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“All that's important is that you were honest with yourself”: Fictional Responsibility and
Morality in Self-Involving Interactive Fictions

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Abstract:

Video games have seen an ever-increasing amount of academic attention in recent years, though most of that has attempted to classify them as something apart from pre-existing foundations. However, I argue that video games belong to an already established, but under-investigated, class of fictions: Self-Involving Interactive Fictions (SIIFs). These fictions are those that make statements in a piece of fiction true of the person participating. According to Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin, SIIFs are concerned with the participant, and “...what your actions say about who you are choosing to be in the story world.” These uniquely personal fictions occupy an interesting junction where story-telling and narrative devices meet with moral responsibility. SIIFs demand more attention on account of their philosophical and literary merits. While not the whole of the genre, some of the most popular and recognizable examples of SIIFs are video games. Therefore, I utilize 2K Games’ *BioShock* (2007), Toby Fox’s *Undertale* (2015), and Obsidian Entertainment’s *The Outer Worlds* (2019) as case studies designed to test and expand the application of the theories compiled in this paper.

Introduction:

With the proliferation of the internet and other technologies, the realm of fiction is consistently growing and becoming more and more accessible to the general population. These advances have also allowed for the rapid spread and consumption of fictions that, by some virtue of their construction, allow for a measure of interactivity by their audience. Interactive fictions are uniquely situated to have direct, responsive engagement from the audience, but interactive fictions have been so overly picked apart in academic writings that there is no longer a coherent definition for them in play.¹

I argue that a specific subset of interactive fictions,² Self-Involving Interactive Fictions (SIIFs), are in need of further study under a unified framework on account of their unique capacity to be more about the those who engage in them in a moral, material, and consequential sense.

Background:

SIIFs were originally described by Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin in a paper published in 2016 as an interactive fiction “...by being, in some important sense, about those who consume them” or as fictions which “in virtue of their interactive nature, are about those who consume them” (Robson and Meskin, “Video Games” 165). Unfortunately, neither of these definitions clearly states what separates a SIIF from any other interactive fiction despite claiming that video games are unique in their capacity to be SIIFs. This failure of conciseness is a long-running problem in the context of interactive literature.

¹ See Ciccoricco, Chaouli, Douglas, Robson, Ryan, Stang, Tulloch, Veale, Wysocki, and Ziegfield from my list of citations. Many searches with the key words “interactive fiction,” “video game fiction,” or “postmodernism,” among other related terms will return many more articles.

² Interactive fiction also describes a type of computer game where players are often asked to type responses to prompts to progress. While they can be described by the content of this paper, I do not refer to them with regards to interactive fiction.

In 2005, Michel Chaouli encountered the very same problem:

I have thus far failed to find a coherent account of interactivity on a level of description useful to textual analysis (for example, technical, aesthetic, phenomenological, or cognitive); it may well be that such a description proves impossible for the simple reason that interactivity and communication may turn out not to permit a final ontological³ distinction. (604)

I have found plenty of authors that have similarly sensed that interactive fiction does indeed have some form of importance, and fascination with scholars and participants alike who have flirted with the idea for decades. They socketed it in philosophy, literature, computer science, psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, and so much more, but none found an agreeable home for this area of study. Nearly seventeen years after Chaouli published his work, I still could not find any solid accounts in my own research that distinguish or identify interactive literature or its impacts in any significant, coherent way.

Interactive fictions and hypertexts were predicted over and over again long⁴ before the invention of the internet itself (Chaouli 602). Ted Nelson, a computer programmer and

³ Ontological refers to the category of being. Ontology is often described as the “science of being” or the “theories of being” (Stanford Encyclopedia). Chaouli is describing a failure to describe the widest possible net that describes these fictions. In computer science, an ontology is generally described as a “formal explicit description of concepts in a domain of discourse” (Noy).

⁴ Philosophers, notably Plato, have long had a complicated relationship with the written word. It is thought that it is impossible to truly understand what an author in a written text means because of the static quality of composition. If you had any questions or arguments, the text would remain the same. You could never interrogate, or interact with, the written word. Discussion, or back and forth, was considered the only true real way to *know* something. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato writes:

You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves. (*Phaedrus*)

computer science pioneer provides the best definition of hypertext⁵ despite composing it before the proliferation of the World Wide Web: “I mean non-sequential writing—text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. As popularly conceived, this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways” (Nelson 3).

I am, of course, not here to discuss the merits of this interactivity or computer formatting. I am, instead, hoping to call attention to a specific subset of Hyperfictions⁶ often alluded to by these authors: fictions that say something about the person engaging with them. By this, I mean interactive fictions that inspire self-reflection and moral consideration in the world of the fiction itself in regards to the participant. Chaouli expresses a similar sentiment when he is unable to find a descriptor for these fictions:

What is instead communicated in nearly every instance is what a good thing interactivity is. It is a moral category packaged as a technical feature, applicable to an improbably large number fractions. Given its slipperiness, it may be more useful to bracket the question of what it is and see what it is thought to *do*.” (Chaouli 604)

From this point on, I will be repurposing Robson and Meskin’s use of the term Self-Involving Interactive Fictions under my own definition. According to Plato’s standards for a good definition, a definition must be universal, non-contradicting, and unambiguous. Most of the articles written about interactive fictions have failed on the first and third fronts, typically by over-specifying the type of fictions these can apply to (e.g. only novels, only video games) or by

⁵ The standard format for webpages is HTML, or Hypertext Markup Language. You will recognize this as the (often, but not always) blue underlines that appear on many pages on the web that allow you to redirect to another page.

⁶ Julio Cortázar’s 1963 novel *Hopscotch* was one of the inspirations for this project. As a stunning example of hyperfiction, all 155 of its chapters can be read in any order the reader so chooses. He provides explicit linking in the beginning of the book in a reading guide. Both of the prescribed paths offered in the reading guide will always exclude chapters.

not specifically stating their definition. Robson and Meskin fail the universal condition by being too focused on video games, and unambiguous by not clearly defining the wording enough to be distinct. One critic, Stephanie Patridge, argues that their use of language is effectively the same as what ludic researchers accomplish in established frameworks for more than just video games. Robson and Meskin partially concede this point, and say that if necessary changes are made SIIF applies to other fictions (“Still Self-Involving”).

Self-Involving Interactive Fictions

Robson and Meskin’s definition of SIIFs, while on topic, manages to be simultaneously too specific and not specific enough. They are only discussing video game fictions. SIIFs must (1) allow the participant to make self-reflexive statements; (2) participate in Affective Materiality; (3) contain both a Work World and allow for at least one Game World.

(1) The first qualifier—allowing the participant to make self-reflexive statements—mandates that participants must be capable of making in-media events true of themselves. By this, I mean that they take responsibility for their actions in a piece of media. For example, someone engaging in *Undertale* would say that “I spared the monster,” which takes the action out of a fictional realm and places the burden of choice upon themselves. They perceive themselves as part of, and influential on, the fictional realm (Robson and Meskin, “Video Games” 167).

(2) The second, participation in Affective Materiality, is two-fold. It refers not only to the physicality and perception of that responsibility, but also to the critical lens that looks at how participant engagement shapes the experience of a piece. More simply, Affective Materiality looks at how a SIIF makes the participant responsible for their

fictional truths through their actions with the text. The ultimate goal for a SIIF is to make a participant “...come to feel responsible for the decisions [one] makes -- even when all of the options we have to choose from are terrible” (Veale, “Friendship;” Veale, “If Anyone’s”). This category typically overlaps with the construction of the next, the Work World.

(3) The Work World is the construction of the media itself. Participants often refer to the Work World as the “lore” or the “worldbuilding” of a piece of media. The Work World is not simply the fictional landscape, it’s the summation of all devices and details within a media: the narrative built around it, the characters who inhabit it, and the ways in which you interact with it. The Work World, though it may change its presentation depending on the decisions of a participant, is ultimately static, and contains every possible fictional truth of a given media. The specific permutation of fictional truths a participant applies to themselves is the Game World. A participant can have any number of Game Worlds, but each one is applicable only to a singular engagement with a Work World (Robson and Meskin, “Video Games” 166).

You may assume from my choice of fictions and the language of the qualifiers that these fictions must be ludic in nature to qualify as a SIIF. However, ludic fictions, or fictions that function as games, are insufficient to identify this stratum of interactive fictions. I argue that game fictions are overtly limiting as well, and excludes texts that were never meant to be gamified and yet fulfill the qualifiers. Take, for example, Ayn Rand’s play *Night of January 16th* (1934). The play is centered on a murder trial, and audience members compose the jury. How the play progresses is based on the jury’s verdict. Rand explains that the jury’s verdict was meant to showcase whether the audience preferred individualism or conformity, which would, by virtue

of audience participation “be about those who consume them” (Rand; Robson and Meskin, “Video Games” 165).

The same goes in the opposite direction, not every game, or even every video game, has the features identified above. *Pong* (1972) is the first commercially successful video game, but that is about all it is. It is two white rectangles serving as ping pong paddles on a black screen, with a line in the middle for the net and two numbers to keep score. That is it, that is the whole game. It cannot meet any of the three criteria. While it is true that a player could say, “I scored four points in *Pong*,” that is not a sufficient statement for a SIIF. “I scored four points in *Pong*” is a simple factual statement that functions the same as “I hit the bullseye in a game of darts.” The player is not implicating themselves in a world of *Pong*, but simply engaging in play.⁷ The distinction lies in the decision-making capabilities of the participant. *Pong*, along with many other games, is a simple skill based task. How successful a player is in preventing a ball from passing their paddle does not make a narrative, does not encourage reflection, nor does it create an individual experience outside of score. A SIIF demands that the participant become part of the Work World, and so a lack of one immediately eliminates a piece of media from consideration as one. It has no sense of responsibility outside of the rules of the game itself.

Selections, Tutorials, and Moral Mechanics:

As for knowing what would qualify under these definitions, I would like to discuss the three fictions that I based and tested the redefinition upon: 2K Games’ *BioShock* (2007), Toby Fox’s *Undertale* (2015), and Obsidian Entertainment’s *The Outer Worlds* (2019).⁸ I will be using

⁷ See Derrida’s definitions of play for further information about play, and engagement as a human function.

⁸ All three fictions chosen are video games, however, that is done out of a respect for the consistency of material and so that little time is wasted on explaining formatting and tools specific to multiple mediums. This is also not an attempt to “legitimize” video games as other authors have done.

each game to showcase a different facet of SIIFs, but first, I would like to introduce both a concept common in SIIFs as well as provide an introduction to some of the terms I will be referencing with video games as the primary focus.

Tutorials—the introductory portion of the game that often explain the controls and direction of a game—are where the Work Worlds and Affective Materiality first meet before releasing you fully into your Game World. These usually much begrudged and bemoaned sections of gameplay serve a greater purpose than simply teaching participants what buttons to push to jump or run. These highly controlled areas of the game serve as both education and integration. In the tutorial, participants are introduced to their fictional selves,⁹ learn how to operate in the Work World, and are often shown the result of their actions. The tutorial section acts as a sort of acclimation tank for the consequential sphere of the game.¹⁰ *The Outer Worlds* directs players through their character creation, and walks them through the basics of movement, interaction with non-participant characters (NPCs), and combat. The Work World is introduced by the participant’s escape pod crashing outside of the first settlement,¹¹ while your rescuer, Phineas Welles, coaches you through the linear path through the tutorial zone to the

⁹ These selves are the fictional body in which the participant is meant to embody or inhabit. These are usually “player characters” (PCs) or “avatars.” PCs are complete characters that have little, if any, construction by the player. Take, for example, Alphonse in *Tactics Ogre: Knights of Lodis* (2001). Alphonse is a complete character with his own motivations and feelings, and the player decides little but his starting combat class and scores. An avatar is on the other end of that spectrum. A distinction I will discuss this distinction further in regards to the entirely player-generated “Stranger” from *The Outer Worlds*.

¹⁰ Tutorials tend to come in one of two flavors: skippable and unskippable. Skippable tutorials are those you do not have to complete in each Game World, but still may be rewarded for participating with in-game benefits (currency, experience); unskippable tutorials are often (but not always) required reading because they either have narrative importance, or set the direction of the game. *Tactics Ogre: Knights of Lodis*, goes so far as to disguise the tutorial as the first level, requiring the participant to play it on each new playthrough. You only control Alphonse, the PC, to help the player settle in his skin and integrate themselves into the game world.

¹¹ Further, the pod manages to land directly on top of the guide who was promised to escort you to your benefactor. Captain Alex Hawthorne’s body protrudes halfway out from under the pod.

ship. He advises you on the controls in a predetermined, carefully crafted environment meant to be accomplished by each control in turn, and slowly open you up to more freedom in response. For example, the game teaches you how to sneak through a thick patch of tall grass roamed by enemies walking in simple, fixed paths. Like many games, returning to this zone is made completely impossible once you have left it; this area distinctly removed from the rest of the game despite leading you into it.

Often, Tutorials cultivate a sense of responsibility, conscious or unconscious, in the participants. They are led to understand that the actions they take within the scope of the world impact the characters or what facets of the Work World they are allowed to see. Through guided actions, and often clear consequences, SIIF tutorials often provide participants with a simple proof:

I chose action X

Action X caused result Y

Therefore, I caused Y by choosing to do X.

If we use this same framework with the first inhabitant we meet in *The Outer Worlds*' tutorial zone we end up with much the same result:

I chose to offer medical aid to the dying guard

The dying guard appears later in Edgewater, alive

Therefore, I saved the guard by deciding to help him.

The creators are fully aware of this. It is intentional in media about choice and consequence that your actions do actually have consequences. How this manifests is in the presentation of the Work World.

As previously stated, the Work World is the complete work of a media. It is every possible decision, every possible piece of the world, every possible bit of text and lore. It is the specific navigation of these individual pieces that compose the individual Game Worlds (Robson and Meskin, "Video Games" 167). These choices are where the conversations of the self come into play. A participant can choose to behave any way that they wish in *The Outer Worlds*, but it will change how they are allowed to view the Work World. The guard mentioned in the proof for *The Outer Worlds* can be dealt with in a number of ways. If you choose to help him,¹² he will reward you with weapons and ammunition, and appear later in the game; if you choose to kill him, you can loot him of his armor and impact your interactions with his superior; or you can choose to do all of the above with all of the listed results except for seeing him later (*The Outer Worlds*). The participant is directly responsible for how events play out, which ties right back to the qualifiers of a SIIF: participants are making decisions they can reflect right back onto themselves. "I killed the guard and looted his corpse;" engages in Affective Materiality by making the participant aware of the consequences of their actions directly. It is up to the participant to decide his fate, and he cannot be bypassed or affected by anything but the participant. Decisions such as these shape the Game World from the Work World. The

¹² Offering to help the guard comes with the additional benefit of some of the earliest portions of lore. The game presents capitalism taken to its logical extreme, and the guard mentions that he will be punished for medical services provided out of company facilities even though his cheaply manufactured gun is what nearly does him in (*The Outer Worlds*).

participant creates a permutation of events pulled from the Work World based upon the choices they make in their treatment of the guard.

BioShock does not present the first free choice of consequence—a choice that impacts the presentation of the Work World—in the tutorial, but alludes to it, or perhaps warns the participant of it. Almost every major character is encountered indirectly through a speaker, or, more commonly, through thick wired glass. Many characters never inhabit the same space as the participant's character, and those that do usually only do so long enough to die by his hands. Unlike *The Outer Worlds*, the participant's only influence on the Work World of *BioShock* is through the game's ending. Actions during the story change very little of the game outside of dialogue and a select few characters' feelings about him. The plot itself is static. The most major change hinges on whether you decide to kill or rescue a type of character, dubbed "Little Sisters." The number of Little Sisters the participant saves changed the ending to one of three. The first sighting of this type of character results in the Little Sister's protector¹³ breaking the glass separating them from the participant's character, though they leave before the participant can engage. The first hint is a subtle one, but neatly guides the participant to their first impactful decision: the decision between killing for power, or prioritizing others before yourself. The game even foreshadows this choice in the very first sighting of a Little Sister.

Undertale's tutorial zone is much more explicit than *BioShock's*, as the first two characters of the game instruct the character (albeit under questionable honesty in the first instance) on the two approaches to the combat system. The approach you choose, and the

¹³ Little Sisters are each protected by a powerful entity known as a Big Daddy. These entities are men fused into a massive diving suit and stripped of any will or drive other than to look after and protect a Little Sister. The first Big Daddy you encounter bashes the head of an average enemy, called Splicers, against the glass until they break through, leaving the body hanging in the hole. The participant has to go through these enemies to reach each Little Sister-Big Daddy pair and achieve their ending.

degree you favor it, directly alter the Game World's presentation. Flowey (a flower) tells the participant that combat is the best way to raise their level (LV), or LOVE, and that LOVE is gained through letting little white "friendliness pellets" strike the red heart that represents the participant's SOUL. Allowing the pellets to hit the heart instantly turns Flowey into a cruel being who mocks the participant's trust in him, and informs them that the world they have found themselves in is kill or be killed. Before Flowey can deliver the killing blow, he is interrupted by Toriel, the keeper of the ruins that compose the tutorial zone. Toriel encourages the participant not to attack anyone at all, and instead talk their way through dangerous situations. She even presents the participant with a training dummy. She is proud if the participant decides to engage peacefully, and horrified if they attack it. Toriel presents the participant with some of the most immediate consequences in-game, most others are delayed



Fig. 1. Role Playing Games (RPGs) are commonly SIIFs. Players often report having negative emotional responses when they choose to behave badly.

until later interactions or environmental details. These two provide a sort of prototype for the type of route, or type of person the participant wants to emulate within the Work World to create their Game World. Following their advice is heavily implied, and almost outright stated, to represent the participant as more

similar to the violent and malicious Flowey, or the kind and compassionate Toriel. Fox clearly defines the moral guideposts within *Undertale*.¹⁴

Here is where the moral leanings of SIIFs come most strongly into play. Like Rand's, *Night of the 16th*, these fictions are trying to have the participants say something about themselves. By making participants responsible for their actions, and by directly allowing them to see how their

choices unfold in the relative safe space

of the media, these fictions allow for a

sort of an “ethical playroom” where

participants can see how certain actions

can play out in a controlled, relatively

consequence-free environment.¹⁵

Participants choices do impact their

perception of the media, and their

reactions become part of the Affect of

the media. Participants often choose to

perform actions they normally would

not do, and are sometimes driven by the

motivation of experiencing as much of

When I'm playing
an RPG and I
decide to play a
renegade character
for a change



When I say the
first mean
thing in the
game and make
an NPC sad



Figure 2. Completionists attempting to see every facet of the Work World often feel as though they're punishing themselves, or report negative emotional responses.

¹⁴ The last chapter reveals that Fox has redefined features we have come to consider standard in the genre: LV, or LOVE, stands for Level Of Violence instead of level, and EXP for EXecution Points instead of experience points. *Undertale* actively subverts many common video game conventions in its quest to make the participant understand that their choices are not simply hypothetical, but reflect who they are as a person.

¹⁵ This is not a perfect comparison, as simulated events cannot be expected to correspond to actual events, and is called a Ludic Fallacy (McGlade 295). I do not mean to say that all participants commit this fallacy in their explorations, but that it is a type of logic game or self-reinforcement. Someone who chooses to behave badly, say kill a Little Sister in *BioShock*, will receive reinforcement from Brigid Tenenbaum, the “mother” of the girls in the form of her disgust and rage.

the Work World as they can. These kinds of participants are often referred to as “completionists,” and they frequently report negative emotional states (Veale, “If Anyone’s,” Walker, Sicart, Stang). An article published on Eurogamer in 2014, recounts author John Walker's playthrough of *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) who only chose to behave badly. Typically, Walker describes his usual experiences with roleplaying games: “When I play...my characters tend to not only lean toward the nicer side, but almost immediately start twinkling with the magical pixie dust of purity. It's embarrassing, but I just make the decisions I believe I'd really make, and end up that way” (Walker). He reports having positive experiences, and genuinely enjoying the run. Walker enjoys being himself and letting his personality work through. However, in choosing to be the worst possible person he possibly could in one particular playthrough of a game he typically loved, Walker states:

I feel quite certain that given another KOTOR [*Knights of the Old Republic*] I would make the kindest choices without hesitation. Because, you know, if you're nice to people they tend to react positively and it generally creates happiness. I like happiness!...But by the end of the game I was numb. I wasn't revelling in the choices, nor reeling from most of them. The numbness is possibly the most awful reaction. I don't want that. The giggling at the naughtiness was a temporary entertainment. But I've never grown tired of picking the nicer choices.

He grew emotionally fatigued as a result of his incessant bad choices and regrets what he has done despite the fictional consequences and responses he encounters as a result of equally fictional choices.

Participants are engaging in moral decision making, despite the fact that these choices are made in fiction. They are feeling the emotional impacts of their choices: guilt, shame, regret, emptiness, and more (Veale, “If Anyone’s,” Walker, Sicart). A common trick participants pull to engage in the naughtiness Walker notes, but absolve themselves of their guilt, is to make it like what they did never happened. This trick, called save scumming, involves a participant reloading a save just prior to an action (“Save Scumming”).¹⁶ Save scumming may look like



Figure 3. *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* spawned a whole slew of memes, one of the most popular templates revolved around the Quicksave feature.

killing a character and reloading to the save before you committed virtual murder. It is a type of wish fulfillment. Save scumming has become a joke for some participants, especially in games that feature a quicksave function, where a participant can save quickly anywhere, anytime. They save a game before performing an action that they do not intend to be permanent. A participant can quicksave, choose to insult a character, see their reaction, and reload. In-game, it is like it never happened. As long as the participant does not save after a bad action, reloading sets the world to a time

¹⁶ This trick is not limited to just moral decisions. It is often used to re-roll probability based events, return a playthrough to a point before a game-breaking problem, skip early portions of a game on a later playthrough, or any number of reasons. It is not all negative, and some games expect, encourage, or even require players to do this.

before it ever happened. No one knows what you have done, because to them, it never did. That bad action was simply erased from existence.

Except, of course, when it is held against you. *Undertale* has a rather unique feature that discourages, and even condemns the participant for this practice. The participant controls a young child who falls into the Underground, home of the monsters after their escape from the surface. The child is found by the keeper of the Ruins, the first area of the game, Toriel, who intends to raise the child from that point on since leaving the Ruins means the child will almost certainly die. Toriel takes the child by the hand and guides them through the ruins, and, when separated, frequently calls to check in and see if you are okay. Toriel is painted as a kind, caring person, but she blocks your path to progression. Your character is not the first child to end up in her care, they have all left the Ruins and died. Toriel is the first boss fight, and while the game tells you that you do not have to kill, many participants do, whether they meant to or not. Everything about her encounter is designed to make it clear you do not have to do this, designed to make you regret killing her. She will stop defending herself at half health, which means she will die instantly on the next attack; she will make her attacks miss when the participant's health nears zero, and if you do manage to get in the way of one of her attacks and die, her expression will be one of pure shock and regret; and she will beg you to let her care for you in safety after her character has long been developed. Participants who are successfully swayed or have accidentally killed her,¹⁷ reset to a point before killing her. However, after the battle, the conversation with Flowey will expand to reflect this:

¹⁷ This is a commonly reported experience on message boards and game guides because Toriel begins repeating a piece of dialogue several times in a row. Participants who expect more immediate gratification think they have to make another choice since this one does not seem to be working.

You spared the life of a single person. But don't act so cocky. I know what you did. You murdered her. And then you went back, because you regretted it. You naïve idiot. Do you think you are the only one with that power? The power to reshape the world...

Purely by your own determination. The ability to play God! The ability to "SAVE."

Undertale presents the participant with their actions, implicating them in deeds they thought were erased. All choices are actually inscribed on the initialization files (.ini), which dictate how a program operates. Unless you edit the file directly, which is not a skill most participants have, you cannot erase what you have done. You are made painfully aware of your decisions and what it means for you as a person. However, this only works if a SIIF can goad participants to assign themselves culpability. If they reject the consequences, they are booted from the narrative. They lose much of their engagement with the Work World if the fiction cannot trick participants into embracing their choices.

***BioShock* and the Illusion of Choice**

Decision-making lies at the heart of SIIFs, and so I will focus on *BioShock* for this section. *BioShock* revolves around the PC Jack finding himself involved in the battle for the underwater city of Rapture. Jack is forced into the city when the plane he is on crashes into the sea right next to a lighthouse. On approaching the lighthouse, Jack finds an elevator and is guided down by the voice of a man called Atlas who promises to guide the participant to safety. This does not even come close to happening. The rest of the game hinges on Jack's escape from the city by helping Atlas take down the cruel, insane founder of the ruined city, Andrew Ryan.¹⁸

¹⁸ Andrew Ryan is an anagram of Ayn Rand with the addition of the letters REW to turn it into a name. *BioShock* was heavily inspired by *Atlas Shrugged*.

This fiction was heavily inspired by Ayn Rand's Objectivism, and thus it is only natural that *BioShock* questions its own narrative.

Atlas is revealed to be yet another villain, the murderous criminal overlord Fontaine, having manufactured the narrative that Jack and the participant believe that they are willingly agreeing to. Fontaine pretends to be Atlas, a folk hero with a charming accent, who needs your help taking down Ryan, saving his family, and getting you out of Rapture. Atlas is a much easier figure to accept working for than Fontaine, the man in charge of Rapture's criminal underground. It is revealed that Jack has been modified like the Little Sisters to unquestioningly obey any command activated by the phrase "would you kindly." The later portions of the game involve deprogramming Jack to finally leave Rapture.

Like Jack, the participant is deceived into believing they have an impact on the story through their choices. As I have previously stated, the Game World is constructed *from* the Work World. What this means is that, no matter how numerous, there is a definite¹⁹ number of possibilities that can be pursued. *BioShock* explicitly limits those possibilities by presenting very few "true" choices. You must complete the objectives in the order they are given to you, in a pre-planned route through Rapture, with dialogue that does not change and cannot be responded to.²⁰ The only thing that actually affects what happens in the course of the game is choosing to spare or harvest the Little Sisters, and even that, comes with in-game negligible distinctions. The game rewards you with either 200 or 160 ADAM (the game's method of powering up Jack), depending on whether you spare or harvest her, respectively. It is a small

¹⁹ That number will vary wildly depending on what level you regard decisions. If you consider "I bashed enemy #483 with a wrench" as an individual choice carved from the Work World, you will end up with far more possibilities than discussing macro decisions. Such small scenes are not excluded in this framework, but that number will be limited by the Work World regardless.

²⁰ A small note: sparing or killing Little Sisters will slightly change the dialogue from specific characters; the ultimate result, however, does not change in the slightest and events will progress as scripted no matter how upset Tenenbaum is with you.

difference,²¹ and is the only significant impact on the game other than which of the three endings you are presented after the final battle.

BioShock seems to regard itself as a SIFF, and, like mentioned earlier, is metafiction. It explicitly recognizes that participants are engaging in self-involvement, and initially takes and instills comfort in the familiarity of its construction. *BioShock* takes refuge in the standard progression of video games. To progress, you have to defeat X amount of enemies or fetch specific items in order to move to the next area or scene. You only progress through the game's narrative at its discretion. Jack has no control over his actions. He must obey whoever uses his

activation phrase, cleverly disguised in the objectives provided by the other characters, with no awareness that this is not what he himself wants to do. The participant is equally as helpless as Jack.

There are a set number of possibilities of what could happen. *BioShock* only has

three possible endings. The idea that a participant has any impact on the story at all is an illusion.

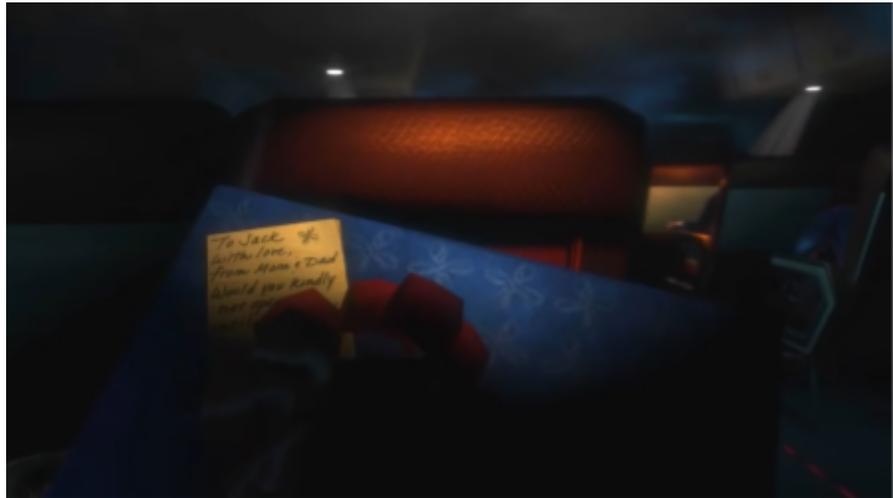


Figure 4. Jack holds a mysterious package on the plane before it crashes. Note the phrase “would you kindly” on the card. Inside the box is the gun Jack must use to hijack the plane and plunge it into the seas above Rapture.

²¹ Tenenbaum will give additional bonuses for every three Little Sisters saved, but the game does not tell you that explicitly.

When Fontaine has finally directed Jack within reach of Andrew Ryan, he employs the activation phrase again: "Now, would you kindly head to Ryan's office and kill the son of a bitch?" No matter what it is the participant wants to do, the game will not progress unless they go after Ryan.²² The only way to progress in the game is to kindly act.

The third entry in the series, *BioShock: Infinite*, makes this explicit. Booker, the participant's avatar, spends the entirety of the game on a quest to rescue his long-kidnapped daughter, who happens to have time and dimension traveling abilities. Elizabeth reveals that the man who gives her to the man that raises her was in fact Booker himself. He cannot accept that he took his own daughter away and refuses to take her from her cradle. Elizabeth tells him that he has to, and if the participant chooses not to act, Elizabeth says, "Booker... you don't leave this room until you do." Neither the participant or the narrative world can progress without doing so. *BioShock* attaches itself strongly to the objectives, forcing the participant to either continue despite the recognition of choice, or to stop the narrative entirely.

***Undertale* and the Third Option:**

The stoppage of engagement is itself a feature of the interactive nature of SIIFs. SIIFs are all about a participant's engagement with a work, and so must logically extend to how much, if at all, they choose to do so. This, by lack of engagement, freezes the Game World in the digital equivalent of closing the book and setting it down. *Undertale* presents several characters who are explicitly aware of their position in a video game. Notably, two characters, Flowey the flower and Sans the skeleton, directly speak with the participant instead of simply leaning on

²² Upon reaching Ryan, Ryan commits suicide by Jack, using the phrase "would you kindly" to beat him rather graphically to death with a golf club. This comes directly after the reveal of the existence and meaning of the phrase, and the reveal that Jack is Ryan's son, whose past in the introduction was completely manufactured.

the fourth wall as most games do.²³ At one point, Sans notes that the participant “act[s] like you know what's gonna happen. like you've already experienced it all before. this is an odd thing to say, but... if you have some sort of special power... isn't it your responsibility to do the right thing?”

That idea is pushed most strongly in *Undertale's* “genocide route.”²⁴ This path directly, and harshly confronts the participant with their decision to continue to engage in slaughter. The background music slows and distorts, towns are devoid of inhabitants who evacuate before you arrive, descriptions change or are totally absent, there are no shops to purchase items, and the game pushes you at every turn to reconsider and question what it is you are doing and why. The Work World withers and dies around the participant, reducing it to its bare minimum.

Participants who do continue to progress to the end find that completion of the route results in



Figure 5. The blue flowers are echo flowers, which repeat what they hear to passerby. Except, of course, when there's no one left to hear.

the game closing itself out. If you attempt to reopen it, the game simply opens to a black screen with the sound of harsh wind playing over it. After ten minutes of this void, the participant is given the option to start the game over by a monstrous character who reflects who the participant has chosen to be. Their doppelganger

²³ It's worth mentioning that Sans is the final boss of the Genocide route, and Flowey is the final boss of the Neutral and Pacifist routes. These two are aware of game mechanics and the nature of their world, with both directly mentioning the save function.

²⁴ This route involves killing as many monsters as possible, and sparing no one.

remarks on how strange it is that the participant would want to engage in the work another time to create another Game World. “Interesting. You want to go back. You want to go back to the world you destroyed. It was you who pushed everything to its edge. It was you who led the world to its destruction. But you cannot accept it. You think you are above consequences.”

What this emphasizes is *Undertale's* recognition of its own medium. *Undertale* understands that it is a video game composed of code. It takes advantage of its own programmable nature to mutate itself structurally to directly impact the Affect of the work. As I noted before, *Undertale* remembers everything the participant chooses to do, and incorporates those into the code of the game. This means that, even if you do choose to start the world over, the game will remember everything you have done. From that point on, every subsequent Game World will be tainted by that one cruel commitment: NPCs will remark that you seem colder, and the endings of every Pacifist and Neutral route will be altered to show that the participant no longer has a soul. The Work World is forever changed unless the participant does a complete, clean wipe of the game.

The Outer Worlds and the Self:

Like *Undertale*, the Work World of *The Outer Worlds* is extremely dynamic. However, what is especially of note is how much control the participant has over their own self-image. *The Outer Worlds* allows the participant a high degree of personalization that even affects how they are capable of engaging in the Work World. A participant can shape their Game World from the outset by deciding, in advance, what type of person they would like to be. Participants choose what their best skills are before they take any action at all. A participant can choose to emphasize speech skills to solve conflicts peacefully, weapon skills to excel in combat, intelligence to solve problems without needing all of the pieces, and so much more.

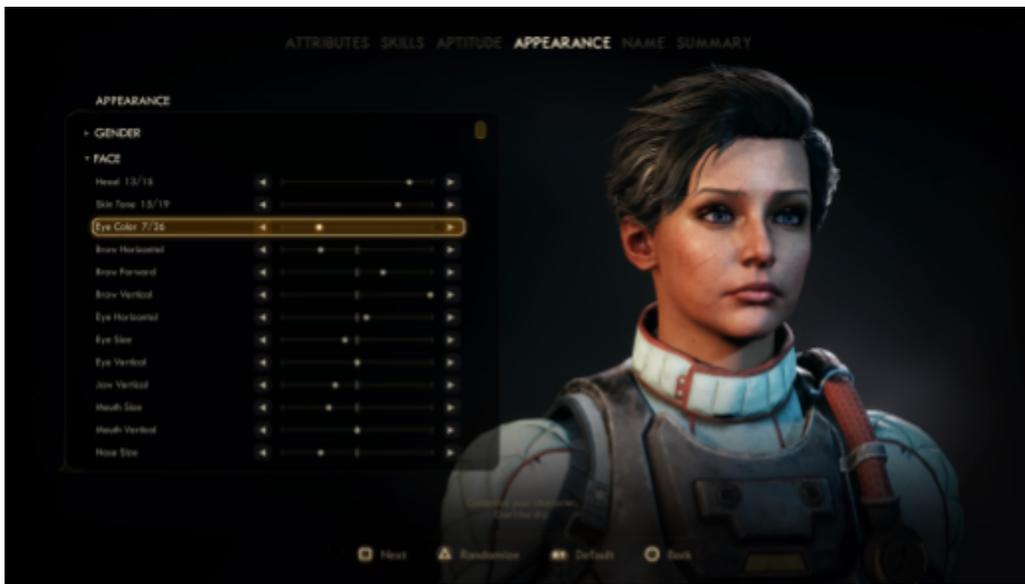


Figure 6. Character creation in *The Outer Worlds* is highly personalizable, not just in appearance, but in intelligence, social ability, identity, and skills.

The Outer Worlds' high degree of customization further makes the boundary between participant and avatar more permeable. Participants are not forced to inhabit a pregenerated body such as Jack who likely does not represent them,²⁵ and other than knowing that your avatar was cryogenically frozen in order to settle on the most distant colonies in the universe, has no predetermined background. Any distance that might have prevented the participant from readily interacting has been greatly shortened.

Conclusion:

SIIFs must make it possible for the participant to feel like they belong in their fictional world. If they are unable to do so, they find themselves unable to complete their primary purpose as Self-Involving Interactive Fictions: becoming about those who participate in them. On account of this distinction, SIIFs have a marked interest in the spheres of literature, philosophy, communication, and beyond. Even though the study of SIIFs has been stalled by conflicting attempts to attempt to describe and expound upon them, interest in SIIFs continues

²⁵ Only Jack's arms and a baby photo are ever seen in *BioShock*, but he is very clearly a White male.

to grow. Under this new framework, the theories previously discussed in the context of these fictions can now connect to one another to build a foundation for the further study of these uniquely personal fictions.

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