The Self-starring Perspective: The Player as a Character

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Abstract: This article explores and dissects five games that break the fourth wall in ways that are integral to the plot. It also tries to define and categorize them in order to develop a vocabulary that can aid in the discussion of the subverted concepts and mechanics and define some criteria for this subgenre proposed. Based on these criteria, the games were directly compared and their commonalities were extracted. Reactions to their unusual elements were also observed through playtests to better understand how these plots are structured and the effectiveness of this way of telling a story.

Keywords: "Player-and-Protagonist-Integration", "Medium-Awareness",
"Fourth-Wall", "Magic-Circle", "Subversive-play".

1. Introduction

It's common for video games as stories to attempt to create a sense of narrative immersion when constructing their plot, however, the way most games go about this is roughly the same as the medium of film or literature would as pointed out by Adams (2004).

By their nature as interactive narrative experiences, video games have a unique ability to use the concept of the magic circle and the fourth wall in ways some other media wouldn't be able to get away with. The fourth wall as defined by the Encyclopaedia Britannica is: "an imaginary wall between actors and their audience. [...] Thus, performers act as if the audience is not there, and the viewer becomes a kind of voyeur, observing the narrative" and breaking it constitutes any dialog or narration that addresses the audience or uses other meta-linguistic tools. The games analyzed for this paper are examples of stories that do this structurally, and in a distinct way that warrants additional classification as separate from conventional fourth wall-breaking media in general.

The games chosen to be the object of analysis in this paper are *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare* (2012), The *Stanley Parable*(2013), *Undertale* (2015), *Oneshot* (2016), and *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017). These are by no means all of the games that would fit in the *Self-starring perspective,* but merely the ones the author was aware of by the time the article was proposed. Trying to analyze more games may have exceeded the scope and time before the deadline.

It has been particularly challenging to talk about and describe why these games are different and it had been hard to grasp for those exposed to these concepts during the process of researching this subject, primarily due to a lack of vocabulary to express these same concepts and no name or subgenre to point at to show these and other examples. Briefly explained, the idea of a game that integrates the player into its story and demonstrates some level of self-awareness of its medium was a guiding principle for the categorization proposed, moments where this breaking of the fourth wall and the techniques used to execute them were compared between the analyzed games. That was the motivation for the analysis and classifications discussed in this paper, and naming this narrative device may help discussions around these concepts and games develop further in a more grounded way.

2. Method

The process used to break down and analyze each game to compare their metafictional or self-aware traits, and their impact on the player's experience is outlined in this section.

2.1 Playtest

To serve as a refresher of their story and structure and the basis for the interview questions the participants will answer, it seemed necessary to conduct playtests of the chosen games. Interviewing these participants about their experiences with each game upon completion should provide a fresh and less biased outlook on the games themselves. For this reason, willing participants who hadn't yet played at least one of the five games analyzed were asked to play through them for the first time while under supervision.

The playtests were not done in a large enough sample size for major patterns to be extracted, for each game only one single participant was asked to play while the researcher observed the play sessions. Each participant was later interviewed about their experience. This process served mainly to prevent single-minded bias and collect some data regarding the different player reactions to the presented games' plot and mechanics. The small sample size of these interviews is the reason much for the gathered data being excluded from the final article.

During each playtest, the author took unstructured notes regarding what each game does that would be considered unusual or that subverts expectations in a metafictional manner, along with any relevant information that stood out. These notes would then be used as the core data for the case study alongside the participants' interviews.

2.2 Case study

Comparative case studies can be described as involving the analysis and synthesis of the similarities, differences, and patterns across two or more cases that share a common focus or goal and interviews are a way to collect data alongside observation and document analysis [Goodrick (2020), p. 3]. Goodrick's framework will be the rough draft of the methodology applied for this paper.

The notes taken during the playtests from each game were the documents used to directly compare and find similarities or common points they share, and how each game approached these similar mechanics or narrative devices. The mechanics mentioned here are, as defined by Hunicke, Robin & Leblanc (2004) "the various actions, behaviors and control mechanisms afforded to the player within a game context." They are the rules of the game, all of the possible interactions, both intended and sometimes unintended. And as Juul (2011) mentioned, they amount to much of the fun of the experience of playing. According to him, the act of submitting to the rules of the game and trying to succeed within them is where the challenge and much of the enjoyment of playing can be found.

From the comparison of the notes and similarities between games, some notions of what is necessary for them to work will be inferred. The playtest interviews will then be used to see how effectively the games balance their meta-fictional aspects while maintaining suspension of disbelief for new players to the narrative of each game. Suspension of disbelief is defined as "The concept that to become emotionally involved in a narrative, audiences must react as if the characters are real" [Chandler & Munday, 2011]. When this balance is disturbed and the suspension of disbelief can no longer be maintained it may be harder for the player or the audience to relate or be emotionally moved by the story, dampening its impact and the catharsis it may have otherwise elicited.

2.3 Classification

After reviewing the related literature, an idea of what these games do that others avoid and the criteria for exclusion for those that were considered but not included in the analysis were constructed. That idea was then given a label and terms to aid conversation about the subject. Finally, once the collected information was analyzed and categorized, the patterns, definitions, criticisms and other findings such as commonalities of both player experiences and narrative or mechanical techniques used to construct these stories were detailed.

3. Important Definitions

This section will be dedicated to the breakdown of, and discussion around important concepts such as the magic circle, the fourth wall, and the nature of play. It will also detail the terms used to distinguish between narrative entities within and around the diegetic universe of the stories and worlds of the games discussed in this paper.

3.1 Narrative Entities

To proceed with this analysis it will be necessary to establish some terms and their meanings in the context of this document, this is mostly to avoid confusion with terms such as player, player character, protagonist, and avatar for instance. The player is the individual playing the game and will be referred to as the *Actor*. The protagonist is the avatar of any given game being controlled by the *Actor* and will be referred to as the *Agent* for that narrative. The developers are the artists and programmers responsible for creating the game and will be referred to as the *Author*. The game is the diegetic

universe contained strictly within the program's window and its timeline of events; and it will be referred to as the *Stage*.

The games to be discussed in this article are ones that address the *Actor* directly instead of referring to the *Agent* in crucial plot points; these games will all be classified as belonging to the subgenre that will be referred to as a *Self-starring game*, or fitting the *Self-starring perspective*. Most of these terms were loosely based on the nomenclature used to define different stages of psychological self by McAdams (2013), with some reassignment of terminology for a more accurate portrayal of each entity's role.

The metaphorical reasoning for these terms and the relationships between each represented entity will be better explained in this section. The *Actor* plays the role of, or pretends to be, the *Agent* and commands their influence on the *Stage*. The *Actor* also perceives the *Stage* to make the decisions on what to do or how to act. The Agent was created in, and bound to, the *Stage* by the *Author* and enacts the *Actor*'s will upon the *Stage*. The *Stage*'s story, setting, and the ramifications of every possible choice were crafted by the *Author*, therefore metaphorically setting the *Stage* for the *Actor* to play on. The *Stage* is also influenced by the *Agent* and narrates the *Actor*'s actions and their outcomes.

The subgenre of video games where the plot gives the *Actor* a lead role and expands the magic circle to include more than what strictly happens within the *Stage* is thus a self-starring story from the *Actor*'s perspective.

In short, the player plays the role of the protagonist, making them the *Actor*. The protagonist acts and executes the *Actor*'s commands and is, therefore, the *Agent*. The game is where the play happens and is therefore the *Stage*. Lastly, the developer creates the *Stage* and provides the script that will be played and is therefore the director, or in this case the *Author*.

3.2 The Magic Circle

It's also important to understand the concept of the magic circle, the term was first coined by Huizinga (2014) and it describes in broader terms a kind of playground that serves as an imaginary consecrated spot where play can take place. Huizinga also notes that the act of play requires a separation in time and space from normal life, this separation is also integral to the idea of the magic circle as it later came to be understood when popularized by Salen & Zimmerman (2003). However, the popularization of the magic circle as a concept has not been without criticisms, as pointed out by Zimmerman (2012) himself. It seems to be that the magic circle described by Huizinga, and Salen & Zimmerman are different concepts and that the latter took inspiration from Huizinga and applied it through a metaphorical lens to video games as later pointed out by Stenros (2014).

Conway (2010) affirms that the term magic circle can very much function similarly to the notion of the fourth wall. But the line where the circle starts and ends can be more malleable than originally proposed by either Huizinga (2014) and Caillois (2001) when applied to the context of computer games as pointed out by both Montola (2005) and Reis (2012). Any actions or happenings of a play outside the fourth wall of

the stage inevitably will break it, whereas the magic circle can be expanded to incorporate more, such as the experience of, say, a soccer game can go beyond just the field to incorporate the cheer from the stands, the large screen used for close-ups, and the narration of the game's announcer in some circumstances.

Caillois (2001) expands on Huizinga's (2014) definition of the magic circle by conceptualizing something he calls the nature of play, which can also be useful in discussing the idea of the fourth wall in video games as it defines limits to protect the activity of play from being distorted and confused with real life. Caillois states that the line of division between real life and the time and place allocated to the act of playing must not be blurred, but also questions what the consequences of doing so may be. Generally, Caillois tries to categorize all games and play-like activities within a quantifiable concept that must fit certain criteria.

Caillois then describes play-like activities that don't fit within the said definition and infers what could be the consequence of corrupting the nature of play; concluding that if the act of play is contaminated by the real world, what was a leisure activity would become an obligation, compulsion, and source of anxiety.

But despite how it may initially seem that *Self-starring games* are a corruption of the play concept that risks blurring the lines between the game and real life, none of the participants of the playtests, nor most of these games' audience report feeling this anxiety of sense of obligation described by Caillois (2001). The conclusion then may be what he defines as the nature of play and its corruption may not warrant the apparent disconnect from the idea of an expandable magic circle or playground, at least in the context of video games.

The reasoning for this is that, even though these games can function beyond the program's window, they are still performing tasks that any other computer program would be capable of executing without reaching into the real world or having lasting consequences, once the *Actor* leaves their computer or console. This sets the *Self-starring game* apart from the idea of pervasive games championed by Montola (2005) and Reis (2012), since these games can use information from real life and don't exactly stop when away from the game's device. Undoubtedly, if a *Self-staring game* used a computer's webcam to record or collect pictures or video within its mechanics, or, for instance, used the player's social media to make a post in their name, that would be a legitimate cause for anxiety and concerns over privacy. There have even been examples of old flash games in the early internet that used webcam footage and movement as a primitive version of motion control systems, similar to Microsoft's Kinect, but those quickly fell out of fashion likely because of the potential risk of legal repercussions. Although the cause for this trend is only speculative, it can still be observed on the website *Newgrounds* (s.d.) which still hosts a variety of early 2000s flash games, including those categorized under the tag *Gadgets - Webcam*. Of the roughly 77 games in this category only 4 were uploaded to the website in the last 11 years, they mostly span from 2004 to 2012.

Therefore these games that skirt the limits of or expand the magic circle like what Montola (2005) and Reis (2012) described in the context of pervasive games, but do so in a subtle way that doesn't truly have repercussions in real life or beyond the

diegetic universe, remaining as purely digital experiences. They do so by subverting the player's expectations of where the line of the magic circle is, expanding its radius with creative mechanics or narrative devices not entirely different from what other non-pervasive stories, games, or computer programs are capable of, but using all of them at once in a unique way. Then the greatest trick these stories have up their sleeves is a clever narrative "sleight of hand" that invites the player to believe that the game is more real than it is, an illusion of self-awareness and subversion, while both the player and game are still restricted by the game's code and implemented mechanics.

4. Criteria and Excluded Titles

Besides the main five games studied there were also three games suggested at some point during the research, at first seemingly relevant to the subject, but that ended up not meeting the selection criteria or the definition arrived at by the end of the research, the individual reasons for which will be elaborated upon later in this paper. The games considered but ultimately set aside are *Metal Gear Solid* (1998), *Pony Island* (2016), and *Inscryption* (2020). Utilizing the idea of the magic circle as something that can be expanded without voiding its protections such as the idea of breaking the fourth wall can sometimes imply, allows for a simpler definition for a *Self-starring game* to be achieved.

The *Self-starring perspective* could then be defined as a piece of interactive fiction that expands the magic circle to include the *Actor* and their actions outside the program's window in a way that is narratively implied or mechanically executed while maintaining a consistent diegetic universe where the story takes place. Another crucial trait is that the *Stage* either points out the divide between the *Actor* and the *Agent*, when there is an *Agent*, or simply addresses the *Actor* directly in the core experience of its plot and not as a one-off joke or narrative device used only temporarily.

This definition would explain why the suggested titles are mentioned but not included in the list of works analyzed. For instance, *Metal* (1998) has a boss battle that breaks the fourth wall in a unique way, the character Psycho Mantis demonstrates his psychic abilities by reading the *Actor*'s memory card data and referencing other games they have played. Additionally, during the same event, Psycho Mantis reads the Agent's mind in this case, Solid Snake, becoming more difficult to hit as he predicts Snake's every move. This can be prevented by swapping the game controller ports and hindering Psycho Mantis' ability to read Snake's mind. However, the fourth wall breaks in this game don't address the *Actor* directly beyond tutorial-like command information such as *Press Start*, even though it does expand the magic circle for the duration of the Psycho Mantis fight it still wouldn't fit the *Self-starring perspective*.

The other two titles that were considered but don't fit this perspective, *Pony* (2016) and *Inscryption* (2020) both expand the magic circle and have an entity that is canonically playing the game that is not the *Actor*. These games mechanically break the fourth wall by using information from the *Actor*'s Steam friends list and information gathered online or from other players and use the *Actor*'s computer files outside the game window to tell their story. But they fail to directly include the *Actor* in that plot by including a proxy character that is implied to also be *outside the Stage*, in *Pony* that character's hands can be seen collecting the *tickets* outside of the game's *screen*.

Inscryption has Luke Carder, a card game enthusiast that is implied to be playing the game and experiencing the events the *Actor* is seeing.

In *Inscryption* (2020) there is a point of contention however, the events of the story have Luke Carder upload his version of *Inscryption* to the internet and then proceed to delete all of the game data from his hard drive. This means that the plot of Inscryption implies that the game being played by the *Actor* is the version of the game uploaded to the internet by Luke along with some of the recorded footage he kept on his computer, allowing the fourth-wall breaking to use the *Actor*'s information but in the stories climactic moments this distinction between the *Actor*'s playthrough and the implied playthrough by Luke get blended together as the Stage addresses Luke directly outside of his recordings. Ultimately the game never addresses the *Actor* directly and uses the character of Luke as a surrogate player within the Stage's diegetic universe, allowing for a very unique story to be told but falling outside the previously established idea of a *Self-starring game*.

It is worth noting that there is a community-curated webpage that documents a similar but more expansive concept that the *Self-starring perspective* would be a subsection of. *The Player and Protagonist Integration* (2023) page on *Tv Tropes* compiles instances within both video games and other media detailing a wide range of different dynamics between viewer/player and protagonist/avatar and some insightful classifications for them.

5. Comparative Analysis

To establish the plot so that the *Self-starring perspective* works, it often seems necessary to build a narrative that includes recurrent moments where the expansion of the magic circle takes place. But for this change of perspective to work it's often introduced gradually and without profoundly impacting the *Actor*'s suspension of disbelief. Conway (2010) mentions that video games can use self-aware elements to enhance immersion and encompass the *Actor* within the magic circle.

The only apparent example among the games observed to explicitly reveal this quite early on is *Oneshot* (2016). However, in this case, it can still be argued that the first time it is done it is still only in mention. It doesn't become completely well-established until further in the game where puzzles can only be completed with the use of the player's system outside of the game's program itself.

An example of this gradual progression is when a character or event recognizes the *Agent*'s actions from other saves or from one of the *Agent*'s previous lives that traditionally are not part of the chronology or succession of canonical events in the narrative. This example is well explored in the game *Undertale* (2015), where if the *Actor* has chosen to return to one such save to a state before certain events in the story happen - in an attempt to fix a mistake, or reverse any consequence of said events, then certain characters can judge the *Agent*'s actions based in part on information from older discarded saves that they wouldn't commonly have access to.

This type of occurrence seems to contribute to the idea that some characters from the Stage's universe are, or become, aware that they are in a simulation. some examples of characters in other media that are aware of their medium are: The character

Deadpool in almost every work where he appears; The protagonist of Sophia's World [Gaarder, J. (2012)]; The character Puck in Dream of a Midsummer Night [Shakespeare, (1877)]; The lead character in the song "Number Three" [They Might Be Giants (1985)].

This demonstration of medium awareness can also help the transition from the standard perspective of the *Actor* as a neutral external observer to one where the *Actor* is in a starring role in the narrative being told throughout the game.

It can be found upon review that at least the titles *Undertale* (2015), *Doki* (2017), and *Oneshot* (2016) have a common trait of heavily relying on empathy or concern to play an important role in their payoff and attempting to lure the *Actor* into being immersed in the narrative and world. When this works well it can be a shock to the *Actor* when a character they have bonded with is put under threat of seemingly serious and lasting harm, since it is implied to be more permanent than other similar stories. This is where the first meta-fictional elements usually show themselves, to demonstrate that the risk is to some extent more permanent or pervasive than in other games, usually leaking through game saves or being irreversible due to the lack or corruption of such saves. The diegetic tampering with the existing save files is another trait that many of these games have in common.

All games except for *Imscared* (2012) are narrative-heavy games with lots of text disclosed via narration or dialog. It seems hard to imagine a story within the *Self-staring perspective* that tries to reveal exposition showing more than telling. However, that doesn't seem to detract from the experience and much can still be left as subtext.

All games have at least one dedicated "character" that recognizes the existence of the fourth wall, *Oneshot* (2016) has several, especially in its special ending, *Undertale* (2015) has two, and *Doki* (2017) briefly gives the ability to a second one before the very end. They usually are the ones that first hint about the expansion of the magic circle. *Undertale*, *Oneshot*, and *Doki* also occasionally have these self-aware characters' sprites face the camera directly to subtly hint that they know the *Actor* is watching before it's revealed that they know they are in a simulation.

There are also dedicated characters that serve as the tutorial in *Undertale* (2015), *Oneshot* (2016), and technically *Doki* (2017). They introduce the core mechanics and guide the *Actor* through the very beginning of the story, sometimes they are the medium-aware characters but not always.

All of the games except for *Stanley* (2013) have the *Actor* revisit the beginning of the game or similar areas close to the end. Arguably *Stanley* does as well, but it does it so often that it doesn't have the deliberate intention of eliciting a sense of nostalgia and closure. The shorter games can have this effect considerably hindered.

Similar to this many of these games but most notably *Undertale* (2015), *Doki* (2017), and *Oneshot* (2016) make heavy use of leitmotifs throughout their story to create a sense of familiarity and serve as a thematic throughline between elements within the Stage. Most of the songs played during the climaxes are different

arrangements of songs or motifs introduced very early on and repeated or iterated throughout the story.

Both *Undertale* (2015) and *Doki* (2017) have the *Actor* choose a name at the beginning and subvert its use at some point, *Undertale* uses the chosen name for a character besides the *Agent*, and *Doki* uses it to mention they know it is a "nickname". Similarly, *Oneshot* (2016) and *Doki* try to refer to the *Actor* by name directly and get the Windows username of the profile the game is installed in, that information can be located in the absolute path of the Windows Temp folder, accessible to any program running on Windows.

In *Stanley* (2013), *Oneshot* (2016), and *Doki* (2017) have lines that portray a character contemplating the idea that the characters on the Stage aren't real and that the only real person in the whole story is the *Actor*. These lines of thought occasionally lead characters to an epiphany, existential crisis, or outright madness. *Oneshot* implies the existence of another "real person" in the story, a character that is the manifestation of the *Author* and is coincidentally also called "the Author" by other characters but that has long since left that world. Adding to this *Stanley* and *Doki* have characters comment at some point about the concept of the illusion of choice, outside of the contemplation of what is a "real" person.

Once the ending that is considered the "true ending" is reached in *Oneshot* (2016), *Imscared* (2012) and *Doki* (2017) attempts to boot the program will not lead to the title screen and the option to start a new game adding an extra sense of finality to the plot. Further playthroughs require the *Actor* to find the game's save files and backups and delete them. *Undertale* (2015), however, allows the *Actor* to start a new game at any point, but certain actions will permanently be remembered unless the same save manipulation takes place.

The next common points are mostly done through mechanics tied to story elements, but they will only be summarized for the sake of brevity. *Undertale* (2015), *Oneshot* (2016), and *Doki* (2017) reveal new information the player wouldn't usually have canonical access to thought gaps in the gameplay's structure such as loading screens, game over screens, booting sequences and the transition between scenes. *Stanley* (2013), *Doki*, and *Oneshot* do something unusual with the credits in a way that fits and develops the game's subversive aspects.

Undertale (2015), *Doki* (2017), *Imscared* (2012), and *Oneshot* (2016) all automatically close the game for dramatic effect at certain points of the story. *Oneshot*, *Doki*, and *Imscared* alter files in the *Actor*'s computer and require the *Actor* to manipulate their game files or retrieve information from them to progress the story. Similarly, but more specifically *Oneshot* and *Doki* have files associated with certain characters that are used in the file manipulation mechanic to represent their whole being.

Oneshot (2016) and *Doki* (2017) have in-game "fake" program dialog boxes, but *Oneshot* then uses real Windows error dialog boxes as well. *Undertale* (2015) and *Doki* use changes in font and formatting to indicate changes in tone or distorted dialog. *Undertale* and *Doki* have extra dialog if the game detects that the *Actor* is streaming their screen.

During the playtests realized some common criticisms were, for example, that some visual glitches that seem too non-diegetic to be believable, or that inexplicably change some of the art styles without context; Over-the-top attempts at shock value without established ties to the overall narrative; Overreliance on, or very frequent use of actions outside of the game window. This seems to be tied to the clarity of what needs to be done, and the backtracking and general repetitiveness of dialog in repeated playthroughs all harmed the immersion to some extent.

These comments also seem to correlate with participants who have some experience with other games that use similar resources. However, participants often reported that the breaking of the fourth wall and attempts to speak directly to them drove more intrigue, engagement, and curiosity than usual when well executed. To sum up, what was found during the case study phase, the existing *Self-starring games* are usually story and dialog-heavy, often backing up the breaking of the fourth wall with mechanical or gameplay interactions that also play into the idea of expansion of the magic circle. These games also use subversion of narrative and the tropes of the other genres they belong to and try to have at least some in-universe reason for these subversions and mechanics tied to their worldbuilding.

The careful use of their framing devices, music, foreshadowing, mechanics, plot, and techniques to elicit attachment or emotion from the *Actor* often leads to a memorable and cathartic experience that is often surprising and highly engaging. As some of the participants also noted there is plenty of potential for great stories when playing with the magic circle in innovative ways, and still very few games that speak directly to the *Actor*.

6. Conclusion

The original objective of identifying what these games do differently from other stories and how they use the idea of the magic circle and the fourth wall to propose a name for its niche subgenre seems to have been a successful endeavor. The proposed definition of a *Self-staring game* appears to accurately represent what sets these five games apart from other games that break the fourth wall in a less integral manner. The playtests helped ground some of the original ideas of how effective the games are at captivating players while still being believable. Directly comparing the elements most frequently repeated amongst them also helped to prevent some bias in choosing what aspects of the games to discuss in more depth, as doing so by a subjective lens of their importance or impactfulness wouldn't have been less desirable.

Although a lot of consideration was dedicated to curating the list of games to be considered and analyzed in this study, the list arrived at is by no means comprehensive, there are likely more games or interactive media that would fit the classification of *Self-starring* that were missed. If this topic were to be further researched, a possible avenue of investigation may be to more closely look at the technical ways the self-aware mechanics and narrative devices work and look at more than the points in common, as many of these games have unique and surprising ways of doing this. Hopefully, developers can continue to iterate and expand on the concept, and if this article helps garner attention or forward discussions about these kinds of games, the efforts in making this paper will be well worth it.

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