Playing with Alterity: Overcoming Boundaries of Difference using the Imaginative Empathy of Play

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As partial requirement for:
MA Philosophy: Global and Comparative Perspectives
Leiden University, Faculty of Humanities

Contents

Introduction

The world of today can barely be compared to the world of a century ago. It is larger, more intertwined than ever before, and at the same time smaller, for we are all directly available to one another. Areas that would otherwise have been a mystery – for all intents and purposes another world entirely – can now be reached physically in a matter of hours. If we cannot be physically present, we can access them online. We have opened our doors to the far-off, and now we are faced with the challenge to embrace this multi-cultural world as best we can. As a global humanity we must find ways in which we can live together on a basis of mutual respect and understanding, and learn to navigate the encounters between cultures that occur on an as good as daily basis.

The navigation of the territory between the familiar and the new, of course, hardly ever goes flawlessly, and the cross-cultural encounter is no exception. Especially since the history that brought our worlds together is seeped in imperialism, racism, and an overall tendency to underestimate and sometimes downright dismiss that which is not familiar to us. Even when we live side-by-side, subconscious and ingrained prejudices complicate the encounter between cultures. If we wish to live together in a multi-cultural society, we owe it to ourselves, each other, and especially future generations to develop methods to help us look beyond otherness, and overcome our historical tendencies of subjugating those that are different from us. In this thesis, I will argue for the potential of interactive fiction that is video games as a means to help garner cross-cultural understanding.

I will endeavour to do this by analysing the difficulties of cross-cultural hermeneutics, and posing that, as a fundamentally fictional and experiential medium, video games offer a wide array of tools that can assist people in coming to understand new and possibly strange worlds. As such, this thesis will concern itself with illustrating how video games can help to promote greater cross-cultural understanding, arguing that video games can offer players a playful and empathic way to familiarise oneself with other cultures and reflect upon one's own.

The interactivity and immersion inherent to video games help players to experience another world through a perspective beyond just their own. By utilising this playful medium intelligently, players can attain insights into different cultures that they came by casually through doing something that they already enjoy for the sake of it. Since this project deals with finding a solution to a particular problem, namely the challenges that complicate the cross-cultural encounter, it stands to reason that these challenges must first be identified before potential solutions can be offered.

Hence, the first chapter of this paper will be dedicated to outlining methods and challenges of hermeneutics; the process of interpretation. Since a cross-cultural encounter can be anything from watching the news to having a conversation with a new neighbour, interpretation of underlying meaning plays a central role, and misinterpretation can jeopardise the success of any such encounter. This interpretative challenge grows the greater the differences between the parties are because meaning is partially informed by our personal and contextual identities. I will refer to the works of Wilhelm Dilthey and Robin Collingwood, who have both developed theories of hermeneutics that emphasise the importance of context as meaning-giving. Similar contexts provide similar meaning between people and vice versa. A lack in familiarity thus constitutes a lack in understanding, which poses a problem for the cross-cultural encounter. They suggest a hermeneutic method based on empathy in order to increase our understanding of others.

After having illustrated the challenges of cross-cultural hermeneutics and meaning, I will delve into the ways in which fiction and eventually play, accumulating into the interactive fiction of video games, can offer a toolset to help cultivate familiarity and understanding between cultures. In order to argue for both the functionality and the value of games as a medium I will address three important aspects of the medium, building to the video game from the ground up. In the second chapter, I will illustrate how fiction functions as both a tool to impart knowledge and as an exercise in empathy, which aids the hermeneutic process, drawing on Suzanne Keen's theory of narrative empathy. When engaging with fiction, audiences temporarily abandon their own context in order to step into the alternate world of fiction. This encourages open-mindedness and empathic understanding of others, which both are of vital importance to the hermeneutic process.

In the third chapter, I'll move on play, showing how it, like fiction, demands a certain openness of mind from the player so they can step into the play-world, which makes play very well-suited to learning by doing. This section on play will be largely informed by Johan Huizinga and Miguel Sicart's work on play and playfulness respectively. By drawing special attention to the importance of players' immersive experience of the game-world, I intend to show that games are a powerful medium to help familiarise the player with the unfamiliar on their own terms. In requiring participation from its audience, they are absorbed into the other, the strange, and the new, and provided with tools to make sense of it. As an immersive and interactive medium, video games thus allow players to gain an intuitive understanding of other cultures from within a medium that helps them see it not as threatening but as another version of 'normal'.

1. Hermeneutics: Interpreting Meaning across Time and Space

Whenever agents from different cultures meet and interact, we can effectively speak of a cross-cultural encounter. Each such an encounter is an opportunity for both cultures to grow in familiarity with one another; to learn from another and garner mutual respect and understanding. However, this is only the case provided that they can navigate the challenges which permeate such an encounter. The encounter between different cultures and the individuals therein is marked with a distinct sense of otherness and difference, something which will take up a central position in this dissertation as primary obstacle to be overcome.

Intercultural encounters run the risk of falling prey to misinterpretation thanks to a combination of perceived otherness and a misalignment of meanings. In a multi-cultural world, however, different cultures can no longer avoid living together. Oftentimes, when two cultures are 'forced' to co-exist while lacking in familiarity and understanding, a sense of rivalry permeates their encounter, as one is encroaching upon the cultural territory of the other.[1] Such rivalry tends to cultivate into one party considering itself entitled to the respect and deference of the other since a rivalry, as a relationship based on contest, must have a winner and a loser. However, the idea that one side must prove superior over the other necessarily poses a threat to the wellbeing of a multicultural world. Garnering cross-cultural understanding and, by extension, empathy, should therefore score high on society's list of priorities. The alternative would be assimilating another culture into one's own, as has historically been the preferred method as proven by imperialism and colonialism, thereby eradicating the difference between them.

Cultural assimilation is particularly undesirable because it serves only the assimilator, while both parties partaking in a cross-cultural encounter have a chance to gain mutual enrichment from the other. Instead, the assimilated are expected to transform into something that the assimilator can understand and accept. The assimilated is not allowed to exist as something that does not fit within the norms of the assimilator, let alone be respected by them. Rather than absorbing and thus destroying others in order to eradicate the difference between two parties, we ought to pursue a relationship between cultures that is based on mutual respect and understanding. While there is little

[1] M. Vargas, "On the Value of Philosophy: The Latin American Case," in *Comparative Philosophy*, Vol.1, No.1 (2010) p35

to no issue with *being* different, seeing cultures and their people as as 'alien' and 'strange' will inevitably cultivate a relationship based on otherness and, consequently, assimilation.

This is where the most notable strength of understanding as opposed to assimilation lies: in the potential to regard the other with empathy, cultivate a shared understanding, and in the process learn from one another. By working to overcome the interpretative complications of difference and otherness, we can generate a hermeneutics that revolves around garnering and cultivating greater cross-cultural understanding, and eventually finding mutual enrichment in the other. If the choices of dealing with others are to assimilate the other, eradicating the difference between them by destroying what is unwanted; and embracing pluralism, thereby working toward becoming a world united, not divided by racism, theological warfare, and the destruction of all that is other until everything is the same – I would argue that the latter is by far the more desirable.

In a global and multi-cultural world, we are in an ideal position to engage with others and be enriched by them. While our world may be struggling to overcome the straggling symptoms of colonialism, I sincerely believe that by using the tools available to us today, we can develop methods that make the cross-cultural encounter a non-threatening one, where neither party feels like the other is encroaching upon their cultural 'territory.' In the continuation of this chapter, I intend to first unpack the difficulties surrounding meaning and interpretation, and how meaning depends on context, outlining a main complication of the cross-cultural encounter. Next, I will briefly explain the hermeneutic theories of Dilthey and Collingwood and how their empathy-centred method can help with these problems. Finally, I will draw the connection between this hermeneutic method and games using Vargas' concept of cultural resources.

1.1 Meaning

When we imagine a scenario in which two cultures encounter each other and attempt to make sense of one another, we quickly come to understand a number of aspects of this process that must be taken into account should we wish for this encounter to be mutually beneficial in any way, shape, or form. Let us assume that this is the case: neither party intends to inconvenience the other or engage in any subterfuge. The encounter is simply one between individuals belonging to different cultures, who are trying to understand one another. What may stand in their way to complicate their endeavour to generate cross-cultural understanding?

Let us also assume that they share working knowledge of a language. If the participants originate from different cultures, chances are that one or both individuals would be dealing with

translating from their native language to another that closely approximates the meaning that they wish to convey. If I attempt to explain to someone from the USA how Dutch infrastructure employs special bike lanes to accommodate the vast number of cyclists in most cities, or the extensive network of trains, trams, and subways, we might run into the fact that some words and/or concepts that are a given in the Netherlands have no translation into English. Because of differences in language, history, and customs, both parties are likely to misinterpret the other based on preconceived notions that, to the individual, might appear universal.[2] Since neither party has access to the context and thus nuances of the other's words or actions, they have no choice but to try and understand the other using their own context-informed perspective. However, these parameters are in all likelihood not shared with the other party.

The aforementioned example already illustrates several complications of a cross-cultural encounter. Firstly, there is the problem of language: participants of a cross-cultural encounter are likely to have to converse across a language difference that requires one or both parties to translate what they would wish to say into another language. During this process, meanings of sentences are already liable to change, for few words translate exactly. Some words may have a direct translation because they refer to global concept, but there are nuances that are not explicit.

Not only is the meaning of a word or phrase itself vulnerable to change through translation, it is also open to interpretation by one's conversation partner. If I were to mention dinner and all I mean to say is the meal one has at the end of the day, the meaning that my partner arrives at may differ from mine. To them, a dinner may constitute a time shared with family, part of a ritual to appreciate and show gratitude for what we have. If this were the case, that person could never imagine a dinner to be had by oneself on the couch while binge-watching the latest season of Stranger Things on Netflix, because that format of dinner is incommensurable with what 'dinner' means to them, personally. The meaning of words is therefore subject not only to the process of translation, but also to the process of interpretation.

Meaning is both what makes an encounter possible, and what complicates it beyond all other things because it is both culturally and historical embedded, as well as a personal interpretation. We cannot help but use personal own lives and experiences as a frame of reference for the language that we use. The meaning of the word 'dinner' is dependent on how I, personally, have thus far experienced dinner. This interpretation can be informed by my family and how we used to have dinner when I was a child, and my family's conception of 'dinner' is likely informed by their personal experiences, as well as any cultural or religious customs that they have internalised.

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[2] M. Leezenberg, *History and Philosophy of the Humanities: an Introduction* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), p183

Meaning is more than what a dictionary may say – it is an accumulation of our personal situation, embedded in the greater scheme of culture and custom. In another word: context.

There are numerous aspects of the cross-cultural encounter that might muddle its results, none of which are necessarily malevolent: they are simply the consequence of our interpretations of meaning. Every single word, action, and object is seeped in contextual meaning that must be conveyed, interpreted, and understood. At no point of the encounter can we callously assume that any of these steps are taking place unhindered: the chances that meaning is lost at each step are greater than that the intended meaning remains fully intact. This is the challenge of *hermeneutics*.

1.2 Identity, Alterity & Context

We have seen that the primary issue in the cross-cultural encounter is interpreting the other's meaning correctly. Meaning is not universal or stationary, but is intertwined with one's identity, both as an individual and as their socio-historical context. A strong indication of the link between meaning and identity is that it is easiest to understand those who are most like us. The more we have in common, the more likely we are to find similar meaning.

In the earlier example of interpreting a word as seemingly simple as 'dinner,' we saw that the meaning of this word is very much dependent on how we, in our unique socio-historical context, have come to interpret it. If I mention dinner to a parent, a figure who had part in shaping my own conception of the word, we will likely find the same meaning behind the word. We have both lived in the same country, in the same culture, with (probably) the same religious convictions, in the same household. All these commonalities make up that we have a partially shared identity, or context that surrounds and connects us to the world.

Our personal experiences, the traditions of our cultures and/or religions, and many other factors play a role in shaping us and the way we view the world, make sense of it, and help us determine who we are within it.[3] Identities are embedded within and made up of multiple overlapping aspects of our lives, such as our family situations, our religious convictions, our cultures as a whole. Each of these aspects carries with it frameworks of meanings, which influence and become part of our personal identities and, by extension, our view of the world. Who we identify as therefore shapes how we live within the world, what meanings certain actions have, and how important those meanings are. My parent, neighbour, or peer may understand what I mean when I

[3] D. Zahavi, *Self & Other: Exploring Subjectivity and Shame,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) p11

say 'dinner,' but the less I have in common with someone, the less likely it becomes that that 'dinner' means the same to that person as it does to me.

Identity necessarily creates alterity by default; that which is different from me and mine must therefore be *other*.[4] During a cross-cultural encounter, we are given the opportunity to broaden our horizons as we are exposed to the meanings of customs, actions, and even modes of thinking that are unfamiliar to us. An encounter with that which is other can thus serve to help us grow as individuals *because* it exposes us to the alterity of an other, but this alterity is also precisely what makes the encounter difficult to interpret correctly. The 'other' party in the encounter is by definition different from 'us.' When we see little to nothing that we can identify or simply recognise as familiar, the context that we use to make sense of the world around us proves insufficient. The more other they are, the fewer identification opportunities arise, the more difficult it proves to understand and empathise with them.

The process of hermeneutics – that is, interpreting meaning outside the self's context and identity – therefore suffers greatly under the strain of otherness. Meanings are exceedingly more difficult to interpret the further removed we feel from the other. Additionally, and more worrisome, an excessive sense of otherness may also serve to antagonise the other as 'too' different. This is where the difference in (cultural) context becomes a problem in and of itself. Manuel Vargas, in his essay *On the Value of Philosophy: The Latin American Case*, starts by acknowledging his assumptions that cultural differences exist, and that these differences can have consequences which raise a number of troubling questions. The most troubling of these is "what happens when the varied benefits and costs of a culture interact with what Nietzsche called "the instinct for rank." If cultural differences can make better and worse differences, you might start to wonder whether there are better and worse cultures."[5]

If something or someone is truly incommensurable with our conception of the world – within the context that shapes our norms, values, and identities – that something or someone not only has no place in 'our world' (that is, the world as we have come to perceive and understand it), they can also be an active threat to its stability. Any attempt at understanding the other would then require sacrificing part of our worldview and, by extension ourselves, in order to account for the alterity of the other. At that point, attempting to understand the other's alterity is not only undesirable, it is dangerous. Otherness, therefore, can at its worst lead to eradication of the other in an attempt to 'save' one's self, and at its best complicate the hermeneutic endeavour.

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[4] S. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* The Vintage Edition (New York: Knopf, 1953) xxiii

[5] Vargas, "On the Value of Philosophy," p35

1.3 The Hermeneutic Circle

Each attempt at communication, whether it is a conversation, a book, or a museum exhibit, is a constant process of interpretation of the underlying meanings of our words and actions across our boundaries of difference. This is done through a shared understanding of words on a superficial level, but words in themselves are seeped in contextual and personal meaning. Additionally, factors such as hand motions, or vocal intonation can all serve to give context to the base content. Sarcasm, for one, is a suitable illustration of how a sentence's meaning can be redefined through interpretation alone: someone who is aware of the sarcastic undertone will find different meaning in the exact same sentence as someone who is not. While this is a rather straightforward example of simple interpretation, the process of interpretation is something that suffuses all types of information we encounter, and this is especially true for the encounter with other people.

The theory behind this process of interpretation in order to find the meaning behind words, actions, and customs is what we will henceforth refer to as *hermeneutics*. It is a search for a method – a practice that serves as a tool for people to understand and navigate the particularities behind the communication.[6] However, the world is not a stationary thing: languages change, cultures evolve and customs shift with them, and as such hermeneutics are never finished or complete. Just as a sentence finds its meaning composed of the words in it, words find their meaning in the context of the sentence: it is a two-way street of meaning where each is constantly redefining both itself and the other. At times our very understanding can change the meaning anew.[7]

Hermeneutics, therefore, should not be seen as a straight line where meaning flows uninterrupted from the content, but should instead be approached as a circle, where we acknowledge that our preconceived notions; our *context* shapes the meaning of everything around us and vice versa. If I attempt to distill the meaning behind a Jane Austen novel, I must first acknowledge that these stories take place in a different country, in a different time, where different customs were the norm. The context in which the book was written is different from the one in which I will read the book, and so when Mrs. Bennett fawns over Mr. Darcy's annual income of ten thousand pounds, my appreciation of his wealth and her eagerness depend on whether or not I know that this is not equal value to ten thousand pounds of today, just as my awareness of the fact that women could not legally inherit property at that time will determine the extent to which I

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[6] Leezenberg, *History and Philosophy of the Humanities*, p181-182

[7] J. Grondin, "What is the hermeneutical circle?," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed Niall Keane, Chris Lawn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2017), p304

recognise the gravity of the Bennetts's many-daughtered situation. If I misinterpret either of these facts, the novel's meaning will differ entirely from if I am aware of these contextual nuances.

Context informs meaning, and that which has meaning in turn helps shape our perception, our environment, and thus the context: a circular cause and effect leading to a constant feedback loop of perpetual change. While we cannot escape this mutual causality, this is not to say that any attempt at hermeneutics is doomed to fail. We should take note of this hermeneutic circle if we hope to effectively practice hermeneutics, and remember that our preconceived notions affect the meaning we find in the world.[8] Jane Austen's context informed the structure and meaning of her work, just as my context informs the way I will interpret her novel.

Having taken note of this circle, we see how we can only come to new understanding, insight, and interpretation if we make an active effort to look beyond the notions and beliefs that have been securely ingrained by our own socio-historical context. If we only ever search for meaning using a context with which we are familiar, we fall victim to a bias of familiarity.[9] As such, awareness of the hermeneutic circle is the first step to adopting the open-mindedness to new ideas. A willingness to have our contexts redefined is of fundamental importance if we wish to engage in a mutually respectful conversation with others, especially others whose socio-historical context differs significantly from ours, as is the case in the cross-cultural encounter. When we open our minds to new meanings, both parties participating in the cross-cultural encounter stand to benefit from the other in a mutually beneficial and enriching manner. We stand to gain nothing but greater insight and wisdom.

1.4 Hermeneutics in the Cross-Cultural Encounter

Despite the opportunity for mutual enrichment, even the most willing participants in the cross-cultural encounter may find the challenge of identity and alterity one that is difficult to avoid in the process of hermeneutics, for one cannot help but view things through the lens of their own context and identity, or translate concepts and ideas into their own language. We interpret based on our own familiar socio-historical context, because that is the only frame of reference we have ever known or needed until we encountered the other. These differences in contexts pose a problem for the success

[8] J. Grondin, "What is the hermeneutical circle?," p299

[9] Grondin, p305

of interpretation no matter how well-intentioned the participants are, for each point of difference can lead to misinterpretation, which can have long-reaching consequences.

In the case of Schopenhauer's studies of Indian philosophy,[10] his interpretation, first thought to be an accurate representation of Indian thought, was eventually found to have been appropriated to support his own theory – one he had settled on before the encounter took place. Another example that illustrates the difficulties in navigating the cross-cultural encounter is Heidegger's influential studies of Chinese and Japanese thought, which was enthusiastically picked up by Western scholars who then proceeded to make assumptions that were attributed to Heidegger. This led to a snowball effect of conclusions drawn from the (mis)interpretations of second- or third-hand sources and citations,[11] and a consequent skewering of not only the Eastern philosophies in question, but Heidegger's own work on them as well.

Misinterpretation and appropriation need not take place knowingly. A scholar like Schopenhauer engaging with Indian thought cannot help but view what he comes across through the lens of his own culture and ideas. Especially if one seeks to prove a point they already believe in, this conviction will colour all that they see and hear and subconsciously influence ideas to fit one's own paradigm. However, as we have seen, an 'understanding' of the other based on one's own context is ultimately an attempt at assimilation of the other, even if one is unaware of it. We should instead strive to understand others within their own context, and take the opportunity to, in the process, expand our own horizons.

One method that is likely to prove effective in bypassing or at least minimising the difficulties that one's identity and consequent paradigm bring to the table is to engage with another culture, religion, or otherwise differing origins directly. By doing so, one minimises the amount of opportunities for misinterpretation: the fewer 'middle men' are involved, the more authentic the encounter is likely to be, as illustrated by the Heidegger example above. Additionally, we must take care to let others represent themselves, lest we further reinforce any oppression they may be facing due to their otherness. No matter how well-intentioned an attempt at speaking for an Other, its effects may well be counterproductive.[12]

In addition to retaining as much authenticity as is possible, it serves both participants of the cross-cultural encounter well to know to what end and/or purpose their encounter serves. An encounter with the intention to find a historical context for cultural ideas will have a different focus

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[10] D. Berger, *The Veil of Maya: Schopenhauer's System and Early Indian Thought,* (Global Academic Publishing, 2004) p222

[11] L. Ma, *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue: Anticipating the Event,* (New York: Routledge, 2008) p4

[12] L. Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," in *Cultural Critique*, No.20 (University of Minnesota Press, Winter 1991-1992) p7

and methodology than one where its purpose is to find as accurate a translation for a particular concept. The intentions behind encounters shape those encounters, just as much as the participants' preconceived notions, such as their language, culture, and identity shape their context.

The problem of identity, alterity, and the far-reaching consequences of our socio-historical context in our attempts at hermeneutic cannot be avoided. Thus, we can only try to be as aware of its presence as possible, and find ways in which we can minimise its influence and risk.

1.5 Methods of Hermeneutics 1: Dilthey

Hermeneutics of Empathy

We have seen the difficulties we face when interpreting meaning in a cross-cultural encounter, and as such we need a method of hermeneutics to assist with that process. One such method is Wilhelm Dilthey's, who was one of the first philosophers to develop a structural method of hermeneutics. He believed that the sciences' focus on empirical sense perception did not translate well to the humanities, because "we do not merely observe humans' behaviour, but also try to identify or empathise with their thoughts and motives."[13] Dilthey's hermeneutic method is based around the belief that empathy, in the sense of *Hineinversetzen;* to place oneself in another's shoes, is an important part of the hermeneutic process and understanding others better. The process of finding meaning is, for Dilthey, ultimately a process of attempting to understand the other and their point of view. By reconstructing (*Nachbildung)* the other's experience, we relive it.[14]

Dilthey distinguishes between what he calls elementary understanding and full understanding, a conception of empathic understanding that has remained and been [evolved] to low- and high-level empathy by Goldman.[15] This focus on empathy can be easily explained by how the goal, outcome, or side-effect of empathy (*Hineinversetzen)* is that we gain an understanding of the other. If we wish to accurately interpret the meaning of an other's words or actions, we must first attempt to understand *them* as best we can, because everything they do is informed by who they are.

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[13] Leezenberg, p186

[14] L. Galván, "The uses of Empathy in Literary Theory and Hermeneutics: A Systems-Theoretical Approach," in *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 42.2 (2016): p28-29

[15] S. Gallagher, "Dilthey and Empathy," in *Interpreting Dilther: Critical Essays*, ed. Eric Nelson (Cambridge University Press: 2019), p149

Dilthey interprets understanding as a process involving "the presence of one's own mental experience" and "the projection of the self into some given expression."[16] Elementary understanding then becomes what we understand of the other based on our own experiences. We can recognise emotions on the faces of others, or may have experienced a similar situation in the past. As such, we have a basic understanding of the position someone else may be in by projecting our personal experiences onto the other and inferring that they are likely to be having the same experience as we did: we reconstruct their experience from our own experiences in the past. This process of understanding is subject to the amount of interest one has in the other: the harder we try, the more we become invested, the more we understand.[17]

On this basis of projecting our own past experience we can build to what Dilthey refers to as full understanding, "the highest form of understanding in which the totality of mental life is active – recreating or reliving."[18] Full empathy, he claims, is an understanding that must grow and evolve as events unfold further, as one re-experiences the events anew. Dilthey claims that this fuller sense of empathy is "facilitated by artistic expression in poetry or theatre, or by fictional or historical narrative."[19] Narratives are particularly important to Dilthey, since these constitute the context that shape our lives and inform meanings. Our lives are, ultimately, stories, and empathic understanding is an act of transposing our own experience onto the other using our imagination, so that we can reconstruct those individual narratives; their contexts. If we can come to understand their narrative contexts, we will have a better understanding of the world through their eyes. The point of hermeneutics, for Dilthey, is ultimately to understand the other better than they understood themselves,[20] and the more of someone's narrative context we know, the more we can understand their perspective, motives, and reasoning.

What adds to the importance of understanding narratives is that all our experience is linked. We are all part of a larger, interconnected narrative: the accumulation of how all lives intersect. The narrative of my life is constructed of both individual experiences from my past and experiences I shared with others. This narrative is shaped by and shapes our lives on a daily basis, and we are necessarily part of its branching network. The more experiences we have shared – the more our narratives are connected, the better I will empathise with another.

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[16] Gallagher, "Dilthey and Empathy," p149

[17] W. Dilthey, *Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, vol. 4, ed. R. A. Makkreel and F. Rodi, (Princeton University Press, 1996), p237

[18] Gallagher p150

[19] Ibid

[20] W. Dilthey, "The Rise of Hermeneutics," in *New Literary History* Vol.2, No.2 (1972): p243

The combination of transposition and narrative shapes a theory of hermeneutics for which empathy through imagination is of primary importance. By tapping into our imagination to transpose our own experience and fit it within the other's narrative we can simulate the other's experience as closely as possible. The connectedness of our narrative experiences both shapes the way in which we view the world and understand others within it, and provides us with context to more accurately empathise with the other.[21] The less our narratives are connected, the greater the part of imagination becomes in the process of coming to an understanding of the other.

Dilthey thus makes empathy a fundamental aspect of his philosophy of hermeneutics, and adds to it the notions of transposition and narrative in order to help us situate the other's experience within their own narrative context and thus come to greater understanding of them and the meaning behind their actions or words. His focus on narrative and empathy are cornerstones to the hermeneutic method that I aim to suggest, which centres around the immersion into a fictional narrative in order to cultivate cross-cultural understanding through empathy and experience.

1.6 Methods of Hermeneutics 2: Collingwood

Hermeneutics in History

Another hermeneutic scholar, Robin George Collingwood, paid particular attention to the hermeneutic method in history. Since history is an accumulation of multiple accounts of the same events, compiled by historians to create a cohesive historical narrative, the very process of writing history is a hermeneutic one, and the process of interpreting and studying history even more so. History concerns itself with the actions of people: who did what, why, and what were the consequences of those actions? The motivations that gave shape to the actions are as important, if not more important, than the actions themselves. We cannot make sense of the actions themselves if we do not understand the process that came before it, which means that the study of history is a study in re-imagining historical events through the eyes of another. In other words, we must learn to understand historical actions from the actor's perspective.

Collingwood refers to this distinction between reasons and results of an event as the 'inside' and 'outside' of an event.[22] The 'inside' of an action constitutes the reasonings that preceded it, and

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[21] Gallagher, p157

[22] L.S. Lemisko, "The Historical Imagination: Collingwood in the Classroom," in *Canadian Social Studies*, Vol38, No2. (2004) p2

it's this 'inside' makes it more than a mere event. Collingwood is not so interested in the mere this-then-that order of events, which is the 'outside' and can be observed using our senses. To him, what sets history apart from the natural sciences are the reasons make an action intelligible.[23] Actions without reason effectively have no real meaning, since they are given meaning by the thought process that went into deciding what action to take. This inner thought process can never be observed by the historian and thus history must not be treated as a natural science, for no meaning can be found in mere events.

In order to find the meaning in historical accounts historians must use their imagination to consider the motivations an agent had to choose the course of action that they took. If I "follow [their reasoning] in my own mind re-enacting it with and for myself, the process of argument which I go through is not a process resembling [theirs], it is actually [theirs] so far as I understand [them] correctly."[24] This includes mistaken reasonings: if an actor makes a decision based on superstition, we have to understand the meaning of their actions in light of their superstition, or we will misinterpret them. Imagining the event from their perspective; from within their context is crucial to understanding the meaning behind actions, and hence the only way to meaningfully study history.

Because of this focus on imagining the inner reasoning of actors, Collingwood's philosophy of history is one that relies heavily on what he calls 're-enactment:'[25] empathising with those actors – not in the emotional sense of the word – but as a way of putting oneself in the other's shoes in order to understand them and their reasonings better. Historians must recreate the actors' thought process using their imagination and their sources, because they cannot meaningfully interpret the actions taken without understanding the agent's reasoning. By placing oneself in an imaginative re-enactment of the historical event, Collingwood believes, we gain the most intimate understanding of what factors drove agents to make *these* choices and take *those* actions.[26]

We can thus see that, if we agree that our interpretation of the actions taken by others is likely to be most accurate if we understand the individual's context and reasoning behind them, we can see that the hermeneutic process is not only assisted by, but in all likelihood dependent on the interpreter's ability to empathise with the subject of their interpretation. Both Dilthey and Collingwood came to the conclusion that hermeneutics is a process of coming to understand the other, and both agree that the best way to do this is to try and see the world from their perspective. If we place ourselves in the another's shoes we can better understand the reasons, and thus the

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[23] Lemisko, "The Historical Imagination," p2

[24] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) p301

[25] Lemisko, p3-4

[26] Ibid p5

meaning behind their actions. Applying this to the cross-cultural encounter shows that we would do well to cultivate opportunities for insights into others' context, both personal and cultural, to help understand their perspective and thus the reasons behind their actions.

1.7 Cultural Resources

We have seen how both Collingwood and Dilthey placed significant emphasis on the role of empathy and the transposing of oneself into the shoes of the other in their theories on hermeneutics. However, philosophers of hermeneutics have acknowledged from the beginning that there is more to the process of interpretation than merely understanding the person themselves. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the first philosopher to devote express attention to the study of interpretation, already acknowledged that "the meaning of a text does not only depend on its author's intentions,"[27] and argues that the structure of a text, its grammar, and its relation to other texts give it an order and a meaning that is beyond what the author may have intended. This proves again that the context surrounding a source or individual is of essential importance for understanding the meanings it informs.

In the case of cross-cultural endeavours of interpretation, the need for context is greater than for most other encounters as we saw in 1.4. As Michiel Leezenberg puts it very succinctly in his book on *History and Philosophy of the Humanities:* "Texts from remote places or periods presuppose various things as self-evident which to us may appear obscure, false, or nonsensical. For the understanding of such texts, the recovery of cultural backgrounds is essential."[28] The socio-historical context that shapes the perspectives of participants in a cross-cultural encounter will likely differ in nearly every aspect, completely skewering the interpretative process of the encounter for both parties involved. We could only transpose our own reasoning onto the other, but as we have seen, our reasoning is informed by vastly different socio-historical contexts. In other words: we require context to understand the individual, and the individual to understand the context. If we want to garner understanding between the parties in a cross-cultural encounter, both sides would be aided significantly in their attempts at interpretation if they had access to the other's context.

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[27] Leezenberg, *History and Philosophy of the Humanities*, p185

[28] Ibid p183

It is at this point I wish to introduce that Vargas calls *cultural resources*. He defines these as "any entity whose nature and origin depend at least in part on the shared norms of a community."[29] Such cultural resources have the potential to be reproduced, or to inspire the creation of new cultural resources. They can serve as windows into that socio-historical context that binds a culture and the individuals within it together. In the network of norms, values, and customs that make up a culture, these resources are expressions of the shared mental life of a group of people, within which they have meaning. They are expressions of the whole in smaller, bite-sized entities, whether they are a song, or a myth, and through them we can access a cultural context other than our own.

Tim Connolly gives the example of the popular film *The Godfather* as an example of a cultural resource. It not only showed an aspect of the Italian immigrant experience as well as aspects of Italian culture and family dynamics that many people were likely unfamiliar with; it was also a treasure trove of resources to be re-used, such as music and quotes.[30] It is a perfect example of how a cultural resource could be used to increase the familiarity people have with an other culture. Having been exposed to the resource, a global population was made aware of certain customs and subtleties that constitute life for another group of people. This knowledge can, in turn, help them (and us) better understand and appreciate perhaps indirect meaning behind any encounter they may in the future have with someone of Italian origin.

Cultural resources can be a powerful tool to generate familiarity with other cultures. They can show – in an however limited way – aspects of another socio-historical context that would be unattainable from, say, a conversation. While our individual contexts stay with us wherever we go, a cultural resource can show us a perspective that is less influenced by another's subjective experience, but a collective representation. Using cultural resources to cultivate familiarity with another's cultural context is precisely what this thesis is arguing for as well: a game can function as a cultural resource that lets players experience life from within another culture for themselves provided it is created from within that other culture. A cultural resource created from unauthentic sources would be speaking for the other, thereby taking away the other's agency to speak for themselves.[31] In chapters 2 and 3 I will further elaborate on why I believe that games are particularly well suited to this task of assisting the cross-cultural encounter by exposing audiences to an insider's perspective.

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[29] Leezenberg p37

[30] T. Connolly, *Doing Philosophy Comparatively, (*London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p204

[31] Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," p7

Wrapping Up Hermeneutics

In this first chapter I have endeavoured to show the complications of the cross-cultural encounter; namely the difference in meaning. Since individuals from different cultures have lived vastly different lives, their meanings are informed by vastly different contexts. Without insight into these contexts, we cannot hope to accurately interpret others' meanings across the boundary of difference. In order to find a method to mediate these difficulties, I have called upon the works of Dilthey and Collingwood, who suggest a hermeneutics based an understanding of the individual to gain insight into the context, and vice versa. To understand meaning behind words and actions, we must first understand the actor's perspective. In order to do this, we require both imagination and empathy, while not necessarily the emotive kind. Cultural resources can help us gain insights into cultural contexts in showing us a broader, more generally informed perspective of another. Imagination, empathy, and cultural resources form the central axes around which I will continue to argue for the power of fiction and finally games to assist in the search for cross-cultural understanding.

2. Fiction: An Exercise in Imagination & Empathy

In the previous chapter we have seen that the main challenge that we are faced with during a cross-cultural encounter is one of interpreting meanings correctly across the boundaries of difference. Every word, every action, every custom is imbued with layers of meaning that are the product of each individual's lives. Lives that are filled with experiences of social customs, with lessons from parents, friends, and teachers informing how we shape thoughts and inform our behaviours. Our lives are what informs the context within which we live: things that fit within it we recognise as familiar and as what is normal.

We have also seen that during the cross-cultural encounter, we engage with something or someone that expressly does not fit within this framework of familiarity. The others' contexts are informed by lives unlike ours, and as a result the foundations of our meanings do not align. The cross-cultural encounter is therefore prone to miscommunications. These can have numerous roots, ranging from translation, to wrongfully projecting our own context onto the other. Ultimately, however, most of these difficulties can be reduced to the different contexts of self and other.

Dilthey and Collingwood have drawn attention to the importance of understanding the other's context so that we can interpret their meanings better. When we 'put ourselves in the other's shoes,' we gain insight into their perspective, understanding of what shapes their context, and thus come closer to ascertaining the other's meaning. We bring the self and the other closer together: if we can imagine another's context we cultivate a shared understanding, and suddenly a stranger is not so strange anymore.

The question now becomes one of determining methods of gaining such understanding. How can we increase our chances of gaining insight into the socio-historical context of others if they are informed by many factors that someone cannot simply gain access to? A family's habit of having dinner together may be rooted in a period of famine during which the entire family shared what they could find – individual meanings may find origins in a national crisis the impact of which reverberated through the generations. Individuals may not even be aware of what events and actions have influenced such meanings. How then, can an other, an outsider who has never lived within that multi-layered context, gain access to the meanings that this context informs?

2.1 Imagination in Empathy

It is at this point I believe we ought to consider the 'tool' that enables empathy: imagination. As was mentioned in the previous chapter's section on Dilthey and his hermeneutics of empathy, the process of empathising involves transposing one's own experience onto the other and imagining what it would be like if we had been in the other's position.[32] Empathy and imagination are thus fundamentally connected. Empathic imagination works especially easily for emotions. Losing, say, a parent, is likely a universal experience of grief, no matter one's individual context. However, it is not universal experiences that demand an active effort of empathy in the cross-cultural encounter. Instead, we are tasked with using our imagination to understand the complex socio-historical context that informs another's experience of everyday life, their perspective and their reasoning. In the case of the cross-cultural encounter, therefore, the notion of empathy we need is not one of mere emotional responsiveness, but a greater kind of empathy with which we imagine ourselves living the life of another, context and all.

Tania Zittoun defines imagination as "the process of creating experiences that escape the immediate setting, which allow exploring the past or future, present possibilities or even impossibilities."[33] Using our imagination, we aspire to recreate in our minds the experience of another so that we may understand the meaning behind their words, actions, and customs. We recall that an action is given meaning through the reasoning that preceded it.[34] Such reasoning is rarely the result of a purely rational process: our perspectives of events are coloured by our emotional state. An exhausted, frightened person will likely choose differently from someone in the same situation who is well-rested and optimistic. If we are to appropriately simulate another's contextual experience of a scenario, we must take into account their emotions as well as the reasoning that informed their decision. Without context we cannot imagine the other's emotive state, and without insight into their contextual emotive state we cannot understand their reasoning. Cognition and emotion are thus intrinsically connected in their influence on individuals' contextual experience, and we require insight into both if we wish to gain the high-level understanding we are aiming for.

Suzanne Keen also notes that "empathy itself clearly involves both feeling and thinking. Memory, experience, and the capacity to take another's perspective (all matters traditionally considered cognitive) have roles in empathy."[35] Keen makes explicit mention of memory,

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[32] Dilthey, *The Rise of Hermeneutics,* p243

[33] T. Zittoun, *The Handbook of Imagination and Culture* (Oxford Scholarship Online: 2017), p223

[34] Lemisko, "The Historical Imagination," p2

[35] S. Keen, "A Theory on Narrative Empathy," in *Narrative* Vol.14, No.3 (2006): p213

experience, and perspective-taking, all of which are aspects of the understanding of the other as a contextual being that we are trying to achieve.

We now have a sense of the type of empathy that we are trying to establish: a high-level understanding of another's context, informed by cognitive understanding of the other's reasoning, as well as emotional understanding of how this experience affects them. Like it was with understanding meaning in chapter 1, we are more readily capable of empathising with those who seem similar to us:[36] the more we have in common, the easier it is for me to imagine how you might think and feel, and thus to understand your contextual experience. Considering the fundamental differences between the two parties in a cross-cultural encounter, the amount of imagination required for such empathic understanding will vastly exceed the imagination required to do the same for a close friend.

The process that precedes our empathic understanding of a cross-cultural other is one that requires considerable imagination. Our imagination guides empathy, because it is through imagination that we envision the experience of others as best we can based on both their emotive and cognitive states, which circularly influence each other. Our empathic insight into the other's experience therefore is both an emotive and a cognitive one, which leads us to a contextually embedded understanding of the other. Without imagination we have no empathy, and without empathy we have no understanding. Imagination thus takes a central role in interpreting a cross-cultural other.

2.2 'Truth' in Fiction

Now that we have seen that our empathic process in coming to greater cross-cultural understanding is heavily reliant on imagination, it is time to consider the method and medium with which to optimally engage our imaginative empathy. If imagination is to play a central role, I would argue we utilise a medium that is already reliant on imagination, and thus encourages empathic understanding. When we engage with fiction, the very act of (for example) opening a book indicates a willingness to enter a world and adopt a perspective and context other than our own. Fiction, at its core, is an exercise in imagining and accepting alterity. While fiction is most commonly seen as 'not

[36] Keen, p214

real,' this does not impair its potential for deep empathic involvement.[37] In fact, fictionality, in being independent from the 'truth of reality,' is crucial to opening audience's minds.

Ideas can be shared through a work of fiction just as easily as they can be through a face-to-face encounter. Myths and folk tales, for example, find their origins in knowledge and information that people wanted to impart on future generations.[38] Fiction is particularly effective in sharing ideas and lessons because while small aspects of a story may change, the context and its moral can remain the same, leaving one story to teach others over the course of millennia. It does not matter whether we believe that what happens in a fiction is 'true' in reality: the fiction shapes its own truth.[39]

In Ancient Greece, for example, inexplicable phenomena were attributed to the whims and wills of the Gods, who lived an a mountaintop. This mountaintop, Mt. Olympus, most certainly exists, and people can climb it and reach the summit. However, one who were to do so would find no lofty palace sitting on its summit, and they would not have expected to have done so either. This incommensurability between fiction and reality did not, as one may expect, disprove the myth. Myth could co-exist alongside incommensurability *because* it was a myth and thus pertained to a unique time that can only be described as 'before;' wholly other than the time of the myth-speaker, like another version of history.[40] As a fictional tale, the truthfulness of its contents becomes of secondary importance. We can compare it to a dramatisation of a historical event: A writer may add a dialogue to make the figures come to life, and while we can say with near certainty that the fictional dialogue is not the dialogue had by the original historical figures, it does not discredit the overall 'truthfulness' of the tale. We take the dialogue for granted as a flavourful addition to what could otherwise be an impersonal retelling of events. While the details of the tale may be fictional, we accept them as part of the experience – one we agreed to the moment we committed to engaging with the tale.[41]

The same goes for mentions of minotaurs, aliens, or other impossibilities within fiction. We may not believe in their 'truthfulness;' would never expect Poseidon to rise from the sea to rain his wrath down upon us, but within the myth – within the fiction, we suspend our disbelief.[42] We do not

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[37] C. Radford, M. Weston,"How can We be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, Vol.49, (1975): p69

[38] P. Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) p22-23

[39] T. Zittoun, *The Handbook of Imagination and Culture,* (Oxford Scholarship Online: 2017) p230

[40] Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?,* p23

[41] Veyne, p21

[42] D. Rowe, "The "Novel" Approach: Using Fiction to Increase Empathy," *Virginia Libraries*, Vol.63, No.1 (2018): p4-5

question whether or not Odysseus truly did outwit the Cyclops in the fiction, even if we would scoff at a sailor claiming to have encountered one today. While we are engaged with the fiction, we engage with its contents as if they were true despite knowing that they are fictional.[43] The fact that its contents are 'unreal' does not impede a fiction's potential to really affect its audience, but in fact encourages them to consider another version of 'truth.' This independent truth-value leading to audience's willingness to accept alternate, even incommensurable truths while they are engaged with fiction is an essential feature of how fiction can assist the cross-cultural encounter, and one that applies equally well to games.

2.3 Empathy and Identification in Fiction

Having illustrated the natural suspension of disbelief that occurs when one engages with fiction, we can see how fictions put its consumers in a state of mind that is open to both fantastical 'untruths' and potential new truths. Fiction is a medium that demands those who engage with it imagine and accept an unfamiliar world. Moreover, they are invited to put themselves in the shoes of the main character, who is necessarily someone other than the reader. As such, consuming fiction is at its very roots an exercise in imagination *and* an exercise in empathy.

The reader must accept the viewpoint of the main character, for the tale is ultimately their experience. We are not ourselves when we read Harry Potter – while we are reading, we imagine life *as* Harry. We are given insight into his family life, his past trauma, and having understood a number of cornerstones that shape his context, we spend the next seven books getting increasingly more familiar with him. We see through his eyes, fear for his and his friends' safety, feel his pain, his frustrations, his joy, and we understand their significance from his point of view.[44] In other words, we temporarily abandon our own socio-historical context in favour of adopting Harry's while we are immersed in the fiction.

In doing so we let our imagination loose, and allow ourselves to embrace a perspective of a world *different* from our own.[45] Magical worlds become real, and so are the hardships that the wizards face within that world. When we imagine life as Harry, this imagination is more than just a

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[43] P. Lamarque, "How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?," in *The British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol.21, No.4 (1981) p296,302

[44] Radford, Anna Karenina, p85,90

[45] S. Mathies, "The Simulated Self – Fiction Reading and Narrative Identity," in *Philosophia* Vol,48 (2020): p333

fleeting consideration: it is an experience of a life beyond merely our own. This experience comes to us complete with the character's socio-historical context so we can accurately interpret the events that our fictive alter-ego experiences, and the choices they make within them. We understand because we have experienced with the character, alongside the character, *as* the character.[46]

As we experience the narrative through the character's eyes, we are made familiar with a perspective other than our own. The more familiar we become with them, the stronger our sense of empathy with them, and vice versa: if we try to empathise with a character who is very much like us, identification comes easy. Similarity between individuals generates an understanding between them, they can identify with one another because they share a context and consequently perspectives. So, too, can we identify with fictional characters. Character identification, Keen says, is "the most commonly associated feature with narrative empathy."[47] This process of identification is aided by a range of attributes that we might recognise, such as their physical description, their motives, their described thought process, or the things and characters that surround them.[48][49] The more complete the image given to us, the greater the potential for character identification.[50] Additionally, the more familiar with them we become, the better we come to understand them, even if they are unlike us.

Not only does the fiction naturally invite us to step into another's shoes, this empathetic exercise that we practice when we engage with fiction is made so easily accessible exactly *because* fiction does not compete with its audience's reality for 'truth.' We don't need to hold on so tightly to our own worldview because whatever the fiction may bring up to challenge it, that challenge is a fictional challenge: it's 'not real,' even if it really does expose us to new ideas. Consequentially, the fictional nature of the source material lessens the rigidity of pre-existing notions of its audience.

Relieving preconceptions of their weight will, in turn, lessen the divide between the self and the other, thereby making fiction an even more attractive tool to consider using for a cross-cultural encounter. Engaging with fiction not only places us in a mindset that is open to accept its 'truth' even if it does not align with our own personal beliefs, it also encourages us to experience the world through the eyes of another.[51] In short, fiction fundamentally stimulates empathy and the embracing of other worlds and worldviews, both of which will assist the quest for cross-cultural understanding.

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[46] Mathies, The Simulated Self, p331

[47] Keen, A Theory of Narrative Empathy, p216

[48] Keen, p217-219

[49] Mathies, p332

[50] Rowe, The Novel Approach, p5-6

[51] Rowe, p7

2.4 Classic Modes of Fiction: Written and Performed

All fiction has this powerful ability to exist both within and outside of its audience's 'truth' and empathically affect its audience, and classically fiction is accessible to us in several different ways, which each offer a unique experience of the tale in the way it utilises the audience's imagination. There is classic fiction as presented in books: a tale shared through written words alone, leaving the reader to imagine the scenarios described for themselves with exception of the odd illustration. Literary fiction requires the greatest input of imagination from its reader since it is a medium that uses almost exclusively words to convey its meaning. It is up to the reader to visually imagine the world, the characters, and the actions described in the fiction. Literary fiction also brings reader and character closest together in understanding and identification by providing an 'insider's perspective.'[52] Because the reader is privy to characters' thoughts and feelings, along with contextual explanation as to why they might be responding this way, audiences of written fiction get the most cohesive insight into the main characters' lives and inner processes – into the context that is so important in order to accurately understand and interpret their actions.[53]

A second type is performed fiction, where the tale is enacted by performers. These forms of fiction include theatre, film, radio plays, audiobooks, and any other method someone might employ to bodily convey a work of fiction to an audience. In a performed work of fiction, immersion into the fictional narrative comes easy since the world and its inhabitants are presented directly to the audience. We can see the world, and infer further information from its and characters' appearance. Additionally, a performed fiction is usually accompanied by purposeful auditory supplements to aid emotive empathy. The cadence of speech in a Shakespearean play may emphasise the tone of the conversation; music may accompany a silent moment between two characters and inform the audience of the character's emotions. While in written fiction the audience was intimately present for the emotions and thoughts of characters, during performed fiction audiences must distill the emotion from its presentation. We are no longer in a position where we can crawl inside the character's mind and observe the world from their insider's perspective. Instead, we watch from a distance and infer the impact of actions and events using our own experience and the fictional context, aided by the actors' performance, lighting, music, and the cinematography.

Classic fiction strongly encourages audiences to empathise with the characters central to its narrative, thereby naturally engaging them with different contexts and perspectives. The fiction's imaginative nature enables audiences to receive in-depth and contextual insight into an alterity

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[52] Keen, p219-220

[53] Rowe, p5-6

while protecting them with a blanket of 'unrrealness' while immersing audiences in a finished narrative, utilising varying levels of imagination to bring them closer to the fictional experience. All classic forms of fiction, however, maintain an experiential distance between the fiction and its audience.[54] In being predetermined, audiences can entertain a fiction's narrative twists and turns, but they are passive observers to its unfolding at all times. We are invited to adopt the perspective of its characters since it is through their eyes that the story is told, so while we may feel like we 'become' a particular character from the story,[55] our experience of the story is necessarily a second-hand one. Even the emotional responses and thoughts of a character are predetermined, and in some cases a character's response to a situation may be so unlike our own that it momentarily breaks the empathic connection between character and audience.[56]

Additionally, while an audience may empathise strongly while they are consuming the fiction, there is no guarantee that they will take any insights they have taken away from the fiction into the 'real world' with them once they have finished with the tale. Rowe, for one, reports on cases where readers' hearts would bleed for the children living in poverty described in his tales, moved by Dickens' portrayal of their misery, but they would not take any action in order to alleviate the suffering of the poor living around the corner.[57]

Classic forms of fiction and the empathic understanding they encourage, as we can see, are far from flawless. There is no guarantee that an audience will identify and consequently empathise with a character, nor that they will take their insights with them into 'reality.' That being said, those who were immersed in the fiction and its events, and let themselves be swept along with the character's experience, were changed after completing it.[58] The more unreal the fiction's story and events, the greater the chance that an audience feels safe behind the protective blanket of the work's fictional nature, and the more likely they "still internalise the experience of empathy with possible later real-world responsiveness to others' needs."[59]

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[54] Zittoun, *Imagination and Culture,* p236

[55] Mathies, p333

[56] Keen, p219

[57] Rowe, p7

[58] Rowe, p7

[59] Keen, p220

2.5 Using Classic Fiction for the Cross-Cultural Encounter

We have seen how fiction is at its foundations an exercise in imagination and vicarious experience, and such fiction offers a powerful medium for garnering cross-cultural understanding. We feel for, and at times even *as* the characters that play their roles within the story, and these experiences stand a good chance of staying with the audience even after they conclude the narrative. It seems that from the perspective of the empathy and imagination placed central in the hermeneutic process during chapter 1, fiction is well-suited to cultivate understanding across cross-cultural boundaries of difference. In light of this thesis' empathic orientation I will continue to focus on the imaginative empathy provided by fictional narratives, even if one might perhaps gain more theoretical knowledge of cultural systems from non-fictional sources. An individual's narrative experience will be a less universally accurate representation, but also contains a potential for identification and empathic understanding of the individual's existence within their cultural context that non-fiction lacks.

We must take care, however, to avoid forced empathy, since it often has a counterproductive effect. Especially when a fiction is being used to purposefully generate empathy for a disadvantaged group of people, audiences tend to react adversely to the empathy generated through depictions of purposefully pitiable (groups of) people.[60] Consequently, when using fiction to garner cross-cultural understanding, the empathy the fiction creates should not be exclusively based on emotions, and *especially* not on sense of pity. Not only does pity place the audience in a preferable position over the other, thus instilling a sense of hierarchy between the participating parties, we also do not wish to imply that one party is responsible for elevating the other to their level out of a sense of pity or duty. Cross-cultural understanding does not speak to *emotional* empathy, but to an empathic understanding of the other that is based on a conception of a shared humanity and contextual insight, despite the existing differences.

Additionally, classic fiction encourages us to empathise with the singular perspective that guides us through the fiction's story. It teaches us one individual's perspective of a context, but this is not necessarily a desirable effect if we wish to garner understandings between larger cross-cultural groups. The individual empathy with a fictional main character makes it easier for an audience to leave their empathy within the fiction rather than carry it into their real lives,[61] exactly *because* the reader has come to empathise with fictional individuals rather than a shared set of attributes that may be found again in the real world. By shifting focus from empathising with an individual's

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[60] Keen, p222

[61] Rowe, p7

perspective to empathising with the shared experience of a group, the empathic experience generated by the fiction stands a better chance of carrying through into real-life. It also comes closer to representing *context* rather than individual experience.

Moreover, classic fiction encourages us to empathise through identification with a perspective of which we have become part of the "in-group;" we understand that which is like us, and through the fiction we have come to identify with the main character as 'like us.'[62] While this may appear desirable at first glance, it hints at assimilation of others into the self and the projection of the self onto others, neither of which serves the cross-cultural encounter. Difference is not inherently problematic; misunderstanding is. Contextual understanding cannot occur if audiences mistakenly come to see themselves as part of an 'in-group' to which they do not belong.[63]

Finally, as I briefly mentioned earlier, most fictional experiences are passive ones. The audience reads, watches and listens to the story and while they may be momentarily transported into the fictional world and potentially even feel like they inhabit the main character, the audience is at all times removed from the active experience of the world and the events within it,[64] only experiencing it as a passenger to the character's 'driving.' When we read or watch Frodo offer to take the One Ring into Mordor we feel admiration for his bravery; we might even feel how out of depth Frodo feels when he admits that he does not know the way, but these remain *Frodo's* experiences. The choice is his, the journey is his; we merely watch, feeling for and with his struggle, but remaining removed from it. We gain empathy and understanding of the character at the cost of our personal experience of the fiction.

2.6 The Need for (Inter)Activity

Traditional means of fiction pull us into the experience of others and in so doing let us empathise with those perspectives and embrace alterity. In the end, however, our insight remains a passive one based on observation of another's journey. This passive experience, I believe, is responsible for most complications of classic fictional empathy in the cross-cultural encounter. Extrapolating from these complications as illustrated by, Keen, Rowe, and Zittoun in the previous sub-chapter, I argue that in order to optimise the empathic potential of fiction, we ought to consider

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[62] Keen, p223

[63] Mathies, p341-342

[64] Zittoun, p236

modes of fiction that engage its audience directly. In making fiction interactive, I believe we elevate it to an experiential medium rather than an observed one. While much of classic fiction's empathy stems from insight into the character, I have argued that empathy with an individual is potentially problematic for cultivating understanding between cultural groups.

If we switch focus from empathising with a character's perspective to the audience's experience of the fictional world, we can look to fiction as a 'trial session' to encounter alterities. Fiction utilises imagination and empathy on a very fundamental level, these traits are not limited to the main character/audience empathy. Engaging with fiction demands we temporarily abandon our real lives for the sake of immersing ourselves in the fiction.[65] The most powerful feature of fiction for the cross-cultural encounter is this loosening of the audience's grip on their context through imaginative empathy. By cultivating an interactive fictional experience for the audience, we can build on the fiction's fundamental open-mindedness, while simultaneously bringing the audience along on a more personal, and therefore more retainable experience.

A fiction that can be experienced as if the audience were a part of it is a fiction that blurs the line between the fiction and reality in a way similar to the myths of old. The fictional and the real can co-exist and both be 'true' for the audience; the fictional experience takes place in a different 'realm' but remains an experience that the audience has had.[66] By making the fiction interactive, it gains a completely different type of accessibility: one where the audience can explore nuances of life within another context, wandering the fictional world as a character immersed therein. The audience exists both within and without the fiction, its world, and its plot.

If we wish to utilise fiction as a tool to let people engage with new concepts and cultures to its fullest, I believe we can do so most effectively by making it interactive. In so doing, we make the subject of the fiction both safe to be considered, yet we add a new dimension where the audience can explore the contexts and nuances for themselves. In other words, interactive fiction in the form of a game, especially, may provide an unexpectedly powerful tool to assist in or subconsciously cultivate a cross-cultural encounter as a fictional, yet immersive, playground.

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[65] Mathies, p331

[66] K. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts,* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993), p247

Wrapping Up Fiction

In this chapter I have argued that fiction utilises the imagination and empathy that Dilthey and Collingwood have designated as crucial to the process of hermeneutics. Fiction naturally encourages its audiences to adopt a looser definition of truth, and asks them to empathise with fictional characters, which are by definition Other to the audience itself. Through fiction, we allow ourselves to be exposed to alternate truths, perspectives, and worlds, which is what we aim to achieve during a cross-cultural encounter. Fiction also protects its audiences from feeling threatened by its 'merely fictional' contents, which helps audiences feel more secure when encountering alterities. Classic forms of fiction are, however, limited in keeping its audiences passive in their consumption. This passivity keeps the audience at a distance from the fictional experience of alterity, and limits them from applying insights learned through fiction to situations in real life. By making fiction interactive, I believe we can bring the fictional experience of alterity closer to the audience, and thus utilise the empathic power of fiction to its fullest.

3. Play & Games: Experiencing Alterity

So far we have explored the complications of the cross-cultural encounter with specific focus on the lack of a shared context and, consequently, understanding between the two parties. Since empathy is an exercise in coming to understand someone else, we might assist the cross-cultural encounter by encouraging empathic encounters. Fiction is a medium whose consumption is based on the premise that its audience empathises with the characters and world. As such, fiction is a promising medium to assist in the cross-cultural encounter. However, consumption of classical fiction has a number of limiting factors: the individual perspective into the new world that the audience is given risks that any empathy that the fiction generates will remain toward the fiction exclusively, and the naturally passive and outsider's experience of the fiction increases this risk further, because the audiences kept at a distance from the fictional experience along with any lessons it may contain.

Yet there is no reason why fiction must remain passive. There are fictions that can be actively participated in; fictions that are interactive. They open a door to another world in which their audiences can run free, explore the world, speak to its inhabitants, and perhaps even save it. Through play, a fiction can come alive. By playing, the fiction's audience is no longer merely watching a character's journey unfold – they are the reason the journey unfolds the way it does. When fiction is playable its audience and the main character become one, and its story is not read or watched, but *lived*.

In this chapter, we will delve further into how the very act of playing adds a layer of experience to a fiction that is unique to the medium of games. We will explore how play, like fiction, has roots in imagination and empathy, and how it blurs the line between fiction and reality using the works of Johan Huizinga and Miguel Sicart. We will consider the unique perspective and experience that the player avatar grants us with Katherine Isbister. I will illustrate how playing a game can help us gain insight into history, as well as other cultures, and can confront us with the consequences of our actions, all from within the safety bubble that fiction provides.

Ultimately, by combining the empathy and safety of fiction and enhancing the experience by adding play to the equation, I will show why games are such a powerful medium to assist in the cross-cultural encounter and cultivate understanding.

4.1 Play, Playfulness, and Action

We have seen the power of fiction, and while it is not a perfect solution to our problem, a perfect solution cannot be found – peoples' subjective experiences make it so that there is no one method that works equally well for everyone. Regardless, we have seen how the imaginative empathy that fiction evokes is also a capable hermeneutic method: by using empathy and putting ourselves in the shoes of another, we gain an understanding of the world through their eyes. However, the distance that classic forms of fiction maintains between its content and its audience enforces the fiction's separation from reality to such an extent that understanding gained through fiction is limited to that fiction. Because the audience is merely watching the narrative unfold with no way of expressing themselves, they remain outsiders to the journey and the *experience* of the fiction. In other words, the imaginative empathy that classic forms of fiction demands of and evokes in its audience is powerful, but limited by the passivity of the audience. This passivity, however, is not inescapable: there are already methods to participate of fiction – methods to act within a world that exists both within and outside of reality. I am speaking of play.

Play

Play, as a word, already has connotations to fiction. Johan Huizinga, in his book *Homo Ludens* also draws attention to the dual meaning of the concept of play. One the one hand, 'to play' can mean 'to imitate.'[67] Think for example of a theatre play: actors playing roles, imitating the lives of the characters of a story, or alternatively consider a child playing with dolls or action figures – to play house, or to play the hero in the story of their own creation. In many cases, play constitutes the taking on a role other than one's own. For the duration of play, the actor, the *player* is not themselves, but whoever they are imitating.[68] They are a conduit, a representation of a thing beyond the mere reality that is present.

A second version is play is already hinted at, but not yet made explicit. We could say it is simply another potential aspect of play: the aspect of competition, or contest.[69] The child playing with their action figures requires a villain to be defeated for the hero to become the hero; a family playing a game of *Risk* means that in the end someone will be the victor; playing a game of tag, or tennis, or pool all result in the settling of a competition of skill. Play, therefore, also concerns the

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[67] J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture,* (Kettering: Angelico Press, 2016), p13

[68] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,* p15

[69] Huizinga, p13

honing of and demonstrating supremacy in a specific skill.[70] Even actors performing a play can do so successfully or poorly. The imitative and competitive aspects of play can compliment and enhance the imaginative empathy of fiction easily, and in the case of a role-playing game where a player steps into the shoes of a character all these elements are seamlessly combined into an immersive fictional experience.

Aspects of Play (Huizinga)

So what constitutes play? When can we speak of it, and what qualities does it contain? According to Huizinga, there are several aspects by which we can identify an occurrence of play. Firstly, play must be voluntary, free, and autotelic.[71] One cannot be playing if one is ordered to play – playing demands the player's freedom to choose to play. There is no reason to play other than the enjoyment of playing, which makes it autotelic: that is, play serves no purpose other than itself. Play is done at leisure, and is never a task. Only when it becomes interwoven with culture and its rites can it become bound up in duty, as is the case with, for example, high-stakes sports.

Additionally, play is imaginative, that is, separate from 'reality.'[72] When we participate in play, we are not living 'real life.' Instead, we are aware that we are acting in a manner that is determined by the rules of play; a layer of reality that temporarily overshadows the real world. When we agree to play, we enter a play-realm, just like when we agree to engage with fiction we let go of our individual perspective of the world for the sake of the fiction. We are perfectly aware that we are only playing, that we are playing pretend, and that words said and actions done while playing must be seen and understood within the context of play. In other words, meanings of words and actions may differ between reality and the play-realm.

This leads us to another aspect of play, which is that play is temporarily and spatially bound.[73] There is a clear moment that signifies the beginning of play, and while we are playing we are aware that the activity and our living within the play-realm will eventually come to an end. Take, for example, a game of football: play initiates when the referee blows their whistle, and ends after 90 minutes. The game is also constrained to the field, and if the ball leaves the field play is halted until it can resume within the agreed upon boundaries. It is the same when we consider a game of hide

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[70] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p105

[71] Huizinga p8

[72] Ibid

[73] Huizinga p9

and seek, a game of cards, even a playful wrestling match between siblings – it is kept separate from real life in space and time.

Finally, play is dictated by a set of rules that overrule 'reality's.'[74] The aforementioned restraints can be part of these rules: when the ball goes out of bounds, play is halted and the team that was in possession must relinquish possession to the other team. These rules are not part of everyday life, but if we agree to participate in the game, we choose to accept the new order and agree to honour those rules. Breaking the rules means shattering the play-realm, for the agreement that brought it into existence has been undone.[75]

Acting within the Game

Play thus takes place on the edge of reality: when we play, we temporarily put the everyday rules, law, and order aside and substitute it with a playful reality. There is a tension between play and real life similar to the tension between fiction and reality. We know the fictional/play-realm is not real, but we choose to participate in it for the duration of the book/film/game and become absorbed by it. The fictional/play-realm becomes our new reality for the duration of our participation. Both play and fiction rely on its participants to agree to a reality other than the one that rules everyday life;[76] both require an open mind and a commitment to the new reality in order to be enjoyed; both remind us that there are worlds, perspectives, and rules others than the ones we are used to, and that these constraints can be deconstructed and reconstructed.

Through play, we experience the world and express ourselves through action. Play, then, necessarily contains action.[77] We cannot play passively, but must participate. We must kick the ball, roll the dice, perform the role we have agreed to take on within the play-realm, or we will be merely observing play rather than playing. Play that has been organised and predetermined by rules and spatial constraints becomes a *game*, but while all games are play, not all play is a game. It is possible to play without having any goal and simply improvise what follows next. The moment we agree upon a set of rules, we have ourselves a game. A game of tag is designated by the rule that when you are touched by the one who is playing the role of 'it', that role is transferred to you; a game of play pretend may rely on the use of a different voice; a game of monopoly is won when all other players have run out of money.

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[74] Huizinga p10

[75] Ibid

[76] Huizinga, p12

[77] Huizinga, p166

A game, then, comes into being when the world is looked at through a lens of playfulness. Miguel Sicart places emphasis on the value of playfulness over the playing of games. If play is an act, and a game is acting within set rules, playfulness is a lens through which the ambiguity of the world becomes clear.[78] Anything can be appropriated by play, its rules rewritten. In play, we find an opportunity to reshape both the world and ourselves, for it is us that play. When we play, we act and in so doing we express ourselves. As Miguel Sicart himself puts it: "Who we are is also who plays, the kind of person we let loose when we play."[79]

Now, if we agree that play, like fiction, takes place in a play-realm that redefines meanings, and actions that take place within the play-realm therefore should not be interpreted by the rules that shape our everyday reality, we see that we have an opportunity to explore ourselves within the play-realm. Actions taken in play have no hold on reality, and have no meaning nor consequences in that reality, because they were taken when operating under a different set of rules. As a result, play frees us to explore both ourselves and the consequences of our actions within a layer of reality that supersedes our everyday life. We can choose to show parts of us that we might otherwise hide, experiment with who we might want to become, or discover things about ourselves that only come our during play, for while the rules of action may be different it is always ourselves that play, even if we take on the role of 'it,' or 'the hero.'

This explorative freedom is especially potent in virtual play, like the virtual world of a video game. In a virtual world, we may explore the efficiency of our actions, the consequences of our choices without fear of these choices coming back to haunt us in reality. When faced with a particularly challenging level, we can try a strategy without fear for our own wellbeing: if it fails, we simply try again. During an in-game dialogue, we can explore aspects of our beliefs and express ourselves without fear that our dialogue partner will punch us in the face. Even if they do, they cannot breach the barrier of the virtual reality and harm the player physically. In virtual play, the player is completely free to act, express themselves, and learn through trial and error.

We have thus far seen that play and fiction share a fundamental aspect, namely that they both require participants to relinquish their hold on reality. However, where most classic fiction demanded its audience remain passive during their engagement, play necessitates action. Play opens the alternative world for the player to participate in, express themselves in, hone their skills through, and explore without fear for repercussions. The play-realm, like the fictional world, is safe because it operates according to rules that transcend reality, therein freeing the player from the constraints of

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[78] M. Sicart, *Play Matters*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), p5

[79] Sicart, *Play Matters*, p17

reality. Yet unlike fiction, the play-realm gives the player the opportunity to express themselves through action and thus enables them to not only explore a world of different meanings, but also themselves, as well as the consequences of their actions.

I have briefly touched upon the notion of games, and the expressive and experiential freedom that virtual games provide the player. In the next section, we will further explore the affect that games and the virtual roles and actions that we take within them can have on players.

4.2 Role-Playing Games: Entering Alterity

Now that we have seen the similarities between fiction and play, and we have noted the expressive power of agency that play offers us, we can continue to combine the strengths of fiction and play in order to achieve a method to fully immerse audiences into another world. In so doing, they will gain an intrinsic understanding of that other world, which, if we remember that the challenge of hermeneutics is the challenge of understanding an other's context, will greatly assist in the cross-cultural encounter. By fictionally and interactively presenting an audience with another world or culture, we can expose them to something new while simultaneously giving them all the tools and safety nets they might need in order to embrace and internalise the new knowledge that they gained from experience.

We have addressed the differences between play, playfulness, and games. For the purpose of this thesis, we are exploring how best we can combine fiction and play. It is not for nothing that the previous chapter was dedicated to fiction, nor that the transition to games was introduced as 'interactive fiction.' Like in classical forms of fiction, the interactive fiction will consist of a world, characters, and their narrative journey. But where the audience was a passive outside observer in the first, they are an active participant and the driving force behind the latter. The audience still views the world through the eyes of the main character, but there is one important difference in games: the audience is now a player in control of that character, deciding what their actions and responses will be within the fictional narrative. Since it is a fictional narrative that the player should have agency in, our form of play already finds itself faced with some constraints. It must conform to a narrative structure that is situated within a fictional world. In other words, we are applying a playful attitude to a fictional narrative – we are structuring play into a game.

Many types of games exist. For most people, the term 'game' will quickly evoke images of board- or card games played with friends and family. However, these are not the types of games I wish to focus on in this paper. The constraints of the board of a board game, for one, forces many

simplifications upon the developer. If we consider, for example, the popular board game *Risk*, we find that the complicated dynamics of power and war are simplified down to the odds of the roll of a die. Were we to apply this simplification to the rich historical and cultural context that we wish to cultivate an understanding of, we would lose the nuances required for full understanding. A circular path on a board with a goal that can be boiled down to winning points and defeating all your opponents can, for all its entertainment value, never hope to serve as an adequate representation for another multi-layered culture.

The type of game that can help cultivate cross-cultural understanding is a game that simulates another culture; its customs, its aesthetics, its people and their stories. These are aspects that inform the contexts of people, and thus meaning. A game that assists the cross-cultural encounter therefore must represent an individual's freedom to explore another culture within the wide context that has shaped it. Additionally, the player should have the opportunity to roam that world freely and interact with its inhabitants so that they receive a comprehensive impression of the culture informed by both their own experience and those of others. In other words, we will need a type of game that provides the player with an open world to explore; a world within which a narrative can give context to the player's experiences and events; we will need an open world role-playing game.

4.3 The Player Character: Avatars of Self

Games have an uncanny ability to involve players directly. Because the player's agency is not only encouraged but *required* in play, players are directly involved in the outcome of the game. Without the player's action, the game and the character's journey does not progress, and unlike during classic fiction the character's choices are not necessarily predetermined. In the case of interactive fiction in the form of a role-playing game (RPG), the player inhabits that world using a player character, or avatar. For the duration of their play, this avatar represents the player's presence in the fiction. Oftentimes, the avatar will take on the form of the fiction's main character, and the player becomes the means by which the character's journey is completed.

While they are playing, the player will act as and for the main character, and for the duration of play they are aligned in goals, journey, and experience. By starting the game, a player agrees to step into the role of the character and takes on whatever quest or job the character has within the fiction,[80] just like a reader accepts the fictional world by opening the book. In the critically

[80] Mathies, p334

acclaimed video game *Papers, Please* the player takes on the role of an admission officer working at a border checkpoint of a fictional country reminiscent of the DDR. It is your job, both as a character and as a player, to check peoples' passports, check for discrepancies and accept or deny their admission into the country. Based on your performance, you can get rewarded or, if you do a terrible job, be responsible for the suffering of your fictional family. Recurring characters and their stories paired with the deceptively simple yet stressful gameplay create a unique experience where players feel the weight of responsibility and the slowly growing burden of enforcing an agenda that feels increasingly more oppressive. Depending on their actions, players may not make enough money in a day to take care of their family, or dutifully have people executed by the armed guards waiting outside, and know that it was their choice that caused this outcome. Players don't need to be told that their character feels bad when they make a difficult choice because *they* feel bad themselves for having made that decision. For the duration of play, they *are* their character.

As a result, players never talk of their gaming experience in terms of the character. They don't say "The character escaped the Uruks," but "I escaped." It doesn't matter that they play another's journey: it is the player's input, their action that makes everything happen in the game. The character wouldn't have walked anywhere if the player hadn't instructed their avatar to move, and this powerful feedback loop of player command, avatar action, and in-game result generates a unique experience in which the player has control over the fiction's development.[81] The character didn't succeed, *I did*, because it was I who acted. The player is responsible for every success or failure in the game, and this responsibility for the fictional outcome opens up a whole new range of empathic experience.

In earlier chapters I have pointed out the distance between the audience and fiction that comes from the audience's passiveness in engaging with the fiction. This passiveness also stops the audience from empathically feeling emotions such as pride, or guilt.[82] A character who does something terrible in a movie is doing it of their own accord – we the audience bear no responsibility for it. We might feel uncomfortable watching a villain be cruel, but no film, play, or novel can make its audience feel responsible for the actions that take place within it. In play, however, we share responsibility with the character, because it is always us the players on whose instructions the character acts. Players thus stand a greater chance of critically self-reflecting and potentially changing their lives as a result of a fictional experience.[83]

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[81] C Jennett, 'Being "In the Game"' in: *Conference Proceedings of the Philosophy of Computer Games* (Potsdam: University Press, 2008) p213

[82] K. Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), p8-9

[83] Mathies, p340

We can thus see that players might still see the fictional world through a character's eyes, but in being the one that acts for them, the player and character merge into one; allowing the player to rediscover themselves within the fiction.[84] The character's perspective is not so all-encompassing and world-shaping as it would be in classic fiction, but more akin to a projection of the player into the fictional world. Because the player acts through the avatar, it becomes their vehicle for expression. This gives the player several options: they can role-play and make themselves into the character, or they can choose to use the avatar as a conduit for inserting themselves into the fiction. They could even pick and mix aspects of themselves and who they want to play as to form an entirely new identity for their avatar. The avatar is the representation of the player within the fictional play-realm, connecting player and fiction through action.

The role-playing aspect of the game also enables players to interact with the fictional world in a non-linear manner. A conversation with an in-game character might be written entirely in advance, but in being pre-determined that conversation ceases to be a dialogue and becomes instead a scene to, similarly to how it would be in a book or film, be only passively observed by the player. It then ceases to be an opportunity for self-expression and exploration. In giving players agency both in action and in dialogue, we allow them to occasionally 'poke the bear' and hopefully learn from the responses they receive.

4.4 Experiencing Fiction: On the Edge of Reality

Now that we have seen how the player and player character are tied together through agency and in-game actions, we can see how player's experience of fiction in the form of a game reaches a new level of immersion compared to that of classic forms of fiction. Our active participation in the interactive fiction ensures that we are absorbed entirely into the fictional world. The player and the player character are one, working toward the same goal, having the same frustrations, and achieving simultaneous growth in skill and abilities. Whatever happens in the game is experientially real for the player,[85] and this experiential layer elevates play and games above all other media forms when it comes to the impact and educational value that the fiction may have on its audience. No other medium utilises agency, and thus becomes 'real.'

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[84] Isbister, *How Games Move Us,* p70

[85] Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe,* p247

This 'realness' of the game stems from the player's actions taken in the game – a player will make a decision, enact it into the fiction through the player character, and observe the consequences of their actions. Yet, these actions still take place within the game and within the fiction: they take place within the play-realm and thus are safe of consequences that might haunt the *player* rather than the *character.* The player is free to try new things within the play-realm because of the fictional protection in a role-playing game. They may say things they otherwise never would just to see what effects it would have, and let themselves loose within the game. Through a combination of audiovisual stimuli, with potentially tactile through the vibrations of a controller, and this feedback loop of action and consequence, the player becomes immersed into the fictional world to such an extent they can feel like they are "mentally and physically present in [the] virtual environment."[86] Even if they never believe that the game is real like their everyday lives are, the experiences are real in the sense that they really happened to the player: they really did make that choice, take that action, and saw its consequences unfold in real-time. They are both fictional and real.

As they continue to play the game, players will develop skills and become increasingly more familiar with the intricacies of the game world and the rules that govern it. In other words, the players are actively engaged with learning new things and familiarising themselves with them until they have mastered them. The fact that they must press a button to cause an action to occur in-game is eventually internalised to such an extent that its relation to in-game action becomes experientially negligible.[87] Through playing, players come to know and understand a world other than their own in much the same way as they would find their place in and come to understand the unspoken rules and social conventions of reality.

Where a book or a film may show us this other world for us to observe, in games we can experience that other world for ourselves and come to make sense of it on our own terms. Play bridges the experiential gap between the other (fictional) world and reality. It makes real what is otherwise 'mere' fiction by adding agency to the experience, thus bringing the player into the fiction through the character; it exposes the player to new understandings and experiences while upholding the safety blanket that fiction provides. Any negative consequences to a player's action will be limited to the player character while the player continues to express themselves through this imperishable avatar.[88]

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[86] Jennett, Being "In the Game", p211

[87] Jennett, p213

[88] Mathies, p335

Social Interactions with(in) Fiction

Games are still a form of fiction and thus bring players all the imaginative empathy that fiction demands and stimulates in a player. A player must put their everyday reality on pause while they play, commit to the play-realm, and agree to treat the play-realm as real for the duration of play. The player's agency means that the fictional journey becomes more than a passive observation: instead, we enter the fiction using the avatar as our medium, and make the fiction a true experience based on a chain of actions and consequences derived from the player's input.[89] The frustrations are ours, the victories are ours, the lessons we learn from them are ours.

This logic applies even to social interactions that occur in-game. In a role-playing game, and especially in open world role-playing games, the fictional world is filled with non-player characters: people who inhabit that world. Shopkeepers, quest-givers, companions, and many more characters give personality and colour to the fictional world, and many of them can be interacted with. A player can start a conversation with someone and learn about their history, their problems, and potentially give a quest that lets you help them. Depending on the type of game, you can even choose how to respond through a number of dialogue options. That way, players also get to express themselves during fictional dialogues. Studies have also shown that to players who are immersed in the game, such dialogues are experienced as real social interactions.[90] As a result, these non-player characters (NPCs) can become real companions for players, and actions taken by these NPCs can impact players significantly. I personally remember once replaying the end of a game because a choice that I made resulted in the death of one of my companions. Rather than have the ideal ending, I couldn't bear the thought that at the end of everything my choice caused the death of a friend, not when there was an option that allowed them to live. This choice made me aware of how my emotional attachments influenced my moral choices, despite both my attachment and moral choice being fictional.

Player Presence through Avatar Types

Thus far, we have seen that actions taken in-game are experienced as real by the player although they took place in the play-realm, the NPCs and social interactions in-game are experienced as real by the player, and we know that the player character is a vehicle for the player's agency within the game. The player character has several options of changing the player's experience of the fiction. For one, the character can take the form of a fully formed fictional

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[89] K Isbister, *How Games Move Us*, p3

[90] Isbister, p7-8

character, like the example of Frodo earlier. That way, the player steps into the shoes of someone else and plays through their story as agent. The player will discover who this character is as they play, and can choose to embrace the character's identity. This version of a player character is most like the experience of classic fiction, since the character has significant definition outside of the player's self-expression. Yet even when playing as Frodo, the player's agency makes it so that we simply appropriate his presence within the fiction to enact our own will. We do not become him; ultimately, he becomes us.[91]

Alternatively, the player character can be a blank slate for the player to fill in, from physical appearance to the character's in-game past to their responses in conversations. In this case, the player's expressive power is maximised, because every single aspect of the avatar is theirs to customise. The player character now is a full representation of the player in the fictional world, and thus can bring the player even closer to the fictional events. These events, after all, are no longer parts of the character's journey, because the character is nobody without the player. We can no longer speak of Frodo's quest to take the Ring to Mount Doom – there is no Frodo. The journey, the narrative, the entire fictional experience is therefore the player's. By giving the player the freedom to design their player character themselves, we also increase the amount of identification opportunities between character and player. A pre-written character might present an incommensurable alterity for the player that estranges them from the fictional experience, or cause them to give up on it entirely. In being a custom creation, the player character shapes itself in the player's image, thus safely ensuring that the in-game experience fully becomes the player's.

Giving players agency through a custom-made avatar further weakens the dichotomy of real/fiction, self/other, identity/alterity. The freedom given players in a RPG to define themselves and explore and converse as they wish helps the player become fully immersed in the in-game world. Rather than the fictional in-game world and all its inhabitants being entirely other, the two are now interconnected. Katherine Isbister illustrates the co-existence of fictional and 'real' identities aptly by quoting game researcher Celia Pearce: "Artemisa still exists within Celia: (…) I [as Artemisa] remain 'real' even when I am not present. (…) We can hold multiple identities both within ourselves and in our conceptions of each other."[92]

By bringing the player into the game as much as possible, we ensure both the deepest possible sense of immersion into the fiction, while maintaining the open-mindedness that fiction encourages in its consumers and extending it to players' conceptions of self and truth. Thus, we have created

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[91] Jennettt, p214

[92] Isbister, *How Games Move Us,* p70-71

very fruitful soil for simulating and exploring a cross-cultural encounter using the combined forces of fiction, play, and empathy.

4.5 Playing with Culture

Taking all of these aspects of play – the safety of fiction, the immersive power of agency, and the identification opportunities that the player's avatar presents – we can begin to wonder at the results of utilising these aspects for the sake of the cross-cultural encounter. Players will gradually familiarise themselves with the fictional world as they continue to play. This fictional world is fictional not because it takes place in a fantasy or sci-fi setting, but because it takes place in the game. Consequently, the fictional world may just as well represent real-world places, and it would still be a fictional world because the players experience it through a game.

We can thus assist players into becoming familiar with a different world or culture by presenting them with that alterity in-game. When players familiarise themselves with the game world, they will inadvertently be gaining insights into its real-world counterpart. Coming to understand the game, therefore, means coming to understand the real world. This will be especially powerful if the game can represent the other culture in its mechanics. That way, players also gain insight into the internal workings.

If we imagine, for example, a game where the player character participates in Ramadan, and the game's mechanics use something like a health or stamina bar which decreases slowly over time and with actions taken, and refills when one eats and drinks, the player will mechanically experience the effects that ramadan has on the body. They could choose to cheat and eat while the sun is up anyway and potentially experience the repercussions, they could optimise their character's activity to the low-energy playmode that Ramadan would entail and feel the relief and celebration at being able to replenish their energy when the sun goes down – players could gain insights into the challenges and joys of Ramadan through play and gain an intrinsic understanding that would otherwise have remained beyond their reach.

Through play, we can increase the very thing that is oftentimes a scarcity between participants of the cross-cultural encounter: understanding. The other world will no longer be strange to them, but familiar because they have already encountered, lived through, and come to know the other world by playing through it. Differences between customs or attitudes are not encountered as immediately threatening to the individual and all that they know as 'normal', because they are encountered from the safety of fiction. Meanwhile, all the experiences that the player has with the

other cultures come in the shape of a journey of self-expression, personal growth and the development of new skills and insights – all inherently positive and experientially real.

While none of these claims can be said to be universally accurate – some players will never view a game as anything other than a challenge to overcome, a skill to develop, or a race to win and thus will never engage with the world and its inhabitants in a manner beyond what is required – I do believe that the features of both fiction and play hold much potential to assist in the cross-cultural encounter. The game's fictional nature protects the player and lets them feel free, while its very nature as a game (that is, fiction) demands that players embrace alterity and familiarise themselves with it at their own terms, pace, and discretion. While walking in the shoes of their player characters, players can choose to be the hero, the villain, or just be themselves as they grow and learn as characters, players, and as individuals.

New and strange things can be scary, and what better way to explore them open-mindedly than through a medium that at its very core relies on imagination, empathy, and learning?

Wrapping Up Play & Games

In this chapter, I have argued that games maintain and improve upon the immersive and empathic potential of fiction. Where fiction requires audiences to temporarily abandon their contexts, games do so with the added virtue of bringing players 'directly' into the fiction by granting them agency within the fictional world. As such, fictional alterities become playgrounds for players to explore and familiarise themselves with as they play. While this alterity may be presented as fictional, the player's active involvement makes the fictional experience a *true* experience for the player, giving them the greatest chance of internalising the lessons learned. By tailoring the game to be representative (and authentically created so as to make it a cultural resource) of another culture, we can utilise the imagination and empathy crucial for the hermeneutic process to cultivate an understanding of alternate realities in the players. It is this unique power of giving players meaningful agency within a fiction that I believe makes games an uncommonly useful medium to assist the cross-cultural encounter.

Conclusion

Over the course of this thesis I have illustrated how interpreting the meaning between participants in a cross-cultural encounter is made exceptionally difficult by the participants' vastly different contexts. Since the contexts of our lives and culture informs much of what we consider normal, valuable, or generally believe to be 'true', a difference in context leads to a difference in meaning, and consequently difficulties for understanding one another. Insight into the other's context is therefore of vital importance if we want to have a successful cross-cultural encounter and cultivate a shared understanding that is not reliant on assimilation of or projection onto the other.

In order to find a hermeneutic method that can minimise the impact of these issues, I turned to Dilthey and Collingwood. Both scholars placed understanding of the *subject* and their context central in their methods. If we can understand the individual within their context and understand the context as shaped by individuals, we stand the best chance of interpreting their meaning correctly. We do this by imagining ourselves in the shoes of the other, which is an exercise in imagination and empathy. If our method requires imagination and empathy, we may as well use a medium that naturally engages those.

In fiction, we are naturally engaged in an alternate truth, within which we are invited to see the world from the perspective of its main characters and, as we continue the narrative, we gain a deeper understanding of them. In short: we are asked to imagine a world that functions on different rules (context) than ours – thus using imagination – and we view this world through eyes of a fictional character – thus using empathy. However, because we aim to gain insight in a broader cultural context rather than one isolated experience of it, our type of fiction would benefit from a more personal experience of its narrative. In classic forms of fiction, the audience is kept removed from the fictional experience because they are passive participants in it. By involving its audience directly, we both maximise its immersive and empathic effect, and minimise the chance that the fictional experience is discarded as applying *only* to the fictional character through whose eyes we experienced it.

It is for this reason we should consider adding play to the fiction, thus arriving at interactive fiction, or a narrative game. The fictional nature of this experience ensures that the player is naturally placed in an open-minded mindset that will accept the changes in context, while their active participation enhances the affect of the(ir) character's experience. When playing a game, the player *becomes* the character through whose eyes they experience the fiction, thus experiencing the fiction as 'real.' Fiction and player become connected through action, since it is the player's input

that makes the character succeed, grow, and learn: what the character experiences, the player experiences too. Additionally, fictional events are experientially indistinguishable from real ones, further increasing the immersion and empathic capabilities of the medium. Thus, a game that authentically represents another culture and the people within it is an opportunity for audiences to freely, immersively, and empathically experience other worlds, cultures and contexts for themselves.

If we ensure that a game contains authentic cultural representations, a narrative structure, and opportunities for meaningful decision-making and self-expression, I believe that we find an unprecedented toolset to help garner cross-cultural understanding. It is a natural practice in imagination and empathy, which are cornerstones to a method of hermeneutics aimed to understand others within their context, and a way to both fully immerse an audience in the fictional experience while ensuring their individual and cultural safety. Players can thus intuitively and positively encounter other cultures on their own terms, thus gaining familiarity with a context that will ultimately help garner cross-cultural understanding.

There are aspects of this endeavour still unexplored in this thesis, such as a more in-depth analysis of the perks of linear versus branching narrative games, or how immersion and empathy are affected by first- or third-person perspectives in either pre-written characters or blank slate avatars, and many more. However, I believe that the potential of games as a medium for increasing empathy-based insight into others has been argued for effectively. With the ever-increasing technological advancements, I can only hope that the future holds many more opportunities for us to refine our methods and expand our horizons using the exceptional medium of games and play.

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