

A game is a game is a game.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, self-referentiality seems to have occurred as a trend among game designers. Games such as *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015), *The Stanley Parable* (Wreden/Galactic Café 2013), *The Talos Principle* (Croteam 2014), and *Papers Please* (Pope/3909 2014) all in different ways reflect on themselves and the nature of game play. Self-reflexive games have also enjoyed attention in academic circles (e.g. Ferri et al 2015; Gualeni 2015; Fassone, 2015; Giapone 2015), latest they have been under scrutiny in a special issue of the Italian Journal of Game Studies. However, such analyzes tend to rest on proceduralist arguments locating signification internally in the game, on the level of game mechanics. This paper will discuss the idea of meta-games and suggest a broader conception of what meta-games are that includes not only the game object, but also the player and the discourse in which it is interpreted.

This paper asks the question of how to understand the notion of meta-game. To do this, the paper will draw on the concept of meta-pictures developed by art historian J.W.T. Mitchell. Mitchell (1994) distinguishes between three different classes of meta-pictures: First, pictures about themselves, second, pictures about pictures that are different of kind, and finally dialectical pictures that are somehow ambiguous or multistable. In the last class, the pictures are not as explicitly meta-pictures than in the former two. Instead they are “mysterious objects whose identity seems so mutable and yet so absolutely singular and definite (Mitchell 1994, 48). Importantly, the self-referentiality of this last class of pictures lies not only in the picture itself but instead depends on its insertion into a reflection upon the nature of visual representation.

Applied to games we find three classes of meta-games. A game such as *The Beginner's Guide* can serve as an example of the first class of meta-games, games about themselves. This game in a very explicit manner represents its own production and the idea of game designer as ‘auteur’ e.g. through the constant presence of the voice of the self-proclaimed designer that seems almost indifferent to the player. In the second class of games we can highlight the *BioShock* series (2K Boston/Irrational Games 2007-13). The *BioShock* games contain several in-game mini-games ranging from shooting galleries, strongman games and slot machines. While far less insisting examples of self-referentiality than the first class of meta-games, these mini-games - being situated in the steampunk environment of the *BioShock* series but at the same time being nested inside contemporary games and played on technologically advanced platforms – allows for a

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reflection upon the development of technology but also represents simultaneously the ‘otherness’ and ‘sameness’ of these two kinds of games. Like Mitchell’s third class of meta-pictures, the remaining class of meta-games contains games that are not formally representations of themselves or more generally of games. Instead their meta-ness rely on the way the player make-sense of them. They are thus not themselves strictly self-referential, but ambiguous and open offering a potential for the player to reflect upon and enter into a dialogue with the game. This last point is important as the ‘power’ of this meta-ness lies not inherent in the game-object but instead appear in the relationship between player and game. In order for the dialogue between player and game to emerge, this paper suggests as examples of this class of meta-games, games that at an immediate level seem meaning-less: games that are not ‘about’ something or that are ‘about’ anything. The *Frog Fractions* ‘game series’ serves as an example of this third class of meta-games. *Frog Fractions* (Jim Crawford 2012) claims to be a game about fractions. However, as serious game it makes little sense and teaches absolutely nothing about fractions. The enterprising player, who will not immediately leave the game but instead explores the limits of it, a nested game is revealed literally below the surface of the first game. When looking at this class of meta-games and in particular this specific case, it is not enough to consider the game alone but also the context in which it appears. This is can be illustrated with the case of ‘*Frog Fractions 2*’. Upon the success of the first *Frog Fractions* game, the developer announced an upcoming sequel but simultaneously revealed that it would be secretly published nested inside another game not associate with neither the original *Frog Fractions* game or its developer. This spawned an alternate reality game that evolved in interaction between players, game and a number of indie-game developers. Finally, after having scrutinized numerous games, players eventually found ‘*Frog Fractions 2*’, nested inside the game *Glittermitten Grove* (Mostly Tigerproof 2016). What we see from this example is different kind of games somehow nested into one another and relying on players to engage in an inquiry about what these games are.

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