PLAYING FICTION-GAMES WITH FICTIONAL GAMES
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This is a pre-print draft of the foreword which appears in Gualeni, S. & Fassone, R. (2022), Fictional Games: A Philosophy of Worldbuilding and Imaginary Play, *Bloomsbury Academic, pp. ix-xiv.*

In Olga Tokarczuk's 1996 novel *Primeval and Other Times,* Squire Popielski, a wealthy landowner in the titular village that is "the place at the centre of the universe" (2010, 9), falls into a profound depression. It is 1932, and he is thirty-eight years old, has lost his religious faith, grown disillusioned with the political promise of the newly-independent Polish nation, and been abandoned by his artist lover. In his despondency, he is visited by a rabbi, to whom he poses three questions: "Where did I come from?", "What can a person actually know?", and "What should a person achieve, how should he live, what should he do, and what not?" (ibid., 75-76). By way of an answer to these questions, and a fourth that the rabbi adds to the list – "Where are we heading? What is the goal of time?" – he receives an old wooden box. Inside are the components of a mysterious game – a complex circular labyrinth printed on cloth, a set of brass pieces representing people, animals and objects, an eight-sided die, and a book of instructions labelled *Ignis fatuus, or an instructive game for one player.*

The Game takes over the Squire's life. He loses interest in his family and business concerns, and only notices the German soldiers who come to occupy the village during the Second World War as an unwelcome distraction. As the novel proceeds, and we learn of the events that befall Primeval and its inhabitants over the course of the upheavals and tragedies of the twentieth century, the Game, and the Squire's playing of it, remains a vital element, interwoven with the novel's many other strands and reflecting the personal and national histories we bear witness to. In this way, *Primeval and Other Times* can be spoken of in relation to numerous other works of fiction – novels, stories, films, TV shows, and even digital games – in which fictional games occupy a significant narrative or thematic role, so much so that, in many cases – as in Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game,* in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games,* or in A. S. Byatt's 1967 novel or David Fincher's 1997 film, both simply called *The Game* – these fictional games occupy a pivotal position reflected in the work's title.

Given this preponderance of examples, it is somewhat surprising that, as Stefano Gualeni and Riccardo Fassone observe in this book, there has been very little sustained critical engagement with fictional games. It is precisely this lack that *Fictional Games* sets out to tackle, and it does so with aplomb. Gualeni and Fassone's achievement, I would argue, is twofold. Firstly – a necessary, foundational contribution in a field so underexplored – they offer a wide-ranging survey of fictional games across literature, cinema, TV and digital games. Though the book does not aim for encyclopaedic exhaustiveness, the appendix, which lists the ninety-one fictional games covered in the book, might well represent the first available transmedial *corpus* of fictional games, providing the reader with a rich whistle-stop tour of fictional games in all their variety, and the scholar with an invaluable resource for any future studies on fictional games.

As significant a contribution as this is, the charting of this corpus, of course, is only the first step for Gualeni and Fassone's project. Their main aim in this book is to delve into the question of the significance of these fictional games. Again, for a work that tackles a relatively unexplored domain, this is another necessary move: a work like this needs to answer the question, *why is it worth paying attention to fictional games? Fictional Games* addresses this question insightfully and incisively, making a case for the polyvalence of the games we encounter in works of fiction. Different chapters explore the significance of fictional games as embodiments, and representations, of the ideological structures of the societies in which they are played, as spaces of utopian possibility that afford resistance to, and transgression of, those same ideological structures, as deceptions or hallucinations

that blur the distinction between reality and representation (and between multiple levels of representation), and as contexts for transcendental possibility.

As the field of study requires, Gualeni and Fassone's approach is inherently multidisciplinary, being informed by game studies, literary theory, media studies, cultural studies, and philosophy, among others. Given the focus on games, not to mention the authors' previous work, it is hardly surprising that the book's theoretical foundations delve most deeply into game studies. Here, though, a crucial question arises. One of the most enduring tenets in the field of game studies has been the idea that the game scholar needs to be an engaged player-researcher (Aarseth 2003), and that the perspective which is most fundamental to understanding the significance of a game is that of "the game as played, as referring to the object of study for game studies from the player's perspective" (Leino 2009, 6). This has been challenged from a number of directions, notably through examinations of zero-player or idle games (Fizek 2018) and the development of posthumanist, relational understandings of gameplay (Janik 2018), both of which decentre the player from the experience and meaning of the game. Nonetheless, the difficulty remains: how does one develop a critical and analytical perspective on games that are – by definition, as Gualeni and Fassone point out – unplayable?

Their response is to thematize the unplayability of fictional games, making their incompleteness and unavailability to player experience an intrinsic aspect of their effect, rather than a limitation to be overcome. This is an approach which aligns well with the second main theoretical foundation of the book – for the intersection of games, play and fiction – particularly literary fiction – is not entirely untrodden academic ground. Patricia Waugh notes that the idea that the creative activity of art is inherently playful – that, say, a work of fiction is the outcome of an imaginative game played by its creator – is an established one (1984, 34). Similarly, in philosophy, Hans-Georg Gadamer claims that the work of art is the "transformation into structure" of the free movement of play (2013, 114). To take one example of this conventional idea of the process of imaginative artistic creation as a game, Christopher Nash's appositely-titled literary-theoretical work *World-Games* (1987) describes the fiction-games (as opposed to fictional games) involved in the creation of "anti-realist" works of fiction, whether in the neocosmic vein (fiction-games that lead to the formation of fictional worlds that are coherent but diverge from representing the world we perceive as actual) or in the anticosmic one (fiction-games that reveal the artifice of, and destabilise, fictional worlds).

The foregrounding of fictional games within works of fiction, then, can be understood as a *mise en abyme* of the process of imaginative creation, a text-within-a-text or a world-within-a-world, a recursion into a second nested layer of fictionality or representation that constitutes a "laying bare of the rules of the game" (Waugh 1984, 41). Gualeni and Fassone are attuned to this, paying special attention to the meta-reflexive qualities of fictional games – the way they can lead us back to thinking about games, play, representation and fictionality, by foregrounding their complex interweaving within the texts and the fictional worlds they are contained in. However – as we have already mentioned – fictional games are, by necessity, incompletely specified, and unattainable. Like the verbal descriptions of the films of Hector Mann in Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions* (2002), or the "Navidson Record" videotape in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), what we have is the symbol of an unreachable original, the sign of an absence that haunts the text.

This is very evidently the case in *Primeval and Other Times.* As readers of Tokarczuk's novel, we learn something of the Game throughout the course of the novel – but not enough for us to be able to recreate and play it for ourselves. We learn the labyrinth consists of eight concentric circles, with each circle having double the number of exits to the next circle out as the one before it had, so that the first circle has one exit to the second circle, the second circle has two exits to the third, and so on, until the player arrives at the eight circle, which has one hundred and twenty-eight exits out of the

labyrinth. We know that each circle represents a new attempt at creation by an increasingly exhausted and dispirited God, and that, as such, the Game represents the cosmology of a tired universe in which the tragedies piled up by Walter Benjamin's Angel of History (2003, 392) are the signs of an inevitable decline, as God withdraws further and further from His creation. We know that the boundaries between the Game and the outside world are blurred, or perhaps that the Game expands to incorporate the entirety of the world, so that, in one instance, Squire Popielski cannot proceed until he has a dream of being a dog, and, on another instance, the arrival of officials from the newly-installed post-war district administration to discuss the nationalisation of his properties appears to satisfy the conditions for him to move on to the next square.

The Game, then, is as vast as the world, containing an entire cosmology in miniature; at the same time, it is as small as the contents of one person's consciousness. It constitutes an example of what Waugh termed the 'black boxes' so prevalent in postmodernist fiction (1984, 39), an apparent solution to the recursion of meaning and signification that, however, is swallowed up by the absent centre of the novel's fiction-game: as readers, we can never be privy to the metaphysical revelation Squire Popielski receives from the Game. In fact, the inaccessibility of the Game's answer to all of the novel's questions is evident: even within the novel's fictional world, it constitutes a private obsession for one single character in a highly multivocal novel. After Squire Popielski's death, his family find the components of the Game in a drawer, and react with sheer incomprehension at the idea that this sparse collection of junk represents their elderly relative's decades-long obsession. The Game, then, becomes the physical token of an unreachable, solipsistic interiority, as private and inscrutable as the roughly-made crucifix clasped in Sebastião Rodrigues's hand as he is cremated at the end of the Martin Scorsese film *Silence* (2016), representing the faith he kept secret for decades – or, more to the point, Cassandra's papers locked in a trunk at the end of Byatt's aforementioned *The Game.*
In this way, the Game in *Primeval and Other Times* reflects, in its multi-faceted, ambivalent significance, and in its very inaccessibility, the range of meanings that fictional games accrue, as meta-reflexive textual constructs. Accordingly, over the course of *Fictional Games,* we encounter, among many others:

- games whose rule-structures codify the ideological structures of the society that produced them, making visible those higher-level structures in all their artificiality and – often – their cruel arbitrariness;

- games that present themselves as hermetic systems embodying an occult metaphysical understanding of reality, thereby threatening the stability of the dominant reality-systems of science, religion, history and politics, resulting in an overdetermination of meaning in which no reality-system can appear definitive or comprehensive;

- games that expand and blur the boundary between themselves and the world, incorporating more and more elements into their own system until the map becomes the territory, or the territory becomes the map, and the world is revealed as a great game – in all its ludic arbitrariness, but, at the same time, in the rigidity of its predetermined order;

- and games that speak to the unattainable centre of meaning of the individual human consciousness, that embody private worlds of imagination and obsession, that are the trace of the separation between interior and exterior worlds.

All of this conceptual and thematic breadth is what Gualeni and Fassone take up as their remit with *Fictional Games.* I consider it a mark of their success that this book, in shining a light on a hitherto underexamined field, invites – even calls out for – further studies that can use the ideas and insights developed herein as a springboard for deeper dives into individual fictional games, for even

more wide-ranging surveys, or for unpacking even more tropes and meanings in fictional games. However, even if such future work fails to materialize, we are still left with this remarkable study as an invaluable resource for tracing the elusive meanings, and unpacking the actual significances, of fictional games. *Why is it worth paying attention to fictional games?* Read on, and find out.

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