark of reality?
- 2) Is what is ludically so and such, also fictionally so and such, or is this at least true in an MMOG like World of Warcraft?

Both of these are very big issues. Here I shall content myself with a few remarks on each of them.

### **Causal relevance and reality**

Many people tend to think that a mark of that which is real is that it plays a part in the causal linking of actual events in a chain, or in short that it is causally relevant. An argument for this is that causal relevance is what matters in the physical sciences. By this criterion many objects in a computer game seem to be real, or at least more real than purely fictional objects, which are constituents of fictional dramas you cannot influence. Many of those who think that causal relevance is what counts, also tend to think that what is causally relevant must be material in a sense. There is, however, no necessary connection here. Contrary to the intuition of some people, by the causal relevance criterion numbers are also real, since they play a causal part in many events: that you have ten dollars and not just nine, say, will be the outcome of past events and may be decisive for the outcome of events in the future, and it is a property of the number ten, though not a number theoretical property of it, that you have ten dollars if that is what you have got. Similarly, it is a property of 0 that it is the number of unicorns. This is something I have learned from Quine (1961: 3 *footnote*). In addition there is the fact, already mentioned, that fictional objects seem to be causally relevant in the sense that they make an emotional impact on us. I shall return to this.

What makes an entity causally relevant? This is a much discussed question, and central to modern metaphysics of mind. If something can be rendered causally superfluous in an explanation, is it real then? My guess, inspired by Quine (1960; 1969), is that any object could be

rendered causally irrelevant and superfluous in one of several explanatory stories that are different in quantifying over different realms of objects even though they have identical explanatory power, each one of them giving an explanation as good as we can get them. What I think then is that it is very problematic to use causal relevance as a criterion of reality. That what happens to ludic characters depicted on a screen in a videogame is sometimes dependent on the players' action while what happens to fictional characters written about in a novel is not, is interesting enough in itself, but this does not make ludic characters more real than characters of fiction. We need a different argument for fictional antirealist ludic realism.

That purely fictional objects can have no place in physical theory will appear obvious to many, but the assumption may be wrong even so, for at least three independent reasons. First, there is the apparent causal relevance of fictional objects which I have mentioned already. This has not been satisfactorily been accounted for so far, as I see it. Second, there is Quinean ontological relativity: Maybe we could rewrite physics so that what we are now used to think of as physical objects no longer have a place in basic physics theory, at least not a prominent place, and so that the new physical objects are not numbers either, which is Quine's suggestion, but fictional objects of a kind. Third, fictional characters in a novel supervene on text in a context in much the same way as ludic characters in a computer game supervene on properties of the game machinery in an environment. If ludic characters for this reason can be assumed to be identical with properties of the machinery, why could we not for the same reason see fictional characters as identical to text properties?

The latter objection could be met with the following argument: A dragon, a young wolf, or a boar in World of Warcraft is presented to you as an integral pattern of pixels on the screen, clearly distinguished from the background on which it is moving in one piece. You cannot in a similar way identify the appearance of a fictional character like Sherlock Holmes with a discernible pattern of letters in Conan Doyle's text. Moreover, and here the causal argument seems to gain new weight: through your avatar you can by your own movements make a physical impact on the ludic object appearing on the screen. You can attack it, and then it strikes back. You can ludically kill it, and that is what you often have to do in this game in order to advance to the next game level.<sup>6</sup> In World of Warcraft there are also the avatars of other players, presented to you in the same graphical way. You interact with them too. For a novice in the game it may at times be difficult to discern avatars from pure game objects. Your experience as a reader of a novel is entirely different. Other readers do not enter into it, and you can do nothing to change the destiny of the protagonists of the story<sup>7</sup>.

### **The ludic and the fictional**

What concerns us here is the ontological status of ludic objects. Are they real, and what does that mean? That they supervene on features of the machinery in the environment seems to be clear.

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<sup>6</sup> At other times a young wolf may be totally irrelevant. In Aarseth's terminology it could be fictional, or it could be virtual to the benefit of other players. It doesn't matter to you.

<sup>7</sup> As a rewriter, however, you can do a lot, not least if you write for the screen or stage. Then you can for instance change Holmes's history and even his personality. (Cf. Nicholas Meyer, *The Seven Percent Solution*.) You can also turn a novel into a videogame; this is done all of the time. Nothing stands in the way of fictional objects' becoming virtual.

But do they reduce to features of the machinery? Are they identical with them, as Sageng (2007) has argued? In that case they must be real, but also different from all extraludic objects of different kinds, to the effect that no real person like Hitler or geographical place like Berlin or historical event like World War II can ever be imported into a game, only their ludic counterparts, if we allow for them. This fits in with the hypothesis that avatars are counterparts of players<sup>8</sup>, contradicting the hypothesis that they are the players themselves in disguise. Besides, since the machinery is already part of extraludic reality, nothing is really exported from the game world to it, so we need not worry about unwanted fictional creatures among us.

Let me introduce the Ludic Operator and the Ludic Parenthesis. When gamers talk about their player's experiences I see the words they use, for example "I killed the monster", as governed by a (usually tacitly presupposed) ludic operator, and the killing of the monster is ludically parenthesized. I should say at once that a stern ludic antirealist is not obliged to accept a ludic operator as meaningful. Ludic antirealism comes in degrees. (Asheim 2007.) The operator preceding the parenthesis tells us that everything going on inside is ludic: within the parenthesis, that is the scope of the operator, the predicate of being a human being is transformed into the predicate of being a human being ludically. This a great difference. A wooden twig could take on human qualities in children's play<sup>9</sup>. A tiger doll becomes a tiger inside the ludic parenthesis<sup>10</sup>. It is not a tiger; it is a tiger ludically. There is no contradiction here.

Games are not one thing, and to make justice to them and their differences there should be a multitude of ludic operators, not just one. I will later introduce a specific ludic operator tailored for MMOGs like World of Warcraft. Even so, a most general ludic operator can always be introduced by definition as the alternation of all the specific ludic operators. Then it is a question of great interest if there is something more to the general ludic operator than simply being the logical sum of all the specific ludic operators. I shall not go into that question here, however, but leave it to others.

Let me then introduce the Fiction Operator and the Fiction Parenthesis it governs<sup>11</sup>. I am not suggesting that authors of fiction make assertions beginning with a tacitly presupposed fiction operator; I am suggesting that we do that as readers and critics of fiction when we talk about fictional objects and events. Talking fictitiously, making up fiction, is quite different from making assertions as I see it, it is a different kind of speech act. But critics of fiction make assertions in my view. Others see it differently. Again, a stern fictional antirealist is not obliged to accept a fiction operator as meaningful; fictional antirealism also comes in degrees. As in the case of ludic logic, the operator preceding the parenthesis this time tells us that everything inside is fiction: within the parenthesis the predicate of being a human being is transformed into the predicate of being a human being fictionally. Sherlock Holmes is not a human being, he is a fictional human being.

Then there is in both cases the question of quantifying in — from the outside, from reality. In so far as quantification into fictional and ludic contexts is not allowed, no fictional or ludic object

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<sup>8</sup> This hypothesis is strengthened by the observation that one player can have more than one avatar.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. The *Knerten* books by Anne Cath. Vestly — now also a movie.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bill Watterson, *Calvin and Hobbes*, famous comic strip.

<sup>11</sup> There should perhaps be more than one operator here too.

exists in reality because the scope of a quantifier is never allowed to contain the fictional and ludic operators I here think of as somewhat similar to modal operators, with similar possible world model theoretic semantics working for them. If, on the other hand, we allow quantification into fictional and ludic contexts, we thereby allow certain objects an existence both inside and outside of the fictional and ludic parentheses. This is fictional realism and ludic realism fully fledged, and the two can be combined, but they are not the same.

Are there then important differences between fictional and ludic objects, so that you could consistently be both a ludic realist and a fictional antirealist, quantifying into ludic contexts but not into fictional contexts? To put it in a very rude way: can ludic objects be more real than merely fictional objects? To make the question a little more precise, let  $\mathcal{L}$  be the ludic operator and  $\mathcal{F}$  the fictional operator, and let  $c$  be a content sentence of any complexity, containing one or more free variables or none at all. Then we should start by asking: is it sometimes not the case that if  $\mathcal{L}(c)$  then  $\mathcal{F}(c)$ ? Then lots of more specific questions will follow.

Clearly it is sometimes not the case that if  $\mathcal{L}(c)$  then  $\mathcal{F}(c)$ . What is fictional in a game of chess? What is fictional in Tetris?

But what about World of Warcraft? This is more specific, and more interesting because of that. Let us introduce the specific ludic operator  $\mathcal{L}_w$  to take care of the ludicity in World of Warcraft and similar games. The World of Warcraft appears fictional enough to me. I think that what is ludically so and such in World of Warcraft is also fictionally so and such<sup>12</sup>. The fictional antirealist ludic realist should of course disagree, he should maintain not only that it is sometimes not the case that if  $\mathcal{L}_w(c)$  then  $\mathcal{F}(c)$ , but argue in addition that when  $c$  contains a free variable the expression " $\mathcal{F}(c)$ " is not even meaningful, since a genuine fictional antirealist should reject quantification into fictional contexts as meaningless. On the other hand, as a ludic realist he should accept quantification into ludic contexts. Most additional questions that could be asked about the relationship between  $\mathcal{L}_w(c)$  and  $\mathcal{F}(c)$  will then lose their relevance.

This is a position that might be tenable. I will present no arguments against it here. The task I set for myself in this talk was just to show you how to be a fictional antirealist ludic realist.

## Games

WORLD OF WARCRAFT. Blizzard/Vivendi, PC, 2004.

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<sup>12</sup> That something is ludically or fictionally so and such does not exclude the possibility that it is also actually so and such, of course, but that is not our concern here.

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