

# Being a Child Again Through Gameplay

## Playable Child Perspectives and the Sitting Simulator

BACKSEAT

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### INTRODUCTION: (THE LACK OF) CHILD PERSPECTIVES IN VIDEO GAMES

There are surely many examples of relatable moments in books and movies, but interestingly enough, some left a deep impression on me without relating to my current adult life: Movies like *BOYHOOD* (2014) and *FLORIDA PROJECT* (2017) do not only tell a child's story but try telling it from the child's perspective. This can cause an emotional response that made me, as a game designer, wonder: What could a child perspective in a game do—a relatable playable child perspective?

While there are games with sensitively written characters able to move the player emotionally or give them an opportunity for meaningful decision making, a broad look at the video game industry will show that game characters seem to offer neither the same depth nor range that can be found in film and literature. Of course, there are some seemingly obvious explanations for this, including the lack of maturity of the medium and the economics of development processes, in which narration is usually not prioritized. Another reason can be found in the dominant share of game mechanics being of physical nature, overcoming material obstacles and exploring a material game world—mainly by running, jumping, fighting, shooting. Consequently, there is a superior number of game characters suitable for said physical tasks: strong and sporty young adults, often male and not uncommonly stereotypical hero figures. Usually, the physical abilities of these characters, as well as the tasks they must fulfill, exceed those of the average player by far; frequently, they are even supernatural. And while it is quite compelling to basically live a (power) fantasy through them, these characters or their narratives

usually do not have much in common with the player and their life experiences. Therefore, the motivation for my research and practice preceding this essay was to diverge from more conventional player roles and investigate a type of protagonist that might contribute to the search for more relatable—yet different—player characters: a child.<sup>1</sup>

For not only watching the child protagonists of a movie like *BOYHOOD*—who are exposed to a violent family dinner with their stepfather—makes me suffer along, but also tiptoeing around a drunk father while playing young Chris in *THE AWESOME ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN SPIRIT* (2018) makes me feel a past sensation of helplessness and childlike adjustment. And while my inner response to playing Chris appears completely reasonable, even natural, the concept of recalling childhood memories or even reverting to a child’s perspective through gameplay seems somewhat unique.

In fact, examining 506 video games published between 2009 and 2019, Emma Reay found that only 45 featured significant, playable child characters, i.e., less than 9 percent.<sup>2</sup> Childhood relatability as a common ground for the majority of adult players, on the one hand, and the underrepresentation of credible child characters as game protagonists, on the other hand, constitute an opportunity: By putting the spotlight on a type of player character which is possibly more relatable than the typical strong heroic one, we can offer a different perspective to our current adult one. The implementation of a relatable child perspective also involves, as will be shown, various artistic and design challenges for the medium of the computer game, regarding its narrative as well as its aesthetic qualities.

Hence, in this essay, playable child perspectives are explored both theoretically and practically: After defining three overall approaches to a playable child perspective, I discuss potential means to a *relatable* child perspective for adult players and give respective examples. Finally, I present the game prototype *BACKSEAT* (2022)—my own implementation of a relatable playable child perspective.

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1 This essay summarizes and further develops some of the findings from my thesis *Being a Child Again Through Gameplay*, with which I obtained the degree of Master of Arts (M.A.) at the Cologne Game Lab of the Cologne University of Applied Science. Find my thesis online here: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361085723\\_Being\\_a\\_Child\\_Again\\_Through\\_Gameplay](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361085723_Being_a_Child_Again_Through_Gameplay)

2 Reay, Emma: “The Child in Games: Representations of Children in Video Games (2009-2019),” in: *gamestudies.org* 21/1 (May 2021).

## DARK, PLAYFUL, OR BLENDED— DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO PLAYING A CHILD

Games serving as examples and basis for my research and the following classification of approaches to a playable child perspective are compliant with the following three criteria: Firstly, there must be a playable child character<sup>3</sup> at some point within or throughout any considered game. For the character to be defined as a child, the game's fictional world must allow the definition of childhood as the preceding life phase to adolescence and adulthood, both also existent in the respective world, at least theoretically.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, playing as a child is absolutely relevant to the respective game or game segment. This means the playable character identifying as a child is of such significance that the narrative would not make sense, or the gameplay message would not come across if they were an adult or other non-childlike being.<sup>5</sup> And thirdly, games covered here are not solely made for children but have an adult target group. This criterion derives from the objective of investigating games putting adults into a child's perspective.

While games complying with the above criteria are comparatively rare, there are still more than can be covered in this essay. Thus, only a few representative ones are exemplarily mentioned. I suggest a classification of game approaches to a playable child perspective, categorizing them into three main types: *Dark Approach*, *Playful Approach*, and *Blended Approach*. The classification and categorization result from my assessment of the considered games and further games with similarities to the considered ones and are ambiguous in some cases. The

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- 3 Within this work, a child character is understood to be a human or humanoid character that clearly is a child within the fictional world of the game. The character is required to be of an age and/or in a developmental stage corresponding to an older preschooler or school-aged child, before puberty, namely between about four and twelve years old.
  - 4 The character may be a human being or any other conscious being with human-like personality embedded in a societal system with a generational structure similar to that of mankind. Thus, the non-human attributes of a character covered by this definition would be limited to their outer appearance and physical characteristics. An example for this would be the later referenced game *A SHORT HIKE* (2019).
  - 5 A counter example to a significant child perspective can be found in the *Jump'n'Run* series *COMMANDER KEEN* (1990-1991). While the protagonist is a boy according to the background plot of the game, his identity as a child does not seem to affect the gameplay in any significant way. An almost identical game with an adult human or, for instance, dog named *Commander Keen* as playable character would be thinkable.

respective portrayal of childhood and child characters as well as the depiction of adult characters and the game world, atmosphere, and narrative served as an orientation while assessing the games. As the three types of approaches express a predominant tendency, the level of manifestation of the respective type of approach can vary between games. However, any game compliant with the mentioned criteria falls into one of the three categories. The three categories—the Dark Approach presenting a predominantly negative child position, the Playful Approach painting a very positive picture of childhood, and the Blended Approach providing a more multifaceted experience—are briefly described in the following and further represented by respective game examples in the subsequent discussion of means to child perspective relatability.

The most frequent of the three approaches, the Dark Approach to a playable child perspective, is characterized by a dark depiction of childhood in general or of a specific childhood shown in the respective game. The main goal of playable child characters is either to break out of an unbearable situation or literally survive the game. Usually, they have no overblown purpose as known from more conventional game narratives but find themselves at the bottom of a power hierarchy, exposed to a hostile environment in which adults are cruel, indifferent, or incapable. Childhood in the sense of a protected and playful youth does not exist. Games with a Dark Approach often rank among the survival horror game genre dominated by stealth gameplay, as found in *LITTLE NIGHTMARES* (2017), *LIMBO* (2010), and *INSIDE* (2016).<sup>6</sup> More rare realizations of the Dark Approach include adventure or point-and-click games, for instance, *THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON TWO* (2013), *FRAN BOW* (2015), and *LITTLE MISFORTUNE* (2019).

The Playful Approach is all about capturing the lightness, carefreeness, playfulness, curiosity, vitality, and spirit of adventure that childhood can be to provide a wholesome game experience to the player. Burdensome themes play no or just a small part, and if they occur, they are presented in a hopeful, solvable way. Typical gameplay involves lively movement and exploration, reminiscent of the adventurous energy of playing children. Correspondingly, bright and colorful outside settings in friendly nature scenes are common. The playful exploration of these settings affords an easy access to a positive child perspective. Some examples of games with the

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6 Emma Reay elaborates on two of these wordless games: Reay, Emma: “Secrets, Stealth, and Survival: The Silent Child in the Video Games *Little Nightmares* and *INSIDE*,” in: *Barnboken* 43 (June 2020).

Playful Approach that I looked at are ALBA: A WILDLIFE ADVENTURE (2020), DORDOGNE (in development), and A SHORT HIKE (2019).<sup>7</sup>

The Blended Approach to a playable child perspective shows both positive and negative sides of being a child, or better even, it does not employ a dyadic construct of two distinct sides but portrays diverse aspects from a spectrum of childhood facets ranging from devastating to joyful, whereas the Dark Approach and the Playful Approach tend to primarily cover aspects from the negative or positive end of this spectrum, respectively. The ratio between child perspective aspects involved varies between games. A versatile depiction of the child perspective is more representative of the average real-life childhood than an exclusively dark or overly playful one. This is often reflected by Blended Approach games being situated in everyday life settings rather than dystopian, idealized, or otherwise constructed ones. THE AWESOME ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN SPIRIT (2018), KNIGHTS AND BIKES (2019), BEFORE YOUR EYES (2021), and BEAR WITH ME (2016) are four examples of games with the Blended Approach to a child perspective I explored in my research.

## POSITION, PERCEPTION, PROJECTION— MAKING PLAYABLE CHILD PERSPECTIVES RELATABLE

Besides classifying the approaches to a playable child character introduced above, I also tried to answer the following question: What turned, or would have turned, a playable child perspective into a *relatable* playable child perspective? And while there is no guaranteeing recipe for creating a playable child perspective that just any adult player can relate to—games are, after all, an art form and speak differently to different kinds of players—, gathering and analyzing design strategies that have been used so far could be a helpful undertaking for future game designers. Based on my findings in later mentioned game examples and standpoints in Game Studies literature, I draft the following supposition from a game design standpoint: For a playable child perspective to be relatable to adult players, some and ideally all these means must be conveyed, a *childlike positioning* within the diegetic game

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7 Playfulness can also be a characteristic of games with playable child characters using the Dark or Blended Approach to a child perspective. Thus, the term Playful Approach refers to games in which childlike playfulness and imagination have priority over any non-playful and negative aspects of the childhood perspective in such a way that the game could be reduced to these predominant aspects of childlike playfulness and imagination without changing the core game idea.

world, a *childlike comprehension and perception* of the game world, and a *projection* opportunity for the player. Optionally, *nostalgic and/or 'retro' sensations* can serve as relatable elements to raise associations with the player's own childhood. The three means are not always clearly distinguishable and often affect each other, e.g., both a well-conveyed child position and perception can create or enhance a projection surface.

Each of these means is outlined in the following, further illustrated by game examples from my research, and finally referenced in the description of my own game, *BACKSEAT*.

### **Childlike Positioning**

What defines a playable character as a child or childlike being is their position in the world and in relation to other (incl. non-childlike) characters within that world. The notion of *position* is used in a broader sense, encompassing the child's role in a social, cultural, and family structure. Sociologist Chris Jenks says about childhood and adulthood:

“The ‘known’ difference between these two social locations directs us towards an understanding of the identity contained within each; the contents are marked by the boundaries. The child, therefore, cannot be imagined except in relation to a conception of the adult, but essentially it becomes impossible to generate a well-defined sense of the adult, and indeed adult society, without first positing the child.”<sup>8</sup>

For instance, not having the liabilities and obligations of the adult members of their family or within their world, not having to self-acquire their vital resources, and being able to use most of their time freely, are qualities of a child's position in our western society that go hand in hand with the situation of having others—parents in a direct sense and society in a superordinate one—decide over a child's life circumstances. Not being seen as a full member of society and thus not being taken seriously are likely drawbacks of being a child, while the same can lead to a liberating acceptance of silliness, nonconformity, and missteps. As many adult players may remember the defining aspects of their childhood, a child position mirrored by the game design, mechanic, or narrative can be a crucial factor in creating a relatable playable child perspective. While the narrative is probably the most intuitive way to indicate the position of the playable character, e.g., via

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8 Jenks, Chris: *Childhood*, London: Routledge 2005, p. 3.

narrative setting or dialog, cues of a child's position can also be included in other game design aspects such as game visuals or game mechanics.

For instance, avatar agency can put emphasis on a childlike position: Rune Klevjer's model of the *avатарial prosthesis*<sup>9</sup> considers the avatar in its function as a *reflexive extension* to *simultaneously* being an interface/extension and an element of the diegetic game world. He points out that, since "[t]hrough the avatar, instrumental agency is replaced with fictional agency,"<sup>10</sup> this extension allows the consideration of fictional—diegetic—elements, such that narrative techniques can be integrated into the fictional agency. Regarding the inferior attributes of a child's position, Klevjer's concept of an *unreliable prosthesis* is particularly interesting. He states that "the unreliable prosthesis makes the avатарial relationship itself less coherent, less well-defined and more slippery."<sup>11</sup> And as Benjamin Beil believes the variations of an *unreliable prosthesis* to be exceedingly diverse,<sup>12</sup> this likely gives room to different opportunities to employ an unreliable prosthesis as narrative means to making an adult player better relate to a playable child perspective. An exemplary scenario that comes to mind is taking away agency from the player, i.e., impeding controls, at the moment, the playable child character is trying to manage a task like carrying a heavy pile of fragile plates or pouring juice from a full pitcher. The risk of breaking a plate or spilling the juice is increased, and the child's motoric shortcoming or self-defeating nervousness and fear of failure (resulting in parental reproach) impedes communication between the player and the avатарial prosthesis, thus becoming an unreliable one. Likely, this results in an emotional tension or even an unpleasant slip-up that some adult players might remember from their childhood.

Furthermore, the choice of camera point of view (POV) can serve as a tool to illustrate a childlike position. Thereby, the POV best suitable for child character relatability is an individual consideration depending on several factors such as the game design, intent, genre, and player. I believe that the relation between POV and relatability is similar to the relation between POV and the often-discussed immersive effect. As Beil claims, the debate around the most immersive POV

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9 Klevjer, Rune: "What is the Avatar? Fiction and Embodiment in Avatar-Based Singleplayer Computer Games," Dissertation, University of Bergen 2006, p. 64.

10 R. Klevjer: "What is the Avatar?" p. 130.

11 Ibid., p. 213.

12 Beil, Benjamin: "'You are Nothing but my Puppet!' Die 'unreliable prosthesis' als narrative Strategie des Computerspiels." In: *Navigationen—Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Jg. 9, Nr. 1 [2009], pp. 73-89, p. 76.

often neglects the context of game and representation modes.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, a child character played in first-person POV with a lower eye level, possibly symbolizing hierarchical inferiority, a more curious view of the world, or the feeling of being cared for on a parent's arm or shoulders, can afford a close experience of certain aspects of a childlike position as well as perception. But nevertheless, most of the child characters in the examined games being played in third-person POV does not seem to lessen their relatability but rather be attributed to well-considered design choices, some of them pointed out in upcoming examples.<sup>14</sup> In Daniel Black's words, "the player's relationship with the game character is not simply one of direct identification. If it was, third-person games would always be less involving than first-person games."<sup>15</sup> And thus, as for my research interest in enabling an adult to be, i.e., feel like being, a child again through gameplay, and the therein motivated sought for relatability, the player does not have to give up their own identity and believe they are the playable child character<sup>16</sup> (in any case not fully feasible) but take part in the "process of metacommunication, a double-consciousness,"<sup>17</sup> as Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman framed it, to put themselves in the child's shoes and thereby remember how they used to be a child.

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- 13 Beil, Benjamin: *First Person Perspectives. Point of View und figurenzentrierte Erzählformen im Film und im Computerspiel*, Münster: LIT 2010, pp. 93-94.
- 14 Laurie Taylor describes the main drawback of a first-person POV as follows: "The third-person point-of-view augments the limited information of the first-person point-of-view, and suggests another aspect of this problem: embodiment is not merely seeing more (i.e., peripherally), but seeing within a context [...]. Third-person games allow for the representation of other-than-visual perception, like often being able to sense entities behind and beside one's body and being able to see straight ahead, to the periphery, and down all at the same instance. Perception often includes the ability to sense when another presence moves right behind or next to a person. In first-person games, this is lost." (Taylor, Laurie N.: "Video Games: Perspective, Point-of-view, and Immersion," Dissertation, University of Florida 2002, p. 29.)
- 15 Black, Daniel: "Why Can I See My Avatar? Embodied Visual Engagement in the Third-Person Video Game," in: *Games and Culture* 12/2 (2017), pp. 179-199, here p. 189.
- 16 This refers to the plunging immersion defined in: Murray, Janet: *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, New York, NY: Free Press 1997, pp. 98-99.
- 17 Salen, Katie/Zimmerman, Eric: *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, London: MIT Press 2004, p. 451.

In the Dark Approach examples LIMBO, LITTLE NIGHTMARES, and INSIDE, several visual aspects convey each of the three playable child characters' mutual childlike position within their respective game worlds, defined by inferiority, hostility, vulnerability, and solitary: Observed from a third-person camera viewpoint that is positioned in parallel to and distant from the two-dimensional (or 2.5-dimensional) scene,<sup>18</sup> the child characters appear especially small in comparison to the screen dimensions and thus quite lost.<sup>19</sup> Seeing their body motion responding directly to the player's input will add to a sense of direct influence, consequential responsibility<sup>20</sup>, and urgency. And repeatedly watching the child character's small body explicitly brutally destroyed can cause a magnitude of fear in the player. In fact, due to their third-person perspective, these games can be considered examples of what Bernard Perron defines as the "extended body genre" in which the body on screen "urges [the player] to act and feel through its presence, agency, and embodiment in the fictional world."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, a sudden loss of control—conforming with the Rune Klevjer's concept of an *unreliable prosthesis* and Benjamin Beil's idea of narrative techniques integrated into the fictional agency—can be found in LIMBO as the player suddenly loses part of their control over the playable child character when a maggot-like entity attaches itself to the boy's head and forces him to keep walking ignoring the player's directional inputs.

In the Playful Approach example, ALBA: A WILDLIFE ADVENTURE, the exclusively positive childlike position of the playable child character Alba is also conveyed visually, both by the friendly environment<sup>22</sup> and her cheerful body

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18 For these aspects to come across, a third-person POV is essential.

19 In LITTLE NIGHTMARES, the player character is exaggeratedly tiny in comparison to adult characters and objects, e.g. furniture and tools, as well.

20 While steering the playable child character, a potential feeling of torturing them could either put a distance between player and playable character or evoke an early life feeling of having to endure an other-directed situation with no other options.

21 Perron, Bernard: "The Survival Horror: The Extended Body Genre," in: Perron, Bernard (ed.), *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, McFarland Company 2009, pp. 121-143.

22 The three Playful Approach games share some characteristics in world design and narrative. They are set either in an especially picturesque and idyllic region (Dordogne) or on a small island. Hence, the game world is a somewhat secluded or even naturally limited microcosm, segregated from a larger, unknown and thus possibly less friendly world, e.g. a city or the mainland. This allows the characters and their narrative to stay inside a bubble of peaceful and well-off living conditions, clearly not

language. Watching Alba skipping through high grass and between trees, occasionally outstretching her arms like a gliding bird,<sup>23</sup> it is hard not to be overcome by a nostalgic feeling of freedom and liveliness and remember what the world once looked like on a long summer day before one was called home for dinner. In fact, all aforementioned Playful Approach examples being played in third-person POV allow the player to see the adorably animated playable child character's as a diegetic part of their wholesome surroundings and privileged situations: All three main characters seem to be on vacation or some kind of break, all of them staying with close relatives which are not their parents or their siblings. The latter facilitates a more harmonic and less conflict-prone relationship<sup>24</sup> with the respective adult guardian and thus a more harmonic and less conflict-prone childlike position. Overall, the in-game conditions around these game examples are blatantly ideal—to the point of them converging into one and the same stereotypical childhood fantasy: If asked for a somewhat viable situation to put one's inner child in good spirits and a more carefree and relaxed mood, coming up with a summer vacation on an island or in the countryside is probably not a far-fetched answer. And this answer conveys an exclusively favorable childlike position, reducing childhood to its playful, carefree aspects.

BEFORE YOUR EYES, a game I associate with the Blended Approach to a child perspective, demonstrates that the before-mentioned loss of perception through a first-person POV<sup>25</sup> can be a stylistic device aiding the game narrative and, here, in particular, portraying a rather passive and observant childlike position. This is further supported by game mechanics only allowing for head movement and occasional object interaction. The surrounding visual field includes areas that remain black, illustrating the fragmentariness of relived memories. The limitations of both visual field and player agency do not only emphasize the playable child's position

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representative of average ones. This lucky location is usually complemented with friendly weather matching a warm season.

- 23 There's a mentionable parallel between Claire's little flying and gliding sprees (*A SHORT HIKE*) and Alba's pretend-flying—an easily accessible metaphor for undaunted childlike energy.
- 24 This is particularly true in the case of a temporary guardianship and a return home to the parents in near future, e.g., during a school break spent at a relative's. Said case pertains all three games.
- 25 L. Taylor: "Video Games," p. 29.

in his family<sup>26</sup>—characterized by narrative themes such as distressed parents, parental conflicts, and high expectations—and as a spectator of his past memories, but the later also constitutes an example of an *unreliable prosthesis*: The sudden impossible control pace requirement the player is faced with during the playable child character's piano recital conveys stress-induced failure. A classic burden of a childlike position, i.e., having a path laid out by a parent, is thereby narrated through game mechanics.

Whether dependence and inferiority or carefreeness and privilege, showing these characteristics of the child position in distinction from the adult position can appeal to the player's memory of being a child and thus cause relatability.

### Childlike Perception/Comprehension

While communicating a childlike position as outlined above is aimed at relating to the child's stand in the context it is in, conveying a childlike perception and comprehension is about relating to a child's mind.

As they are in a different life phase and developmental stage—and due to their just discussed childlike position—children perceive and comprehend some things differently than adults. This difference can complicate making an adult player relate with a child character but can be used as a means to child perspective relatability. For if the game can manage to convey the child's comprehension and perception, the adult player might be able to project themselves into that child's perspective. Few exemplary strategies are given here to illustrate how this could be done. Surely these do not cover all possibilities of making childlike perception/comprehension accessible to an adult player.

*Grown-up Words:* For instance, when an adult character says a sentence that is contextually comprehensible to the adult player but not to the playable child character, the game would have to be designed in a way that suggests this discrepancy to the player in order to make them relate to the child. This is not an easy task as the player's intellect cannot be lowered. One possible way would be to make this sentence audibly incomprehensible to put both player and playable character on the same level. Another could be to slightly change the sentence in a way that suggests an incomprehension on the playable character's side. For instance, a sophisticated word could be substituted by an altered version that is slightly off, not an accurate word but easy to reconstruct. The player will still know what is

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26 The child helplessly exposed to an adult-determined world is a scheme also found in the Dark Approach, however in vast contrast to that as the adults in BEFORE YOUR EYES are caring and well-intentioned.

meant but be reminded of the child character being on a different level of comprehension. The same effect could be achieved by the child character wrongly reusing a sophisticated word, reacting confused, ignoring it, or checking back with another character to understand its meaning.

*Understanding Situations:* Differences in comprehension are not only linguistic. Also, an entire situation can be understood differently by a child than an adult, which does not necessarily mean that the child's understanding is less right. The playable child's understanding then has to be conveyed to the player. This can again be done in different ways, for instance, through dialog or audible/readable thoughts, visually or through the child's reaction in or after a respective situation.

*Imagination:* Children's view of the world is often more imaginative and naive than that of an adult. They are less likely to have been disappointed or disenchanted yet, ideally, live in a protected environment, are often raised with wholesome, naive, and fanciful narratives, and have fewer real experiences on which to base their view. This is, of course, a generalizing assumption but surely applicable enough. Therefore, making that view visible can be an effective approach to portraying a childlike perception.

Regardless of the means to close the gap between childlike and adult comprehension and perception, being aware of that gap is probably the more crucial aspect in creating a relatable child perspective. Some case examples will be pointed out in the discussion of game examples further below.

The Playful Approach example ALBA: A WILDLIFE ADVENTURE provides a childlike perception through the narrative of Alba's successful quest of actively solving an environmental issue, which is not frustrating to the point of hopelessness like global warming but more of an adventure than a catastrophe and thus approached with an optimistic drive, reminiscent of the image of environmentalism one might have had and felt passionate about as a child—being concerned about the well-being of cute animals and trash in the park.<sup>27</sup> Alba confidently saving the nature reserve, becoming a respected local hero, and finally having everyone on her side portrays a young child's idealistic view of their own efficacy as well as doubtless self-perception.

In the Blended Approach title THE AWESOME ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN SPIRIT, it is the choices given to Chris that likely prompt the player to project themselves into the child character's position and comprehension.<sup>28</sup> The discrepancy between

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27 This is not meant in a condescending way. Surely, at a young age, environmental pollution is easier to grasp on a small scale and in a local context.

28 For example, when one of two choices is to be honest or even provocative and confront the father with his shortcoming and wrongdoings and the other is to be careful,

the relatable child character's choices and the player's adult perspective is exposed at several points during tense dialog with the father and becomes particularly clear when the player eventually tries to get rid of a concerned neighbor on behalf of the playable character even though from an adult perspective seeking help would be preferable. Here, the childlike position and comprehension have been well conveyed.<sup>29</sup> The game aspect constituting the Blended Approach of this game is the coexistence of the menacing situation with the father—feeling helpless, tiptoeing around him—on the one hand, and just an ordinary or at least playful childhood—getting lost in one's own limitless imagination—on the other hand.

*Figure 1: Chris sitting in his room, coming up with an adventure in THE AWESOME ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN SPIRIT*



Source: THE AWESOME ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN SPIRIT (Square Enix 2018, O: Dontnod Entertainment), <https://square-enix-games.com/games/the-awesome-adventures-of-captain-spirit>

soothing, or silent to avoid confrontation with the father's anger and preserve harmony, the player can not only find out what kind of child they would want to be but possibly reflect on what kind of child they once were.

- 29 Incidentally, understanding one's childhood behavioral patterns and coping mechanism only retrospectively, leads to an intriguing aspect of experiencing a child perspective as an adult player, also found in THE AWESOME ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN SPIRIT: As the player, one realizes quite soon what is going on with Chris' Dad but it is not quite clear if Chris does, at least not to the whole extend, including the damaging situation he is in.

For Chris, the playful and imaginative is a way of coping with the oppressive and the powerlessness, as he imagines himself as a supernatural strong hero to deal with his vulnerable position as the smallest and weakest person in his home. The player might remember coping in a similar manner as a child, when withdrawing to their room and assuming the biggest worry they had was what to play next would distract their minds from being helplessly subjected to a world ruled by grown-ups or, to give the most classic example, a moody or mean parent. Eventually, Chris gets so absorbed in his imagination that it comes alive not only to him but also to the player's perception, i.e., visually on screen. This allows the adult player an actual look at the imaginative childlike perception of the playable character.<sup>30</sup>

Dark Approach games like *LIMBO* and *LITTLE NIGHTMARES* convey a childlike perception/comprehension by making use of the menacing game experience inherent to their survival horror genre: Despite the player's negative childhood recollections obviously not matching the playable child character's excessive hardship, their personal childhood sorrows might have felt similarly desperate once, not from a rational adult perspective but from a child perspective. Thus, the shown horror scenario might depict a childlike perception/comprehension of frightening childhood situations, exemplified by the following two game aspects: While the average player most likely had contact with other children in their childhood and hopefully never was completely on their own in a miserable situation, it might have felt like that at times—each of the three child protagonist seemingly being the only young child within the respective game worlds might mirror that feeling.<sup>31</sup> Also, the antagonists in *LIMBO* represent things commonly dreaded by young children, such as spiders, mean older children, water, and darkness, providing a relatable object of fear. These actually being life-threatening in the game might be an 'exaggeration' expressing a childlike perception of rationally (i.e., from an adult perspective) mostly harmless confrontations.<sup>32</sup>

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- 30 The effect of visualizing childlike imagination is found even stronger in *KNIGHTS AND BIKES*, another title with the Blended Approach to a playable child perspective. A third Blended Approach example of extensive visualized childlike imagination is *BEAR WITH ME* (2016) in which the better part of the game is an imaginary crime case.
  - 31 Few temporary encounters (e.g., a childlike water creature in *INSIDE*) could be seen as small exceptions, however negligible as they are never on one level with the playable child character.
  - 32 In *LITTLE NIGHTMARES*, adult antagonists are depicted as huge, deformed, obese, creepy and grotesque looking monsters seeking to devour the playable child character. They are savage and instinct-driven and appear a human satire, with their urge to eat

To exemplify some possible difficulties in apprehending a childlike comprehension: In *FRAN BOW*, another game of the Dark Approach, the playable child character's demeanor, wisdom, and humor, being quite mature at times, might aggravate a relatable childlike comprehension. In the Little Red Riding Hood-reminiscent Dark Approach title *LITTLE MISFORTUNE*, the player might find themselves occasionally shaking their head or laughing about the overly naïve and clumsy playable child character Misfortune and thereby, perspectively, taking a seat next to adult antagonist Mr. Voice while tragic Misfortune herself somewhat degenerates to a delightful element of entertainment and comic relief. Or, putting it in terms of the here discussed means, as the childlike position is conveyed rather from an adult viewpoint, the childlike perception is hard to grasp.

### Projection Surface vs. Individual Experience

To aid adult players in recalling their personal childhood memories, a method standing to reason is providing a projection surface to them, possibly achievable both by creating relatable circumstances and leaving room in the overall game design for their own interpretations and personal memories. By finding known concepts in the game, e.g., common and familiar childhood scenarios like a family dinner, a children's birthday party, or a parent argument, players can project their own memories onto the game, which lets their mind return to that past reality. Then, by comparing the experience made during gameplay to their individual one made in a past situation, the players can find detailed similarities and differences. On that basis, the players may reflect on that piece of their childhood or rediscover their younger self's emotions. In other words, a balanced synergy of a familiar context as a projection surface and an individual content making for a unique and credible experience is expected to be a promising approach to designing a game able to put its players into a child perspective and personal retrospective.

The idea of a given, i.e., written, designed, and programmed, content and the player's projection adding up to a unique and individual experience can be regarded as analogous to Wolfgang Iser's concept of narrative *gaps* in literature.<sup>33</sup> These gaps, resulting from the distinctness of colliding schematized views, introduce a scope of interpretation of the correlation between aspects presented in these

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the child character likely constituting a metaphor on a sick inter-generational dynamic within an aetnormative society

33 Iser, Wolfgang: "Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa," in: Warning, Rainer (ed.), *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, Munich: Fink, pp. 228-252.

views.<sup>34</sup> According to Iser, it is the reader who fills these gaps and thereby completes the literary work:

“[...] the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two. [...] The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader.”<sup>35</sup>

Analogously, the convergence of the game as artistic pole and the player’s interaction with and response to it as aesthetic pole generates the true game story and experience,<sup>36</sup> which ideally—in the case of the pursuit of my research—includes personal childhood associations.

Blended Approach games tend to be situated in everyday life settings rather than dystopian, idealized, or otherwise constructed ones, allowing us to project our own real-life experiences onto them. For instance, playing as ten-year-old Chris in *THE AWESOME ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN SPIRIT*—spending a snowy Saturday morning roaming the home and garden, playing, finishing some chores, and trying to handle life with his alcohol-addicted father—constitutes a relatable projection opportunity. That is, the game mirrors, in an amplified case, the diverse nature of being a child within an imperfect family dynamic and fallible social system. So regardless of whether their own life story involves an addicted parent, the essential feel of this might be rediscovered in an individual adult player’s childhood. Similarly, biking around the neighborhood and thinking up adventures to fight small-town boredom and escape family problems in *KNIGHTS AND BIKES* likely provides a projection opportunity for players that experienced comparable childhood phases.

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34 Ibid., p. 235.

35 Iser, Wolfgang: “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” in: *New Literary History* 3/2 (1972), pp. 279-299, here p. 279.

36 A similar notion is contributed by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmermann: “Game design is a second-order design problem. A game designer designs the rules of the game directly but designs the player’s experience only indirectly.” (K. Salen/ E. Zimmermann: *Rules of Play*, p. 171.)

The Dark Approach to a playable child perspective almost exclusively concentrates on negative aspects of childhood. It often does this in a way that requires some translation into the real world for its parallels to one's own individual childhood to become apparent, meaning such projections can be indirect<sup>37</sup> and figurative.<sup>38</sup> The design challenge is providing a projection surface through the child protagonist, i.e., a child perspective, without their vulnerability—the defining character trait for most of the Dark Approach examples—pushing the player into the role of a protector, i.e., a parent-like perspective. If this balancing act can be accomplished, its strength lies in providing an extensive projection surface for the player's childhood fears and sorrows, especially potently staged by the horror survival games LIMBO and LITTLE NIGHTMARES, likely evoking primal fears.

The before-mentioned Playful Approach examples create projection opportunities by depicting situations of childlike playfulness and the spirit of adventure. Stress-free key game mechanics like exploring or collecting, e.g., exploring the island nature, spotting and photographing various animals in ALBA: A WILDLIFE ADVENTURE, are typical childlike diversions that might remind the player of either exploring their neighborhood or their collection of stickers, game cards or whatever trinkets were popular in their youth.

## Nostalgia and Retro

Talking about the idea of games providing a retrospect on childhood suggests at least a short consideration of the feeling of *nostalgia*, a certain aesthetic style referred to as *retro*, and the roles they both play when providing today's adults a child perspective.

Nostalgia, as a bittersweet emotion, as well as retro as a design choice, are ways of referencing the past, both differing and affecting each other. Nostalgia describes the longing for past circumstances that are remembered positively or even idealistically and cannot be restored. Or, as theorist Svetlana Boym puts it, nostalgia is “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's

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37 Particularly, the point-and-click games FRAN BOW and LITTLE MISFORTUNE seems more suitable for interpretation than identification, encouraging thinking rather than feeling.

38 Similarly, even though the topic of family tragedy in BEAR WITH ME (Blended Approach) is too extreme and unique to provide projection surface in itself, when understood figuratively, it might encourage the player to reflect on one's own way to deal with hard to grasp situations or strong negative feelings as a child.

own fantasy.<sup>39</sup> Helpful for sensible use of nostalgia in digital games seems to be Boym's distinction between *restorative* and *reflective* nostalgia. While the first is a collective striving to reconstruct a lost time, home, or order, the latter does not strive for change but endures, even savors, a personal longing for past moments within one's individual narrative.

In the context of digital games reminiscent of childhood, nostalgia can be assigned to the second type, reflective nostalgia. According to Boym, this variant "can be ironic and humorous [...] reveal[ing] that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection."<sup>40</sup> While possible idealization should be considered when regarding nostalgia as a means of creating a child perspective in a player's mind, reflective nostalgia could indeed help to offer the player a nuanced look at their childhood, i.e., depending on the game's intention, causing nostalgia can be still, or even more so, desirable.

However, regardless of its effects, unless a dark/horror approach is pursued, nostalgia is difficult to evade when designing a game that puts the player back into a relatable childlike position. Music journalist Simon Reynolds links nostalgia to childhood, stating that a "component of nostalgia can actually be a hankering for a time before time: the perpetual present of childhood. [...]" and lists childhood as the first one of the "golden periods" in his life that "all share this quality of total immersion in the now."<sup>41</sup>

As an emotion, nostalgia is not a conscious choice, whereas using a retro artifact is an active, rational decision. While during a creative process, nostalgia can be an incentive to a retro approach and perceiving or experiencing a retro artifact can induce nostalgia, they are different in their nature. Regardless of how one might evaluate the retro trend in audiovisual media,<sup>42</sup> its relation to a relatively recent past can benefit the objective of creating a relatable child perspective for adults.<sup>43</sup> Finding, for instance, a typical 1980s toy within the diegetic game

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39 Boym, Svetlana: *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, NY: Basic Books 2001, p. 19.

40 Ibid., pp. 150-151.

41 Reynolds, Simon: *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, London: Faber & Faber 2012, p. xxviii.

42 Simon Reynolds argues, while retro "in its strict sense tends to be the preserve of aesthetes, connoisseurs and collectors [...] the word has come to be used in a much more vague way to describe pretty much anything that relates to the relatively recent past of popular culture." (Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.)

43 Furthermore, Reynolds claims that retro "tends neither to idealise nor sentimentalise the past but seeks to be amused and charmed by it. [And its approach is] ironic and

environment might both hint at the temporal setting and speak to players familiar with it. Generally, retro as reference to a (pop-) cultural past and nostalgia as an emotion directed at a personal past are independent of each other. They can, however, stand in connection: Retro is a tool linking a contemporary medium to the past. Nostalgia is one potential emotional response to it, linking the (cultural) past perceived in that medium to a personal past, evoking individual experiences and feelings.

While a retro element is a clear reference to probably most players, the nostalgic effect a game might have on a player depends on that player's individual memories. For instance, *KNIGHTS AND BIKES*, set on a fictional British island in the 1980s, provides an example for evoking nostalgia as the following personal game experience described by Stuart MacKay, host of *Get Indie Gaming*, shows:

“Having spent much of my youth living on Guernsey in the Channel Island I quite honestly can't look at the game's quaintly British Cornish Island setting of Penfurzy without self-referencing the look and feel of my experiences of my childhood. Just like the two girls featured here, me and my sister and our friends spent much of the weekend and our school holidays dreaming up and acting out our own adventures [...]. Over the years all these battles and escapades were also fully aided by the bikes we had and, as children, the relative freedom living on a small and reasonable safe island in the middle of the English Channel affords.”<sup>44</sup>

Even though MacKay does not literally mention nostalgia, one can sense it from his talk of childhood “adventures” and “freedom.” His statement also reveals triggers of his nostalgic collection, such as the setting of a British island in the 1980s and the bikes—playing a significant role in the game as well as MacKay's childhood. Playful materials like these bikes, as well as the look and feel of *KNIGHTS AND BIKES*, especially the player characters' free time activities, are certainly powerful devices to create a retro atmosphere. Hereby, an exemplary relation between nostalgia and retro is shown.

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eclectic.” (Ibid., pp. xxx–xxxi.) Retro could thus serve as a counterbalance to a possibly too idealizing nostalgia or assist the more critical reflective nostalgia suggested by Boym.

44 Get Indie Gaming: “Knights and Bikes PS4 Review—Indie Insights,” <https://youtu.be/DcYVbvzaIfY?t=40>

## Approaches and Relatability

For games of the Dark Approach, especially for silent survival horror realizations, on the surface, their extreme nightmarish settings seem unrelatable to almost any adult player. However, when understood as a metaphor for primal fears in a child's mind not yet repressed by mature rationalism, they can provide access to these past sensations. As a metaphor for truly or subjectively being alone, feeling helpless, vulnerable, and lost in or overcharged by an adult world—because an adult world, hostile to children, is clearly what their game worlds represent—the games could be either an unpleasant reminder or a cathartic journey. Overall, realizations of the Dark Approach have a tendency to feel a bit heavy-handed. Though confronting one's childhood fears and anxieties can be considered valuable, these often cruel games are trapped in the black-and-white construct they create—of innocence vs. evil, child vs. world—which does not allow them to provide a multi-faceted perspective on adults, child-adult-relationships, or childhood but can only cover a one-sided segment of possible child experiences. Conclusively, the biggest drawback of their relatability is the lack of positive aspects and playfulness involved in the childhood they depict.

The relatability of the Playful Approach often sets in through the atmosphere, with its carefree happiness being a common denominator most players find in at least some of their childhood memories. However, while it provides a good approximation of a likely setting of particularly positive childhood memories, one happy summer vacation does not represent an entire childhood. Thus, as the Playful Approach manages to reduce childhood to its playful, carefree aspects and evade possible problem sources, it provides the player with many impulses to remember their individual happy and playful moments as a child while typical childhood sorrows like parental conflicts, demanding expectations, social pressure, or loneliness find no room within the playable child perspective, depriving it of a more-dimensional projection and relatability.

Compared to examples of the Dark and the Playful Approach, titles with a Blended Approach, such as *THE AWESOME ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN SPIRIT* and *KNIGHTS AND BIKES*, put the player into a rather relatable world: the everyday life. The playable characters are neither on vacation nor in a life-threatening nightmare. The settings do not seem too far from the world the player knows (or knew), and the portrayed childhood joys and sorrows are coexisting and co-relevant—the core of the Blended Approach—and moreover, they are somewhat familiar and, therefore, potentially relatable. The child perspective of the Blended Approach will never provide the player with a solely joyful or solely upsetting experience—

because usually, neither does life. I see both great potential and prospective opportunities for less tragic realizations in this approach.

## BACKSEAT—SITTING SIMULATOR WITH CHILD PERSPECTIVE

Parallel to my dive into various games with playable child characters, I set myself the task of prototyping my own idea of a relatable playable child perspective. Searching for a relatable setting allowing for both positive and negative childhood associations while being both manageable—compared to a more complex situation like a school day or birthday party—and not too restricted temporally and narratively—compared to a family dinner—a car ride soon came to mind, and the idea of BACKSEAT was born. As a reoccurring scenario in many childhoods since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, sitting in the back seat and being both self-determined in small actions within a small radius and restricted—even other-directed—on a grander scale seemed a childhood analogy worth exploring. Furthermore, the resulting game concept, which I like to term *sitting simulator*,<sup>45</sup> relies on the examination of, interaction with, and communication about surrounding virtual playful materials much more than bodily action and space-consuming physical conquest. Selected game objects conveying both a relatable narrative and child perspective to the player and thereby serving as playful materials might contribute an interesting aspect to the overall topic of this book.

BACKSEAT is a small first-person game in which one plays a child sitting in the backseat of a car on a long car ride with their family while talking to family members, interacting with objects, and playing mini-games. On the one hand, the car ride can be spent playfully in a way one might remember from childhood: interacting with toys taken along, making up stories, firing questions at the front seats, munching cookies, waving at vehicles, or just watching the passing landscape. On the other hand, the player as a child will experience the parents' authority and be confronted with conflicts between and with them while being trapped both literally, in the car, and figuratively, as a dependent and vulnerable child in their family. Accordingly, the game idea aims at realizing the Blended Approach to a playable child perspective as previously introduced.

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45 The term *sitting simulator* is introduced here to describe a variation of the narrative exploration game (sometimes dismissively referred to as walking simulator) which reduces the usually already relatively basic movement of said genre even further to a mere head movement around a fixed sitting position.

Figures 2 and 3: Early sketches of BACKSEAT game idea.; View on parents in front seats in BACKSEAT



Sources: Development phase of BACKSEAT (Cordula Heithausen 2022); Screenshot of BACKSEAT prototype (Cordula Heithausen 2022)

The objective of the narrative sitting simulator BACKSEAT is to offer a virtual environment to its adult player that may throw them back into a familiar childhood situation which might trigger sweet memories of playfulness and a once innocent view of the world as well as unpleasant feelings of being patronized, helpless, confused, or scared. At the least, the player hopefully will find themselves grinning about a memorable moment in their parents' car, excited for the journey ahead. Ideally, an emotional ambivalence can be caused, making the player recall both happy and difficult aspects of their childhood through the child perspective of the playable character.

## Plot Structure

The entire game takes place during the car ride and is split into two acts, the first happening during daylight and the second after dark, with the player's character's nap functioning as a cesura in-between.<sup>46</sup> Besides the player character, there are four non-player characters present in the car, the player character's father, their mother, their sibling, and their stuffed toy tortoise Tony. The player character can communicate with the other family members, look around the car while remaining in their seat, and pick up and interact with various objects found in the middle seat. When talking to the other characters, the player can choose from a selection of topics dependent on previous conversations and already examined objects. Conversations are either started by the playable character clicking on a family member (or Tony) or—if certain conditions and time-dependent random variables are true—by another family member and are at times joined by other family members present in the car. The narrative of the game is advanced by trigger points both in conversation and object interaction. While the first act mostly comprises playful diversion and regular talking with occasional squabbling, a parental conflict about to boil up is hardly perceptible yet.<sup>47</sup> The second act lets the player character awake from their nap to still soft but assertive front-seat voices. Soon they find themselves exposed to the parents' loud and furious dispute. Attempts to intervene may be ignored or backfire but will not solve the situation. The player character can try various ways to distract themselves from the upsetting situation, however, an oppressive atmosphere remains throughout the second act.<sup>48</sup>

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- 46 Before the first act, there is a short prolog, composed of ambient audio and written dialog, describing the chaotic departure of the family onto the road. An epilog narrates the family's arrival, upon which a consoling atmosphere is suggested (through dialog), and the sleepy playable child character is carried off to bed. Both prolog and epilog are non-interactive and intended to frame the playable part of the game, showing top-down view still images of the middle back seat prior to and after the car journey.
- 47 However, diverse child perspective facets of the Blended Approach are already present during the first act with negative aspects appearing during sibling arguments and parental authority.
- 48 A certain combination of interactions—comforting the sibling and finding distraction from the parents argument—will eventually calm the player character down enough to fall asleep again and thereby end the second act.

## Aiming for Relatability

Several design aspects of BACKSEAT aim at promoting child character relatability; some are outlined in the following. The back seat symbolizes and displays the child's position within the family, sitting comfortably while being 'steered' by their parents. The restricted player agency could be understood as an accentuation of the playable child character's lack of agency on the car ride and beyond. The first-person camera view is intended to help assimilate the playable child character's visual perception.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, it can likely mirror the spatially—as well as figuratively—narrowing situation better than a third-person camera view.

Both comprehension and imagination are conveyed throughout the game, mostly by dialog, for instance, when a lack of knowledge is revealed in a conversation with other family members or when talking to and being answered by the player character's toy. When the mother eventually reacts to the siblings' loud quarrel by posing an empty threat—"You Two Can Get Off The Car Now If You Don't Stop Yelling."—one can experience childlike comprehension as the playable character takes their mother's warning seriously.

All perceivable design aspects of BACKSEAT are intended to provide a projection surface<sup>50</sup> to the adult player, aiding them in recalling personal childhood memories. By putting the player into the likely familiar childhood situation of sitting in the back of a family car, surrounding them with the corresponding sounds of roaring engines and noisy radio music and leaving some room for mental expansion in the visualization of the non-player characters,<sup>51</sup> said intention is supported.

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49 While a first-person view is typically associated with an avatar rather than a playable character according to the typology by Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., the child one controls in BACKSEAT is further referred to as player character or playable (child) as their narrative as well as their identification as a child makes them more than "a non-intrusive representation of" the adult player. Cf. Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon, Heide Smith, Jonas, and Pajares Tosca, Susana (eds.), *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*, New York, NY: Routledge 2016, p. 210.

50 Creating a projection surface is limited by and dependent on the individual story being told. In the case of BACKSEAT, the family constellation, the parents' and sibling's personality traits and dialog topics are only some of the specifics the player can put in contrast to their own experiences.

51 The game characters, visualized through assembled two-dimensional images positioned within the three-dimensional car interior, are designed in an anonymous style, not showing more than a back or oblique from behind view of their heads. This

BACKSEAT is set in the 1990s. This does not only avoid the problem of a child possibly spending a larger time of a car ride on their smartphone but may also strengthen a potential feeling of nostalgia by being closer to the childhood reality of adult players. Retro elements like a Game Boy, animal-shaped cookies, and a cheap plastic slide puzzle can serve to both indicate the 90s setting and help create a familiar atmosphere of the past or even evoke memories within that past.

### Mini-Games and More—Playful Materialities in BACKSEAT

Next, I would like to point out some specific playful features with potential for child perspective relatability gain. While BACKSEAT as a spatially very limited sitting simulator denies the player the urge to navigate through and explore a material diegetic world—substantial to so many games—players are all the more encouraged to interact with the possibilities inherent in any object in reach. The virtual materials fulfill a threefold purpose: (1) contributing to an object-oriented narrative, (2) conveying—and coming alive through—a childlike perspective, and (3) raising personal childhood associations. These three effects vary in proportion. While some virtual objects carry the game-progressing narrative, others embellish it, allude to certain childhood sensations, or serve as an end in itself, compliant with the aspect of a childlike pastime. In all cases, the player’s physical and conceptual interaction—and ideally self-reflexive engagement—is required to activate the virtual materials within the condensed game world of BACKSEAT and transform them into playful materials. Hence, my objective for BACKSEAT was to provide a framework that turns the adult player’s playful input into a relatable childlike perspective. In total, four mini-games and other additional game design features are employed to meet this objective:

As a variant of the car game *I Packed My Bag* that is about remembering a sequence of words, the *Cookie Zoo* mini-game combines a memory game idea with eating cookies. The player character and their sibling take turns drawing animal-shaped cookies from a cookie box<sup>52</sup> and must name all previously drawn

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supports the idea of offering the player a projection surface to remember real persons of their childhood, namely close family members. For the same reason, the sibling character’s outer appearance does not distinctly imply a gender, nor does the character’s name “Lu,” which can likely be an abbreviation or diminutive for both a male or female first name.

52 The cookie box has to be handed out by the mother previously, which requires both compromise (finishing one’s sandwich) and persuasiveness.

cookies each time until one of them makes a mistake.<sup>53</sup> This mini-game cannot only evoke memories of childhood snacks but reveals a childlike playfulness in approaching mundane activities, such as eating, lost on, or even frowned upon by most adults.

A few rounds of the well-known car game *I Spy* (“I spy with my little eye, something beginning with...”) in which one must guess what the other person is looking at by asking yes-no-questions can be played with the player character’s sibling as well. Besides serving as a representative car ride pastime, this mini-game yields some childlike communication traits, such as kindergarten humor, immature logic, and ‘endless’ yes-no-sibling-quarrel.

As a solitary mini-game, BACKSEAT includes a classic 8-piece slide puzzle. This simple toy, probably remembered and loathed by many, can be found on the middle seat and tried to be solved. Furthermore, it leads to new parent-child dialog options that can be seen as a brief comment on expectations and self-assessment.

In contrast to the performance-driven puzzle, another mini-game, *Tony’s Adventure*, is all about imagination and boundless play. Toy tortoise Tony, the player character’s best buddy, can “jump”<sup>54</sup> in the backseat window while the passing landscape, e.g., the roadside pillars re-interpreted as “sharks,” serves as a side-scrolling platformer level. But unlike an actual platformer, this experience has no fail state, just free submersion in childlike imagination.<sup>55</sup>

Despite having some crucial object-dependent plot points, the game narrative allows for further creative extensions in the form of either new playful materialities (narrative objects, mini-games, associations) or further exploration of existing ones. Thinking beyond the prototype of BACKSEAT, many additional features, either providing the player with more choices of playful amusement and diversion from car-ride boredom or enriching the narrative with further facets, come to my mind. Some ideas are introduced in the more extensive discussion of my research and prototype found online.<sup>56</sup>

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53 For the sibling’s memory to fail eventually a randomized algorithm, which increases the probability to fail logarithmically with the length of the animal sequence, was implemented.

54 Tony is moved up and down in the player character’s hand (not visible) which in the child’s notion is Tony jumping.

55 While the playable child character could surely play Tony’s fail, no outer bounds or rule set control the experience.

56 Heithausen, Cordula: *Being a Child Again Through Gameplay*, M.A. Thesis, TH Köln—University of Applied Sciences 2022, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361085723\\_Being\\_a\\_Child\\_Again\\_Through\\_Gameplay](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361085723_Being_a_Child_Again_Through_Gameplay)

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The objective of my theoretical research was to explore games regarding their realization of a playable child perspective and evaluate their relatability. A supposition on how a relatable child perspective for adult players can be achieved was formed—namely by establishing a childlike position, a childlike comprehension/perception, a projection surface, and optionally the sensations of nostalgia and/or retro—and I proposed a threefold classification of approaches to a playable child perspective: the Dark Approach, the Playable Approach, and the Blended Approach. The Dark Approach paints a threatening scenario in which mostly negative characteristics are appointed to adults and childhood seems deprived of playfulness and lightness, while the Playful Approach appears to be overly wholesome, soothing, and often-times optimistic. The Blended Approach, however, positions itself somewhere between the Dark and the Playful Approach. By merging the negative and positive aspects of childhood into one multifaceted, often melancholic game, it can get closer to a realistic and more universal portrayal of the child perspective than the other two approaches.<sup>57</sup> Games with this approach usually emphasize narrative and include themes like childlike imagination and family issues. Though given examples involve severe strokes of fate,<sup>58</sup> the Blended Approach would likely work with low-key narratives also as its strength is illustrating the diverse experience of a child's everyday life. I believe that versatile relatability is most likely achievable through the Blended Approach.

In conclusion, while interesting and inspiring playable child perspectives exist, the selection and variety are comparably limited and leave room for novel realizations. Depending on the approach, the players' association and memories of childhood can be excited in different ways, all of which are appropriate depending on the game intention and player expectation.

To engage with the topic of playable child perspective through hands-on practice, I developed BACKSEAT, a sitting simulator prototype with a playable child perspective of the Blended Approach. Within a very limited but expressive diegetic environment, I created an interactive narrative putting a strong emphasis on varying playful materials, intra-family dialog, and the connection of both. I integrated several mini-games and other pastime features, while many more formed in my mind.

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57 This refers to childhood in western culture.

58 For example, an abusive and addiction-strained parent-child relationship or the tragic loss of a parent (THE AWESOME ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN SPIRIT, KNIGHTS AND BIKES) ground the gameworld with a sense of realism.

Retrospectively, developing the BACKSEAT prototype was an enriching experience. It taught me both the limits of a very restricted diegetic setting and all the opportunities arising out of them. Overall—and although BACKSEAT remains at this point just an imperfect prototype waiting to become more—it strengthened my initial hunch that games do not always need vast spaces, extraordinary characters, dramatic stories, or even complex agency to interactively, creatively, and credibly narrate a worthy story and involving ambiance. All it takes is the right means—playful material(ities) that invite the player to interact and convey a narrative perspective in return.

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