

A Literary Excursion Into the Hidden (Fan) Fictional Worlds of Tetris, Starcraft, and Dreamfall

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss a part of participatory culture that so far has not received much attention in the academic world; it is the writing and reading of *game fan fiction*. The focus in this paper is on fan fiction, based on three different games that represent three different game genres: *Tetris*, *StarCraft* and *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey*. The aim is to advance our understanding of how players experience and understand the game environment, and promote further research interest in fan fiction based on computer games. We do this by discussing narrative elements in the above mentioned computer games, and the fan fiction that is based on them.

Author Keywords

Computer Games, Fan fiction, Narratology, Participatory Culture

INTRODUCTION

Narratives are a fundamental part of human thinking and one of the hallmarks of cultural development [11;6;3]. They are cultural artefacts (tools) that are central to teaching and learning behaviours, traditions, and history, among other things [16]. They also advance imagination and metaphoric thinking and allow the play with roles, rules, and routines. Children learn to use the narrative format preferred in their cultural community, and although narratives may change over time, they retain the central elements [ibid]. Narratives in fan fiction (other terms include fanfiction, fanfic or fic [8]) are cultural tools as well, tools that allow fans to learn about and participate in fan communities [4;10]. So far, however, we do not know much about these kinds of

cultural tools, aside from a few exceptions [e.g., 22], which provide the basis for this paper.

Many computer games such as action, shoot-'em-up, and adventure games contain strong narrative elements whereas games like *Tetris* [23] mostly can be found on the opposite end of the narrative spectrum [cf., 9;12]. This, however, does not prevent people from writing fan fiction about the adventures and feelings of *Tetris* blocks [27]. This begs the question: why do people choose to write fan fiction based on games with limited interactivity and non-existing storylines? It would seem to make much more sense if there actually were a backstory to a game, such as *Mortal Kombat* [15] or *StarCraft* [18].

Without doubt, the writing of fan fiction based on games raises important questions regarding the nature and meaning of game fan fiction, not only in comparison to fan fiction based on other kinds of media and source-material, but also to the games themselves. Is it, as Ryan [17] suggests, that "*fictional worlds* [e.g., in fan fiction] *become interactive and participatory in a much more imaginative way than in hypertext or even video games, even though the individual texts do not contain interactive devices*"? Also, what does fan fiction based on games tell us about the relation between game play and storytelling? It puts an interesting spin on the difficult relationship between ludologists and narratologists since it seems to move the actual activity of playing a game back into the narrative space, and also hands back the narrative tool to the player (or fan fiction writer). A lot of games are also very rich in visual quality, with a detailed and vibrant game environment, whereas the same game's characters often remain fairly simple and flat. The focus lies more on what a character can do within the

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game environment and less on its motivations and feelings. Game fan fiction, on the other hand, seems to take the opposite approach, putting much more emphasis on character-depth and development, as well as relations between characters, and less emphasis on the looks of the (game) environment inhabited by the characters. One of the questions here is to what extent and how peoples' perceptual experiences of the game world affect their narrative capacities [cf., 11;14]. Another question is what game fan fiction can tell us about the ways players handle character depth, or lack thereof, in games; spending a lot of time close to a fictional character might evoke underlying processes of identification and empathy with a character, something a game itself might not always fully provide.

AIM & APPROACH

Obviously, the questions raised above cannot be fully addressed here, given the space constraints. Instead this paper presents an initial exploratory study in which researchers with backgrounds in game studies, cognitive science, and literature science came together to approach this particular area of participatory culture. The intention is to advance our understanding of how players experience and understand the game environment, and promote further research interest in fan fiction based on computer games.

The stories chosen for our analysis all come from www.fanfiction.net, a popular website where people can post stories related to all forms of popular culture. We did not contact the writers to get permission to discuss their stories since fanfiction.net is a public space that is open to everyone who visits the site. Neither do we attempt to analyse or judge the writers' motivations and personal feelings; our focus is solely on the stories themselves. However, to not hurt the writers' feelings we decided not to include their pen names and the story titles in the conference proceedings; instead we use abbreviations of the writers' names and stories.¹

The stories analysed in this paper are based on three different games that represent three different, yet quite popular game genres: *puzzle games* (Tetris [23]), *strategy games* (StarCraft [18]), and *adventure games* (Dreamfall: The Longest Journey [7]). Fan fiction exists about all three games (game genres), with players telling stories that are about, or related to, their favourite game(s). So, the initial question is rather simple: What kind of stories do players choose to tell with their fan fiction?

¹ Those who would like to read the stories for themselves are welcome to contact the first author to get the direct links to the stories on fanfiction.net.

PUZZLE GAMES²

Tetris [23] is a popular game that is impossible to win, and yet it does not stop us from trying to create horizontal lines of blocks without any gaps. From a narrative point of view, no narrative is to be found in the game: no background story, no plot, no characters, just blocks that keep falling until we turn off the game. This, however, is not a good enough reason for people not to write fan fiction about it.

The starting point for writers is, obviously, the game, the genre and the game experience. However, the lack of dramatic structure and plot in the game leaves them with the freedom to not have to consider the question whether to accept the story line and the plot, or to reject it all together. This situation is also part of the explicit challenge for many of those writers. In some cases this freedom seems to lead to stories with rather weak links to the game, the content and the playing experience. For example, the setting and the characters of the eight-chapters long story WeBe by S is an outburst of dialogs between a number of characters that can only be described as surreal at best. This might also be the reason why the story can be found in the "Parody" category.

Stories that do relate to the game can be divided into two types, depending on whether the protagonist is a player of *Tetris* or becomes part of the game. In the first category, there are stories like T by MS, and JaL by R, where the player centered point of view forms the dramatic nucleus of these stories. For instance, the game's beginning is likened to the process of birth in JaL, and when "Game Over" flashes on the screen it means death has come to the player. A more elaborated narrative is presented in the versified story T, which puts emphasis on the stressfulness of playing the game; the harder and faster the game gets the more intense emotions the player experiences. In fact, it is a game addict's story that is being dramatized here. As the game becomes more difficult, sleep and social life take a backseat to the more pressing matter at hand – playing the game – up to the point where family and friends have to make an intervention. This part of the story is told entirely through flashback, which makes it clear that the player now is back in front of the screen, playing *Tetris* and ignoring the rest of the world. The social realism of the story is abandoned by the writer in the text's final six verses; the narrator compares the game with real life and comes to the conclusion that if life was more like *Tetris*, then work, relationships, and life itself would be much better. This ending could be the reason why the writer has put *Tetris* into the "Humor" category. However, considering the total

²The Tetris fan fiction discussed here can be found at [27].

content of the story, it could just as easily have been slotted into “Angst” or “Tragedy”.

Stories in which Tetris is viewed as a fictional world and where blocks become (main) characters appear to concentrate more on plot than on comparisons between the activity of playing *Tetris* and real life. There are stories where the mimetic narrating, in the shape of a narrator, is dominant, and there are others that are structured by dialogue. The latter type, like HIM by HH, T1 by K and T2 by VQA, consists almost entirely of dialogues, with only a few comments by the narrator or descriptions as in a stage play manuscript. Both T1 and T2 dramatize the game situation and humanize the blocks, building on a conflict between the blocks as they fall, collide and come in conflict with each other. In T2, the conflict is one of nationalities and misunderstandings due to different languages. In T2 there are also racial and gender complications, the story ending on a humorous note with an absurd twist, as in a Samuel Beckett play, when a message appears over the head of the disillusioned blocks: “Play again?”. It is obvious that in these stories the game of *Tetris* is an allegory for human life and behavior.

A more direct connection to human life is presented in HIM, where everything is turned upside down and a Tetris block plays a game of humans. The repetitive nature of the game (and/or of life) is the conclusion at the end of this story as well. Another game will be played and the humans will have to act the parts of blocks again and again. Some stories are more elaborated mimetically, coming closer to the narrating form of the traditional novel, for example BB by BL. BB is another example of a story where existential issues is the main motif and with an absurdist ending. The short period of time from the Tetris block's first conscious thoughts about who he is until he reaches the bottom of the game and seizes to exist has an intertextual reference in the passage from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* [2], where it is stated that Woman gives birth, squatting over the grave.

A final example of a more elaborated story about *Tetris* is SiB by S. The genre is stated as “Humor/Adventure”, and not only are the blocks involved in agonistic dialogue, the description of the environment in the game is a parody of environmental descriptions in novels, the first line sounding a lot like the kind of beginnings that Snoopy composes on top of his dog house: “It was a cold and frosty morning...”. There is also a twist in the story that has no equivalence in the other stories about *Tetris*. The threat of being extinguished pushes the main character, B, to take extreme measures. B jumps out of the game and into the reality of the player and tries to kill him before he gets the chance to turn of the computer; an action left uncompleted as the

story ends before B has bit through the skin over the player's jugular vein.

STRATEGY GAMES ³

StarCraft [18] is a real-time strategy game set in the 26th century in a far away galaxy that evolves around three different species – the Terrans, the Protoss, and the Zerg. The game's background story is, as told by Blizzard Entertainment on the official website:

In the distant future a small group of human exiles have been doomed to fight for survival on the edge of the galaxy. Through military strength, espionage and deceit, a unified Terran government has maintained an uneasy peace. As resources run short, however, these Confederate nations find themselves looking towards the rich worlds of their alien neighbors, the enigmatic Protoss. To further complicate matters, it seems that a previously unknown and deadly species known only as the Zerg has entered Protoss space and is destroying everything in its path. The time for war has come... [18]

The stories built on *StarCraft* are generally much longer and with more elaborated intrigues than the ones about *Tetris*. The presentation of the looks, psychological complexity, and feelings of the characters are very much in line with the complex narrative and elaborated characters in the game. Two stories that exemplify this are ReS by D and GU by TLZ. The stories differ from each other in many ways, but some features are common. The fighting scenes are central and the plot is central for moving the story forward. Another common feature is the detailed description of the main characters' looks, personalities and some psychological background to different kinds of behavior. In neither of these stories do reflections of life and death as motifs play any part. Although death comes to a large number of characters in both stories, it is not seen as a problem or anything to ponder. The game, and apparently therefore the stories, are built on the idea that losses are part of the fictional world, and not to be made into a problem.

In ReS the conflict lies between the commander of the troops that are ordered to protect an outpost against the rebels, and the corrupt governor, a greedy traitor who sells them out to the rebels. The plot is not very developed and the characters' reasons for actions are not complicated. Their appearances and the way they dress, reflect their personalities and makes it easy for the reader to recognize who is good and who is bad. The character GuS, for example, is described as being overweight, the colour of his face going from pale white to deep purple, depending on

³ The *StarCraft* fan fiction discussed here can be found at [26].

what feeling overwhelms him. Not only does he indulge in different vices, has no control over his feelings, he has also no esthetical sense, which is made clear in the way he dresses and the combination of colours. The main protagonist and the second in command, a female lieutenant, is the opposite of the governor. She has impeccable taste and controls her feelings, except for when duty calls. It is obvious that the intrigue, not moral or psychological complexity, is the focus of and the mechanism that drives the story forward towards the inevitable end, where treason and betrayal is punished. The middle part of ReS consists of a battle between the troops and the rebels. This part, with several shifts in point of view and turns before the battle is won, is a description of a battle in the game, depicted in words over several pages. It is obvious that this part is important to the story, even though it does not bring the plot forward. The battle scenes can be seen as a way for the writer to show his, or her, strategy skills within the game. This is also supported by no less than two footnotes to this episode of the story, where the writer hopes that the reader will appreciate the battle scenes, and asks for comments and responses to the writing.

There is no battle between forces in GU. The story is of another kind, with a plot more focused on the unit's individual characters and their psychological capabilities. The plot is not focused on solving a problem, such as to find out who the traitor is and to beat the rebel troops as in ReS. In this story the unit is discredited and the task is to clear its name, and for their new leader to gain acceptance as well as to become convinced that the members of the unit are top soldiers. This is being done during a mission that does not lead to battle, but to a chapter that describes how the unit makes its way through winding corridors in a building filled with armed enemies. The second part of the story puts the members of the unit in a different situation; they are taken hostage and being tortured, which leads to another type of storytelling than before. The story moves from the torture chamber to the rescue ship and back. Before the unit is freed there is, again, a battle scene, a duel between the ship sent to rescue the unit and the pirates that are holding them. The two stories set in the world of StarCraft are, in comparison to the stories built on *Tetris*, much more adapted to the science fiction genre and uses stereotypes in themes, motifs, characters etc., that readers of science fiction and viewers of, e.g., *Star Trek* [20], *Star Wars* [21], or *Stargate SG-1* [19] recognise. The form of the text, the genre, or the philosophical content is not as important or developed as are the plot and the battle or fighting scenes in the stories.

ADVENTURE GAMES⁴

Dreamfall [7] is the continuation of *The Longest Journey* [13], a game that has many devoted fans. Throughout the course of *Dreamfall*, the player takes on the role of three different characters – Zoë Castillo, April Ryan, and Kian. Below is the story that is given on the game's official website [7].

Zoë Castillo is about to get involved in a conspiracy that spans parallel worlds and hundreds of years.

Something is affecting our world: static interference disrupts technology, and it seems to be linked to a ghostly presence seen only by a few – a presence inhabiting a black house in a wintry landscape. As Zoë begins her search for a lost friend, she discovers that there is a magical world behind our own – and the search is now on for the one person who may help Zoë unravel the dangerous web she has become entangled in:

April Ryan.

The game ends with a cliffhanger, to many fans' dissatisfaction, and no follow-up game has yet been planned.

The way the game ends is a main reason for many writers to write fan fiction about *Dreamfall*, in addition to what some players perceived as character changes in the sequel. Two stories from fanfiction.net exemplify this. These are R by Q and ASH by Z. The two writers have used a preface to their stories in which they state their dissatisfaction with the dubious ending of *Dreamfall* and with the personality changes in the main character, April Ryan, in *Dreamfall* and in *The Longest Journey*. These writers do not take the story of the game or the fictional world it is set in as the starting point for an expansion of the world, the story, or the complexity of the characters. These writers are out to fix what they regard as flaws and mistakes in the story and in the presentation of the characters.

The first of the stories, *R*, uses the transition between two fictional levels to make the plot. The main character of the story is not one of the characters in *Dreamfall*, but the storywriter, Ragnar Tornquist. He is threatened by one of the main characters in the game, the angel Kian, who has been able to cross the border between game and reality to threaten Tornquist into writing a sequel to *Dreamfall*, a sequel where the heroine April is saved from the imminent death she is facing at the end of *Dreamfall*, a death that is not 100% certain. Much of the dialogue between Tornquist and Kian revolves around how April might have survived or how to have her reborn without braking the logic and

⁴The discussion contains spoilers about *Dreamfall* [7]. Proceed at own risk. The fan fiction discussed here can be found at [25].

physical laws of *Dreamfall's* universe. The narrative meta leaps – where a fictional figure that Tornquist has created, transcends the fictional boundaries and enters his creator's reality – is repeatedly commented upon, often in humorous ways. Kian's capability to move from one fictional level to another is explained, which is also done towards the end of the story when Tornquist is thrown in to the fiction of *Dreamfall*. When the story R has reached its end, a plausible explanation to why April is not dead has been delivered. Tornquist has also written an alternative end and a sequel to *Dreamfall* (this is however turned down by the production company) and he is incarcerated in a prison in the world of *Dreamfall*.

The second story, ASH, is also introduced with a preface. It states that the reason for writing the story is that the writer sees a change in the character April Ryan's personality in the last parts of the game. This is discussed, exemplified and explained in the story. There are no shifts between different levels of fiction in this story. However, the temporal order of the story in the game is cut up since the narrator, April Ryan, is positioned outside the actions of the game's story. April is confronted with her dark twin, and together they look at scenes from *Dreamfall*, scenes where April acts and interacts with other characters in a fashion that is uncharacteristic for her. The plot and the structure of the narrative resemble Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* [5], with a scent of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [24]. In the dramatic end, the dark side of April dissolves and April makes peace with herself. Her actions in the game have been explained and she is whole again.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

No matter the amount of backstory in a game, or lack thereof, it is very likely that there is fan fiction written about it. This is nicely illustrated by *Tetris*, a game with no story or plot whatsoever. Players, it seems, do enjoy complex backstories, even if it means that they have to tell them themselves. This leaves us, as researchers, with the question what we can make of all of this.

According to Grodal [9], the act of agency evokes emotional reactions which correspond to how viewers of a given situation choose a certain type of fiction: “*I want to see something funny, or something passionate, or something that terrifies me*” (p.163). This might explain, e.g., why players who were dissatisfied with the ending of *Dreamfall* decided to channel their disappointment in a creative way, i.e., why they wrote fan fiction related to the game's dubious ending. However, this does not differ much from fan fiction based on other source material, because

people try all the time to “fix” with their stories what they consider flaws in their favourite movie or TV show. In the case of *Tetris* fan fiction, on the other hand, the writing of it can be seen more as a (fun) game in itself, with players trying to breathe life and agency into a bunch of blocks of mixed shape. A common aspect in all game based fan fiction is the fact that the game environment is a given factor; writers don't bother much with rich descriptions. Instead, the focus is on character development and player experiences. The message to potential readers is, in other words, a very clear one: If you don't know the game, then don't read my stories; they won't make any sense to you.

As already mentioned, the material presented here is the result of an initial study; naturally, this opens up more questions than it provides answers. At this point we only know for sure that there is a larger amount of game based fan fiction out there, and that players write it for various reasons in many creative ways. Areas of future research should consider fan fiction in relation to the games it is based on in a more in-depth manner. Issues to look into are, for instance; the very process by which writers become participants of game fanfiction culture – how do they acquire the literacy required in this specific culture?; what emotions, and (aspects of) chronotopes [1] (interdependent elements of time and space) from a specific game are used in the writing, and what does that tell us about the players' play experiences and world views? There are also many other fan fiction sites on the Internet, besides fanfiction.net, websites that allow for more social-networking activities, and we should not underestimate how discussions on player forums and in other communities affect the writing of game-related stories. Rather, such websites offer yet another opportunity to learn more about game fan fiction.

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