

RULES AND FICTION

Rules and fiction interact, compete, and complement each other. A video game may project a world and the game may be played in only a part of this fictional world. Examining a number of game examples in detail, it turns out that fiction in video games plays an important role in making the player understand the rules of the game. A statement about a fictional character in a game is *half-real*, since it may describe both a fictional entity and the actual rules of a game.

In the game design process, the game designer must select which aspects of the fictional world to actually implement in the game rules. The player then experiences the game as a two-way process where the fiction of the game cues him or her into understanding the rules of the game, and, again, the rules can cue the player to imagine the fictional world of the game.

Rules and fictions can rarely match completely; there are many examples of jarring mismatches between them. It is therefore tempting to describe their relation as inherently problematic, but when rules and fictions do not match perfectly it can still generate a *positive* effect, working as a way of playing with the player's expectations, as a way of creating parody, and finally as a way of foregrounding the game as a real-world activity.

However, space in games is a special case. The level design of a game world can present a fictional world *and* determine what players can and cannot do at the same time. In this way, space in games can work as a combination of rules and fiction.

With the ideas developed throughout the book, I will finally consider what a game *means*.

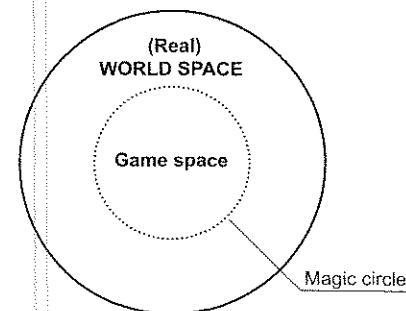
World Space and Game Space

In the introduction, I mentioned Roger Caillois's empirically incorrect claim that games are *either* ruled *or* make-believe. Let us revisit his argument:

Despite the assertion's paradoxical character, I will state that in this instance the fiction, the sentiment of *as if* replaces and performs the same function as do rules. Rules themselves create fictions. The one who plays chess, prisoner's base, polo, or baccara, by the very fact of complying with their respective rules, is separated from real life where there is no activity that literally corresponds to any of these games. That is why chess, prisoner's base, polo, and baccara are played *for real*. *As if* is not necessary. (Caillois 1961, 8)

While his conclusion is incorrect, Caillois does point to an interesting similarity between rules and fiction in that both contain an element of separation from the rest of the world. Rules separate the game from the rest of the world by carving out an area where the rules apply; fiction projects a world different from the real world. The space of a game is *part of* the world in which it is played, but the space of a fiction is *outside* the world from which it is created.

Building on Johan Huizinga, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman have used the term *magic circle* to describe the border between the context in which a game is played and what is outside that context: "The term is used here as shorthand for the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game.... As a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world.... In a very basic sense, the magic circle is where the game takes place" (2004, 95). Soccer is played within a designated playing field; a board game only takes place on the board. This can be expanded to provide a more general description of the relation between the space in which a game is played and the space of the world around it. In sports or board games, *the game space* is a subset of the space of the world: The space in which the game takes place is a subset of the larger world, and a magic circle delineates the bounds of the game (figure 5.1). When a ball game has a rule prescribing that the game stops if the ball leaves the playing field, this relates to the border between game space and world space. But in video games, the magic circle is quite

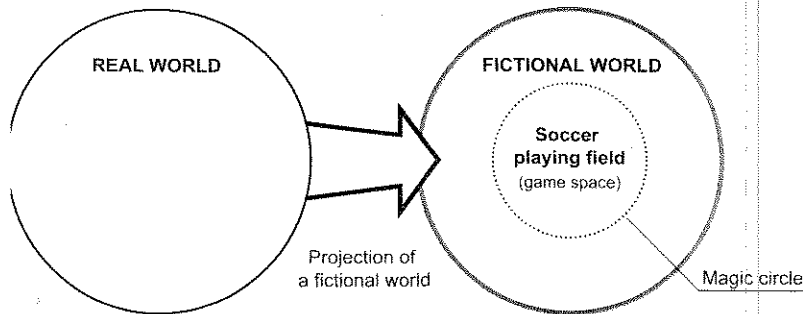


| Figure 5.1 |

A physical game (such as soccer): The game space is a subset of the space of the real world.

well defined since a video game only takes place on the screen and using the input devices (mouse, keyboard, controllers), rather than in the rest of the world; hence there is no "ball" that can be out of bounds.¹

In a computerized soccer game such as *FIFA 2002*, the game is delineated by the screen and input devices, but the game itself projects a fictional world quite similar to the real world of FIFA world cups, inside which a game space is delineated by a magic circle and a soccer game is played (figure 5.2). This is typical of sports adapted to video games (and many other video games): A fictional world is projected and a game is played in a part of that fictional world. Since it adds meaning to a game to place it inside a larger fictional world, this is a common way of constructing a game. The simplest setup is to claim that the series of rounds that make up the individual game are part of a tournament. This is the case in *Unreal Tournament* and *Tekken 4* (Namco 2002). The relationship between game space and world space becomes more interesting in games with more elaborate fictional worlds, where the end of the game space has to be marked in more subtle ways than by using a white line or a wall. In *Battlefield 1942*, the player approaching the edge of the game space is informed by a textual message, "Warning! You are leaving combat area. Deserters will be shot." This is known as *invisible walls*: The fiction gives no clue that the world ends, but for no apparent reason, the game space ends. When the game magazine *Edge* reviewed Shigeru Miyamoto's game *Super*



| Figure 5.2 |

FIFA 2002 projects a fictional world, with a playing field on which soccer is played.

Mario Sunshine, disappointment was high since the game in this area fell short of its predecessor, *Super Mario 64*:

[In *Super Mario 64*] There was always somewhere to go, always something to do; levels thrilled and baffled in equal measure; there were tiny polished touches that you might not discover for days, months, years. So lucid and solid, too. No obvious invisible walls.

Sunshine begins on an island, and the island is surrounded by invisible walls. There are more around the island's central hub, the town and in each of the seven worlds that lead off it. That is disconcerting, unnerving in the follow-up to a game that used coherence as one of its central tenets. (Edge 2002, 80)

It is a hallmark of a coherent world game that the bounds of the game space are reasonably motivated by the fictional world: *Grand Theft Auto III* has a very elegant solution, where the player is initially stuck on an island whose bridge to the mainland was destroyed when the player was freed from a prison transport in the beginning of the game. It is only when the player has solved a number of tasks that the bridge is reopened and the second and third islands become accessible.

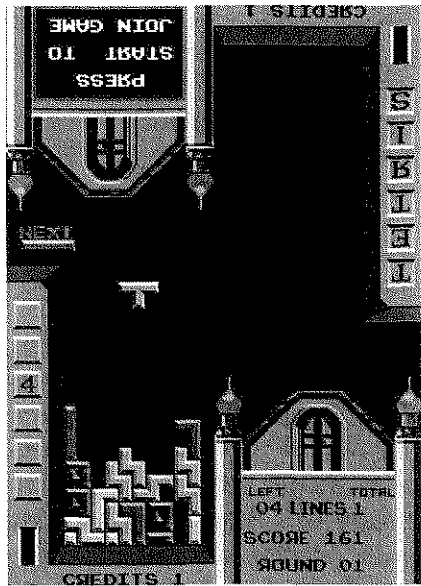
One type of incoherent world game is the game with several rounds which have no clear connection. This covers *Pengo* (chapter 4) and the newer game of *Counter-Strike* where two teams compete in a number of

ontologically unconnected fictional worlds. In these games, the magic circle is inverted, and the space in which the game is played becomes larger than the space of the world in which it is played. The entire game becomes a superset of world space, and a series of fictional world spaces with magic circles inside are created and deleted during the course of the game.

Half-Real Games

In addition to containing a fictional space, the fictional world also influences the players' understanding of the game rules. Let us examine the following statement: "Hamlet is Prince of Denmark." It is a philosophical problem whether this statement is true or not (Pavel 1985, 13–17). On the one hand, there is no real person called Hamlet who is Prince of Denmark. On the other hand, it is more correct to say that Hamlet is Prince of Denmark than to say that he works as a banker. That is, Shakespeare's play describes a fictional world that does not actually exist, but in which there is a character by the name of Hamlet who is Prince of Denmark. "Hamlet is Prince of Denmark" is true in the fictional world that the play creates, and we normally accept the statement "Hamlet is Prince of Denmark" because we take it to refer to the possible world of the play. Now consider this statement: "Tennis is a game where two people hit a ball using a racket." This statement is true in the normal sense: It is about the real world, and it describes how the game of tennis is actually played. Let us then look at a computer game, *Tetris*, in figure 5.3. We can make the following statement about *Tetris*: "In *Tetris*, when you have covered an entire row, it disappears." This is a statement about the real world much like the previous statement about tennis. The rules of *Tetris* are not physical but programmed; but this does not change the fact that it is a verifiable statement about the real world. Looking at *Tekken 3* (figure 5.4), a game that is not abstract, consider the statement: "Eddy Gordo is Brazilian and fights using the martial art of capoeira." Is this true? In this case, we have to combine the question about Hamlet with the question about the rules of tennis:

1. There is no real-world person called *Eddy Gordo*, but in the *fictional world* of *Tekken 3*, there is a person by the name of Eddy Gordo who fights using the martial art of capoeira.

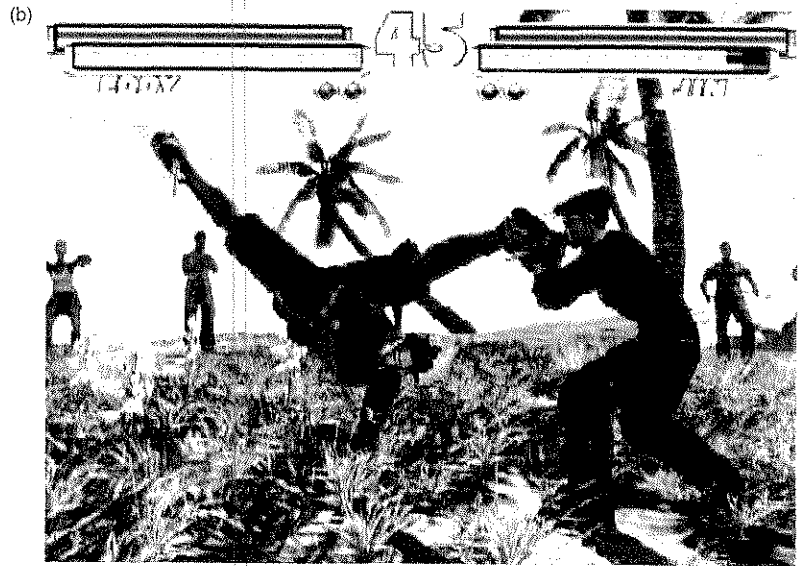


| Figure 5.3 |
Tetris (Atari 1986).

2. *And:* In the real world, it is factually true that you can choose Eddy in *Tekken 3*, and that you can control the character of Eddy so that he attacks his opponent using capoeira moves.

The first point looks at *Tekken 3 as fiction*; the second point looks at *Tekken 3 as real activity*. The description of the fictional character of Eddy *also* describes the real-world fact that having selected that character in *Tekken 3* gives the player the option of performing a number of special moves. *That Eddy Gordo fights using capoeira moves describes the fictional world of the game, and it describes the real rules of the game.*

The fictional world of a game strongly depends on the real world in order to exist, and the fictional world cues the player into making assumptions about the real world in which the player plays a game.



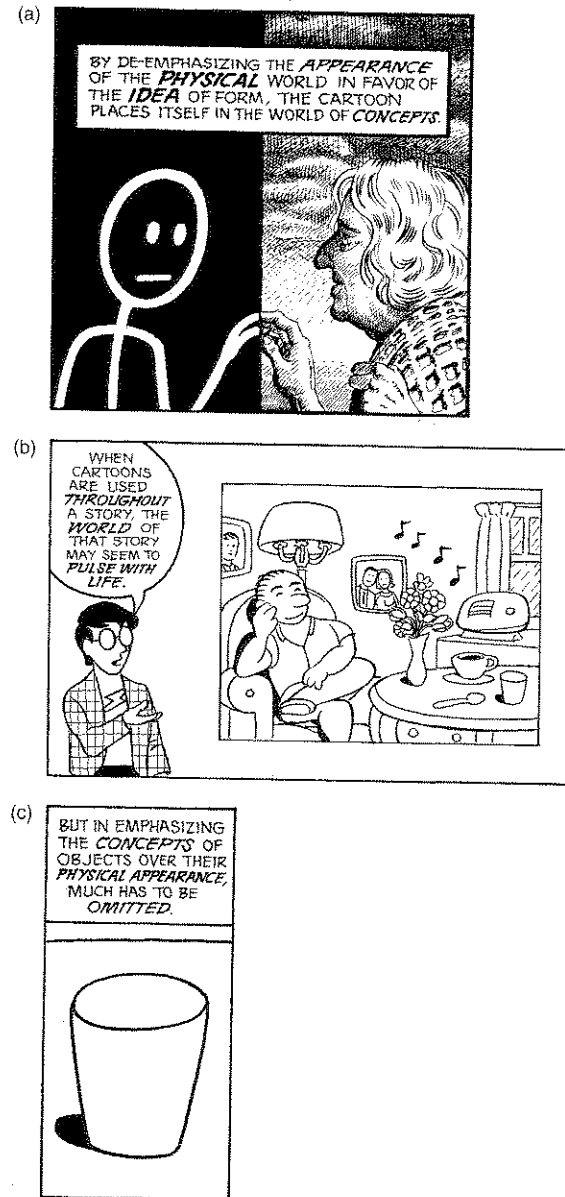
| Figure 5.4 |
Tekken 3 (Namco 2000): Eddy Gordo fights using capoeira.

Implementing a Fictional World: Stylized Simulations

On a basic level, a game with a fictional world can be seen as a simulation, as the implementation of a fictional world in the rules of a game. A racing game is a simulation of racing; *FIFA 2002* is a simulation of soccer. Simulation can have varying degrees of fidelity to what is being simulated.² *Tekken 3* simulates fighting in general and capoeira with the character of Eddy. A practitioner of capoeira, however, would undoubtedly feel that the game was an extreme simplification. Countless moves have been omitted, and the available moves have been simplified and are only available as either/or options: perform a handstand or do not perform a handstand. Here, capoeira has lost much of its expressive potential. *Tekken 3* is a very imprecise and low-fidelity simulation of capoeira.

If we assumed that the quality of a game hinged on its degree of realism and the detail of its simulation of the real world, this would be a serious detriment to the experience of playing *Tekken 3*. Another example of a low-fidelity simulation is when the player enters a car in *Grand Theft Auto III*. Simply being near the car and pressing Δ on the Playstation 2 controller makes the protagonist run to the nearest car door, open the door, remove any person in the car, get in, and close the door. This is also a very low-fidelity simulation: In real life, we can enter a car in any number of different ways. But unlike in the capoeira example, we are unlikely to feel any significant loss here, since entering a car is generally not considered a very interesting activity. Simplification and stylization can be found in most games with fictional worlds. The player cannot lie down, do handstands, or simply leave the playing field in *FIFA 2002* or *Virtua Tennis*. Game fictions and rules are not perfect and complete simulations of the real world; they are flickering and provisional by nature. But stylization is an expressive device that games can use.

In his seminal book, *Understanding Comics* (1993), Scott McCloud demonstrates the expressiveness of simplification in comics (figure 5.5). The drawing of the cup in McCloud's example represents not as much a cup as the *idea* of a cup. By removing detail, the comic appears closer to the world of concepts than to the minute details of the real world. This provides a more positive account of what simplification provides: By removing detail from the source domain, the game focuses on a specific *idea* of what the game is about such as capoeira, soccer, tennis, driving



| Figure 5.5 |
 "By de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts" (McCloud 1993: 41).

cars. A game does not as much attempt to implement the real world activity as it attempts to implement a specific stylized *concept* of a real-world activity. The tennis and soccer games implement only what are considered interesting core parts of the real-world game; since entering a car is ultimately an uninteresting detail in the larger world of *Grand Theft Auto III*, the simulation of that activity is reduced to the pressing of one button.

Even though the actual design and development of a game are also subject to financial and time constraints, this goes to show how games are often *stylized simulations*; developed not just for fidelity to their source domain, but for aesthetic purposes. These are *adaptations* of elements of the real world. The simulation is oriented toward the perceived interesting aspects of soccer, tennis, or being a criminal in a contemporary city. In the case of sports games, the fact that sports are typically experienced on television also shapes the game: Most sports games contain slow-motion replays of the most dramatic moments in the game. The stylization of a simulation is, of course, a subjective art that must take into account common perceptions of whatever domain is being simulated.³ *Virtua Tennis* simulates lobs, smashes, and other dramatic aspects of tennis, whereas tennis elbow and broken rackets are omitted. In many strategy games, humans pop into existence within a few seconds; in *Age of Empires II*, a villager can be created at the click of a button (figure 5.6).

To Win the Sword Fight, Solve the Puzzle: Difficulty Metaphors

Many aspects of computer-based games are not just simplifications of real-world activity, but something quite different. In the tennis game *Top Spin* (Power and Magic 2004), a perfect serve must be performed by pressing the front right controller button and releasing it at the precise time when the bouncing yellow mark is in the middle of the serve indicator (figure 5.7). What is the connection between serving in real tennis, throwing the ball into the air, twisting your body to achieve maximum power while retaining enough control to direct the ball to the right position on the other side of the net, and pressing and releasing the front right button on the Xbox controller at the right moment? The basic answer seems to be that both tasks are *difficult*: instead of performing a serve by mimicking the actual tennis activity, the serve has been replaced by another difficult



| Figure 5.6 |

Age of Empires II (Ensemble Studios 1999): Create a villager by clicking a button.

task. The video game activity is a metaphor for the tennis activity. *Puzzle Pirates* (Three Rings Design 2003) works explicitly with this type of metaphorical substitution. Challenging another player to a sword duel leads to a two-player duel in a puzzle game. This is a duel of sorts, but the activity bears no relation to what the fictional setting of the game would lead us to expect. Likewise, when being on board a ship, the task of bilge pumping turns out to be the playing of another action puzzle (figure 5.8).

Puzzle Pirates stands out because it foregrounds how video games often substitute one difficult task for another. Again, this does not mean that the in-game fictional task is always replaced by arbitrary real-world tasks that the player has to perform. It simply means that in games that emphasize a fictional world, there has to be a metaphorical substitution between the player's real-world activity and the in-game activity performed.

Fiction Cuing Rules and Rules Cuing Fiction

While the *design* of a game can work by choosing a domain or fictional setting and then subjectively designing rules to implement that domain, the player of a video game experiences this in an inverted way, where the representation and fictional world presented by the game cue the player into making assumptions about the rules of the game. In a computerized soccer game, the fictional world of the game will cue the player to assume that the game implements whatever concept the player has of soccer, including the normal soccer rules. An object that looks like a car is likely to be drivable. The even marginally experienced player is additionally likely to be aware that some aspects of the fictional world may not be implemented in the rules, and that generally the rules of a game are selective stylizations of the domain they are supposed to simulate. As such, the player is unlikely to expect to be able to leave the playing field in *FIFA 2002* or to disassemble a car for spare parts in *Grand Theft Auto III*. Only selected aspects of our assumptions about the fictional world are actually implemented in the game: The player does not have to eat; the car never runs out of gas.⁴

The vast majority of video games present fictional worlds in one way or another, whereas the vast majority of traditional non-electronic games are abstract. This is not, however, a sufficient description of this split—the majority of commercial board games are also representational (this may be because it is easier to market a representational game)—among other reasons because the potential buyer cannot possibly predict the gameplay of a game simply by reading the rules. In video games, the rules are initially hidden from the player—this means that the player is more likely to use the game world to make inferences about the rules. In fact, the player may need a fictional game world to understand the rules. In an article discussing their rhythm game *Amplitude* (Harmonix 2003) and its predecessor *Frequency* (Harmonix 2001), Greg Lopiccolo and Alex Rigopulos explain how the introduction of recognizable elements can help the player understand the rules of the game (figure 5.9):

To make sure new players could get the feel of the game right away, we redesigned the interface in a number of ways, introducing a spaceship that the players steer to shoot lasers at targets. This way, when a prospective player

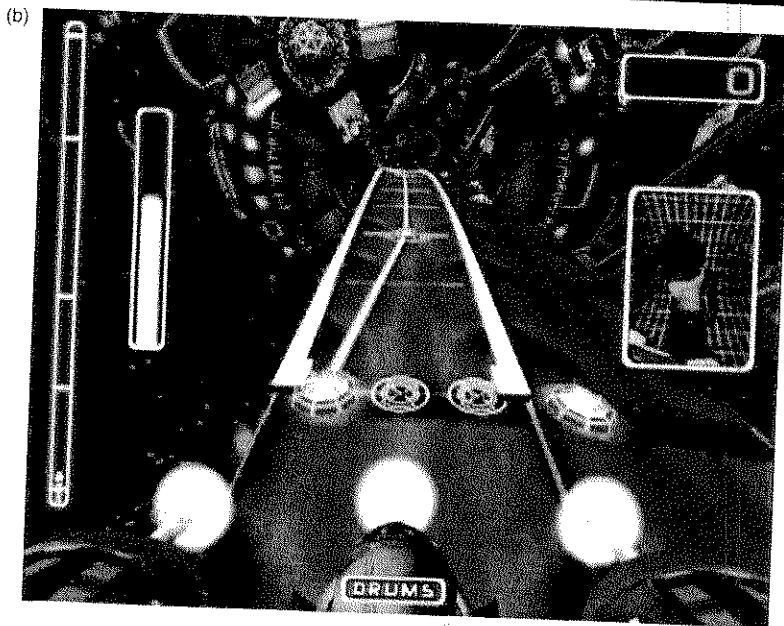
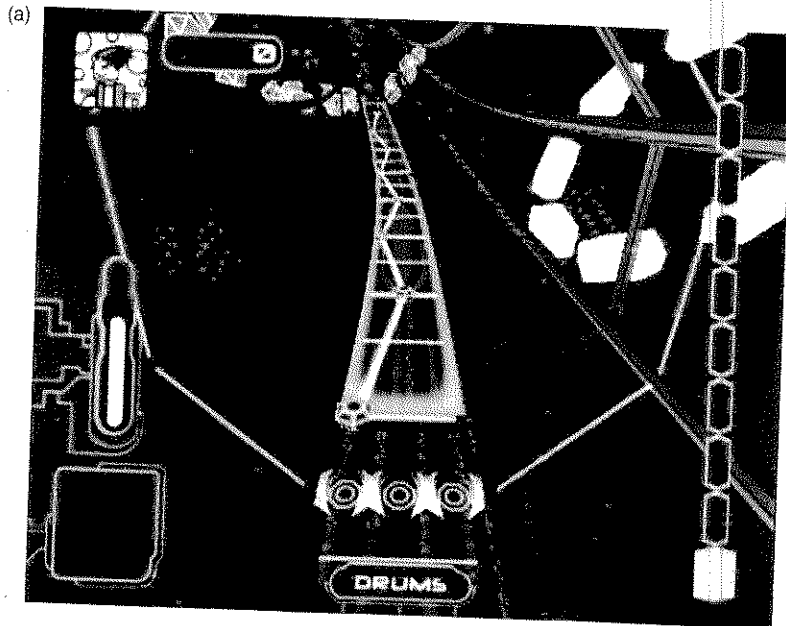
sees a screenshot of *Amplitude*, or watches someone else play the game, he or she immediately reacts. “Oh, I get it. I’m, supposed to shoot things.”

Interestingly, this interface change really only affects players for the first few moments they play. Thereafter, the player’s attention ends up focused on the same three little target spots that were the center of the interface in *Frequency*. But the key point here is that those first few moments are absolutely crucial for luring in the new player. (Lopiccolo and Rigopulos 2003, 43)

Even though fiction and rules are formally separable, the player’s experience of the game is shaped by both. The fictional world of a game can cue the player into making assumptions about the game rules: In a game with a first-person perspective, the player facing evil-looking monsters is likely to assume that the monsters are to be avoided or possibly destroyed. If the images of the monsters were replaced by something benign, perhaps large flowers, the player will likely make different assumptions about the rules of the game. It is not just the graphical representation, but also the rules of the game that project the fictional world. The way a given object or character behaves will characterize it *as a fictional object*; the rules that the player deduces from the fiction and from the experience of the playing of the game will also cue him or her into imagining a fictional world.⁵

Conflicts between Rules and Fictions: The Good and the Bad

In previous writings, I have assumed that the incongruence between rules and fiction was an insurmountable obstacle for games (or game scholars) wanting to emphasize games as fictional worlds (Juul 1998, 1999). A game may exhibit the problem that the rules and the representation do not match; the representation may give the players reason to make assumptions about the rules that turn out to be false; and the representation may fail to give the player important information. There are certainly many examples of such problematic relationships between rules and fiction. *Myst*, for example, is extremely inconsistent in implementing the fictional world in the rules. Here, the player can manipulate the switch, but the ship model cannot be touched (figure 5.10). This is a problem many games exhibit, but it especially happens in the adventure game genre since the progression structure means that all possible interactions in the game



| Figure 5.9 |

Frequency (Harmonix 2001) and *Amplitude* (Harmonix 2003): Identical rules, but easier to grasp with a spaceship metaphor.

have to be explicitly programmed, and implementing even the most obvious interactions requires more resources than are available for the development of the game. In text-based adventure games, the mismatches can be even more jarring, such as in this example from *Witness* (Infocom 1983):

>wait

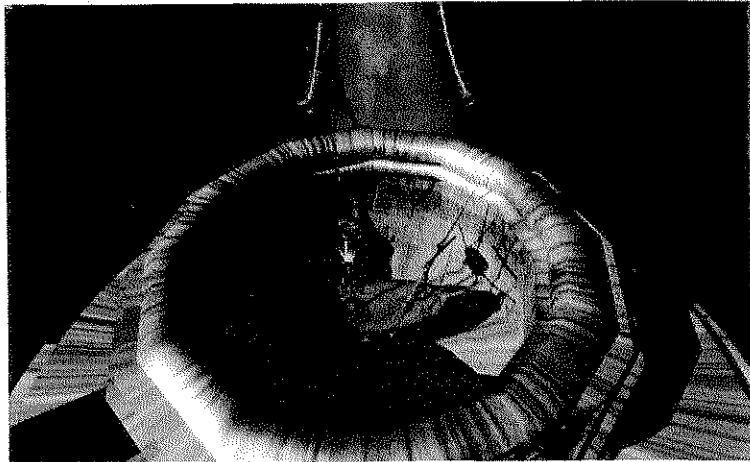
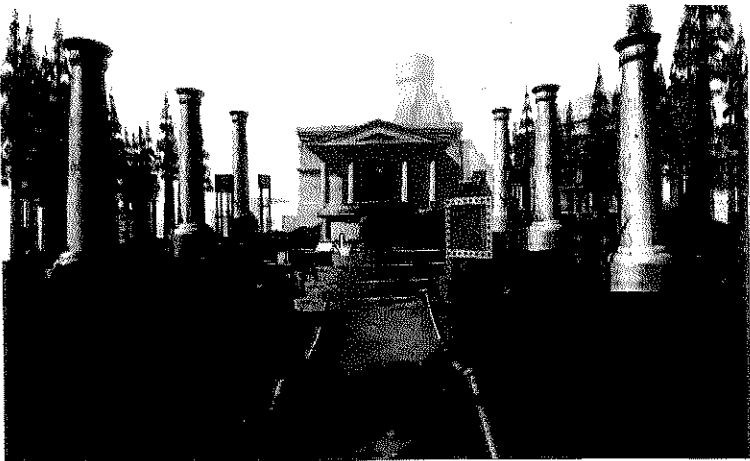
The rain is falling heavily now.

>drink rain

(Sorry, but the program doesn't recognize the word "rain.")

In *Myst* and *Witness*, the fictional world gives the impression that many things are possible that are not implemented in the rules. The reverse case is when the rules allow for actions that the fictional world does not cue the player into expecting. Many first-person shooters of the late 1990s featured wooden crates that turned out to contain medical kits and other items that the player could pick up. For an inexperienced player, this is nonsensical and not cued by the representation: Only the trained player knowing the conventions of the game genre would understand it.

In the game of *Hitman: Codename 47*, the player has to perform a number of assassinations using any combination of stealth and violence. One of the stealth tricks is to render harmless another character and steal his clothes. Since the protagonist, 47, is a very tall bald man, the stolen clothes often do not look very credible, but the in-game characters generally take no notice of this. The representation gives the impression that the disguise is unconvincing, but the rules dictate that the other characters are convinced.⁶ This appears incongruous, but such incongruities can also be used as expressive devices. In the fighting game *Tekken 4*, players can choose between a number of different characters. In this case, we have chosen the small girl, Xiaoyu versus the big muscular Marduk (figure 5.11). The representation of the game leads us to believe that Marduk is a stronger character than Xiaoyu but, in actuality, her strength is on par with all the larger characters in the game (figure 5.12). In my experience, the discrepancy between the outward appearance of the characters and the rules governing their behavior tends to be considered humorous. Here,



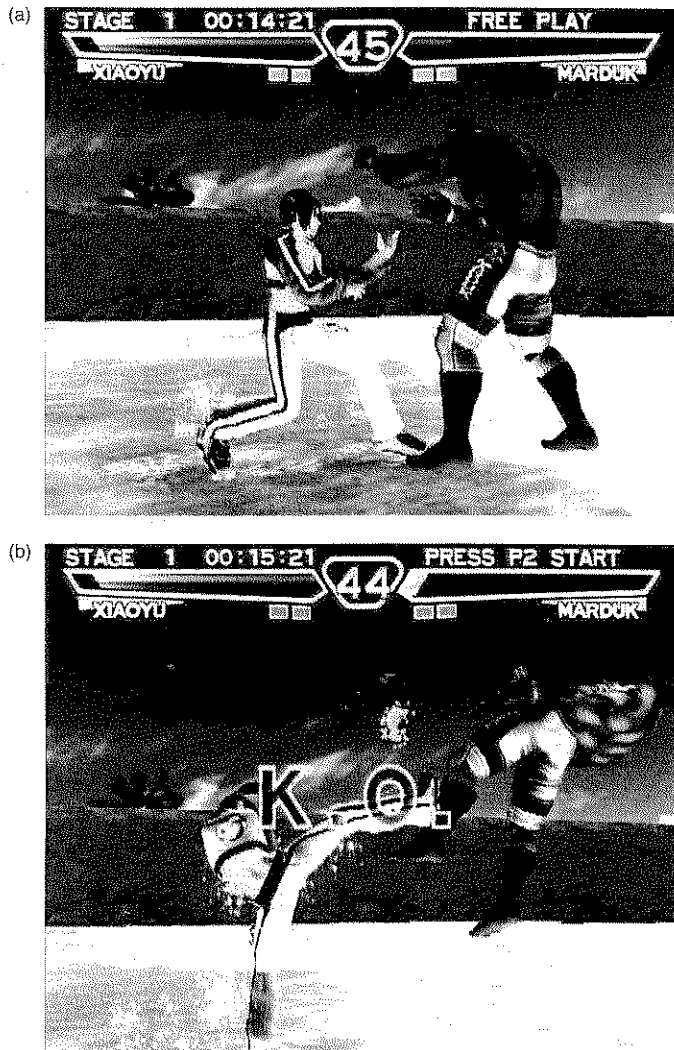
| Figure 5.10 |

Myst (Cyan 1993): The player can manipulate the switch, but not the ship model.



| Figure 5.11 |

Tekken 4 (Namco 2002): Xiaoyu versus Marduk.



| Figure 5.12 |
Xiaoyu defeats Marduk.

the surprising difference between what the representation suggests and what the game rules determine adds depth to the characters in the game. It also ties into the story of David versus Goliath, and the supposedly amazing powers of martial arts. In this case, the representation cues something that is contradicted by the rules, but this incongruence is an interesting effect.

Through the Glass Barrier: Characters Who Know You

If we assume that the fictional world of the game is a *world*, it would make sense to assume that the characters in that world are therefore generally unaware of their being fictional characters or being part of a game at all. In *Super Mario Sunshine*, many contextual clues are provided to the player. In the following figure, the circled B signals that the player should press the B button on the GameCube controller in order to engage in conversation (figure 5.13). The B is a contextual clue from the game interface, even if it is also a pseudo-three-dimensional object *in* the game world. In a surprising twist, an in-game object called the *FLUDD* talks about the layout of the GameCube controller (figures 5.14–5.15). It is a mixing of fictional levels when an object in the fictional world knows about things in the real world and knows that it is part of a GameCube game.

In another GameCube game, *Pikmin* (Nintendo 2001), the protagonist is a scientist stranded on an unknown planet. As the game progresses, the scientist takes notes in a diary that is displayed on the screen, including notes about the game controller (figure 5.16). In *Pikmin*, the mixing of levels has an extra twist in that it is the protagonist, and by extension the player, that is taking notes in a diary. From that perspective, taking notes on the game controller makes sense, since this is exactly the kind of thing we would write down if we were to take notes about our playing of the game.

We could easily frame this as being an interesting self-reflexive avant-garde praxis in the tradition of French *nouvelle vague* cinema, but it has a more immediate effect when we experience it. When an in-game character talks about how to use the controller, it rhetorically befriends us, not just as in-game characters, but also as real-world players. The breakdown of fictional levels is a positive emotional experience.



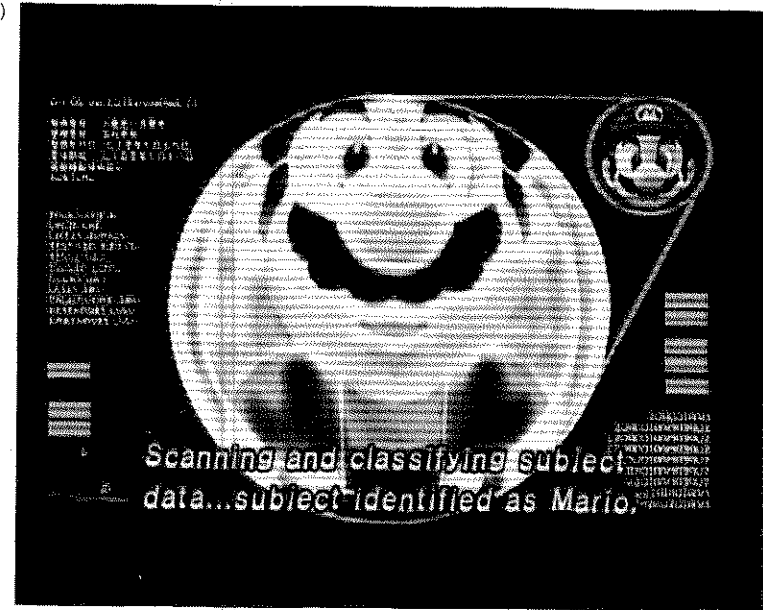
| Figure 5.13 |

Super Mario Sunshine (Nintendo 2002): Press B for conversation.

Satire

Any incongruity between rules and fiction can also be productive. As in any aesthetic field, there is a chance that what is considered a problem can also be used as a positive *effect*. Helene Madsen and Troels Degn Johansson examined how incongruities can be used as satirical devices (2002). Following their analysis, I discussed two similar games in chapter 1 that do not display an arbitrary relation between rules and fiction: They are satires where the love/hate relation that viewers have with TV presenters and the activity of creating video game theory are both staged metaphorically as space battles. Countless satirical games follow this pattern of framing a complex issue within a well-known video game genre.

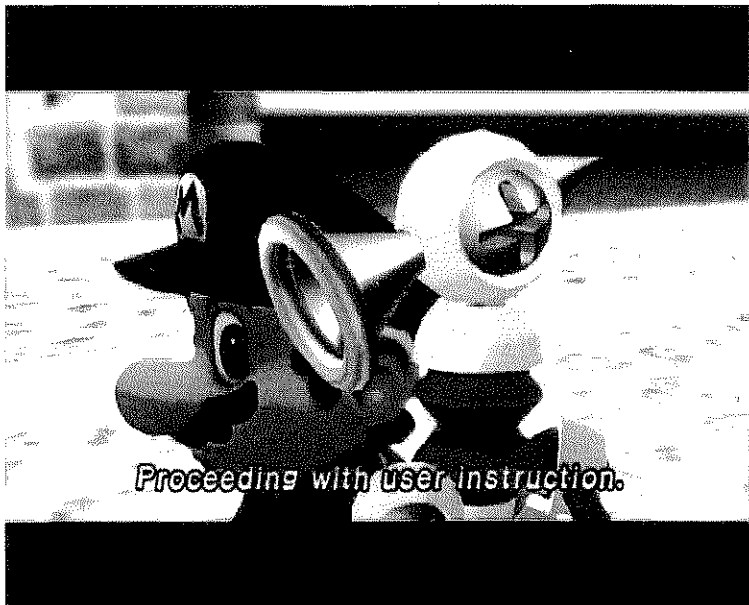
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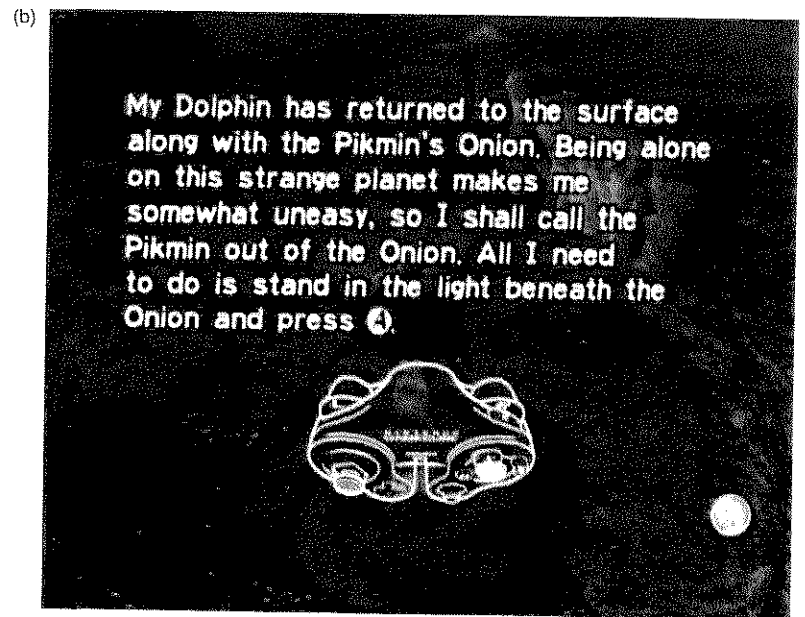
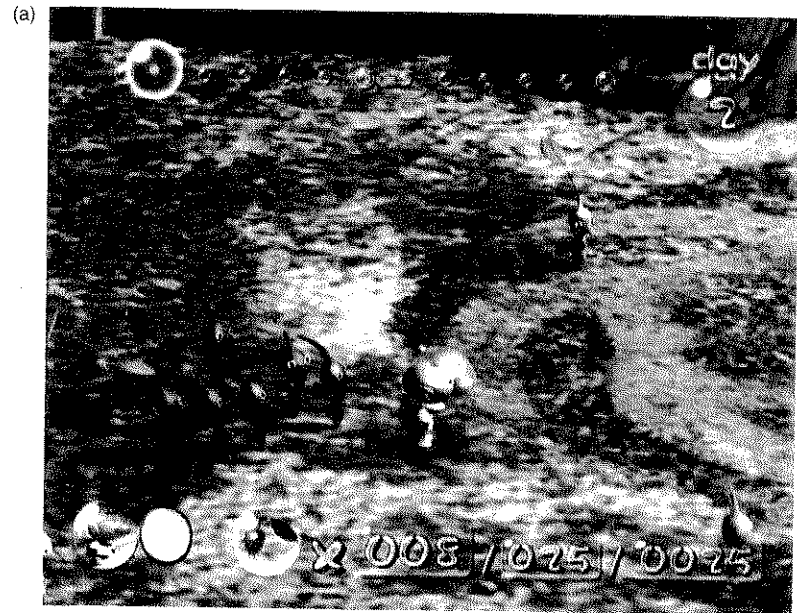
(b)



| Figure 5.14 |



| Figure 5.15 |



| Figure 5.16 |

Can Rules and Fiction Match? Space in Video Games

Focusing on the differences between rules and fiction and the ways they can work against or with each other, it is easy to overlook how they can, in some situations, completely overlap: *Space* is a special issue between rules and fiction. The level design in a game may create an emotionally evocative landscape and at the same time determine the shape of the game tree and hence the gameplay of the game. On the “Wake Island” map in *Battlefield 1942*, the U.S. side holds a U-shaped island, and the Japanese side must invade the island.

In figure 5.17, the topography of the island not only cues the player into imagining an island, it also provides cover and hides information. The player can only see the attacking airplane when it is too late. The shape of the island determines choke points, which points are easily defendable or very vulnerable, and more generally what strategies will

work for either side on this map. At the same time, the physical layout of the level prompts the player into imagining an island in the Pacific. As such, level design, space, and the shape of game objects refer simultaneously to rules and fiction. This is a case in which rules and fiction *do* overlap.

Implementing a World

Viewing games as rules, there is a sense in which all games are created equal, the difference between different games being merely their rules and the challenges they present. This suggests that any set of rules can in principle be made to be about anything, but as we have seen, rules and fiction are quite intertwined. From a rules perspective, the most crucial role of fiction is to cue the player into understanding the rules, and this easily leads us to the assumption that games are *themable* (Juul 2001b), that the representation and fiction of any game can simply be replaced with something else. Since an attractive feature of games is the way they challenge their players, games do not *need* an interesting fictional world or *any* fictional world to be considered interesting, but this does not mean that fiction is irrelevant for player experience or game quality.

A serious game design challenge is that at least some aspects of the fictional world have to be implemented in rules, but that some things are easier to implement than others. Games resist many of the more complex themes we can imagine, such as love, ambition, and social conflict, because they are not easily implemented in rules. When games actually are about these things, the actions that the player can perform are often simple, but the “complex” events in the game are only presented in the fictional world, or happen as a result of the player’s simple actions. *Myst* contains a love story as well as a conflict between two brothers, but neither of these are implemented in the rules of the game, they are simply presented to the player once the player has performed some very simple mechanical tasks such as turning stone wheels or moving objects about.⁷ *The Sims* deals with this issue by letting characters speak to each other using only simple sounds rather than actual language, and the player can then imagine a dialogue from these sounds. This shows that the technical issue of what is readily implemented in rules and/or programming influences the content of the fictional worlds of video games.



| Figure 5.17 |

Battlefield 1942 (Digital Illusions 2002). The “Wake Island” map.

The Blue Arrow of the Video Game

The importance of coherence in the fictional world of a game is an ongoing discussion in game development circles. Noah Falstein has initiated the *400 project*, a project of collecting rules for creating good games. This is rule #7:

7. Maintain Suspension of Disbelief⁸

- With narrative, keep player in story
- Don't remind them "it's only a game"
- Domain is games with any narrative.

(Barwood and Falstein 2002)

As previously discussed, it is not entirely clear what definition of narrative is being used here, but surely *Grand Theft Auto III*, with its numerous cut-scenes and linear overall structure, qualifies in Falstein's view. However, the game also has numerous incoherencies in its fictional time (chapter 4), and like the *Legend of Zelda* game of the introduction, this game also has large arrows that point to the rules of the game. Though Jeff Gerstman's review (2001) describes the game as a living, breathing place, he does not mention that the game also features large blue arrows that point to the game rules.

Janet Murray's book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) helped popularize the idea of *immersion*. Inspired by the *holodeck* of *Star Trek*, Murray claims that the ideal immersive system would be a perfected virtual reality system that was indistinguishable from the real world. This undoubtedly tapped into the then popular idea of *virtual reality*. Following Murray, immersion has commonly been described as the feeling of being transported to a fictional world, but as we have seen in the description of fiction in games, this is a misleading account of what is going on in a video game. The player may be completely absorbed by the game *as a real-world activity*, and the player may for the duration of the game or in isolated parts of the game also strongly *imagine* the fictional game world. In *Rules of Play*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman name the exaggerated focus on immersion *the immersive fallacy* (2004, 466–471). Focusing exclusively on coherent worlds and well formed storytelling is a misunderstanding of what games are about.

What a Game Means

Even if games are not exclusively fictional worlds, they are nonetheless subject to constant interpretation. But what does a game mean? It is very hard to create convincing interpretations *of the rules in a game themselves*.⁹ One of the most discussed games is *SimCity*, where as the mayor of a city, the player has to control land development, tax levels, and so on (see figure 4.12). *SimCity* is not the actual world, but a model, and this model is obviously based on a set of assumptions. Ted Friedman has claimed that "most fundamentally, it rests on the empiricist, technophilic fantasy that the complex dynamics of city development can be abstracted, quantified, simulated, and micromanaged" (1999). It shines through that Friedman is against this fantasy. But if we actually play *SimCity*, the experience is one of *not* being able to control a city. *SimCity* is an excellent example of a game of emergence where the complexity of the game is far higher than the complexity of the rules. In this way, *SimCity* is a prime example of how a city is unpredictable and uncontrollable. The most important issue here is that Friedman not only ignores what it is actually like to play the game, but also sidesteps the possibility of things like irony, parody, and poetic license. We need to take a step back to consider how we interpret other art forms.

Where Is the Moral?

As a first example, consider Cecil B. DeMille's film *The Ten Commandments* (1956). With Charlton Heston playing the part of Moses, we follow the biblical tale of the birth of Moses, his adoption, the exodus from Egypt, his parting the Red Sea, and his finally receiving the Ten Commandments from God. In this film, it is clear that the protagonist is *good*, and that his actions are *good*. We see the protagonist as the film's moral center, but are protagonists always good? We can compare the Ten Commandments to Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*: The personal goal of Don Giovanni is to seduce as many women as possible, at which he is sublimely skilled. Toward the end of the opera, Don Giovanni is offered the option of repenting his sins, but he refuses and is finally swallowed by the flames of hell. It should be clear that the moral of the opera is that God punishes sinners, and that the protagonist demonstrates what we *should not* do. We do not automatically assume that the actions of a protagonist are "good" or "right."

Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* (1991) is a more complex case. Here, the protagonist commits a number of gruesome murders, all of which are described in great detail. *American Psycho* is critical of modern society (that is, it is a warning against the values and actions of the protagonist), but it can also be criticized for aestheticizing violence. The same kind of criticism is easily directed toward Oliver Stone's movie *Natural Born Killers* (1994), which presents itself as a critique of media fascination with violence while being quite susceptible to the same kind of criticism. Such cases tend to be framed in discussion of whether the violence is gratuitous or motivated within the context of the work. Is the violence a part of the message or just a cheap trick for increasing sales? This is not easily determined, and it is hard to reach any kind of clear interpretation of a movie or novel concerning a dangerous or unpleasant aspect of the world: They can always be interpreted as enjoying or glorifying a tragic aspect of reality or as warning against the same.

What Does Monopoly Mean?

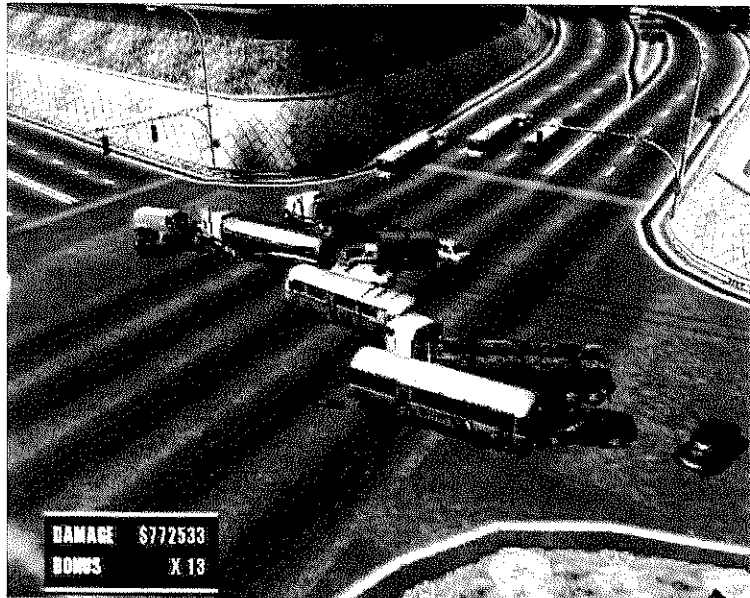
Let us return to games. It has been a common assumption that the board game *Monopoly* promotes the values of capitalism. *Monopoly* is of course a game with the goal of acquiring as much money and property as possible, and this was straightforwardly interpreted as a statement that we should acquire as much money and property as possible *in real life*. As a response to this, Ralph Anspach created a counter game called *Anti-Monopoly* (Anspach 1973), in which the explicit goal is to break rather than create monopolies. As a game, however, *Anti-Monopoly* is quite similar to *Monopoly* except for the names of the pieces used: Players also move pieces around the board and collect other pieces, but rather than collecting property, they collect assets to use for breaking monopolies. Following the publication of *Anti-Monopoly*, Parker Brothers sued Ralph Anspach for violating the copyright of *Monopoly*, but during the legal proceedings, it turned out that *Monopoly* was itself a copy of Elizabeth J. Magie's 1903 game *The Landlord's Game*.¹⁰ *The Landlord's Game* had been developed to educate the public about the evils of monopolies on land and, more specifically, to promote the single tax system proposed by the economist Henry George where only land is taxed. The instructions of *The Landlord's Game* state: "The object of this game is not only to afford amusement to players,

but to illustrate to them how, under the present or prevailing system to land tenure, the landlord has an advantage over other enterprisers, and also how the single tax would discourage speculation" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 520). This demonstrates that two games with identical rules *and* fiction can be interpreted as promoting *and* rejecting the creation of monopolies. The entire story of *Monopoly* and its precursors can be found in Ralph Anspach's book *The Billion Dollar Monopoly (R) Swindle* (1998).

A Meaningful Car Crash

It would be a misunderstanding to see a game as an expression of the players wanting to perform the in-game actions in reality. Games—like stories—are things we use to relate to death and disaster. Not because we want them to happen, but because we know they exist. Consider the game *Burnout 2*. *Burnout 2* can be played in a special *crash mode*, where the object is to drive into a busy intersection at full speed in order to create the largest pile-ups possible (figure 5.18). It should be obvious that we do not play this game because we *want* traffic accidents, but because we know they exist and because we want to consider the possibility of death and destruction. The audience of a movie does not automatically assume that the protagonist *does good*, and neither does the player of a video game believe that the protagonist of the game *does good*. A game is a play with identities, where the player at one moment performs an action considered morally sound, and the next moment tries something he or she considers indefensible. The player chooses one mission or another, tries to complete the mission in one way or another, tries to do "good" or "evil." Games are playgrounds where players can experiment with doing things they would or would not normally do.

Literary theorist Stanley Fish has argued that the meaning of any given text is something that is not strictly in the text, but is negotiated in a specific *interpretive community* (Fish 1980). There is no long tradition for interpreting video games, and hence no conventions or community for upholding a specific interpretation. I do not think this should be followed to a conclusion of blanket subjectivity; I think that having the tools for discussing games, and remembering how we interpret other cultural forms, can prevent us from making naïve, literal interpretations of games.



| Figure 5.18 |

Burnout 2: Point of Impact (Criterion Studios 2002), crash mode: Create the largest traffic accident possible.

The Interplay between Rules and Fiction

Different games contain different types of fictional worlds. The rules of a game relate to the kind of fictional world it can project. There is a general correlation between the progression game structure and coherent worlds, perhaps because the fictional aspect of a game is more important when the player only sees it once, and because it is easier to create a variety of different actions when the implementation only has to work in a few selected cases.

Incoherent fictional worlds are often emergence games, perhaps because emergence games have a stronger focus on their rules, and the incoherence of the fictional world is less likely to be experienced as a problem in an emergence game than in a progression (adventure) game. Breaking the coherence of the fictional world does not so much foreground the way the game projects a fictional world as it foregrounds the rules, the game as an activity. In a multiplayer game, breaking the coherence of the fictional world can work as a foregrounding of the game as a real-life social activity. The lack of coherence in some game worlds appears to originate in games being rule-based, and the resulting issues such as creating interesting gameplay, modifying difficulty, and giving the player multiple attempts at the same task.

Can rules and fiction ever match? Level design and the spatial layout of a game are the prime examples of things that are part of rules as well as fiction. *Should* rules and fiction match? Generally speaking, the mismatches may be a larger problem for novice players because they are more likely to use cues from the fictional world in order to understand the game rules. Seasoned players have more knowledge of game conventions and are therefore more skilled at explaining fictional incoherence as the product of game rules. Fictional incoherence and rules/fiction incongruities may in some circumstances make games inaccessible to new players.

Finally, we can point to a set of conventions regarding rules and fiction in games:

- A game can use *functional stylization* to implement selected interesting aspects of the fictional world.
- Space and level design in games are special areas where rules and fiction can overlap: The shape of a fictional island, for example, also works like a rule in that it determines what the player can or cannot do.

- Rules can cue the player into imagining a world.
- Fiction can cue the player into understanding the rules of the game.
- The player's real-world actions have a metaphorical relation to the fictional in-game action: Pressing of a controller button at the right time means making a perfect serve.
- The interplay between rules and fiction of video games is what makes them *half-real*: real rules and fictional worlds.