Games Within Games

The Two (or More) Fictional Levels of Video Games

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Abstract. Video games that incorporate other games in their game-world create interlacing fictional levels. These can be used to engage with concepts of "gameness" from within the game itself without abandoning the aesthetic illusion created by the macrogame, in which the minigame is embedded. In my paper, I delve into the question why we are willing to immerse ourselves in video game worlds even if they contain elements that overtly emphasise the fictionality of these games. I explore concepts of illusion as well as interlacing fictional levels from a theoretical perspective before I research various modes of games within games with or without an impact on the gameplay of the macrogame as well as their relationship to illusion. The outcome of my paper will be a comprehensive study of the critical potential of minigames, which is accomplished by discussing a large corpus of different video games.

Keywords: Minigames · Narrative video games · Illusion · Make-believe · *Mise-en-abyme* · Chinese-box structures

1 Introduction

(Video) games differ from reality because we[1] engage with them in an attitude of make-believe. This means that we, while playing a game, immerse ourselves in the fictive world[2] in which we move. We control the avatar, through which we use the weapon, explore, fight, and engage with others. In the process of immersion in this fictive world, the knowledge that the game-world differs from reality is suppressed in order to allow for the acceptance of its illusion. Immersion is thus important for how we approach games since it marks the difference between lie and invention. However, it is not equivalent to naïveté, meaning that the player actually believes in the game-world or

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[1] In the context of my paper, "we" is used to denote players of video games.

[2] Following Grant Tavinor [1], narrative video games are regarded as fiction and defined as a work 'in which the characters, places, events, objects, and actions referred to are fictional rather than real. A strong fictive thesis might claim that videogames are *essentially* fictions in that they necessarily depict fictional characters, places, objects, events, and actions' [1]. The world created in (narrative) video games consequently differs from reality due to its status of being fictional, yet might be referred to by other terms than fiction, such as Roger Caillois's description of them as 'a second reality or […] a free unreality' [2].

confuses it with reality; rather, the concept denotes a sense of accepting the illusion of the game-world and the rules governing therein as valid. The existence of the game-world might even have validity for us beyond the game, namely when we exchange our experience with other gamers on platforms or discussions. Despite this immersion, however, play is a fundamentally reflective, conscious, controlled, and distanced mode.

What happens, however, if these game-worlds, which create self-contained illusions, comprise elements that are ludic, yet different from the game-world we move in? In the sections that follow, I want to explore the effects games within games have on our perception of the game-world and games in general as well as on the concept of make-believe. Analogous to the minigames[3] that are contained in other games, I will term games containing other games "macrogames". By drawing attention to ludic elements, such games need not necessarily disturb the illusion when reflecting on "gameness"[4] and games from a critical perspective.

In order to engage with various forms of self-reflexive modes employed in games within games, my paper will set out with a theoretical discussion of games and their relationship to illusion[5] in order to determine why we are willing to play games as well as how we engage with the worlds created by them. This is followed by a discussion of the interlacing fictional levels constructed by games within games. I will distinguish between two kinds, namely Chinese-box structures, meaning that a game contains a game that is separate from the main game, and *mise-en-abyme* structures, which is a term denoting the mirroring of characteristics of the embedding game. These two sections form the theoretical foundation for the analysis of various games within games, comprising the third part of the present paper. I will further distinguish between minigames that are not needed to progress in the macrogame, and minigames that are an inherent part of the macrogame. This analysis is guided by the questions how the incorporation of minigames affects our perception of the game-world of the macrogame as well as how they can be used to critically engage with "gameness" from within games (without abandoning the illusion of the main game). The outcome of this paper will be a comprehensive analysis of minigames and their relationship to the concept of illusion, which is accomplished by drawing on various exemplary video games.

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[3] The defining characteristic of minigames is that they are embedded in another game, wherefore they differ from independent minigames as, for example, defined by Clark Aldrich [3].

[4] My understanding of "gameness" is based on Sébastien Genvo's argument that 'gaming-oriented devices must convince the recipient of their playfulness through pragmatic markers that meet certain cultural representations of the activity and incite to consider this object as a game' [4]. In other words, the game must contain elements that suggest to the player that it is a game. These characteristics are further defined and discussed by Genvo, particularly with regard to the concept of "ludic ethos", which 'invites us to understand how individuals are guided in their play activity by some "pragmatic markers", and how structures build a universe of specific values to be accepted as a game' [4].

[5] Following Werner Wolf [5], illusion is not to be understood as a deceptive mode but as the aesthetic process of creating a world that differs from reality. While the immersion of the recipient in this illusion created by the medium is desired, an awareness of its difference from reality and, thus, a reflective, conscious, and critical stance counterbalances a potential delusion.

2   Our Willingness to Play Games

Games are frequently associated with a mode of distraction, as something superfluous to real life. However, if the history of games is considered, their vital contribution to the formation of culture soon becomes evident. Johan Huizinga determines the characteristics of play, which can be seen as the activity of the object game, as follows:

> [P]lay is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life." [6]

Huizinga does not make a hierarchical distinction between games and reality, but states that play is different from life. This definition allows for a degree of freedom with regard to the inclusion of what is considered as play or game. Roger Caillois links to Huizinga's definition, yet adds aspects and presents them in form of six characteristics of play: free (not obligatory), separate (exists in its own time and space), uncertain (not fixed despite some rules), unproductive (situation at the end is the same as at the beginning), governed by rules, and make-believe [2]. The last feature is particularly important in the context of my paper, and Caillois says of make-believe in reference to play that it is 'accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life' [2]. These definitional qualities are similar to Clara Fernández-Vara's definition of video games as performance, proposing five basic features:[6] 'a special ordering of *time*, a special value attached to *objects*, *non-productivity* in terms of goods, *rules*, and *performance spaces*' [7]. That games are essential parts of culture is not only true of "traditional" games as identified by Huizinga and Caillois but, I would argue, also of video games: they are, after all, simulations of aspects of reality, such as social relationships, negotiating skills, or economic strategies. Seen in this light, the reason for the willingness why people play games soon becomes intelligible: they resemble reality, but they are different from it. However, particularly the notion of the "magic circle" assigned to games by Huizinga, Caillois, and Fernández-Vara has been criticised in recent years because, as argued by Mia Consalvo [8], outside knowledge about games and gameplay as well as the players' personal life experience is always brought along when a new game is played. That is to say, despite games being assigned specific locales (e.g. the boxing ring or the console), they are not entirely separate from other places.

In order to invest oneself in a game, it is necessary to let oneself in for the illusion created in the game-world and to accept the rules being in effect in the game as valid. Games create illusions of a world that might be close to or utterly different from the world we perceive as real.[7] This illusion is not a negatively connoted deception, but an aesthetic

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[6] These five features are shared by play, games, sports, theatre, and rituals [7]. As Fernández-Vara notes, there are exceptions to this definition, such as, for example, online poker, which includes monetary gain and, hence, productivity.

[7] The similarity between the real and the game-world depends on the game's deviation from reality. Games can depart from reality to a large extent while they are still being perceived as believable; this, however, is only the case if they follow their own inner logic, regardless of how much they differ from reality.

process. While non-aesthetic illusion is mainly interpreted in negative terms and concerned with uncovering deceptive modes, fictional or aesthetic illusion wants to intensify the ability to create a world that differs from reality outside the game [5]. Yet, a game can never be congruent with a subjectively perceived reality. It always creates illusion. For literature, Wolf analyses the relationship between text (game) and reader (player) on the basis of this illusion. He proposes the two terms *Distanz* (distance) and *Partizipation* (participation) to outline the reader's (player's) cognition of the illusion [5].[8]

Distance denotes the idea that users of media with fictional content are aware of the difference between illusion and reality. Patricia Waugh argues the following for literature: 'Of course we *know* that what we are reading is not "real", but we suppress the knowledge in order to increase our enjoyment' [13]. Distance is created, for example, through our awareness that we enter a video game world via a screen or a console or that it is perfectly logical that zombies exist in one game-world, while they do not make any sense in another. This difference can be approached with recourse to a question posed by Erving Goffman: '*Under what circumstances do we think things as real?* The important thing about reality […] is our sense of its realness in contrast to our feeling that some things lack this quality. One can then ask under what condition such a feeling is generated […]' [14]. During the process of immersing oneself in the fictional medium, distance fades into the background and the player participates in the illusion. Goffman defines participation as 'a psychobiological process in which the subject becomes at least partly unaware of the direction of his feelings and his cognitive attention' [14]. Thus, distance and participation are both related to illusion, within which they initially follow an order since distance is replaced by participation. This process is not linear but alternating because the recipient can change from distance to participation and back to distance in an endless regress (e.g. when pausing or reloading a game), or simply move from distance to participation (e.g. when finishing a game in one playthrough). If no progression is made, the recipient does not participate in the illusion.

Video games in general demand from the player to acknowledge the "as if" nature of the game-world and the readiness to take part in the make-believe. Only then it is possible that they immerse themselves in the illusion created by the game. An example that illustrates this argument is the ending of *BioShock* [15], when it is revealed that Jack has been used by Atlas and manipulated with the phrase 'Would you kindly' to fulfill the orders he is given. In this sense, the game admits that the avatar is moved by another entity – by Atlas within the story-world, yet also by the player outside of it. Despite this bold admission, *BioShock* nevertheless creates an image of characters and of a coherent game-world. Although the concept of agency is made explicit, the illusion constructed in the game still persists.

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[8] Similar concepts are Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" [9], Kendall L. Walton's "make-believe" [10], Peter Lamarque's "Thought Theory" [11], and, yet more extensive, Wayne C. Booth's "fictional pact" [12]. These theories were developed to describe the relationship between a fictional text and the reader, yet for video games, the situation is entirely different, mainly due to the agency of the player in the creation of the story. In order to avoid terminological ambiguities, Wolf's concepts of distance and participation are therefore more beneficial to a description of the potential interaction with illusion.

One of the questions of the present paper is how this preparedness to accept the fictional illusion of the game is affected if a game occurs within this game. The consideration is that the game's illusion and its difference from the real world are emphasised if a system of a similar or even the same structure is presented within it. It appears, however, that players are still willing to accept the game-world despite the fact that it is marked as invention. In order to explore this argument, I will be looking at video games of a specific type. The games I am considering are narrative video games,[9] i.e. games that create a linear or branching story either through language or through aspects of world-creation. These games are considered because they can potentially generate a strong fictional illusion while simultaneously possessing various modes how to call this illusion into question by inserting games within their own fictive worlds. Additionally, the narrative presented in the game-world needs to be doubled based on an insertion of another game in the story-world, either one that resembles the nature of the embedding game or one that is different from it. If these two criteria are fulfilled, it is possible to explore the various functions games within games can have. Games that are not considered, on the other hand, are those that are collections of games, such as *Mario Party* [17], which is a compilation of minigames. Before the analysis of interlacing fictional levels in exemplary video games can be conducted, however, it is necessary to define fictional levels as well as what effect they have on our perception of illusion.

3   The Interlacing of Fictional Levels

Any artefact that contains more than one fictional level unavoidably signposts its own fictionality. Although this might initially suggest that the fictional illusion and the recipient's willingness to participate in it run the risk of being denied, it actually has the effect that a critical discourse about the nature of the artefact and fictionality can be initiated in the artefact itself. This process is termed "self-reflexivity", yet in literary studies, which has, to date, most comprehensively researched this tendency, it is referred to as "metafiction". Since the interest of the present paper lies with the interlacing of fictional levels in video games, it is appropriate to use these two terms synonymously and, hence, metafiction is discussed in more detail in order to determine what is meant by self-reflexive games. In her seminal work *Metafiction*, Patricia Waugh has proposed that

> *Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. [13]

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[9] Although I focus on narrative video games, illusion is also possible in non-narrative games. In *Tetris* [16], for example, players are still willing to accept that the purpose of the world they enter is to put blocks of various shapes atop each other. However, no (complex) narrative is told.

In the context of my paper, several points of this definition will be relevant, yet some need to be modified in order to be appropriate for video games. Firstly, the notion "fictional writing" can be extended to "fictional artefact" because metafiction (as a term and as a concept) can be realised in other media besides literature; the only characteristic that needs to be given is that their subject matter is fictional (as is the case with video games). Secondly, this process of self-reflexivity must not be accidental, but intended by the programmer or the author of the narrative level in the game. Thirdly, it is not obligatory that the relationship between fiction and reality is explicitly thematised as Waugh would suggest; rather, through critically engaging with world-creating processes of the illusion and how they are perceived, questions about the creation and perception of reality are implied. This argument links to the fourth point, namely that this suggests that our perceived reality is not objective and might even be fictionalised in the process of perception.

These preliminary considerations therefore suggest that any engagement with the fictionality of the game in the video game itself draws attention to its illusion (in contrast to reality). One mode to achieve this is through the device of multiplying the fictional levels of the video game. In other words, as soon as a game occurs in a game, the "gameness" of the macrogame is emphasised. In the following section, I will define, from a theoretical perspective, two modes how these games can be embedded in the main game, namely Chinese-box structures[10] and the *mise-en-abyme*. Again, I will draw on literary studies to lay the foundation for the focus of my paper, namely the exploration how video games can multiply their fictional levels and what effects this has on the perception of the main game.

Games within games constitute one or more gaming level(s) separate from the main game to establish an analogy to the embedding game.[11] They can be potent metafictional devices that render the act of gaming by making it a central part of the game itself. The represented world-creating process of a game has the effect that the artefactuality of the game it appears in can be commented on without necessarily having to state that it is a game; the illusion of the game-world can still be maintained. With regard to literature, Dorrit Cohn states that such multi-layered narratives constitute an 'interior […] metalepsis that occurs between two levels of the same story' [20]. For video games, this means that the avatar can play the game in the game (sometimes even by playing another avatar), thus moving from one fictional plane to another, while the player still plays the avatar.

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[10] Brian McHale describes narrative structures of 'forking paths' as 'nesting or embedding, as in a set of Chinese boxes or Russian *babushka* dolls' [18]. Wolf [5] also speaks of "Chinese-box structure". This metaphor is adopted here since it depicts the relationship between the individual fictional levels and their interdependence.

[11] These added levels can but need not be hypodiegetic. Games within games are hypodiegetic if they possess their own narrative elements, i.e. if they fulfill all elements of narrative as defined by Gerald Prince: 'The representation (as product and process, object and act, structure and structuration) of one or more real or fictive events communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two, or several (more or less overt) narratees' [19]. The inclusion of *Maniac Mansion* in *Day of the Tentacle* generates a hypodiegetic narrative structure due to the minigame's fulfilment of Prince's definitional aspects, while the game of connecting pipes in *BioShock* does not.

Analogous to literature, two forms of games within games can be distinguished: the Chinese-box structure, where the embedded game only possesses a weak link to the structure the embedding game, and the *mise-en-abyme*, where the second game level strongly resembles the first; both metafictionally signpost the "gameness" and fictionality of the embedding game. Games within games are used for 'foregrounding the ontological dimension of recursive structures' [18]. An embedded game explicitly alludes to its own and implicitly to the fictionality and "gameness" of the embedding game, hence an analogy to the latter's relationship to reality can be drawn, namely that it is absorbed in fiction and ludic structures.

The function of including a game within a game can be linked to Michel Foucault's emphasis on the importance of mirrors in art.[12] He argues that they 'play a duplicating role: they repeated the original contents of the picture, only inside an unreal, modified, contracted, concave space' [23]. Mirrors distort reality because of the spectator's awareness that they present a reflection, that they do not show the actual world, but only a representation of it. The same holds true for games: a game within a game is a reflection of the procession of the game as such, hence also of the embedding game. What McHale states for the *mise-en-abyme* is also true of Chinese-box structures: 'mise-en-abyme is another form of short-circuit, another disruption of the logic of narrative hierarchy, every bit as disquieting as a character stepping across the ontological threshold to a different narrative level' [18].

How this ludic underpinning is foregrounded through incorporating games within games is the focus of the next section, explained in recourse to exemplary video games possessing the characteristics defined above.

4   Games Within Games

Based on the discussion of fictional illusion and the theory of games within games, I will now discuss various modes of embedded games, their functions, and their effects in recourse to exemplary games. I will work on a spectrum, meaning that on the one side we find embedded games that do not have an impact on the gameplay of the macrogame, while on the other side we can locate embedded games that are inherent (or maybe even necessary) elements of the game they appear in. On both ends of the spectrum, the games can either be realised as Chinese-box structures (frequent) or as *mises-en-abyme* (infrequent). The first section of the analysis below is therefore concerned with games within games that do not add anything to the macrogames but they are a nice addition to the embedding game. The second section focuses on minigames that benefit or are even necessary for the macrogame, for example through obtaining bonuses or upgrades, having to be played in order to achieve 100% completion, or even through being an essential aspect of the macrogame.

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[12] The metaphor of the mirror is later also utilised by Lucien Dällenbach: 'the *mise en abyme* is any internal mirror reflecting the narrative as a whole by simple, repeated or specious duplication' [21]. Mieke Bal suggests to abandon the term *mise-en-abyme* as it does not depict 'the totality of an image, but only a part of the text, or a certain aspect. […] I suggest we use the term "mirror-text" for *mise en abyme*' [22].

4.1   Games Within Games Without an Impact on the Gameplay of the Macrogame

The first category of minigames that is analysed are those that do not have to be played in order for the macrogame to progress. Nevertheless, since they constitute a second fictional level in the embedding game, they indirectly emphasise the "gameness" of the macrogame. The reason for this is that these minigames often follow very simple structures or resemble games we know as games (such as hide and seek); we approach them in an attitude of a game, while the embedding game might nevertheless be perceived as different from it. In order to develop, research, and exemplify this argument further, various minigames occurring in macrogames are analysed by exploring the relationship between the two (or more) fictional levels they constitute.

The first examples to be considered are games appearing in a classical video game series: *Grand Theft Auto*.[13] Of the series, the games *GTA Vice City* [24],[14] *GTA San Andreas* [25], *GTA IV* [26], *GTA V* [27], and *GTA Online* [28] contain arcade-style video games that are found in various places, such as bars, restaurants, clothes shops, 24/7s, etc. These minigames are based on real video games, wherefore they immediately evoke a point of reference and an association with "gameness". An example is the game *Let's Get Ready to Bumble* found in *GTA San Andreas*, in which the player assumes the role of a bee that has to collect flowers. This 2-D platform game is based on Tehkan's classic arcade game *Bomb Jack* [29], where the aim is to collect red bombs. This strong intertextual link to a game that exists in the player's reality has the effect that the "gameness" of the game within the game is strongly emphasised; at the same time, however, the illusion created by the macrogame is not abandoned. Rather, it is supported because the player is confronted with the fictional nature of the minigame, which stands in contrast to the macrogame, and the latter is perceived as a framework of reality in which the embedded game exists.

Another example from *GTA IV*, which also occurs in the two add-ons *GTA IV: The Lost and Damned* [30] and *GTA IV: The Ballad of Gay Tony* [31], is *QUB³D*.[15] The aim of the game is to match up four or more blocks of the same colour before the screen fills up. This game is inspired by *Puyo Puyo* [32] and partly also by *Tetris* [16]. Both games can be seen as iconic and are associated with the early days of an emerging gaming culture. These two minigames as well as the others found in the games of the *GTA* series share some features with classic arcade games, such as straightforward objectives, simple (2-D) graphics, a retro style, and lists with high scores.[16] Furthermore, the games do not add anything to the advancement of the macrogame, but are simply a pastime. Still, the illusion of the embedding game remains intact (i.e. it is not overtly presented as a game) and it is situated on a different plane from the embedded game.

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[13] Abbreviated to *GTA* hereafter.

[14] The minigames in *GTA Vice City* are unplayable.

[15] The game also occurs in *GTA V*, yet it is not playable.

[16] The high scores can be seen and are saved on every machine of the same type. This would not happen in reality unless the machines are connected.

Fallout 4 [33] contains a game called *Red Menace*, which has similar effects on our perception of fictional levels as do the games in *GTA*, partly due to its intertextuality. The game is highly allusive of *Donkey Kong* [34] but instead of a gorilla it features an alien. It is played on a terminal or a Pip-Boy and the player collects the cartridge in Vault 111. Similar to the arcade games in *GTA*, this game is physically separate from the macrogame, meaning that it has to be accessed through a device. This has the effect that its "gameness" is immediately exposed, thus requiring an attitude of gaming. A special case of this kind of games within games is presented in LucasArts's *Day of the Tentacle* [35], in which one of the computers contains Lucasfilm Games's *Maniac Mansion* [36]. The game is fully playable for free. The inclusion of this game within the game can be understood as homage to the original title, but also as a self-reflexive comment on the status of games. It is a clear example of metafiction and can be seen as a commentary on the industry, using real-world agents and reframing the first game as precisely that, a game.

Other prominent kinds of games within games are those resembling a puzzle-structure. In *Batman: Arkham City* [37], deciphering plays a prominent role. When using the radio scanner, three unregistered stations can be found, which play rows of numbers. By using cyphers, messages can be decoded, such as "Fear will tear Gotham to shreds" uttered by Scarecrow. This message foreshadows the role he will play in *Batman: Arkham Knight* [38], yet it does not add anything to the embedding macrogame. Similar to this puzzle-game, forms of gambling are frequently incorporated in macrogames. *Red Dead Redemption* [39] contains many different gambling games, such as poker and horseshoe throwing. A prominent example is *Liar's Dice*; the player gets five dice, which s/he needs to shake in a cup, put them on a table, secretly look at, and say how many of a certain number they have. In order to beat the others, they need to bluff and lie. If you get caught, you lose. This game can be played for as long as the player wants, yet it is not necessary for the progression of the macrogame. While they do not directly contribute to the main game, such puzzle and gambling games have the effect that the player's analytical skills are trained, which, in turn, can be useful in the macrogame.

Sometimes, games appear within games that are not playable, wherefore it can be argued that they are not minigames in the strictest sense of the term. However, since they certainly foreground "gameness" by evoking a sense in the player that they are different from the game-world they appear in, they are worth further consideration in the context of the present paper. *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* [40] features a narrative sequence where Elena Fisher introduces Nathan Drake to the original *Crash Bandicoot* [41]. It is unplayable for the player but since we are aware that it is a game, we nevertheless approach it in a game-like attitude. By including this game in the macrogame, it is possible to present a critical analysis of the gaming culture from within the game itself, particularly when Drake declares 'I don't know why people get into video games' [40]. This ironic, self-reflexive comment on the attitude towards games as a pastime stays within the fictional illusion of *Uncharted*'s game-world, wherefore players are not encouraged to move from participation to distance.

Minigames without an impact on the gameplay of the macrogame are additions that allow for a critical engagement with the status of games and gaming from within a game. They can therefore be seen as a mode of theorisation through practice because

they can be used as testing grounds for ludic elements of the game itself, while simultaneously allowing the player to observe the act of playing from a position external to it. In this sense, such games within games are elements that emphasise the illusion created by games without abandoning it.

4.2 Games Within Games with an Impact on the Gameplay of the Macrogame

Unlike the minigames discussed above, the minigames in this section are an inherent part of their macrogame, while the game they are embedded in still consists of a coherent story, thereby being different from "Party Games" such as *Mario Party* [3]. Since they are marked by such a tight connection to the game they appear in, they differently emphasise the existence of fictional levels in a game in contrast to minigames without an impact on the gameplay of the macrogame. The examples below all support the argument that the illusion created by a game-world need not be abandoned only because the "gameness" of the macrogame is laid bare by emphasising the "gameness" of the minigames. How various manifestations of games within games can do so shall now be discussed in detail.

Games of *The Legend of Zelda*[17] [42] series contain many minigames of different shape and form. They all share that they are inherent parts of the game they appear in; they thus resemble the structure of their macrogames because one of the core characteristics of the *Zelda* series is their puzzle structure. That is to say, *Zelda* consists of a series of compulsory minigames (mainly located in dungeons and shrines) that are framed by an overarching narrative (Link has to help Princess Zelda to fight Ganon (dorf) and free Hyrule). Furthermore, these minigames reward the player either with Pieces of Heart or with upgrades. Generally, the minigames can be grouped into three major categories: (1) simulations of real-life activities, such as fishing or shooting galleries,[18] (2) games resembling "classic" analog games, such as hide and seek, and (3) games of gambling and luck, such as lottery or the treasure chest game.

A minor category of more complex games can be added, which often share features of the three major categories. An example is the *STAR Game* in *Twilight Princess* [43]. The aim is to collect light orbs, which are suspended in the air, in order to be rewarded with Quiver upgrades. The game comes in three levels, which have to be completed consecutively and this can only be accomplished if Link possesses a Clawshot and a Double Clawshot[19] because otherwise light orbs that are out of reach cannot be collected. In the third stage of the game, Link has to beat his personal best time. The game thus comes with a number of premises and features: Link needs to be in possession of two items, which already need skill to be collected; the game is a combination of the three categories of games described above because it is a blend of luck and skill as well

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[17] Abbreviated to *Zelda* hereafter.

[18] It is important to note that for Link, these activities are real-life practices, wherefore they are termed "simulations" and not "games".

[19] A Clawshot is a latching device with which Link can hang off suspended objects such as trees or walls. A Double Clawshot allows him to shoot a second latch once hanging on the first.

as classical game features and real-life simulations. The *STAR Game* is not imperative for the successful completion of *Twilight Princess*, but the reward in form of a Giant Quiver allows Link to hold up to one hundred arrows, making it easier to defeat more difficult enemies.

Another popular example, in which one particular minigame plays a central role since it massively contributes to the success of the macrogame, is *Final Fantasy VIII* [44]. *Triple Triad* is a card game that forms a sidequest. It is played on a 3x3 board and the aim is to capture the other player's cards by putting one of a higher rank next to theirs. These cards can then be refined into items through Quezacotl's[20] card mod ability, making it easier to obtain rare items; the game therefore has an impact on the gameplay of the macrogame. This minigame has become so popular that it has been transformed into an independent game that is playable outside *Final Fantasy VIII* (and other games of the series containing the game). This postulates a very rare case of a minigame because besides constituting an additional fictional plane within the macrogame, it also establishes a separate fictive world, thus becoming its own main game, while it is still strongly associated with its original *Final Fantasy* game-world.

Minigames can serve the purpose of a training ground for skills needed in the macrogame. The puzzle-platform game *Catherine* [45], which focuses on the protagonist Vincent Brooks, is played in two modes – a daytime sequence following social simulations and a nighttime sequence consisting of nightmares. The daytime sequence takes place in the Stray Sheep bar, where Vincent can play the *Rapunzel* minigame, which simulates the gameplay of the nighttime sequence. By including the structure of one aspect of the game in another part of the very game, a *mise-en-abyme* is created, which emphasises the act of playing from a meta-perspective. A similar situation can be observed in *Far Cry 3* [46]. Comparable to the gambling games in *Red Dead Redemption* discussed above, *Far Cry 3* incorporates poker, yet this time with an immediate effect on the game itself. It contains tutorials where you can learn how to play poker in a very realistic setting created by a tense atmosphere in a saloon. The newly learned skill is not initially needed to succeed in the game, but poker is also contained in the ending, making it easier for the player who has practiced. The secondary game level created by the embedded game hence has an impact on the primary game level of *Far Cry 3*, yet not to the effect that the illusion of either of them is running the risk of being abandoned. Rather, the tight embeddedness of the minigame has the effect that it is not immediately perceived as separate from the main game, but as an integral element of it.

The final category of games within games that shall be of interest here are those following a puzzle structure. In *BioShock* [15], some vending machines allow for the player to play a minigame where they have to connect pipes to form a continuous steam outlet. The reward takes the form of discounts on weapons and ammunition. The faster the steam moves, the harder it gets to connect the pipes in time, but also the higher the discounts are. Although the minigame is not vital for the progression of the macrogame, it nevertheless has positive impacts on it, such as the possibility to gain cheaper access to better weapons. A puzzle-structure minigame is also found in *LEGO Star*

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[20] In *Final Fantasy VIII*, Quezacotl is a winged Guardian Force.

Wars [47], yet with a different status regarding its relationship to the macrogame. One of the doors in the hallway on Kamino leads to a room where a puzzle has to be solved. If successful, the floor becomes a disco, playing a disco version of the *Star Wars* theme song. Although this Easter Egg[21] does not immediately impact the macrogame, it is needed to achieve 100% completion. These two examples of puzzle-structure minigames share that they follow a constitution that differs from that of the main game. Furthermore, they are very obviously presented as games, drawing particular attention to their characteristics of "gameness". They therefore have the effect that the illusion of the fictive world presented by the game is strengthened, inviting the player to participate in the make-believe.

5 Conclusion

As the analysis of the two categories of minigames has shown, games within games emphasise their "gameness" in a much stronger mode than the macrogames do. One possible explanation is that macrogames actually want to disguise the fact that they are games by creating an illusion that masks their unreality. It is also notable that minigames do not have the effect that the illusion of the macrogame is laid bare or even destroyed. Rather, characteristics of games can be presented up close without risking that the players abandon their willingness to take part in the illusion. This is true for both categories of games within games analysed above, namely games that do not add anything to the progression or achievements in the macrogame and those games that do.

What, then, can we learn about the fictional levels of video games through looking at minigames and their relationships to the macrogames they appear in? Firstly, that video games generally create illusions (similar to literature or film) that players are willing to immerse themselves in, at least for the time of playing. Secondly, by presenting a game within a game, the concept of "gameness" can be evaluated from an interior perspective, thus allowing for a critical engagement with characteristics of games. And thirdly, despite inserting a second fictional game layer within a game, the illusion created by the macrogame is still intact. As a final note it can therefore be stated that minigames constitute a practical approach to the formation of a games theory.

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[21] Easter Eggs – "treasures" hidden within games – need not be games *per se*. They can be, for example, extra money as in *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* [48], where a hidden room, "The Chris Houlihan Room" [49], contains extra Rupees. While Easter Eggs need not be games, their discovery follows game-like structures because they are hidden and not actually part of the main game. Their detection is akin to a treasure hunt and very often treasures are awaiting the inquisitive player.

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