

Really just making it all up:
*Fictionalism about the virtual and a
whole lot more*

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AIMS AND MOTIVATIONS

- Aim: sketch conceptual background for extending *McWild's* fictionalism to include *much* more than merely virtual objects
- Various motivations
 - Unified account of virtual & social ontology
 - “Flat” Ontology
 - Fits with/supports other, related projects
 - ‘Race is no more mythical and fictional than gender, both powerful fictions.’ (Lugones 2008: 12; see also Logue 2022)
 - Scientific models as fictions (Knuuttia 2009, Frigg 2010, Frigg & Nguyen 2016, 2017)
 - Waltonian accounts of immersion (Wildman *ms*)
 - Neat explainer of recent phenomena: Cryptocurrencies and NFTs

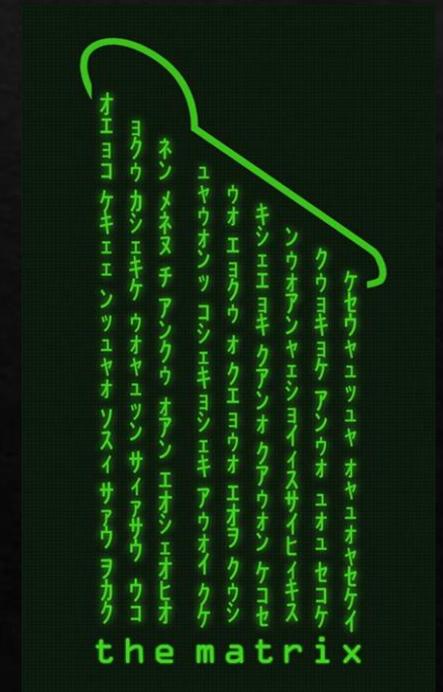
Roadmap

- ◇ Background: Virtual Ontology
- ◇ Fictionalist Social Ontology
- ◇ Fictional Features
- ◇ Mandated and Consensus Fictions
- ◇ Case Studies: Bitcoin and NFTs



BACKGROUND: VIRTUAL ONTOLOGY

- Virtual digitalism
 - Virtual objects exist and either are or depend upon digital objects
- **Cross-Play Problem:** single virtual object can be instanced by distinct digital “objects”
- **Over-determination Problem:** there’s no room for virtual objects to do any (virtual) causing once we’ve got digital objects





VIRTUAL FICTIONALISM

Contra realism – virtual objects are not real, but *fictional*.

‘Fictional’ takes the Waltonian scope – broad, technical meaning.

- ◇ Games of make-believe
- ◇ Props
- ◇ Principles of generation

GAMES OF MAKE BELIEVE

Walton

- ◇ Engagement with representational (art)works just is playing *games of make-believe*
- ◇ Such games are (perhaps) more sophisticated than childhood, but basically the same imaginative activity

+ *McWild*

- ◇ Virtual objects do not exist; can be said to “exist” within these games of make-believe

PROPS

Walton

- ◇ *Prop* – object whose existence/features are used to guide & determine features of imagined game-world – Walt-Fiction

+ *McWild*

- ◇ Digital objects etc. are *props* in games of make-believe
- ◇ Props can “inherit” in-game value
 - Prop can be valuable in part because of how it lets you play a game of make-believe

PRINCIPLES OF GENERATION

Walton

- ◇ *Principle of Generation* – “rule” that fixes prescription to imagine
 - May only be implicitly understood; need not be something participants can articulate (Walton 1990: 38)

+ *McWild (new!)*

- ◇ Principles of generation come in different forms, and that helps explain a surprisingly broad range of phenomena.

EXTENDING THE PROJECT

- Fictionalist *social* ontology
 - **Political entities**: nations, laws
 - **Economic entities**: money, debt
 - **Social entities**: class, race, gender, institutions
- Underlying entities/facts exist & are props in games of make-believe; social entities/facts only “exist” within these games.



FICTIONALIST SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

- Some precedent
 - Thomasson (2003) raises, but dismisses, a Waltonian account
 - I have not been able to turn up examples of fictionalist approaches to social facts generally... (Brouwer 2022: 35fn27)
- Some benefits
 - E.g., nicely accounts for social inconsistency!
- Some issues
 - Why does fictionalism about Pikachu feel more natural than fictionalism about social entities?

FEATURES OF FICTIONS

- ◇ We think that there are important differences across different types of fictions, and that we can understand those by reflecting on features of games that are also features of games of make believe:
 - ◇ **Mutability** – how rules can change over time
 - ◇ **Openness** – who can change the rules (before playing)
 - ◇ **Flexibility** – whether and how rules can change mid-game
- ◇ Reflecting on these illuminates the two new categories of fiction that we illustrate here: consensus and mandated fictions.



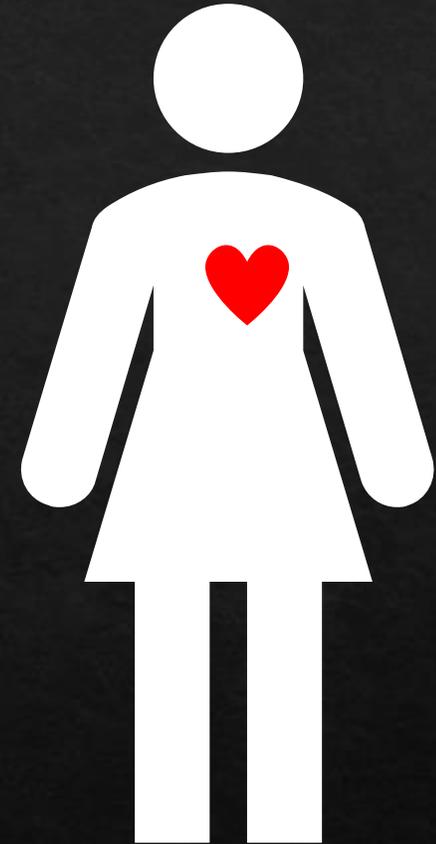
▶ HACK N SLASH

FEATURES OF FICTIONS

- A fiction's media impacts what features it has
 - Literary fictions are mostly closed & inflexible
 - Videogames are occasionally open & flexible
 - TTRPGs are open, some are flexible
- Flexibility & openness levels can shift over time
 - Game might start out quite flexible, but might gradually *ossify*
 - Ossification can be due to intentional (The FA and football) or unintentional action (e.g., tig)

CONSENSUS FICTIONS

- ◇ Shared game of make believe
- ◇ Re-enforced by adoption of common principles of generation – consensus
- ◇ Open and flexible only via shifts in consensus (else: fragmentation)
 - ◇ Castling in chess versus rival codes of rugby
- ◇ Closed and inflexible when consensus too widespread, longstanding, robust.
 - ◇ Drawing of a heart; middle finger raised.



MANDATED FICTIONS

- ◇ Shared game of make believe
- ◇ Re-enforced by adoption of common principles of generation – consensus.
- ◇ Consensus is somehow forced or mandated:
 - ◇ Paper currency
 - ◇ Private property
 - ◇ Intellectual property
- ◇ Breakdown beyond the mandate's reach (£ in Paris, copyright in Indonesia)



CONSENSUS FICTIONS

Case Study: Bitcoin

- ◇ Bitcoins are digital tokens created through a resource-intensive, computing process.
- ◇ The purpose of Bitcoin platform is to create a decentralised digital medium of exchange.
- ◇ Inherent rarity ensured by 'mining' (finite tokens, exponentially resource-hungry to produce).
- ◇ Consensus **possible** by the blockchain mechanism of tracking ownership (**according to this fiction**) in a ledger.
- ◇ Fiction of fiat currency is Mandated (governments), fiction of Bitcoin has (mere) Consensus but aspires to general, not narrow community, use.
- ◇ The success of a crypto-currency is tied to the breadth/strength of the Consensus Fiction.



CONSENSUS FICTIONS

Case Study: NFTs

- ◆ Non-fungible tokens are instances of digital objects (tokens) which have no pre-determined rate of exchange between them (non-fungible).
- ◆ NFTs act as a cryptographically-produced unique digital serial number associated with an instance of some other (normally digital) object – thus inherently *rare*.
- ◆ Like Bitcoin NFT, ownership **according to that fiction** is tracked via a decentralised ledger.
- ◆ The purpose of NFTs is to track ownership of digital assets according to that fiction, even if those assets are replicated, saved, and shared widely by others.
- ◆ Social import of ownership claim is a function of the strength/breadth of the Consensus Fiction.
- ◆ But non-fungibility undermines consensus, and NFT ownership ignores pre-existing IP rights.



CONSENSUS AND MANDATE FICTIONS

- ◇ **Fiat currency** << Mandated by state(s)
- ◇ **Bitcoin** << Aspires to be currency without mandate, consensus strength fluctuates across the class (fungible)
- ◇ **NFT** << Aspires to be property without mandate, consensus strength determined per token (non-fungible) so highly volatile, difficult to sustain

CONCLUSIONS

- When it comes to the virtual, we think (Waltonian) fictionalism is the way to go!
- Once you've got the Waltonian machinery, it is tempting to apply it to other areas
- But it feels less “natural” to be fictionalists about e.g. nations, \$\$\$, and institutions
- That's because these fictions are *mandated*
 - High ubiquity, largely closed & inflexible