The Art of Being There
Artistic Practices of Presence in Narrative Media

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> In turning to films and books for inspiration, game writers seem to miss the true potential of the medium of games, in which the player becomes the arbiter of the character's fate through actions which, ostensibly at least, should reinforce or alter the moral compass of the character.
> Andy Dilks (Inbox *EDGE*, June 2007)

> A film is viewed externally, voyeuristically. A game, by contrast, exists to be interacted with. The player must feel that they are writing their own story as they go, and that their actions are actually having an effect on the ultimate outcome.
> Howell Davies (Inbox *EDGE*, December 2007)

For many years now, the topic of storytelling has been high on the agenda of game magazines. The popular periodical *EDGE* contains tons of articles, columns and letters discussing the particular ways in which games deal with stories. What these contributions often share is a profound belief in the new possibility computer games offer in terms of narrative. The exact interpretation of these new possibilities can however differ greatly. No general idea exists on the affordances of games in terms of storytelling.

The two quotes that are printed above are exemplary of this lack of consensus. Both have been from letters sent by readers to *EDGE*. When comparing the letters, they seem at first sight quite similar in the way they approach game stories. Both authors emphasize, either explicitly or implicitly, the interactive nature of games as something that separates the relatively new medium from older media such as films and books. However, on closer examination, it seems that the first let-

ter approaches interactivity as something that allows the player to operate as the arbiter of the character's fate, while the second letter connects interactivity to the ability of players to experience their own personal stories within the games they play.

There seem to be two distinctive logics at work in the ideas of these writers. One focuses on the player as an implied author who guides the hero through his trials and tribulations. The player can intervene in the hero's faith by controlling him. The other focuses on the player as an embodied participant in the world of the story. In the former, the player closely follows the hero through his adventure; in the latter, the player becomes the hero and experiences adventures of his own.

The aim of this article is to make explicit the implicit logics that play their part in the ideas these letters put forward. How can we define these logics what are their characteristics and how do they differ from each other? Moreover, how do the two logics relate when co-existent in the design of one and the same avatar-based 3D-game. I believe that games exist in which one of the two logics is more prevalent. In games such as *Fahrenheit* (Quantic Dream 2005) or *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010) the player becomes the implied author of an unfolding story. These games hand the player the power to alter the destiny of protagonists by making certain choices for them. Games such as *Half-Life* (Valve Corporation 1998) or *BioShock* (2K Boston 2007), on the other hand, seem put the player directly in the shoes of the main character, and try to blend the boundary between player and protagonist. (Although these types of games are often first-person games, examples exist of first-person games where the other approach is more dominant. One striking example is the game *Dinner Date* (Stout Games 2010) where the player hears – by controlling the protagonist's first-person view – the thoughts and anxieties of the protagonist while he is waiting for a date to show up. Similarly, there are also many examples of third-person games who aim to give us the sensation as if we are the main character, often by using a fixed over-the-shoulder-cam).

Between the four examples, many other games exist where it is not so clear which logic steers their design. Both logics can be apparent and can clash in interesting ways. This paper wants to investigate the implications of this co-existence concerning the *narratological* for the design of avatar-based games.

The Screen-Projected Avatar

One of the main reasons why both logics are visible in the design of many avatar-based 3D-games stems from their dependency on screen-projected avatars. On the one hand, 3D-games excel in giving players the feeling as if they themselves are walking around in the story world; this sensation of existing in a mediated environment is commonly called 'presence' (Ryan 2001; McMahan 2003; Carr

2006; Nitsche 2008; Tamborini/Skalski 2006) – and is possible only because of the avatar.

The avatar is needed in a computer-simulated and screen-projected space to mediate the feeling of presence. Rune Klevjer (2006, 10) has written extensively on this phenomenon in *What is the Avatar*, describing the relationship between player and avatar as "a prosthetic relationship; through a process of learning and habituation, the avatar becomes an extension of the player's own body." On the other hand, however, this screen-projected avatar also invites another design approach. As demonstrated by Bolter and Grusin (1999) in *Remediation*, games tend to remediate films because they look alike in their means of mediation. Computer games and cinema are both screen-dependent media. Because most popular films focus on the portrayal of the experiences of others, it is not so surprising that many 3D-games do the same.

Looking at the popular games sold today, one indeed sees how they foreground the avatar as both an extension of the player's body as well as a main character in a story to be told. *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North 2008), for example, tells the story of Niko Bellic and his quest for revenge and allows players to experience their own stories as they rampage through Liberty City. Somehow, the availability of screen-projected avatars invites and allows both logics. Conceived of as protagonists, they allow game designers to communicate the adventures of imagined protagonists, similar to actors on a movie screen. Conceived of as an extension of the player, they allow game designers to build elaborate fantasy worlds where players can venture out in for themselves. Although this, mostly implicit, double logic in the design of game stories is not wrong per se, it does lead to an interesting aesthetic tension.

When the avatar is designed as a body belonging to the protagonist, but also as an extension of the body of the player, the experiential merits of the separate logics might clash. A particular event in a story may enrich me when I act as an implied narrator, but as an embodied player, I might not be affected positively at all. In the case of *GTA IV*, the scripted events Niko Bellic goes through in Liberty City tell an exciting tale of vengeance, but set many boundaries to my own bodily experience of the game world and its narrative context. An interesting story event to witness and control as distant observer can be very boring to experience first-hand, and vice versa. In 3D-game research this entanglement of embodied and story-based participation is one of the most pressing issues that need to be theoretically unraveled, as Klevjer (2006, 218) emphasizes in the conclusion of his thesis:

> A dedicated study of the relationships between avatar-based play and avatar-based formats of storytelling would be an obvious next step in the analysis, particularly with respect to the contemporary 3D action adventure. The fusions,

> overlaps and tensions between embodied and story-based fictional participation in singleplayer computer games is a complex and diverse area of study.

My paper wants to make the next step Klevjer proposes with an elaborate theoretical exploration of the two logics at work in these 3D-games. For this purpose, the following paragraphs will critically review the representational concept of narrative as developed once in structuralist narratology and will develop an additional presentational conceptualization, applicable to both marginal narrative practices of the past as well as mainstream practices of the present.

Narrative as Representation

Although the scholarly interest in storytelling has a long history and can be traced all the way back to Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*, the study of narratives as an autonomous academic discipline only came into existence in the 1960s. Termed 'narratology' by Tzvetan Todorov (1969, 10) in his work *Grammaire du Décaméron*, the theory of the narrato*logical* aims to present a logical and structural description of the way in which stories are told. The narratologist dissects the narrative phenomenon into its component parts and attempts to determine functions and relationships (Jahn 2005). As becomes clear from this description, the shared episteme of these first narratologists is strongly rooted in the discourses of French structuralism (e.g. Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes, Christian Metz, Claude Bremond, Algirdas Julien Greimas, Gerard Genette) and Russian formalism (e.g. Vladimir Propp, Roman Osipovich Jakobson, Yury Tynyanov, Boris Eichenbaum, Viktor Shklovsky and Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin).

While scholars in what often is referred to as structuralist narratology disagree about the exact definition of narrative, their work unanimously conceives narrative as representational in nature. As explained by Marie-Laure Ryan (2004, 13) in *Narrative Across Media*, these narratologists believe the standard conception of narrativity to be manifested in the act of "telling somebody else that something happened, with the assumption that the addressee is not already aware of the events." Also, the etymological root of the word narrative defines it as a form of recounting, as it derives in part from the Latin verb *narrare*, which means 'to recount.' A feasible definition of the structuralist concept of narrative, then, is given by Gerald Prince in his Dictionary of *Narratology*. According to Prince (1987, 58; my emphasis), narrative should be thought of as "the *recounting* […] of one or more real or fictitious events *communicated* by one, two, or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two, or several (more or less over) narrates." With this definition in mind, Prince subsequently argues that statements such as 'Mary is tall and Peter is small' do not constitute narratives, since "they do not *represent*

any event" (ibid.; my emphasis). Similar definitions of narration can be found in the works of other prominent narratologists. Rimmon-Kenan (1983, 2; my emphasis) describes it for example as "a *communication* process in which the narrative as message is transmitted by addresser to addressee." Branigan (1992, 146) accordingly believes the concept of telling to involve "a 'narrator' who places the events of the narrative in the past, or creates some other non-present temporal modality."

What is distinctive about this particular conceptualization of narrative, then, is that it understands narrative as something that communicates real or fictitious events from the past. The concept of recounting implies that the events expressed (the story) already happened and find themselves re-presented in the present by some discourse, whether verbal, written, pantomimic, or any other form of narrative transmission (Chatman 1978). For structuralist narratologists, then, a narrative retrieves the there-and-then in the here-and-now, thereby suppressing (but not replacing) our direct experience of the here-and-now. The following statement by Christian Metz (1974, 22), taken from his *Semiotics of the Cinema*, is exemplary of this basic principle:

> Reality assumes presence, which has a privileged position along two parameters, space and time; only the here and now are completely real. By its very existence, the narrative suppresses the now (accounts of current life) or the here (live television coverage), and most frequently the two together (newsreels, historical accounts, etc.).

Leaving aside the epistemological question of reality, the words of Metz are typical for the representational approach to narrative. In this approach, the *modus operandi* of narrative is concerned with communicating or re-presenting events, not with staging new events. Stories concern the there-and-then and are solely expressed in the here-and-now.

Representation or Presentation?

Although structuralist narratologists study various forms of narrative transmission, their episteme has arisen mainly out of stories that are either told or written. Not surprisingly, it is in these narrative formats where one finds a strong representational logic:

> The states of affairs stipulated […] in novels are at an evident remove from the stipulater's or reader's immediate context, so much so that classical narrative is always oriented towards an explicit there and then, towards an imaginary 'elsewhere' set

> in the past and which has to be evoked for the reader through predication and description. (Elam 1980, 98)

The 19th century novel is exemplary here. Books of authors such as Charles Dickens or Jane Austen portray without exception the story as a thing recounted. This can be contributed largely to the presence of a narrator who, in telling the story to the reader, explicitly emphasis its 'pastness.' Narrators establish the story as something that happened in the past by using the past tense when discussing, summing up, and commenting on, the events pertinent to it and by employing specific temporal tropes (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 110). The following famous sentence from *A Christmas Carol* illustrates this practice clearly: "Once upon a time – of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve – old Scrooge sat busy in his counting-house" (Dickens 1843, 5; my emphasis).

The representational approach to narrative becomes problematic however when applied to narrative formats without an explicit narrator. In cinema or theatre, for example the discourse does not always clearly acknowledge the 'pastness' of the story it expresses. We are presented with a sequence of images or gestures, and have the feeling as if the events projected or performed are happening right in front of us, in the here-and-now rather than the there-and-then. Elam writes: "Dramatic worlds […] are presented to the spectator as 'hypothetically actual' constructs, since they are 'seen' in progress 'here and now' without narratorial mediation" (1980, 98). So, to what extent are these events still representational in nature as the audience witnesses the events unfolding directly in front of them? Is this representational logic still valid? In the second edition of *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, Abbott (2008, 15) addresses this specific problem, he writes:

> Those who favour Aristotelian distinctions sometimes use the word presentation for stories that are acted and *representation* (re-presentation) for stories that are told or written. The difference highlights the idea that in theatre we experience the story as immediately present while we do not when it is conveyed through a narrator. My own view is that both forms of narrative are mediated stories and therefore involved in re-presentation, conveying a story that at least seems to pre-exist the vehicle of conveyance. A good counter-argument to my position asks: Where is this story before it is realized in words or on stage? The answer, so the argument goes, is: Nowhere. If that is the case, then all renderings of stories, on the stage or on the page, are *presentations* not *representations*. […] I will stick to the term 'representation.' I do this in part because the word is so commonly used in the way I am using it and in part because it describes at least the feeling that we often have that the story somehow pre-exists the narrative, even though this may be an illusion.

Like Abbott, I do not prefer to use the (actually already Platonic) distinction between 'telling' (*diegesis*) and 'showing' (*mimeses*) to designate the difference between representation and presentation. I do prefer however, unlike Abbott, to keep the distinction in practice: To me, the logics of representation and presentation provide valuable insights, not when used to differentiate between vehicles of narrative conveyance, but when used to address different ways in which every single one of these vehicles in principle can deal with stories. Even a story that is told can have a presentational logic, and a story that is shown a representational. Admittedly, the representational logic governs many popular books and movies, but this logic seems confidently at home in – not essential to – the medium-specific form of these particular media.

In terms of story, a Choose-Your-Own Adventure book operates differently than a traditional novel, just as a cinematic experiment as *Lady in the Lake* (Montgomery 1947) works differently than most classical Hollywood blockbusters. Moreover, the dominance of a representational logic does not exclude moments in which a presentational logic takes precedence. In fact, many of the special effects in popular cinema aspire to the effect of presence (Gumbrecht 2004, 140). The cinematic artform even finds its roots in experiments that try to place the audience in the mediated presence of spectacular or extraordinary scenes – like *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (Lumière/Lumière 1896). Such examples are famously referred to as the 'cinema of attraction' by the noted film scholars Tom Gunning (1986) and André Gaudreault (with Gunning 1989; Strauven 2006).

I approach, then, the logics of representation and presentation epistemologically rather than ontologically. They do not explain the modus operandi of a medium's essential form, but describe differences in how media are creatively designed, publicly received and academically understood. Still, it does not surprise me that Abbott chooses to stick to the term representation, as the representational logic dominates the field of narrative media and arts. Most of the popular movies, books and plays indeed create the feeling that the story somehow pre-exists its expression. In game studies, this intangible yet familiar feeling has been brought into the discussion on game stories by ludologists to argue that the medium of games differs fundamentally from cinema, literature or theatre. Popular real-time avatar-based 3D-games such as first-person shooters or action adventures, evidently, do not evoke this particular feeling. In his pioneering article on game stories, Jesper Juul (2005, 222) writes:

> Although movies and theatre do not have a grammatical tense to indicate the temporal relations, they still carry a basic sense that even though the viewer is watching a movie, now, or even though the players are on stage performing, the events told are not happening now.

Though Juul's observation relates to a sensation many of us recognize, we should be aware that his observation only concerns movies and plays with a representational logic. In their search to distinguish games from narrative, ludologists borrow heavily from structuralist narratology, and in doing so, create a concept of narrative, which not necessarily applies to all narrative formats (Ryan 2006, 184). In recent decennia, many practices have arisen that explore new ways of storytelling.

These practices no longer belong solely to the artistic domain of the marginal or the avant-gardish, but have grown to become a widespread part of our popular entertainment culture. Not only a lot of the avatar-based 3D-games sold today, but also things such as LARP (Live Action Role Playing), PnP (Pen and Paper) role playing, war re-enactments and virtual or augmented reality belong to this category. To understand how these media and art practices deal with stories differently than conventional movies or plays, we need to further explore the narrative logic of presentation and the way it deviates from the representational one.

The Logics of Representation and Presentation

So, what is exactly the difference between a representational and presentational narrative logic? To get a clearer idea of how the two logics differ from each other, this article borrows from performance theory. In theatre studies, a clear distinction is made between representation and presentation, not to describe different ways of narrative transmission, but to describe different ways in which the performance of a story addresses the audience:

> There are two ways of relating to the audience during the performance of a story. The difference is clearest in theater. In a representational play, the actors all act as if there were a fourth wall between them and the audience. If they look in the direction of the audience, they give no sign of seeing that anyone is out there looking at them. Instead, they pretend that they're seeing only what would be there if the play were real – another wall of the drawing room, or the rest of the Forest of Arden. […] Presentational theater, on the other hand, tears down that imaginary fourth wall. The actors don't just admit the audience is there, they make constant contact with the audience. (Card 1988, 134-135)

Following Card, I believe the essential difference between representation and presentation to lie in the way the audience is addressed in the performance of a story, and consequently the kind of spatiotemporal consciousness that arises from this difference. The audience is either addressed as physically present or physically absent in the world of the story. This essential difference, as emphasized by Card,

not only holds true for theatre. Still, the difference is particularly clear in theatre, thus as example, theatre helps to further explore these two logics.

In a representational story performance, we often feel as if we are looking at events that belong to some other time and place, even though the performance happens in the here-and-now. The actions on stage 'stand for' or 're-present' actions that unfold in another spatial and temporal moment. Sceneries, actors, and props all portray places, people and objects belonging to this dimension of the there-and-then. Elam (1980, 88) thus describes the dramatic world in theatre as "a spatio-temporal *elsewhere* represented as though actually present for the audience."

We as the audience, consequently, have a strong feeling we do not belong to this other construct of space and time; we observe it hidden behind the fourth wall, but do not have our place within it. Even though we experience the story in the here-and-now, we still feel as if it happens somewhere else than the here-and-now of our own physical, lived existence. The representational performance of a story addresses the audience as if physically outside the story world, and thus, in a sense, as a ghostly presence: consciously present, but physically absent, able to travel through temporal and spatial barriers (Bordwell 1985, 10). In its goal to show the events that are relevant to the story, the performance often propels us forwards or backwards in space and time. In only a couple of hours, we are mentally transported through many different moments in time while visiting many different places.

To illustrate that not only plays, but also many other narrative expressions possess this particular representational logic, one only has to look at popular cinema. In their study on various forms of mediated presence, Schubert and Crusius (2002, 2) write:

> With a few exceptions movies keep the viewer in the position of an invisible observer – characters in the movie do not look into the camera (i.e., do not look at the observer), and the viewer has no body in the filmed environment.

Much like the theatrical performance, most movies do not address the spectator as physically present within the world of the story. We should however be careful when using the word 'disembodied' when discussing the difference between presentation and representation. Though spoken to as a disembodied observer, the audience nevertheless becomes physically touched by the things happening on the screen. We identify with characters and their struggles, empathize with them, and thus go through all sorts of emotions and affects during a movie screening. Moreover, as convincingly argued by phenomenology-inspired media scholars (e.g. Sobchack 1991; States 1987), our understanding of what happens on the screen or on the stage always presupposes our physical presence. Without a mortal body,

anchored in space and time, nothing in the story would make sense in the first place. In a sense, a phenomenon such as disembodiment does not exist, as we simply cannot escape our 'flesh.' The question therefore is not whether or not somebody feels physically touched in a performance, but whether or not the narrative *addresses* the audience as physically present within the story expressed, thereby *positioning* them either as disembodied observers or embodied participants.

Distinctive of narrative discourse when steered by a representational logic, is the feeling it creates in the audience as if they move away from the here-and-now of their physical existence towards the there-and-then of the story told. This feeling is commonly associated with the idea of narrative immersion, as Richard J. Gerrig (1993, 3) describes in *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*:

> Readers become 'lost in a book'; moviegoers are surprised when the lights come back up; television viewers care desperately about the fates of soap opera characters; museum visitors are captivated by the stories encoded in daubs of paint. In each case, a narrative serves to transport an experiencer away from the here and now.

As will be explained later, the exact opposite seems to happen when the discourse is steered by a presentational logic. While we move away from the here-and-now towards the there-and-then of the story in what I refer to as the represento*logical* mode, we seem to stay in the here-and-now and the there-and-then of the story moves towards us in the presento*logical* mode (think of reenactments, augmented reality or LARP). Notably, both modes alter our perception of the world around us. When following Janet Murray's (1997, 98) exemplary definition of immersion as "the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus", the feelings evoked in presentation and representation both fall within the definition of immersion, even though the former operates distinctively different than the latter.

In his ground-breaking thesis *Digital Games as Designed Experience*, Gordon Calleja (2007, 88) gives an insightful account of two forms of immersion in computer games that seems to align with my own distinction between representation and presentation.

> There is a distinction that needs to be made between holding mental images of a scene in mind while imagining being present within that scene, and occupying a location within a computer-generated environment that anchors users with regards to other agents and enables them to interact with the environment from that specific location. […] When we identify with a character in a movie or a book, or imagine we are in the same room as the protagonist, we have no way of altering

> the course of events; no way of exerting agency. Likewise, the environments and characters represented in these media have no way of reacting to our presence, no matter how strongly we identify with them.

I follow Calleja in the distinction he makes between a form of immersion in which one has the feeling of being in the presence of characters without them noticing your presence (representological mode), and a form of immersion in which one has the illusion of being physically grounded to one specific location in space and time, perceivable for those who share this spatial and temporal moment (presentological mode). I prefer however not to incorporate the idea of interaction in this distinction. The distinction between narrative presentation and representation is not essentially a distinction between interactive and non-interactive. Both forms can be either interactive or non-interactive. Interactivity, or 'ergodicity' in the context of storytelling, describes the condition of media objects where "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (Aarseth 1997, 1-2). Admittedly, many presentational narratives possess this ergodic quality, but there are many examples of representational narratives which also need nontrivial effort to make the story unfold, think of interactive DVD's, games such as *Heavy Rain* or particular experiential forms of theatre. All these examples hand the audience some form of control over the story's direction, thereby giving them the power to (co-)decide the faith of the story's characters.

In the tentative article *Beyond Myth and Metaphor,* Marie-Laure Ryan (2001a; my emphasis) labels this form of narrative discourse 'External-ontological interactivity,' describing it as follows:

> Here the user is like the omnipotent god of the system. Holding the strings of the characters, from a position *external* to both the time and space of the fictional world, he specifies their properties, makes decisions for them, throws obstacles in their way, and sends them toward different destinies lines by altering their environment.

Different from this form of interactivity, Ryan also proposes the categories of "Internal-ontological interactivity" and "Internal-exploratory interactivity," respectively referring to narrative discourse where "the user is cast as a character who determines his own fate *by acting within* the time and space of a fictional world" and narrative discourse where "the user takes a *virtual body* with her into the fictional world, but her role in this world is limited to actions that have no bearing on the narrative events" (ibid.; my emphasis). Although these two categories differ from each other in the way the player influences the unfolding story, they both belong to the presentational logic as both categories give players the feeling as if things are happening in the here-and-now of their physical existence.

In a presentational story performance, events seem to happen in the perceptual field of our direct, first-hand or lived experience, even when mediated through a screen or some other means of transmission. The moment the performers acknowledge our presence, make eye contact, and start interacting with us, we change from being an invisible observer to an active participant. We are made aware of our physical presence and through this contact are drawn back to the here-and-now of our own bodily existence: physically anchored to one location in space and time and in principle able to act. Contrary to the representational logic, we do not move away from the here-and-now towards the there-and-then of the story, but as already stated, seem to stay in the here-and-now while the there-and-then of the story moves towards us. In effect, we still feel as if existing in some other spatial-temporal moment, but one that aligns with our experience of being physically in the here-and-now. In theatre studies, many scholars have tried to explain how this presentational mode differs from the representational one.

Most importantly, performers make the audience aware of their own presence by inviting them into some form of interaction, thereby undoing the audience's spectorial and voyeuristic position. This is often accompanied by a focus on the execution of acts that are real in the here-and-now and find their fulfilment in the very moment they happen. What occurs in the interaction between audience and spectator could be, but is not necessarily, meaningful in comparison with what has happened in the past and is about to happen in the future (Lehmann 2006, 104-105). Also, the performers usually do not enact prescribed roles but carry out prescribed tasks. They can still assume fictional personalities, but no in the representational sense; their actions do not signify the actions of protagonists. Rather than representing others personas, performers try to alter their own self, typically by changing their appearance and behaviour (Kostelanetz 1981, 8). As a result, the audience recognizes the performer through the fictional disguise. Performers lose their conventional function as an actor portraying a role, and make their performativity an integral part of the theatrical experience, often introducing a strong element of role-playing and playfulness in general (Cremona et al. 2004, 4).

In his book on what he labels 'postdramatic theatre,' Lehmann (2006, 104) sums up rather precisely the various characteristics of presentological performances as discussed above:

> [These performances] work on the physical, affective and spatial relationship between actors and spectators and explore possibilities of participation and interaction, both highlight presence (the doing in the real) as opposed to re-presentation (the mimesis of the fictive), the act as opposed to the outcome.

These characteristics also apply to many story-driven games. In games such as *Half-Life*, *BioShock* (2K Boston 2007) or *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008)

the game characters, similar to the performers in the prior examples, make direct contact with players. They acknowledge our physical presence by looking into our eyes, and direct their speech towards us. The opening scene of *Half-Life 2* (Valve Corporation 2004) is particularly strong in making the player feel as if they are physically anchored in the story world. When the player steps of a train riding into a station, a flying robot moves in front of the player and takes a picture of him (fig. 1). In this very moment, the game explicitly addresses us as present and perceivable within the story world that unfolds around us.

Fig. 1: Half-Life 2

Not surprisingly, this does not happen in a representological game like *Heavy Rain*. Characters do not look into the camera directly. Their eyes focus on the avatar who the player is controlling, even in the case of a point of view-shot. As in conventional cinematography, the camera in these shots positions itself near, but not along, the avatar's line of sight (fig. 2). Rather than looking straight into our eyes, characters look slightly past us, thereby enhancing the sensation that these characters do not perceive us as being present.

Fig. 2: Heavy Rain

Also, in games like *Half-Life 2* we hardly find as many temporal devices (ellipses, flashbacks and flash forwards) as in games like *Heavy Rain*. The extensive use of these editing techniques makes the existence of a narrator recounting a story apparent behind the seemingly 'presentness' of visual presentation (Branigan 1992, 146-147). Thus, *Half-Life 2* avoids these techniques as they would disrupt our feeling of being, not only mentally, but also physically grounded in the story world. Like the theatrical performances discussed, the focus is not on the communication of events from the there-and-then, but on the execution of acts in the here-and-now, as Juul (2005, 223) also emphasizes: "Now, not just in the sense that the viewer witnesses events now, but in the sense that the events are happening now, and that what comes next is not yet determined."

Game characters play an important role in creating this focus. Like performers, they come equipped with a set of pre-scripted tasks. Their aim is not so much to represent certain events from a real or fictitious past, but rather to create new events through interaction within the confines of the narrative context. The freedom fighters the player encounters in *Half-Life 2* for example assist the player in various ways, based upon the situation at hand and the decisions the player makes. Each encounter results in a different outcome, but stays meaningful within the story world.

As explained by Michael Nitsche (2008, 55) in his seminal book on *Video Game Spaces*, story events like these do not seem to pre-exist the discourse – they do not evoke the sensation of 'pastness' – but seems to come into existence the very moment they happen:

> Narrating in video game spaces differs from that of fixed literary or cinematic pieces. It occurs at the same time as the generation of the interactive event and is influenced by it. While literary, cinematic, and many oral forms of narrating build on events past and retold, real-time virtual worlds – like live television or radio broadcasts – narrate the events at the moment of their manifestation.

A similar observation has been made by Henry Jenkins in his exploratory work on storytelling in computer games. In his often-cited article *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*, Jenkins discusses game stories as being essentially spatial. Although he does not really define the phenomenon of spatial stories or environmental storytelling, it seems that he understands them as being presentological in nature. Jenkins (2004, 122) characterizes spatial stories as follows: "In many cases, the characters – our guides through these richly-developed worlds – are stripped down to the bare bones, description displaces exposition, and plots fragment into a series of episodes and encounters."

Again, the same presentological characteristics I have discussed earlier seem to be foregrounded here: Events feel as if coming into existence in the very moment they are expressed as the discourse focuses on describing what happens in the here-and-now (description) rather than providing a lot of background information on the plot (exposition). Consequently, the discourse places events meaningfully besides each other rather than after each other. Unlike the representological mode, where events often structure themselves in tight strings of cause-and-effect, here events organize themselves in episodes and encounters. Spatial stories also portray the protagonist less as a distinctive other and more as an empty vessel for somebody to project one's own identity on. Because of this, they succeed in extending our physical presence and thus function effectively as guides through richly developed story worlds.

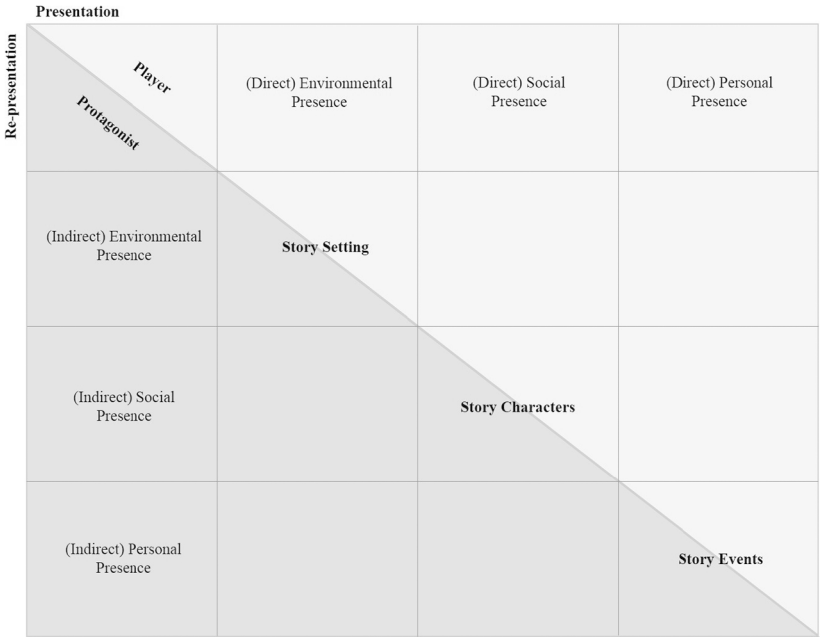
To conclude this paragraph, the aim of the presentational mode is to create a story event in the here-and-now, while the aim of the representational mode is to communicate a story event from the there-and-then, whether set in the past, the present or the future. The former creates a form of presence in which things seem to happen in a time and place aligned with the here-and-now of our own bodily existence, even though we are not always literally physically present. The latter creates a form of presence in which one feels consciously present when things happen to others in a time and place beyond the here-and-now of our own bodily existence.

(Re-)Presentological Game Design

So, what are the implications of the difference between narrative representation and presentation for the design of avatar-based 3D-games? I have tried to map the difference between narrative representation and narrative presentation by placing the representational and presentational logic besides the three commonly accepted constituents of narrative (Fig. 3): "Narrative representation consists of a world (setting) situated in time, populated by individuals (characters), who participate in actions and happenings (events, plot) and undergo change" (Ryan 2001a). On the left and upper side of the diagram, I have plotted three forms of presence. These forms of presence have been borrowed from an article of Heeter (1992) where she reduced the phenomenon of presence to three main categories:

A sense of presence in a virtual world derives from feeling like you exist within but as a separate entity from a virtual world that also exists. The differentiation and experience of self may be enhanced if other beings exist in the virtual world and if they appear to recognize that you exist. It may be enhanced if the virtual environment itself seems to acknowledge your existence.

Fig. 3: Two logics of narrative



The three forms of presence discussed by Heeter (environmental, social, and personal presence) align with the three main constituents of narrative (story setting,

characters, and events). On the presentological side of the diagram, I use the additive 'direct' to signal that in presentation the story setting, characters and events seem to exist in our direct physical presence. On the representological side of the diagram, I use the additive 'indirect' to signal that in representation, as the word 're' emphasizes, the story setting, characters and events seem to exist in another temporal and spatial moment, one that exists outside our direct physical presence. By positioning the three main constituents of narrative besides the various categories of direct and indirect presence, the diagram plots three primary points of friction: representational vs. presentational story settings, representational vs. presentational story characters and representational vs. presentational story events. What follows is an exploration of the implications of these points of friction for the development of avatar-based 3D-games, primarily from the perspective of presentological games.

Story Setting

When looking at the spatial design of 3D-games, the recurrence in sceneries is remarkable. Many games place the player in vast landscapes, from war-torn cities and stretched-out dungeons to grand canyons and endless forests. What is most striking about these locations is that, although they seem highly similar in their visual presentation, the way they are bodily experienced differs greatly. An endless forest can be experienced as a corridor, a maze, a branching path, even as a closed-off room, all depending on the way designers choose to structure them spatially. Everybody who plays 3D-games knows the awkward sensation of being blocked by an invisible wall when a forest visually stretches out for miles. Suddenly, the never-ending forest becomes ending, and thus, not an endless forest at all. (Often, designers use more elegant solutions than an invisible wall, for instance natural barriers such as a river or a mass of rocks.) This is where the difference and sometimes problematic relation between narrative presentation and representation in game design becomes visible.

The difference between representation and presentation concerning the story setting comes down to the idea of recounting once again. The story setting commonly refers to the where and when of the story expressed. Gerald Prince (1987, 86) in his *Dictionary of Narratology* defines it as the "spatiotemporal circumstances in which the events of a narrative occur". From a representational perspective, the setting recounts or re-presents the temporal and spatial circumstances in which the events pertinent to character(s) happened. To do this effectively, media rely on the ability of users to infer space and time from cues within the discourse, be it a description of a garden, an image of a city or the sound of a waterfall.

Cinema for example, calls upon our imagination to expand on that, which is actually seen, as Bordwell and Thompson (2001, 68; my emphasis) explain: "The narrative may ask us to *imagine* spaces and actions that are never shown." The setting when approached presentological on the other hand does not concern itself with communicating the spatiotemporal circumstances of events from the there-and-then. Space is not visually re-constructed through the imagination, but is constructed in real-time around the body of the user. Time is not represented, but develops in a progressing present. Thus, the spatiotemporal modus of presentation deals with environments addressing our bodily existence in the here-and-now, tied to one specific location in space and time, even when mediated by the screen-dependent technologies used in for example computer games or virtual reality.

The difference between representation and presentation leads to an interesting yet problematic tension in 3D-game design. As already discussed in the previous sections, avatar-based games do not position the player in an actual tangible environment. They need a screen-projected avatar to simulate the feeling of presence, which immediately invites a representational logic. As a result, their worlds always belong respectively to the avatar as protagonist and to the avatar as a disciplined extension of the player's body. When a 3D-game designs its setting solely as the world of the protagonist without taking into account that this setting also hands the player the feeling as if they themselves move through a world, aesthetic conflicts could arise. The body may disrupt the spaces developers want to trigger in the mind of the player. The way in which a story world is represented and consequently imagined can be drastically altered by the way this world, in its presentation, is experienced. Imagine a game in which we see an exciting cut scene of a character running through a forest chased by creatures unknown. This forest is shown to be vast and dense. It stretches out in all directions. The moment the game gives us control of this character, the forest that was first a maze, can suddenly become nothing more than a box with a clear exit. The moment at which the avatar changes from protagonist to the extension of the player's disciplined body, we suddenly, physically, feel the borders built into the game world. The vastness so convincingly portrayed visually, fades away when our bodies, confronted with the spatial borders of the game, remind us of the fact that we are simply running in a marked-off space.

Of course, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Some game genres, for instance Japanese Role Playing Games, design their spaces always in this fashion. Mainly because it is the representational quality of the story, expressed in elaborate cut scenes, that makes these games appealing. Whether the setting of the story changes from a canyon, to a mountain range or a forest, mostly it is, in experience, just a long pathway filled with enemies to beat before receiving another cut scene, which propels the story forward again. When we think about presentological ava-

tar-based 3D-games on the other hand, especially action adventures, it becomes much more important to surpass this one-dimensionality in spatial design, as they are less concerned with representational storytelling.

When comparing the popular 3D-games sold today with those of previous decades, the development in setting is remarkable. Game developers have steadily become better at building rich, atmospheric sceneries, imbued with spectacular set pieces. The studio that developed the *BioShock* franchise for instance employed some of the best skilled artists to create this fibred underwater dystopia. However, in terms of presentation most 3D-games remain quite one-dimensional. To put it bluntly, the player still mainly moves through corridors, occasionally fighting off hordes of enemies. The next obvious step in 3D-game design will be the abandonment of this one dimensionality. Not only will the worlds of future games look even more atmospheric, they will also offer a richer, more meaningful palette of spatial experiences.

Story Characters

The relation between representation and presentation concerning story characters mirrors the previous paragraph on story setting. The same difference in logic applies. In presentational narratives beings exist in bodily presence to each other, and specifically to the player, within an environment, even when mediated through communication technologies. Story characters in representational narratives, on the other hand, come into existence through our imagination. They belong to the represented world of the main character and logically exist solely in his or her presence. Because representational narratives center on the trials and tribulations of the protagonist, our emotional investment in other characters is often channeled through empathic identification with this protagonist. Movies make us care for the main character so we feel moved when we see him or her struggling to reach a certain goal, as Torben Grodal (1997, 1; my emphasis) writes:

> The film experience is made up of many activities: our eyes and ears pick up and analyse image and sound, our minds apprehend the story, which resonates in our memory; furthermore, our stomach, heart, and skin are activated in empathy with the story situations and the protagonists' ability to cope.

Whether this protagonist is able to cope also depends on the characters surrounding him or her. That is why our emotional responses towards these characters depend largely on how they relate to the actions, feelings and desires of the main character. In short, we tend to feel sympathy for those who are loved or help-out. We dislike those who obstruct, endanger or deceive. The emotional reactions of

the main character towards others, serve as cues for us to build our own emotional relationships. We closely observe facial expressions, body language and other signals to infer from them how we should relate to the other characters in the story. For example, when we see protagonists mourning the death of a friend, we tend to mourn with them. When we see them in pain, we tend to be deeply moved, which does not differ that much from watching a loved one in tears. Even if we have never actually seen the deceased friend in the movie, we care for his death, because the main character cares and we care for the main character. This empathy-driven investment in story characters does not work the same way in presentological avatar-based 3D-games.

Presentational narratives are less able to provide us with these sorts of emotional tie-ins. As already discussed in previous paragraphs, the game world does not solely belong to the protagonist, but also to the player, since the avatar functions as both the main character and the extension of the player's body. In presentational avatar-based 3D-games, the boundary between protagonist and player blurs, therefore we lose the empathic identification with the main character so typical for representational narratives. The emotional relationships we build in these games focus less on the main character and more on the characters surrounding him or her. Story characters do not longer only belong to the world of the protagonist, as they exist also within our simulated physical presence. Exactly this quality offers new possibilities for building emotional relationship with them.

When a presentological narrative confronts us with a deceased character, this often barely affects us emotionally when the meaning of this event is placed too much with the emotional state of the protagonist. It means something to him or her, but not necessarily to us. In presentational narratives, our empathic identification with the protagonist seems different from representational narratives. Because we are, in a sense, the main character, we barely see his or her emotional reactions to events, be it for the occasional cut scene. There is no camera registering every single facial expression or physical gesture. We see the world through the protagonist's eyes (first-person view) or from behind his shoulders (third-person view). In *Half-Life* for example, we almost never see or hear the protagonist Gordon Freeman. He remains for a large part a tabula rasa; an empty vessel for us to project our identity on. To really feel the loss of another character in a game, then, their continuous presence to us in the game world needs to be undone. To build an emotional relationship between players and characters, they must be placed in each other's physical presence in a meaningful way. To put it simply, they have to spend time together.

Presentological avatar-based 3D-games that succeed in building a meaningful bond between player and story characters mainly employ this approach. In its series on the best games of the last decade, the magazine *EDGE* pays homage to Valve's *Half-Life 2*, praising its character design with the following words: "Half-

Life 2's characters are engaging both dramatically and in action: they are a *tangible presence* in the world which help or hinder the player directly" (Anon. 2010, 70; my emphasis). In successful presentological games we often see that instead of the protagonist, the character(s) closest to the protagonist provide the player with emotional connections to other story characters. It is no coincidence that in *Half-Life 2* the most intense dramatic moments concern relatives not of Gordon Freeman, but of Alyx Vance, the girl who follows him throughout his adventures. For example, it is her father who gets killed in one of the episodes. Because the player spends a lot of time in the presence of Alyx instead of Gordon, we feel touched more easily when she rather than he suffers. Would it have been the death of Gordon's father, the effect probably would have been less as we play Gordon Freeman, and to empathize with the death of somebody else's father is in general emotionally more moving than to mourn the death of one's own imagined father.

Other successful games have asked players to visit their families regularly, like in *Fable II* (Lionhead Studios 2010), to escape a dungeon hand-in-hand with a little girl, like in *Ico* (Team ICO 2001) or to hang out with friends in bars, bowling alleys and clubs, like in *Grand Theft Auto 3* (Rockstar North 2001). As these games show, 3D-games can be emotional engaging when it comes to their characters. We humans have the peculiar ability to care for inanimate objects and anthropomorphic entities, think of the Tamagotchi or other robotic beings. Rather than re-presenting character relationships, the language of presentological games should further tune in on this particular human attribute. This is not only done by perfecting the way these digital beings act, look and talk to us. Also, their spatial position in relation to us is essential in how we relate to them emotionally. Space functions as a mediator. It can literally force us into someone's presence, or force us out of someone's presence. It can make a loved one reachable or condemn us to solitude. In simple ways, games have already been mapping emotional tensions on their spaces for decades. In *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1985), we have to cross a number of worlds in order to save the Princess. By expanding on these predecessors, future game designers will become more and more skilled in staging meaningful meetings between human and digital beings.

Story Events

The tension between representation and presentation in relation to story events also comes down to the difference between the player and the protagonist. From a representational perspective, story events are the events that happen to protagonists whereas from a presentational perspective they concern events that happen to players. Because in three-dimensional, avatar-based games the avatar is both player and protagonist, this tension is one of the most fundamental ones in 3D-game design. Are the things that happen to the protagonist still meaningful

when they are experienced as if directed towards our personal presence? Marie-Laure Ryan (2001a) has written on this question:

> What kind of gratification will the experiencer receive from becoming a character in a story? It is important to remember at this point that even though the interactor is an agent, and in this sense a co-producer of the plot, he or she is above all the beneficiary of the performance.

One could indeed wonder if the majority of events that happen to characters in for example popular movies are still meaningful or pleasurable when they are staged as if happening to us. Ryan concludes they are not as "any attempt to turn empathy, which relies on mental simulation, into first-person, genuinely felt emotion would in the vast majority of cases trespass the fragile boundary that separates pleasure from pain" (ibid.). There seems to be a major difference in the sort of story events we like to experience ourselves and the sort of story events we like to be told about. A simple example will suffice to explain this. In games we enjoy running, jumping and shooting for hours on end, while most people would certainly not enjoy watching this for the same amount of time. Some events are worthwhile to be experienced in the here-and-now while others are worthwhile to be represented. It is not easy to say what characterizes the difference between these events. We need to study these differences in more depth which in the end will be of benefit to game designers. What sort of events are interesting to tell or to be told about (book), to show or to be shown (movie), to enact or to see being enacted (theatre), and what kind of events are interesting to stage in the here-and-now and to be experienced firsthand? When the answers to questions like these become clearer, the development of avatar-based 3D will equally mature.

It is important to emphasize the essential spatial quality of the presentational narrative mode at the end of this paper. When players are addressed as an embodied participant in the story world, the spatial design of the game world becomes important. Game designers indeed become, as Jenkins (2007) proposes in one of his articles, 'narrative architects.' Like architects, they trigger specific emotions in players just by structuring the spaces around their bodies in a particular way, thereby influencing the kind of stories players personally experience. Space thus can become much more than just the setting or background of the story, as explained by Mieke Bal (1997, 136) in her *Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*:

> Space functions in a story in different ways. One the one hand, they are 'only' a frame, a place of action. In this capacity a more or less detailed presentation will lead to a more or less concrete picture of that space. The space can also remain entirely in the background. In many cases, however, space is 'thematized:' it

> becomes an object of presentation itself, for its own sake. Space thus becomes an 'acting place' rather than the place for action.

The spaces conjured up in narratives are not simply locations for events to take place. Narrative events often possess spatial structures that express profound meanings in themselves. One of Bal's well-known examples relates to the spatial tension between the house as a safe and the street as a dangerous place. Many movies deal with spatial transgression, with invaders who cross this threshold between the outside and the inside. These stories are powerful as they relate to broadly shared and deeply felt existential structures. In cognitive linguistics these structures or patterns are called image schema.

In *The Body in The Mind* Mark Johnson (1987) distinguishes some elemental ones, for example the container (inside/outside), the path or the blockade. In 3D-game design, too, these image schemata could be used as a language for staging arresting experiences. The beauty of 3D-games is that they seem to be able like no other medium to hand us the feeling as if we are physically present in the story world. Avatar-based 3D-games really excel in giving us sensations as if being inside or outside a building or as if being caught between two walls. The challenge for game designer, then, is to explore the various spatial experiences games can conjure up and embed them meaningfully in the context of a narrative. Besides running, jumping and shooting through corridors, computer games can stage many other worthwhile spatially grounded human emotions and experiences. When employed meaningfully within the context of thrilling story worlds, computer games move closer towards becoming that full-grown artistic medium we all long for.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the logics behind two distinctive ways in which narrative media, particularly avatar-based 3D-games, deal with presence. I have argued that a basic distinction can be made between games in which players steer a hero through challenging trials and tribulations (e.g. *Heavy Rain*) and games in which players become the hero and have adventures of their own (e.g. *Half-Life*). Drawing on theories from structuralist narratology, the article has shown the former approach to be essentially representational in its logic. Subsequently, by bringing together alternative theories on storytelling from the fields of game-, film-, and theatre studies, the article has developed a new, additional concept of narrative, applicable to the latter approach. This presentological conceptualization explicates the narrative practice of creating story events in the present, while the representological concept describes the practice of communicating story events from the past, whether diegetically set in the past, the present or the future.

The former creates a form of presence in which things seem to happen in a time and place aligned with the here-and-now of our own physically anchored existence, even though we are not always literally present. The latter creates a form of presence in which one feels consciously present when things happen to others in a there-and-then; a time and place removed from the here-and-now of our own physically anchored existence.

The distinction between a presentational and a representational narrative logic proposed in this paper is broad and academically abstract. It only helps in making an elemental division in the broad range of narrative formats seen today, but does not suffice to describe the intricate differences between formats with the same logic. Popular avatar-based 3D-games for example share their narrative logic with experience theatre, but there still exist many differences between the two. For one, the former depends on the screen to stage its events, while the latter stages events in our material reality. It feels different when a real actor comes to you and shakes your hand than when a digital character does exactly the same, even when controlled by a real person. Future studies should elaborate on these difference forms of mediation, (dis)embodiment, participation and observation.

At the end of this paper, I like to mention that in principle not one of the two logics developed here is preferable over the other in future game design. It could well be that they originate from different basic human desires. Though more research is necessary to support this claim, it seems human beings on the one hand seem to enjoy listening to the adventures of others. We like to get an inside view on somebody else's experiences and thoughts, empathize with them and think how we would have done things differently. The affordances of real-time 3D computer technology enable people to have a say in how things turn out for story characters. We can steer heroes into specific situation and witness their reactions. This is one of the novel narrative pleasures 3D-games offer us.

On the other hand, human beings also want adventures of their own. We love to venture out into the unknown. In our contemporary experience society, the advent of previously marginal practices such as extreme sports, experience theatre, free running, land art, survival tours and interactive architecture testify to a culture evermore captivated by this direct exposure to intense experiences, from the subtle and the gentle to the extreme and the spectacular. Computer games take center stage in this development. Their affordances enable people to visit places non-existent in real life. Build like no other medium, games elaborate fantasy worlds for us to dwell in. This is another revolutionary pleasure offered to us by the story-driven games of today.

In the end, both logics make use of the affordances of game technology in their own particular ways. If designers and critics proceed on the paths they have now taken, these logics will steer the future design of game stories into two promising yet alternative directions.

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