4 Towards the Implied Player

"What are games? What do they consist of? What are they in relation to similar phenomena?"[1] Video game studies have often focused on describing what it means to *be* a game and what aspects make games *different* from non-ergodic forms of representational art. This perspective is beneficial, as it sheds light on the ontological dimension of the medium, which tries to clarify basic questions such as those of Espen Aarseth, above, and discusses whether video games should be seen as forms (or show elements) of non-digital games, hypertexts, simulations, narrative fictions, films, performances, dramas, virtual artefacts, and so on.[2] Partly, this was necessary (and still is) to describe the peculiarities of the video game medium and designated a first inevitable step towards establishing a new field of study dealing specifically with digital games. In turn, a stubborn and uncritical demarcation of video games as one of these forms neglects the multifarious nature of the phenomenon. The initial narratology vs. ludology[3] debate stands as

1 Aarseth, "Ontology," 484.

2 For example: See Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan for different approaches to video games such as drama and performance, ludology, simulation, hypertext, space and narrative, and so on.

3 The ludology vs. narratology argument was a fictitious straw man debate that hit video game studies at its beginnings in the early 2000s. While the former approach relied on the analysis of games as simulations or dynamic processes that are organised according to a set of rules (without acknowledging that games would be able to outline interesting narratives), the latter approach tried to describe the phenomenon as a form of narrative. In focusing on specific aspects, both perspectives neglected the complete picture of the phenomenon. A first attempt to reconcile the seemingly opposite poles was attempted by (Gonzalo Frasca, "Ludologists love Stories too: Notes from a Debate that Never took Place," *Proceedings of the 2003 DiGRA International Conference: Level up* 2, [2003]: 91-99, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/05163.01125.pdf).

a reminder of the one-dimensionality that views of video games may show.[4] Hence, Aarseth's recent attempt to clarify

> the 'ludologist' position [which] was not, as has been claimed, 'to see the focus shift onto the mechanics of gameplay' (Jenkins 2001) [Jenkins, *Architecture*, 118] but to emphasize the crucial importance of *combining* the mechanical and the semiotic aspects and to caution against and criticize the uncritical and unqualified application of terms such as 'narrative' and 'story' to games.[5]

In fact, there has often, if not invariably, been a distinction made between "two elementary senses or 'layers' in the concept of game: (1) *core*, or game as gameplay, and (2) *shell*, or game as representation and sign system."[6] While it is true that such a separation between core and shell may be useful for analysis and for laying the focus on specific parts of a game, their mutual complementation must not be neglected. Especially if the researcher narrows her focus to one of these interlocking aspects, it can have detrimental effects on the understanding of the video game phenomenon as a whole and on the player's experience of a game. What further complicates the matter is Mäyrä's use of the term *shell*, which runs the risk of having a depreciative connotation—this is just one example in which scholars (implicitly or explicitly) try to lay the focus on the inner mechanics of a game, its rules and algorithms, while neglecting semiotic aspects of the gameworld. Faced with such a variety of ingredients in a game, it would be fatal to reduce a player's experience to either one of these aspects. It is therefore only through the combined analysis of *mechanics* (the game as system) and *semiotics* (the sign system of the gameworld) that the act of play can be properly described. As Aarseth formulates: "Mechanics and semiotics together make up the *game object*, which is a type of information object, and when a player engages this object the third component, gameplay, is realized."[7] Naturally, for the purpose of analysis, mechanics and semiotics can be regarded separately, but it is indisputable that they only signify as a whole.

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4 For example: Jesper Juul's argumentation in *Half-Real*, that games cannot be seen as stories (Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real rules and Fictional Worlds* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005]), or Ian Bogost's in *Persuasive Games*, where he claims that meaning-making in games primarily depends on the medium's procedural abilities. (Bogost, *Persuasive*).

5 Aarseth, "Narrative," 130; emphasis added.

6 Mäyrä, *Introduction*, 17; emphasis added.

7 Aarseth, "Ontology," 488.

The discussion of ontology in video game studies has been beneficial, however difficult it has been and still is, and offers a gateway to regarding games as the diverse forms of entertainment and aesthetic artefacts they are. To reach such a conclusion, one has to first see the ills of one-dimensional approaches to video games and, second, to start seeing them as a multifaceted phenomenon. This view has carved its way into the minds of many scholars—including Aarseth, Tosca, Calleja, Domsch, and Ryan—who address a certain but most common subtype of the video game. To them, many video games are *hybrid* forms between non-digital games and narratives.[8] Aarseth, for instance, underlines "the composite makeup" of "the story-game amalgams"[9] and Domsch states that "[s]ome things are played as games, and some things are read as narrative, and sometimes, a thing is both. The latter is what is called *storyplaying*."[10] Similarly, for Susana Tosca the game-narrative hybrids only signify if their two intertwining parts—the "story" and the "action / procedures"—are regarded as inseparable parts similar to the concept of yin and yang.[11] While these three scholars foreground the aspects of game and narrative in their descriptions, Calleja throws virtual environments into the equation: "games nowadays are in fact extended virtual environments which contain a game or multiple games within them."[12] Finally, Ryan invites the approach of

> ludo-narrativism that studies how the fictional world, realm of make-believe, relates to the playfield, space of agency. By connecting strategic dimensions of gameplay to the imaginative experience of a fictional world, this approach should do justice to the dual nature of video games.[13]

In these views, then, video games are hybrid forms of many things, the most prominent variant of which offers the player a virtual environment and fictional space for *narrative play*. This variant I want to refer to as the *video game narrative*, a

8 The current trend of many video games to incorporate literary aesthetics into their formula points to a departure from traditional games. This was indirectly (that is, without the scholar sharing this opinion) alluded to in Juul's *classic game model*, where storytelling was given the status of a non-game. (Juul, *Half-Real*, 44; Dominic Arsenault, "Narratology," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron [New York: Routledge, 2014], 481).

9 Aarseth, "Narrative," 130.

10 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 3.

11 Tosca, "*Amnesia*," 120; cf. 119-120.

12 Calleja, *In-Game*, 14-15.

13 Ryan, *Avatars*, 203.

large and diverse genre to which I will also ascribe the *video game dystopia*. Consequently, when talking about video games (or games), and if not specifically described otherwise, I will invariably be referring to these hybrid forms.

Though video game studies have made huge leaps forward in respect to game ontology, much remains to be said. Instead of embarking on this path, however, I choose to adjust the question of what it means *to be a game* to *what it is like to play a game*, and what actually *happens to the player during the act of play*. I thus enter the realms of *phenomenology*, which many scholars have entered before, with different concerns that can roughly be divided into three different branches (it should be noted that most of them are interested in a 'textual' analysis of response rather than an empirical investigation of player reactions).[14] The first branch describes the related phenomena of *immersion*, *presence*, and *involvement* that are fundamental to a player's experience of a game. Janet Murray, for example, described the concept of immersion in 1997 as "the physical experience of being submerged in water. … the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality … that takes over all our attention,"[15] while Alison McMahan illustrates the feeling of presence in 2003 as one "of being there."[16] Alongside other takes on this issue, such as Marie-Laure Ryan's in 2001,[17] there are recent attempts to elaborate on what it means to become involved in a game. These include, for example, Carl Therrien's discussions of immersion in 2014[18] or Gordon Calleja's 2011 theory on player involvement—to which I have alluded before and that I will primarily follow.[19]

In addition to these, a "*corporeal turn*"[20] occurred in game phenomenology, with studies focusing on the *avatar's (or PC's) relation to both the gameworld and the empirical player*. Important works in this respect were conducted by Rune

14 Fahlenbrach and Schröter offer a similar and detailed subdivision of player response theories in game studies. (Kathrin Fahlenbrach and Felix Schröter, "Game Studies und Rezeptionsästhetik," in *Game Studies: Aktuelle Ansätze der Computerspielforschung* [Köln: Herbert von Harlem Verlag, 2015], 166-174).

15 Murray, *Hamlet*, 98.

16 Alison McMahan, "Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A Method for Analysing 3-D Video Games," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003), 68.

17 Ryan, *Narrative*.

18 Therrien, "Immersion."

19 Calleja, *In-Game*.

20 Fahlenbrach and Schröter, "Rezeptionsästhetik," 170.

Klevjer, who considers the player's involvement as a form of "fictional and vicarious embodiment."[21] As such, "[t]he relationship between the player and the avatar is a prosthetic relationship; through a process of learning and habituation, the avatar becomes the extension of the player's own body."[22] Daniel Vella builds on these conclusions, but focuses on the mutual influence of avatar and player. He describes a "playable figure" that "encapsulates both the fact that the entity is taken on and 'played out' by the player … but also the fact that it remains a figure in its own right."[23] Lastly, Brendon Keogh is interested in the "physical"[24] but "unconscious, embodied engagement between player and videogame, where the videogame is touched, seen, heard, and ultimately understood through a perceiving located (and augmented) body."[25] This claim he explains in "how the player embodies the videogame" but also "how that embodiment is always already constituted by the videogame."[26]

The phenomenological theories on embodiment can, according to Fahlenbrach and Schröter, be integrated into the vast branch of "Cognitive Game Studies"[27] such as Bernard Perron's works on emotions created in playing horror games[28]—but these are of minor importance for my deliberations here. Contrary to these theories, I focus on the player's *aesthetic experience* in the act of play and how a game's mechanisms outline the player's involvement—that is to say, the *structure* that affords play in the first place and the player's experience of meaning. This structure I refer to as the *implied player*: a dynamic framework of play that offers the empirical player a specific role (or roles) to be performed and functions as a trajectory towards catharsis. My approach in this chapter is thus both a *phenomenological* and *structuralist* one—inspired by theories of fiction/aesthetic response and narratology—which understands a game and its world as a system of perspectives that borrow elements from the empirical world but rearrange them in an unfamiliar manner as representations in order to have the player make connections between the two realities. By analysing these preconditions of play's aesthetic effect, the chapter opens up several threads that will be answered in chapter V, which

21 Klevjer, "Avatar," 9.

22 Ibid., 10.

23 Vella, "Ludic Subject,"10.

24 Keogh, "Play of Bodies," 15.

25 Ibid., 17.

26 Ibid., 19.

27 Fahlenbrach and Schröter, "Rezeptionsästhetik," 170.

28 Bernard Perron, *Silent Hill: The Terror Engine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

will lay the focus on the empirical player's dialectical communication with the intersubjective framework of dystopia's implied player. Through such an analysis of play's underlying mechanisms (with play seen in ergodic and imaginative ways), it will not only be possible to comprehend how the VGD exerts a certain effect on the player but also to draw conclusions about the ontology of the game-narrative hybrids alluded to above.

Given the video game medium's multifacetedness, then, it makes sense to begin with a theory of representational art. By means of this approach, I avoid the mistakes one-dimensional approaches to video games have made in neglecting to address the vital similarities between games and other forms of art. What this does *not* mean is that I consider the player's experience equal to that of reader, spectator, viewer, or appreciator—and becoming involved in a virtualised storyworld (or gameworld) and playing its contents shows an aesthetic of its own. Yet there are also crucial similarities that must not be overlooked, ones which most fundamentally revolve around the appreciator's and player's dialectic with a work of art and a potential storyworld (if that is the case). For these reasons, Kendall Walton's theory on representational art or fiction, and the appreciator's communication with the latter in terms of make-believe becomes strikingly beneficial as a starting point.

These general deliberations will then be supplemented by related theories from game studies (for example, Klevjer, Tavinor, Aarseth, Ryan, Domsch) and refined by integrating Jacques Rancière's thoughts on an emancipated spectator's involvement in plays, Lubomír Doležel's recent conception of fiction as a semantic communication between the work of art and the appreciator, and Wolfgang Iser's groundbreaking theory of aesthetic response. In the latter, the reader engages in an imaginative dialectic with the structural concept of the implied reader, which is described as a system of perspectives which creates various indeterminacies (gaps/blanks) for the reader to fill in or close. These outline the empirical reader's imaginative involvement in the literary work by evoking acts of ideation in her—that is to say, the creation and continuous revision of images by resorting to her real-world knowledge to close the blanks.

From these theoretical manoeuvres, I wish to arrive at a *unified theory of aesthetic response* and a *phenomenology of art experience* in VGNs in general and the VGD in particular. For only if one regards fiction in terms of *a semantic communication* and as *a functional concept* can the relation between the gameworld and the player's empirical surroundings be properly understood, and the effect this experience has on the player. As Doležel puts it:

Fictional texts are composed by actual authors (storytellers, writers) using the resources of an actual human language and destined for actual readers. They are called fictional on *functional grounds*, as media for making, preserving, and communicating fictional worlds. They are stores of fictionality within the world of actuality, where the products of the writers' imaginations are permanently available to receptive readers.[29]

4.1 VIDEO GAMES AS FORMS OF REPRESENTATIONAL ART AND FICTION

There has been much debate about whether video games count as forms of representational art[30]—and even Marie-Laure Ryan, who normally tends towards the narrative pole of the spectrum, poses this question. She thereby distinguishes between "[*r*]*epresentational*" and "[s]*imulative*"[31] forms of narrative and argues that "[w]hile the simulation machine [to which she allots the video game] cannot by itself be called a narrative, each of its individual runs produces images of a world that undergoes change as the result of events."[32] Consequently, video games "may not be stories, but they can be machines for generating stories."[33] Indeed, although video games differ in their form of discourse, they still, and most magnificently, create worlds—and thus, virtual representations with which the player can interact. As such, I see no reason why they should not fall under the umbrella category of representational art and agree with Grant Tavinor who comes to the conclusion that games that create virtual worlds such as "*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studies, 2011) can be considered a … representational artifact."[34] However, then TETRIS (Nintendo, 1989) would also count as representation, as the game simulates some form of visual, if only rudimentary, world on the screen.[35]

29 Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 28.

30 Tavinor, *Art of*, 44ff.

31 Ryan, *Avatars*, 13.

32 Ibid., 188.

33 Ibid., 188-189.

34 Tavinor, "Art," 59.

35 Murray views the game as an allegory on the "perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s—of the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention." (Murray, *Hamlet*, 144). Also, Sebastian Möring offers an insightful discussions of Murray's interpretation. (Sebastian Möring, "Games and Metaphor – A Critical Analysis of the Metaphor Discourse in Game Studies," [PhD diss., IT University of Copenhagen, 2013], 229-230, 233-234, https://en.itu.dk/~/media/en/re

The question of representation may not be so easy to answer, and one has to pursue such a claim further—an enterprise that leads to the question of *fictionality*. It comes as no surprise that the consensus on this topic in video game studies is no more unanimous than that of narrative. There are primarily two schools of thought that radically differ in opinion: "ludo-fictionalism and ludo-realism."[36]

> The ludo-fictionalist school, inspired by Kendell Walton's radical and influential *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990), on the one hand, sees games, game objects, and game worlds as fictional, as 'props in a game of make-believe.' For them, the rules may be real, but the discursive elements and actions are fictional (Juul 2005; Bateman, 2011). The ludo-realist school, on the other hand, sees game objects and game events as real, or at least closer to reality.[37]

Building on this distinction, Aarseth allocates himself to the school of ludo-realism and explains his ontologically interested position in terms of the status of in-game objects and the player's usage of them. Thereby, it must be noted that his focus rests on multiplayer games and online worlds in which "players typically treat important in-game objects much the same ways as they treat their extra-ludic property."[38] It is especially the real-world value of these "ludic objects" (often in-game objects can be traded and sold for large amounts of real-world money) that makes them different from "fictional objects" and which leaves them "on an entirely different ontological level, in the same category as digital word processing documents … and money in our digital bank accounts."[39]

In addition to this, Aarseth goes on to downplay the importance of make-believe for competitive multiplayer games such as COUNTER-STRIKE (Valve, 1999). Here, in-game objects fail to function as props in the Waltonian sense and could rather be compared to "sports equipment" in that what is of importance are the object's "capabilities"[40] and not the imaginings they evoke.

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search/phd-programme/phd-defences/2013/20130929-full-thesis-sebastian-moering-itupdf.pdf?la=en).

36 Aarseth, "Ontology," 491.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

> But there is no need for make-believing when players shoot each other in *Counter-Strike* … ; they are manipulating nonphysical, informational guns that shoot non-physical, informational projectiles and when their avatars are hit, they do not have to make-believe that they are eliminated. This happens, factually, in the game machine, entirely independent of the players' imagination, just like a pinball when it drops below the reach of flippers.[41]

Admittedly, there is a certain degree of truth to this claim, especially when discussing specific types of games such as TETRIS, pinball, or competitive multiplayer games like the above-mentioned COUNTER-STRIKE. One could agree that the primary function of such games is to engage the player in sports-like competitions where the fictional quality of the gameworld becomes of secondary importance (at least, its visual aspects). Nonetheless, such thinking robs video games—and specifically the genre of the VGN—of one of their essential qualities: in focusing on the internal mechanisms of a game, one runs the risk of neglecting its *imaginative-evocative* qualities. This would be a serious mistake, and one that fundamentally underestimates or misunderstands the power of representation, or fiction (two terms that I am using interchangeably for the sake of reducing complexity).

Indeed, it seems that Aarseth's trouble lies with the concept of fiction in general, or a certain understanding of it.[42] In another essay, he suggests a three-part segmentation of games into the ontological layers of "the real, the virtual and the fictional" and argues that gameworlds are "composites"[43] made up of these layers. His argument thereby runs as follows: to begin with, game events are *real* and not fictional, in that "we really win or lose" when playing a game, and labyrinths (out of which the gameworld is composed) are real at least "in a conceptual sense."[44] Labyrinths are also "virtual in the physical sense"[45] just as other game objects—such as characters or items—with which the player can interact. Continuing his discussion of purely *virtual* existents, Aarseth mentions doors that can be opened and closed and dragons as instances of animated characters. These are "neither physically nor conceptually real, but merely simulated" and "can typically be acted upon in ways that fictional content is *not* acted upon."[46] The *fictional* elements of a game he then reduces to objects such as doors with which the player

41 Ibid., 491-492.

42 Klevjer, "Avatar," 83-84.

43 Aarseth, "Fiction."

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

cannot interact and that "are merely textures on the walls that look like doors, but whose function is purely decorative."[47] Combined with the notion of fiction as "illusory, fabricated,"[48] Aarseth's argument shows a dismissive, "radical"[49] stance towards the concept of fiction he employs—and he underestimates the importance of make-believe to many games (going as far as negating these games' function as props).

Before hastily dismissing Aarseth's conclusions, however, one must concede that there is nonetheless huge benefit to be found here. First of all, Aarseth directs attention to the need to critically investigate "the status of fiction in games,"[50] and suggests that not all video games fall under the category of fiction. Secondly, he offers a vital starting point for further deliberations on the issue. This he does by coming to the conclusion that "games are not fictions, but a different type of world, between fiction and our world: the virtual."[51] Rune Klevjer is aware of these issues and offers an insight that will become vitally important to my deliberations. Instead of excluding the concept of fiction from virtuality, as Aarseth does, Klevjer claims that virtuality—following Ryan and Walton—is in fact what connects non-ergodic fictions to games. This he explains by referring to Aarseth's example of doors the player can open and those she cannot open. Instead of distinguishing between virtual and fictional artefacts here (and thus between different ontological levels), Klevjer argues that both function as *props* in the Waltonian sense. They differ, however, in that one of these props is a "model," "a dynamically reflexive prop"[52] and "a functional representation (the expression of a process in terms of a material or logical structure) … that prescribes as fictional the *changes* that we effect in it," whereas the other prop is "perceptually reflexive."[53] This conception implements a "form of agency"[54] as a discursive act into the realms of fiction and

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Klevjer, "Avatar," 84.

50 Aarseth, "Fiction."

51 Ibid.

52 Klevjer, "Avatar," 78. For Klevjer, especially the avatar is "a dynamically reflexive prop in relation to its environment." (Ibid., 87). This he explains in that "[e]mbodied make-believe is premised upon an *environment* within which the participant can become an acting body. Mediated by the avatar, the environment becomes our tangible world, our habitat." (Ibid., 88).

53 Ibid., 77; cf. 77-78, 82-85, 115.

54 Ibid., 78.

serves well to describe the player's oscillation in the act of play between ergodic and imaginative actions.[55]

As such, fiction is seen in a "*generative*"[56] way that constructs realities and becomes useful for considering games as virtual environments that show fictional qualities—for many outline diverse narratives and offer possibilities for player interaction that go beyond those of traditional fictions. Video games, so it seems, are thus similar to what Michel Foucault has called *Other spaces* or *heterotopian spaces*.[57] They are *playgrounds* which are, "formally speaking, demarcated from everyday space" but that nonetheless stand in intimate connection with it: "a heterotopian other feeding from and mirroring the everyday."[58] What this means is that the concept of fiction does not lose its validity—at least for the genre of the VGN. As microcosms within the real world and other spaces of estranged, artificial nature, video games occupy a limbo state between the fictional and the empirical world, drawing from both, but, at the same time, showing the player their results in a refracted mirror (see chapter V). To explain this specific quality, Aarseth's notion of fiction remains problematic, yet this offers the possibility for clarification and a finer granularity of the topic.

I therefore want to explore fiction in games in a different sense, moving away from its ontological dimension and towards the concept's *function as a phenomenological experience*. This quality manifests itself in a specific, aggravated relation to the empirical world, and in order to establish the connection between the gameworld and the real world, the player has to exert efforts of ideation—an enterprise that will eventually give rise to something new and the aesthetic effect of play. Fiction, then, shall not be seen as something illusory, fabricated or fake, but in a Waltonian sense as a powerful means of involving the player in games of make-believe that fuel her imagination in diverse manners and which hold the possibility of influencing her actions in both the virtual and the real world. The concept of virtuality I employ does thereby not exclude fiction but embraces it.[59] For the gameworld the player encounters and interacts with, exhibits virtual prop-

55 Ibid., 44.

56 Ibid., 87.

57 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1997), 350-356.

58 Walz, *Toward a Ludic Architecture*, 143; cf. 135, 136, 143.

59 For Tavinor, the "virtual and the fictional" are "somewhat overlapping categories" that are conceptually related. (Tavinor, *Art of*, 44; cf. 46).

erties (the gamespace) as well as showing inherent fictional qualities (the storyworld), but in a different sense than Aarseth has proposed. These sensualise the abstract space of the virtual and its underlying rules and evoke in the player diverse imaginings.[60] To prove my claims, Walton's concept of fiction offers a promising starting point (especially if augmented by Doležel and Iser's observations on the phenomenon, which go into more detail). Here, fiction becomes a matter of *attitude* and holds the *function* of immersing the player into the occurring events, involving her in a playful manner in a virtualised storyworld (or gameworld). As Ryan remarks, "fictionality is not a property inherent to a certain media but a specific use of the media for which the concept is valid."[61] Walton's theory, she continues, thereby offers "a basis for a transmedial theory of fiction"[62] and seems extremely valuable for a discussion of the phenomenon in games.[63]

4.2 THE DIFFERENT GAMES WE PLAY WITH FICTIONS

In his seminal work *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (1990), Kendall Walton meticulously describes the appreciator's involvement in representational works of art which for him are synonymous with works of fiction in a specific way.[64] The concept of fiction is thereby used in a very broad and inclusive manner.[65] Certainly, one could argue that Walton's scope

60 Domsch similarly argues that a storyworld "is the fictional world in which the structure of the game and its rules as well as the actions of the player within it are given meaning" (Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 27-28)—and that to better understand a game's events, players semanticise "its abstract properties (rules)." (Ibid., 19).

61 Ryan, *Avatars*, 37.

62 Ibid.

63 Klevjer, "Avatar," 25, 29; Tavinor, *Art of*, 40.

64 Walton justifies his *synonymous use* of *fiction* and *representation* in ascribing "an extension both broader and narrower than it is usually understood to possess" to the latter term. (Walton, *Mimesis*, 2). Similarly, works of fiction shall not be limited "to human artifacts" and a use of the term "[f]ictional representation" could lead to the implication that this "category is a species of a larger class of 'representations,' understood to include 'nonfictional' as well as 'fictional' ones." (Ibid., 3). Consequently, and because Walton "know[s] of no better" term, he assigns *representation* a specific, fictional use in his work. (Ibid).

65 Ibid., 3, 72.

is too wide, but he nonetheless manages to describe the phenomenon in a persuasive and useful manner.

To engage with representations (or fictions), the appreciator willingly participates "in a game of make-believe in which the appreciated work is a prop."[66] This is Walton's main thesis and premise for the appreciator's engagement with fiction. As stated above, his scope is broad. For the American philosopher, make-believe assumes a "nearly universal"[67] role common to all cultures and is intimately linked to children's games of make-believe and a *specific* form of imagining.[68] He therefore exemplifies:

> In order to understand paintings, plays, films, and novels, we must look first at dolls, hobbyhorses, toy trucks, and teddy bears. The activities in which representational works of art are embedded and which give them their point are best seen as continuous with children's games of make-believe themselves, and I shall argue that representational works function as props in such games, as dolls and teddy bears serve as props in children's games.[69]

If fiction designates such an all-inclusive category, why then not include video games as well? The question is valid and on the surface seems easy to answer.[70] To be certain, however, one has to take a detour, which begins with a brief but telling example.

"Let's call that stump a bear."[71] This is Walton's famous example in which he describes children's experience of embarking on a fictional adventure. For this purpose, they make-believe that a real-world stump they encounter confronts them with a bear in their game.[72] The stump thus functions as a *prop*, and this prop "generate[s] fictional truths independently of what anyone does or does not imagine."[73] This logic, Walton continues, is based on so-called *principles of generation*

66 Ibid., 190.

67 Ibid., 11.

68 Ibid., 12.

69 Ibid., 11.

70 In fact, many scholars in game studies have tried to answer it, with differing results. For example: Klevjer, "Avatar;" Tavinor, "Art"; *Art of*; Aarseth, "Fiction;" "Ontology;" Ryan, *Avatars*; *Narrative*; Domsch, *Storyplaying*; or Aaron Meskin and Jon Robeson, "Fiction and Fictional Worlds in Videogames," *Philosophy of Computer Games* (2009), https://www.academia.edu/244532/Fiction_and_Fictional_Worlds_in_Videogames

71 Walton, *Mimesis*, 23.

72 Ibid., 21ff.

73 Ibid., 38.

and on "a certain convention, understanding, agreement on the game of make-believe."[74] In other words, if players *agree* that all stumps *are* bears, then in the fictional world they *imagine* all stumps *are* bears. If this is so, it follows that to engage with fiction the appreciator willingly accepts the conventions of a work world (and often storyworld) and follows certain "*rules* about what is to be imagined in what circumstances."[75]

However, such deliberations run the risk of conflating the notions of *what is imagined* by the appreciator and *what is fictional*. Walton is aware of this pitfall in that he argues that although

> [b]eing fictional and being imagined are characteristics that many propositions share … it would be a serious mistake simply to identify the fictional with what is imagined. What is fictional need not be imagined, and perhaps what is imagined need not be fictional."[76]

In a footnote, he explains the difference: "For any imagining, we might recognize a fantasy in which what is imagined is fictional. But it need not be fictional in the 'world' the imaginer is mainly concerned with – e.g., that of a game of make-believe."[77] With this claim, Walton wants to stress that what is fictional is not determined by the imagination but by the work of art itself. Imagine a game of make-believe in which a stump is covered by branches and moss. Even though the players do not recognise it (they do not imagine a bear to hide in the forest), the rules of the game prescribe it nonetheless, if they were agreed upon beforehand—that is to say, "[f]ictionally a bear is lurking in a thicket."[78]

Fiction, as such, can be seen as *a specific mode of the imagination* that creates realities and in which people most often, if not invariably, show an open-minded attitude towards the work they are confronted with by respecting its rules and integrity. Samuel. T. Coleridge has most famously called this attitude "the willing suspension of disbelief"[79] and which Murray—giving it a more positive connotation—turns around into the "active creation of belief."[80] So it can be said that the

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid., 40; emphasis added.

76 Ibid., 37

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.; cf. 37.

79 Samuel. T. Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria," *Project Gutenberg* (2004), ch. XIV, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6081/6081-h/6081-h.htm

80 Murray, *Hamlet*, 111.

appreciator's open-minded attitude is crucial to creating the fictional space in the first place, but equally important is the work of art itself.

According to Walton, fiction fundamentally differs from nonfiction in that it occupies the *function* of "*prescribing imaginings*"[81] about the work appreciators are confronted with, while the latter, to put it simply, does not.[82] Walton takes as an example of nonfiction Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, about which he claims that the "book itself does not prescribe believing"[83] in the same way Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* does, which counts as representation in the specific Waltonian sense. While in the former, believing is up to the reader (she can choose to approve of Darwin's observations or not—that is, the work does not mandate believing, although Darwin certainly intended it), fictional works *are* to be believed (it is *mandatory* for the appreciator to believe), and she generally does so without questioning the contents.[84] Consider William Gibson's famous opening line of *Neuromancer* (1984): "The sky above the port was the color of a television, tuned to a dead channel."[85] Nobody engaging with the novel would doubt the truth of this utterance,[86] and a simple dismissal of it would lead to a breakdown of the reader's immersion. The unlikeliness of such disbelief is easily explained. Fiction, so the general consensus, is not about deceiving or lying to the appreciator[87]—instead, the reader takes the novel's storyworld to include a plethora of *fictional truths*. Consequently, one can say it is *Neuromancer*-fictional that the sky above the port resembles a certain colour and that Case partially lives in the matrix. These truths are specific to *Neuromancer*'s fictional storyworld and are not to be confused with any real-world truths, though they show a certain connection, or relation, to them.[88]

81 Walton, *Mimesis*, 91; emphasis added.

82 Ibid., 58, 70-71.

83 Ibid., 71.

84 Ibid., 70-71.

85 William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: ACE Books, 1984), 1.

86 An exception to the norm might be when people know that they are dealing with a form of *unreliable narration*. Still, even then they would refrain from questioning the integrity of a storyworld, but only question the narrator's explication of it (although a distinction is certainly difficult to make).

87 Richard M. Sainsbury, *Fiction and Fictionalism: New Problems of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2010), 11.

88 Walton, *Mimesis*, 41, 60, 62.

Hence it follows that for a work of art to be included in the category of fiction, not only the appreciator's attitude towards it is important but even more so the work's *function*.

> Works of fiction are simply representations … *whose function is to serve as props in games of make-believe* … however minor or peripheral or instrumental this function might be … ; only what lacks this function entirely will be called nonfiction.[89]

Walton's insight thus goes hand in hand with other observations on fiction, specifically with those that determine the concept on the basis of so-called *fictive intentions*. Sainsbury, for instance, defines fiction as follows: "a fiction is either the product of fictive intentions, or, though it starts as serious narrative, it rightly comes to be treated as a work to which make-believe, not belief, is the appropriate response."[90] This view correlates well with Walton's in that Sainsbury lays emphasis on the work's function while not excluding the appreciator's attitude and response to it. He, however, narrows his claim by stating that when seeking to understand fiction, the work of art becomes more important than the appreciator's perspective, as "consumers are fallible."[91] "Whether something is fiction is determined by how it came into existence and in particular by the aims and intentions of the producer"[92]—and, in this respect, mainly the fictive intentions are of importance. With these, "the utterer intends a potential audience to make-believe something."[93]

How, then, can one distinguish between fiction and nonfiction, if the aims of the producer are unknown to the appreciator (or whether visual representation in games is intended as decoration or goes beyond that in holding specific fictional quality)? I reject Sainsbury's notion, at least partially, and instead opt for the consideration of *both function and attitude*[94] in determining whether a certain work can be called fiction or not. I will thus speak about fiction in terms of a *functionalist approach*, following Walton, Doležel, and Iser. Here, it is not so much the

89 Ibid., 72; emphasis added.

90 Sainsbury, *Fictionalism*, 21.

91 Ibid., 5.

92 Ibid., 5-6.

93 Ibid., 8.

94 Admittedly, Sainsbury is aware of this fact: "In seeking to understand what fiction is, we can look either to the producer or the consumer or to some combination." (Ibid., 5). As mentioned before, he however delimits his claims by stating that "consumers are fallible." (Ibid).

question of truth that is the decisive factor in determining whether a work of art shall be called fiction or not—for the appreciator generally accepts these worlds for what they are—but rather the *effect on her* becomes of prime importance, and how this effect is outlined or triggered by the work. Fiction can therefore be described as a *communication of a special sort between the work of art and the participant* and "is primarily a semantic phenomenon located on the axis 'representation (sign)—world."[95] As such, "fictional worlds are accessed through semiotic channels and by means of information processing. Because of the semiotic mediation, accessibility is a bidirectional, multifaceted, and historically changing commerce between the actual and the fictional"[96]—and for this communication to occur, it is crucial that the participant knows with what she is engaging, for this knowledge will change her perception.

A brief example will illustrate my claims. Consider the player of so-called *newsgames*[97] or *documentary* games[98] and how she relates to these games' contents. Now, imagine the player of a virtualised storyworld and do the same thing. Both players, it is clear, "will bring different attitudes and expectations"[99] to the games. While the former player assumes a direct connection between virtual and empirical world (the response to these games is believe or disbelieve), the latter player first has to make sense of what she encounters (the response to these games is make-believe). This is so because video games that project a fictional world involve the player in vivid games of estrangement and postulate an indirect, hindered connection between the virtual and the empirical reality—forcing the player to exert effort in connecting the dots. Things fall neatly into place if one regards fiction to require a specific kind of effort, which is that of *ideation*. In this sense, fiction does not work against reality (nor can it be seen as its opposite) but rather designates "a reformulation of an already formulated reality, which brings into the

95 Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 2; cf. Iser, *Act*, 53-54.

96 Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 20.

97 Bogost et al. claim that newsgames refer to "a broad body of work produced at the intersection of videogames and journalism." (Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari, and Bobby Schweizer. *Newsgames: Journalism at Play* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010], 6).

98 For Aarseth documentary games "refer to events and existents in our world (e.g. in our history), they do not fictionalize but document." (Aarseth, "Ontology," 491). In addition, Domsch mentions so-called "realist' games" that, similar to realist fiction, are never able to achieve complete realism, although that is the intent. (Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 16; cf. 16-17).

99 Ryan, *Avatars*, 51.

world *something that did not exist before*"[100] and, therefore, becomes "a means of telling us something about reality."[101]

Fortunately, players usually know perfectly well what they are dealing with, and video games that virtualise a storyworld are able to engage them in a fruitful communication with the worlds they create (especially the genres of SF and utopia). Before going into further detail here and discussing Iser and Suvin's take on fiction in chapter V, the lesson to be drawn is the following: not all video games can be considered fictions, so I explicitly reject Meskin and Robson's claim that "all videogames fall into the category of walt-fictions"[102] as an oversimplification. However, the vast majority of video games do qualify—including the VGN and the VGD—and these are of interest here.[103]

For such games, the attitude of make-believe is of essential importance, but this attitude "does not admit degrees."[104] The appreciator either make-believes or she does not. Make-believe therefore stands in stark contrast to "analog" theories of fiction for which "[f]iction and nonfiction are two poles of an analog continuum, and there is no definite, stable boundary between the two."[105] Instead, Ryan ascribes make-believe to "digital"[106] approaches, which serve well for a discussion of video games. "The digital model deals with hybrid phenomena by allowing texts to borrow elements from the other side of the border without being infected by these elements, because the reader makes separate judgments of fictionality on the local and global level."[107] "[T]he reader," Ryan continues, "will assume that

100 Iser, *Act* x; emphasis added.

101 Ibid., 53.

102 Meskin and Robson, "Fictional Worlds," 4.

103 Indeed, Domsch goes as far as to claim that "[t]here are almost no games in which there is not at least an element of fictionality." (Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 19). Yet the discussion of fiction in games might be more complex than he indicates. Things become complicated once the researcher includes every game genre in the equation, such as competitive multiplayer games or online worlds in which players together embark on (make-believe) adventures. Even racing simulations or city building games create problems. Especially in the latter case, it can be discussed whether their function is one of make-believe or whether these games primarily aim at the creation of belief or non-belief about certain real-world issues through exact simulations.

104 Ryan, *Avatars*, 53.

105 Ibid., 52.

106 Ibid., 53.

107 Ibid.

some statements are true in both the real and the fictional world, while others describe the fictional world only."[108] Such an understanding of fiction is especially beneficial when dealing with a hybrid phenomenon like the video game. Then, Aarseth's ontological distinction between *real*, *virtual* and *fictional* elements of a game becomes obsolete[109] in that both the player's *attitude* towards the game and, equally importantly, its *function* become of prime interest. This is especially important pertaining to the VGD, which generally holds the function of warning the player of troubling tendencies in her empirical present by having her make-believe the fictional storyworld to be true (thus creating the necessary credibility). Function thus becomes of utmost importance and assumes an aesthetic quality.

As a result, let me give a preliminary conclusion. Fiction in the Waltonian sense is best seen as a communication between the work of art and the appreciator who engages in the latter in a *playful manner* and with an open-minded (aesthetic) *attitude*. This dialectic is of a special kind, as is the nature of fiction, and the appreciator assumes a vital role in the participation process—a fact that Walton repeatedly stresses. "The basic appreciative role consists, in a word, in *participating* in a game of make-believe in which the appreciated work is a prop."[110] As a consequence of her involvement, the appreciator is willingly sucked into the game and becomes absorbed by the all-engulfing space known as fiction.[111] Fiction thus exerts an irresistible fascination for the appreciator. It not only draws her into lively games of make-believe but creates a fictional space that extends into the real world, surrounding the appreciator. This occurs, for instance, when the museum-goer becomes involved in a painting[112] or when she engages with a sculpture from different angles and distances.[113] If this is so, it follows that in video games even the player's extradiegetic "*play space*, meaning space of play, which includes

108 Ibid.

109 This is similar to a theatre play, where the materiality and ontological dimension of the stage is of no great importance to the spectators. Rather, what counts are the imaginative-evocative qualities of these stage props, which allow the spectators to become immersed in a fictional world.

110 Walton, *Mimesis*, 190.

111 Ibid., 190ff., 215-216.

112 Walton exemplifies this claim with the example of Willem Van der Velde the Younger's *The Shore at Scheveningen* (ca.1820-30). Here, "it seems to be fictional not only that there are several sailing ships offshore but also that Stephen [the museum-goer] sees them. His looking at the picture makes this fictional of himself." (Ibid., 215).

113 Ibid., 215, 338.

the player and the video game hardware,"[114] becomes surrounded by the irresistible veil of fiction.[115]

Yet Walton explicitly warns us not to conflate what is fictional in the games appreciators play with what is fictional in the work of art itself.[116] Therefore, to continue the investigation and to determine the nature of the relation between work of art and the participant, it becomes necessary to take a closer look at the specific form of communication that occurs between both parties and to explore if or how these insights hold true for video games. Moreover, although the appreciator's experience of non-ergodic artwork cannot be entirely equated with the player's experience of a video game, Walton's notion of fiction may help to shed light onto the player's *imaginative interaction* with a gameworld—with the notion of the *prop* being of specific interest here, which I will later regard in the Iserian sense as a perspective on the game and its world.

4.2.1 Work Worlds and Game Worlds

To underline the appreciator's decisive role in the communication process, Walton differentiates between "work worlds and game worlds, between the worlds of novels, pictures, and plays and the worlds of games of make-believe in which these works are props. Appreciators belong to the latter."[117] Such a statement necessarily endows Walton's theory with "ludic aesthetics,"[118] and to explain the function of props and the *playful imaginings* these trigger, he resorts to a discussion of Georges Seurat's painting *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte* (1884-1886)—amongst other examples.

Like other representations, *La Grande Jatte* functions as a prop in the appreciator's game of make-believe, and, by doing so, evokes a rudimentary storyworld

114 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 16.

115 This is particularly so when using the extradiegetic play space in a kinetic manner such as fictionally playing tennis with a Wii Remote or other similar games with Microsoft's Kinect.

116 Walton, *Mimesis*, 58-59.

117 Ibid., 215.

118 Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 11; Klevjer similarly discerns Walton's theory as "a play-based theory of the nature of representation" and as a "'phenomenology' of art appreciation" that focuses on "*imaginative play* … as the central model for understanding representation in arts." (Klevjer, "Avatar," 23; emphasis added).

to interact with.[119] Unlike stumps or cloud formations, however, which serve as "ad hoc props … for a single game … on a single occasion,"[120] representations are generally more akin to toy trucks and dolls.[121] They are "designed" props for "games of certain kinds, ones in which they generate certain sorts of fictional truths."[122] These observations lead Walton to the following questions: what sorts of games does the storyworld of *La Grande Jatte* allow? And, in playing those, will the storyworld's "objective integrity"[123] be maintained?[124] To answer them, Walton distinguishes between *two sorts of imaginings*: those that conform to the rules (the principles of generation) of *La Grande Jatte*'s storyworld—like imagining a couple strolling in the park—and those which he claims of are a "misuse"[125] of the painting—for instance, imagining a number of hippopotamuses enjoying themselves in a mud hole.[126] Thus, Walton concludes:

> It is not the function of *La Grande Jatte* to be a prop in games in which fictionally hippos are wallowing in a mud hole, no matter what games people actually play with it. The hippopotamus game is inappropriate for the painting, *unauthorized* … to play it is to misuse the work. This is why it is not *La Grande Jatte*-fictional that hippos are wallowing in a mud hole.[127]

119 Walton, Mimesis, 60. In this respect, "figurative paintings" or artworks that "'point beyond' themselves", such as *La Grande Jatte*, in that they depict "people and objects distinct from the painting itself" and thus evoke a storyworld, can be distinguished from those which do not. (Ibid., 57). These "nonfigurative" (Ibid., 54) representations focus on abstract objects and only portray their "own elements in a certain manner" without evoking a greater storyworld. (Ibid., 57; cf. 54-57).

120 Ibid., 51.

121 Sicart describes the potential for toys (and also for video games) to evoke certain kind of reactions in the player: joyful or unsettling, etc. (Sicart, *Beyond*, 83-88, 93). Thereby, his explanations come close to Walton's on props in representational artworks—leading to the hypothesis that gameworlds may function in the same way.

122 Walton, *Mimesis*, 51.

123 Ibid., 67.

124 Ibid., 59-60.

125 Ibid., 60.

126 Ibid., 59-60.

127 Ibid., 60.

On the other hand, "authorized games, games it is the function of the work to serve in,"[128] organically work within the bounds of *La Grande Jatte*'s storyworld (or work world). According to Walton, then, it is both "*La Grande Jatte*-fictional that a couple is strolling in the park" and that an appreciator "sees a couple strolling in the park, for [such a game] (let's assume) is in accordance with the painting's function."[129]

Figure 12: Georges Seurat's 'La Grande Jatte' involves the appreciator in imaginative games of make-believe.

Georges Seurat, *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte* (1884-1886).

Arguably, the line Walton treads is slim, but with it he wants to direct attention to the fact that representations involve the appreciator in vivid games of make-believe, yet that these games are regulated by certain rules (principles of generation) the appreciator has to follow in order to experience a work's function. Such a directing effort through props will become of importance to the genre of the VGD, for it generally aims to evoke in the player a certain response to her experience in virtuality.

128 Ibid.

129 Ibid.

To sum up, props "prescribe imaginings"[130] and therefore "insulate fictional worlds from what people do and think."[131] Hence it follows that becoming involved in representations, appreciators generally follow certain guidelines or "rules"[132] they have to respect, which the work of art has *outlined* for them. If this is so, fictionality can be seen "in terms of prescriptions to imagine,"[133] or "what is fictional in a work is what appreciators of it … *are* to imagine."[134] What this does not mean is that the appreciator's part is devaluated or neglected. Rather, work worlds function as *dynamic frameworks* that guide the appreciator's participation and involve her in expressive games of make-believe. These games are most diverse, and primarily two sorts can be observed: *games of proximity* and *games of distance*.

The importance of participation is beyond dispute, and Walton highlights the appreciator's imaginative and psychological involvement in representational works of art throughout his entire work. There are many things appreciators *fictionally* do when engaging with representations: seeing,[135] fearing,[136] feeling, worrying, sympathising, enjoying, hoping, wanting, knowing, having "certain beliefs, expectations, suspicions, hunches," being "ignorant or uncertain,"[137] and so on.[138] Given the diversity of these actions, it follows that appreciators cannot be reduced to "mere spectators of work worlds, observers from the outside … That leaves out our *participation*."[139] Rather, they are wilful participants "blatantly playing along with the fiction."[140]

Yet Walton's observations go further and do not fail to recognise the appreciator's involvement on the level of concept. Besides her imaginative and psychological "involvement in the worlds of our games,"[141] critical observation remains a substantial aspect of her experience. "The appreciator's perspective is a dual one.

130 Ibid., 51.
131 Ibid., 67.
132 Ibid., 60.
133 Ibid., 58.
134 Ibid., 60-61; emphasis added.
135 Ibid., 215.
136 Ibid., 241ff.
137 Ibid., 259.
138 Ibid., 258-259.
139 Ibid., 208.
140 Ibid., 246.
141 Ibid., 272.

He observes fictional worlds as well as living in them [sic]."[142] Hence, to engage with representational works of art (paintings, literature, plays, and so on), appreciators "simultaneously"[143] play two sorts of games. These are in themselves multifaceted and include: 1) participatory games that involve the appreciator on a basic level of entertainment and affective emotions (games in which she comes to know the fictional world, either an abstract world or a storyworld including characters and their relations—that is, the developing plot), and 2) emancipatory games that allow for the close examination and reflection of props.[144] Consequently, the appreciator's game is best described as one of *proximity* and *distance*, as she constantly oscillates between the poles of inhabiting and observing a fictional world.[145]

It is clear that Walton does not stand alone with these observations, as they chime in with those of other scholars, such as Rancière or Iser, who describe the *phenomenology of art experience as an active participation process* in which the reader or emancipated spectator engages in a dialectical communication with the literary work or play. As Rancière holds: "Why identify gaze and passivity, unless on the presupposition that to view means to take pleasure in images and appearances while ignoring the truth behind the image and the reality outside the theatre?"[146] With this statement, Rancière opposes two misconceptions that reduce spectators to "passive voyeurs:"[147] for one, the didactic mindset that "viewing is

142 Ibid., 273.

143 Ibid., 285.

144 It is first and foremost works that show a certain amount of aesthetic quality and diversity which extend the appreciator's participation into "a long ... psychologically rich game of make-believe" that continues after she has closed the book or stepped out of the museum (Ibid., 254) while listening to a Blink record.

145 Ibid., 285. Ryan refers to the reader's involvement in narratives as follows: "Participating in the plot is a compromise between identification with the character and distanced observation. We simulate mentally the inner life of these characters, we transport ourselves in imagination into their minds, but we remain at the same time conscious of being external witnesses." (Ryan, *Avatars*, 124-125).

146 Rancière, *Emancipated*, 12.

147 Ibid., 4.

the opposite of knowing,"[148] that during the observation of a play knowledge undergoes a "straight, uniform transmission"[149] from "schoolmaster" to "ignoramus."[150] For another, that viewing "is the opposite of acting," that "the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive."[151] Against these claims, Rancière holds the notion of *emancipation* and underscores the spectator's imaginative and interpretive participation in the spectacle.

At the heart of his argument thus lies the call for emancipation from certain oppositions, specifically from the "poles of distanced investigation and vital participation."[152]

> Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; … It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The Spectator acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, relates, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on stages, in other kinds of places.[153]

Given these observations, spectators are far from passive and actively participate in plays on both an imaginative and interpretive level. To do so, they mobilise their world knowledge and relate the actions on stage to the empirical world they live in.[154]

Being a spectator thus means to enjoy *and* understand—and, indeed, it appears that to engage with representational art means to perform a courtship play between distance and proximity; to play between the poles of what Rancière has called "distanced investigation and vital participation"[155] and to what Iser refers to as "[t]he ability to perceive oneself during the process of participation [which] is an essential quality of the aesthetic experience; the observer finds himself in a

148 Ibid., 2.
149 Ibid., 14.
150 Ibid., 9.
151 Ibid., 2.
152 Ibid., 5.
153 Ibid., 13.
154 Ibid., 22.
155 Ibid., 5.

strange, halfway position: he is involved, and he watches himself being involved."[156] The result is a life-giving tension between critical reception and illusory immersion, and it is only through this tension that the appreciator's engagement with fiction comes to full fruition.

Considering these facts, one can start seeing work worlds—whether they are those of literary fictions, theatre plays, or video games—as *incomplete constructs* that necessitate the appreciator's involvement—and it is only through the mutual interaction between the two parties that the work of art may come to life.

Every work of art, even though it is produced by following an explicit or implicit poetics of necessity, is effectively open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings, each of which causes the work to acquire new vitality in terms of one particular taste, or perspective, or personal *performance*.[157]

In other words, representations (in the sense of fictions) involve the appreciator in complex participation processes, and work worlds thereby assume a vital part. For they are dynamic frameworks that outline the appreciator's imaginative involvement (in the case of non-ergodic fictions) and ergodic involvement in them (to anticipate the additional plane for hypertexts, video games, and so on) by using props to guide her imaginings, emotions, and ergodic actions (in children's games of make-believe or virtuality). *Work worlds*, one could argue, *imply* appreciators and allow participation to occur in the first place. The resulting *game worlds* are fascinating. They not only allow access to the work worlds but, in doing so, function as "expansion[s]" of them.[158] The result is the creation of something *new*, something brought about only through the act of engaging with representational art. As Rancière maintains: "from the schoolmaster the pupil learns something that the schoolmaster does not know himself. She learns it as an effect of the mastery that forces her to search and verifies this research. But she does not learn the schoolmaster's knowledge."[159]

The deliberations so far evoke the following questions: can the player's experience of a video game be compared to that of the reader, spectator, or appreciator? If so, in what aspects do their experiences coincide and how do they differ (which was implied above)? Video games are easily thought of as being fundamentally

156 Iser, *Act*, 134.

157 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989), 21.

158 Walton, *Mimesis*, 216.

159 Rancière, *Emancipated*, 14.

different from non-ergodic representations, and there is a certain amount of truth to this claim. One has to bear in mind Aarseth's observation that in ergodic media, such as the video game, "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader [/player] to traverse the text."[160] By doing so, both the game system and the player are responsible for producing semiotic sequences.[161] In addition, Walton recalls the fact that with different media, there are different kinds of games to be played[162]—and that the appreciator's games are restricted compared to children's games of make-believe, which are "active, physical, and involved."[163] Consequently, and because of the appreciator's more distanced involvement, her game is "more reflective, more contemplative. The restrictions on physical participation shift the emphasis to psychological participation."[164]

Now, one may think that video games show strong similarities to children's games of make-believe in that players have direct influence on the gameworld through what Gordon Calleja calls "[k]inesthetic involvement."[165] This influence is effectuated through the player's physical manipulation of some sort of input device: a controller, mouse and keyboard, or an even more physically demanding input source such as a Wii Remote or a Kinect camera. The logical conclusion to be drawn would be that through the player's physical input, the focus of her game world (similar to children's games) is shifted away from a more distanced reflection of what is being played towards a more involved one, towards the frenzy of spectacle ludic encounters so often show. Luckily, in many video games such a conclusion is not so easily drawn. To be precise, however, and to do justice to the player's multifaceted involvement in the virtual worlds of the video game, a brief excursion into Calleja's take on the phenomenon may be beneficial. His perspective is fruitful, as it sheds light on the intricate processes that emerge during play.

4.2.2 Becoming Involved in the Virtual Worlds of the Video Game

"Fictional worlds have always been meticulously designed to allure us into inhabiting them. With the advent of networked digital technologies, we now have the

160 Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 1.

161 Aarseth, "Ontology," 487.

162 Walton, *Mimesis*, 220.

163 Ibid., 224.

164 Ibid., 228.

165 Calleja, *In-Game*, 71.

ability to simulate these worlds and share them across the globe instantly."[166] It is widely understood that becoming involved in the virtual worlds of the video game differs in certain aspects from the appreciator's involvement in non-ergodic fictions—and some would claim that it is an entirely different phenomenon (as explained before). Calleja recognised this particular aesthetic, and in his influential work *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (2011) he makes keen observations on the player's extended involvement as a form of *inhabiting* "virtual spaces not just through our imagination, but also through the cybernetic circuit between player and machine."[167] He then continues to develop a model that does justice to the "multidimensional phenomenon"[168] of the video game and establishes six distinct but interwoven categories: kinesthetic, spatial, shared, narrative, affective, and ludic involvement.[169] In addition, Calleja goes on to distinguish between micro and macro involvement: the "moment-to-moment involvement within the respective dimension"[170] and "the ongoing motivation to interact with the game and the off-line thinking that fuels it."[171] These observations lead Calleja to the conviction that the term *incorporation* best describes the player's involvement in the gameworld, a term that transcends the concepts of immersion and presence. To Calleja, incorporation works on basically two levels: on the first level, the player incorporates the virtual environment she navigates and interacts with into her "mind as part of immediate surroundings,"[172] while on the second level, the direction is reversed. Here, it is the player herself who becomes part of that same virtual environment through her PC.[173]

To reach such a conclusion, Calleja postulates a close connection between the virtual and empirical world and argues that we make sense of virtual environments with the help of "*experiential gestalts* that inform being in everyday life."[174] In this line of thinking, the boundaries between *what is virtual* and *what is real* seem to blur, as there is "no longer need to draw a strict line of demarcation between stimuli emerging from the virtual environment and stimuli emerging from the

166 Ibid., 185.

167 Ibid., 167; cf. 181-182.

168 Ibid., 31.

169 Ibid., 37-38.

170 Ibid., 4.

171 Ibid., 37.

172 Ibid., 169.

173 Ibid., 169.

174 Ibid., 167-168; emphasis added.

physical world, for the emphasis is placed in the internally constructed consciousness of the individual."[175] Incorporation, he continues, therefore "allows us to move beyond the notion of virtual environments as *experientially separate otherworlds* and to treat them instead as domains continuous with the media-saturated reality of everyday life."[176]

Calleja is generally right about the blurring of boundaries between the virtual and empirical world, but is wrong about the unhindered communication this notion of connectedness implies, specifically when dealing with fictional gameworlds—for the access to fiction is even further away than that for virtual and empirical realms.[177] This is so because with fiction there can be no direct connection to empirical reality, and this results in a hindered and aggravated form of communication through both *world* and *agency* in which the player has to exert effort in connecting the dots and building up a situational context out of an estranged gameworld.[178] Although fictional worlds are also made accessible through experiential "gestalt groupings,"[179] the connection to the empirical world is dependent on a *secondary gestalt*, which is not explicit in the text … [and] brings out something which is not stated by the linguistic signs."[180] I will come back to this matter in chapter V, but for now it suffices to point out that, even with the complication of fictionality, the potential this form of communication entails—between the virtual and empirical world—is beyond dispute. The merging of realities brought about by the bi-directional communication between player and the game consequently shows the strong potential to influence the player in a lasting manner.

Ergodic media (such as hypertexts or video games) are thus different and, at the same time, very much connected to forms of non-ergodic media (such as the novel, the non-participatory play, or the film). The difference rests in the fact that

175 Ibid., 179.

176 Ibid.; emphasis added.

177 In fact, Calleja implies that ultimately, the processing of the virtual and empirical world occurs through the same psychological *gestalts*, so never in a direct, immediate way.

178 Indeed, one could argue that many aspects of the empirical world seem strange as well to the onlooker. But in fiction, the strategies of estrangement are employed for creative use and to exorcise the appreciator's inner demons for a cathartic purge.

179 Iser, *Act*, 120.

180 Ibid., 121.

in ergodic media the player's presence in the gameworld is directly "acknowledged by the system itself,"[181] whereas in non-ergodic media one can 'only' imagine oneself being present in the fictional world, "but the world does not recognize"[182] the reader or viewer.[183] These, Calleja concludes, are very "different forms of involvement"[184]—and while true, there is no denying the fact that they display yet another game of proximity and distance (indeed, a very much closer one). The connection, then, lies primarily in two forms of involvement Calleja and many others[185] have neglected in their descriptions of video games, which are that of the player's *imaginative* and often *emancipated involvement* in the diegesis.[186]

Calleja implicitly recognises these two forms of involvement in his *narrative involvement* but, surprisingly, has not integrated them as a separate category.[187] Therefore, and in order to do full justice to the player's spectrum of pleasures in a video game, I wish to underline the category of imaginative involvement and propose that of emancipated involvement, which are fundamentally related. Whereas imaginative involvement occurs on a basic level when the player engages cognitively with the game- and storyworld, filling in its indeterminacies and combining its perspectives, emancipated involvement goes further to designate a quasi-transcendental viewpoint in which the player not only becomes involved in the occurring gameworld events but, at the same time, occupies a detached, observing perspective on it.[188] Consequently, the player, as Daniel Vella eloquently puts it, finds

181 Calleja, *In-Game*, 22.

182 Ibid., 29.

183 Ibid., 22, 29.

184 Ibid., 29.

185 A similar mistake is committed by (Britta Neitzel, "Medienrezeption und Spiel," in *Game Over!? Perspektiven des Computerspiels*, ed. Jochen Distelmeyer, Christine Hank, and Dieter Mersch [Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008], 102-103).

186 Naturally, the connectedness also lies in the player's *psychological involvement* in fictions, and one could argue that there is a form of spatial and shared involvement (watching a movie together, for example) in any kind of fiction—although these are admittedly very different in video games.

187 Calleja, *In-Game*, 113-134.

188 This *dual performance of participation and observation* comes close to Walton's distinction between imagining *de se* and imagining *de re*. *De se* imaginings (of which the most prominent variant is *from the inside*) represent "a form of self-imagining characteristically described as imagining *doing* or *experiencing* something (or *being* a certain way), as opposed to imagining merely *that* one does or experiences something or possesses a certain property [*de re* imaginings]." (Walton, *Mimesis*, 29). Imagining

herself exposed to "two dimensions of subjectivity … by which the player inhabits both a perspective internal to the gameworld as the ludic subject, and a perspective external to the gameworld, which frames the ludic subject as an object of perception."[189] For my notion of emancipated involvement this means that it occurs when the player steps beyond the pleasures of entertainment and affective emotions (although these are vital parts of her experience) and reaches for the levels of significance/concept by contemplating on the events experienced and enacted. It is only then that the act of play can lead to a partial restructuring of the player's habitual dispositions.

Consequently (as chapter V and the rest of this study will further clarify), although the player's involvement in the virtual worlds of the video game is extended beyond that of the non-ergodic media participant, it would be a serious mistake to think that the newfound level of ergodic participation comes at the detriment of the player's imaginative, psychological, and emancipated involvement in these worlds. Rather, and following the observations above, the player of a video game shall be seen as *amalgam of both creatures*, living on the fragile border between *inhabiting* and *observing* a fictional gameworld—and, therefore, holds a liminal position between "identity and difference, proximity and distance, selfhood and otherhood – that play out across the gap between the player outside the game and her ludic subjectivity in the game."[190] The imaginative and emancipated games she plays, thereby, go naturally hand in hand with her ergodic (or physical) games.

There are a number of questions that remain to be answered. Work worlds in video games seem different to the ones appreciators have come to know in non-ergodic fictions, as the player's involvement in them is extended, allowing for

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oneself to be the player-character and to experience the gameworld from the inside—while still retaining the critical distance of *de re* imaginings, when props prescribe imaginings about gameworld objects—thus holds the potential of affecting the player on a personal level. It is as Walton describes of the appreciator: "It is chiefly by imagining ourselves facing certain situations, engaging in certain activities, observing certain events, experiencing or expressing certain feelings or attitudes that we come to terms with our feelings—that we discover them, learn to accept them, *purge ourselves of them*." (Ibid., 34; emphasis added). This is how we understand fictional characters, "when I imagine *myself* in another's shoes … my imagination helps to understand *him*." (Ibid., 34; cf. 29, 33, 34, 106). Of course, enacting fictional characters in video games certainly does not hinder this process of comprehension but further enhances it.

189 Vella, "Ludic Subject," Abstract.

190 Ibid., 17.

more variety in participation. Then again: 1) What kind of work worlds are players actually interacting with? 2) Do they prescribe imaginings such as other forms of representational art do, and if so how? 3) In addition, do players play according to the rules of a storyworld? 4) Most intriguingly, does the player's extended game world (her imaginative and ergodic involvement in the game) alter the work world in a nontrivial manner or does the latter remain stable? Maybe it is even the creation of something new that emerges through the interactions of play? I will postpone questions two and three and tackle the remaining ones now. For this reason, a closer look at two perspectives on the video game medium is helpful.

4.2.3 Video Games as Objects and Processes

Approaches to the study of video games often focus on one of two interlinking perspectives (or points of view) on the medium: games as *objects* and games as *processes*. "Games are both objects and processes (a combination of states not dissimilar to the duality of language: langue/parole, paradigm/syntagm etc.)."[191] As such, if one follows the object perspective on a game, the focus inevitably shifts towards two formal aspects: 1) the game's rules, which are inscribed into its code, and 2) the representational sign system of the gameworld.[192] In combination, these two interlocking aspects formulate a semi-open and dynamic "*framework*"[193] that allows for play in the first place. Furthermore, Calleja argues, "[f]om the game-as-object perspective, the player is conceived as an ideal, or implied, player," not as an "actual, active player."[194] This is different in the games-as-processes perspective, where the player is referred to as an empirical being influenced by social and cultural contexts.[195] Here, the focus rests on the processes of play, whereby "[t]he term *processual* refers to the potential for variation in a game's enactment at every engagement and favors a dynamic and recursive view on games."[196] That is, each time a player interacts, or different players interact, with the same game framework, the result of their engagement will differ[197]—on both imaginative and ergodic levels, I might add.

191 Aarseth, "Ontology," 484.

192 Calleja, *In-Game*, 10ff.

193 Ibid., 12; emphasis added.

194 Ibid., 11.

195 Ibid.

196 Ibid., 10.

197 Ibid., 12.

It is no coincidence that such observations dovetail well with that of other scholars, such as Domsch or Tavinor. Domsch, for instance, distinguishes between 1) the game's *architecture*, or "the overall structure of the text, containing its rules, its nodal situations (e.g. tree or network), possible entry and exit points etc.;" 2) the *individual run*, which "is the concrete realization of one possible reading/playing;" and 3) the resulting *protocol*, "the perceptible, recorded result."[198] Tavinor, on the other hand, differentiates between "work *type*" (or multiples), for example the movie *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977)—or more appropriately, a play such as *Hamlet* (William Shakespeare, 1599-1602)—and "work *tokens*, [instances] which are comprised of individual screenings [or performances] of the world."[199] From this he concludes that "[w]here a film is reproduced by a screening, a video game is reproduced through its various *playings*, which are dual acts of performance and interpretation."[200] If this is so, in films or plays the work world the spectator engages with becomes synonymous with the work token, that is, the individual screening. From there, the spectator's imaginative and psychological game world merges with that of the work world to produce something new. Players, conversely, as Tavinor notes, produce tokens themselves as they interact with bare work types, whereas spectators only rarely do (for example in participatory plays or interactive films).[201] Hence, in games the player's dialectic with the work world starts a level earlier and her game world (which is created through interaction) comprises both her ergodic as well as imaginative, psychological interaction with the game.[202]

So what are work worlds in video games, then? What is the result of their interaction with the player's game worlds? If one follows Tavinor on this matter, "work worlds and game worlds play out differently than it does with traditional fictions," and "[w]hen appreciators interact with videogame fictions, the game world effectively *projects* into the work world of the fiction because the work is only rendered after the game has been played."[203] As a result, both worlds seem to

198 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 48.

199 Tavinor, "Art," 64. Meskin and Robson claim that "[t]o each production (and arguably each performance [of a play]) there may correspond a distinct work world." Meskin and Robson, "Fictional Worlds," 17-18.

200 Tavinor, "Art," 64.

201 Ibid.

202 It could be argued that different versions of the same game, such as THE LAST OF US on PS3 and the remastered edition on PS4, represent different work tokens and thus different work worlds (the framework the player engages with).

203 Tavinor, *Art of*, 57.

fuse, and, therefore, video games may only "contain the *bones or possibility of a work world*"[204]—in other words, a framework for interaction on both an ergodic and imaginative level. In stark contrast to these claims are Meskin and Robson's observations on the phenomenon. For them, video games still retain a stable distinction between work world and game world, even though they allow "for actions by agents other than their creators to directly determine the nature of relevant work worlds"[205]—with work worlds, crucially, being equated to the instance of an individual playthrough.[206] They justify their claim with several examples, in which emotions (such as shame and guilt) are specific to the player's game world, or where there are divergences in what the player fictionally sees and what the PC sees, or in their respective states of knowledge about the fictional world, and so on.[207]

Frankly, it is true that one can equate exclusive emotions, states of knowledge, or what the player fictionally sees with her game world. But Meskin and Robson's implication that the player's game world may only start *after* the creation of a particular instance (or work world) is not remotely adequate. For one simply cannot reduce the player's involvement (that is, her game world) to imaginative and psychological interactions that occur *only after* the instance of a certain playthrough was created. This is so because a great deal of the player's personality—her values that drive the play experience[208]—has found direct entrance into the cocreation of the gameworld and the resulting narrative, in ergodic, psychological, and imaginative ways. Consider, for example, a playing of FALLOUT 4 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015) where a player who in real life likes animals (and maybe has pets of her own) encounters a supposedly animal-friendly woman in the Commonwealth. She lives in a small shed together with several cats, but when the player chooses to barter with her, he encounters a shocking truth: the women sells cat meat. In a frenzy of potential fictional anger, now, which feeds back into FALLOUT 4's work world, the player may choose to deal with the situation in various ways. Since it is the virtual post-apocalypse, free of the constraints of the empirical world, he may choose to blow off the women's head. A player who dislikes animals may act differently, of course. But the point is that in both cases the player's game world—finding her real life experience partially reflected in the game—is

204 Ibid., 58.

205 Meskin and Robson, "Fictional Worlds," 20.

206 Ibid., 1, 18ff., 29.

207 Ibid., 20-27.

208 Sicart, *Beyond*, 15.

guided directly because of who she is,[209] and this self will inevitably project back into the work world through ergodic and imaginative action. What Meskin and Robson suggest, however, is a distinction between ergodic interaction, on the one hand (creating the instance of the playthrough), and imaginative and psychological involvement on the other (the player's game world)—a conclusion I find highly problematic.

Now, to approach the issue from an alternative vantage point, one may recall Tavinor's claim that the player directly affects the work world by means of her game world—and this fusion, so I claim, will not only result in the creation of another work world (if at all[210]) but in the creation of something *new*, something more personal, which comes into the world through the act of play. It begins with the game designers' creation of a dynamically incomplete framework: a work world for the player to complement (or fill in) through her personal game world (her emotions, feelings, ergodic and imaginative actions, etc.). Logically, the result is not simply another work world, or merely a resulting protocol (for this would in a sense devalue the player's efforts), but, as described above, something entirely new that brings forth an *aesthetic effect* as described by Iser—and this effect does not refer to something already in existence, yet brings forth a meaning new to the world.[211]

Consequently, in order to describe this all-pervasive effect, the intricate dialectic that evokes it becomes of interest: a dialectic between the *implied player* (the dynamically incomplete framework of the work world) and the *empirical player* (the player's game world on various levels). For this purpose, it first becomes necessary to inspect different empirical player types and how they are implied by a game's structure. In a second step, a critical scrutiny of Wolfgang Iser's original concept of the implied reader will be conducted, which informs the notion of the implied player as it has been used in video game studies (particularly by Aarseth) and that I will describe as a system of perspectives. Third, the creative dialectic between empirical and implied player becomes the focus of attention (chapter V)—and, most importantly, the *aesthetic response* the process of play triggers within the player, thus creating something new, which is neither to be found exclusively in the work world nor in the game world.

209 Of course, the player can also role-play and try out certain perspectives he might normally decline: this is not the point here.

210 Indeed, why should one call the result of the act of play a work world, if so much of the player's self and personality has found entrance into its co-creation?

211 Iser, *Act*, 22.

4.3 THE IMPLIED PLAYER

It has become clear that participating in representational works of art entails several restrictions to the appreciator's games. Props dictate imaginings of a certain kind and the appreciator generally plays according to the rules of a particular storyworld or abstract representation. This is so because the appreciator willingly agrees to an informal but binding contract with fiction, which is that of make-believe. Now, it is these restrictions in involvement that further link video games to other kinds of representations, but in video games the binding instructions are of course extended to include the player's ergodic interactions with them.

The role of rules is widely discussed in video game studies, and they are usually understood as prescribing the function of game objects and the player's ergodic participation in a game. However, it is not only the rules of a game that outline the player's involvement in it but also the props (or perspectives) the gameworld is composed of which guide her imagination.[212] Having both observations in mind is of utmost importance and is a vital starting point for further deliberations on the issue. The *rules of the gameworld* can therefore be seen to prescribe both the player's ergodic and imaginative interaction[213] with it—and to better illustrate the structure that affords the player's involvement, I will start with the hypothesis that *the implied player describes a structural construct and a dynamic work world that outlines the empirical player's participation on all levels of involvement (offering her various roles to perform)*. To reach such a conclusion and to expand on it, let me start with elaborations on how the implied player is used and defined in video game studies to then move back to the concept's origins found in Iser's observations on the phenomenology of reading. Both perspectives are fruitful, and in combination they will inform the definition and use of the implied player I am proposing here.

212 Tavinor explains this through the example of RED DEAD REDEMPTION (Rockstar San Diego, 2010), where the player is "guided by the depictions of a fictive prop, imagines that a man named Marston exists and that he has the various features ascribed to him in that fiction." (Grant Tavinor, "Fiction," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron [New York: Routledge, 2014], 437).

213 However, players often try to break the rules of a game, be it the rules outlining their ergodic participation or those of the storyworld's integrity. This form of play, which Aarseth has called *transgressive play*, should not be underestimated, as it is a common form of engaging with games. (Aarseth, "Implied.").

4.3.1 The Multi-Layered Qualities of the Implied Player: Popular Cultural Player Types and the Emancipated Player

When Espen Aarseth transferred Wolfgang Iser's concept of the *implied reader* to the study of video games, he defined the phenomenon as follows: The *implied player* "can be seen as a *role* made for the player by the game, a set of *expectations* that the player must fulfil for the game to 'exercise its *effect*'."[214] Although appropriately formulated, one cannot help but wonder as to what *effect* he is talking about, *because there are many*. Before coming back to Aarseth's take on the implied player (and tinkering with it and expanding on it), let me first dive into the multifarious effects a game can have on a player and the many roles she may assume.

The reason for the multifacetedness of games can easily be explained. Many video games these days are mass market productions (AAA games) that try to reach an audience as diverse as possible in order to maximise profitability—and this is also true for some indie game productions. They are designed to cater to a wide variety of different tastes and mindsets, and it comes as no surprise that an analysis of player types and their specific needs and tastes is an important aspect of the game development process.[215] Few games, however, can reach all potential player preferences, and hence it follows that certain kinds of games imply certain types of players—or, to be more precise, playing styles that cater to specific genres (whereby I mean both ludic and narrative genres).

Domsch, for instance, describes the empirical player of chess as somebody who "is implied in the game's structure" and who "wants to win" the game.[216] Similarly, the player of QUAKE III ARENA (Id Software, 1999) fulfils her role implied by the game's structure in that she participates in rapid ludic action against other players, which takes place in multiplayer arenas. Research has identified this type of player who enjoys *ludic pleasures* on a level of entertainment and affective emotions. It is common to Bateman and Boon's "Conqueror,"[217] John Kim's

214 Ibid., 132; emphasis added.

215 Chris Bateman and Richard Boon, *21st Century Game Design* (Boston: Course Technology, 2006), 49ff.

216 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 10.

217 Bateman and Boon, *21st*.

"gamist"[218] attitude, or Richard Bartle's "Achievers"[219] that their agenda lies in "winning and 'beating the game'."[220] They enjoy "a fair challenge … which may be tactical combat, intellectual mysteries, politics, or anything else"[221] and "regard points-gathering and rising in levels as their main goal."[222] Consequently, as a structural construct, QUAKE's implied player (or that of other ludically focused games) outlines a specific style of interaction for the player, letting her fulfil a certain role.

Besides ludically oriented player types, there are a plethora of others: for instance, players who are inclined towards *world exploration* and the *experience of a narrative*. While these still work on a basic level of entertainment and plot, the focus shifts towards the engagement with a virtualised storyworld. There is, for instance, the player of DEAR ESTHER (The Chinese Room, 2012) who engages in the dreamlike gameworld, not only to explore its bounds but also to decipher the story behind this world, and that of Esther. This intimate experience of playing a story may result in an emotional attachment on the player's side and implies types of players such as Bateman and Boon's "wanderer" and "participant,"[223] Kim's "dramatist,"[224] Craig Lindley's "performer" and "immersionist,"[225] or Karen and Joshua Tanenbaum's narrative-oriented player who "is concerned with participating in a fictional world where her decisions and actions are incorporated meaningfully into that fiction."[226]

In addition to these, there are "killers" and "socializers"[227] who play against or in tandem with other players (this is especially so in competitive multiplayer

218 John Kim, "The Threefold Model FAQ," *Darkshire*, accessed June 28, 2017, http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold/faq_v1.html

219 Richard Bartle, "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players who Suit Muds," *Mud*, accessed March, 21, 2016, http://mud.co.uk/richard/hcds.htm#1

220 Bateman and Boon, *21st*, 58.

221 Kim, "Threefold Model."

222 Bartle, "Hearts, Clubs."

223 Bateman and Boon, *21st*.

224 Kim, "Threefold Model."

225 Craig A. Lindley, "Story and Narrative Structures in Computer Games," in *Developing Interactive Narrative Content: sagas/sagasnet reader*, ed. Brunhild Bushoff (München: High Text, 2005).

226 Karen and Joshua Tanenbaum, "Commitment to Meaning: A Reframing of Agency in Games," *Proceedings of Digital Arts and Culture Conference* (2009), http://escholarship.org/uc/item/6f49r74n?query=tanenbaum#page-1

227 Bartle, "Hearts, Clubs."

games); or "managers"[228] and "simulationists"[229] who are respectively concerned with "the mastery of the game" and "how to play well"[230] as well as "resolving in-game events based solely on game-world considerations, without allowing any meta-game concerns affect the decision."[231]

It is common, then, to all these types of players discussed above that they primarily work on a basic level of entertainment and affective emotions—and all address a specific aspect of the player's experience only. This is so because a discussion of player types inevitably mixes up *implied* and *empirical players*—and the above-mentioned players are, of course, to be seen as constructs, for empirical players are not confined to exhibiting solely one of the described attitudes. Similarly, there is a distinction to be made between games that primarily imply one type of player (which are mostly ludically oriented and unilinear in focus—such as many smartphone games) and those that cater to a diverse array of player preferences (for example, open world games, which generally allow for a variety of playing styles).

Now, it is especially the latter variant—which shows aesthetic complexity and allows for a variety of playthroughs, imaginings, and interpretations—that often implies a further group of players. These *aesthetically-oriented player types* step beyond the basic pleasures of entertainment and affective emotions (although these are certainly a vital part of their experience), and start pondering the meaning of these games for their lives. Video games, it is clear, "can disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change."[232] Yet it is not only a game itself that is responsible for that change but, similarly, the player's attitude. In this regard, McKenzie Wark talks about a player type who is "playing with style to understand the game as a form," who "trifle[s] with the game to understand the nature of gamespace as a world … and to discover in what way gamespace falls short of its self-proclaimed perfection."[233] In addition, Miguel Sicart addresses an *ethical player* who "voluntarily steps out of the pleasures of instrumentality and incorporates play as a way of understanding the world including experiencing and exploring ethical and political thinking."[234] However, although Sicart's player moves in the realms of the

228 Bateman and Boon, *21st*.

229 Kim, "Threefold Model."

230 Bateman and Boon, *21st*, 62.

231 Kim, "Threefold Model."

232 Bogost, *Persuasive*, ix.

233 McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2007), pa. 21.

234 Sicart, *Beyond*, 78.

aesthetic, his focus on playing in an ethically correct manner does not suffice for the purpose of my claims.

Consequently, and in order to fully appreciate a game's manifold experiences, an emancipated player becomes necessary to further discussion.[235] The emancipated player slumbers in all empirical players and is (primarily) interested in experiencing play's aesthetic effect. She is critical about her involvement in the game- and storyworld and confronts it with an open attitude and the necessary respect. Compare, for instance, the 'standard' player of BIOSHOCK (2KGames 2007) who engages solely for entertainment purposes with the attentive player of this critical dystopia who continues to ponder the larger significance of her actions within the virtual diegesis. While the former's involvement remains caught up on the level of the plot and affective emotions (to recall Iser's distinction), the latter's goes on to establish links between the virtual and empirical world, thus aiming for levels of significance. This transforms the emancipated player neither into an ideal nor a model player but into a real-world player type who engages in a creative dialectic with the intersubjective structure of the implied player.

This being said, it is natural that for emancipated play to occur, high demands are imposed not only on the player—as she frees herself from the confining opposition between inhabiting and reflecting on a gameworld, letting both forms of involvement occur—but also on the video game (dystopia) at hand. For it is only when a game shows a certain degree of aesthetic complexity that the demands of the emancipated player are met and satisfied (certain conditions that can be found in a game's structure; having classified many video games according to what Eco has called multi-layered artefacts). To put it simply: for emancipated play to occur, the emancipated player has to be *implied* in a game's structure, and it is only then that the *preconditions* for experiencing play's aesthetic effect are given. To analyse these may be one way to answer Tavinor's question why some video games may be considered art while others may not[236]—and for this purpose, a closer look at the intersubjective structure of the implied player becomes necessary. Before embarking on this venture, however, let me formulate *five hypotheses* on the emancipated player that I will explicate and use in the further course of this study.

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235 Although showing certain overlap, the emancipated player differs from Sicart's ethical player in that the former does not necessarily need to play in an ethically correct way. What is more important for the category of the emancipated player is that she tries to see through the occurrences of the gameworld while, naturally, being involved on an entertaining level. She thus retains enough critical distance to reflect on the enacted events.

236 Tavinor, "Art," 61.

It is a concept that expands on Rancière's notion of emancipation and Walton's and Iser's deliberations on the imaginatively active appreciator and reader.

1. *The emancipated player enjoys and understands. She refrains from accepting a languid attitude towards representational art and participates to her fullest potential in the video game (narrative). This means it will not satisfy her to be merely involved on a basic level of entertainment and affective emotions (that is, on a purely ludic or plot level), but only the playful thrills of significance will suffice. Emancipated play may thus only occur through the player's combined efforts of inhabiting and reflecting on the gameworld.*
2. *The category of the emancipated player is closely tied to an aesthetic complexity of video games, and it is only when this quality is given (that is, inscribed into the implied player) that the preconditions for experiencing play's aesthetic effect are given.*
3. *The emancipated player slumbers in all empirical players. However, it is clear that the affordance and appeal structure of the implied player can better be read (or filled in) the more knowledgeable (or informed) the player is and the more life experience she draws on. Consequently, an intellectual richness of playthroughs, imaginings, and interpretations becomes possible. This sort of emancipated (aesthetic) involvement necessarily distinguishes the emancipated player from popular culture player types.*
4. *The emancipated player expresses herself through play as she engages in a creative dialectic with the implied player (a playful trial action). While doing so, she resembles a scientific investigator who employs her world knowledge to establish links and associations. The emancipated player participates, observes, selects, interprets, and acts upon her deliberations. Not only does she imprint herself in the gameworld, but she constantly relates the diegetic events to facts about her empirical present or other works of art she has previously encountered. Consequently, and in her quest for truth and self-reflection, the emancipated player accepts the role(s) the implied player has offered her (otherwise the game could have no effect on her) but, at the same time, subjects them to meticulous scrutiny in an act of emancipation.*
5. *The emancipated player frees herself from a confining perception and interpretation of video games. Instead of solely analysing a particular aspect of the video game (its procedural rhetoric or semiotic layer, for example), the emancipated player tries to see the video game (narrative) in its entirety and in a holistic manner. Hence, a variety of different perspectives on the gameworld appear, the combination of which may create the most interesting blanks to close.*

It is easy to discern that the emancipated player represents an aesthetically oriented type of player[237] who delights in beauty and confronts the gameworld with the necessary respect and a critical attitude. Given the diversity of player types discussed above—most of which belong to the category of popular culture players—and the multitude of different playing styles a game may afford, the emancipated player becomes necessary to further the discussion on the VGD (or any aesthetically complex video game). This is so because her priorities do *not only* rest in winning the game, becoming immersed in ludic encounters, exploring the gameworld, or participating in the creation of plot, etc. (although these aspects necessarily formulate part of the emancipated player's experience). Instead, the emancipated player's involvement in the gameworld reaches further in that she tries to engage with the implied player on a higher level of sophistication—motivating herself to attain a quasi-transcendental viewpoint that is nonetheless never reached—and thus enters a creative dialectic with it (see chapter V). The result is the experience of the aesthetic effect, something that happens *naturally* if one does not play in an outright depreciating manner. The emancipated player should therefore *not only* be seen as a specific type of real-world player but can, through her interaction with the implied player, be used as a *method for analysis* that works especially well for VGNs, thus describing a specific phenomenology of play.

Until now, I have repeatedly mentioned a so-called *aesthetic effect* that deeply and lastingly affects the appreciator or player. To describe this phenomenon and

237 However, the emancipated player is not an elitist type of player, which would reduce her to a specific intentional community. To clarify: the emancipated player slumbers in all empirical players and is a very inclusive concept, designating the meaning-seeking animal human beings are. Emancipated play hence begins the moment the player allows a game to exercise its effect on her, that she becomes affected by it. Yet for this effect to be experienced, a certain amount of effort is necessary. I am referring to languid players who care less about the meaning of their actions or those who solely engage for entertainment purposes—for example, in frantic ludic encounters without taking into consideration the bigger picture. This may happen in the BORDERLANDS series when players go on scavenger hunts for hidden treasures while neglecting the storyworld, which would give them a different perspective on the selfish and brutal actions they commit. Such play comes close to superficial perceptions in everyday life, where human beings take pleasures in spectacle while—as Rancière would say—"ignoring the truth behind the image and the reality outside the theatre [or game]." (Rancière, *Emancipated*, 12). Emancipated play thus begins on a basic level, but becoming affected by art can be addictive and exposes the individual to pleasures unknown to her before the first encounter.

the player's experience of it, it is time to delve into the work of Wolfgang Iser, who convincingly explains not only the aesthetic experience of engaging with literature but, on a bigger scale, that of engaging with representational art.

4.3.2 On the Phenomenology of Reading and the Aesthetic Effect of Art

"As readers, we exercise a power over narrative texts that is arguably as great as their power over us. After all, without our willing collaboration, the narrative does not come to life."[238] In his groundbreaking work *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), Iser sets out to describe the reader's imaginative and emancipated involvement in a literary text (without using the term emancipation) and the potential effects the reading process has on her.[239] To illustrate this process and its consequences, the literary theorist explains the reader's communication with the literary text in terms of a tripartite *dialectic* between text, reader, and culture:

> [T]he art of our times has created a new situation: in place of the Platonic correspondence between idea and appearance, the focal point now is the interaction between the text and, on the one hand, the social and historical norms of its environment and, on the other, the potential disposition of the reader.[240]

Iser's basic premise thus rests on a rejection "of the nineteenth-century concept of literature"[241] in which it was common for critics to embark on a quest for "the hidden meaning"[242] of a text. Such an attitude and the frequent question, "what does it mean,"[243] are, according to Iser, highly detrimental to the literary text. For if meaning is reduced to "a *thing* which can be subtracted from the work … the work is then used up – [and] through interpretation, literature is turned into an item for consumption."[244] Instead, Iser suggests a different attitude.

238 H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative, 2nd ed*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 86.

239 Iser, *Act*, ix, 18-19.

240 Ibid., 13-14.

241 Ibid., 5.

242 Ibid., 4.

243 Ibid., 11.

244 Ibid., 4; emphasis added.

The phenomenology of reading is based on the reader's interaction with the text, yet for this process to occur, the literary work itself cannot be a closed and finished object. Instead, the solution Iser proposes is to situate the literary work in between the opposites of author and reader and to view it as basically "*virtual* [in the sense of *indeterminate*] in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism."[245] Now, if the text's work world remains dynamically incomplete awaiting the reader to fill in its particulars, it follows that the literary text may only come alive through the process of *actualisation* and the interaction between reader and text.[246] This interaction is of a special kind and differs from other forms of communication in that the fictional quality of the literary work hinders the reader's comprehension. The argument rests on the assumption that in literary communication the *validity* of familiar real-world experiences suffers, "[a]nd it is precisely this loss of validity which leads to the communication of *something new*."[247] I will come to this matter soon and look at it in detail (chapter V), but for now I would like to follow up on the question of what kind of *newness* the communication with fiction actually produces.

In this respect, Iser proposes a most interesting conclusion. To him, the newness being unveiled through the act of reading rest in "*what comes through it into the world*" (emphasis added), and herein lies the nature of the *aesthetic effect*.[248] "It is characteristic of [the] aesthetic effect that it cannot be pinned to something existing, and, indeed, the very word 'aesthetic' is an embarrassment to referential langue, for it designates a gap in the defining qualities of language rather than a definition."[249] Meaning, in other words, cannot be reduced to a thing (it cannot be grasped, defined, or extracted), but is "imagistic in character,"[250] always in motion, and should rather be compared to an "experience" and "a dynamic happening."[251] This is chiefly so because "[t]he aesthetic effect is robbed of this unique quality the moment one tries to define what is meant in terms of other meanings that one knows."[252]

245 Ibid., 21; emphasis added; cf. 20-21.

246 Ibid., 19, 21, 66.

247 Ibid., 83; emphasis added; cf. 83.

248 Ibid., 22.

249 Ibid., 21-22.

250 Ibid., 8.

251 Ibid., 22.

252 Ibid.

Imagine reading a book or playing a game—say, JOURNEY (Thatgamecompany, 2012, 2015)—and think about how the experience results in a personal response to the game and the establishment of unexpected connections to the empirical world. In JOURNEY the player is sent on a spiritual quest towards an enigmatic mountaintop and on a journey of self-discovery. The meaning-making process is thereby in a continuous flux, for the image of the mountain and the journey towards it (as floating signifiers, so to say) are in constant renegotiation. With every stage of the route—from the initiation in the vast desert, to the perilous underworld ruins, and to the final steps towards the mountaintop, which are at first tortuous then pleasurable—the player finds herself in *constant renegotiation of meaning*, incorporating newly found perspectives (and those she has helped create) into the horizon of past ones and aligning this experience with her real world knowledge.

Figure 13: The beautiful post-apocalypse of JOURNEY*, and the player's venture towards an enigmatic mountaintop.*

JOURNEY (Thatgamecompany, 2012, 2015)

Consequently, the moment the player tries to define the journey's meaning, it eludes her grasp, and only fragments of the experience remain—those unexpected connections established between the virtual and the real world, between a fictionally enacted perspective and the player's self. JOURNEY may thus be described as an *experiential epiphany* that is different for each and every player (but may as well fail to impress the languid player) and which stands in the tradition of fictions like Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1952), which, as Martin Middeke correctly claims,

reflects upon the insufficient validity of all systems of the production of meaning by a radically open formal structure in which readers of all backgrounds find their respective interpretive consciousness activated yet at the same time frustrated.[253]

So far, it has become clear that the process of ideation and the ongoing flux of images (to which I will dedicate the entirety of chapter V) are undeniably important to the appreciator's or player's involvement in representational art, and Iser is well aware of this. He therefore argues that both the literary text and art in general resist "translation into referential meaning,"[254] and this generally conforms to the characteristics of images. "The image cannot be related to any … frame [of reference], for it does not represent something that exists; on the contrary, it brings into existence something that is to be found neither outside the book nor on its printed pages."[255] Images, so it seems, are a vital aspect of *fictional communication*, and in order to explain the mechanisms behind this process, the investigation finally leads to the implied reader and player.

For this purpose, let me begin with a simple explanation. If the aesthetic effect is created through the interaction between reader, culture, and text, and the text exhibits virtual (indeterminate) qualities, then it must also be structured in a certain manner in order to guide the participation process. For there is a sense in which art—as my previous observations have shown—guides, or even prescribes, the appreciator's involvement in it. In this regard, the video game is similar to the literary text, whose "full potential"[256] can never be exhausted. Consequently, while the literary critic "elucidate[s] the potential meanings of a text,"[257] the video game scholar illuminates both the player's ergodic and imaginative possibilities of play, which she does by scrutinising the structure that affords them. This is an important insight, as one has to bear in mind that "[a] theory of aesthetic response [Wirkungstheorie[258]] has its roots in the text" (or game) and does not arise "from a history of readers' [or players'] judgments."[259] Consequently, what is important

253 Martin Middeke, "Reception Theory," in *English and American Studies: Theory and Practice*, ed. Martin Middeke, Timo Müller, Christina Wald, and Hubert Zapf (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2012), 194.

254 Iser, *Act*, 11.

255 Ibid., 9.

256 Ibid., 22.

257 Ibid.

258 The "[t]he German term 'Wirkung' comprises both effect and response." (Iser, *Act*, ix).

259 Ibid., x.

is the question "what happens to us through these texts"[260] and games, which inevitably lays the focus of the investigation on "the structure of 'performance':"[261] *on the bare work world that awaits the appreciator for complementation*, and not its "result."[262] The implied reader or player, therefore, is by no means to be confounded with any empirical being but rather resembles a *structure* that outlines the player's participation in a work world.[263]

4.3.3 The Intersubjective Framework of the Implied Player

> Aesthetic response is … to be analyzed in terms of a *dialectic relationship between text, reader, and their interaction*. It is called aesthetic response because, although it is brought about by the text, it brings into play the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader, in order to make him adjust and even differentiate his focus.[264]

In his analysis of the reader's *aesthetic response* to a literary text (or fiction), Iser maintains that the meaning-making process primarily depends on two faculties: the text and the reader, who draws on her cultural knowledge to understand the text. Dissatisfied with previous concepts of readers, on which he nonetheless builds, Iser continues to develop his own model, which he names the *implied reader*.[265] As a structural concept firmly anchored in the text, which involves the empirical reader in a creative dialectic because of its incompleteness, the implied reader consists of primarily *two interlocking aspects*: 1) "the reader's role as a textual structure" and 2) "the reader's role as structured act."[266]

While the first part of the implied reader sheds light on the *strategies* (and the *repertoire* from which they draw) by which a text guides the empirical reader's participation in it (ascribing a certain role to her), the second part clarifies how the empirical reader becomes affected by the text, that is to say, how the text "induces structured acts in the reader"[267] and thereby exerts a gradual influence on her self.[268] To give Iser's full definition:

260 Ibid.
261 Ibid., 27.
262 Ibid.
263 Ibid., 27-28, 34; Aarseth, "Implied," 130-131.
264 Iser, *Act*, x; emphasis added.
265 Ibid., 27-34.
266 Ibid., 35.
267 Ibid., 36.
268 Ibid., cf. 35-36, 85.

> the implied reader … embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted in the structure of a text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader.[269]

It is clear that the effect Iser is alluding to is the *aesthetic effect* explained earlier, and this effect has its predispositions outlined by the literary text. Structure, therefore, becomes of utmost importance, for as Iser reminds us, "the role described by the text will be stronger" than "the reader's own disposition," which, in turn, will "form the background to and a frame of reference for the act of grasping and comprehending."[270] Iser's focus on *the determining nature of the text* has often been disputed by other scholars, for example by Strasen, who argues that the implied reader is a theoretical emergency brake, since Iser does not respect the unbounded diversity of meaning creation inherent to the reader's communication with the literary text which his theory implies.[271] Yet it is true that only when the work of art assumes a superior role in the communication process (or one sufficient enough), it may have a lasting effect on the participant, paving the way to incorporating "new experiences into our own store of knowledge."[272] Naturally, the empirical reader remains a vital part of the communication process, and Iser is well aware of that.

To Iser, the implied reader designates *a network of structured indeterminacies*—an appeal or "textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient"[273]—and therefore fulfils a dual function. Because of the text's virtuality (indeterminacy) and the reader's consequent ability to be involved, it "must already contain certain conditions of actualization."[274] From this Iser concludes that one can start seeing the implied reader as "a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text."[275] During this process "the reader is … offered a particular role to play"[276] and this role is twofold, as I have alluded earlier—for otherwise the implied reader is reduced to a "structured prefigurement," which

269 Ibid., 34.

270 Ibid., 37.

271 Sven Strasen, *Rezeptionstheorien: Literatur-, sprach- und kulturwissenschaftliche Ansätze und kulturelle Modelle* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2008), 67.

272 Iser, *Act*, 37.

273 Ibid., 34.

274 Ibid.

275 Ibid.

276 Ibid.

implies a uni-directional communication between both parties, and that the text would "imprint" itself on the reader.[277]

Consequently, and in order to underscore the inherent dynamism between text and reader, the first half of the implied reader constitutes the *textual strategies* that organise a particular viewpoint on the world. This viewpoint includes and, at the same time, transcends the author's point of view, since the text "constructs a world of its own out of the material available to it" and "*bring*[*s*] *about* a standpoint from which the reader will be able to view things that would have never come into focus."[278] It does so by organising the literary text in a framework that consists of "a system of perspectives," of which Iser postulates four basic ones: "the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the fictitious reader."[279] These "provide guidelines originating from different starting points," and it is only in their convergence achieved through the reader's acts of ideation that the locus of "the meaning of the text" may come to the fore.[280]

While this first part of the implied reader lays the emphasis on the text as structure that "offers guidance as to what is to be produced,"[281] the second part aims to underscore the reader's importance in the process. For one must not neglect the reader's involvement and "the extent to which this text can *activate* the individual reader's faculties of perceiving and processing"—thus triggering structured acts in her.[282] This is further reinforced by the fact that reading is a *selective process* in which the reader has to make decisions as to which possibilities are to be imaginatively actualised. In other words, "there are many different interpretations of a single text …[different] attempts to optimize the same structure,"[283] which leads Iser to the conclusion that the implied reader should be seen as an "intersubjective structure"[284] and a "textual pattern"[285] that outlines the reader's involvement in a text, giving "rise to … many different subjective realizations."[286]

In video games, the selective process is extended to the player's ergodic involvement in the game, and Aarseth recognised this potential for the implied

277 Ibid., 107; cf. 107.

278 Ibid., 35; cf. 35, 96, 107.

279 Ibid., 35.

280 Ibid.; cf. 35.

281 Ibid., 107.

282 Ibid.; emphasis added; cf. 107.

283 Ibid., 118.

284 Ibid.

285 Ibid., 9.

286 Ibid., 118; cf. 118, 123-124.

player. According to his working definition, "[*g*]*ames are facilitators that structure player behavior … and whose main purpose is enjoyment*."[287] In this line of thinking, empirical players have to follow strict guidelines. They subject themselves "to the rules and structures of the game" for the process of play to occur and to complement the dynamically incomplete work world.[288] Having learned and accepted these rules, players are now able to manoeuvre within the confines of a system—which closely aligns Aarseth's notion of player to that of Salen and Zimmerman, who conceive of play as a "free movement within a more rigid structure. The particular flavor of a game's play is a direct result of the game's rules."[289] These rules, they continue, "guide and shape the game play experience."[290] Still, Aarseth goes one step further in that he compares the empirical player's experience of a game to "the prison-house of regulated play."[291] Combining the implied player with "[Hans-Georg] Gadamer's notion of the unfree player subject," he concludes that "we can start to see the implied player as a boundary imposed on the player-subject by the game, a limitation of the playing person's freedom of movement and choice."[292]

Against this notion of regulated (or confining) play, in which players play according to a game's rules and representational aspects (by which he means visual aspects, not fiction), Aarseth holds the "counterweight"[293] position of "transgressive play."[294] This he describes as "a struggle against the game's ideal player" and the "active, creative, and subversive"[295] "rebellion against the tyranny of the game."[296] Although in essence a true observation (and one that in a modified version will be useful for describing the player's involvement in dystopia[297]),

287 Aarseth, "Implied," 130.

288 Ibid., 130; cf. 132.

289 Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 310.

290 Ibid.

291 Aarseth, "Implied," 133.

292 Ibid., 132.

293 Ibid., 133.

294 Ibid., 130.

295 Ibid.

296 Ibid., 132.

297 This perspective (though too narrow for games in general) is extremely beneficial when it comes to describing the VGD and the constricting rule system of these games. Their fictional societies are in disarray and show confining processes from which there seems to be no escape. Consequently, the player assumes *a transgressive role* in that

Aarseth's conception of the implied player remains narrow when compared to Iser's original phenomenon. Of course, it is possible to conceive of the implied player as a framework for play that outlines the player's ergodic participation in the game—but this is only part of it. Although Aarseth recognises the potential for a broader concept in that he ascribes a vital part in the creation of "ludic meaning"[298] to the implied player, this aspect remains underdeveloped. Indeed, one only needs to think about the gameworld as a system of props (or perspectives) that, besides obvious ludic functions, guides the player's imagination—or other aspects, for example: "characterization, themes, or even expressly narratological elements such as point of view,"[299] which David Ciccoricco also ascribes to the implied player.

Consequently, it is more than adequate to describe the implied player as "the game's formal structure" "for the player to inhabit," and as "the standpoint the game establishes for the player as an individual outside the gameworld."[300] Yet there are also alternative ways of setting things up that do not consider this structure as confining as Aarseth (and to a degree Vella) describes it to be. For the *implied player offers an intersubjective and (potentially) multi-layered framework of play that enables the empirical player to subversively engage in its structure and in a fruitful dialectic—delighting in the elegance of the form, but, at the same time, negotiating its contents and exposing it to meticulous scrutiny through play. It can thus be seen as the affordance and appeal structure of the game that offers the player various roles to perform and functions as a road map to catharsis and the aesthetic effect (harbouring all necessary predispositions).* As such, and to further explore this conceptual framework of play, it is beneficial to refer back to Iser's original notion of the implied reader, which is composed of an *entire system of perspectives.* This intricate structure offers the reader a participatory framework that grants her access to a work world and guides her involvement in it—an interaction that will eventually result in the creation of the aesthetic object.

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she tries to escape the prison of her situation and to actualise the utopian horizon hidden within the system. But this role is already *inscribed into the implied player* (it is part of the VGD's strategies) and thus differs from Aarseth's notion of *transgressive play*.

298 Ibid., 131.

299 David Ciccoricco, "'Play, Memory': *Shadow of the Colossus* and Cognitive Workouts," *Dichtung-Digital: Journal für Kunst und Kultur digitaler Medien* (2007), http://dichtung-digital.de/2007/Ciccoricco/ciccoricco.htm

300 Vella, "Ludic Subject," 24.

4.4 THE GAME(WORLD) AS A SYSTEM OF PERSPECTIVES

To better understand this important aspect—and to describe the perspectival system of a game that comprises the implied player—consider again JOURNEY, whose virtual desert offers the empirical player *a semi-open framework for play and an indeterminate space for creative expression and interpretation—which is guided by structure but negotiated by the player*.[301] Stepping into the virtualised story-world (gameworld), the player enjoys the liberty to inscribe herself into it and to express who she is through play. This means to play in a specific manner by trying out certain roles and playing styles: to travel with companions or not, to be gentle to them, or ignore them, and to imaginatively link the enacted to her own life experience. By doing so, the player has already entered a *creative dialectic* with the game's implied player and allowed it to exercise its effect on her—an experience that may have a lasting influence on the player's habitual dispositions and self-awareness by rearranging her stock of knowledge. This aesthetic effect is hard to explain, and one has to recall Iser's observation that as soon as one tries to define it—to explain why a work of art moves the appreciator in a particular way—it has already eluded one's grasp.

Such a conclusion is frustrating, if one strives to explain the reasons behind the creation of meaning. However, there might be an approximation of this issue. In order to approach the preconditions of the aesthetic effect, two interlocking aspects need to be addressed: 1) the *structural peculiarities* of the game framework (the implied player), which allows the player's participation in a work world (this will be conducted in the following by detailing the perspectival system of a game) and 2) the *interactions* between this framework and the empirical player (an aspect I will postpone to chapter V, which furthermore links my deliberations to the genre of dystopia). The moment the empirical player commences the act of play, she enters a creative dialectic with the intersubjective framework of the implied player, whose roles she interprets, performs, and scrutinises—and it is through this playful trial action that she will experience the beauty of the aesthetic effect.

Consequently, in order to analyse the game structure of JOURNEY, one has to take a closer look at its gameworld (and generally at that of any other VGN), which is framed as *a whole system of signs and perspectives.* These perspectives are

301 Fahlenbrach and Schröter similarly regard JOURNEY's gameworld in terms of a *structural openness* that revolves around its implicit backstory, the potential of interaction with the gameworld, and the emergent social interaction between two players. (Fahlenbrach and Schröter, "Rezeptionsästhetik," 201).

composed of both structural elements that formulate the game's discourse as well as gameworld items that oscillate in function between *virtual game objects* with which the player can interact and *props* that evoke specific imaginings—to expand on Klevjer's distinction between *dynamic reflexive props* and *perceptual props*. In other words, the perspectives of the game not only afford the player's ergodic involvement—by offering her the possibility of exploring the gameworld and acting within its bounds—but also, as Domsch claims, guide her understanding of the abstract gamespace, its objects and rules through imagining a world.[302] Hence it follows that becoming involved in a game, both the player's ergodic and imaginative faculties are at work (and, of course, her psychological/affective ones). As such, it is only through these combined efforts and by inserting herself into the game—her feelings, attitudes, and stock of knowledge—that the player may experience play's aesthetic effect.

Thereby, the term perspective is used in a *specific way* and should be understood similarly to what John Sharp has called "the rhetorical perspective[s] embedded in a game's design."[303] Likewise, in the Iserian sense, "perspective … implies a channelled view (*from the standpoint of* narrator, characters, etc.)"[304]—that is to say, "the different views and patterns" through which "the reader passes"[305] and that the player helps create.

Hence, the moment the player sets foot in the estranged gameworld of JOURNEY, she encounters a panoply of these perspectives: the vast desert where her journey begins, its ruins and tombstones, the characters that inhabit it, and so on. These trigger imaginings of times long forgotten, which are complemented by the question of how the characters managed to survive in this world. In addition, the ever-present mountain looms pompously in the background. This is where the journey inevitably leads—and the mountain therefore holds a dual function: as a point of orientation for the player's navigation of the gameworld (leading her through its labyrinthine structures) and her imaginative interaction with it (triggering diverse imaginings in her because of its indeterminate nature).[306]

302 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 19.

303 John Sharp, "Perspective," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014), 107.

304 Iser, *Act*, 113; emphasis added.

305 Ibid., 21.

306 In essence, the mountain can assume a host of meanings for the player. From being regarded as a final destination towards which life inevitably leads or a life goal one aims to surmount, to more creative interpretations such as the finding of happiness or

Being a video game, however, the player's experience of the gameworld does not halt at this initial level of *discovery* but is complement by that of *creation*. For, in contrast to non-ergodic forms of art, where the appreciator can also decipher a multitude of perspectives that constitute the storyworld and its discourse (its mode of transmission), the player's involvement in the world of JOURNEY extends beyond that. This is explained through a game's systemic nature that enables the simulation of a world in which every occurrence, process, or event creates a perspective on the gameworld, which includes the player's actions. Consequently, setting foot into the virtual worlds of the VGN, the player enters a space of disclosure and creation, of perceiving the gameworld and acting within it—or reacting to it. This experience is similar to how human beings generally perceive the real world (to recall Calleja's observations). Indeed, Iser mentions that he has derived his theory of aesthetic response from "a basic rule of human perception, as our views of the world are always of a perspective nature"[307]—which, nonetheless, is more intricate, because the reader needs to compose a secondary *gestalt* to establish the link between fictional and empirical world (chapter V).

Clarifying why these insights apply so well to VGNs and VGDs will be undertaken in the remainder of this study by describing a phenomenological experience in which the player perceives the gameworld as a *perspectival system of discovery and creation*.[308] The individual perspectives (or perspective segments) of the VGN, then, comprise:

1. **Sensorial perspective***: the player's sensorial (visual, auditory, haptic) perspective on the world of the game, which grants her access to it in the first place, but that is also guided by the movements of a virtual camera*.
2. **World perspective:** *the gameworld including its settings, objects, architecture, and labyrinthine structures; the sounds and music of this world; and the characters who inhabit it (what they say and do).*
3. **Plot perspective:** *the plot developments that are outlined according to a narrative framework which structures the gameworld in organising its 'loose' elements by giving them a purpose and role within the overarching plot.*

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sexual pleasures, which culminate in the orgasmic experience of the mountain's upper regions in which the player ecstatically flies towards its peak.

307 Iser, *Act*, 38.

308 To view games as a perspectival system is not confined to VGNs. Games that do not fit in this genre feature several perspectives as well, though one has to subtract the plot perspective and, in rare cases, the world perspective (for instance, in very abstract games).

4. **System perspective:** *processes, playing styles, and player actions that are outlined by the game's dynamic system and rules. These structure the gameworld on a basic and profound level and grant the player agency within it.*

Consequently, whereas the first of these perspectives primarily, though not exclusively, resides in the player, the rest of them are used to *incorporate* the player into the world of the game by involving her in the act of play. In combination, they thus constitute the *general framework of the game*,[309] a dynamic structure that implies various types of players and playing styles and that enables the player's participation in a work world on both an ergodic and imaginative level. Being confronted with this *larger framework of the implied player*, the empirical player assumes a particular role that is both informed by who she is yet, at the same time, is guided by the structural finesse of the implied player and its system of perspectives.

To participate in a game, therefore, means to engage in a creative dialectic with its *work world*: to encounter a panoply of perspectives, to perceive them, to interact with them, and to scrutinise their appearance, but also—and this aspect is specific to ergodic media—to aid in their creation. Engaging on such a personal level with a form of representation means to experience a *game world* (the player's interaction with the game) that is more intimate than that of the non-ergodic media participant and potentially more subversive, because the player inserts part of herself into it. What is similar, though, to other forms of representations is that the creation of the *aesthetic object* (which is experienced in and through the act of play) depends on the player's acts of ideation and on the consequent convergence of the perspectives.

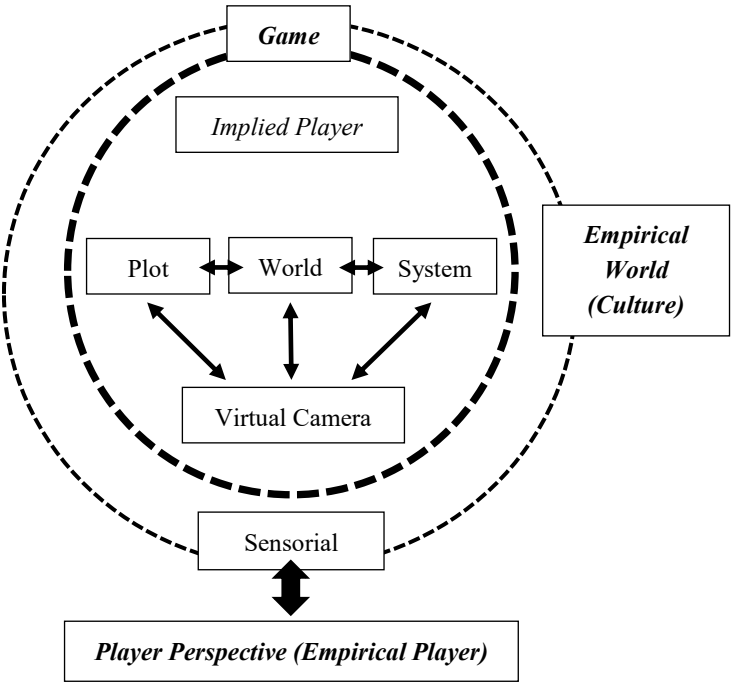
Before coming to this matter and the interaction of perspectives in chapter V, it is necessary to elucidate *the nature of the perspectives*. This starting point requires one to bear in mind the player's intimate involvement in a game that is due to the creation of a private *fifth perspective* that aims at a quasi-transcendental view point on the game. This *player perspective* oscillates between the poles of proximity and distance and offers the player a participatory yet reflective window into the world of the game—in other words, a dual position from which the player can imagine the gameworld and act within it and one from which she can observe

309 Markus Engelns devises a different categorisation of *narrative affordances* that direct the player: "Narrem, Historisierung, narrative Mitte, Konsequenz, Achse der Handlung, topischer Pool, Isotopien, Achse der Topoi, narrativer Ursprung." (Markus Engelns, *Spielen und Erzählen: Computerspiele und die Ebenen ihrer Realisierung* [Heidelberg: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag der Autoren Synchron Publishers, 2014], 393).

it from afar.[310] To explain this communication model for the act of play, the following scheme frames and gives an introduction to the forthcoming deliberations.

Figure 14: A Communication Model for Video Game Narratives

The communication model describes the tripartite dialectic between culture (world), player, and game. Thereby, the empirical player draws from her cultural knowledge to play a game and engages in a communication with the implied player. The dashed lines imply the fluidity of boundaries between game, player, and empirical world (similar to the fictional being part of the actual). The sensorial perspective lies at the threshold to a game, for it grants the player partial entrance into its world. The two-sided arrows describe the mutual communication between all parts of the model. This is to say, by becoming involved in a game, the player's cultural knowledge also experiences a restructuring as a result of play. Consequently, her values and habitual dispositions may change.



310 Neitzel would describe this as the oscillation between "*Point of Action*" and "*Point of View*" (Neitzel, "Medienrezeption," 100) and as a game of *proximity and distance* ("Nähe und Distanz"). (Ibid. 102).

4.4.1 The Player's Sensorial Perspective

To begin with the description of the player's sensorial perspective on a game—which includes her *visual*, *auditory*, and *haptic involvement* (through the controller or gamepad)—one has to recapitulate Vella's claim that the PC, or playable figure (as he describes it), can be regarded as an "*ontological duality* … between *self* and *other* … and the *phenomenological duality* … that the figure is both a *subject*, with a perspective upon the gameworld that the player adopts, and an *object*, being itself perceived."[311] As such, the player's sensorial perspective is to a degree always filtered through her PC (if that is the case) and situated on the threshold between the game and the player's empirical world.

In this regard, Klevjer has observed that the avatar is, in fact, "a prosthetic extension of the body-in-the-world,"[312] and Keogh claims that during the act of play, the game and player "come together … to form particular modes of embodiment through which a videogame work is both *interpreted* and *perceived*."[313] This entanglement leads to the player's augmentation through "the phenomenon of videogame play to perceive, sense, and ultimately feel a liminal presence within a virtual world"[314]—"touching the controller in their hands, looking at the moving images on the screen, listening to the music and sound from the speakers."[315] However, Keogh continues, "[a]s the player acts and engages with and makes choices about how to perform or enact the videogame, so too is the videogame already constricting, affording, and shaping the player's habit and perceptions in some way," which leads to a "irreducibility of player and videogame."[316] With this statement, Keogh lays emphasis on the importance of both the empirical and implied player in the act of play, who engage in a dialectical communication with one another.

This directs attention to the fact that the player's *sensorial perspective* cannot be exclusively constituted by the empirical being living outside of the diegesis—who engages with the gameworld—but also by the game's discursive strategies that outline this participation. Two of these are the PC, as a being living in the gameworld (which I will describe in the gameworld perspectives), and the player's *visual viewpoint* on the gameworld. A useful description of the latter is formulated

311 Vella, "Ludic Subject,"11.

312 Klevjer, "Avatar," 93.

313 Keogh, "Play of Bodies," 15; emphasis added.

314 Ibid., 17.

315 Ibid., 15.

316 Ibid., 28.

by Michael Nitsche, who describes a "virtual camera"[317] that is positioned in the game environment and through which the player *sees* the events of the gameworld, through which they *are conveyed* to him.

> It is the nature of a camera (virtual or real) to select, frame, and interpret. Through this selection, the moving image infuses the virtual world with a perspective. It narrates the space to the player … [and] constitutes a particular perspective that uses a specific range and features a genuine narrative force.[318]

The virtual camera is thus akin to Sharp's first type out of five perspectives that is concerned with the "means of constructing images with the illusion of dimensionality."[319] Yet it would be a mistake to reduce the virtual camera to an external discourse device only, and instead of exclusively conveying something to the player, its *performativity is shared* between the game's dynamics system and the player—for it is mostly she who is able to steer its movements, although in a more or less restricted form.[320] Consequently, a structural analysis of the gameworld implies a close observation of in-game objects and their perspectival arrangements (through both system and player) that will foreground certain aspects of the world (such as the mountain in JOURNEY) or create other visual illusions. In any case, the virtual camera offers the player a perceptual and participatory entrance into the gameworld, with the player enjoying the possibility to (figuratively) step beyond the *fourth wall*—which supposedly separates the realms of fiction from those of reality.[321]

4.4.2 Items of Setting and Characters

Right at the outset of JOURNEY, the player encounters a magnificent place whose excellence she thus experiences in a haptic (feeling the sticks, buttons, and rumble of the controller), auditory (hearing the sounds in the environment), and visual form (by moving both the PC and the virtual camera around the environment).

317 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 77. During the development of a game, the virtual camera (which is depicted through a camera icon in game engines such as Unity or Unreal) is placed into the gamespace by the designer, and the player's viewing angles can be determined through a variety of settings.

318 Ibid., 77.

319 Sharp, "Perspective," 107.

320 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 112-113.

321 Murray, *Hamlet*, 113ff.

However, it is not only this sensorial exercise that requires the player's attention (although it will always feed into her experience), for the gameworld she encounters holds many mysteries, and wandering through its spaces, the player not only tries to assemble its past and figure out the roles of its inhabitants,[322] but, most importantly, aims to decipher her own role within this process.

Consequently, being confronted with the gameworld as a confusing *network of indeterminacies*, the *existents* (the setting, its objects, and characters)[323] are amongst the most obvious perspectives of the game and illustrate guidelines to support the player's process of comprehension. These include apparent perspectives, such as *the game environment, its locations, signs, sounds, and architecture*; but also more obscure ones, for example: its *musical score* (diegetic or extradiegetic) or the *underlying labyrinthine (topological) structure* of the world—which in the case of JOURNEY follows a linear corridor that moves from level break to level break and includes larger areas for exploration and task fulfilment. In addition, there are the important perspectives of *in-game characters* (NPCs or additional human players) that inhabit the gameworld and what they say and do. These are sometimes (but not in JOURNEY) complemented by a reliable or unreliable *narrator*, be it a *homodiegetic one* (who belongs to the diegetic gameworld) or a *heterodiegetic one* (who does not belong to it)—a distinction originally proposed by Gérard Genette for the literary text.[324]

As such, these initial perspectives do not only constitute parts of the gameworld but, at the same time, they convey (discourse/narrate) something to the player and guide her participation in a decisive manner (in both ergodic and imaginative terms). I will explicate environmental storytelling techniques in chapter V, but for now I wish to direct attention to a fundamentally important perspective I have outlined before and which could also be ascribed to the sensorial perspectives. However, as the *player-character* belongs to the diegetic gameworld, his relation to the player is best discussed here. Confusion is hardwired, as the PC shares his point of view and other commonalities with the player herself, who takes control of him and not only executes most of his actions but, as a consequence for her agency, cognitively transforms into him.[325] This may result in *a*

322 Fahlenbrach and Schröter, "Rezeptionsästhetik," 195.

323 This distinction is informed by Chatman's observations on the ingredients of narrative. (Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse in Fiction and Film,* 2nd ed. [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980]).

324 Gérard Genette. *Die Erzählung. 2nd ed*. trans. Jane E. Lewin (Paderborn: Fink, 1998), 244-245.

325 Murray, *Hamlet*, 170.

conflation of PC and player perspective (through the player's sensorial involvement), yet there are also important differences that favour a separation, and for this reason a brief investigation into the issue of *focalisation* becomes necessary.

The concept of focalisation was first introduced by Genette who describes it as the point of view through which the reader gains access to a story, the perspective through which it is filtered to her. Genette thereby discerns three subtypes of focalisation: 1) the now rare "*zero focalization*,"[326] which grants the reader access to the storyworld through an omniscient point of view; 2) "*internal focalization*,"[327] in which the story is filtered through the perception of a) one specific character ("*fixed*"), b) of alternating characters ("*variable*"),[328] or c) of various characters ("*multiple*"),[329] each of which sheds light on the same event (or chain of events) from a different vantage point. Finally, there is 3) "*external focalization*,"[330] "in which the hero performs in front of us without our ever being allowed to know his thoughts or feelings."[331] Transferring Genette's observation to video games can be difficult, however, and requires medium-specific deliberation. In the following, I will thus further develop Allison Fraser's premise that there are primarily *three different aspects* that affect focalisation in games: the "audiovisual presentation, its selection and restriction of private knowledge, and its ludic affordances."[332]

To begin with, from a purely *visual standpoint,* the transition works surprisingly flawlessly—Sharp's "view perspective."[333] Games that move the virtual camera to a great distance from the action and allow the player to assume a 'god-like' view from above—such as TETRIS (Nintendo, 1989), BLACK & WHITE (Lionhead Studious, 2001), or strategy games that are depicted from an isometric point of view—could be compared to Genette's zero focalisation, because they offer the player a rather *omniscient* point of view on the events.[334] This perspective

326 Genette, *Die Erzählung*, 189.

327 Ibid.

328 Ibid.

329 Ibid., 190.

330 Ibid.

331 Ibid; cf. 189-190.

332 Allison Fraser, "Whose Mind is the Signal? Focalization in Video Game Narratives," *Proceedings of the 2015 DiGRA International Conference* 12 (2015): 1, http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/whose-mind-is-the-signal-focalization-in-video-game-narratives/

333 Sharp, "Perspective," 111.

334 Ibid.

Neitzel has called "the *objective* point of view."[335] Conversely, games that simulate the viewpoint of a character through a first-person perspective and "through the character's eyes"[336] are akin to Genette's internal focalisation, which offers the player an *internal* point of view of the events. Neitzel calls this "subjective perspective."[337] Lastly, there are games that depict the action from a third-person perspective, which creates an *external* point of view of the game events.[338] Neitzel calls this the "s*emisubjective*" perspective.[339]

Problems of strict classification arise rather quickly, however, for example in games such as FALLOUT 3 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008) where the player can switch between a visual first-person and third-person perspective. What complicates matters further is when analysing the problem from a literary standpoint as originally intended by Genette. Here, it is rather the *information conveyed through the fictional character* and the *established closeness or distance* to the reader that are of interest. Hence if the subject is to be analysed more thoroughly, one has to take into account the player's *relative proximity or distance* to the PC (her level of immersion and identification), which is not only based on the visual view perspective. This is important, since it prevents a premature conflation of PC and player perspective—which although sharing certain points, are to be separated nonetheless.

> The point of view of the player character is always different from that of the player, even in games where this difference is minimised as much as possible. A player, no matter how good the immersive experience, is always aware that he sits in front of a screen using some kind of interface device. The character always inhabits the game world.[340]

In order to explain the differences, let me first begin with the similarities. In many cases it would seem reasonable to suggest that games using a first-person perspective come close to a form of internal focalisation that literary fictions are not able to produce. For these games leave the visual perspective to the player as they set

335 Britta Neitzel, "Narrativity in Computer Games," in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 238.

336 Sharp, "Perspective," 111.

337 Neitzel, "Narrativity," 238.

338 Sharp, "Perspective," 112.

339 Neitzel, "Narrativity," 238.

340 Steve Ince, *Writing for Video Games* (London: A & C Black, 2009), 65.

her into the PC's skull, thus enabling him to become "the lens through which we see [and act with] the [game]world, rather than through a narrator's recounting."[341]

> There is no distinction between what someone accomplishes as a character and as a player. While this is true of all styles of videogames, FPSs are the only genre where you and the character are 'virtually synonymous'. And in many ways, you aren't in the character's head so much as the character is you.[342]

This fusion of player and PC perspective is reinforced by Fraser's claim that a game increases the subjective feeling of internal focalisation through gameplay elements, for instance: *diegetic markers* in the game environment that help the player manoeuvre through it—such as the colour *red* in MIRRORS EDGE (DICE, 2008) that marks certain objects in the otherwise white gameworld. While obviously fulfilling a ludic function (navigation and pathfinding), this strategy succeeds in linking the player's consciousness to that of her PC, Faith, in that the former executes her abilities. For in the fictional world of the game, the ability to perceive effective ways to traverse the environment is explained through the so-called Runner Vision.[343]

Peak conflation between player and PC perspective is reached in first-person games with a silent-player-character—who, as the name suggests, refrains from talking and is often void of personality.[344] This creates an interesting situation for the player, for it is solely her perceptions, imaginings, and actions that constitute the PC perspective—for example in DEAR ESTHER or in HALF-LIFE 1 and 2. Still, as soon as these characters show hints of personality, the internal focalisation can never be complete. Gordon Freeman, for example, is a scientist and has a history that evokes the desire to role-play in the player.[345] Also, there are fully fledged personalities with many lines of dialogue such as Booker DeWitt in BIOSHOCK INFINITE or William J. Blazkowicz in WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER. To talk in these cases of a complete conflation between PC and player perspective would be misleading, for several blanks arise between player and PC due to different opinions on gameworld aspects and so on.

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341 Sharp, "Perspective," 109.

342 Lucien Soulban and Haris Orkin, "Writing for First-Person Shooters," in *Writing for Video Game Genres: From FPS to RPG*, ed. Wendy Despain (Boca Raton: A K Peters, 2009), 62.

343 Fraser, "Focalization," 7-9.

344 Soulban and Orkin, "Writing," 62.

345 Sharp, "Perspective," 113.

Similarly, it is not always easy to speak of external focalisation in the case of a third-person perspective. While it is true that in most of these games, the player enjoys an external perspective on her PC—from both a visual and informational standpoint (for example, in THE LAST OF US, the player does not know Joel and he rarely discloses his thoughts)—there are other instances, such as HEAVY RAIN (Quantic Dream, 2010), in which this is not the case. Here, three out of the four characters[346] give the player an insight into their feelings and thoughts by the use of *interior monologue*, which can be triggered by the push of a button. Yet this moves the focalisation decisively towards an internal one, since the interior monologue is one of the latter's most complete forms[347] (which is only trumped by stream-of-consciousness techniques).

Whereas such a state of affairs moves the focalisation away from an external one, this may also occur on a more general note, which can be explained through the player's relative proximity to her PC. Even in games with a third-person perspective, where players are able to control the virtual camera above and around the PC (and thus witness the gameworld from a slightly different vantage point than his), they are nonetheless "*viewing-with*" him, as their "point of view is connected to the movements of the avatar."[348] Such a closeness to the PC is further increased by player decisions that determine the PC's self—for example, choosing between dialogue options for the PC to utter.[349]

What is surprising, however, is that the contrary is also the case. Players role-play fictional personalities and are *only* able to actualise certain types of behaviour the game system allows them to perform and they are thus closely linked to the PC's self.[350] This is so because

> ludic affordances [that outline the actions the player may perform] … convey a great deal about the character's nature, goals, and mental models, as well as their abilities. In doing so, the player's own perspective and way of thinking is shaped according to what is required to operate the video game.[351]

346 Except for Scott Shelby, who is the Origami Killer—which the player does not know. Although Shelby gives the player insights into his thoughts, his true nature remains hidden until the game's later events.

347 Genette, *Die Erzählung*, 193.

348 Neitzel, "Narrativity," 238; cf. 238.

349 Fraser, "Focalization," 4.

350 Ibid., 11-12.

351 Ibid., (13-14)

Having these facets in mind, any attempts at external focalisation in games may be disrupted—and, on a more general note, they illustrate how difficult it can be to translate literary theory to the study of video games. For my present observations, this does not pose a huge problem, however, since I have embarked on this excursion to prove a certain point. Although showing overlaps, *the PC perspective cannot be equated entirely to that of the player* and the *relative closeness or distance* between the two depends not only on the visual viewpoint from which the gameworld is perceived. What is also of importance is both the roundness of the PC (the conflation being stronger with a *flat* PC and looser with a *round* PC) and how well the ludic affordances tie into the PC perspective. If done well, these have the player perform a certain role—types of behaviours and mental models—and offer her insight into the PC's self. What this does not mean is that the player has to agree with every kind of behaviour the PC affords (such as morally ambiguous situations in which the PC has to kill certain characters for the greater good or simply for the game to continue). Consequently, friction arises between the player[352] and PC perspective—between the former's beliefs and emotions and the perspective of a fictionally enacted character—a state of affairs that will give rise to the most interesting blanks to close (see chapter V and Part III).

Thus far I have scarcely scratched the surface of the gameworld perspectives, and in order to devote more attention to their diversity, I wish to address the *perspectives created by a game's topological structures* to then summarise and expand my findings in a table—which categorises the gameworld perspectives according to the player's potential interaction with them: *tending* either towards imaginative interaction or a mixture between imaginative and ergodic interaction. Before doing so, a vital way of outlining the player's participation in a gameworld can be done by employing certain *labyrinthine structures* that organise the gameworld and direct the player's movement within it. In general, there are "five clearly different topological structures."[353] These may occur in several combinations and variations.[354]

352 My notion of player perspective is similar to Sharp's (but does not exhaust itself in it), which is built up from "the way the player is represented [through her PC], what the player can do … ; the micro- and macro- goals assigned to the player," and the emotions she develops during play. (Sharp, "Perspective," 113; cf. 113-114).

353 Aarseth, "Narrative," 131.

354 Ibid., 131.

1. "[T]he linear corridor"[355] or unicursal labyrinth, "where there is only one path, winding and turning, usually toward a center."[356] This structure sets the player on a mostly linear route through physically confined spaces and occurs in primarily two forms of progression: a) in a purely "linear,"[357] where the game progression is structured according to consecutive levels that are interrupted by a pause screen, cutscene, or organic forms of these, like a blocked pathway (EA Montreal's 2010 ARMY OF TWO: THE 40TH DAY or THE LAST OF US); b) in a "continuous" form, where the unicursal labyrinth is not interrupted by level breaks and allows the player to revisit previous areas of the gameworld (BIOSHOCK, HALF-LIFE 2).[358]
2. "[T]he multicursal or hub-shaped labyrinth,"[359] "where the maze wanderer faces a series of critical choices, or bivia"[360] (THE STANLEY PARABLE, DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION). This labyrinth tends towards an open-world space but is still confined to smaller or bigger areas and mazes that add up to the gameworld. Due to its confusing structures, the multicursal labyrinth aggravates the player's pathfinding and can be employed in the form of maze-like areas to heighten the intensity of combat (by having the player struggle to find the maze's exit in hostile situations).[361]
3. Akin to the multicursal labyrinth but used for different purposes is the hub-world—if one "separate[s] hub from multicourse."[362] In this structure—which Boon refers to as "domain structure"[363]—the player's access to the gameworld is channelled with the help of a central hub that connects the individual parts of the gameworld (which may then employ any of the five labyrinthine structures available) (DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION).[364] Due to their centrality in

355 Ibid., 131.

356 Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 6.

357 Richard Boon, "Writing for Games," in *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames*, ed. Chris Bateman (Boston, Mass.: Charles River Media, 2007), 59.

358 Ibid., 59; cf. 59-60.

359 Aarseth, "Narrative," 131.

360 Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 6.

361 Another application of the multicursal labyrinth is the simulation of city spaces in a fairly realist fashion. These convey the sensation of being lost in a city and the enticing experience of navigating through its mazes (similar to a tourist's experience of Venice).

362 Aarseth, "Narrative," 131.

363 Boon, "Writing," 60.

364 Ibid.

the gameworld, hub spaces are regularly visited by the player and become familiar locations for her in which she can rest from the strains of travelling (Princess Peach's castle in Nintendo's 1998 SUPER MARIO 64 or the Normandy in Bioware's MASS EFFECT trilogy (2007, 2010, 2012), a spaceship that offers the player a base of operations with which she travels the galaxy). Hub spaces create the sensation of *being at home* in the gameworld and represent places of sanctuary.

4. Moving one step further towards gameworld realism is "the open world"[365] structure in which the player can almost freely roam the environment (Bethesda Softworks' FALLOUT 4 or the 2011 THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM). This "contiguous structure attempts to create the illusion of a complete, explorable world" in that it virtualises a realistically open and interconnected space with various locations the player can visit.[366] Games that use an open world format are also referred to as *sandbox games*. These are said to create a malleable space that can be shaped by the player in many ways by offering her a great degree of freedom and creativity.[367] There may, however, be some restrictions to the player's movement within the open world such as mountain formations, larger multicursal (city) spaces, or confining indoor spaces integrated within the open world.
5. Lastly, there is the rare "one-room game"[368] (PAPERS, PLEASE), which, as the name suggests, is confined to a particular (small) space in which the action occurs. Because the rest of the gameworld is visually and physically inaccessible to the player, she has to imagine most of it.

365 Aarseth, "Narrative," 131.

366 Boon, "Writing," 60.

367 Ahmet Saad, "Writing for Sandbox Games," in *Writing for Video Game Genres: From FPS to RPG*, ed. Wendy Despain (Boca Raton: A K Peters, 2009), 137.

368 Aarseth, "Narrative," 131.

Table 5: Gameworld perspectives and elements of discourse[369]

Visuals, Objects, and Signs *imaginative interaction*	The visuals, objects, and signs of the gameworld invoke in the player the desire for what Chatman has called "*reading out*."[370] This means extracting meanings from what is depicted and giving it causality by connecting its elements and interpreting genre conventions.[371] Consequently, the settings of a story (including any objects or signs) are an important discursive vehicle that reinforces the narrative, its characters, and the gameworld's depth.[372]
Topological Structures and Labyrinths *imaginative and ergodic interaction*	**Linear corridor:** Directs the player through a unicursal labyrinth towards a certain destination or goal. **Multicursal labyrinth:** Sets the player in a multi-branched maze through which she needs to manoeuvre. Such a structure is beneficial for combat encounters or simulating intricate cave structures or city spaces. **Hub world:** Creates a central home space for the player from which she can explore the gameworld. **Open world:** Creates a fairly realistic open space for the player to discover at her leisure. Open world games often give the player vast possibilities for interaction and creative play. **One-room:** confines the player to a single, small room.
In-Game Artefacts *imaginative interaction*	In-game artefacts are gameworld objects that contribute to the plot and give the player various information.[373] They include: textual writings (letters, diaries, notes, emails) or visual and auditory forms (answering machines, tape-re-

369 See Domsch for a similar segmentation and description of a VGN's discourse. (Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 31-47).

370 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 41.

371 Ibid., 36-42.

372 John Feil, "Writing for Action-Adventure Games," in *Writing for Video Game Genres: From FPS to RPG*, ed. Wendy Despain (Boca Raton: A K Peters, 2009), 31, 33.

373 Richard Dansky, "Introduction to Game Narrative," in *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames*, ed. Chris Bateman (Boston, Mass.: Charles River Media, 2007), 4.

	cordings, mobile phones, television and radio transmissions).[374] In-game artefacts are mostly optional for the player to find, collect, read, or view,[375] but they add to her understanding of the gameworld.
Music and sounds *imaginative interaction*	The sounds and noises of the gameworld make the player aware of certain events (the proximity of enemies, animals, or characters), while the musical score (intra- or extradiegetic) contributes to the emotional impact of the game by bestowing additional lustre to the gameworld. This may sometimes create perspectives on it: for example, by having songs or radio transmissions critically comment on gameworld events.
Characters and Dialogue *imaginative and ergodic interaction*	Characters (NPCs and PCs) are one of the most effective methods to convey story. "By what they say and do, you'll expose the beats of the story, reveal personalities of the characters, and unveil your plot."[376] The player may interact with characters by entering into a conversation with them, often via so-called dialogue trees. These give her a certain amount of freedom in that she may choose from several options to initiate a conversation or respond to NPCs.[377] Again, the player is confronted with two kind of perspectives: those she perceives from an external POV (the NPCs she is talking to) and those in which creation she helps (that of her PC), thus co-determining the PC's self from an internal view point.
Focalisation: Player and Player-Character *imaginative and ergodic interaction*	Focalisation in games depends on the player's relative proximity to or distance from her PC, which may vary according to three aspects: 1) the player's sensorial perspective on the gameworld through which she perceives and interacts with it; 2) the level of informational proximity to the PC, which varies according to the roundness of these characters and how much insight is allowed into them (their thoughts and feelings); 3) ludic affordances illustrate the

374 Boon, Writing," 49-50; Dansky, "Game Narrative," 4; Soulban and Orkin, "Writing," 54.

375 Feil, "Writing," 31.

376 Ibid., 32.

377 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 38.

	PC's self and shape the player's role of performing him. Although sharing overlaps, the PC and player perspective are not to be confused, and blanks may emerge between them.
Narrators *imaginative and ergodic interaction*	Narrators that are not also NPCs are rare. Such narrators comment on the gameworld and its events (reliably or unreliably), and in some cases (Supergiant Games' 2011 BASTION; THE STANLEY PARABLE) they interact with the player by addressing her upfront or responding to her actions.[378]

4.4.3 Plot Developments and Narrative Framework

So far the investigation of the gameworld perspectives has revealed more obvious ones—such as the game environment, its objects or characters, which are quickly perceived and understood by the player—but also more obscure perspectives that shape the player experience and her access to the gameworld in a hidden fashion (the labyrinthine structures). Into these, one can also include the *developments of plot* that arise out of the interacting gameworld elements. These are framed in a specific manner for the dramatic action to occur, and I have pointed out in Part I the importance of such a *narrative framework* to the VGD (the clash between official narrative and counter-narrative that structures the game and its events).

Now, it is easy to see that any VGN is shaped according to a certain plot framework, and this framework adds considerably to the clarity of the gameworld events by giving them a focus and lending purpose to its existents[379]—be it in a looser form (Hello Games' 2016 NO MAN'S SKY, JOURNEY) or a stricter form (THE LAST OF US, BIOSHOCK INFINITE). For, as Nitsche argues, "[w]ithout narrative elements, a 3D video game would be in danger of disintegrating into singular unconnected splinters of momentary interaction."[380] This may be a blunt statement (and perhaps

378 See Froschauer for a specific contribution of narration in video games. (Adrian Froschauer, "Der Kampf um die Erzählhoheit: Voice-over-Narration im Computerspiel," in *Spielzeichen: Theorien, Analysen und Kontexte des zeitgenössischen Computerspiels*, ed. Martin Hennig and Hans Krah (Boizenburg: Werner Hülsbusch, 2016), 117-126).

379 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 64-65; Egenfeldt-Nielsen Simon, Jonas H. Smith, and Susana P. Tosca, *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 201.

380 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 64-65.

not very accurate to describe all types of games), yet Nitsche has a point when it comes to the VGN. Consequently, only when such a narrative framework is given will I talk about a VGN—because otherwise, even the most basic worlds and abstract actions would qualify, such as that of TETRIS (Nintendo, 1989) or THE MARRIAGE (Rod Humble, 2006). This is a crucial aspect, for if the framework is integrated well, the individual parts of the gameworld are united and held together by a strong *theme* and a *trajectory* for the player to follow—for instance, in the open world game THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT (CD Projekt Red, 2015), whose gameworld is given causality through the theme of war and suffering.

Before going into further detail here, let me first clarify my use of the terms *story*, *discourse*, and *plot*, which together make up what is usually called *narrative*—some of which I have employed above without further discussing their application. These terms are often mixed up by scholars and the general public alike and, to avoid this mistake, they should be strictly separated from one another. Consequently, a first distinction can be made between *story* and *discourse*, with which I follow general narratological theory which claims that "[t]his analytically powerful distinction between story and its representation is, arguably, the founding insight of the field of narratology."[381] Similarly, Seymour Chatman delimits both terms as follows:

> Structuralist theory argues that each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happening), plus what may be called existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, the story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how*.[382]

When discussing VGNs (from both a game studies and game writing perspective), the distinction between story and discourse seems to withstand the transfer to this medium, although one has to make adjustments to what these terms refer to. For this purpose, consider narrative designer Richard Dansky's claim that in video games "story is a launching point for the narrative, not the narrative in toto."[383] This statement rest on the assumption that "story is what happens, the flow of the game that can be separated from the game mechanics and retold as a narrative,"[384]

381 H. Porter Abbott, "Story, Plot, and Narration," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 40.

382 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 19.

383 Dansky, "Game Narrative," 2.

384 Ibid., 2.

whereas he defines "narrative as the methods by which the story materials are communicated to the audience."[385] These are most diverse and (as previously explained) include "cut scenes, characters, dialogue, and more."[386] Clearly, Dansky interchanges the term narrative and discourse here, and for reasons of clarity, I will stick to the latter term when it comes to how a story is conveyed. What is interesting, though, is that he refers to some *basic building blocks* (launching points) out of which a narrative may be constructed.

This observation chimes with those of narrative and game studies scholars who discern *story* as basically a *virtual* construct—thus implicitly aligning the concept of fiction with that of virtuality. In this line of thinking, *narrative* "is the textual actualisation of story, while story is narrative in virtual form"[387] and, therefore, only exists at some "abstract level … quite separate from any particular kind of manifestation."[388] If this is so, narrative is automatically decoupled from any kind of medium, for story is then conceived as "a mental image, a cognitive construct that concerns certain types of entities and relations between these entities"[389]—and this construct may be discoursed (or actualised) by a variety of media[390] (such as film, theatre, poetry, literature, music) or plain language itself.[391] Consequently, from this post-structuralist perspective, which embraces "the complexity of narrative across modes, media, and genres," "games can be studies from a narrative standpoint by examining how they renew, complicate, or transform our understanding of what a narrative is, and of how narration can operate."[392] These are vital questions when it comes to the VGN, and to answer them one has to first

385 Ibid., 1.

386 Ibid., 2.

387 Ryan, *Avatars*, 7.

388 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 44.

389 Ryan, *Avatars*, 7.

390 The concept of narrative I am using can be seen as a *broad approach* to narrative—which includes video games. Such an approach includes "anything that 'tells a story'" and assumes "that narrative is primarily characterised by the representation of noteworthy events." (Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning, *An Introduction to the Study of Narrative Fiction* [Stuttgart: Klett Lernen und Wissen, 2008], 11). As such, it stands in contrast to *narrow approaches* to narrative which restrict the concept "to verbally narrated texts" and require the telling of a narrator. Ibid. From this point of view, many video games (if not all) would be excluded.

391 Ryan, *Avatars*, xx; Neumann and Nünning, *An Introduction*, 8-9.

392 Arsenault, "Narratology," 477.

observe the abstract elements of story, "the raw material"[393] out of which a (video game) narrative is composed.

In this respect, Aarseth has discerned some "common denominators"[394] between games and stories. These include "*four independent, ontic dimensions: WORLD, OBJECTS, AGENTS, and EVENTS*. Every game (and every story) contains these four elements, but they configure them differently."[395] These elements, to which Chatman has referred as *existents* and *events*, constitute the basic material of how narratives (in games) can be constructed and serve well as a starting point. However, the existence of such elements in a game does not necessarily mean it can be included in the genre of the VGN. Consider, for example, DR. MARIO (Nintendo, 1990), a puzzle game that features some rudimentary world and characters that allude to the bigger Mario-universe, or MINECRAFT (Mojang, 2009), which lets the player construct an entire gameworld in the form of a Lego building set. Aarseth rightfully describes MINECRAFT as a pure game and not a story[396]—and what both examples lack is a *unifying plot framework* that artfully outlines the player's participation in the resulting plot.[397] It is as Dominic Arsenault holds: what is of importance are not so much the *extrinsic* elements of a story (its basic building blocks) but rather "the means by which they are put into play by the unique properties of the video game."[398] Consequently, it is only through an analysis of these *intrinsic* narratological methods, which include both game system and player —"when the algorithm … orders the events and relays the effects of

393 Ryan, *Avatars*, 7.

394 Aarseth, "Narrative," 130.

395 Ibid. Ryan similarly argues that "computer games present all the basic ingredients of narrative: characters, events, setting, and trajectories leading from a beginning state to an end state." (Ryan, *Avatars*, 182).

396 Aarseth, "Narrative," 132.

397 Indeed, one could argue that anything that includes some rudimentary world, characters, and events (actions); and that is represented in the one or other way in some medium could be called a narrative. (Abbott, *Narrative*, 19, 23; Marie-Laure Ryan, "Towards a Definition of Narrative," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007], 23-24, 28-31). But, then, almost anything (and almost any virtual world) would classify as such, and the concept runs the risk of losing its validity. Consequently, I will restrict the VGN to those games that besides showing the above-mentioned elements, feature a *plot framework* that structures the gameworld and the player's involvement in it in a dramatic form—however loose and rudimentary this framework may be.

398 Arsenault, "Narratology," 479.

actions and current state of the fictional world through visual semiotics"—that one may understand the specific nature of the VGN.[399]

In order to integrate "play within a narrative and fictional framework,"[400] then—which strings together the loose story elements and endows them with potential artful arrangements—additional aspects have to be considered. For this reason, consider Dansky's statement:

> In many ways, creating a game story is about creating opportunities and effects. The opportunities are for gameplay, moments in the story where the player takes heroic control and succeeds in action. The effects are chiefly those experienced by the player: moments of emotional intensity. The story, then, must be created with more than its artistic component in mind. It also needs to serve as a framework for gameplay to be hung upon, and a road map to reward and catharsis.[401]

What Dansky describes, in other words, is a *malleable framework* that not only contributes to structuring the game's progression with the help of a "*story arc*,"[402] which paces the action and leads to some sort of "climax" (14), but also the player's involvement in it.[403] As a result, the player participates in this plot framework and experiences both the *effects of discourse* as well as showing the ability *to act* within the bounds of the framework.[404] This leads to the conclusion that story in VGNs is actualised/conveyed/discoursed through both the game's discursive strategies (some of which I have detailed above) as well as the player's decisions and actions, which are also to be viewed in terms of discourse.[405] So, whereas in literature story is primarily actualised and conveyed through a narrator's descriptions and the arrangement of events (this is what gives the story its substance and form), video games explore this aspect in a radically different way. Here, the *discourse of the story* is divided between game and player[406]—it is co-discoursed between a dynamic work world and the player's game world—and both constitute a collaboration which actualises and conveys the virtual construct of the story (in

399 Ibid., 482; cf. 479-482.

400 Ryan, *Avatars*, 182.

401 Dansky, "Game Narrative," 13; emphasis added.

402 Ibid., 13.

403 Ibid., 13-14.

404 Calleja similarly distinguishes between "*scripted narrative*" and "*alterbiography*." (Calleja, *In-Game*, 115) (see chapter V).

405 Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 5; Klevjer, "Avatar," 44.

406 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 54-56.

other words, they decide *what* happens and *how* it happens). The result of this interaction is not only a specific effect on the player—an often cathartic experience previously described as the aesthetic effect—but also the creation of a certain *plot* that was guided by the framework Dansky describes.

As a consequence, the second important distinction to be made is the one between story and plot. Whereas *story* referred to *the mere agglomeration of existents and potential events* existing in virtual form (in JOURNEY these included the derelict but beautiful gameworld, its characters, and the panoply of potential events that may occur), *plot* exists at a more pragmatic level.[407] Here, the individual building blocks of story have become actualised and artfully arranged into a coherent whole by the discourse, and this adds *causality* to them.[408] The argument thereby runs as follows: whereas all stories move from an initial state towards an end state (in JOURNEY, for example, the story begins long before the player enters the gameworld, with a proud population that has now vanished into oblivion), the selective work of the discourse fashions the bare story elements into a graspable whole, which in the Aristotelian sense includes "a beginning, middle, and end"[409] (in JOURNEY these would be the playable parts of the game, beginning in the desert and ending on the mountaintop). In this sense, plot designates "a type of story"[410] that can depart from the chronological order of the story in that it chooses to depict (or have the player enact) specific events while leaving out others (which happens frequently in Campo Santo's 2016 FIREWATCH or Naughty Dog's 2009 UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES) as well as reorganising the temporal structure of the story, for instance, the plot may begin at the story's end and move towards its beginning, or in other fashions[411] (a drastic rearrangement of the story chronology occurs in Quantic Dream's 2013 BEYOND: TWO SOULS, in which Jodie's important life events are played in an almost random order).

Now, while in some cases the arrangement of story events into a plot may undermine and confuse the reader's understanding of it (creating suspense in detective fiction, or confusing the reader in fragmentary postmodern fiction), the structuring usually contributes to clarity of the work. This is so because a specific arrangement of the events endows the separate story elements with causality, and this can be strengthened by explicit or implicit elaborations. Chatman illustrates this point through E. M. Forster's example: "'The king died and then the queen

407 Abbott, *Narrative*, 19.

408 Abbott, "Story," 43; Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 43.

409 Abbott, "Story," 43.

410 Ibid.

411 Ibid.; Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 43.

dies' is only a 'story' … [whereas] 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is a 'plot'."[412] Whereas such explicitness helps the reader to grasp the causality of a story (in games this can be done through a variety of discursive features), Chatman does not fail to acknowledge the reader's involvement in the creation of plot. To him, human beings invariably seek meaning and structure, and they do so by closing the blanks between the elements of a story, thus adding causation to them. In other words, readers infer that the queen died out of grief, even if this is not explicitly stated.[413] This is an important insight, because it places emphasis on the appreciator's imaginative involvement in representations as *co-creators of plot* (a fact that I will elaborate in the following chapter when discussing what Iser calls the *process of synthesis*).

Considering these deliberations, a preliminary conclusion concerning the VGN's plot framework can be formulated. In structuring a game in a decisive manner, leading to closure and catharsis, the plot framework adds to the overall structure of the game by outlining an indeterminate but framed story space for the player to interact with on both an ergodic and imaginative level (to recall what Domsch has called the *architecture* of the game). In this virtual space, the building blocks of narrative lie dormant in a state of superposition awaiting the discourse to give them shape and a perceivable form—with discourse including both the game system and the player (out of which the system assumes the dominant role in the process). These two select, actualise, and arrange the game events (the *individual run*), and out of this interaction one of many plots is created (the resulting *protocol*).[414] It is as O. B. Hardison puts it: "Each arrangement [of the story events] produces a different plot, and a great many plots can be made from the same story."[415]

412 Ibid., 45.

413 Ibid., 45-46.

414 See Nitsche for a similar conception of how story is conveyed in VGNs, but who reduces the creation of plot to a "cognitive process," "the order and connections between events as understood by the reader" or player. (Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 50; cf. 49-56). In my conception, *plot* is the result of an interaction process (the *discourse*) in which both the system and the player's ergodic and imaginative faculties are at work. Here, different plots stemming from the same virtualised *story* prototype may be created.

415 O. B. Jr. Hardison, "A Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics," in *Aristotle's Poetics: a Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature*, ed. O. B. Hardison (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 123.

To illustrate these points, let me again resort to JOURNEY, whose game structure is meticulously outlined with the help of Joseph Campbell's[416] famous plot framework of the Hero's Journey.[417] Many of its steps are also discernible in the game and primarily outline the player's *creation* and *comprehension* of plot. This is possible due to "[t]he flexibility of the Hero's Journey"[418] as a plot framework, as it "provides a scalable and adjustable matrix" which allows "a form of quest that comes to live in the player's comprehension and his or her interaction with the game space."[419] This flexibility is discernible in JOURNEY, and specifically in one of the framework's aspects I will come to later: the player's agency to find a virtual companion. Beginning with the player's *departure* (including the *mentor* she meets and the first *threshold* she passes), the road continues as the player faces a series of *obstacles* and *enemies*, but also encounters *friendly companions*. Having found her *death* in the torturous ascension of the snowy mountain, the player is *resurrected* and relishes the final ascent towards the mountaintop.

All these steps endow the journey with structure and causation. They formulate *milestones* the player will pass through and contribute to the formation of the plot, which is structured by the system and negotiated by the player. In Chatman's terms, these steps of a story are called *kernel events*.[420] They are of indispensable necessity to the logic of a story (that is, they make a certain story that story and not a different one) and cannot be deleted without severe consequences[421]—without Ganondorf capturing princess Zelda at the beginning of THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME (Nintendo, 1998), a completely different story would have been actualised and turned into a plot; without the PC's resurrection in

416 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Bollingen Series XVII*, 3rd ed. (Novato, California: New World Library, 2008).

417 See Jacobs for a general application of the Hero's Journey to video games. (Stephen Jacobs, "The Basics of Narrative," in *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames*, ed. Chris Bateman [Boston, Mass.: Charles River Media, 2007], 28-30); and Fahlenbrach and Schröter who argue that JOURNEY is structured according to Campbell's monomyth. (Fahlenbrach and Schröter, "Rezeptionsästhetik, 190).

418 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 63.

419 Ibid., 64.

420 Aarseth suggests a similar segmentation of game events into *kernels* and *satellites*, remarking that "[t]hese two concepts, kernels and satellites, allow us to say something about the ways games can contain one or several potential stories." (Aarseth, "Narrative," 131; cf. 130-132).

421 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 32, 53-55.

JOURNEY, the game would come to an early end.[422] In JOURNEY, the linear succession of kernel events (the steps of the Hero's Journey) is facilitated through the game's structure of progression, which follows the trajectory of a unicursal labyrinth with level breaks between the different sections. Consequently, the player witnesses the game's major events in a mostly linear fashion, since "level order is fixed", [kernel] event order is also fixed, and story material may be planned exactly."[423]

What this does not mean, however, is that the player is robbed entirely of her freedom to explore and influence this world, and her agency primarily rests in actualising certain *satellite events*. These are, according to Chatman, of minor importance to a story (they may influence the plot but not the deeper story level) and can be omitted without disrupting its logic. In JOURNEY, these include exploring different areas of the gameworld in more detail, taking different routes through it, or savouring its vistas instead of rushing through the game, etc. Although not altering the main story in a vital fashion (what turns JOURNEY into a mainly *linear story*), the player's experience and creation of satellite events should not be underestimated, for they aesthetically enrich the resulting plot through diversity and precision. In other words, they formulate "the flesh on the skeleton" of the kernels.[424]

Besides these interactions on a relatively minor level, JOURNEY also allows the player to participate in the creation of one of its kernel events—which is where the most intriguing pleasures of participatory narratives lie. Connecting the PS4 console to the Internet, the player is able to share her journey with a fellow human being and to engage in the pleasures and dangers of this world cooperatively. This not only includes the choice of taking the route together, but also of performing various actions such as communicating via music, waiting for the additional player, or helping him out in dangerous parts of the gameworld—a fact that Fahlenbrach and Schröter attribute to the social dimension of the game, which affords a feeling of solidarity between the players.[425] As such, these potential ker-

422 However, as Abbott remarks, it is sometimes difficult to judge whether a certain event can be endowed with the status of a kernel, as the process is a subjective one. (Abbott, "Story," 41). Nonetheless, such a distinction can be of importance to VGNs, as kernels offer the player branching points that may lead the story in a different direction (a fact of essential importance to the critical dystopia variant II).

423 Boon, "Writing," 59.

424 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 54; cf. 32, 53-55.

425 Fahlenbrach and Schröter, "Rezeptionsästhetik, 198-200.

nel events represent a vital change not only to the game's plot but also to its underlying story, for the journey differs considerably (as does its interpretation) once the second player has joined (which I will illustrate in the following).[426]

As Chatman puts it: "Kernels are narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events. They are nodes and hinges in the structure, branching points which force movement into one or two (or more) possible paths."[427] Consequently, the degree of the player's influence on (or creation of) kernel events contributes highly to the amount of *agency* she has in the gameworld: "the capacity to effect meaningful changes" in it, "or at least the illusion that the player has this capacity."[428] This power to influence the gameworld in a decisive manner is of course dependent on the gameworld's level of indeterminacy (which the player may fill in through ergodic action) and also on the specific plot structure employed. These may differ from one another,[429] and range from fairly *linear stories* (JOURNEY, THE LAST OF US) in which the player's potential to actualise a certain plot is restrained by the number of possibilities the virtual story space offers, to structures that allow for several endings in which a variety of branches may be actualised and turned into plot. These are *interactive stories* such as HEAVY RAIN and FALLOUT 4.

426 One could object at this point, for even though the second player joins the journey, its steps remain the same, and only the indeterminate space between them is filled differently (consequently reducing the interactions with the second player to satellite events). This points to the inherent difficulty of determining a kernel event (which remains subjective to a degree).

427 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 53.

428 Boon, "Writing," 63.

429 See Ryan or DeMarle for a description of interactive plot structures. (Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* [Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2015], 160-185; Mary DeMarle, "Nonlinear Game Narrative," in G*ame Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames*, ed. Chris Bateman [Boston, Mass.: Charles River Media, 2007], 71-84).

Table 6: The perspectives of the plot framework as elements of discourse

Plot framework and its various steps *imaginative and ergodic interaction*	The plot framework is the narrative skeleton of the gameworld that endows its elements with structure and causation and sends the player on a journey to closure and enlightenment. It does so by organising the gameworld through various discursive ways (see chapter V) and by the strategic distribution of kernel events the player will witness or actualise. Their distribution differs according to the game structure employed (a fairly linear distribution in case of unicursal labyrinth and a non-linear distribution in case of an open world). Either way, kernel events offer cruxes in the storyline and will eventually determine whether the player is dealing with a form of *interactive story* (kernel events offer more than one choice to the player) or *interactive plot* (only satellite events offer more than one choice).
Cutscenes *imaginative interaction*	Kernel events can be portrayed in different ways, and the cutscene is a traditional method of doing so. A cutscene is a movie clip that plays between sections of gameplay. Most often, important events are depicted through this storytelling technique.[430] This is because cutscenes deprive the player of agency and allow the game designers to take control over the action. They thus enjoy the possibility to structure the story in a careful manner without the player interfering, and reward her by offering cinematic visuals.[431] However, there are instances in which the choice between several options results in different cutscenes, which makes them slightly more interactive.
Quick-Time Events *imaginative and ergodic interaction*	QTEs are akin to cutscenes in that they are presented cinematically but differ from them in that they allow a minimal amount of player agency. They do so by interspersing the cinematic action with moments in which the player may intervene by the push of a button. This will either ensure the continuation of the action (if the button push occurred within a limited time span) or dramatically change

430 Dansky, "Game Narrative," 4.

431 Boon, "Writing," 54-55.

	the course of events, thus actualising a new event branch in the ongoing plot.[432]
Static Images *imaginative interaction*	Static images are akin to cutscenes in that they represent non-interactive pieces of visual information—such as paintings, drawings, or comic strips—that can be used to tell the story. They may also occur in dynamic form with the help of camera zooms or pans and are often given context by the words of a narrator.[433] In addition, static images can be found as objects that are organically integrated into the gameworld such as paintings, graffiti, or drawings.

4.4.4 Processes, Playing Styles, and Player Actions

In 1997, when Janet Murray elaborated on the *four essential properties of digital environments*—which are "procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic"[434]—she set a milestone for researchers. I have already addressed the participatory aspect of playing games (the player's ergodic and imaginative interaction) and touched on the remaining ones. Amongst these, the *procedural aspects* of video games and their underlying *rule system* have been fervently discussed by game scholars. They are often designated "the deep structure of a game from which all real-world instances of the game's play are derived"[435] and, thus, its "formal identity."[436]

Rules, in other words, structure the gameworld and its underlying system on a basic but profound level and are diverse in their respective areas of application. Although some researchers (Aarseth or Salen and Zimmerman) consider rules to be restrictions on the player's freedom to interact with the gameworld, there are others—such as Jesper Juul—who regard rules in a more creative way as both "*limitations* and *affordances*."[437] Such a view is especially interesting pertaining to the VGN and the semi-open framework of the implied player I am proposing. To elaborate on this aspect, Domsch's narrative-oriented classification of game rules becomes beneficial, for which he discerns basically two sorts: "rules that state the game's existents, and rules that define the valorisation of options and

432 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 35-37.

433 Boon, "Writing," 53.

434 Murray, *Hamlet*, 71.

435 Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 120.

436 Ibid., 121.

437 Juul, *Half-Real*, 58.

outcomes."[438] Consequently, while the former type of rule is responsible for *determining aspects of the gamespace and its mechanisms*—the virtual space in which the game takes place (its size and variations), the agents to be encountered (NPCs and their behaviours), and the range of potential player actions and their consequences—the latter type describes *the values at play in the gameworld*. These also determine the player's goals and objectives and specify which options or paths in the gameworld are considered desirable.[439]

Now, what becomes of interest when analysing a particular VGN or VGD are the choices that create *frictions* between the structuralist level of the game system (system of rules) and that of the gameworld's semiotic aspects (system of props)—thus playing with the values at hand. This may happen when a player decides to take a choice simply for the game to proceed (or to succeed in the game at any cost) without having in mind the consequences for the storyworld (blowing up a door that will kill NPCs instead of taking the longer route to avoid this confrontation). Acting according to such "gameplay rationality"[440] is more common than Domsch suggests (the gamist player-type, for example, for whom the pleasures of *ludus* stand in the foreground). But the literary theorist has a point when he claims that players (at least the narrative-oriented type) inevitably endow their choices with meaning and significance—especially in the midst of a fictional storyworld.[441] This is also why game *processes* in themselves (which are a direct result of the game's algorithm and rules system) are meaningless when not aligned with the remaining perspectives of the gameworld.[442] In this case, however, they contribute to the significance of a game and the player's experience of meaning—which brings me to the following aspect.

438 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 53. A distinction Domsch has developed based on Juul's observations of game rules. Juul, *Half-Real*, 55-120.

439 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 16, 53, 61, 68, 150-151.

440 Ibid., 124.

441 Ibid., 124-125.

442 Aarseth compares two similar yet fundamentally distinct games: THE HOWARD DEAN FOR IOWA GAME (Frasca and Bogost, 2003) and KABOOM: THE SUICIDE BOMBING GAME (Fabulous999, 2002). While both games are identical from a game mechanics perspective—the player's goal is to bring as many people as possible into a certain area of the gamespace to gain points—the representational aspects differ in that in DEAN FOR IOWA, semiotic aspects of the gameworld visualise an electoral campaign in which the player's goal is to gather followers, while KABOOM revolves around the machinations of terrorism. (Aarseth, "Ontology," 489-490).

For Ian Bogost, the creation of meaning in video games (and, most specifically, the subgenre of persuasive games) is a result of what he calls *procedural rhetoric*, the "practice of using processes persuasively."[443]

Procedurality refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes. And processes define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems, from mechanical systems like engines to organizational systems like high schools or conceptual systems like religious faith. *Rhetoric* refers to effective and persuasive expression.[444]

This "art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions" can thus be seen as the predominant locus for the creation of meaning in games, "rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures."[445] To explain his claims, Bogost resorts to examples such as THE MCDONALDS VIDEOGAME (Molleindustria, 2006). The game mounts "a procedural argument about the inherent problems in the fast food industry"[446] by involving the player in the inner mechanism that fuel it and having her control four aspects: "the third-world pasture … the slaughterhouse … the restaurant … and the corporate offices."[447] During the process of play, each "unit-operation" further elaborates how the grander system of McDonald's operates, and through a combination of these processes, the player comes to see beyond the capitalist strategy of the company.[448]

Bogost thus ascribes the authority in the meaning-making process in games (and thus a normative role) to the processes that occur during play. Such an argument runs contrary to many observations on representational art (see the entire previous discussion) and also meets strenuous opposition in game studies from some scholars.[449] For processes may only hold meaning if aligned with the remaining perspectives of the game(world), and to neglect these would be a fatal act considering their diversity. Yet if regarded in their context, the gameworld processes (and unit-operations) can provide a vital perspective for the player's acts of ideation. This aspect is of importance to the VGD, since there the player engages in a

443 Bogost, *Persuasive*, 3.

444 Ibid., 2-3.

445 Ibid., ix.

446 Ibid., 31.

447 Ibid., 29.

448 Ibid., 36; cf. 31, 36.

449 Miguel Sicart, "Against Procedurality," *Game Studies* 11, no. 3 (December 2011), http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap

confining system of rules and resulting processes which she seeks to disrupt (see chapter V).

For now, however, it is important to state that a *game system,* its *code*,[450] *rules* and *mechanics* assume vital perspectives in the player's participation process.[451] They constitute a basic layer of perspectives in a VGN (and games in general), and can be located on the same level as the virtual story construct (to recapitulate Ryan's assertion that games are machines for generating stories) awaiting actualisation by the player, who through her actions breathes life into them. These ground-layered perspectives give rise to more pragmatic ones, which the player can perceive on a visual level: *the results of processes* and *gameworld events* and particular *playing styles* or *player actions.* All of them contribute to the formation of plot and create fictional truths[452] in the Waltonian sense. To further elaborate on this aspect, the discussion leads to the player's *agency* and her diverse interactions within the gameworld.

The issue of agency is heatedly discussed in video game studies, and for my current observations, those theories that align agency with the player's participation in a fictional storyworld become of prime interest. In this context, most are familiar with Janet Murray's definition of *agency* as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices."[453] This stands in strong contrast to pure *interaction*, which Murray reduces to the mere ability to move a joystick or to press a button. Player actions based on agency are thus *intentional* and of specific interest within a "narrative environment."[454] Of these, the

450 Ea Willumsen goes as far as to observe code itself, which can be regarded as a commentary (and perspective) inscribed into the game by the game designers (or programmers). (Ea Christina Willumsen, "Source Code and Formal Analysis: A Hermeneutic Reading of *Passage*" *Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FGD* 13, no. 1 [2016], http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/source-code-and-formal-analysis-a-hermeneutic-reading-of-passage/).

451 Sharp, "Perspective," 114-115.

452 Tavinor argues that "this account of fiction also means that the activities the player carries out in the game world, activities that constitute gameplay, are fictional." (Tavinor, "Fiction," 437). These actions are conducted through "the player's *fictional proxy* [her PC] in the game world." (Tavinor, *Art of*, 70).

453 Murray, *Hamlet*, 126.

454 Ibid.; cf. 128.

"constructivist pleasure is the highest form of narrative agency the medium allows"[455]—that is to say, the pleasures of filling in the gameworld's indeterminacies, of building objects within it, and of creating plot and altering story through expressive action.

Given these early observations, it is no coincidence that Murray's theory has often been taken up when discussing games in a narrative context. Karen and Joshua Tanenbaum, for instance, argue that *narrative agency* is experienced by players when their actions are in accordance with the internal logics of the plot—that is, make sense within the framework of a fictional world. Here, the "player is less concerned with limitless – but meaningless – freedom, and is instead interested in some systematic reification of the meanings which she is performing as an inhabitant of this world."[456] Agency in their sense is clearly *bounded* and adheres to the internal logics of a fictional storyworld. Another convincing theory in this respect is offered by Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al., where agency is connected to both the "player and game" and occurs "when the actions players desire are among those they can take (and vice versa) as supported by an underlying computational model."[457] In this regard, the gameworld and its imaginative-evocative qualities as a *prop* (or an agglomeration of props)[458] becomes strikingly important. For it prescribes imaginings about that world, which, in turn, will influence the player's desire to act within its bounds. Wardrip-Fruin et. al.'s notion of agency thus works in alignment with the internal logics of a fictional world and its plot structure.[459]

To create the phenomenon of player agency in relation to a fictional world it is necessary to suggest dramatically probable events, make material affordances available for taking those actions, and provide underlying system support for both the interpretation of those actions

455 Ibid., 149.

456 Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum, "Commitment to Meaning."

457 Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Michael Mateas, Steven Dow, and Serdar Sali, "Agency Reconsidered," *Proceedings of the 2009 DiGRA International Conference: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory* 5 (2009): 1, http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/agency-reconsidered/

458 Klevjer builds on Walton's observations on props and distinguishes between "'world props' and other props" (Klevjer, "Avatar," 28)—such as "complex props – like computer games – that are, in a sense, both like tapestries and statues at the same time" and which are made up of several individual elements. (Ibid., 29).

459 Wardrip-Fruin et. al., "Agency Reconsidered," 1, 3, 4, 7.

and the perceivable system response to those actions … In other words, agency requires the construction of a playable software model of the domain of the fictional world.[460]

What follows from this model is that it attunes the rule framework (which affords the gameworld processes and player actions) to that of the world and plot framework. This is not necessarily the case in all video games or VGNs, but if done successfully, it results in the creation of participatory narratives that captivate players. Clarifying this collaboration of working forces (specifically for the VGD) will be attempted in the remainder of this study. By doing so, I will explore how the perspectival system of the game collaborates as *one framework*, consisting of a system of props[461] that prescribes imaginings about a fictional storyworld and a system of rules that affords processes and player actions within a virtual gamespace, the results of which also function as props. Before coming to this aspect and to how the perspectives coalesce in the player's act of ideation, there is one last issue that requires clarification.

Thus far, I have aligned video game theory with that of fiction and narratology, which has led to the description of the necessary requirements of the VGN. However, even the most reasoned argumentations are bound to run into minor bumps eventually, and there is one aspect I would like to address now, to then come to a nonetheless positive conclusion about the genre. In the beginning of this chapter, I posed the question of whether players of VGNs *play according to the rules and integrity of a fictional storyworld*—and the answer is both *yes* and *no*. This is because player types and preferences vary considerably, and not all of them are willing to play according to the function of a particular VGN—which directs attention to the multiple ways in which games can be played. None of this is surprising given the diversity of the medium, yet clarifying the boundaries of the VGN as a genre (and those of the VGD) is necessary.

For this purpose, let me consult Domsch's distinction between player choices that only affect the *game state* (the properties of game existents and the relations between them in a certain moment of play) and those that additionally have an influence on the *state of the fictional storyworld*. Only the latter choices can also be called "narrative" or "semantic choices."[462] As such, narrative choices should have "consequences on the internal development of a game's storyworld"—such

460 Ibid., 4.

461 These *props* can include "the graphical, auditory, and haptic elements of a video game display" (Tavinor, "Fiction," 438)—and I will use them as *perspective segments* in the Iserian sense.

462 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 127.

as the choice for or against Megaton in FALLOUT *3*—instead of solely on its "external shape"—secondary aspects such as "the type of landscape, or choosing whether a protagonist is male or female."[463] These are of importance to a player's sense of *narrativity*—"the quality of being … narrative, the set of properties characterising narratives"[464]—and involve her in the role of one or more PCs whose actions contribute to "the gameworld's narrative development."[465]

Domsch's observations, however, scarcely dent the problem, for how can one distinguish between these two types of choices and how can minor player acts, such as killing a random monster or picking up an item, be classified? To clarify the diversity of this matter, consider WATCH_DOGS 2 (Ubisoft Montréal, 2016) (or similar open world games) in which the player can engage in activities offered in virtual San Francisco besides following the main story line. These include, for example, dressing in different fashions, playing a tourist (a player type who wanders the gameworld and takes selfies or pictures of the environment), going on a sailing trip, or coming up with creative tasks such as swimming from Alcatraz to the shore, thereby role-playing an escapee. Many of these do not or barely have an effect on the status of the fictional storyworld or the main story, yet they constitute inherent aspects of playing this game.

To solve the issue, let me refer back to Walton's distinction between those games that organically work within the bounds of a storyworld (*authorised games* that are in accordance with the work's function) and those that are a misuse of it (*unauthorised* or *transgressive games* that disobey the rules/integrity of a storyworld). Such a distinction is more *inclusive* than the one Domsch proposes, and what becomes of interest is not so much whether certain activities influence the status of the storyworld, but whether or not they are *in accordance with its function and themes*. In this sense, even the supposedly random activities described above are both *virtually true*—they affect the game state—and *fictionally true*—they work within the bounds of the storyworld's function; in the case of WATCH_DOGS 2, they respect the game's theme as technocratic dystopia and the utopian enclave of an expressive lifestyle led by the main characters, which aims to disrupt the confines of a system in which every niche is controlled.[466] Such a dynamic fictional framework has the benefit of including a variety of actions (satellites) into

463 Ibid., 128.

464 Gerald Prince, "Narrativity," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), 387.

465 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 127; cf. 126-128.

466 In this regard, even random activities, such as toying around with the hacking possibilities of San Francisco, are in accordance with the game's function, for they create

its possibility space and, thus, playing styles the player will comprehend as part of the overall plot—in a wide sense of the concept. Consequently, only those player actions that are nonsensical (running around in circles for hours in THE LAST OF US) and that, therefore, work outside the bounds of the game's function, are to be considered *virtually true only*.

All in all, my conclusions on the VGN as a genre are largely positive, and to bring the discussion on the perspectival system of the VGN to a close, it is beneficial to come back to JOURNEY. For this game represents an example in which most (if not all) player actions are both virtually and fictionally true and assume vital perspectives in the player's acts of ideation (in other words, the intricate games of the emancipated player). This is so because JOURNEY's rule system virtualises a dynamic space for creative expression and the performance of several roles (or playing styles)—all of which are implied by the greater structure of the implied player and are meaningfully integrated within the game's theme as a *life journey*. Such a journey can, of course, vary considerably depending on how the participant and life wanderer chooses to conduct it. Consequently, playing JOURNEY with consciousness of a *gamist attitude* (a *conqueror* and *achiever*), one may come to the creation of the following perspective: this player rushes towards the story's end and lays the focus on collecting pieces of scarf, which might distract her from savouring the gameworld's particulars and beauty. In an allegory of life, such a playing suggests a lifestyle focused on success and the fulfilment of duties. It neglects life's precious moments, while blindly rushing towards its end—thus creating a certain perspective on the game that works in accordance with its function.

A *wanderer* or *explorer*, conversely, may experience JOURNEY in a different manner. Here, the player is interested in the gameworld itself, in its intricacies and mechanisms. Such players have a lot in common with *narrative* player types and would stop once in a while to marvel at the gameworld's beauty—thus shutting their windows to the barren yet overloaded landscapes of their existence in order

a perspective on this world—and this is also the case for more VGNs. Consider, for example, GRAND THEFT AUTO V (Rockstar North, 2013) and its stunt driving throughout the city, random shooting of NPCs in broad daylight, exploitation of sex workers, or infamous pigeon hunts. Although these activities do not substantially influence the state of the storyworld (or at all), they are in accordance with the game's *function as satire*—for the GTA series can be seen as social critique on American society and the Western world. Consequently, all of the described actions are virtually *and* fictionally true.

to experience happiness. Finally, there arises an interesting difference when considering the playthrough of a *killer* compared to that of a *socialiser*/*ethical* player. While the *killer* represents a lone wanderer through life who may not be inclined to cooperate with NPCs or the additional player (and might even try to harm them), the socialiser (especially when showing an ethical attitude) will act differently and embark on the journey in companionship.

The list could be developed further, but it suffices to prove a certain point. Not only are these playing styles in accordance with the game's larger function as a participatory fictional artwork (being both virtually and fictionally true), but they also create important kernel events and perspectives on it. In playing JOURNEY, the player thus experiences *the highest form of narrative agency* a VGN can afford: the pleasures of creating a kernel event and altering the story in a decisive manner. Hence, with JOURNEY the player encounters an instance of an *interactive story* (specifically in multi-player) for which at least one kernel event or node has to offer the choice to actualise one out of two or more branches in the resulting plot—when "dynamic kernels" create multipath games.[467] Moreover, for this highest form of narrative agency to occur, the enacted event has to be an *action* conducted by the player, which Chatman defines as a "change of state brought about by an agent or that affects a patient. If the action is plot-significant, the agent or patient is called a character."[468] I thereby follow general *action theory* which claims that actions

> are construed as deliberate, planned behaviours within a larger context that also includes unplanned events … or happenings; more or less durative processes that may have been triggered by an agent, but that then continue to unfold over time; and actual as well as possible state or conditions in the world, i.e., ways the world is before, after, or as a result of the performance (or non-performance).[469]

This stands in contrast to what can be called a *happening*, which also evokes a change of state but "entails a predication of which the character or other focused existent is narrative object: for example, *The storm cast Peter adrift*."[470] Consequently, actions that locate the player as an *agent* (as described by Herman) within

467 Aarseth, "Narrative," 132, cf. 132.

468 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 44.

469 David Herman, "Action Theory," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), 2.

470 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 44; cf. 44-45.

the gameworld and determine the nature of kernel events (without the game system interfering) are responsible for affording the highest pleasures of narrative agency. They can be contrasted with such events in which the player assumes the role of a *patient* such as QTEs, scripted events, forced choices, or cutscenes (as an extreme form). However, one should not underestimate the importance of satellite events, for such activities furnish the resulting plot with variety and personality. Consequently, if a game fails to offer the choice between kernel events but grants the player the possibility to choose between satellite events, one can talk about an *interactive plot—w*hat Aarseth calls a "playable story."[471]

To close the chapter, I wish to direct attention to the insight that narratology in the sense of *structuralism* is perfectly applicable to VGNs—in a creative way that critically rethinks the concept and takes it one step further. As such, I partially reject those claims that argue that narrative in games may only be understood through *cognitive narratology*—a branch of narrative theory that "overcomes the shortcomings of essentialist approaches" and is rather "understood as anything that is conductive to the user's mental linking of (at least) two events and the creation of a storyworld."[472] While this is certainly part of the player's experience of a VGN (in a phenomenological sense)—the "road", as Nitsche claims, "exists in the mind of the player and is constantly fueled by stimulants from the game"[473]—it does not exhaust itself in it. For the implied player as a dynamic framework of play has already done more than half of the job in structuring this road—and one must not forget the player's ergodic interaction with the gameworld that co-determines the ongoing plot. This is not to say that I deny the importance of the player's imaginative interaction with a game—nothing could be further from the truth. For this reason, I will now focus on the player's interaction (ergodic and imaginative) with the intersubjective structure of dystopia's implied player: the creative dialectic in which the empirical player engages. This playful trial action will not only result in the creation of a certain plot but, on a grander scale, of the *aesthetic object*.

471 Aarseth, "Narrative," 132.

472 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 2.

473 Nitsche, *Game Spaces*, 43.

Table 7: The rule system, its resulting processes, playing styles, and player actions as perspectives and elements of discourse.

For all of these, player involvement oscillates between ergodic and imaginative interaction

System	The code, system, rules, and mechanics designate the deep-layered perspectives of the game. They are found in all forms of video games and can be situated on the same level as the virtual story construct and the plot framework. These perspectives will result in more pragmatic ones the player encounters and co-creates in the gameworld. As a whole, the system perspective is of importance, for it illustrates both how a system works independently and how it responds to player interference.
Processes	The underlying processes of a system result in pragmatic events and happenings that contribute to the player's understanding of the gameworld. They add to her knowledge of the gameworld as a system and may include: player independent behaviour such as the mechanisms and routines of a city and its inhabitants (WATCH_DOGS 2) or those that govern a wasteland (FALLOUT 4, MAD MAX), to uni-operations that concern sub-systems such as the behaviours of characters. During the act of play, the player will negotiate the functions and boundaries of this system through interacting with it and experience the results of her interference.
Emergent Events	Because of a game's dynamic system, it is not uncommon for emergent events to occur in the gameworld. These include events and happenings the game designers did not consider and emerge out of interlinking factors. They surprise the player and add to the feeling of participating in a gameworld.[474]
Scripted Events	An opportunity to merge gameplay and plot are scripted events. These do not interrupt the flow of the player action and leave her partially in control—thus adding to a

474 Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 151-168.

	player's sense of proximity to the gameworld.[475] Moreover, although scripted events grant the player some agency, they are happenings in which the player rather assumes the role of a patient (imagine a crumbling house the player tries to escape from).
Player Actions, Movements, and Agency	In a video game nothing will occur unless the player acts and moves her PC through a 2D or 3D environment.[476] Most often, it is the player who triggers certain events through her actions and movements. These include 1) "location-based" triggers where once the player steps over an invisible marker, a cutscene or other scripted events are triggered; 2) "event-based"[477] triggers that have the player fight enemies or solve tasks before further narrative material will be displayed; 3) NPCs triggers that occur once the player approaches a character.[478] Consequently, any action or movement the player undertakes can be seen as an event within an unfolding narrative[479]—be it as simple as turning the virtual camera to view a flock of birds.
Playing Styles	The rule system of a game and its mechanics may afford various playing styles. These constitute the sum of player actions and can be seen as perspectives on player behaviours and how she conducts herself within the larger framework of the implied player. A particular playing style is that of emancipated play in which the player assumes a quasi-transcendental role by trying to interpret the meaning of individual playing styles within a grander context (game and empirical world context).

475 Dansky, "Game Narrative," 4; Soulban and Orkin, "Writing," 61.

476 Egenfeldt-Nielsen et.al., *Understanding*, 201.

477 Boon, "Writing," 63.

478 Ibid., 63-64.

479 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 35.