

On the absence of imaginative resistance in games (or, Why game players aren't psychopaths).

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ABSTRACT

I introduce David Hume's notion of "imaginative resistance" and offer a brief summary of currently available understandings and explanations of imaginative resistance. I examine these in order to determine how they distinguish, if they do, imagination resistance in fiction from imaginative resistance in games. I find imaginative resistance of the sort found in fiction is relatively rare in games and speculate as to why this is the case. I conclude that while fiction is characterized by a suspension of disbelief, games are characterized by a more actively reinforced disbelief. This conclusion has significant implications regarding the function of imagination and belief in games: games and fiction engage belief in different ways. Imagination in games appears more powerfully engaged, and belief in games appears more voluntarily engaged (i. e., less "correlated with truth") than in fiction.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

Game studies, humanities track (aesthetic, philosophical, and ontological aspects of games and play)

General Terms

Theory.

Keywords

belief, fiction, games, imagination, imaginative resistance, make-belief.

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of "imaginative resistance" is commonly attributed to "Of the Standards of Taste" (1760) by David Hume [4], who describes that notion this way:

...where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation, this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition.

While human aesthetic preference (or "Taste"), according to Hume, is governed by "rules of art" rather than by reference to "exact ... geometric truth," human aesthetic preference is, in some specific instances, imaginatively limited.

In more modern expression, the notion of imaginative resistance implies that works of fiction -- toward which we adopt a very lenient attitude regarding the truth of their fictional content -- are given little (to no) leniency regarding the truth of their fictional *moral* content. Thus, while we, as readers of fiction, might readily accept time travel, magical unicorns, and giants atop beanstalks as provisionally, contextually, and fictionally true, we are not, given roughly the same circumstances, willing to accept the goodness of murder or the righteousness of villainy as equally true. Our imagination, in other words, "resists" claims of fiction to the extent these claims breach pre-existing moral standards.

If imaginative resistance implies that morals are not subject to the conventional authority we grant authors of fiction, then, in the 18th century, we might well have taken this as an indication that morals are universal, or innate, or otherwise prioritized over art. However, since Hume's day -- and, in fact, quite recently during the last decade -- there has been renewed interest in imaginative resistance as an indication of more than this: How human belief works.

2. THE CONTEMPORARY VIEW

Though contemporary discussion acknowledges that imaginative resistance occurs, in some cases, much as Hume describes it, this discussion has broadened and refined a more nuanced version.

This version's newly realized breadth includes fictional content other than moral content. As Todd [11] notes, "...the problem [of imaginative resistance] is rather more widespread, affecting a range of different types of concept and proposition, normative and non-normative alike..." (p. 188). This widespread problem includes (as representative examples drawn from an extensive list provided by Weatherson [12]) -- the problem of the attribution of fictional mental states and the problem of thick moral concepts.

The problem of the attribution of fictional mental states (according to Weatherson) is one like this: "Although he believed he loved Juliet, and acted as if he did, Romeo did not really love Juliet, and actually wanted to humiliate her by getting her to betray her family." Despite this interpretation of Romeo's mental state being in no overt conflict with the fiction of *Romeo and Juliet*, we resist its imaginative lure.

The puzzle of thick moral concepts (again according to Weatherson) is one like this: "The cowardly Macduff called on the brave Macbeth to fight him face to face" -- an imaginative belief that would require us to uneasily continue to think of Macduff as cowardly.

In addition to acknowledging non-moral content subject to imaginative resistance (such as that within the examples above), current discussion also acknowledges that fictional content, of itself, may be insufficient to explain all instances of imaginative resistance. Consequently, some have shifted the cause of imaginative resistance from content to author. Levy [5], for instance, believes that imaginative resistance is most fundamentally caused by what sort of fictional authority is -- or is not -- present: i. e. whether fictional content is “authority-independent” or “authority-dependent.” Along this same line, Gendler [2] proposes to find cause of imaginative resistance within “narrator doubling” -- a circumstance in which we “fail to follow the author’s lead in make-believing what the author wants to make fictional...[because] she is providing us with a way of looking at *this* world which we prefer not to embrace” (p. 79).

Gendler further proposes to distinguish between an *inability* to imagine fictional content and a more resolute *unwillingness* to do so. Positioning imaginative resistance as resulting from unwillingness is then but a hair from arguing it away entirely -- i. e., perhaps not the result of purposeful unwillingness so much as ignorant laziness. Given a more industrious application, perhaps, our imagination might prove suppler, more resilient, and more productive when confronted by circumstances composed (or contrived) by philosophers wishing to convince us that those circumstances induce imaginative resistance.

Thus, while imaginative resistance is a phenomenon noted by many, it remains a phenomenon with several different, often competing, explanations and understandings. These explanations and understandings tend to expand the original concept to include other than fictional moral content, and, simultaneously, to question whether imaginative resistance is as involuntary and unavoidable as Hume first posed it.

3. BELIEF AND MAKE-BELIEF

Ultimately, contemporary versions of imaginative resistance make strong reference to a more general faculty of *belief*. The human imagination is therein seen, at least in part, as requiring some threshold of belief in critical components of fiction (either content components or authorial components) in order to avoid ‘resisting’ the imagining of that fiction. However, the nature of this belief (and why it is sometimes in opposition to our imaginations) remains uncertain.

Nichols [8], for instance, explicitly points to the indeterminacy of this relationship between belief and imagination (or, synonymously hereafter, between belief and *make-belief*) as the consequence of “a single code” within a shared cognitive mechanism, wherein one function is occasionally and unavoidably conflated with the other. And Meskin and Weinberg [6] further speculate on imaginative resistance as an indication of embedded flaws in the intertwined cognitive clockwork of belief and make-belief.

3.1 Belief and make-belief in games

It is this yet undetermined relationship between belief and make-belief that I wish to dwell on further in order to examine how these two function within games. And I wish to prime this analysis with this claim about “believing at will,” found in Gendler [2]:

We do not seem to be able to bring ourselves to believe arbitrary things at will, and at least one of the reasons for this is that beliefs aim -- at least most beliefs mostly aim -- at something that is generally independent of our wills, namely, something roughly correlated with truth. So it is a

nonaccidental fact about belief that, given the sorts of things we expect beliefs to do, believing at will just could not be one of the ways that we generally come to form beliefs. (p. 59)

Gendler asserts this as “undoubtedly correct.” However, while this may be “generally” true in some sense, there are important complications unaccounted for in Gendler’s claim -- most particularly the complication of *disbelief*. For, while belief may well often appear unwillful and “correlated with truth,” it is equally often only indirectly so. Wherever belief is challenged and, as a consequence of that challenge, adopted, it must be accompanied by disbelief in some alternative. Therefore, in such circumstances, belief “correlated with truth” is only made possible with the precedent of more willful *disbelief*.

Obviously, where Gendler says that we are unable “to bring ourselves to believe arbitrary things at will,” she does not mean this to apply to make-belief, but rather to distinguish make-belief from belief more generally. For, in fact, we obviously bring ourselves to believe arbitrary things all the time in the context of reading fiction and (perhaps even more so) in the context of playing a game. And, in each case, some level of disbelief seems required.

As regards fiction, for instance, there is a well-known account of the “willing suspension of disbelief” -- as advanced by Samuel Coleridge [1]. Somewhat in parallel, as regards games, there is the well-known notion of a “lusory attitude” necessary for game play -- as advanced by Bernard Suits [10].

Suits’s lusory attitude is willfully voluntary and willfully accepting of otherwise arbitrary game rules. Within the grip of this lusory attitude, the game player chooses to believe precisely what is necessary to believe for game play to take place. And, just as is the case with belief in fictional content, belief in the seriousness of games requires willful *disbelief* in order to suspend any alternative and contradictory belief. Threatening alternative beliefs might include, for instance, a belief that time travel, unicorns, and giants cannot exist -- or a belief that game rules and objectives are not as equally binding, nor game objectives as equally valuable, as non-game rules and objectives.

Now, most admit this of imagination and make-belief: that willfulness is possible, even expected; but Gendler (and other non-voluntarists) steadfastly deny willfulness is essential to more fundamental, real-world belief. Let us call this real-world belief *true-belief* (in accord with Gendler’s account that it is truth-dependent).

Precisely how “truth” is correlated with true-belief is then left unclear in Gendler’s account; but, even more bothersome is whether or not will-dependent make-belief does not simultaneously require *true-disbelief* -- i. e., a true-belief that is not “correlated with truth.”

3.2 Imaginative resistance in games

The most obvious candidate for inducing imaginative resistance in games is deviant moral content. If imaginative resistance in games operates in parallel with that in fiction, then game content dealing with murder, genocide, slavery, and racial prejudice as acceptable practices should elicit some level of imaginative resistance during game play.

Games that are in part historical simulations (e. g., *Civilization* (MicroProse, 1991) frequently involve reference to slavery and war, in many cases positioning these as necessary to engage imag-

inatively (i. e., fully, creatively, and skillfully) to play the game successfully.

And, of course, many widely popular and acclaimed digital games are variations of a first-person shooter template, in which the game player willfully chooses to “kill” something. Game fiction and backstories employ a variety of glosses (beyond that of historical precedent) to justify this “killing”: self-defense being perhaps the most common and morally defensible. However, some isolated games are quite explicit in justifying in-game killings (including rape and torture) with reference to either morally ambiguous contexts (e. g., the wantonness of *Postal* (Ripcord Games, 1997) or the grotesquery of *Manhunt*, (Rockstar, 2003)) or unabashedly morally deviant contexts (e. g., the perversion of *RapeLay* (Illusion, 2006)). Even in these most extreme (and relatively rare) cases, however, it is unclear whether games evoke the same sort of imaginative resistance as does fiction.

Indeed, the prevailing assumption seems to be that they do not. Sigart [9], for instance, in his analysis of games as a useful means to explore and reflect on otherwise morally repugnant acts and desires, does not consider imaginative resistance a significant obstacle to doing so. And, religious, political, and cultural groups (e. g., PETA) have protested objectionable moral content in games with objections based on the assumption that immoral content in games does not, of itself, induce imaginative resistance -- or at least not sufficient imaginative resistance to prevent gamers from adopting whatever belief game content might entail. In these contexts, games are conceived as a particularly seductive form of fiction, involving activity and participation in which pre-existing belief -- including pre-existing moral belief -- is directly confronted and potentially swayed.

This trope of games as an especially effective form of realistic fiction -- in which lessons are learned and beliefs are adopted -- is a useful one both for those objecting to game content and for those designing and promoting games as educational tools. But is it an accurate representation of imagination in games?

3.3 Imaginative resistance – or imposition?

When applied specifically to digital games, the extended reasoning behind this trope might go something like this: The effectiveness of the digital game’s ability to affect player belief is abetted by game play accessing physical and motor control mechanisms of the game player.

Because the reflexes and technical knowledge needed to fly a plane or to shoot a gun may be considered (relatively) morally neutral, the process of learning to do these things through automation and habitualization -- and being rewarded for learning to do them skillfully -- more easily leads to disassociating these activities from their real-world applications and, related, from their real-world implications. This circumstance, the story thereafter goes, provides an opportunity for Sigart’s moral “reflection” [9] or, more generically, Grodal’s emotional “control” [3].

If we are to go along with this story, then a consequence of disassociating true-belief from in-game decisions and behavior might be that thick moral concepts -- i. e., those involved with imaginative resistance of the sort described earlier in the Weatherson example -- are less likely, within games, to be imaginative problematic. Thus, there may be less imaginative resistance of Macduff’s heroic challenge of Macbeth if the concept of “cowardliness,” along with Macbeth and Macduff and all else in a game, is thrown into the liminal flux of *play*.

The willful disbelief necessary of games (with its accompanying lusory attitude) then does not provide the proper platform for reflection and repose. Rather, make-belief during game play has, by default and in topsy-turvy fashion, *greater* authority than true-belief. Or, in other words, in circumstances where the fiction *refers to* the real world (creating instances of conflict and imaginative resistance), the game *replaces* the real world. Fiction counters true-belief with *false*-belief; games counter true-belief with *true*-disbelief.

So, for instance, in *Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare, 2003), players make decisions throughout the game that transform their avatar into either a virtuous, “light side” or a wicked, “dark side” Jedi. But these decisions are, for the most part, always equally available to the player, so that any previous “dark” and unethical behavior choice does not necessarily prejudice or preclude any subsequent “light” and ethical behavior choice. And, it is not at all clear that players choose a more virtuous and ethical path through the game because a wicked and unethical path is subject to imaginative resistance; nor do players seem to choose a less (or more) wicked path because they are involuntarily swayed by the game fiction to do so. Rather, based on player comments and discussions regarding such choices, these choices seemed determined as much by disinterested aesthetic preference than by either moral necessity or game fiction *per se*.

In *Knights of the Old Republic* and games similar to it -- such as *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004) -- players make in-game decisions for reasons of consistency and variety as often as ethics and morals. Consistency of player behavior and choice constructs a paragon -- of either virtue or vice -- that is often, in accordance with the design of the game, more powerful in its particular moral realm than any more morally ambivalent character outside that realm. Morally ambivalent (i. e., less behaviorally consistent) characters then are jacks of several in-game trades and masters of none, with their in-game value diminished accordingly.

Further, players commonly play and *replay* a variety of in-game choices -- good and bad, ethical and unethical -- in a spirit of experimentation and exploration. This replay tends to dissociate true-belief from in-game (and/or fictional) belief insofar as belief adopted within the game allows and aids *instrumental* play -- play that has some impact on game consequences regardless of its value and meaning (again, including its moral value and meaning) outside the game.

In some sense, this is rather counter-intuitive: that games, even simulation-based games, are ultimately considered *less real* (i. e., less referential of the real world) -- and thus less likely to prompt imaginative resistance -- by their players than fiction is considered by its readers. This is an especially peculiar conclusion to draw if belief is most fundamentally, as maintained by Gendler and other non-voluntarists, “truth-dependent.” For surely, if real-world belief were truth-dependent, then that true-belief (and its associated truth) would not vary so significantly from game player to fiction reader as to force imaginative resistance on all of one and none of the other.

Emphasizing disbelief in this way to explain how imaginative resistance works differently in fiction and games is rare (though, admittedly, few have considered its function in games at all). However, Moran [7] does recognize a different sort of imagination at work in fiction and other circumstances (which might well include games): i. e., Moran distinguishes between “hypothetical” and “dramatic” imagination.

If this distinction holds, then perhaps belief in games is based on something more akin to hypothetical reasoning than dramatic imagination. And, indeed, instrumental play in games does seem more akin to hypothetical reasoning than does, for instance, *role-play* -- with these two often in conflict in how they guide and determine player choice and make-belief. But, if this explanation were all that were needed, then we might expect to see little (to no) imaginative resistance during the hypothetical reasoning associated with games, whether concerning moral belief or some other.

Two observations seem to deny this possibility of entirely different belief systems governing fiction and games, however. First, games *do* seem to engage some portion of the same (dramatic) imagination that is engaged by fiction. Players are quick to acknowledge this -- perceiving games as most enjoyably something other than mere puzzles solved through abstract and hypothetical reasoning and finding frequent (even if often frustrating) similarities between games and narratives.

Second, there *is*, in some instances, imaginative resistance associated with games. For instance, given knowledge of a game's fiction -- say knowledge of *Manhunt*'s fiction -- some might simply refuse to play (or stop playing) *Manhunt* on that basis alone. However, once engaged with the game and (importantly) under the influence of a lusory attitude, there is a more common imaginative phenomenon associated with games, manifest as a sort of double entendre of imaginative resistance: i. e., a resistance of imaginative resistance. Let us call this, less recursively and confusingly, *imaginative imposition*.

One example of this imaginative imposition lies in parallel with (in that it is the opposite of) Weatherson's earlier example of the problem of the attribution of mental states. While readers of *Romeo & Juliet* are likely to resist attributing Romeo's mental state to any belief of which Romeo is unaware, gamers are likely to *impose* attributing a game component's "mental state" to belief of which the game and its component algorithms and rules are most certainly unaware. Digital game players -- particularly young players -- when commenting on their algorithmic game opponents, are prone to say, "This game doesn't play fair," or "This game is mean." And, in response to player demands, game designers often strive to create digital game opponents with human-like characteristics -- including dumbing down grandmaster-level chess AI programs to make (stereotypically human) blunders.

The persistence and universality of anthropomorphism in game design and play indicates a sort of imaginative misstep consistent with imaginative resistance -- i. e., players are unable to either initially or enjoyably imagine their automated game opponents as other than human-like opponents.

Perhaps this, then, is where we should focus our search for imaginative resistance in games: in a resistance, in games, not to immoral but to *inhuman* belief, especially belief outside the range of our normal expectations regarding human social interactions.

This notion finds some support in another of Weatherson's examples evoking imaginative resistance in fiction: the outlandish use of *shape predicates*. Weatherson's specific example here is a fictional account of the conventional shape of a five-fingered maple leaf being considered an *oval* shape (drawn from Yablo [13]). It seems that any imaginative leap that would allow for such belief would be an alien and difficult one. In a game, however, should there be a game rule specifying that maple leaves are, in all re-

spects, equivalent to ovals *during game play*, then we are bound by our voluntary acceptance of those rules to impose whatever imaginative band-aid we can on this matter and play on.

Likewise, in games such as *Postal* and *Manhunt*, the game player's *disbelief* in the game's real-world implications (not the game player's hypothetical reasoning concerning those implications) seems critical to sustaining imaginative game play. The fiction of self-defense used to explain and justify in-game killings -- e. g., the grotesque killings in *Manhunt* -- might be significant in any *reasonable* justification as to why these acts are or are not morally appropriate. But this fiction seems (figuratively and literally) immaterial to imaginative imposition; that is, at some point in extended play, make-belief of the sort commonly found in fiction is superfluous to continued game play: It just doesn't matter. Insofar as the (pseudo-)material components of in-game behavior (e. g., the killings) do not have real-world consequences (e. g., real pain and real death), then our disbelief concerning that behavior is sufficient to sustain play, even in instances where that disbelief may be (in its disregard of game fiction, for instance) unreasonable.

In fiction, *disbelief is suspended* in order to adopt, for however long it lasts, an alternative belief, which we call make-belief. In contrast, in games, *disbelief is adopted* in order to suspend, for however long it lasts, whatever elsewhere we would call true-belief. In this sense, game play is an on-going, active reinforcement of disbelief. During play (and replay), the player kills something and that something does not, in fact, die; the player kills something else and that something else does not, in fact, die; the player kills something else... and so forth. Over time and play of this sort, games tend to hollow out true-belief and replace it with a more functionalist belief system based on instrumental play.

This may be precisely why games can be composed entirely of formal objects, void of true-belief -- or, at the very least, without the necessary accompaniment of the make-belief of narrative fiction (as is the case, for instance, of games like *Tetris*). And it is why role-play, as mentioned earlier, is in some intermediate imaginative position between the reading of fiction (where imaginative resistance is experienced) and the playing of games (where imaginative imposition is asserted). The role-player of fiction brings an overdose of make-belief to the reading of fiction; the role-player of a game brings an underdose of disbelief to the playing of a game.

4. ANOTHER VIEW OF IMAGINATIVE RESISTANCE

Having established a relationship of this sort between fiction and games -- a relation involving true-belief, make-belief, and, most fundamentally, *disbelief* -- it is somewhat easier to generalize the phenomenon of imaginative resistance in fiction. Imaginative resistance in fiction seems not the result of any failure to believe fictional content (based on either specifics of content or authorial authority), but rather the result of a failure to willfully suspend disbelief. In this explanation, imaginative resistance does not indicate a failure of the imagination in the positive; it rather indicates a failure of the imagination in the negative.

This may seem but a semantic difference, but, upon close inspection, offers some insight as how to resolve the original, Humean problem of imaginative resistance.

If so, then how is understanding imaginative resistance as the involuntary persistence of true-belief (which is the conventional un-

derstanding) different from understanding it as an inconsistent and incomplete disbelief? Here it is: Where true-belief is positioned as other than willful, disbelief is more readily positioned as an act of denial and, as an act of denial, an act of *will*. And, even without direct comment on more general faculties of belief, this requires a voluntarist explanation and understanding of disbelief.

Hume's original notion of imaginative resistance functions best -- and perhaps was intended to function best -- as a means of defining the self as composed of an embedded set of moral beliefs uneasily subject to denial (or at least not subject to easy denial during the reading of fiction). This stance, however, ignores the sort of imaginative imposition found in games.

And, indeed, this stance also tends to ignore immoral acts committed by those who, by Hume's standards, should have exhibited some resistance to doing so. That is, if immoral belief is commonly resisted in fiction, why are some unable to resist that belief in the real world? How can we ever imagine such immoral behavior in the face of imaginative resistance? How do the authors of fiction -- those who provoke the reader's imaginative resistance -- avoid that same resistance themselves?

This answer is, conventionally, twofold. First, we divide belief into true-belief (which is *necessarily* true) and make-belief (which is not necessarily true). And then, second, we consider someone who holds true-belief *that is not true* a psychopath.

In games, however, players choose to hold make-belief as *necessarily* true (i. e., through the mechanics of *true-disbelief*), allowing them to avoid imaginative resistance during game play. And we do not normally consider these players psychopaths.

Now, maybe there is some disagreement about this. Maybe we do (or should) consider those who are skilled players of *Postal* or *RapeLay* as immoral psychopaths, even if they hold a belief necessary to play these games *only* during play of these games. Maybe the capacity to adopt true-disbelief regarding immoral content -- even if only temporarily, within the context of games and rules, and under the influence of a luscious attitude -- is an indication of psychopathy. I prefer, however, to think of this as an indication of imagination. And, here, by "imagination," I mean *a willful act of disbelief*.

This self-determined faculty of imagination then seems more powerful -- as demonstrated during game play -- than any that can be resisted during the reading of fiction. And, if so, then we need to understand imaginative resistance in fiction as the same sort of resistance we might have to holding to a diet or denying someone a job: a difficult task, perhaps, but not one that is beyond our capacity to perform and a task that, with practice, we might perform more often and well.

Some might accept this, even if reluctantly, about moral belief. But then some might still have questions about more radical and alien (i. e., "impossible") belief -- belief beyond our cognitive capacity to believe. Perhaps, for instance, the solution I offered earlier to the problem of shape predicates -- an "imaginative band-aid" -- seems one glossed over.

I think this problem, however -- involving "impossible" belief -- is of the same class of problem as this one: How might we come to imagine more than three physical dimensions?

The suggestion offered here is that even if our natural capacity for alien (and/or multi-dimensional) make-belief fails, our natural capacity for disbelief remains open for business. So, through a willful *disbelief* of a three-dimensional existence -- perhaps prompted, in part, by hypothetical reasoning reminiscent of that associated with games -- we might come eventually to believe (even if only in some liminal, game-like state) in strange, alien, and multi-dimensional existences.

If so, then this sort of belief seems to require an imaginative imposition of the sort found in games; it is not easily explained with reference to an imaginative resistance of the sort found in fiction. And, equally so, the aesthetic experience associated with reading fiction -- during which imaginative resistance might be experienced -- must remain necessarily distinct from (and in important ways incompatible with) the aesthetic experience associated with playing games.

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