"Together They Are Twofold": Player-Avatar Relationship Beyond the Fourth Wall

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Abstract

Although breaking the fourth wall is one of the most common ways to achieve comic relief in films and TV series, some argue for its meaningful function as a technique enhancing the audience's informed experience of the text. While it seems obvious what "breaking the fourth wall" means in the theater context (Stevenson, 1995), in video game studies there seems to be a substantial confusion surrounding this term with multiple cases of varied use. A common voice seems to be the one negating not only the existence of the fourth wall in specific video games (Conway, 2010) but the sole possibility of its existence in the whole medium (Jørgensen, 2013). On the other hand, those who speak in favor of it seem to use this term very broadly (Kubiński, 2016). By reaching back to literary and theater theory, in this paper I aim to organize and clarify the various terms connected to metafiction, placing a particular emphasis on different definitions of the "fourth wall". Furthermore, I will distinguish between fiction-aware characters who recognize their fictionality without the awareness of the player and the two types of game-player communication through the wall: one-directional and the twofold play of the player.

A character in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004–2017) stares blankly at the empty space in front of them and proclaims that their "inventory is full" when there is no one around to hear them.

In *Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door* (Intelligent Systems, 2004), Rawk Hawk points at the screen and asks the player: "Have you forgot about me?" while another character, Goom-

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bella, can be heard voicing the following concern: “Oops, I just broke through the fourth wall there, didn’t I?”.

In *Max Payne* (Rockstar Games, 2001) during his drug-induced nightmare the eponymous character has the realization of being a part of a computer game which “was the most horrible thing [he] could think of”.

In *Moss* (Polyarc, 2018) Quill, a brave and adventurous mouse, finds a shiny stone. As she straps it to her backpack, she notices a change in the world. She looks around, not able to put her finger on it at first only to notice a white, silent spirit looking at her from above. The being, “that silent giant of [hers],” is the player, who not only controls the mouse warrior but plays a separate entity too, with the ability to heal Quill, help her solve puzzles and defeat enemies.

Although all these video games differ in genre, style, platform, and even the country of origin, each of them at some point has been categorized, not necessarily accurately, as breaking the fourth wall. In the context of video games it is a curious concept, one that eludes precise definitions, the consequence of which is its various and often contradictory applications: while video game journalists are prone to use it as an umbrella term denoting all experiments relating to metafiction, video game scholars have a tendency to disagree on whether the interactive medium allows for the existence of the fourth wall to be broken. While the definition of “breaking the fourth wall” seems intuitional when discussed in theatrical context (Stevenson 1995), it seems that the multiple cases of varied use in video game studies resulted in a substantial confusion surrounding it. Thus, the aim of the article is to discuss these commonly used definitions and approaches, and create a typology of various interactions between a game and a player beyond the fourth wall, believing that by placing them under scrutiny it will become easier to distinguish between their different potential functions as meaning-making tools which can serve to better interpret the players’ role and involvement with the game. Furthermore, it could be argued that by understanding specific ways of breaking the fourth wall it will be easier to differentiate between such experiments with which the developers can test the boundaries of the still comparatively new medium and the metareferential qualities understood as its inherently self-referential characteristics.

Thus, first I organize the available literature on the topic to show various trends in video game studies. Secondly, I differentiate between what is called the utterances of the “fiction-aware characters” from the actual cases of fourth-wall breaking, which are further separated into two categories: the one-directional and the two-directional, the special case of which, the twofold play, is solely found in video games. The latter category differs from the other because rather than giving the player the full control over the character,[1] it demands the cooperation between the two agents who are positioned next to each other. Finally, I recognize that although games often break the fourth wall to create the sense of defamiliarization that favors critical reflection, the twofold play can possibly reinforce the positive

player-character relationship and emotional involvement in the narration.

Metafiction, Metareferentiality, and the Problem of the Fourth Wall

The term "metafiction", which in literary studies denotes the "fiction about fiction" (Waugh, 1984) proves to be quite resistant to its reconceptualization into video game context, spurring multiple definitions. The prefix "meta-" which in the literature indicates self-referentiality of the text (Waugh, 1984), in games tends to be applied to the specific practices and communities that historically arose around certain games. The word "metagame" was introduced in the *Magic: The Gathering* card game in 1995 and later was adapted into the tabletop roleplaying games and, eventually, to video games (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017, p. 23). According to Carter, Gibbs and Harrop (2012) the three main meanings assigned to this word are: 1) a higher strategy requiring the player to think about their opponents' potential moves and decisions, 2) an added content to the already existing campaign or 3) the act of "breaking the fourth wall". Although many experimental forms and solutions characteristic to postmodern texts and metafiction can be found in video games (Fest, 2016), it is the breaking of the fourth wall that gains the most attention, while admittedly often deployed ambiguously in experiments.[2] Instead, I use the term Meta-Games to denote those metafictional "games about games" which include self-reflexive and metareferential traits (Backe, 2016).

Whereas the term "fourth wall" originated in the theater (Stevenson, 1995) where it has initially been ascribed to Molier and Denis Diderot (Kubiński, 2016, p. 114), it has since been adapted and applied to film (Brown, 2012), television (Auter & Davis, 1991), and, finally, to video games (Keogh, 2014). In the theatrical context, the concept of the fourth wall is a straightforward one. There, the fourth wall was the convention imagining a space separating the actors and the audience. Thanks to suspension of disbelief, the latter can voyeuristically peek into the enclosed space of the stage, not seen by the characters of the play. On the other hand, the "breaking of the fourth wall" refers to the situation in which said suspension is lifted, and the previously invisible audiences become seen and acknowledged by the diegetic characters. However, what often is omitted in discussions, is the temporality of the phenomena. This means that the two worlds do not mix but, rather, when a temporal fracture is created, it becomes possible to peek from one side of the wall to the other. However, as soon as the moment passes, the crack becomes patched, restoring the firm and clear distinction between the diegetic and extradiegetic. Although the presence of the audiences in theatres allows for the two-directional as well as one-directional interactions, for example by encouraging the audience to clap or sing along, in the film the majority of fourth wall breaking utterances are one-directional. Where the same encouragement of participation occurs in film or TV series, one can still consider it a one-directional interaction characterized with a higher level of self-awareness.

The problems, however, arise when the concept is adapted from theater to cinema and television. Whereas the screen easily replaced the edge of the stage as a threshold between the ac-

tors and the viewers, it created an obvious distance between them. In his *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Access in the Cinema*, Tom Brown (2012) admitted that "looking at the film audience is clearly never 'direct' in any material sense; it is also rare that its effect or meaning is as obvious as 'direct' implies" (p. x). Furthermore, the introduction of explorable 3D environments and the player's role as ergodic participant[3] (Aarseth, 1997) further problematizes the fourth wall in the context of the video game medium. For example, Matthew Weise (2008) argued that the boundary between the gameworld and the player was an "elastic membrane" rather than a stable wall, and Steven Conway (2010), borrowing from Huizinga ([1938] Conway 2010), famously reinvented the concept of a wall in the video game context as a magic circle with the ability to expand and contract in order to further immerse the player. He also described the occurrences in which "the fictional world of the digital game expands beyond its previous boundaries into other software and hardware" (Conway, 2010, p. 147) through the implementation of augmented reality. On the other hand, by "contracting" Conway meant the instances of "self-awareness", for example in the case of Sonic (Sonic Team, 1999) who would leave the screen thus triggering the "game over" screen in response to the player's absence and in the aforementioned scene of Max Payne's self-realization.

Perhaps the most polarizing positions towards the definitions of the fourth wall belong to Piotr Kubiński and Kristine Jørgensen. In his book on video games poetics, Kubiński (2016) categorized breaking the fourth wall as one of the "emersive effects" serving to break the player's immersion either through a creator's mistake or the deliberate action. His typology included three types: a tutorial, a comic relief, and an artistic device. Thus, the definition was inclusive and broad enough to encompass all games mentioned above in the introduction of this article. Alternatively, Kristine Jørgensen entirely rejected the idea, arguing that "digital games do not have the fourth wall in the same way that much traditional fiction does" (Jørgensen, 2013, 125). By analyzing gameworld as interfaces she did not concentrate on singular instances of the characters' self-consciousness, like in the aforementioned *World of Warcraft* character's realization, but acknowledged self-referentiality as a necessary quality of all gameworld systems. Since the game interfaces need to, above all else, provide the players with feedback and meaningful communication to make the game experience as easy as possible, the types of self-consciousness became not an exception but a convention (9). By using Wolf's (2009) concept of "metareferences" which "can be seen as a special kind of metacommunication used in fictional media" (p. 124), Jørgensen (2013) argued that most of the self-referential and self-conscious occurrences assumed as instances of fourth wall breaking are simply traits of the video game medium. Therefore, she assigned the same ontological weight to tutorial one-liners (e.g. "Now, boy, you can press at any time to open your Spells Menu" from *Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch,* Level-5, 2011) and to the comments of the overburdened avatar—those, lacking an obvious addressee, were easily interpretable by players as a system information. Nonetheless, while recognizing the humorous potential of these instances, she qualified them as a subversion of the conventions rather than "breaking down of the fictional universe" (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 126).

In 2015 Steven Conway and Andrew Trevillian explored the player's capability to switch attention between the game and social contexts, framing it as rapid changes between the three levels of the game event: the social world, operative world and character world. This explains the complex relation between a double placement and role as a player in the social world and the avatar in the character world. Furthermore, deriving from the Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, they analyze the relationship between the object and human as "just one example of many *interpretations* generated through different object relations" (p. 75), placing emphasis on the fact that the same object—such as a DualShock controller—has different relationships with the players, the console, and the game which it is used to play. The SOC (Social/Operative/Character) model they propose deals with the double role throughout the fourth wall and the interactions between the worlds on the two sides of the screen that are at the core of these occurrences, including especially those moments that draw attention to the presence and involvement of both software and hardware.

Having briefly summarized these positions, I will now discuss a new typology of the metareferential and self-conscious video game moments, arguing that there are, in fact, certain specific instances which evoke the existence of game's fourth wall and further, break it.

The Typology of Character-Player Behavior Along the Fourth Wall

I would like to begin by differentiating between what I will call the behavior of "fiction-aware characters" and the player-character interaction through the symbolic fourth wall. Under the name "fiction-aware characters" or the game's "fiction-awareness",[4] I propose to collect a number of utterances, often either in the form of a humorous one-liner or a short dialogue, which refers to the game's fictionality without acknowledging the player on the other side of the fourth wall. These can be often encountered in tutorials, like in the case of *Ni No* Kuni, or in other parts of a game as comic relief—that second case is especially common in the point-and-click adventure genre. Some examples include *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games, 1990) where Guybrush, the protagonist, remarked that one should "never pay more than 20 bucks for a computer game" or *Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door* (Intelligent Systems, 2004), where Gus proclaimed that "you dumb video game heroes always do this!". These kinds of occurrences, however, are all part of the gameworld and can be explained as video game's metareferentiality rather than an instance of *breaking* of the borders between diegesis and non-diegesis. The entanglement of the terminology related to metafictionality and metareferentiality of video games seemingly erased the differences between the tenets of metareferentiality, which after Hans-Joachim Backe (2018) I recognize as an innate quality of the video game medium, and the additional, overlaying experiments, such as the purposeful breaking of the fourth wall. The distinction seems crucial since the too liberal use of the concept of fourth wall breach can result in the players' inability to notice and properly understand different, more radical narrative strategies when they occur. For example, Guybrush's fiction-awareness is coherent with the on-the-nose aesthetics of many Lucas Arts' humorous point-and-click games and, therefore, it not as much breaks the player's

expectations as reflects them. Similarly, understanding the utterances found in tutorials as meta-communication characteristic to the medium strips them from the responsibility of being a symbol of something else and allows them to be appreciated for what they are—that is, experiments with which the creators test the possibilities of the game medium and engage players in more in-depth contact. Subsequently, this allows one to concentrate on the types of breaking the fourth wall discussed further in the article, which tend to be tools of meaning-making that create an effect of defamiliarization or enhancing the emotional response and creating the intimacy between the player and their avatar/character.

A different example of a fiction-aware character who does not break the fourth wall in the discussed sense is Max Payne. This example is far more controversial as it often was discussed as the most straightforward case of breaking the fourth wall.[5] However, Max never crosses the fourth wall. He does not realize that there is world outside of his, nor does he direct his commentary at the player. Furthermore, one could argue that, since he is hardly in "his right mind" and the whole sequence is purely a hallucination of a drugged mind, it remains within the logic of the world.

Realizing the fictionality of one's universe is epistemologically different than acknowledging, perceiving and communicating with the player on the other side of the wall. Among the fourth wall breaches the most common and the most researched is what I call the one-directional type. Here, the characters not only are aware of the player but also address them. Similarly to the audience at the cinema, the player here is not expected or allowed to reciprocate the contact. Such occurrences can take place, among others, in tutorials in order to establish a more personal connection with the player and facilitate the learning process.

These games often break the fourth wall in order to encourage a more conscious, in-depth reflection on the part of the player, as is the case in *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2011) or *Spec Ops: The Line*[6] (Yager Development, 2012). Both of these games are examples of one-directional fourth wall breach, as the player is acknowledged (often through a direct verbal comment directed at them with the use of the second person pronouns) but is not given means of reciprocating the contact. By noticing them, the game encourages critical thinking, either through parody and surprise (*The Stanley Parable)* or discomfort (*Spec Ops: The Line)*. Although some see it as an aesthetic feature which, albeit a complex and sophisticated one, first and foremost is intended to increase the "narrative complexity" of the text (Pérez Latorre, 2015), others point out psychological, emotional, and political consequences of the experimental forms used in them. The analysis of how these games break the players' immersion to disillusion them and force a more educated, political reading of the texts, conducted using both Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* or the "V-effect" (de Wildt, 2014; Dunne, 2014; Evans, 2014) and Augusto Boal's concept of a spect-actor (Pötzsch, 2017), confirming further that game creators reach for these experimental features, considering them apt tools for engaging players in the more critical play.

While the aforementioned titles break the fourth wall in the most common sense, that is, without taking advantage of the peculiarity of the player-game relationship, a small group of games explored this dynamic further. Here, the close interactions between the protagonist and the player became not only the most important mechanic in the game, but they often also remained at the core of its narrative, fully embracing the possibilities of the interactive medium and allowing for the more in-depth analysis of the complexity of the player-character relationship (Gazzard, 2009; Banks, 2015).

By forcing the player to interact with the game's console, Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid*[7] (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, 1998) experimented with the wall breach in an innovative way, rarely seen in the contemporary titles. When Psycho Mantis telekinetically moves the player's controller around the floor in the real world through the use of DualShock's vibrations, the player has a choice to obey or not, signalizing that this interaction is symmetrical: the former invites the latter to participate. Furthermore, when Mantis surprises the player by "seeing" them and, later, by being able to read the console's saves in order to comment on the player's game choices, the player is not defenseless. To win the almost impossible fight the player needs to unplug the controller and plug it again into another port on the console, interrupting Mantis' "telepathic connection". The surprising technique pushes the player out of their comfort zone, forcing them to perform an action they were not expecting nor, in many cases, even thought possible. Although the scene is short and thus it implements "breaking of the fourth wall" as a device of singular use, the player can and is required to respond. This is of great ontological importance as the metaleptic jump occurs in two directions: while Mantis moves to a higher level, the player temporarily becomes closer to the lower level (Fludernik, 2003). Thus, this is an example of a fourth wall breaking where the player is not only acknowledged but invited to participate. Furthermore, Conway and Trevillian (2015) additionally offer an in-depth analysis of the event through Linderoth's and Goffman's concepts of upkeying and downkeying,[8] analyzing the ways in which the game ascribes new meaning to the controller, console, and the memory card in order to engage the player in the new ways, arguing that through "manipulation of the network of objects within the Game Event, the world of *Metal Gear Solid* becomes more encompassing, more persuasive" (p. 88). Furthermore, they acknowledge the originality of Hideo Kojima's game and coin a phrase term "Kojima Upkey" defined as "an object from the Social World upkeyed into the Operative World, its previous utility discarded as it assumes a new role in the Game Event" (Conway & Trevillian, 2015, p. 91). As such, it can be classified as two-directional contact in the proposed nomenclature here—the player has means to answer through the interaction with the console and the game.

In the rest of the article I will concentrate on twofold play, a specific type of the two-directional fourth wall breaking, where the player is given maximum control over the game environment and where their communication with the player-character and, through them, the game, is a crucial element of the narrative and the most important mechanic.

The Player-Avatar relationship

Since twofold play relies heavily on the interaction and the emotional responses with the player character, it is worthy to discuss first the research on the player-avatar relationship. The concept of identification in game studies seems to be one of the most often discussed concepts, the problem which, as Luca Papale (2014) observed, is an umbrella term which tends to be used vaguely, if not incorrectly. Apart from identification, Papale (2014) identified other types of possible reactions towards the avatar, including: empathy/sympathy, projection, and detachment. There, projection was "a conceptual opposite of identification", as it "takes place when it's the player that makes personality, values, and choices flow into the avatar" (Papale, 2014, p. 4) and detachment referred to the situation in which the avatar does not trigger any emotional response from the player, thus remaining solely the vehicle allowing for game progress (p. 5).

However, the relationship with the avatar cannot be discussed without the understanding of different types of the character types and personalities. An important typology was created by Daniel Kromand (2007) who described four main character archetypes based on two axes. On one hand, an "open" avatar type "has no personality traits without the involvement of the player" while the "closed" refers to the non-customizable one (Kromand, 2007, p. 401). On the other hand, the second scale indicates emotional perspectives. Thus, the *central* identification describes the relationship in which the player inhabits the character and controls their every movement, and the a*central* identification requires emotional separation from the character. It correlates with the perception of the avatar as the "emotional third person" (Kromand, 2007, p. 402) and expressing sentiments towards them. Another scale of the player-avatar relationship was developed by Jaime Banks (2015) who introduced four types of avatar perception: avatar-as-object, avatar-as-me, avatar-as-symbiote, and avatar-as-social other. Thus, Kromand's central identification seems to mirror avatar-as-object where the latter is referred to as a tool or vehicle, while the *acentral* resembles the last category by Banks. On the difference between the two Rune Klevjer (2012) wrote that "we must make a distinction between 'avatar' understood as a playable character (or persona), and 'avatar' understood as a vehicle through which the player is given some kind of embodied agency and presence within the gameworld" (p. 17), and what Daniel Vella (2014) coded as, on one axis, the status of "self" or "the other", and, on the other, as "subjective" and "objective" relation.

Another typology was also proposed by Francesco Alinovi (2011), who based it on the character depth which constitutes of a zero dimensional (a-dimensional) character personality, indicating an absence of characterization and "created from a scratch by the player" (i.e. in RPG genre), a one-dimensional personality, based on one defining trait and three-dimensional characters with rich and complex personalities. Luca Papale and Lorenzo Fazio (2018) created an updated classification which included five types of character: transparent, vehicle, mask, character, and meta-character. Each category was described in terms of characterization and alteration of player's identity. By a meta-character they understood an embodiment

of postmodern theories which perceived the identity as fluid and digital games as the medium which allows one to experiment with their self-perception and self-identification. It thus was "gifted with the ability to instill deep identity instability in player" (Papale & Fazio, 2018, p. 273). One more type of avatar that is worthy of attention here is what Trena Lee and Alex Mitchell (2018) called "shell" playable characters—a new type found in some recent games (i.e. *The Stanley Parable*) which, while game hints on their story, lack personality, leaving space for the player's interpretation. This type is particularly interesting in terms of a vast group of games which decrease the distance between the character and the player, making it at times difficult to distinguish them and thus, complicating the discussion about their placement around the fourth wall.

The aforementioned theories take into consideration that the relationship between the player and their avatar is a complex one, depending on the level of freedom left for the former. Being at the same time a spectator and an active agent with control over various aspect of the character—their name and appearance, their movements, or their personality crafted through the dialogue—becomes perhaps even more paradoxical when the interaction evolves around the broken fourth wall. When, rather than striving for an illusion of a complete immersion and unmediated play, the roles of both the player and the equipment they use are emphasized, it becomes clear that neither of the roles is stable. Instead, it could be argued that the player identity and the character's role are fluid, constantly negotiated and incessantly constructed.

Before moving to the discussion of twofold-play games which include such shifting roles, it is worth mentioning that a similar relationship occurs in several virtual reality (VR) titles which rather than breaking the fourth wall expand the "magic circle" in order to preserve the immersion and keep the fourth wall intact. One of such games is the 2018 VR game, *Moss,* mentioned in the introduction of this article. Although it does not break the fourth wall in the discussed sense as it never acknowledges the player as a separate entity, instead it casts the player simultaneously in two roles: on one hand they control Quill, a brave mouse searching for her uncle, and, on the other, they embody a friendly, voiceless guide spirit with its own set of skills such as object manipulation and healing ability that can be used on Quill. By pulling the player into the game and concealing them as a character in the gameworld, the game ensures that the immersion remains intact. Hence, the "magic circle" expands in order to incorporate the player into the diegesis. The wall prevails because neither of the characters—Quill especially—is aware of the player. Notwithstanding, Quill's trust in her guide's help and the emotional charge of her relationship with it match the relations in the other games from the genre, and its peculiarity is acknowledged both by the game's narrator, who explains that "Together they are Twofold", and by the trophy awarded for 100% game completion—"Together We're Twofold". Had it not been for the lack of space in the article, it would have possibly been worth exploring further the player-character relationship in other VR games which, while mimicking the twofold-play fourth wall breaking, often disguise the player as an in-game character in order to maintain the fictionality of the game-

world. Nonetheless, the dynamic between Quill and the Player-spirit is remarkably similar to that between the Player and the protagonists of a small group of games that introduce a two-directional fourth wall breach, which I will refer to as twofold-play games or twofold-fourth-wall.

Although the games that I will discuss in the following section all follow a very similar pattern and engage the player in an uncannily similar ways, there are too few of them to make claims about the genre. However, I feel that in the discussion about Meta-Games it is important to pay attention to them, since, unlike the other discussed types, they try to influence the player's attachment to the character and enhance the immersion by further involving them into the play rather than creating defamiliarization effect.

The games that I wish to discuss here were all released in the second decade of the 21st century and they all follow a similar structure: the protagonist, the Chosen One, displays child-like naivety, innocence, and attachment towards the god-like Player with whom they directly interact, verbally or non-verbally. While the majority of characters are not aware of the player, there usually is one or two supernatural, powerful entities who reside above the world and its rules and who address the player directly, knowing more than them, and either playing a role of the friendly guides or the villains.

Among the most notable examples are *Tearaway* (Media Molecule, 2013), *Tearaway Unfolded* (Media Molecule, 2015), *Undertale*[9] (Fox, 2015), *OneShot* (Little Cat Feet, 2016), and *Glitched*[10] (En House Studios, 2019).

The Player's Twofoldness in *Tearaway Unfolded (2013)*

In the following sections I will analyze two examples of twofold play, *Tearaway Unfolded* (Media Molecule, 2015) and *OneShot* (Little Cat Feet, 2016). Their analysis serves to refine the existing definitions of Meta-Games. Furthermore, due to their unique structure in which the player is forced to play two roles[11] at once it further supports the argument provided by Papale (2014) about complexity of player-avatar relationship.

Years after the well-acclaimed *Tearaway* on PS Vita (2013), Media Molecule released PlayStation 4 version titled *Tearaway Unfolded*. Where *LittleBigPlanet* (Media Molecule, 2008), a previous platformer by the company, introduces a ragdoll protagonist in the world seemingly made out of fabrics, the world of *Tearaway* is created of paper, and its protagonist is an envelope-like messenger (Atoi or Iota, depending on which of the binary genders is chosen). Here, in a way similar to *Moss*, the player performs two roles at the same time: Atoi/Iota on one side of the screen and themselves (player-as-character), on the other. While Víctor Navarro-Ramesal and Shaila García-Catalán (2015) refer to that relationship as the player's "dual actantial role" to acknowledge the shift between the two characters, I propose the term "twofold play" as a special case of two-directional fourth wall break, as opposed to the

one-directional. Where one-directional type includes game characters acknowledging the presence of and talking directly to the player, the two-directional type allows—or, sometimes, requires, like in the previously discussed *Metal Gear Solid*—the latter to respond. However, while in these types the player's reaction to the fourth wall breach tends to be a separated, individual occurrence, by introducing the sub-category of the twofold play I want to draw attention to the games that structure their entire gameplay around the interactions between the characters and the player. Thus, not only is the player character constantly aware of the presence on the other side of the screen but the player needs to, apart from controlling the protagonist, act out themselves as a separate character in the game which can be referred to as player-as-character. Therefore, similarly to the double role of a spirit guide and Quill in *Moss*, here the player acts both as themselves and Atoi/Iota.

What differentiates Tearaway Unfolded from many games is that it begins by clearly distinguishing between the character and the player, asking separately for their genders—restricting, however, this choice to binary options. While the choice of the player's gender does not seem to be as important later in the game, in the case of the character it determines the name of the Messenger—Atoi for a girl and Iota for a boy—and their default appearances, which can be further customized, perhaps as a nod to the studio's previous series of *Little Big Planet* games which heavily rely on the collection and use of stamps in the creation of the levels. The customization of the player character is an important part of the gameplay, recognized even by an adequate achievement ("Too Much Swag", awarded for putting "more than 10 Decorations on your Messenger"), which complicates somewhat the relationship with the character by accentuating the creative control over it, temporarily defining it as a possession rather than a companion.

By encouraging the player to put the effort in the creation process of Atoi/Iota, *Tearaway Unfolded* facilitated the perception of the avatar-as-me or the central identification. Here, the change in the avatar's status is, therefore, the most obvious. For the most part, the messenger serves as a vehicle through which the player explores the paper world, having full control over its movements. The *acentral* identification and the avatar-as-social other perception may be triggered in the moments when Atoi/Iota breaks from under the player's control, so to speak, acknowledging the presence on the other side of the screen. *Tearaway's* protagonist does not speak, but they are often seen searching for the player when scared, lost, or unable to overcome certain obstacles "on their own". The player cannot answer verbally either, but in the PlayStation 4 version, for example, they can use the Dualshock controller's back triangle light to shine the way, influence the surrounding, and stun enemies while Atoi/Iota fights them. Directing the light at the messenger causes them to light up in happiness, a reaction which establishes the hierarchy between the dominant and protective player and submissive and child-like character.

This embodied interaction through DualShock is an interesting example of a game experimenting with possibilities of the hardware, and contraction of magic circle in Conway's

understanding. While the vast majority of games aims for the unmediated experience under the assumption that there is a correlation between the transparent interfaces and one's involvement (Llanos & Jørgensen, 2011), *Tearaway* games utilizes these functions of PlayStation consoles which seem to not be used as often, including the triangular light on the back of DualShock controllers which shines into Messenger's world and brings color to its certain parts. Thus, the DualShock becomes the part of the player's extended body—their "phenomenal body" to use Maurice Merleau-Ponty's terminology ([1980] Keogh, 2018). Since the direct contact with the digital avatar is not possible, it is mediated by the DualShock which replicates the physical touch through the vibrations. Hence, when Atoi/Iota throws objects (e.g. stones and squirrels) through the screen into the controller, the vibrations in the player's hand paired with the adequate noises from its speakers create a life-like sensation. It is almost easy to believe that there really *is* a squirrel trying to get out of the Dualshock controller. A controller is then, subjected to "Kojima Upkey", a tool of communication with the avatar and the decoder of their messages, making the communication if not more significant, then more personal. This has serious ontological consequences, as it is one of extremely rare examples in which the fourth wall breach moves from the verbal to physical sphere, an event which usually was limited to the discussion around virtual or augmented reality games.

Atoi/Iota for the majority of the game remains mute, communicating with the player non-verbally, conveying the emotions and questions through the gestures, body language, and occasional sounds. However, after reaching their goal and entering the sun—which is a portal to the player's world, as signified by the video captured by the PlayStation camera, and, thus, directly symbolizing the break in the fourth wall — they can be heard summarizing the events of the game and their voice is unquestionably a child's one. The responsibility for the innocent, trusting Atoi/Iota is further enhanced through the use of the second-person pronoun "you". Through the game, the in-game gods who are the entities placed beyond the gameworld's rules, directly refer to the player as "You" or, when talking to Atoi/Iota, "your You". The introduction of the second-person narratee was widely discussed in literary studies (Fludernik, 1993; DelConte, 2003). Fludernik (1993) noted the postmodernist potential of subversion of the "story/discourse dichotomy and as an erasure of the fictionality signals framing realist fiction" (p. 229) through imposing on the reader—narratee—an identity that might not find it easy to accept. DelConte (2003) critiques Genette's division on heterodiegesis and homodiegesis as defined through voice/narrator (p. 210), causing him to dismiss the second-person narration as obvious and homogenous. Although he quickly points out the exception to the proposed rule, he boldly states that "[o]ne could, in fact, argue that all second-person narration is actually homodiegesis considering that a narrator must be on the same diegetic plane as his/her narratee-protagonist" (DelConte, 2003, p. 210). Further, he introduces a new model based not only on the narratee, but on the relationship between the triad designated by the narrator, the narratee, and the protagonist, which includes non-coincident narration (where all three are distinct from each other), completely-coincident narration (when they are identical) and three types of partially-coincident narration (DelConte, 2003, p. 211). The interactivity of the game experience threatens to confuse this division,

often purposefully blurring the lines between the player and the avatar — something that games like *Superhot* (Superhot Team, 2016), where the protagonist enters a game called *Superhot*, thus creating several diegetic levels to take advantage of. However, in the discussed titles, the use of singular "you", which creates an impression of a direct communication with an individual person on the other side of the screen at the precise moment of the interaction, draws attention to and emphasizes the specific player as an agent responsible for their actions.

What makes *Tearaway Unfolded* such an interesting example, is the vast number of ways in which it plays along the fourth wall. On the verbal level, it directly addresses the player, playing with the double meaning of the pronoun "you". By including the physical, embodied aspects, it at the same contracts and expands the magic circle.

The Emotional Attitude Towards the Player-Character in *OneShot* (2016)

The cute design, low difficulty level, and the emphasis on the emotional attachment are all qualities of a new category of games at times referred to as "cozy games" (Cook, 2018). The phrase is used to described those titles that include lush and comforting aesthetics and rely on friendship-building to reinforce positive feelings, and which allow the player to experience and explore the sense of connectedness, belonging and self-actualization rather than concentrating on satisfying the needs from lower levels of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, namely physiological and safety needs (Brinks, 2019). While *Tearaway's* Atoi/Iota form a bond with their player through non-verbal communication, *OneShot* emphasizes it further by not only giving voice to its protagonist, but also to the player. Where *Tearaway* constructs the relationship with non-verbal communication, *OneShot* fleshes out the player-as-character's personality in order to stress that the role of an individual player later than generalized one, thus making the twofoldness more obvious.

OneShot (2016) is an indie puzzle adventure game developed by Little Cat Feet studio. It centers around Niko, a child of unknown gender with cat-like features. After waking up in a strange, abandoned house, Nico finds a lightbulb, which turns out to be a sun that they need to restore to the world. This means they are a Chosen One, which is further proved by the fact that they can hear and talk to a god: a Player. When Nico addresses the player, the background fades to black and Niko can be seen turning towards the screen, directly asking the player questions. The latter is given their dialogue tree, usually constrained to two or three options, thus being directly involved in the conversation and actively breaking the fourth wall from their own side. Niko relies on the Player, asking them for guidance, reassurance, or, sometimes, asking questions due to their curiosity: Sometimes they comment on the difficulty of the task or point out that they cannot or do not want to perform it in a manner similar to many classical point-and-click adventure games, providing feedback. This once again emphasizes the double role of the player, who controls and guides Nico, solving puzzles and deciding whether and to whom to talk, but also who constructs a player-as-character through

dialogue options—where, of course, they have a complete freedom as to whether answer Nico truthfully or not, and, in consequence, whether to *play themselves* or create a new avatar of “a Player”. The process of inserting the player as a protagonist is a practice common in, for example, first-person shooters where by the lack of focus on the game’s protagonist the player is invited to insert themselves in their place, as well as the dating-sim visual novels, many of which do not specify the protagonist’s name or appearance for the same reason. However, it could be argued for the novelty of the solution presented in the twofold-play games which not only demand the control of one character, but also require the player to construct and perform a character that represents themselves.

The difference between a character who is controlled and the one who performs self-efficacy and independence is an important element here. In the aforementioned text, Kromand noticed the occasional stubbornness and refusal to comply in *Sims* (Maxis, 2000), which was an example of the *acentral* identification. There, the individualization of the avatars required the player to care for them, but also to accommodate to their needs, often in opposition to the player’s wishes. This means that although the player has god-like control over the Sims, they at times resist commands, prioritizing their needs or wishes over the player’s. Similarly, in *OneShot* Niko’s ontological distinctiveness manifests not only when they turn towards the screen to ask the player questions, but also when they refuse to obey an unreasonable and dangerous task which would result in getting them hurt. In an adventure and point-and-click genres especially, it is not uncommon for the characters to remark on the impossible nature of a task, or simply the characters’ unwillingness to perform it at the given time. There, such comments fulfil a similar role of feedback as to when the *World of Warcraft*’s character complains about their full inventory (Jørgensen, 2013). However, by additionally addressing the player directly, the game manipulates the player in such a way as to create in them feelings of guilt. Early in the game, there is an achievement, “Shocked”, awarded for forcing Niko to touch the running generator, causing them pain. If the player tries to repeat the action, Niko pleads, “I don’t want to get shocked again, [your name]!”.

The metaphor of the player as a parent is reinforced by Niko’s design. Their enormous, glowing cat-like eyes are the first thing to notice apart from the cat ears, but the whole body proportions are meant to connoted one of a child. Furthermore, they have certain naivety and show vulnerability. Very early in the game Niko meets a robot who explains to them that the player (using their name provided on Steam, which can be changed later) is a God of this world and it encourages Niko to contact them anytime they need assistance, as they “are the Messiah after all” (*OneShot*, Little Cat Feet, 2016). Niko quickly accepts the player as their protector, turning to them when lost, curious, or scared. Especially the latter is further constructed in such a way as to create an empathetic reaction in the players, causing them to feel responsible for Niko, and to feel guilty if they get hurt. While the exits every time Niko takes a nap, it is also possible to exit the game through the menu. Then, however, upon re-entering the game, the player is welcomed by confused Niko, who explains that they experienced sudden darkness and sudden lack of contact with the player. Terrified by the

unexplained, Niko is seen calling out the player's name in panic, asking "What happened? Everything went pitch black for a second...", again trying to make the player experience guilt.

It could be argued that by situating Niko so clearly as the Other and, at the same time, coding them as a vulnerable child, the game manipulates the player into strong emotional response they otherwise might not have. This, once again, shows the difference between the twofold play and the games that break the fourth wall in one direction—the latter often aim to defamiliarize and alienate the player; here instead, they build closeness and intimacy between the characters to strengthen the emotional impact.

The game bears similarities to *Tearaway* in the overall structure of the character behaviors around the wall as there are several characters aware of the player's existence, despite perceiving and coding them as a god figure. While Nico is the only who develops a relationship with the player, they are not the only one able to communicate through the fourth wall, the other notable example being the evil Entity, which appears in the form of a pop-up screen when Niko uses a computer. Niko often expresses a lack of understanding of what the Entity might mean as it possesses the knowledge of the player's world beyond the knowledge of the other characters. Towards the end of the game, it becomes clear that there is one more person aware of the player and the Entity's attempts to stop Niko's mission to save the world by returning the sun to the Tower: the game's developer, who hides messages and hints in the computer files. Therefore, to win the game, the player needs to abandon the game and use the data that is transferred to their desktop or hidden on the disc. It is worth noting that neither of these tasks is particularly difficult—the player is not required to change the game code, for example. Rather, it resembles other puzzles that can be encountered in the game, expanding maybe the magic circle onto the computer software. Unlike *Tearaway: Unfolded*, where the controller mediates the fourth wall breach, here the game world leaks out of the game screen and into the computer space, utilizing the software as the threshold between the realities where the two can actually meet.

Conclusions

The concept of the fourth wall, although eagerly reached for in the critical and journalistic critiques and review, proves to be complex and often misunderstood. Whereas it is common to use it to denote different metareferential devices, its direct translation into the medium of video games is problematic and was thus questioned by some scholars. In this article I recognize the differences between the self-conscious utterances of various characters encountered in the game world, with the emphasis on the tutorial parts of the games, separating them by the object of those comments. What then distinguishes the "fiction-aware characters" and their comments about the fictionality of the gameworld or themselves from the instances of breaking the fourth wall is the perception of the player as the autonomous, external being with agency over the world.

Hence, breaking of the fourth wall should not be synonymous with any self-referential comments, but rather it relies on direct communication with the player. Furthermore, I propose two types of the fourth wall breaking: the more common, one-directional break and the twofold play as the particular example of the two-directional type. While the former describes the variety of cases in which the player is addressed, but does not respond, the latter refers to a group of games in which the player-as-character is incorporated into the story, often as the being of god-like status.

The introduction of the two types of fourth-wall breach and the closer exploration of twofold-play sub-type add further nuance to the existing theories, show that the Conway's distinction is not exclusive and that both forms can happen in one title and that how gameworld-as-interface shifts based on the player-avatar connection. The latter is particularly important and the exploration of player's twofoldness and their double role can perhaps serve as another example showing that player-character relationship goes beyond simple identification.

It would appear that the twofold-play games often follow a similar structure: The main protagonist is either a child or child-like, characterized by naivety and dependency on others. The player acts in two roles here: On one hand, they control the player-character, but on the other, they perform themselves, the player-as-character, who is separate from the controlled protagonist. This allows for the complex relationship between the two and the verbal or non-verbal communication: in *OneShot* the player is asked questions and allowed to answer them, while in *Tearaway Unfolded* the DualShock controller is used to communicate with Atoi/Iota. While the player-characters remain mostly oblivious to the rules of the world and its "gameness" and the majority of the non-player characters do not know about the existence of the player, there usually is at least one character placed above them: either a villain or a friendly guide, they are aware of player, the game's fictionality, and even the rules which at the time can be unknown to the player. While the games vary in the genre and the type of communication permitted between the two-player characters, the similarities are striking and constant enough to allow the discussion about the subgenre should there more similar titles appear.

Endnotes

1. I make a distinction here between the "avatar", understood as the playable character which is controlled and customized by the player to allow maximum level of identification and "player-character" which is often pre-scripted and thus can more often be perceived as a vehicle or the tool for exploration.

2. Interestingly, less attention has been brought to the analysis of the fourth wall breaking than, for example, metalepsis, which although at times close in meaning or even overlapping, remains a much broader concept. Furthermore, the one-directional type bears, for example, a close resemblance to

rhetorical metalepsis which “opens a small window that allows a glance across levels, but the window closes after a few sentences, and the operation ends up reasserting the existence of the boundaries” (Ryan, 2006, p. 207).

3. On the subject of the relationship between theater and video games, and the role of the player/spectator, see also Homan and Homan (2014).

4. Referred to by Conway and Trevillian (2015, p. 93), alternatively, as 'fourth-wall awareness" when discussing the uterrances aimed at player, developers, and meta-commentary about the game in *Deadpool* (High Moon Studios, 2013).

5. See Conway (2011) and Kubiński (2016).

6. For detailed discussion on these two titles see, for example, Keogh (2013), de Wildt (2014), Fest (2016), and Jørgensen (2016).

7. For the further analysis of the game and the encounter, see for instance Keogh (2014), or Kubiński (2016).

8. They define these terms in the following way: "upkeying and downkeying as fruitful orientational metaphors describing one’s disposition within a frame: the more one upkeys, the more one commits to the role within the Game Event; the more one downkeys, the more one assumes disinterest in the focused encounter" (p. 77-78).

9. *Undertale* is a peculiar example as, despite incorporating certain elements that can be found in the other games, it does not follow the same structure closely: while it includes the all-knowing villain, and allows the player to interact with them as a character on their own, the protagonist remains oblivious of the Player and do not form attachment to them in the same way the other three titles not some VR games like *Moss* do.

10. At the moment of writing the article, *Glitched* is available as a demo with the release planned for 2020.

11. The obvious argument here can be made that the player always is engage in more than one action during play. While several games allow them to control more than one character—including paradoxical instances where they are each other’s opponents—a similar level of agency can be attributed to the control over the camera, menus, the HUD, etc., splitting the control over several objects.

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